NOTES


History and Emancipatory Interest


The work of Thomas Flynn is well-known to those engaged in Sartre studies. Through his many articles and especially his book Sartre and Marxist Existentialism he has established a reputation for impeccable scholarship, clarity of expression, and a knack for revealing, to borrow a word from Sartre himself, the “sens” of Sartre’s writings. One might summarize the latter in terms of Flynn’s view that Sartre’s philosophy consistently reflects a commitment to the primacy of the individual in ontology, epistemology, and ethics, and that the intertwining of imagination and morality forms the core of all of Sartre’s works.

In his most recent venture, Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason. Vol. 1, Toward an Existentialist Theory of History (TEH), Flynn tells us that “the aim of the present volume is to erect an existentialist philosophy of history according to plans scattered throughout the Sartrean corpus” (xi). The realization of this aim falls into three parts. Part One deals mainly with the War Diaries and the Notebooks, with a brief and most important excursion into What Is Literature? In this first part, one finds, perhaps surprisingly, that Sartre entertained an interest in and began developing views about the philosophy of history in the 1930s. While this interest appears to be bracketed in Being and Nothingness, it picks up again in the Notebooks. Flynn’s view is that, despite the rather fitful and unsystematic nature of Sartre’s early ruminations on this topic, the existentialism that pervades his thinking on the intelligibility of history at this early stage is definitive. Part Two takes up those works in which Sartre dealt thematically and systematically with the issue of history, developing and honing notions fit for that purpose in Search for a Method and the Critique of Dialectical Reason.
vol. 1," and his "application" of these notions in the Critique of Dialectical Reason, vol. 2* and The Family Idiot." In Part Three, Flynn summarizes and synthesizes his reconstruction of Sartre's existentialist theory of history, offers pertinent criticisms, and initiates a move toward the material on Foucault, which will be the focus of the second volume of Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason.

In Part One, Flynn contributes enormously to present Sartre scholarship with his painstaking excision of texts pertinent to a Sartrean view of the intelligibility of history from the War Diaries and Notebooks and with his careful binding of them into a coherent reading. One finds Sartre, in the War Diaries, provoked by his friend Raymond Aron's Introduction to the Philosophy of History: An Essay on the Limits of Historical Objectivity. While Sartre shares with Aron a perspectivist epistemology, he is, Flynn argues, uneasy with Aron's relativistic conclusions. Aron denies that there is any overall unity discoverable in the disparate events of history, or in factual evidence, other than that provided by a common tradition of reading (interpreting) events and facts. Sartre, Flynn tells us, because of the irrepressible realist strain in his thinking, resists what he perceives to be an unacceptable relativism and idealism in Aron's views. As facticity would be Sartre's recourse against Husserl's idealism in Being and Nothingness, so would it function in the case of Aron, but according to Flynn, with a different nuance.

But the facts in question are historical; it is not a case of the simple in-itself (facticity) of a single consciousness. Hence Sartre must stretch his budding ontology in a way not repeated in Being and Nothingness by claiming that "there is a certain in-itself, not of the for-me, but of the for-others \(\text{pour-autrui}\)"... Facticity qualifies our interpersonal and public life as well. (TEH, 7)

When Sartre writes that "there is a certain in-itself, not of the for-me, but of the for-others," he is groping for a public space and time necessary to mediate individual lives. But mediations were not his speciality then, as is evident in the presence of what Flynn calls the "budding ontology" of Being and Nothingness in the War Diaries. Nonetheless, Flynn points out how Sartre experimented with the mediating notions of "event" and "simultaneity" to meet the needs of his response to Aron. "Event" and "simultaneity" are fashioned to factically (realistically) found the intelligibility of history and, in the process, to provide a locus of unity missing in Aron's analysis. However, Flynn judges that the ontological category of Being-for-Others, as Sartre understood it throughout the War Diaries and Being and Nothingness, based as it was on the looking-looked at dyad, could not bear the burden of mediation demanded of it. On the other hand, the ontological mode of Being-for-itself indelibly marked the entirety of Sartre's thinking about history. Any consideration of history must respect the ontological category of subjectivity, defined as a "break in being," and thus its irreducibility to the discourse of things and forces. Being-for-itself must be understood in terms of moral discourse, for its action is