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The Possibility of an Existential Philosophy of History in Jaspers and Sartre

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Abstract: Contingency and historicity would seem to preclude a philosophy of history that would ascribe meanings to origins, ends, and meanings of the historical process. Jaspers' and Sartre's existential philosophies of history argue for an Axial Age which enables consciousness to transcend its particular historicity to participate in the "loving struggle of communication" between past, present, and future of humanity. Sartre's dialectical comprehension sees the possibility of negative and positive reciprocity between individual men and history as the measure of freedom.

I was taught with the *Baltimore Catechism*, an onto-theological handbook designed for memorization and recitation. This book taught a way of living and included a philosophy of history. Historically this catechism was similar to *Enchiridions* or Stoic handbooks and more recently to Mao Tse Tung's *Little Red Book*. Lesson I of the *Baltimore Catechism*, "The purpose of Man's Existence," opens with succinct questions and answers: "1. Who Made Us? God made us." It progresses quickly, "3. Why did God make us? God made us to show forth his goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in heaven." The lesson concludes, "4. What must we do to gain the happiness of heaven? To gain the happiness of heaven we must know, love, and serve God in this world."¹

The message is clear, I am bound to God. The good news of the gospel is that salvation trumps death. The sad news is that the historical world always fails us. The world is a cropper for all as our lives resonate with the Latin adage, *Sunt lacrimae rerum et mentem mortalia tangere* (there are the tears of things, and the mind touches its mortality). Also there are world-shattering collapses in the histories of peoples, nations, and civilizations that like us also decline and perish. Shortly before his death Plenty Coups, the last chief of the Crow Nation said to his biographer: "When the buffalo went away, the hearts of my people fell to the ground, and they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened."²

J.C.L., New York: W.H. Sadlier Inc., 1945, Nihil Obstat:
Arthur J. Scanlan, S.T.D., Censor Liborum and Imprimatur:
Francis J. Spellman, D.D. Archbishop.

¹ *The Illustrated Revised Edition of Baltimore Catechism*, Number 2. With study lessons by Ellamay Horan, Ph.D submitted to and approved by Rt. Rev. Msgr. James W. O'Brien, S.T.D.,

² Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 3

The following pages fashion a new catechism about the possibility of an existential philosophy of history. First, it briefly clarifies connections between ontology, existence, history, and the philosophy of history. Second, there are criticisms, polemics, and arguments against the possibility of an existential philosophy of history. However, one of the sweets of sweet philosophy is its pluckishness! When the impossibility of a conception is established, some philosophers begin work on overcoming the contradiction. In this instance, Karl Jaspers and Jean-Paul Sartre offer cogent existential philosophies of history.

All the grand narratives we tell ourselves in the histories of myths, religions and philosophies illuminate how existence fares with Being. The religious spirit always has bowed in awe before the infinite, and addressed the many names of Being on behalf of contingent humanity. Thus we learned to pray for our daily bread, for forgiveness of sin, and especially for the grace of faith that we will not perish utterly "now and at the hour of our death." Philosophy, at its most general, is called ontology (study of Being) or metaphysics (literally what comes after physics). It uses reason to study what Hegel calls the Being of beings to know the universal truth of reality. Existence philosophy asks what is the relation between "lower case b" beings, of which you and I are concrete, particular examples and "capital B" Being? Specifically what is the relation of contingent existences in all their endless too-ing and fro-ing to Being? Jaspers' Axial Age and Sartre's dialectical reason are innovative ways of dealing with men in their times, and the historical times in the man that is the focus of existential philosophies of history.

Recently Senator Olympia Snow (R, Maine) explained her position in favor of voting on health care with the tautology, "When history calls, history calls." It is not clear who is calling whom or what the call says about history.³ Our catechism asks who is the subject of history? Answer, it is about us. There are no histories of the life of things and no autobiographies by feathered or furred species. As the police say, we are persons of interest who find ourselves along with other persons in a world with particular places and times. History

³ On December 21, 2009, Senator Snow cancelled the call of history and announced that she would not vote for health care.

includes the events that occur between humans and between us and things so it records individual biographies, collective actions, and human transformations of nature. The answer to the matter of history defines its study as descriptions and explanations of what actually happened.

The philosophy of history interprets the meaning of what actually happened to us individually and collectively. The larger philosophical questions are why it happened, and what it means. For example, is there one origin, aim, purpose, goal or end to the totality of history? Is there one universal cause that connects the billions of individuals and countless nations over millennia? Does history move toward increasing human reason and freedom that eliminates poverty, killing and war? Or is it the case that we are determined inexorably to a tragic destiny beyond our thinking and willing? A third alternative is that we are adrift in a chance universe without order or direction. Thus, the meaning of history is that history has no meaning, or as the late writer John Updike depicted man's relation to the world when he quoted Martin Fairchild, "we are riding an aimless explosion to nowhere."⁴

Western culture has provided several philosophies of history. Cyclicism, the eldest, is based on the notion that history repeats itself. For the Greeks, there were diminishing cycles or ages dominated by gods, heroes and men. For later stoic philosophers worlds ended in conflagrations and new cycles began. Nietzsche proclaimed eternal recurrence as the endless repetition of the same individuals and events. If history is simple repetition then the past is decisive and there is "nothing new under the sun" and the longer history unfolds the worse things become. The second chorus of Sophocles' *Antigone* sang that nothing is "more wonderous or strange" than man. Men would be like gods, they will not leave things as they are. Prows and plows churn up sea and land and only death resists him.⁵ Similarly, Old Testament prophets invoke the fragile cycles of human life:

⁴ Julian Barnes' review of John Updike's last books, in *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. 56, Number 10, 11 June 2009.

⁵ Sophocles, *Antigone*, transl. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, University of Notre Dame Texts Online, Ode 1, Strophe 1, <http://www.attleboroschools.com/ahs/teachers/GormanEnglish/antigone.htm>

I returned and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding nor yet favor to men of skill, but time and chance happeneth to them all.⁶

Providence is the second great trope and it pictures history not as a circle but as a narrative that runs a straight line from creation to fall to salvation and to final judgment. As Emily Dickenson put it: "God made no act without a cause,/ Nor heart without its aim."⁷ Our prayers and hopes are that our heart's aim will coincide with God's causal grace.

The third philosophy of history is progress, an optimistic and secular version of providence. Progress, the stepchild of modern philosophy, insists upon the integral rationality of the universe, discernible in the mathematization of scientific method that promises, said Descartes, "to order every single contingency of human life" through the application of certain and simple rules. Cartesian certainty is guaranteed by God. Later enlightenment thinkers dismissed god as the "worst form of name dropping" but subscribed to a philosophical view that nature and mind combined in science and technology to guarantee future happiness of mankind.

The next view sees history as evolutionary or spiritual processes spiraling toward the universal end of history irrespective of individuals. Hegel said all previous accounts of history concluded "history is the slaughter bench at which the wisdom of states and the hopes of individuals have been sacrificed." Still the philosopher asks why, and for what purpose? Hegel's philosophy of history establishes the end of man and history as recognition and reconciliation in freedom for, in his famous phrase, "the real is the rational and the rational is the real." The historical process moves toward absolute knowledge, or the truth of reality, that achieves itself through the concrete realization of human freedom. History achieves its rational end despite the irrationality of historical agents as "the cunning of reason" includes more actuality than

either historic individuals or societies intended.⁸ Marx claimed he turned Hegel's idealism upside down into a materialist process that overthrows capitalism through a proletarian revolution that, in turn, brings forth communist society and a new socialized humanity. Marxist historical materialism was an evolutionary synthesis of economic formations conjoined to a secular providence that aimed to realize heaven on earth. Marx wanted to dedicate *Capital* to Charles Darwin, who politely declined. August Comte's earlier sociological perspective of history postulated a progression from a theological stage to a metaphysical worldview of abstractions and the final historical stage of scientific positivism and social altruism.

Twentieth century philosophies of history reacted with far less optimism to the upheavals, revolutions and two World Wars of the past century. Oswald Spengler, Arnold Toynbee and P. Sorokin devoted multi-volume examinations of the historical and sociological decline and millennial historical struggles in which a mere handful of cultures survive amidst the corpses of hundreds of previous civilizations. The agreed consensus was that Western civilization was in decline. In recent decades Norman O. Brown, Herbert Marcuse, and Francis Fukuyama have written requiems to the end of history and humanism.⁹

Contemporary historians and philosophers dismiss the concept of a philosophy of history in general and an existential philosophy of history in particular. Interpretations of history produced substantive theoretical and practical problems about the combinational possibilities and tortuous relations between Being and beings, and between particular historical moments and the totality of history. For example, the physical immensity and complexity of temporalization is staggering. This universe, one of many thousands

⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, transl. John Sibree, London: Bell, 1914.

⁹ See Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, authorized translation, London: George Allen & Unwin, Vol. 1, 1926, Vol. 2 1928; Arnold Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Vols. I-XII 1934-1961, London: Oxford University Press; Pitirin Sorokin, *Social and Cultural Dynamics, 1937-41*, Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 1970 (1957); Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death*, New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1959; *Love's Body*, Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1966; Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1987 (1955); Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Chicago, IL: The Free Press, 1992.

⁶ *Ecclesiastes ix*, 11.

⁷ Emily Dickenson, "God made no act without a cause," Johnson number 1163. But she broke faith with as the poem continues "Our inference is premature / Our premises to blame."

containing billions of stars, is nearly 14 billion years old. Planet earth is five billion years old. The dinosaurs flourished for 140 million years before any hominoids appeared. Man has existed for than two million years. Since a generation is specified at forty years as the average time for human reproduction; then, man has existed for 50,000 generations. But written historical records extend back only 6000 years or 150 generations.

If history is about what actually happened; then, it is clearly impossible to know history; for, even most detailed chronicle or biography falls short of an exact replica of individual lives or eras. We were not alive when what actually happened, in fact, occurred. As a consequence, historical knowledge is contingent upon documentation, evidence or discovery. And reference to the not yet existent future is pure speculation. Pointedly, earlier historians failed to predict the rise of new world religions, civilizations, revolutions or the world transformation produced by science and technology.

The connection between historical time and human existence is confusing! Although history antedates my birth, and if the past is prologue—when young I wondered what that phrase meant—then I grudgingly admit that history will continue after my death. But the paradox is that while history outlasts individuals, humanity has existed far longer than the historical record. Walking on upright dates back six million years. Tarkan boy, the skeleton of eight year old who stood five foot eight inches tall, lived 2.2 million years ago. He was recognizably one of us. So aside from bones and ruins ninety-nine percent of the history of the species is totally unknown.

The theoretical and practical problems with philosophies of history began with Aristotle's casual remark that poetry was closer to philosophy than history. Finite and contingent individuals seem tailored for particular historical moments. In contrast, ontology, logic and theoretical sciences are characterized as *sub speciae aeternatis* whereas existence is encountered through contact with what Hume calls matters of fact and real existence. Contradictions result from choosing between a universal/eternal or de-historicized ontology or particular/contingent existents and facts. If either alternative is absolutized, then the other is condemned. This is the paradox of Plato's metaphysics: if eternal and necessary Being is the "really real" then it does not exist and conversely, things that exist are not

real. These disjunctions between eternal reality and existing appearances are the historical basis for epistemological contradictions about truth. If truth is eternal then as Foucault said, "Insofar as truth is true, how can it have a history?" Conversely if only particular objects exist then there can be no eternal truth. Indeed, the whole history of Western philosophy is a series of dialectical antinomies or contradictions between universal/particular, necessary/contingent, ideal/real subjects and objects that are either determined or free.

In the confusions above there seems a natural affinity between humans who live within particular histories. Recognizing the identity between human existence and time is called historicism. And historicity seems the sole reality for most contemporary philosophers. And this has led to the wholesale rejection of metaphysics, and philosophies of history, as well as all totalizing concepts of nature, culture and humanity. The spell of historicism became the intellectual discontent of our age as man and history are trapped within the endlessness of time. From birth to death the narrative of historical subjectivity constitutes what Samuel Beckett described as the *petit pendant* of existence and the long *après* of death.

Existentialisms emerged only in the twentieth century and centered upon the human subject as the immediate certainty of existence and, as such, human 'b' beings have only a negative commensurability with Being. After centuries of optimism in reason and progress, the mood of our time became one with Unamuno's "tragic sense of life" and we experienced ourselves as *post festium*, existing in "bare, ruined choirs" of spiritual and moral exhaustion. We no longer heard our hopes and despairs echoed in either catechistic certainties of theologies or political ideologies. World wars, genocides and holocausts and mushroom-image of splitting atoms forced the abstractions of reason, life and Being to confront our all-too-human historical propensities for irrationality, slaughter, and omnicidal capability for nothingness.

Historicism had been recognized previously but it became an ontological game changer that drastically altered the mood and content of contemporary philosophizing. The new historicism de-centered man from a self-conscious, free agent into a determined product of social classes, unconscious desires, irrational will to power, or genetics. The acting subject was a fiction and as Althusser claimed,

"history was a process without a subject." In particular, subjectivity itself was deconstructed. Epistemology revealed itself as without foundation, legitimation or cognitive justification. Post modern thinking produced various analyses establishing the death of the author, and insisting that meaning was fabricated, and, in consequence, there was neither text nor theory.

Postmodern historicism focuses on discovering the patriarchal, Eurocentric and identitarian biases of race, class and gender as necessary conditions of possibility for history as residues of specific power relations.¹⁰ The twilight of all theories means that there is no impartial history. In fact there is no philosophy of history as neither the essence of man nor history itself rests on a rational foundation. There is no end, destiny, cause, or specific direction to history. We are undone through global, planetary technology that controls us. In sum, historicism devolved into relativism and nihilism. But the de-centering, de-constructive historicism only strengthened the moral and political status quo and made philosophizing speechless about evil, suffering and death but dogmatic about meaninglessness and un-intelligibility.

Before turning to the specifics of Jaspers' and Sartre's existential philosophies of history let us see what, if any, inferences can be drawn from the above? First, if the science of history purports to offer objectively valid knowledge; such knowledge is possible solely because of transcendence. The past is known to the present through memory—which Proust described as a rope let down from heaven to rescue us from the abyss of non-being—and the future through imagination. Human minds have a built-in capacity to transcend, surpass, leap beyond time in memory and imagination to comprehend knowledge of the past and speculate about the future.

Second, history is about us and about what actually happened after long irreversible stretches of time. And this means human history originated only with the rise of human consciousnesses. Hence the transcending synthesis of past and future in the present moment shows that history begins only with the self-conscious realization of the subject as a finite temporal existent endowed with a capacity

for transcending all history toward a philosophical perspective that is eternal and necessary as being beyond time and self.

Finally, since existentialist philosophers place time at the heart of humanity, historicism is accepted as a fundamental truth. And the negative limitations of historicism expressed above must be considered.

Karl Jaspers

In 1937 the National Socialist Government dismissed Jaspers as a Professor of Philosophy at Heidelberg. In 1943 he was prohibited from publishing. This professional and personal disaster occurred because Gertrude Jaspers, his wife, was Jewish. Visiting professorships at Oxford and Paris failed to materialize, and he was unable to accept a position in Switzerland because his wife was denied an exit visa. They lived in Germany under constant threat, and their names appeared on lists for extermination camps in the months before the end of World War II.

During this period of internal exile Jaspers began to study Chinese and Indian philosophy. He conceived the idea of comparative philosophy from a universal historical perspective. Jaspers wondered whether the rupture of communication within totalitarian Germany could have been overcome by a world history of philosophy and the possibility of universal communication. Philosophizing was "connected to the entire real and spiritual world" and to "the consciousness of existence as a whole and of being-human in particular at a given time." Jaspers wrote thousands of pages dividing this project according to various criteria: historical and geographical chronology; history as concepts, problems, and systems; history as rooted in philosophy in myths, religions, and culture; history as praxis or practical philosophy; history as dynamic struggle of spiritual forces; history in the person of great philosophers.¹¹

Karl Jaspers was the first philosopher of rank since Hegel to offer a philosophy of history. His book, the *Origin and Goal of History*, appeared in 1946. Jaspers argued the empirical thesis of five distinct historical ages. The first was the era of Prehistory he called the Promethean age, a period in which mankind developed tools, and linguistic capacities, and mankind gradually

¹⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *Interrogating the Real*, eds. Rex Butler and Scott Stephens, New York: Continuum, 2006.

¹¹ See Hans Saner, "Toward a World History of Philosophy," in *Karl Jaspers's Philosophy: Expositions and Interpretations*, eds. Kurt Salamun and Gregory J. Walters, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books 2006, p. 10.

changed from nomadic hunter gatherers to living in fixed agricultural habitations. The Promethean age took up an enormous time span. *Homo sapiens* dates back two million years or 50,000 generations. The written record of history begins a mere 6000 years ago. The second age Jaspers notes is the appearance of separate river civilizations in China, India, and the eastern Mediterranean. The first conclusion drawn by Jaspers' philosophizing about history is our complete ignorance of historical origins because over 90% of human evolution occurred in prehistory. The immediate fact of history is its endlessness. The coextensive rise of history and self-consciousness is a significant philosophic point:

Man is more than he can know about himself. For that reason we distinguish between knowledge of mankind as an object that is to be researched infinitely as he becomes a focus of study; and growing awareness of mankind in The Encompassing that we are and that we can be on the infinite path of our freedom.¹²

The main thesis was Jaspers' original postulation of an Axial Age of history that extended from 800 to 200 BCE and includes China, India, and the West. "What is new about this age, in all three of these worlds, is that man becomes aware of Being as a whole, of himself and his limitations. He experiences the terrible nature of the world and his own impotence."¹³ The Axial Age, where civilizations arose simultaneously but in ignorance of one another, causes a fundamental change in humanity. Human existence becomes, as history, the object of thought. Men feel and know that something extraordinary is beginning in their own present. According to Jaspers there is no adequate explanation for this "empirically evident axis of world history for all men" (OGHR 385). The Axial thesis is Jaspers' unique contribution to the philosophy of history and it is the basis for

philosophizing as "a summons to boundless communication" for all humanity.

The fourth age is the rise of Western science and technology which Jaspers claims as the only unique development in world history of the past two millennia. Materially and spiritually it is the singular decisive event since the Axial Age, and it is the real existential divide between "unprecedented opportunities and hazards" for humanity. Science is the conquest of existence "independent of the knowing subject." From Babylonian astronomy to string theory the characteristics of modern science are unparalleled inquiry and radical doubt. Jaspers claims that the certainty and objectivity validity of scientific method is a double edged sword. Science is not only what we know but it must also recognize the limitations of what we do not know.

All philosophizing begins with the present historical situation, so the fifth age is the present crises. The "historical rupture of communication" can be healed by the World History of Philosophy. In Jaspers' attempt to understand his own historic time, he anticipates planetary globalization, the growing realization that mankind is irreversibly one and stands at the threshold of world history. Historicity simultaneously marks the decline of the Europe and the West (OGHR 381).

In the four volumes of *The Great Philosophers* Jaspers provides a dialogic encounter with the inexhaustible tradition of thought. Jaspers came to philosophy from medicine and specifically, psychiatry. He was one of the great readers of souls and he captures great philosophers as immanent to their particular historicity. But each thinker transcends the limitations of his milieu to contribute to the ongoing dialogue communicated throughout world history. A great thinker is dominated by an intuition, idea, or intellectual perspective that is either in accord or in opposition to the objective world-view of his time. The reciprocal communication means that the exemplars of his various categories such as paradigmatic individuals, seminal thinkers, systematizers, doubters, and awakeners, etc. engage their own time in dialogic communication, and simultaneously serve as our contemporaries in the "loving struggle of communication." The task of philosophizing is the never achievable goal of expressing universal and timeless truth of Being to finite humans tied to particular concrete histories.

¹² Karl Jaspers, "Über Bedingungen und Möglichkeiten eines neuen Humanismus," in *Die Wandlung* IV/1949, Heidelberg, pp. 710-34, transl. Suzanne Kirkbright, *Karl Jaspers, A Biography*, Navigations in Truth. New Haven, Yale University Press, p. 214.

¹³ Quotations from Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* are taken from Karl Jaspers, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited and translated with an introduction by Edith Ehrlich, Leonard Ehrlich, and George B. Pepper, New Jersey: Humanities Press 1995, p. 383. [Henceforth cited as OGHR]

Actualizing potentialities of knowledge expresses the essence of thinking. In the unrepeatable historicity of their time, great philosophers speak original, authentic truths and norms of Being itself, which is beyond time. The true test of greatness for thinker and thought alike is the communicative revelation of "what I am." Jaspers designates Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus as paradigmatic individuals whose singular humanity forced itself into historical consciousness and inspired world-religions and philosophies. All but Jesus existed within the Axial Age, these four individuals stand alone as transformers of humanity. These "exemplary" individuals are complimented by Jaspers' nomination of Plato, Augustine, and Kant as the greatest thinkers and seminal founders of Western ontology.¹⁴

Historicism lies at the heart of Jaspers' philosophy of history. Both the axial age thesis and the dialogic communication of the philosophic tradition are permeated by historicism. Because of temporality all objects and subjects undergo change. In fact, Jaspers' divisions of his philosophy into separate realms of objective world orientation, and the illumination of Existenz and metaphysics as well as his basic conceptions of communication and levels of truth are parts of perennial philosophy. According to one scholar, Jaspers novel treatment of historicity is the basis for his singular contribution to cultural hermeneutics.¹⁵ Historicity, as the reality of temporal processes, characterizes his descriptions of the various modes of existence, truth and communication. It is the explanation of transcendence in immanence that frees us from past and present to place us within the encompassing moment, "By making history our own and cast an anchor into eternity."¹⁶ This is the ground for the possibility of a leap from transcendence to transcendent truth. Truth is "a loving struggle of

communication" among men who find themselves in specific struggles to overcome objective and subjective limits of thinking language and historicity to reach beyond foundering and shipwreck of boundary situations to grasp in that impermanent moment what is timeless about freedom, spirit and being.

Jean-Paul Sartre

Bernard-Henri Levy claims that Sartre was the last European philosopher "who attempted to escape from Hegel's belief that history is more or less closed off."¹⁷ The substance of early work was his radical analysis of freedom. A choice of "dreadful freedom" over all determinisms was the basis for his description of human consciousness and freedom as "a nothingness which exists." The world is dualistically divided between subjective being-for-itself in opposition to the being-in-itself of objective things. A troublesome third relation is possible which Sartre calls being for others. The argument is that since nothing can determine nothingness, then determinisms must be forms of bad faith or denial to mask the total responsibility of the individual to choose, even including a choice of not choosing. As Sartre's experience of the world and man matured he had to acknowledge that this radical idea of freedom was highly restrained and conditioned by "the force of circumstances" in history.

In Sartre's late works on history and biography there are tangled ontological confrontations between the "in-itself and 'for-itself', and relations of I/Me and We/Us, of subjectivity and objectivity, of universals and particulars, and especially freedom and determinism. In the historicity of Sartre's own intellectual tradition, historical materialism and psychoanalysis were determinisms. Men were explained as effects of either socio-economic or bio/psychological causes. Both dogmatic historical materialism and Freudian psychoanalysis precluded free agency. Sartre's innovative and unique theory accounts for the inter-relations between man and society in the incomplete 1,700 pages of the two volumes of his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*. This complex work is

¹⁴ Karl Jaspers, *The Great Philosophers*, ed. Hanna Arendt, transl. Ralph Mannheim Volume I (1962), Volume II (1966). *The Great Philosophers*, Michael Ermath, Leonard H. Ehrlich, and Edith Ehrlich, editors and translators, Volume III (1993), Volume IV (1995), New York: Harcourt Brace and World.

¹⁵ See Richard Mall, "Jaspers' Axial Age and Cross Cultural Hermeneutics" In *Karl Jaspers Philosophy: Expositions and Interpretations*, eds. Kurt Salamun and Gregory J. Walters, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2006.

¹⁶ Karl Jaspers, *Way to Wisdom, An Introduction to Philosophy*, transl. Ralph Mannheim, foreword by Richard M. Owsley, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002 (1951), p 109.

¹⁷ Frank and Maarten Messter, "Grandeur and Misery of Commitment," an interview with B. H. Levi, *Sartre Studies International*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2000, pp. 62-88, here p. 64.

Sartre's philosophy of history.¹⁸ It is supplemented by the equally massive and incomplete biography of Gustav Flaubert, *The Idiot in the Family*.¹⁹

Sartre's claims statements about collective historical behavior and individual acts in terms of their rigorous conditioning are analytic tautologies. To the tautological propositions that all causes produce effects and every effect is produced by a cause he adds his analysis of dialectic reason. The first is comprehension or understanding of the complex mediations between interiority and exteriority that are not reducible to cause and effect relations. The second is the postulation of a new form of knowledge Sartre calls *vecu* or the lived experience of a single individual. Neither the times nor the man are reducible to one another without remainder and both the individual and his historical situation play constituted and constituting. This philosophy of history offers a dialectical engagement between interiority and exteriority grasped as a transition between the specific historicity of a tradition and a culture that that forms or makes us and, in turn, becomes history as what we make of ourselves.

Dialectical comprehension is the unitary meaning of history. The regressive and progressive method thinking events backwards to conditions and forwards to transformations allows one to grasp the intelligibility or senselessness of singular and collective historical agents acting in concert or opposition. This dialectical and anti-dialectic circularity as well as the counter-finality of processes encountered in external associations, like bread lines or in the interiority of pledged affiliations in institutions, is directed backward or regressively to the objective past and forward or progressively towards a future. Both the internal and external, regressive and progressive actions of individuals or groups are struggling perpetually with the

structural contingencies of scarcity, available technology and the resistance of the practico-inert or worked matter. The dialectical comprehension of history centers upon the reversibility between positive and negative reciprocity of individual and collective history. The totalizing acts of every singular, contingent being are re-totalized in exteriority by other agents. The messy plurality of historical acts fail because of a lack of reciprocity or the unintended consequences of alienated beings thrown together. There are exceptional moments when the collective action of a fused group of individuals actually changes the course of history, e.g. Sartre cites the storming of the Bastille. The rare occurrence of history altering events leads to the dialectical comprehension of "configurations of dialectical reality ... [as] rigorously conditioned by the previous one, while preserving and superseding it at the same time."²⁰

The benefit of this view of the dialectical movement of knowledge and being is that it is not some powerful unitary force directing history and individual lives like the will of God or destiny but rather it is human reality. As Sartre says, "it is not the dialectic which forces historical men to live their history in terrible contradictions; it is men, as they are, dominated by scarcity and necessity and confronting one another in circumstances which History or economics can inventory, but which only dialectical reason can explain" (*CDR1* 37).

The biography of Flaubert has as "Its subject: what can we know about a man?" Sartre begins with the earliest historical testimony that little Gustav had difficulty with the alphabet when his mother tried to teach him and his younger sister to read. Sartre's applied dialectic will disclose how and why this dull child—*The Family Idiot*—grew up to become a great novelist. How, for example, do we connect external facts to the subject's testimony? In 1864 Flaubert, by then a famous author, wrote, "It is by the sheer force of work that I am able to silence my innate melancholy. But the old nature often reappears, the old nature that no one knows, the deep, always hidden wound" (*TFI X*). Only the biographer's

¹⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume I, Theory of Practical Ensembles*, transl. Alan Sheridan-Smith, ed. Jonathan Ree, London: Verso, 1982. [Henceforth cited as *CDR1*]. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume Two, The Intelligibility of History*, ed. Arlette Elkaim-Sartre, transl. Quentin Hoare, London: Verso, 1991. All citations in the text are from these editions.

¹⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Family Idiot, Gustave Flaubert, Volumes 1-5*, transl. Carol Cosman, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981-1993. [Henceforth cited as *TFI*]

²⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, "Itinerary of a Thought," in *Conversations with Jean Paul Sartre*, Sartre interviewed by Perry Anderson, Ronald Fraser, and Quentin Hoare in November-December 1969, Seagull Press 2006, pp. 3-66, here p. 15. [Henceforth cited as *IT*]

empathy and imaginative capacity to enter the interiority of the subject can connect "the old, always hidden wound" to the external evidence of "this poor relationship with words." And thus, the historical-biographical-dialectical method can be read also, says Sartre, as a novel which multiplies viewpoints so that the reader simultaneously knows what happened, what it meant and how it felt for the subject and others.

Hence, for Sartre, there are real imaginary objects and worlds inhabited by imaginary people like Flaubert who act out their existence "like a leak of gas." So the biography of Flaubert uses words to tell the story of how the idiot in the family became a great man of letters and this novelistic tale posits the relation between real and imaginary as analogous to that of being and nothingness. Sartre's brilliant response to the question of what can we know about a man is the methodological overcoming of irreducible meanings and multiple interpretations by reconciling Flaubert's individuality with his sociality, i.e. the interior signification and the exterior testimony. Sartre describes the dialectical synthesis:

For a man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call him a universal singular. Summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he in turn resumes it by reproducing himself in it as singularity. Universal by the singular universality of human history, singular by the universalizing singularity of his projects, he requires simultaneous examination from both ends. [TFI]

The first volume deals with what was made of young Gustav by his mother, father, siblings, family's social status and milieu, and the localizations of French history and culture. All of these psychosocial considerations are methodically presented as constitutive or determining conditions for interpreting objective facts. The signs of idiocy were Flaubert's neurotic reaction to the constituted pathos of his childhood? The regressive method posits two items, which profoundly influence Flaubert's constituted reality. The first is Gustav's non-valorization by his mother. Madame Flaubert bore her husband twelve children but only three survived infancy. Achilles was nine years older than Gustav. The future author was born in 1821 between the deaths of two sons. The mother always wanted a daughter and Caroline, the only female, was born three years later. The second blow was the indifference of his father toward his younger son. Achille was a clone of

his father and he also became a surgeon. Sartre makes much of Gustav's status as a middle child who was insufficiently loved and concludes from this that Gustav suffered his existence as a passive, superfluous victim, an imposter who can only see himself through the eyes of others. This crisis of being is that there is no purpose to his existence. This prevents Flaubert from establishing any connections to others because he is incapable of understanding himself and he is reduced to "the pure boredom with living" as his self-experience is characterized by vague feelings of sub-human animality.

The socio-economic dimension of the Flaubert family in its historicity is drawn from the parent's backgrounds and France from the post Napoleonic era to the restoration and the first and second republics. This was the era of bourgeoisie ascendancy and specifically the triumph of Flaubert's father, who leaped from the peasant class of veterinary barber-surgeons to become a chief-surgeon, head of hospital, modern philosopher physician who married into minor nobility. On the other hand, his mother held to the blind Catholic faith of her childhood. Culturally the young Flaubert was exposed to these contradictory ideologies of science and faith, which he was unable to reconcile in his fiction.

The second volume on personification treats Flaubert's adolescent project of becoming a writer. This is what little Gustav made out of what had been made of him. This is Sartre's version of the dialectical constitution of the self. The argument is that from what is externally known one can infer, by empathetic imagination, the interior process of achieving personalization: "The person, in effect, is neither completely suffered nor completely constructed; furthermore, the person does not exist," save as the transcended result of the project to assimilate the nonassimilable (childhood) so that a person is "the abstract and endlessly retouched product" of the real living being whose vécu or lived experience is like the spoke of a wheel, or the center of multi-centered spirals. [TFI2 6]

The third volume deals with the objective neurosis that Sartre calls culture and the projected fourth volume was to deal with Flaubert's masterpiece, Madame Bovary. The last two volumes double the dialectical relation by integrating the individual within collective history. That is, Flaubert the writer, who was himself a byproduct of a

constituted and constituting dialectic, is confronted with objective culture. Culture is defined by Sartre as a practico-inert, or worked matter as the institutionalization of humanity's past. Prior to writing his masterpiece *Flaubert* must enter into a dialectic with the past in order to choose his role as an artist, to decide what to say, and how to say it, and to determine the audience for whom he writes and in this process of self acculturation Flaubert is making imaginative commitments to connections between literature and politics and philosophy. Sartre's methodological contribution is to show us how the dialectical creation of a person as a subjective-objective praxis/process is intelligible only as situated with the objective-subjective praxis/process of a history.

In *Madame Bovary*, the author's lived experience (vice) reappears in the novel. This is the meaning of Flaubert's famous comment, "Emma, c'est moi." According to Sartre, in this constituted and constituting dialectic between his life and his work, Flaubert is transformed from a universal singular, a human characterized by indifferent universals, into a singular universal, who incarnates the historicity of his times within his person. And Sartre says, in the exercise of this historical-biographical method, one sees human freedom in all the mediated temporalizations of the self. Sartre traced this process throughout the several biographies he wrote of literary and artistic figures. The following passage about Genet is quite clear:

For the idea which I have never ceased to develop is that in the end one is always responsible for what is made of one. Even if one can do nothing else besides assume this responsibility. For I believe a man can always make something out of what is made of him. This is the limit I would today accord to freedom: the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him. Which makes of Genet a poet when he had been rigorously conditioned to be a thief. [IT 9]

These historical and biographical mediations are Sartre's existential philosophy of history. It is one that argues for free individual acts and for the possibility of positive, collective reciprocity in heavily conditioned history. The dialectical synthesis of history and life is indispensable for a philosophic anthropology. Sartre's combination of method, theory and application is unique, suggestive and

reasonable. Sartre's historical and biographical method can be regarded as a philosophic equivalent to the law of complementarity. In physics, complementarity occurs when two true accounts of nature can be seen in experiments but never in the same experiment, e.g. electrons can be demonstrated as waves in some experiments and electrons can be seen as particles in other experiments. In history and biography dialectical reason moves between outside and inside, between the interiorization of the external tradition of social formation and cultural milieu that makes us and the exteriorization of interior subjectivity through which we make ourselves individually and historical differences collectively.