

ARTICLE

Ethical Invention in Sartre and Foucault: Courage, Freedom, Transformation

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ABSTRACT. This article explores the concept of ethical invention in both Jean-Paul Sartre's and Michel Foucault's later lectures and interviews, showing that a courageous disposition to invent or transform plays a key role in both thinkers' visions of ethics. Three of Sartre's post-*Critique of Dialectical Reason* lectures on ethics are examined: *Morality and History*, *The Rome Lecture*, and *A Plea for Intellectuals*. It is shown that ethical invention for Sartre requires the use of our freedom to transcend our current circumstances, a willingness to break away from harmful ideologies, and directing our free praxis towards the goal of universal humanism. Examining several of Foucault's interviews alongside his lecture series *The Government of Self and Others* and *The Courage of Truth*, it is shown that ethical invention for Foucault requires a rejection of necessities or inevitabilities in our current landscape, a willingness to reshape our current beliefs, and a philosophical way of life that results in an alteration of the relationship to self and others. For both thinkers, ethical invention should be preceded by a critical reflection on ourselves in our historical moment. Both argue that ethical invention requires a rejection of the inherent value of our world and realization that the conditions of possibility for being subjects are malleable. Last, it is shown that both philosophers specifically call philosophers or intellectuals to invent.

Keywords: Sartre, Foucault, Ethics, Courage, Invention

INTRODUCTION

While Michel Foucault and Jean-Paul Sartre are considered two intellectual giants of 20th century France, Foucault believed his work had little in common with Sartre's. Indeed, he commented more than once that he considered his work incompatible with Sartre's thought and used it as a point of contrast. Foucault once referred to Sartre's monumental work *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* as "the magnificent and pathetic attempt by a man of the nineteenth century to think the twentieth century."¹ In other interviews he drew sharp contrasts between his works and the works of Sartre and other existentialists: "We

¹ Michel Foucault, interview with C. Bonnefoy [1966], in *Dits et écrits, tome I: 1954-1975* (2001), 541.

had experienced Sartre's generation as certainly courageous and generous with a passion for life, politics, existence," he notes, "But we have discovered something else, another passion: passion for what I shall call 'system.'"² Foucault saw his own works as focused on language, social institutions, and practices—systems—as creating the conditions of possibility for subjectivity to emerge. He considered this view incompatible with the free subject of existentialism found in Sartre's work. However, a closer look shows that the thinkers may have had more in common than Foucault realized, especially when considering Sartre's later work on ethics.

While neither Foucault nor Sartre are considered traditional moral philosophers, both were deeply engaged in the social, political, and ethical issues of their time and were interested in what it means for individuals to create themselves ethically in their historical moment. Examining Sartre's and Foucault's later lectures, we see that each thinker believes that a key component of an ethical life is the courage of invention. Invention is an exercise of freedom that must be preceded by critical historical reflection on oneself in one's historical and cultural context. For Sartre, invention requires using the power of our transcendence to control our circumstances rather than being controlled by them, being willing to break with our deeply held beliefs or ideologies and project ourselves toward a new set of possibilities, and devoting our free praxis to the goal of a universal humanism. For Foucault, invention is a disposition to uncover the contingency of our current ways of thinking, speaking, and doing to show spaces for resistance and freedom, in addition to a willingness to think something different than we thought before. It is a philosophical way of life that requires an alteration both in our relationship to ourselves and our relationships with others. For both thinkers, an individual's ability to invent takes place in a social context, and thus invention is both a transformation of self and a transformation of our relationships with others. Both thinkers specifically call philosophers or intellectuals in particular to the task of invention. For Sartre, I rely on his lectures *Morality and History, A Plea for Intellectuals*, and *The Rome Lecture*. For Foucault, I examine his lecture series *The Government of Self and Others* and *The Courage of Truth*, as well as several interviews he gave towards the end of his life.

I. ETHICAL INVENTION IN SARTRE

Foucault considered one of the major differences in his and Sartre's thought as their differing views on the subject. Indeed, Foucault thought that social practices and institutions had to be starting points for understanding subjectivity rather than vice versa. Sartre saw human beings' conscious experience of the world as prior to its participation in social institutions. In fact, it is this very assertion that, at least partially, anchors his ethical thought. Sartre's concept of ethical invention found in his later lectures is conceptually rooted in his notions of praxis and practico-inert that he introduces in *The Critique of*

² Foucault, interview with Madeline Chapsal [1966], in *Dits et écrits, tome 1*, 513.

Dialectical Reason Volume 1 (CDR).³ In *Being and Nothingness*,⁴ Sartre uses the expressions “being In-itself” and “being For-itself” to distinguish between two types of being. Being In-itself is the fixed and static world, being that is what it is. This includes objects and matter in the physical world, the past, the body, and any other being that cannot willfully change its characteristics.⁵ Being For-itself characterizes human consciousness, which does not coincide with its essence and defines itself negatively by contrasting itself with what it is not. Being For-itself can make choices, have goals and beliefs, experience emotion, and imagine.⁶ In CDR, Sartre introduces different terms to capture roughly the same concepts, but with some important alterations. The For-itself and In-itself pair is replaced with “praxis” and “practico-inert.” Praxis refers to purposive, goal-oriented, conscious activity which totalizes (makes intelligible as a whole) all the various objects and perceptions of its environment into a continuous unity when pursuing our chosen ends.⁷ Praxis is, in its essence, fundamentally inventive: it involves a process of rebuilding, rearranging, or reforming an existing practical field into a field of possibilities for achieving a goal.⁸

Sartre claims that our subjectivity is constructed through a dialectical interaction of praxis with reified and institutionalized results of previous human affairs.⁹ The “dialectical” aspect of our subjectivity is a product of our conscious decisions and actions being directly altered by their encounter with the environment and with the historical past, the traces of which are all around us. Sartre refers to these traces as the “practico-inert.” Sartre introduces the term to represent “alienated praxis and worked inertia.”¹⁰ The different layers of the practico-inert included artifacts imprinted with human meaning, language, deeply engrained ideas, social institutions, and historically, culturally specific norms.¹¹

While Sartre’s earlier notion of spontaneous free consciousness is modified, freedom nevertheless plays an important role in the conception of subjectivity he presents in CDR. Our possibilities are structured and limited by the practico-inert, but this does not mean that we are solely determined. Freedom is exercised when we choose how to navigate these limitations, resist these limitations, or imagine a state of affairs beyond them. In the 1969 interview *An Itinerary of Thought*, Sartre refers to freedom as “the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him.”¹² While our conditioning saturates the

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Vol. 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles* [1960] (2004).

⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* [1943] (1956).

⁵ Sartre, *Being*, 102-103.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 56-60.

⁷ Sartre, *Critique*, 80.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 83

⁹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 98, 101, 300.

¹² Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Itinerary of Thought* [1969], found in *Between Marxism and Existentialism* (1974), 35.

possibilities for our project, we still have the opportunity to use the power of praxis to make something different of ourselves.¹³

While CDR provides the groundwork for Sartre's concept of invention, in his post-CDR lectures he emphasizes the importance of invention or creation as a distinctly ethical task. In his lecture *Morality and History*,¹⁴ Sartre argues that all praxis has an inventive moment, and emphasizes that ethics requires subjects to use the power of invention inherent in praxis to restructure a given environment into a field of possibilities for achieving an end. Sartre begins with the insight that the normative is a human experience that offers us possibilities for our existential projects. Norms are, Sartre says, widespread social structures that regulate human relationships. Sartre argues that all moral norms pose determinate ends to be pursued and simultaneously present these ends as "unconditionally possible."¹⁵ "Unconditionally possible" means whatever the conditions may be. Moral norms have a compelling force on us because they present themselves as commands we are to follow, no matter what. The existence of the unconditionally possible means that the possibility of being a moral person remains open to us at all times, even if we regularly fail to meet the norm.¹⁶

Sartre argues that we live up to norms easily when the practico-inert favors their realization. However, we also encounter difficult circumstances in which our "moral comfort" is upset. Sartre uses the example of a husband and wife in a Puritanical society. The wife has been diagnosed with cancer and will be dead within a year. The husband alone knows the truth about her condition and experiences moral conflict regarding whether or not to tell her. Knowing that her death will come within a year would mean that the strict relationship of deference between them would have to change. The man would have to "invent" a new relationship with his wife. The man chooses to lie to his wife to maintain their current way of life until her death, choosing to avoid "the difficult task of self-invention."¹⁷ The man's failure to invent a new relationship with his wife makes him a "man of repetition,"¹⁸ that is to say, one who lets his behavior be determined by practico-inert norms. The Puritan man in this example chooses repetitive praxis that reaffirms the status quo instead of inventive praxis that would force him to choose a new set of possibilities.

Giving more specific content to his notion of invention, Sartre refers to it as the process in which human consciousness restructures a given field of possibilities in light of a future end. Sartre argues that the structure of the ethical is founded on the "moment of

¹³ Sartre, *Critique*, 332.

¹⁴ Excerpts from Sartre's Cornell lecture notes, titled *Morality and History*, can be found in Robert Stone and Elizabeth Bowman, "Sartre's *Morality and History*: A First Look at the Notes for the Unpublished 1965 Cornell Lecture" in *Sartre Alive*, ed. By Ron Aronson and Adrian Van den Hoven (1991), 53-82.

¹⁵ Sartre, *Morality and History*, found in Stone and Bowman, "Sartre's *Morality and History*," 64.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 65. Sartre appeals to an example of a survey of young female schoolchildren. Asked if they believed that lying should be morally condemned, 95% said yes. When questioned if they themselves lie, 90% of them admitted that they do, in fact, lie. Sartre argues that this is evidence that we want the moral ideal to exist even if we consistently fail to live up to it.

¹⁷ Stone and Bowman, "Sartre's *Morality and History*," 67.

¹⁸ Sartre, *Morality and History*, found in Stone and Bowman, "Sartre's *Morality and History*," 67.

invention" which is present in all praxis.¹⁹ It is human praxis that destructures an impossibility in the present moment and restructures what is given into a field of possibilities for achieving the end. Invention, Sartre says, is the moment present in all human action that reveals the susceptibility of all things to rearrangement into new hierarchies according to our chosen ends. "Invention as a fundamental moment of praxis qualifies all work as the transformation of the impossible into the possible by the modification of present conditions of possibility based on the goal to be realized."²⁰ The moment of invention changes the conditions of possibility when consciousness pursues a new end.²¹

Sartre refers to an "ethical radicalism" in which the historical agent integrates the entirety of one's praxis into the means to achieve the chosen end. Sartre uses the example of Pierre Brossolette, a member of the French socialist party who jumped out of a window to his death after one session of being tortured. Sartre says that because Brossolette feared he may talk after being tortured once, he sought death in order to achieve the unconditional possibility of silence. Unlike the Puritan who chose to lie to his wife, Sartre says, Brossolette uses his autonomy to invent:

At this level, the true meaning of unconditionality is revealed: it is the possibility in me of producing myself as an autonomy which affirms itself by dominating external circumstances instead of being dominated by them; or, if you prefer, *it is the possibility of producing myself as a pure subject of interiority.*²²

A pure subject of interiority is one who controls one's circumstances rather than being controlled by them, no matter what.

Ethics envisaged as a determination of activity appears at first as an essential but provisional moment of all praxis: indeed praxis tears itself away from the given—that is, from the present conditions—by transcending it toward a nonbeing from which praxis returns to the given *in order to invent its own conditions of possibility.* In this *moment of invention*, praxis posits its goal as unconditional.²³

By striving to create oneself in accordance with a norm one conceives as unconditionally possible, for example, as one who does not lie or does not speak under torture, the fundamental inventive moment has the same structure. Sartre is emphasizing that all people possess the power to invent and direct our praxis towards a moral goal. Not all societally specific moral norms are desirable, however, and thus we must appeal to other lectures where Sartre introduces his vision of a universal ethical ideal to be pursued.

¹⁹ Stone and Bowman, "Sartre's Morality and History," 68

²⁰ Sartre, *Morality and History*, quoted in Stone and Bowman, "Sartre's Morality and History," 68.

²¹ As Stone and Bowman comment, "Sartre calls this double process *invention*—a necessary moment of praxis that is specifically ethical. Invention is that moment of historical praxis generally that can lend to any particular project its aspect of unconditional possibility. Of course, given the encounter with matter and the practico-inert, the project may also fail." See "Sartre's Morality and History," 68.

²² Sartre, *Morality and History*, found in Stone and Bowman "Sartre's Morality and History," 70. Emphasis added.

²³ *Ibid.*, 71. Emphasis added.

A lecture where we find this ethical ideal is *The Rome Lecture*.²⁴

In *Rome*, Sartre focuses more concretely on the social demands of ethical invention and the importance of directing our power of invention toward the ultimate moral ideal. Sartre introduces the moral ideal of integral humanity, or that which all human beings have in common. Sartre argues that our commonality is rooted in integral human needs. In *Rome*, he argues that ethics requires individuals to bond their praxes together to work for a society in which as many people have their needs met as possible. This ambitious task requires the use of autonomous free praxis and the courage to imagine a different future unconfined by the current oppressive practico-inert structures:

There will be no integral man as long as the practico-inert alienates man, that is, as long as men, instead of being their product, are only the products of their products, *as long as they do not unite into an autonomous praxis which will submit the world to the satisfaction of their needs* without being enslaved and divided by their practical objectification.²⁵

It is clear that Sartre's ultimate moral goal, a universal humanism in which human needs are fulfilled, requires that individuals unite together into an autonomous, free praxis. Sartre argues that we should establish a "pure unconditioned norm" which is not alienated by the practico-inert. Sartre again suggests that this morality is found in solidarity with exploited people because they seek a "future beyond the system."²⁶ Sartre believes that the underprivileged have unique insight into the integral humanity ideal because they feel no natural attachment to the status quo. Sartre makes a bold call for those who live in a society alienated from integral humanity, to overthrow their current social and economic systems in order to become fully human and produce a future that will enable autonomous, integral, and whole humanity.²⁷

While Sartre does not use the term "invention" in *Rome*, the idea of invention is implicit with his discussion of a "pure unconditioned norm" and a "future beyond the system." The fulfillment of needs, or the pursuit of a society in which needs are met, requires envisioning a future that transcends our current social and political structures. This means that we must look beyond current practico-inert limitations and invent a new future, a new system, and a new form of communal praxis. While the emphasis in the lecture is on human need, his underlying argument is that fulfillment of needs, or "integral humanity" will allow the possibility of creative praxis. In this sense, the fulfillment of needs is not only intrinsically good, but plays an instrumental role in creating an environment where creative and inventive praxis can become the norm. Currently oppressive economic structures keep many people at the level of the subhuman, as their praxis must be devoted to meeting their daily needs amidst practico-inert limitations.

²⁴ These notes are understood to be the most complete account of Sartre's later ethics. The untitled notes were written in preparation for a lecture Sartre gave at the Instituto Gramsci on May 23, 1964, at a conference titled "Ethics and Society." Translated by Robert Stone and Elizabeth Bowman, accessed September 7-20 2015 at Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, France.

²⁵ Sartre, *The Rome Lecture*, 100. Emphasis added.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

The last lecture that exemplifies both the individual and social nature of invention is *A Plea for Intellectuals*. In this lecture, Sartre emphasizes that ethical invention should be preceded by a critical reflection on oneself in one's historical moment, which includes immersing oneself in the experiences of others. Sartre also explicitly argues that ethics requires rejecting deeply engrained ideologies in favor of praxis devoted to universal humanism. Sartre's lectures were often directed at a very specific demographic among society, and *A Plea* speaks to experts of practical knowledge, or academically-oriented professionals.²⁸ He argues that the pursuit of a job as a technician of practical knowledge submits students to a "specific structuration of the field of their possibilities, of studies to be undertaken, and at the same time, a *destiny*."²⁹ Sartre means that their education directs them towards particular ways of thinking about the world. The training they take on is presented as universal and objective, but the individuals are inevitably instilled with ideologies and educated to preserve the values and traditions of the dominant class.

Sartre says that technicians of practical knowledge eventually become aware of a "fundamental contradiction"³⁰ regarding their status in society: they have likely been humanists their entire lives and believe that all human beings deserve equal respect and opportunity. However the technicians themselves are living proof that all human beings do *not* have equal opportunities, as they occupy privileged positions many never have access to. Additionally, while they seek universal forms of knowledge, they can only do so within an obedience to an ideology and political policy. Sartre argues the professional can do one of two things: either accept the dominant ideology, or become intellectuals who call into question the very system of which they are products.³¹ To become an intellectual constitutes a rejection of the ideologies upon which they were trained, thus requiring a renunciation of deeply instilled beliefs. This necessitates projecting oneself toward a new set of possibilities, a transformative process. Sartre emphasizes that the transition to the new mode of being requires that intellectuals investigate themselves first, as an attempt to rid themselves of their contradictions. This requires an investigation of the ideologies, structures, and praxis of the society of which they are the products, because "the self is referred to the world and the world is referred to the self."³² Ethical invention must be preceded by a historically and culturally situated understanding of oneself in the world.³³

In the critical exploration of themselves and the world, intellectuals will perceive many things that are in contradiction with the ideologies upon which they have been educated. "[H]e will perceive *that man does not exist*."³⁴ In other words, they will perceive that a universal humanism does not currently exist. Intellectuals will come to grasp "man as a *task* [...]" an intellectual who achieves self-awareness necessarily comes to see both his

²⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, "A Plea for Intellectuals" [1972], in *Between Marxism and Existentialism* (1974), 230.

²⁹ Sartre, "A Plea for Intellectuals," 230.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 242.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 246.

³² *Ibid.*, 248.

³³ *Ibid.*, 247.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 250.

own singularity and its adumbration of man, as the distant goal of a practical and daily enterprise."³⁵ Sartre calls intellectuals to invent themselves by directing their praxis towards the goal of a universal humanism, reinventing their social world at the same time. In order for intellectuals to know their contradictions, they must remove themselves from their situations and immerse themselves in the experiences of those who have not had access to the same life privileges. "It follows that if he wishes to understand the society in which he lives, he has only one course open to him and that is to adopt the point of view of its most underprivileged members."³⁶ If intellectuals adopt the viewpoint of individuals who endure a multitude of different types of exploitation, they can see themselves from below, truly understanding the ambiguity of their positions.³⁷ Sartre concludes the lecture with a discussion of the task of the writer. He says:

[T]o the extent that this creative freedom aims at communication, it addresses itself to the creative freedom of the reader and solicits him to recompose the work by reading it (for reading to, is creation); in other words, it invites him freely to grasp his own being-in-the-world as if it were a product of his freedom—as if he were the responsible author of his being-in-the-world even while suffering it.³⁸

Sartre emphasizes the creative freedom of the author while at the same time highlighting the ability of the author to stimulate the creative freedom of the reader, and inspire the reader to use their freedom to author their own being in the world, creating the conditions for the possibility of their transformation. This is an inventive task on behalf of the writer and the reader—an intersubjective process that transforms them both.³⁹

A Plea exemplifies the theme of invention at the level of the individual and of society. At the individual level, the intellectual must invent themselves by rejecting bourgeois values and ideologies, even those that favor themselves, immerse themselves in the experiences of the exploited classes, and have the courage to choose a new set of possibilities, even if that means putting themselves at risk. At the social level, they must have the courage to use their privilege to advocate for the exploited classes as well as direct their free praxis toward the societal goal of universal humanism, although the means for getting there and the exact form this system would take have yet to be invented. This

³⁵ Ibid. Sartre's emphasis.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 258

³⁸ Ibid., 278.

³⁹ Kristian Klockars argues that the take-away from Sartre's discussion in *A Plea* is that for Sartre, morality concerns values chosen by concrete individuals in their praxis. Klockars interprets Sartre as saying that the question of morality "concerns our possibilities to reflectively take the conditions revealed into account in our praxis" (168). In Klockars' interpretation, ethical reflection should include deciphering the impact of a specific value to social reality and deciding which values are justified in historical praxis (171-177). This ethical reflection should be informed by directly immersing oneself in the experiences of the vulnerable in order to better understand how different people are affected by our current social and political structures. See Kristian Klockars, *Sartre's Anthropology as a Hermeneutics of Praxis* (1998).

invention cannot be *ex nihilo*, but must take the experiences of the underprivileged classes as a starting point.

When we consider *Morality and History*, *The Rome Lecture*, and *A Plea*, we can outline Sartre's notion of ethical invention as follows. First, ethical invention relies on the inventive moment inherent in our praxis when we transform a given environment into a field of possibilities for achieving a goal. Ethical invention must seize on the inventive moment inherent in all praxis and positively will it. Second, invention requires a willingness to break with our current way of being and choose possibilities that may be a direct rupture with the choices we made in the past, especially choices that affirmed the status quo. This is clear in *Morality* in Sartre's example of the Puritan man who chooses repetitive praxis and in *A Plea* with his call for intellectuals to rid themselves of their contradictions and redirect their praxis. Third, as shown in *Rome*, for invention to qualify as ethical, it must be rooted in the ethical ideal of integral humanity. Fourth, ethical invention should be preceded by critical reflection on ourselves in our historical moment, as exemplified in *A Plea*, when Sartre argues the intellectual can only investigate oneself by understanding the society of which one is a part. Lastly, ethical invention requires a robust sense of courage on behalf of the moral agent. In the example of Brossolette, Sartre argues that ethical invention requires not only courage but the ultimate sacrifice. While the example of Brossolette's suicide is quite extreme, Sartre's example of the Puritan couple is more relatable. Sartre shows that it is often easier to repeat one's current way of life than to have the courage to take up a difficult, ethical path of invention. It is also noteworthy that Sartre devotes an entire lecture to the task of the intellectual and the writer, suggesting that Sartre saw the increased privilege that comes with access to higher levels of education to correspond with an increasing responsibility to take on the burden of ethical invention.

II. ETHICAL INVENTION IN FOUCAULT

Foucault was adamant throughout this career that he was dedicated to uncovering, not legislating. This was another point of disagreement with Sartre, as Sartre was not hesitant to take moral and political stands. However, if we look to Foucault's spoken statements on ethics, as well as his exploration of historical ethical practices, we see at least one common theme for an ethical life emerges: an ethical life should be inventive. For Foucault, an inventive life involves a transformation of the self in relation to our historical field of truth, knowledge, and power. Like Sartre, Foucauldian invention must be preceded by a historical understanding of ourselves.

In *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault retrospectively comments on his motives throughout his career. He states that throughout his works he has explored a "history of thought," which he describes as:

[A]n analysis of what could be called focal points of experience in which forms of a possible knowledge (*savoir*), normative frameworks of behavior for individuals, and potential modes of existence for possible subjects are linked together.⁴⁰

He identifies three different axes in his work: the axis of things, the axis of behavior, and an axis of modes of subjectivity.⁴¹ All of these axes, ultimately, were dedicated to what it meant to be a subject in a specific historical context. In his works on the axis of things, his interest was the lived experiences of subjects in different historical periods that were influenced by the creation of bodies of knowledge and different standards for truth.⁴² In the second axis, where his focus is on behavior, Foucault analyzed strategies of power and how conduct was controlled, observed, and classified in order to establish different categories of normality and abnormality.⁴³ Foucault's third axis refers to modes of being a subject or practices of the self.⁴⁴ This refers to ways that subjects perform practices on themselves in order to become a certain type of subject. In this stage, he examines the ethical practices of ancient cultures. Every stage of his thought, Foucault says:

[T]ried to define to some degree what could be called "experiences." The experience of madness, the experience of disease, the experience of criminality, and the experience of sexuality are, I think, important focal points of experiences in our culture.⁴⁵

Foucault's famous explorations of madness, prisons, sexuality, and ethics are ultimately about experiences people have that influence what they think, speak about, and do. He explored different historical and cultural contexts to understand what it meant to be a subject at that particular time in that particular place.

While he believed there was no ethical system that could transcend an historical epoch, Foucault's comments on ethics focus on a specific theme. In a 1980 interview with Michael Bess, when questioned about ethics, Foucault replied that ethical practice should rely on "*refusal, curiosity, and innovation.*"⁴⁶ When the questioner pressured Foucault because his answer was too vague, Foucault responded, "I'm not a prophet. I'm not an organizer. I don't want to tell people what they should do [...] I try to analyze a real situation in its various complexities, with the goal of allowing refusal, and curiosity, and innovation."⁴⁷ Before we address innovation, let us first examine curiosity and refusal.

When we consider Foucault's entire corpus and his retrospective statements about his objectives, I believe that refusal and curiosity together refer to a process of critical historical interrogation of both ourselves and our social situation. Refusal likely refers to a

⁴⁰ Michel Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at Collège de France 1982-1983* (2010), 3.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

⁴² This period of his thought included works such as Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* [1966] (1994) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* [1969] (1972).

⁴³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* [1976] (1990). *Discipline and Punish* [1975] (1977).

⁴⁴ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual: Interview by Michael Bess" [1980], *History of the Present* 4 (1988): 13, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Foucault, "Power, Moral Values, and the Intellectual," 13.

rejection of the inevitability or necessity of our current practices. In an interview in *Technologies of the Self*, Foucault says,

It is one of my targets to show people that a lot of things that are a part of their landscape—that people think are universal—are the result of some very precise historical changes. All my analyses are against the idea of universal necessities in human existence. They show the arbitrariness of the institutions and the spaces of freedom we can still enjoy and how many changes can still be made.⁴⁸

Foucault expresses the sentiment that his works were catalysts for interrogating our current social and historical situation. He emphasizes that his works were intended to open up spaces of freedom. However freedom for Foucault is not the robust sense of individual transcendence that we find in Sartre. In another interview, when he was again criticized for not telling people what to do, Foucault responds:

If I do not say what ought to be done, it is not because I believe there is nothing to be done. Quite on the contrary, I think there are a thousand things to be done, *to be invented*, to be forged, by those who, recognizing the relations of power in which they are implicated, have decided to resist or escape them. From this point of view, my entire research rests upon the postulate of an absolute optimism. I do not undertake my analyses to say: look how things are, you are all trapped. I do not say such things except insofar as I consider this to permit some transformation of things. Everything I do, I do in order that it may be of use.⁴⁹

Here again, Foucault states that his historical analyses were intended to be useful. They were introduced in order to show how strategies of power shape our situation, and simultaneously reveal the contingency of our situation. This allows people to see spaces of resistance or possibilities for change, which could enable the creation of something new. But he would never tell people what that new thing should be—that is up to individuals themselves to *invent*.

One resource we could explore to see how Foucault viewed ethical invention functioning in the past is through his exploration of historical *parrhesia* or truth-telling. While Foucault does not advocate we return to any specific form of *parrhesia*, exploring how an inventive ethics functioned in the past could offer insight into how it might manifest in the present. Foucault shows that, historically, ethics, philosophy, and truth-telling were inseparable creative and transformative processes. While we cannot return to the practices of the Greeks, we can see how truth-telling, philosophy, and power functioned together in a transformative way.

In *The Government of Self and Others*, Foucault studies *parrhesia* alongside the relationship between politics and philosophy in Ancient Greece and Rome, and early Christianity. In late Antiquity and the first two centuries BCE, Foucault says there was a development

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, "Truth, Power, Self: An Interview with Michel Foucault" [1982], in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (1988), 11.

⁴⁹ Michel Foucault, *Dits et Écrits 1954–1988, Vol. II, 1976–1988* (2013), 911-912. Emphasis added.

of a technique of telling the truth in which one could not properly care for oneself without a relationship to another person. The role of this person was to tell the truth.⁵⁰

Truth-telling by the other, as an essential component of how he governs us, is one of the essential conditions for us to be able to form the right kind of relationship with ourselves that will give us virtue and happiness.⁵¹

Telling the truth was not about revealing timeless metaphysical facts about ourselves or the world, but had to do with the way one related to self and others in processes of government. Truth telling was about forming a particular type of relationship with ourselves, which at the time was a transformative process.

Foucault examines Plato's *Seventh Letter* and the philosophical *parrhesia* contained therein. Foucault explains that there was a deterioration of the connection between democracy and *parrhesia*, insofar as democracy, which allowed everyone to speak equally, came to narrow the space where *parrhesia* could be practiced. *Parrhesia* was in danger of being indistinguishable from flattery. This is why, Plato argues, philosophers must come to power.⁵² It is to be noted that the type of philosophy advocated for was not a transmission of knowledge, but rather "a mode of life, a way of being, a practical relationship to oneself through which one elaborates oneself and works on oneself."⁵³ This mode of being was characterized by taking part in an active philosophical task (*ergon*), in which the philosopher was concerned with the affairs of the city and the governing of others.

Foucault argues that philosophy in Plato's *Seventh Letter* was not a form of truth-telling that legislated. If philosophy intervened in politics, it was to help those who govern and those who were governed to learn to care for themselves and others.⁵⁴ Importantly, philosophy was viewed as a constant work performed on the self:

[T]he reality of philosophy is found in the relationship of self to self. And it is indeed in setting out the problem of the government of self and the government of others that philosophy, here, in this text, formulates its *ergon*, at once its task and its reality.⁵⁵

The self described in this passage does not refer to an unchanging metaphysical reality, but a subject that is constantly produced and transformed. The task and reality of philosophy was to perform work on oneself and to become more balanced and reflective when governing oneself and others. Philosophers helped those who governed turn their gazes inward in order to first know themselves. By doing so, they were able to independently envision foundations for concepts of justice regarding how politics should operate, and then direct that knowledge outwards, to govern others.⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Foucault, *The Government of Self and Others*, 43.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 232-234.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 255-257.

While there is no use of the word “invention” in these passages, there is a portrayal of a general creativity and transformativity as a way of life. Philosophy was not just formulation of logical arguments, but an active process of work on the self. It allowed the individual subject to understand his or her place in the social order in relationship to the processes governing public life. Through the philosophical way of life, the relationship to self was changed when one better understood how one fits in relation to others and in the public sphere. In *Government*, Foucault recalls a historical time when ethics, in the sense of how to relate with others, was intrinsically linked with *parrhesia* and the willingness to transform the self.

*The Courage of Truth*⁵⁷ explores these themes further. Invention as an ethical way of life is cogently exemplified in Foucault’s description of the philosophical life practiced by the Cynics. Foucault finds the Cynics particularly interesting as they took the Greek concept of a true life and made it their own—inventing their own ethical way of life. The Cynic life was characterized by intentional poverty, begging, and roaming, which they considered the conditions of possibility for telling the truth.⁵⁸ The truth was to be publicly visible in one’s behavior, and one’s body, dress, and general conduct was intended to give witness to it.⁵⁹ In Foucault’s account, the “true life” in Ancient Greek thought could be characterized according to four principles. First, the true life was unconcealed, in the sense that a true life did not hide its intentions and aims. Second, the true life was unalloyed, that is to say, good and evil, pleasure and suffering, vice and virtue were separated and kept distinct. Third, the true life was a straight life, or a life lived according to norms and principles of conduct. And fourth, the true life was unchanging, permanent and without disturbance or corruption.⁶⁰ Foucault says that Cynicism never broke with this concept of a true life, but rather, took these themes “to their extreme consequence, as an extrapolation of the themes of the true life rather than as external to them.”⁶¹

The Cynic life was still based on the four themes of Greek truth, but they took these themes and transformed them. The Cynic interpretation of the unconcealed life was a life lived concretely and materially in front of others, exemplified in their intentional public presentation of poverty.⁶² The unalloyed life under the Cynic interpretation was characterized by a real material poverty without possessions. It was an active poverty that sought more than just lack of concern for wealth, but a physical state of being in scarcity.⁶³ The straight life was a life that conformed to the principles of nature, embracing animality and others types of brute existence. These three changes in the unconcealed, unalloyed, and straight life are what Foucault calls the “Cynic reversal.” The last characteristic of a

⁵⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: The Government of Self and Others II, Lectures at Collège de France, 1983-1984* (2011).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 220-225.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 253.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 258-259.

“true life” as an unchanging or incorruptible life took the form of a sovereign life. The sovereign was a philosopher king who by nature cared for others to the extent that he would be willing to sacrifice himself for others.⁶⁴ The aim of Cynic life, according to Foucault, was not just to say what the world is in its truth, but to exemplify it:

[I]ts final aim, is to show that the world will be able to get back to its truth, will be able to transfigure itself and [...] in order to get back to what it is in its truth, only at the price of a change, a complete alteration, the complete change and alteration in the relation one has to self.⁶⁵

The Cynic reversal took the Greek notion of a true life and invented something new with it. This new notion of true life was materially presented in front of others, and one’s entire body and existence in the world became part of bearing witness to the truth. To do so fully required a change or transformation in oneself. We see in the Cynic sense of invention not only as a conscious creative process, but a complete transformation of one’s material existence in the world.

In his analysis of Foucault’s ethics, Colin Koopman argues that a Foucauldian ethical orientation requires a general disposition towards transformation. He argues that there are two different forms of transformation in Foucault’s portrayal of historical *parrhesia*: a social transformation and an individual transformation. On the social level, *parrhesia* is portrayed not as a transmission of the knowledge that social practices are unjust, but “rather transforming our conceptions of justice such that we can come to recognize certain practice as possibly unjust.”⁶⁶ *Parrhesia* as a political practice of truth-telling does not reveal what is true or false about society but, rather, “transforms the conditions of the possibility of showing something to be true or false.”⁶⁷ On the level of individual transformation, Koopman argues that *parrhesia* “functions to reflexively effect transformations in our selves: one way of taking care of ourselves.”⁶⁸ Through critical examination of our assumptions about what is true, we exhibit a willingness to become different if this is where our investigation leads us.

Like Sartre’s concept of invention, Foucault’s sense of ethical invention also requires courage. In an interview in which Foucault was asked if he was a philosopher or a historian of thought, he responded:

I don’t feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, *do you think that you would*

⁶⁴ Ibid., 278-279.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 315.

⁶⁶ Collin Koopman, “The Formation and Self-Transformation of the Subject in Foucault’s Ethics” in *A Companion to Foucault*, ed. Christopher Falzon, Timothy O’Learly, and Jana Sawicki (2013), 530.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 537.

*have the courage to write it?...*The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know where it will end.⁶⁹

In another interview, Foucault states that he himself viewed writing as a process of self transformation and a process of thinking something different than he previously thought. He again references the courage necessary for taking up such a task.

An experience is something that one comes out of transformed. If I had to write a book to communicate what I was already thinking, *I would never have the courage to begin*. I only write a book because I don't know exactly what to think about this thing that I so much want to think about, so that the book transforms me and transforms what I think.⁷⁰

Foucault states not only that writing a book is a full transformative experience, but an experience one must begin without knowing where one will end. Beginning a journey in which you don't know where you will end up requires courage.

Also, like Sartre, invention for Foucault cannot arise from nowhere, but first requires a critical inquiry into our present. Foucault's genealogies and historical analyses were examples of critical historical inquiry that could enable the conditions for the possibility of invention. We can also see this theme emerge in Foucault's essay "What is Enlightenment?", where Foucault explores the historical context of philosophy during the period of Enlightenment and presents a distinct task for philosophers today. He suggests philosophers adopt an inquisitive attitude and questioning of historical events and practices that have structured the possibilities for how we think, speak, and behave. He calls this a "historical ontology of ourselves."⁷¹ This process of critical questioning must include a "historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing, thinking, saying."⁷² This critical inquiry does not seek to uncover a metaphysics of human beings which would then be translated into a scientific discourse of the truth about ourselves. Instead, it would reveal our contingency. Foucault's reference to freedom appears to refer to a process of releasing oneself from the shackles imposed by the belief that humans can be reduced to a science, and realizing that the exact nature of what we are is in flux and can be, within our historical limits, invented.

Like the philosopher of the ancient past, Foucault expresses a role for philosophers that does not consist of telling others what should be done, but instead asking new questions that are not currently being asked and potentially changing the conditions of possibility for bearing witness to the truth. This philosophical *ethos*, as Foucault calls it:

⁶⁹ Foucault, "Truth, Power and Self," 9.

⁷⁰ Michel Foucault, "Interview with Michel Foucault" [1978] found in *The Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984. Volume Three: Power*, ed. by J. Faubion (2000), 239-240. Emphasis added.

⁷¹ Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?," in *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (1984), 16.

⁷² *Ibid.*

[O]pens up a realm of historical inquiry and puts itself to the test of reality, of contemporary reality, both to grasp the points where change is possible and desirable, and to determine the precise form this change should take.⁷³

He is careful not to advance the point of view that this historical ontology could give us complete and definitive knowledge of ourselves and our historical limits, as it is impossible to objectively remove ourselves from our current way of thinking. He suggests that the criticism makes an indefinite number of inquiries into how we are constituted as subjects of knowledge, power relations, and moral subjects of our own actions.⁷⁴ By posing these questions for different historical epochs, we unveil the contingency of our present.

Thus, while Foucault gives no structured ethical framework, we see that he consistently portrays the disposition to invent as key to an ethical life. His historical analyses were intended to help us understand who we currently are and at the same time reveal the contingency of our current ways of thinking, speaking, and doing. He saw writing as a courageous, inventive process that changed him in the process and enabled change in others. In his historical exploration of *parrhesia*, he opens a window to the past in which philosophy was a way of life that transformed oneself and the way that one related to others. In his discussion of the Cynics, he identifies a historical example of invention—taking a presently operative concept and inventing a new way of life with it. While the key to invention has to do with the relationship of self to self, this also transforms one's relationship with others.

III. SARTRE AND FOUCAULT AND ETHICAL INVENTION

To date, the most robust comparative study of Sartre and Foucault comes from Thomas Flynn in his monumental works *Sartre, Foucault and Historical Reason, Volumes 1 and 2*.⁷⁵ In the second volume, Flynn elaborates on two key differences between Sartre's and Foucault's views on subjectivity, which have implications for their views of subjectivity. The first difference concerns the ontological nature of the interaction of the subject with the sources of conditioning. Sartre argues that history is incorporated into our project in a dialectical way whereas Foucault argues that we develop as subjects through historical breaks without dialectical continuity. Sartre considers that manipulated nature, machines, social institutions, class being, language, and ideas are "layers" of the practico-inert. These structuring conditions are presented as the antithesis of praxis: they limit and enable praxis. The practico-inert and praxis thus create a circular dialectic in which the practico-inert encounters praxis and incorporates it into the practico-inert. Foucault, on the other hand, does not posit the existence of an ontological realm with consistent characteristics that functions in opposition to human consciousness throughout each historical period, nor does he believe that the structuring conditions operate in a dialectical relationship

⁷³ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 47- 49.

⁷⁵ Thomas Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason: Vol 1: Toward an Existentialist Theory of History* (1997), and *Volume 2: Toward a Post-Structuralist Mapping of History* (2005).

with human thought and action. Instead, each epoch is characterized by rupture, so that new modes of thinking, speaking, and doing replace the old.⁷⁶

The second major difference between the two accounts concerns human agency, that is to say, the degree of freedom and deliberate choice-making of the human subject. According to Sartre, agents have a greater degree of freedom and conscious control over shaping our possibilities than Foucault allows.⁷⁷ Flynn emphasizes the fundamental incompatibility between Sartre and Foucault to be their views of human agency, which diverge because of their positions on freedom.⁷⁸ In Sartre's view, while the practico-inert saturates our experience with meanings we cannot help but take for granted, those meanings are themselves the product of past praxis. As the practico-inert is created by praxis, it is ultimately intentional human action that can take control.⁷⁹ For Foucault, however, we experience our freedom through practicing it, not through simply consciously experiencing the world. We *exercise* freedom by resisting power mechanisms, or by performing active critical reflection. Our original interpretation of our situation and our place is determined by the categories of our *episteme*, and the frameworks for normality and abnormality that are presented to us, not chosen. Our freedom emerges secondarily to these forces of conditioning. Thus, Foucault's sense of individual autonomy and agency is not originary and must be developed through reflection and practice.⁸⁰

For these reasons we must be careful not to assume that Foucault was merely continuing Sartre's ethical project. Foucault himself saw stark differences between his works and Sartre's, and we can see there are real differences in their thought. This has implications for the scope of the critical historical reflection required for invention. For Sartre, critical historical reflection examines the dialectical interaction between praxis and the practico-inert, while, for Foucault, critical historical reflection is characterized by identifying historical breaks. This is important because Sartre thinks that there is a pattern in the way we interact with history, while Foucault believes it to be characterized by rupture. Thus, according to Foucault, we should not look to uncover commonalities between our present and previous epochs. This should not be confused with Foucault's argument that our own ways of thinking and doing are historically specific. But it means we cannot look to the past ways of thinking and doing to understand our own. This is why care of self and philosophical way of life cannot be recovered in the present in the same way they were practiced in the past.

The second key difference involves the precise role of freedom in invention. For Sartre, since praxis is free and has primacy over the practico-inert, invention can look beyond existing practico-inert categories and imagine a future with different structures. More importantly, because of our intentional praxis, we can rearrange our possibilities in the present in such a way that we can potentially use the practico-inert to our advantage.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 232-236.

⁷⁷ Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason Vol. 2*, 232-260.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 256.

⁷⁹ Flynn elaborates on this in depth in *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism* (1984), 109-115.

⁸⁰ See Flynn, *Sartre, Foucault Vol. 2*, 258-260.

Invention can involve a direct break or rupture from our own personal past, which is possible given the robust sense of agency that Sartre grants to praxis. For Foucault, we cannot objectively reflect on our current *episteme*, because it is our blind spot, so to speak. Consequently we are not in a position to envision a future that transcends our historical limits. Invention is primarily about new modes of governing ourselves, relating to others and the relationship we choose to have with telling the truth in our epoch. While it requires a general willingness and courage to become different, we do not have the same degree of freedom and control over the conditioning forces that offer us possibilities for thinking, doing, and being.

Despite these key differences however, there are distinct similarities between their ethical visions as well. Although they come to the topic from different perspectives, both thinkers consider an ethical life a particular way of creating oneself in the world alongside others. A key component of this process is the courage to invent. Sartre emphasizes that ethics requires us to upset our own moral comfort and look beyond existing practico-inert structures. Invention is both a willingness to transform our own personal possibilities and invention of a social system that transcends the status quo. Foucault speaks of a courage to think something different than we thought before and to take up the task of recreating ourselves through practice. He offers us a window into a time when one had to make oneself different in order to be capable of receiving the truth. Thus, both thinkers share the view that ethics involves a willingness and courage to exercise freedom, become different, and transform oneself. Both thinkers also argue that this sense of invention must be preceded by a critical historical understanding of ourselves.

Both thinkers' notion of ethical invention are conceptually rooted in their rejection of the inherent values of things. Sartre's and Foucault's sense of ethical invention rejects inevitabilities in our moral practice, and rejects any inherent set of values or norms. When Sartre discusses the inventive moment present in all praxis, he speaks of the fact that we realize the susceptibility of all things to be rearranged according to our own hierarchies. We recognize ourselves as the ones who bring value to the world and that what we place front and center in our praxis becomes most important. Our entire environment can be reinvented based on the values that we project on to it. Foucault, too, showed a lack of necessity in our social world, using his historical analyses of the past to show that our current ways of thinking and doing are contingent, not universal. Further, there is no metaphysics of what it means to be human, for this changes over time.

Both thinkers argue that ethical invention involves a willingness to break with our current patterns of thinking and acting. In *A Plea*, Sartre emphasizes that intellectuals must reject harmful ideologies, many of which are part of their academic training and thus deeply engrained. In order to usher in this radical break, it is necessary that they immerse themselves in the experiences of the exploited classes in order to gain a viewpoint closer to the ideal of universal humanism and less biased in favor of those who are already privileged in society. Foucault speaks of resisting current power relations as well as the arbitrariness of our current social institutions, which once realized, allow for change. He

viewed his own works as revealing the contingency of our present in order to reveal spaces for resistance and transformation.

The last notable similarity in the two philosophers' accounts is that they both speak directly to philosophers or intellectuals as having a special obligation to invent. Sartre devotes an entire lecture directly to intellectuals, suggesting that their positions in the world bestow upon them a greater sense of responsibility: to gain insight into the experiences of the exploited, and to use their education to creatively invent new means of overcoming this exploitation. Foucault directs his analyses towards other philosophers, recounting a time when philosophy functioned as an inventive way of life. Additionally, he specifically suggests that philosophers make critical historical inquiries into our existing power relations. Both philosophers thought that higher levels of education and intellectual ability were accompanied by a corresponding obligation to live an inventive, ethical life. In a similar vein, both thinkers saw the process of writing itself as an inventive task. Sartre specifically speaks of the ability of writers to use creative freedom to reinvent themselves and the reader. Foucault speaks of his books transforming himself and what he thought. Both see the possibility of invention as inherent in the creative process of writing.

CONCLUSION

While Foucault himself may not have seen his work as compatible with Sartre's, we see that despite some key disagreements, both saw invention as a vital component of ethical life. Through an examination of Sartre's and Foucault's later lectures on ethics, we see that despite several key differences, both advocate for a vision of ethics that combines critical historical reflection with courageous invention. Both philosophers call on us to combine a historical diagnosis of our subjectivity with the courage to invent in our present. For both, invention is not an isolated individual task, but something we must partake in alongside others. Both call us as philosophers to have the courage to create ourselves anew alongside others, as well as the courage to resist or change the current social order. Both leave us with an ongoing ethical task to be pursued—a future for ourselves and others, yet to be invented.

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