

# Escaping into the Other

## An Existential View of Sex and Sexuality<sup>1</sup>

---

**Richard Pearce**

---

### **Abstract**

Drawing on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, this paper develops an existential approach to sex and Sexuality. The initial focus draws on Sartre's early work pertaining to 'being for others', before considering the significance of his later work, in particular his attempts to contextualise the individual within a social and historical context.

### **Keywords**

Consciousness; Dialectic; Existential; Intimacy; Sartre; Sex; Sexuality

### **What is an existential perspective?**

The sub-title of this paper is "an existential view of sex and sexuality" and it seems appropriate to start with highlighting what it is that we mean by an "existential view" in this context. I describe myself as an existential psychotherapist and counsellor, but it is highly likely that I work differently to a greater or lesser degree, than to those describing themselves in the same way. This is to be expected, since one thing that an existential perspective allows is the uniqueness of each individual, and this includes the uniqueness of each therapist. So when I am talking of an existential perspective I am talking about *my* existential perspective. Nevertheless this exercise would be pointless if there were not significant areas of agreement regarding what it means to work existentially and common ground with regard to what is significant about this approach with regard to sex and sexuality.

I suggest that the first axiom of an existential approach in this context is the idea that we are relational beings and defined by our relationships. That is not to say that we are solely a product of our relationships, but that we cannot *imagine* ourselves except through our relationship both with other beings and with nature. As sexual beings, therefore, we are defined, in part, by our sexual relationships.

Underpinning this axiom is the premise that the existential approach denies two potential dichotomies: that between subject and object, and that between interior and exterior. The first of these pertains to a discussion of self, or the absence of self. Critical here is the idea of the unconscious, and our rejection of the idea of an independent system governing psychological

activity that takes place ‘out of awareness’ [Spinelli, 2001; Ch. 4]. I believe this has profound implications for an existential view of sex, as I will return to below.

The second premise pertains to a critique of the idea of an independently fashioned psyche, and an acceptance that we can only perceive ourselves as ‘being in the world’, as entities in context; as beings that are, at least in part, fashioned by our environments: physical, social and cultural. Again, I believe it is an intrinsic part of an existential approach to sexuality that we both accept, and seek to understand, the influence on both sexual preferences and sexual activity of these environments.

One final hallmark of an existential perspective is the acceptance of choice: that the individual is free to choose who they are in the context of their facticity; a contingent freedom, perhaps, but a freedom nevertheless. How does this notion fit with perspectives on sex and sexuality? This raises the question of how much we are responsible for our sexual proclivities, and I will try to open up this can of worms later.

In summary, I am saying that an existential perspective of sex hinges on the premise that sex is an activity that is relational; contingent; and, to a greater or lesser extent, consciously driven by choice. I should also add that from this perspective sex is also an activity that is future oriented, that sexual practice is an activity (like all others) that involves or responds to a sentient yearning for what might be, for a state other than the present.

## **Sex, the body and ‘being sexually’**

Weaving sex more fully into the existential fabric, I begin with a look at the interior: the body as a sexual organism; before considering the exterior, the environmental factors affecting our sexual activity. I will then briefly present a first attempt at integrating these dichotomies into a view of our sexual facticity.

It is widely agreed that our sexual drive has evolved in order to ensure the survival of our genes, and science tells us that the stimulation of reproductive organs activates, in turn, pleasure centres in the brain that provides an incentive for sexual and therefore reproductive activity. The bodily awareness of our sexual potential (or the potential for sexual activity) is motivated and accentuated by the release of hormones (chemicals released by cells that affect physiological activity elsewhere in the body). So, in terms of our physiology we are (to a greater or lesser extent) sexual beings with sexual potential.

Although some Darwinian fundamentalists may argue differently, the idea that sexual activity in humans is governed to any great extent by the need to perpetuate or diversify genetic blueprints is largely rejected. We are much more complex than that. As well as our physiology, our sexual activity will be influenced by our socio-economic, cultural and physical

environments. The influence of the physical environment on cultural and social organisation is also well documented.

Thus, for existentialists, the body is more than just a physical object, it exists in a context: a locational context that influences habitat and appearance; a socio-economic context that influences physical well-being, security and class status; and a cultural context, where norms of behaviour are imposed in some way. This implies that while the sexual 'drive', or the sexual imperative that makes the desire for sexual contact part of existence, is a characteristic of our facticity, the body does not describe facticity entirely. Because humans exist in a context, that context will also determine how the sexual is expressed [Spinelli, 2001: Chapter 5].

Perhaps the first thing to note about ourselves as sexual beings is that our sexual behaviour is very diverse. In expressing themselves sexually, humans can be heterosexual, homosexual, or bi-sexual. The act itself is often in pairs, but can also be in groups or alone. It can involve penetration (engulfment) or not, and a variety of erogenous zones. Its very diversity reinforces the idea of conscious choice.

When we describe ourselves as sexual beings, what do we mean? We know that humans are embodied with senses that facilitate the desire for sexual contact, and that the latter is driven, in part, by hormonal imperatives. These basic drives are part of our facticity. But when we talk of ourselves as sexual beings we, as existentialists, are talking of embodied beings, implying that it is inappropriate to make a distinction between mental and physical dimensions of being, or between the body and consciousness. The extent to which individual existential philosophers departed from a Cartesian dualism in this respect is controversial, but if we accept, initially, the notion of ourselves as an embodied consciousness, then this has profound implications for ourselves as sexual beings.

Our sexual potential, from an existential perspective, will be described by a combination of the body we are borne and grow with, and the interaction of that body with the environmental context in which it lives and experiences. Together, these describe the objective conditions of our sexual existence, of our being as a sexual being. This facticity, however, does not describe us sexually if we are embodied beings, as it does not allow for consciousness. If we are an embodied consciousness, our sexual behaviour is, at least to a degree, consciously driven. The very diversity of sexual activity reflects this role of consciousness, which is the heart, I suggest, of what we are considering in an existential perspective on sex and sexuality. To develop this further I want to draw on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre.

## Sartre and Sexuality

Sartre's work on sexuality develops from his chapter in *Being and Nothingness* on 'the Existence of Others', where he elucidates his perspective of 'being-for-others' [Sartre, 1956: Part 3, Ch. 1]. His writing on the 'look' is well known, especially the notorious 'keyhole' episode. This analysis of being-for-others can in turn be seen as the basis of his thinking on inter-subjectivity. The expression 'look', however, can be interpreted as limiting the implications of what is implied. An alternative expression might be a 'coming into awareness', for which sight recognition is not a necessary condition. When we bring an 'other' into our awareness they become an object to us, something upon which we might exercise our will. The reciprocal of this is our own object like status to the other. This invokes feelings of self-consciousness (or shame) as our subjectivity is 'captured' and reduced to object-like status by the other.

The reciprocal nature of this process is apparent, as is our desire not only to exercise our will upon the other (whether benignly or otherwise), but also to know and influence the perception of our self that the other brings into awareness. It is not only the other's objectivity that we seek to appropriate in this inter-subjective process, therefore, but also their subjectivity or freedom with respect to the way in which we are 'seen'.

Put more simply, we desire recognition and affirmation of who we believe ourselves to be within any context; we are seeking acceptance as a consequence of the other's knowledge of our 'selves', a concern that is so prevalent in the therapy room. Whatever the outcome of this process, it is one of 'knowing' and 'being known'; a process through which our relatedness becomes apparent. This notion of seeking affirmation of a sense of ourselves through the other's subjectivity, through appropriation of the other's consciousness, is critical to what Sartre develops as the paradox of inter-subjective relationships.

Two further concepts that Sartre elaborates in this context are those of 'desire' and the 'caress'. Desire is viewed as underlying the attempt to subjugate, to usurp or dominate the other's consciousness. We desire sexually in order to appropriate another's embodied consciousness. The caress is an expression of this desire; it is an attempt to bring or entice this (sexually) embodied consciousness to the surface, in order that it may be captured.

Thus from his discussion of the Look, Sartre reviews at length the impossibility of human relationships in his analysis of inter-subjectivity. It is here that he uses human sexuality as a prototype for all human interactions and arrives at the pessimistic conclusions for which he is renowned [Sartre, 1956; Part 3 Ch. 3].

In the 'First Attitude Towards Others' Sartre talks of love and masochism; the second attitude concerns hate and sadism, but he adds that

there is no stable way of being-for-others, that the contradictions of one position can lead to the other, both contain the other within them.

Sartre used the sexual metaphor in describing relations with others. But I believe he often presented his thoughts in terms of polarities, in order to clarify and strengthen his arguments. But any position on that continuum is unstable: submission takes us close to someone, possibly to the point that we become unnerved by the loss of self and retreat, asserting our own consciousness over the other, with the relationship then becoming one characterised by the attempt to dominate. This continual oscillation seems to characterise human relations in general and sexual relations in particular.

I suggest that in the context of sexual activity, Sartre's first 'attitude' of love and masochism, an attempt to 'woo' the partner, the sexual relationship is characterised by the desire for affirmation that is freely given, the desire for merger with the other through submission. This can be contrasted by the second attitude characterised by hate and sadism, and merger through domination.

In the first, the sexual act can become merely an attempt to please, hence 'love' degenerates into masochism and the subject allows his or her self to be made an object by the other. The experience may then cease to be affirming. This may persist or alternatively the submissive partner may assert their subjectivity and the basis of the relationship shifts to the second attitude. In the second, the attempt to dominate, if successful, may lead to a loss of respect for the partner, such that recognition by that partner is no longer affirming. Again the relationship may continue in this mutually destructive state, or alternatively, it may lead to resistance as the partner asserts their subjectivity and the relationship moves to one based on submission.

The typical stereotype of sexual activity is of the male sadist and the female masochist, with a similar counterpart in homosexual relationships. In part this may be due to fact that often sexual intercourse is completed through penetration of one partner by another, and this act itself is suggestive of physical dominance. Of course this need not be true, but the language used with respect to sexual activity is supportive of such a stereotype. This stereotype is, of course, a grossly distorted one, but it does give a flavour of the conflictual nature of human and sexual relationships.

### **Intimacy: the possibility of mutuality**

It can be argued the conflictual nature of Sartre's portrayal of human relationships does not exhaust what he was describing. The space remains within his ontology for a mutuality of interest, a reciprocity of knowing. If we take the apprehension of the Other as a search for knowledge, the desire to know (or to capture) the Other's subjectivity in order to be known, not

as an object but as a subject, to be affirmed and accepted in one's entirety, then the possibility of reciprocal knowing is established. This may not be achievable, which is perhaps what governed Sartre's perceptions, but it may be held and cherished in some way, it could become work in progress. It could be described as a mutual curiosity, a desire held in common between two mutually engaged subjectivities.

One commentator has developed this perspective to suggest that this mutuality is rendered possible through dialogue, through a narrative exchange [Martinot, 2005]. But one can experience an inter-subjective exchange also through something much more immediate. A common experience is the glance of the stranger, the mutually held curiosity. There is a cultural dimension to this, and that is very important, but in the abstract this exchange of the 'glance' seems to evoke a curiosity, a vista of possibility, a potential for knowing.

We could describe this desire for knowledge of the other, and of one's self through the other, as a process of seeking acceptance, of seeking affirmation of our being-in-the-world through the being-in-the-world of the other.

But the immediacy of the look becomes mediated by reflection, and reflection is fed by knowledge. As the Other's knowledge of one's self grows, so too can the possibility of anxiety informing that exchange, and the mutuality becoming lost. Perhaps this is what led to Sartre's seemingly pessimistic conclusion regarding inter-subjective relationships. But it may also be possible that the dynamic is maintained, that the reciprocal exchange of knowing can be sustained. This is what one might describe as intimacy. I will return to this towards the end of this paper.

The implications for sexual relations are straightforward, and sex can be seen in this respect as *part of* a search for intimacy, a frequently recurring theme in therapy.

Of course, Sartre's search for what it is to be human centred in his early work on consciousness, and this remains core, in my view, in unravelling an existential approach to human sexuality. I will explore some implications of this aspect of his work later in this paper. In considering 'the look' I have merely outlined an aspect of his work that allows a view of sexual activity that explains what we understand by desire or lust in a way that goes beyond the mechanical drives of hormones and gratification. From this quite archetypal and polarised approach a number of important characteristics emerge. These are:

- Sexual attitudes reflect more general human attitudes to 'being with others'.
- They (ways of being sexually) are potentially conflictual and unstable in nature

- There is something about the need for sex, when it is present, which reflects the paradoxical nature of perceptions of self: the desire to hold and concretise, alongside the will to escape and to withdraw, in this case into the other.
- Hence there is an interior conflict alongside, and simultaneous with, an exterior one.
- But there is also the possibility of mutuality, of a reciprocal desire for affirmation and acceptance that is described in the search for intimacy.

## **Incorporating some later Sartrean ideas**

The ideas that I would like first to briefly review are incorporated in the concepts of seriality and praxis, and totalisation. These stem from the Critique of Dialectical Reason, an unfinished work, part of which was first published in 1960, and part posthumously in 1985. This was Sartre's attempt to reconcile existentialism and Marxism, an undertaking that he felt he had completed successfully. A short introduction to this substantial work: the "Search for a Method" probably captures most succinctly his mature approach to understanding what it is to be human.

Perhaps the most important component of the philosophical approach that Sartre develops here is the regressive-progressive method, which provides a way of combining what might be described as sociological and psychological methods to explain human behaviour. Essentially the regressive component involves the interiorisation (absorption and expression) of the 'static' world of the individual's facticity: the social, cultural, environmental and personal 'given' relationships that determine this. The progressive element illustrates how the individual's lived experience of these relationships responds to this interiorisation [Sartre, 1968]. His biographical studies are examples of the deployment of this method<sup>2</sup>.

I have referred to the importance to the existential approach of taking account of the exterior. The concept of totalisation as expounded in the Critique is a way of perceiving this process. Man lives by internalising the external. Through conscious acts she takes what is external and "makes of it a structure of inner life" [Barnes, 1968: xxi]. But what is external: it is the result of past acts of Man as she crafts the world of nature. Hence when we face an experience, we face a totalisation of the cultural, social, economic and environmental. And we act within that totalisation, just as we are part of it. Sartre termed this the practico inert, through which he extends the concept of facticity, the body and its context, to give it a historical and social dimension.

The Sartre of Being and Nothingness reflected the culture of a western, post renaissance world, one which prioritised the individual over the

collective, and one where individual acts driven by individual will were seen as those that shape our knowledge. It is increasingly (geographically) the world we still live in. Sartre's engagement with Marxism allowed him to add dimensions to his thought that saw the individual as neither (just) a product of nature subject to deterministic law, nor as a free and isolated, but autonomous entity. In elaborating the space between existentialism and Marxism he articulated the possibility of the individual both determining and being determined by her exterior, by a socially and physically described facticity.

## **Introducing the dialectic**

So, how might we explain this process? Undoubtedly it would be possible to see these changes in both sexual attitudes and practice as a product of changing socio-economic and (therefore) cultural determinants. In turn it might also be possible to place the dynamism of historical change at the feet of technological change; an all-pervasive technological determinism (a functional Marxism). For Sartre, the process hinges on his notion of 'praxis' and his 'dialectic'. The notion of Praxis for Sartre (meaning a reflective action that seeks to transform that with which it engages) is an extension of the 'project' of Being and Nothingness. The latter he describes as representing the subjective surpassing of objectivity to objectivity, a passage "stretched between the objective conditions of the environment and the objective structure of the field of possibles". It is through praxis, the active engagement with the practico-inert, that we surpass the current objectivity that the latter represents. And this surpassing, the going beyond the situatedness of the current, is a result of a dialectical process [Sartre, 2004b; Ch. I].

From Hegel, through Marx and Kierkegaard, to Sartre, the dialectic represents the interaction of the interior with the exterior in a way that allows not a synthesis of opposites, but one where action arising from a conflict of interior and exterior leads to a new situation (objectivity) where both are changed, but also contain within them the substance of what went before<sup>3</sup>.

This dialectic is demonstrated at the social level by the looking again at the example of the expression of female sexuality in 'western society'. The feminist movement of the 60s and 70s together with the increasing economic importance of women in the market place, as well as the advent of the birth control pill, combined to facilitate a change in cultural attitudes to female sexuality. The praxis of individuals and groups of individuals has led to a changed perception of what is culturally accepted as 'being sexually'. But this emancipation was subsumed within and also subsumed the prevalent context of cultural practices and attitudes (the practico-inert), one that did not value female emancipation. So we have a new synthesis, a

new totalisation where the acceptance of female sexual emancipation has been partial, and where the 'price' has been an increasing commoditisation of female sexuality.

## **The individual and change**

But what facilitated these changes? Where has the motivation for praxis come from? Sartre, in his chapter on the progressive-regressive method [Sartre, 1968, Ch.III], suggests that within a given and determining context, man's praxis or conscious action is what provides the energy that leads to the overturning of those conditions, through subsuming them within a new order, a new totalisation. Thus we (our interiority) simultaneously determine and are determined by our conditions (our exteriority) [Sartre, 1968:87].

But how does 'praxis', the expression of a free conscious will, arise. Here, I believe, Sartre turned to a further dialectic, an internal one, implicit in Being and Nothingness, but made far more explicit in his later work, particularly the pseudo-biography of Flaubert. Some commentators have argued that Sartre's later work, especially his engagement with Marxism, implied a radical departure from the Sartre of Being and Nothingness. Most serious commentators, however, see a continuity of thought, even if there is a changing emphasis<sup>4</sup>. One of the most pervasive icons of his early work is the absolute nature of human freedom, an icon he was at pains to later qualify and reduce. But a window remained, and the window is described by individual praxis [Sartre, 1977: 116, and 2008: 34-35].

## **The Sexual Dialectic**

I suggested previously that in terms of sexual behaviour, there is a difference between sexual compulsion and sexual desire. One might perceive sexual compulsion as an expression of an absolute freedom, a natural freedom, a behaviour that follows the dictates of hormones and also the innate striving for reproduction. In so far as the hormonal structures of females and males differ, one might expect different expressions of compulsive behaviour.

But if we accept that our freedom is constrained, that it arises from our facticity, is contingent, and interacts with those constraints in a dialectical manner; then perhaps it is possible to see sexual activity in a different light, as an expression of desire. But if this is not to degenerate into a conflict between ego and id, how do we find an understanding of desire.

The philosophical basis of this was most clearly expressed by Sartre in his work on Flaubert, although he also said that his biography of Genet most succinctly expressed his thoughts on human freedom [Sartre, 2008:

35]. But it is in the *Idiot of the Family* that he talks of ‘lived experience’ (*Le Vecu*) [Sartre, 1981].

The analysis of consciousness in *Being and Nothingness* distinguishes between pre or non-reflective consciousness and reflective consciousness. This distinction, I believe, is fundamental to our work as psychotherapists, and fundamental to an analysis of sexual behaviour. In understanding ‘lived experience’ as non-reflective conscious we allow for the continual movement of that part of our consciousness that remains ‘out of awareness’. We are describing the experience of what it means to ‘just be’. But there is an internal dialectic here, between our lived experience and our reflection, between therefore pre-reflective and reflective conscious processes. So that felt sense of ourselves, a sense we can never really know or describe, is always moving, always changing with the internal dialectic. This, I argue, is the origin of sexual desire, of the unknown but known sense of ourselves as sexual beings, the desire is an expression of a yearning to know ourselves through the other.

A useful analogy of the living nature of ‘Le Vecu’ can be found in Sartre’s early analysis of the image. In the ‘*Imaginaire*’ he describes a process through which the image we hold of something is never constant, but always changes with our experience [Weber, 2004]. So, too our perception of our facticity changes, through the process of just living. But within the parameters of the context; our bodies, the practico-inert, there is the possibility of individual expression that is our freedom, that is our desire, and this expression is the yearning to know ourselves.

## **Sex and the ‘other’**

I have tried to describe sex, in terms of both sexual behaviour and sexual preferences, as a dialectical process, but one that is, like all behaviour, an expression of interacting dialectical processes. That between our given and our becoming, and between interiority and exteriority. We are at any moment an embodied mind, but the self-consciousness of that embodied mind is a constantly moving interaction between lived experience and our reflections on that experience. And its pursuit of self-knowledge is forever unrequited<sup>5</sup>.

Of course there are sexual drives, sexual compulsions, and these both vary and change. They change with lived experience, an experience mediated by culture, by economics, and also by age. But it is important to recall that sex is always about an ‘other’; even when sex occurs alone, it remains in the realms of fantasy about an ‘other’; that the sexual compulsions we encounter are mediated, above all perhaps, by our experience of the other.

For Sartre, the way we act sexually is a reflection of our project. He also speaks of project being driven by scarcity and need arising from scarcity.

This can engender praxis, action designed to transcend the existing totalisation. He describes this eloquently [Sartre 1968: 91]. But our project is forever circumscribed by our lack of self-knowledge. We know we are not that (our facticity) but we don't know quite what we are; our project is ultimately to know ourselves, but always some future self, a projected self, it is our becoming we desire. And it is through the other that we seek that knowledge; we desire the subjectivity of others to know ourselves.

What better way of approaching this need, this lack, than through sex. It is an act usually performed naked: we know at least our bodies? It is behaviour that may involve a high degree of spontaneity, of subjectivity. It may involve entering or engulfing another's body part, but even where this is not the case, it usually climaxes in a sense of abandon that is almost unparalleled in any other human activity. So when Sartre describes the 'caress' as a way of bringing the other's subjectivity to the surface where it may be captured, he is also describing a desire for intimacy, for knowledge of ourselves through others. Sexual relations, as all other human relations, have then the possibility for freedom, a freedom founded in the desire to transcend ourselves, and to know ourselves in that transcendence.

## **Sex and society**

With respect to our subject of sex and sexuality, the social mores, cultural inhibitions and imperatives, as well as the conscious body that engages in sexual acts and relationships, are part of a repeated pattern of seriality described by the practico inert. For example, the extent to which particular ways of sexual expression are accepted within a society will be a reflection of that particular totalisation. When we act sexually, we mostly choose to act in ways that are acceptable to that historical moment [Weekes, 1985: 122]. So, for example, the repression of homosexual activity in many cultures over many centuries meant that many people, who might have chosen to express their sexuality in engaging with their own gender in another historical time, refrained from doing so. It is quite probable, that for many the possibility would not be considered, would not be felt or known as itself. Move now to a different historical juncture and the possibilities change. Foucault, among others, has written extensively on this [Foucault, 1998; Weekes, 1985].

A further illustration might be found in the changing attitudes to female sexuality. Looking back to the first half of the last century, and probably many centuries beyond, the importance of female sexual expression was socially minimal. Sex was the preoccupation of male heterosexuals. Perhaps with the greater importance of female labour in the market-place, the social recognition of female sexuality has become apparent. But with this we have also seen a commodification of sex, and particularly of females as sexual beings. Somehow now the promise of sexual potency or

gratification goes together with choice of supermarket and the nascent sexuality of young girls is used to sell children's clothes. So some growth in the possibility for women to express themselves sexually (as well as in other ways) has taken place in the context of an increasing tendency to treat women (and to an extent men of course) as sexual objects. If women are freer, they are also freer to be exploited.

### **The dialectics of Sexuality**

But does this possibility of freedom, this narrow window, encompass also our sexuality? The latter describes the structural characteristics of our sexual activity. Often it is used to refer to the gender preferences of an individual in terms of sexual desire. In the context of human sexuality it is pertinent to debates surrounding that aspect of sexuality that describes preference for sexual partners of a particular gender.

Freud, along with others, maintained that humans are born bi-sexual, but generally become either heterosexual or homosexual over time. Others argue that we are borne with our gender sexuality, and that it is not therefore an issue of choice. Such perspectives are generally used in a way that is both explanatory and defensive of homosexual behaviour, arguing that homosexual's are the way they are because they 'can't help it'. The potential condescension of this argument, though unintended, is apparent; although biological 'evidence' is generally cited in support [Freud, 1977; Tatchell , 1998].

Sartre's concept of lived experience, however, transcends this debate: even though biological evidence is likely to be tentative and refutable, it is not really relevant. Our gender sexuality, in common with other sexual preferences, involves a window of choice. We choose to be who we are subject to our facticity: given our bodies and the constraints on how we choose to use them in sexual activity, we may determine our own sexual preferences. We may not always be aware of it, but it remains a choice that emerges through the dialectical process described above involving lived experience and reflective consciousness. The window of choice may be narrow, or often unseen, but it is there.

### **Escaping into the other?**

A quite simple point, made at the beginning of this paper, is that we are relational beings, and sex is a part of our relating. We relate sexually, just as in any other way. But, as I suggested before, I believe that for Sartre there is something metaphorical about relating sexually, something that encapsulates all other aspects of human relating, and that is the need, the desire, for something that cannot be found within ourselves, and which we strive to find through others, and that is ourselves. The ultimate human paradox, we cannot know ourselves but we constantly seek to find

ourselves. Intimacy, the desire for knowledge of our ‘selves’ through the other, is a constant companion (overt or covert) to the sexual act.

There is a sense in which this thought can be related to what others might see as a desire to escape one’s sense of self altogether, however limited that sense might be. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the emergence of the idea of a self separate from (typically) the mother, can leave a residue of desire to escape from that separation back to a feeling of ‘oneness’, of the security of being part of the ‘other’. But the prospect of this is equally terrifying as the idea of the loss of the ‘separate self’ or loss of identity emerges [Kaplan, 1979].

Similarly Freud, in his later work, talked of Thanatos, the desire for death, a metaphor for the ultimate escape from the paradox of self, of being. In fact, the climax of sexual activity, the orgasm, has often been described (poetically at least) as a ‘mini-death’. Hobson, a Jungian analyst, also talked of merger and separation, although in a different context, but the metaphor is present in his work, the continuum of aloneness-togetherness that characterises the paradox of human relations [Hobson, 1985].

Of course, these descriptions of human behaviour emerge from different theoretical traditions, but I believe that the continual longing for, and repudiation of, union with an ‘other’ or ‘others’, is both a fundamental characteristic of human beings, and a core tenet at the heart of Sartre’s thought. But perhaps, in this unrequited search, we also seek to escape from our selves, from our individuality, from a self that cannot be known, into the subjectivity of an ‘other’.

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre describes sexual activity as desire for the other’s subjectivity, as well as the other as an object: hence the paradox. Hence in consensual sex there is a mutual surrendering of, and taking of, subjectivity. We surrender our ‘selves’ in a vain attempt to know ourselves through the other. Escaping into the other, therefore, implies escaping into the other’s subjectivity where we might more possibly be known.

**Richard Pearce** combines a private psychotherapy practice in Bath with work for a University Counselling Service.  
Contact: richard.pearce4@gmail.com

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented to the Annual Conference of the Society for Existential Analysis, entitled ‘Sexistentialism’, 20<sup>th</sup> - 21<sup>st</sup> November 2010.

- <sup>2</sup> In particular the study of Jean Genet [Sartre 1963] and of Flaubert [Sartre, 1981].
- <sup>3</sup> For an interesting and very lucid discussion of the Sartrean Dialectic, and of Sartre's "Search for a Method", see Farrar (2000).
- <sup>4</sup> For example, see Barnes (1981), Catalano (1986) and Jameson (2004).
- <sup>5</sup> For an excellent review of the concept of embodiment, in which she elaborates and enhances Sartre's concept, see Morris (2008), Chapter 5: "The body".

## References

- Barnes, H. (1968). Introduction, In Sartre, J.-P. *The Search for a Method*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Barnes, H. (1981). *Sartre and Flaubert*. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Catalano, J. (1986). *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Farrar, R.C. (2000). *Sartrean Dialectics: A Method for Critical Discourse on Aesthetic Experience*. Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi.
- Foucault, M. (1998). *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*. London: Penguin.
- Freud, S. (1977). *Three Essays on Sexuality*, London: Vintage.
- Hobson, R. (1985). *Forms of Feeling*. London: Routledge.
- Jameson, F. (2004). Foreword, In Sartre, J.-P. *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1*. London: Verso.
- Kaplan, L. (1979). *Oneness and Separateness: From Infant to Individual*. Tiptree, Essex: Anchor Press.
- Martinot, S. (2005). The Sartrean account of the look as a theory of dialogue. In Van den Hoven, A. and Leak, A. (Eds) *Sartre Today: A Centenary Celebration..* Oxford: Berghan Books.
- Morris, K. (2008). *Sartre*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Morris, K. (2011). The graceful, the ungraceful and the disgraceful. Chapter 9. In Weber, J. *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Sartre, J-P. (1956). [1943]. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. Trans. Barnes, H. New York: Philosophy Library.
- Sartre, J-P. (1963). *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Sartre, J-P. (1968). *The Search for a Method*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Sartre, J-P. (1977). *Life/Situations: Essays Written and Spoken*. New York: Random House.

- Sartre, J-P. (1981). *The Family Idiot, Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857: Volume 1*. Trans. Cosman, C. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Sartre, J-P. (2004). [1940]. *The Imaginary*. Trans. Weber, J. Oxon: Routledge.
- Sartre, J-P. (2004b). [1960]. *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume 1*. London: Verso.
- Sartre, J-P. (2008). [1974]. *Between Existentialism and Marxism*. London: Verso.
- Spinelli, E. (2001). *The Mirror and the Hammer*. London: Continuum.
- Tatchell, P. (1998). Just Cases of Mistaken Identity, *Tribune*, 07/14, August.
- Van den Hoven, A. and Leak, A. (Eds) (2005). *Sartre Today: A Centenary Celebration*. Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Weber, J. (2004). Philosophical introduction. In Sartre, J-P. (2004). *The Imaginary*. Trans. Weber, J. Oxon: Routledge.
- Weber, J. (2011). Bad faith and the other. Chapter 12. In Weber, J. *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Weber, J. (2011). *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Weekes, J. (1985). *Sexuality and its Discontents: Meanings, Myths and Modern Sexualities*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.