

Chapter 4: Sexual expression, authenticity and Bad Faith

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For I believe that a man can always make something out of what is made of him. This is the limit I would accord to freedom: the small movement which makes of a totally conditioned social being someone who does not render back completely what his conditioning has given him. [Sartre 2008, p.35]

Introduction

Issues around sex are certainly very prevalent in the therapy room, either explicitly or implicitly, and my concern in this chapter is to unravel something of the complexity that underlies this prevalence. I am not concerned here with the techniques that might characterise an existential approach, but rather with elucidating the understanding of sex (and therefore therapeutic concerns that might be present) that is consistent with such a philosophical perspective.

I take as a starting point the premise that we are meaning-making beings. Above all we seek to make sense of our lives in the context of our finitude. We seek to give our lives purpose and value in a way that makes our lives meaningful. At the same time, the being that makes meaning is both transient and contingent. Transient in the sense that our sense of ourselves is in a constant state of change, is never still or known entirely as we perceive an object to be known; and contingent in so far as our choices are always, to a degree, conditional on our context and past experience, as well as the choices of others. The being that makes meaning, therefore, is continuously in a state of change, of becoming.

The term ‘being’ as used in this chapter requires some clarification. The approach followed here attempts to follow Sartre’s ontology. This might be encapsulated by the expression ‘singular universal’ in the quote that ends this chapter. It implies that an understanding of the abstract (such as existence or being), the universal, can only be approached and understood through the particular, through the ontic expression of that universal; and that the two (the ontological and its expression) are in a perpetual state of interaction and change¹. The notion of ‘being’, therefore, can only be understood through the manifestation of ‘a being’; one that describes ‘universal’ characteristics that are attributes of humanity and are made known through ‘singular’ expression, through what Sartre described as ‘lived experience’².

If our lived experience is such that it is consistent with this sense of becoming, then it is more possible for us to feel comfortable with ourselves, to feel authentic. Lived experiences that cause us to be in conflict with that which gives meaning, or to render such meaning inaccessible or thwarted, cause us emotional discomfort or pain and lie at the root of the many surface pathologies that are described in the proliferating literature on psychological ‘disorder’.

But if we are meaning-making beings, who seek to find purpose and value in our way of being in the world, and accept at the same time the observation that a very prominent source of emotional discomfort for many concerns sexual expression, then we must ask the question:

what purpose or meaning do we attribute to sex, what role does it play in our lives that is consistent with our way of being in the world? Further, stemming from this, to what do we attribute the ubiquitous nature of this subject in the therapy room?

In the process of attempting to answer these questions, this chapter illustrates discursive argument with vignettes derived from the author's experience as a therapist³. The first section locates the focus of discussion in the arena of authenticity reviewing, through reference to the work of Sartre, the way in which this concept and the associated concept of 'bad faith' are rooted in our search for ourselves, to live in accordance with our 'fundamental project', and the fruitless paradox of such endeavour. It is here, in the arena of freedom and responsibility that we encounter the possibility of bad faith.

The second section extends the framework by considering the ground of our awareness, and the association between this and our unrequited desire to know, and be comfortable with, ourselves; the uncertainty this vain pursuit engenders and the consequent ease with which we fall into 'bad faith' or inauthenticity. It is appropriate, however, to consider the 'being' that is seeking to make meaning of existence; in particular, we then consider the question of what it means to 'be' sexually.. We identify humans as having sexual potential, whose underlying physiology, while informing our natures, also leaves room for freedom and choice in our sexual expression.

The chapter then proceeds to consider our fallibility in recognising and acting on our freedom in the way we relate to others, and reveal a potential, if not a tendency, to act in bad faith, to manifest an inauthenticity in the way in which we express ourselves sexually. The chapter then elaborates on this tendency implicit in the Sartrean 'fundamental project', before moving on to a more direct discussion of sex and authenticity, and the ease with which a search for intimacy can lead to its opposite.

A second theme of the chapter attempts to take this paradox of individual authenticity into the arena of human society. Drawing on Sartre's later work⁴, the chapter considers first the way in which the human individual and her preferences are both determined by, and determining of, the wider social and historical context; a process that informs sexual, as well as other, modes of expression. We review the Sartrean concept of totalisation, and the implications of this for our 'fundamental project', and the role that sexual expression plays in this. The following section elaborates this concept, considering the way in which sex can be understood as a vehicle for social as well as individual expression.

Finally, a conclusion attempts to draw together the various threads of the chapter, weaving together the role that sexual activity plays in our search for ourselves through others: the 'singular universal' in her encounter with the paradox of authenticity.

Authenticity and Bad Faith

The Sartrean concept of 'bad faith' appears early in *Being and nothingness*, suggesting that for the author it was a precursory concept, one that was necessary for the coherence of much of what follows⁵. The term 'Bad Faith' describes a condition whereby we live in denial of our 'true nature', and our essential freedom. However much he qualified the scope of human freedom in his later years (as exemplified by the opening quote of this chapter), a central feature of Sartre's existential philosophy is that humans are essentially free beings. There is always room for manoeuvre, a possibility of choice, no matter how constrained or

circumscribed the context. It follows that our (intentional) actions carry with them responsibility, since it is ourselves both within, and outside of, awareness that choose among alternatives. Bad faith ensues when we deny that choice, and therefore choose not to accept the responsibility (and uncertainty) that goes with our choosing. We act as though we are a determined object, a confusion of transcendence and facticity⁶. The expression also applies when we deny the choices of others, when we see the other as an object, rather than another subject, free to choose as we are.

There are well-known descriptions of bad faith in Sartre's work, but underlying them all is the absence of a god, or a moral authority: take this away and we have no guiding principle for choice (the moral dilemma that inhabits western culture). The word 'faith' in the expression is important in this respect. 'Faith' implies belief in the absence of proof, and belief always entails an element of doubt, of uncertainty. But, as suggested above, to be human is to be uncertain of our existence, but this is hard to live with, hard to accept. It is easier to deny the uncertainty of who we are, of our existence and therefore our choices, so that we can avoid the responsibility of our freedom. 'Good Faith' then, would be a (pre-reflective) acceptance of the indefinable and unrealisable nature of self, of constant ambiguity, of the uncertainty that choice brings.

For Heidegger, the word 'authenticity' implies the notion of 'becoming one's possibilities'. Losing sight of these, taking what might appear as an easier option meant 'falling' into inauthenticity, into the 'they'⁷. In Sartre's work this same notion is developed in his discussion of bad faith, with the latter providing an elaborated understanding of inauthentic choice. Our choices and actions are embedded in a network of 'projects'. We project towards the future in our freedom, with each choice potentially congruent or incongruent with what he describes as our 'fundamental (or original) project'. That congruency in turn describes our potential for authenticity or bad faith.

Sartre coined the term 'fundamental project' to describe the expression of an authentic sense of self, and recognised the impossibility of knowing this in an objective, concrete sense. It is a sense of ourselves that we both hold and strive towards. It most of all reflects our 'desire for being'. It is a reflection of our values and is a notion, I suggest, that we carry with us as a pre-reflective, pre-cognitive sense of who we are in the world. We 'feel' through our bodies this sense of who we are⁸. It underpins also our sense of authenticity. Whether we form, early in our lives, a sense of ourselves and our destiny that describes this, or whether it is more appropriately perceived as a more dynamic concept is less relevant here, what matters is that such attempts to frame a self concept are fundamental to our sense of 'being-in-the-world'⁹.

The fundamental project, however, is not a static position or state of nature, rather it is a 'totalised' expression of our non-reflective consciousness: a dynamic entity, but still one that reveals "the original choice of our being"; one that provides the framework for our being in the world. But each network of projects, and our fundamental project, are premised on the realisation of 'self', of knowing oneself in terms of an objectivity. Each project is therefore unrealisable. To act in denial of that is to act in bad faith, to be inauthentic. To be authentic, for Sartre therefore, is to be 'in despair'; to be accepting of the failure of realising what is intended by our actions, but nevertheless to act or choose regardless of this acceptance¹⁰.

Underlying this analysis of authenticity, therefore, is a sense (or denial) of what it entails to be a self. To elaborate this point: in the development of each and every one of us we become aware of a world that is separate from ourselves. This becoming aware creates a distance

between ourselves and other entities in the world, both in a particular and a general sense. Precisely when this awareness kindles and grows is controversial¹¹, but how we handle this emerging and developing sense of separateness may be the most significant characteristic of each human life, outside of the context within which that life is played out.

One consequence of this sense of separateness concerns how well it is received. We may find this state too threatening, too uncertain and unsafe, and seek to overcome this portending isolation through merger with the world, with the group, or with another. There are many ways we may attempt to achieve union with the world: we may seek to merge into the background, and live our lives in the shadows of existence where uncertainties are minimised. One manifestation of this may be the desire to be 'at one with nature', to be absorbed by the natural forces that surround us, free from the uncertainty of human relationships, which appear more threatening than the apparently random vagaries of nature.

Alternatively, we may seek to shelter in the social, to avoid standing out, to be anonymous in the security of conformity. More particularly, we may take refuge in the group: class, ethnicity, kinship or family provide the 'safe place' or nest through which we try to escape our aloneness and view the world from the secure base of mutually agreed and reinforced rules of engagement, a relative anonymity: a refuge within a social and economic capsule masked by a veneer of cultural distinction: the diminution of the other, of the separate, through collective association¹².

As individuals there is also a strong desire to escape from the sense of isolation that comes with separateness. Through our relations with others we find solace from the overwhelming sense of uncertainty that our separateness brings. While it is through these relations that we first come to know our separateness, and through which we constantly seek to construct a more concrete sense of our separate selves, it is through them also that we also seek to escape from the tyranny of aloneness. We desire 'closeness' to others in order to escape from both the threat of others and from ourselves. The greater the degree of 'closeness' the more possible this escape appears. But of course this desire for 'escape' is paradoxical. The 'other' represents at the same time a vehicle of escape from our isolation, from a sense of self, as well as the means through which we seek to know and construct this sense of self through difference.

Awareness of others, therefore, brings with it a paradox of seeking to find what we are simultaneously seeking to avoid. In our relations with others we are seeking to know ourselves, to grasp our subjectivity as object through experiencing ourselves as the object of an other's perception. But what is it we are seeking to grasp? And what is the intentionality behind such seeking. The dilemma of the self-construct is well documented; the existential tradition has ably demonstrated the impossible goal of self-knowledge that we are constantly striving for, a goal only realisable in death; but why is this goal so important to us?

To grasp our subjective sense of who we are and concretise or objectify this sense, implies we know who we are, we are certain of our selves. This sense of certainty implies knowledge of how to be in the world; since I am that, I cannot be any other way. I can accept myself as that, and be accepted as that by others. If I do not feel accepted as that, then I can change into something more acceptable; I can know my acceptability and can be in the world in a way that is certain and acceptable to those with whom I relate.

But, my subjectivity is not graspable, it is a subjective awareness that cannot be an object,

and to grasp it through the subjectivity of another is impossible because that would mean appropriating the other's subjectivity. Without being the other, I am not able to do this. So I remain uncertain of my 'self' and of my acceptance by others, my being in the world is characterised by uncertainty. This uncertainty that characterises my being in the world, my existence, is the core of existential anxiety, and of being human. It is a relational anxiety, and we might try (at times) to escape it through eschewing human contact, possibly through immersion in the 'natural' or supposedly non-human world. We might also try to deny our uncertainty through assuming a spurious certainty derived from a contrived sense of self. Both of these forms of escape from, or denials of uncertainty, have been described as manifestations of inauthenticity or bad faith.

If uncertainty lies at the heart of existential anxiety, and if in seeking to reduce that uncertainty we look to others, to various ways of relating, to the use of others in attempts to give meaning to our lives, it may be that we seek intimacy. We seek a pre-cognitive sense of being known by, and knowing another. 'Intimacy': a common word in the therapy room, usually used in the context of unfulfilled desire, of a lack which can only be provided it is imagined through sex, or alternatively through the closeness that is implied in mutually enjoyed sex even, as in the case of friendship, when there is no sexual desire. So there are gradations of intimacy, and perhaps the potential, mutual self-revelation and the abandonment of self associated with sexual arousal and orgasm, provides for many a sought-after archetype of intimacy. Certainly the frequency with which the words 'intimacy' and 'sex' are used interchangeably in the therapy room bears witness to the extent to which sexual activity is idealised as part of a search for intimacy, and perhaps from escaping from oneself, and that dark pit of existential uncertainty, through merger with another.

But it would be naive to suggest that sexual desire is only about such a search for intimacy, even if that is often prominent amongst those in therapy. For many, existential anxiety, the uncertainty of self, takes a different route. For example, where relationships with humans are too threatening, too evoking of past pain or where the uncertainty of outcome is somehow unbearable. Here it is not intimacy that is sought through sex, but possession and control: a form of relationship, but one that is made 'safe' by denying the possibility of reciprocal awareness, of being known and 'seen'. The 'other' is perceived as a threat to one's own subjectivity: better to bear the pain of existential anxiety than to risk (or bear the uncertainty of) the greater pain of being known and shamed by others. It is possible to identify a wide range of sexual practices as being manifestations of such motivation, from the relatively harmless (for example, the practice of mutually agreed promiscuity or 'fuck buddies') to those that cause serious physical or psychological damage to others (such as rape or paedophilia).

The contingency of encounter and the origins of intimacy

Before exploring further the authenticity of our sexual responses to others, however, I will elaborate on the felt context of encounter that is the awareness of others. An awareness of being held in mind by another has been described by Sartre's account of the 'look'. Many commentators agree that Sartre's 'look', while a valuable and informative analysis, captures only one extreme end of the continuum of possible responses to an awareness of another. It is a response based on shame or on pride, both of which arise from a sense of being reduced to the object of the other's subjectivity. The other becomes, as a result, a threat, and a focus of competition and anxiety. There is a thread, in *Being and Nothingness*, from this initial encounter with the other to Sartre's analysis of sexual relations (and human relations in

general) as being characterised by conflict, and expressed sexually through a combination of sadism and masochism.

The inadequacy of this analysis as a complete explanation of human relations is accepted¹³, but it provides, nevertheless, a very powerful explanation of an aspect of these relations, and a useful basis for elaborating a less partial approach to what happens when we encounter another. In addition, the physicality of the ‘look’ as portrayed by Sartre cannot be denied. The sense of shame can be appreciated physically as well as conceptually. The notion of being ‘held in mind’, of being present to another, whether encompassing a visual glance or an imagined presence, is perhaps first sensed in our bodies, or in our embodied pre-reflective consciousness, prior to becoming known through reflective consciousness. This is not to suggest a dichotomy between bodily (physical) senses and reflective (mental) consciousness, but to posit that, if there is no Cartesian split, we think with our entire bodies, not just with our brains¹⁴.

Introducing 'Jenny'

As an illustration of the varying possibilities of encounter, I introduce my patient Jenny, a young woman in her mid-twenties, presenting with severe depression and a history of suicide attempts. Although probably a beautiful young woman according to popular criteria, she loathed her body and felt her looks to be repellent to others. She was living increasingly as a recluse, and occasionally self-harmed. The origins of her predicament are not relevant here, although this was the main focus of our work together. In addition, though, we agreed that she would try to ‘get out’ of her room at least once each day, to go for a walk to the local park and back. Initially, she avoided eye contact with anyone on her walks. She described the felt sense of being seen by another as something she dreaded, something that would confirm her feeling of worthlessness. Slowly, however, she managed to exchange looks with people, and then gradually to greet some of the people she passed. Of course, many would pass her by without looking, but she noted that as she felt more able to engage in returning the glance of those who looked, she would consequently feel more at ease with herself, more attuned to ‘being in the world’. These walks, and the developing engagement, proved very important in her gradual acceptance, and letting go, of past embedded experiences. Perhaps the process was most captured by her description of a chance encounter as she set out on her walk one morning:

“I was crossing the road and this woman was coming the other way. I had never seen her before, but we looked at each other as we passed. Not for long, but perhaps for fractionally longer than usual. I felt her looking at me, and I knew she felt me looking at her. And it was all ok. That was all, and I went on to the park. I didn’t see her again, and I am not sure I would recognise her if I did, but it meant something to me. I am not sure what, but it was like she was telling me it was ok to be me, and I was telling her it was ok to be her. Like we both knew that.”

This was a very pivotal event for Jenny. Of course, it did not occur in isolation, it was not a sudden epiphany, but a chance encounter that occurred in the context of a process of opening out. But the significance of this glancing exchange bears more detailed scrutiny.

How we experience the presence of another is conditioned by the embodied (pre-reflective) consciousness that prevails in the context, and the sense, of the other, which is in turn conditioned by the embodied response of the other as (in this case) manifested in the fleeting

gaze exchanged. With respect to Jenny, she found in the felt presence of the other woman something receiving and accepting that helped her to be more accepting of herself. The pre-reflective exchange of presence told a story of familiarity and comfort, a story of knowing and being known, a story of potential intimacy.

It was hard for Jenny to move to a place where she could experience not only a sense of shame and avoidance in the presence of another, but also potential acceptance. The potential reciprocity of acceptance was not overtly affirmed or stated, but was something that Jenny experienced in her felt sense of the other's look. Of course, in this instance it was only potential, but that was what was significant for her: the knowledge that there was potential for a reciprocal and accepting experience of knowing and being known; an exchange of subjectivities. What was also apparent in Jenny's story was that such a potential was contingent: the encounter of two people who possibly found in the glance they exchanged the potential for a shared world, a potential that existed as a result of the coming together of two receptive embodied consciousnesses.

In our encounter with the other we move on a continuum between shame and acceptance; between a retreat into withdrawal and fear, and a desire for intimacy. How we meet the other will be contingent: on a felt response, which is in turn contingent on the proximities of two lives and the context in which they cross; a matrix of possibilities where individual choice, while constrained by past histories and current context, has a limited but significant part to play in the tapestry of a life. It is the choice between the possibility of defence, of retreating into the safe haven of isolation and certainty, and acceptance of the uncertain outcome of mutually conceived knowledge and merger. We are pulled in both directions: to retain the safety of separateness or to embrace the possibility of intimacy

Being sexually: Sexual potential and sexual expression

This chapter has so far focused on drawing out the meaning of authenticity from an existential perspective, one that is contingent on our contact, our coming up against, the world that meets our perceptions. As sentient, meaning making beings we seek ourselves most of all through our engagement with other sentient beings. At the same time, meaning arguably arises first as a sense, a pre-reflective presence that is only later interactive with language and reflection. We feel, and know it in our bodies before we 'understand' it in our discourse (with ourselves or others). It follows, therefore, that our first knowledge of ourselves is also part of that felt sense, the pre-reflective awareness that we carry constantly with us¹⁵.

Given the ubiquitous presence of sexual concerns in the therapy room, however, it is pertinent to ask how sex fits into the equation. If we describe ourselves as 'beings with sexual potential', what does this mean and what are the implications of such a statement? Merleau-Ponty more than all existential philosophers described the intrinsic nature of sex in our relations with others. For him, our sense of presence was permeated by an awareness of sexual potential.

Sexual potential occupies a significant space in our physiology, our facticity. It is described by our anatomical distribution of erogenous zones and the chemical processes that express through hormonal activity the potential for sexual activity. Even though the fostering of our reproductive capacity may have been the evolutionary reason behind the development of these physiological characteristics, this bears little or no relation to sexual activity in human

beings. But this capacity, this scenario of sexual potential remains part of our bodies, part of our pre-reflective awareness that is as much a part of our sensory matrix as feeling and breathing, it evanesces (sometimes) from our pores¹⁶. In this sense it is a characteristic that describes human existence, we exist sexually, sexual potential is an expression of our ontology.

But, unlike breathing, the extent to which this potential remains nascent or latent varies considerably between individuals and with time and context. It is apparent that the strength of these chemical or physiological processes varies between individuals. Experiences in the therapy room provide ample evidence that some individuals seem disinterested in sex, while for others it is a major preoccupation. It is no doubt true that sexual activity can wane with age, and changes in the hormonal structure. The significant number of ageing men who bring to therapy the loss of interest in sexual activity from their partner following childbirth or menopause, and claim this as justification for infidelity, pornography or paying for sex, might appear to confirm age old prejudices that men have greater, more diverse, and more persistent sexual interests than women. From this perspective sexual potential remains rooted in the physiological, there is no place here for the notion of potential and choice.

But this is a socio-cultural stereotype: there is always anecdotal evidence of unevenly waxing, or waning of sexual interest within both male and female, same-sex partnerships. In addition, it is not uncommon for gender roles to be the reverse of that described, where women's sexual interest is felt to be unmet by more passive and disinterested male partners. It may be true that hormonal activity reaches a peak early in life, and tends to decline thereafter, and sexual activity can be observed to follow this pattern. But it is always possible to cite cases where the pattern of sexual behaviour does not accord with the hormonal pattern; a sudden increase in sexual activity in the so-called 'mid-life' years is a frequent testament to this.

So while the physiological processes that engender sexual potential are a part of us, part of our facticity, the frequently observed departures from biological determinism suggest that we respond to our sexual potential in diverse and non-biological ways. We manifest a set of sexual preferences that appear to be rooted both beyond and within our bodies. How we use our sexual potential is much more complex than a mere reflection of physiological processes. The use of our sexual potential, our sexual expression, I suggest is an ontic expression, our way of 'being in the world'. In a more formal sense, existence (or 'being') for humans implies sexual potential, a potential that is only known and understood through expression. A further characteristic of humans is that expression carries with it the inevitability of choice, even if that choice is constrained as suggested in the opening quotation of this chapter.

Sex and authenticity

So how might the concept of bad faith assist in the understanding of sexual expression? In *Being and nothingness* Sartre was very pessimistic about human relationships in general and sexual relationships in particular, suggesting them to be underpinned by conflict, with any possibility of reciprocal acceptance becoming unsustainable. This pessimistic analysis was prefaced by a discussion of the 'sense' or presence of the other described by the 'look': as discussed, a notion underpinned by the notion of bad faith, and inauthenticity.

Lack of intimacy is a very common subject in therapy; it highlights a lack, a sense of being made separate from, an absence of closeness. In the context of sexual relationships it reveals

an unrequited desire for a sense of ‘oneness’ with another, for merger. These feelings described by three very different clients are symbolic of many:

Rosie, Ashley and Charlie: The search for intimacy

Rosie had suffered much and felt that no-one could hear her story, the lack of intimacy in her sex life was a source of real distress:

“I want sex to be about creating an understanding through a complete knowing of each other; but for him it seems like its a way of avoiding knowing me or himself, of avoiding being intimate with me”.

Ashley, a promiscuous, and impatient young man, sometimes consumed with guilt, told me his was looking for something in sex he couldn’t seem to find:

“I want to be so close to someone, like I am inside their head, and them in mine I know it’s not possible, but I want to be as close as I can get”

Charlie, lonely in his middle-aged relationship:

“He is just so self-contained, so self-sufficient, there is no room for me...and I want to reach out....to share....to be curious and open”

The lack of authenticity in the sexual relationships described by these three clients is apparent. The sexual expression for each takes place in a context of bad faith: for two of them, Rosie and Antonio, there is no mutual acceptance of subjectivity with objectivity, their partners able to see them only as ‘other’; Ashley, on the other hand, uses sex in his search for intimacy, but in so doing turns his sexual partners into objects, unsuspecting vehicles in his misguided search for himself.

These three clients are typical of many who bring sexual issues to therapy. The common element amongst them is the association of sex with intimacy, and the identification of a lack of intimacy with sexual dissatisfaction. This is not to say that a search for intimacy is the only driver in sexual expression, we are hormonal beings, but, as suggested above, we are also relational beings, and it is the search for intimacy, the discovery of self through another that provides in the context of our physiology, the motivation for authentic sexual expression.

Of course, many clients manifest their sexual concerns around issues other than intimacy. I would argue, however, that these concerns almost always stem from the same source: the feelings of a lack of fulfilment, a lack of connection, that is engendered by a failure of sexual expression to provide a pathway to a sense of meaning, to a sense of ourselves that is in tune with our ‘fundamental project’.

Perhaps sexual dysfunction is the most common presenting issue in this category. A typical example of which concerns men with erectile dysfunction brought about by an overwhelming desire to ‘perform’, to please or satisfy their partner, and a consequent fear of failure. The underlying sense is of themselves as objects, bodies-for-the-other. This sense is echoed in many women in therapy, who see themselves as ‘frigid’ and as failures because they are unable to enjoy sex, unable to be an object for the other. The emotional pain that is concomitant with both of these manifestations of bad faith is often severe.

That is not to say that sexual relations practised in bad faith necessarily cause levels of anxiety sufficient to bring people to therapy. Most manifestations are likely to go by unnoticed other than a sense of unease or lack of fulfilment. Frequently, such unease may lead to attempts at substitution; to other potential avenues of attachment be it alcohol or other drugs, various preoccupations with consumption, whether of food or materials, and often to a rejection of sex or intimacy as something either undesirable or unobtainable: a withdrawal behind the veils of safety and isolation. This may be accompanied by a retreat into the pursuit of sexual expression alone, often through the use of pornography or fetishes; surprising preferences are often disclosed in the therapy room.

The withdrawal from the possibility of intimacy, of good faith in sexual expression, is often accompanied by hostility towards the other, particularly the other as sexual object. Sexual promiscuity can be an example of the use of sex as a weapon (often an addictive one), although more often it displays a curiosity and search for something not recognised. More extreme displays of hostility, however, such as rape and sexual harassment reveal a deep fear and loathing of the 'other' or, in many contexts, of the 'stranger'. The case of Martin captures the way in which our experiences, our contingency, may render it difficult to either accept or know intimacy, yet seek it in impossible pathways using sexual activity as an expression of bad faith.

Martin's Pain

Martin is in his late twenties. He works in "marketing"; not a well paid position he tells me, but "it's enough to get by". He told me how he had never felt 'safe' at home, and at school was bullied and "always felt an outsider". He was "thin and scrawny", and "didn't fit in". "I was a long distance runner, not a team player". He remembers adolescent sexual fantasies about other boys and 'came out' when he was 16: "It felt like a reason and justification for being who I was". After this he slowly began to feel better about himself, coming to terms with his gay identity. When he first came to therapy he had been living with his partner Will for three years, in what he describes as a "loving relationship". Although he had few real friends apart from Will, he was outwardly sociable; and exuded good looks and superficial charm.

Martin came to therapy after he had begun to visit gay clubs looking for casual sex. Will was often travelling for his work, and this provided Martin with an opportunity to explore what he described as his 'fantasies' in secret. While he became weighed down by guilt and self-dislike, he was also dependent on the challenge and thrill of "seducing as many men as possible". He had begun to feel that he was "not doing his job", unless he was pursuing another sexual conquest. I had the impression that Martin was searching, in his promiscuity, for an intimacy that was lost. The perception developed of someone who wanted to be recognised and affirmed.

This was Martin's description of this part of his journey:

"It was an easy decision for me to accept myself as gay; it made sense of my life and somehow gave me an identity, a feeling that I was a whole person..... I always had this uneasy feeling that I was not good enough, that I never felt good enough, although I didn't know what for..... When I met Will it all seemed ok for a while, I could be myself and it was ok. But somehow, after a while, I began to feel trapped, like he didn't really know me.

..... I realised that something was still missing; and I felt I had to test the boundaries, to break out, to discover who I was, who I could be.....maybe it wasn't the best way to do this, but it seemed like a way, the only way I could findit was like searching for something without knowing what it was”

During therapy, Martin soon dropped what he describes as his “cruising obsession”, but remained melancholic and confused. Eventually he told his partner of his activities, and after a brief separation they reconciled.

I believe Martin’s desire to continually ‘seduce other men’, to dominate them, stemmed from his distrust of intimacy and the paradoxical need to be affirmed and recognised. At the same time he knew that he was making himself unhappy, but felt unable to do anything about it. His sexual relations with Will had become quite infrequent as the trust between them eroded, and he increasingly sought solace and affirmation by sexually dominating others. His rupture and subsequent reconciliation with Will came after he had been able to recognise and ‘let go’ of his sense of distrust, and feel comfortable enough with himself to be open and accepting of both himself and others; he no longer needed to ‘capture’ others to make himself safe. He was able to explore the possibility of a more authentic relationship.

Moving beyond the individual: the singular universal¹⁷

The analysis so far has focused on the individual and the paradox of authenticity in sexual relations that emerges in the individual’s engagement with her world. This reflects Sartre’s early thinking. In order to elucidate a rationale for the interaction between an individual and her world, however, I draw on the work of the later Sartre, the Sartre that attempted to integrate individualistic, post-renaissance, western Man, with the social perspective of 20th century Marxist political economy. A brief excursion here into a Sartrean dialectic clarifies this point. His later philosophical approach was premised on what he described as the regressive-progressive method¹⁸. This method is a way of perceiving human behaviour that considers the way in which individuals receive their experiences: a process first of ‘interiorisation’ that involves the absorption and expression of their world. Their ‘world’ in this case, or their facticity, embraces the totality of the social, cultural, physical and personal (relational) environments in which they reside at any particular moment. An experience is received and in some way held (interiorised). Individuals then respond to what is interiorised, interaction with their ‘world’ is both changed by the interiorisation and changes that world.

For Sartre, both these processes are *dialectical* processes. The dialectic implies a process of change through which interacting forces are changed by the encounter, each containing the influence of the other in a new synthesis. An experience of the ‘world’ changes, through absorption, the recipient, whose response changes in the same way the ‘world’ within which she is situated.

I have discussed the encounter with the other in terms of responses to a pre-reflective, embodied felt sense; that the idea of an embodied mind carries with it the cognitive consequences of physiological data. While we are feeling and reflective beings, we are also a series of chemical processes. Embodiment implies that we are a totality of emotional, cognitive and physiological processes that are interacting dialectically and constantly, to produce the constantly changing entity we manifest at each moment in time.

Referring back to the process of interiorisation, our embodiment implies that our encounters

with another contain the potential for chemical (or hormonal) responses that may influence that encounter. But this is merely potential, and the extent to which these sexual responses are present will depend on the elements of the encounter. The encounter that Jenny experienced crossing the road did not (as far as we know) elicit any sexual response, but it still contained the potential for such a response. The look of the stranger was interiorised and responded to. A process occurred that changed her interaction with her world.

This rationale describes the manner in which an individual experiences the world in context, albeit a constantly changing one. That context is described by the sum of the economic, cultural, and natural environments that obtain at any point in time. The being that experiences that world is an embodied mind that has potential, a latency described by genes and physiology. Part of that latency is sexual potential, the hormonal resonance that occupies our bodies. The experience of 'being-in-the-world' is, on one level, a totalisation, an interaction of interior and exterior worlds that is only what it is, and what Sartre describes as the *practico-inert*. Our 'being sexually in the world', therefore, is at any moment a totalisation, a particular configuration, and an expression of our sexual potential.

There are several dimensions to this 'sexual potential'. An interior dimension describes the way in which we feel our sexual potential *at any point in time*. We have a sense of our 'sexualness' that is a part of our pre-reflective, pre-cognitive, intuitive state of being: part of our overall sense of ourselves that is manifest in our 'project' or authentic way of being in the world. But the interior is not a given, or a fixed entity, rather it might be seen as a continuing or resonating interaction of the felt sense and the parameters of that felt sense, a constant dialogue between feeling and that which feels. This might be described as an interaction between facticity and pre-conscious awareness, but these expressions imply a separateness which is not intended.

An exterior dimension describes the world in which the interior exists, and there are many aspects to that which is external to the being that is in the world; all manifestation of that which is other, or separate from the individual entity fall into this category. In terms of our sexual potential: this will, of course, be influenced by cultural norms and prejudices, social expedient and economic necessity. For example, heterosexual women, lesbians and gay men might express their sexual potential very differently in 21st century Western societies than in many other contemporary societies or Western cultures of 100 years ago. This is not to say, for example, that people feel more 'free' in current urban western societies than in, say, an isolated rural community in North Africa, merely that cultural and social norms borne of perceived economic necessity provide the parameters within which people feel, and choose to express themselves sexually. There are countless examples of how major changes in economic circumstance influence acceptable sexual behaviour, although not, of course in a straightforward and linear pattern, but rather in response to, and in concert with, a complex socioeconomic dialectic¹⁹

We are, *at any moment*, a totalisation of these interior and exterior forces. We live in a context which permeates us through a dialectical interaction, so that there is always movement. Our interior potential, born of what we are given and what we make of it, meets and is met by the exterior. This implies that our physicality in all its manifestations, together with our life experience, forms a potential that is, in turn, shaped and expressed through interaction with the social, cultural and physical environment that constitutes our exterior; in a relationship that is always reciprocal, although the degree of reciprocity is often unseen.

Sartre described this contextualised individual as a ‘singular universal’²⁰; each individual expresses the universal, epochal energies of their time, but by interiorising also changes them in that process. We are individuals moulded by, and in turn moulding (albeit usually unseen and unsung) a constantly interacting array of social and economic contingencies and histories. Our sexual behaviour, our perceptions, preferences and choices, is an expression of this ‘singular universal’.

The concept of totalisation allows a broader interpretation of the notion of the fundamental project. Nevertheless, the original construct arising from our ‘desire for being’ is helpful in framing a notion of our ‘sexual potential’. The latter manifests as an expression of that construct, an immanence of sexual presence. But this implies that our sexual disposition is engendered not only from the interior manifestation of this being, but also from our exterior. Our felt sense of our sexual selves, the choices and desires that ensue, are always to an extent a reflection of the contexts in which we live and have lived.

Sexual expression and social expression

By the term ‘sexual expression’ I refer to not only to choices regarding sexuality, but also how, within those broad choices, preferences and fantasies are felt and sometimes practised through actions. As a therapist I am aware that such ‘expressions’ are sometimes highly individual, so much so that it would not be possible to relate them here without loss of confidentiality. Most often they are commonplace and adhere to specific cultural perceptions of ‘normality’. But always the manifestations are current felt responses to the myriad of individual and social influences described.

It is apparent that the later Sartre defined the self-construct as a broader entity than in his earlier work, one with more dynamic potential. ‘Praxis’ describes not only action, but also a capacity to challenge; to move beyond the accepted order or social configuration (the practico- inert) if that is in conflict with the felt sense of the fundamental project. In terms of sexual behaviour this might be manifest in the struggle to express the (interiorised) felt sense of a sexual proclivity that runs counter to socially accepted behaviour²¹.

For example, western societies witnessed a struggle for the social acceptance of male same-sex relationships over the latter half of the 20th Century, a challenge to the pervasive order that is now open, but still ongoing in such societies. In other socio-cultural contexts this struggle is currently becoming increasingly dangerous and difficult as it contends with the rise of religious conservatism. One can make links here between the efficacy of that challenge and the stability of socio-economic conditions: in periods of relative certainty the social acceptance of changes in individual expression is greater, difference is more easily countenanced. Uncertainty spawns fear of the ‘other’ and behaviour that is conceived as ‘other’. The de-facto social conservatism of the ‘revolutionary’ movements of the 20th Century are witness to this, in spite of rhetoric that sometimes ran counter to such conservatism.

This is not to make a moral statement, for example to the effect that the relative social acceptance of a variety of sexual expression is desirable, although from my own particular socio-cultural perspective this might be the case. Nor is it relevant here to ask the question ‘why now?’, although this itself might be a fruitful line of investigation. The point here is that the manifestation of our ‘desire for being sexually’ is subject to an external as well as an internal dynamic, and that the configuration of such a totalisation has its own dynamic which

may or may not result in conflict with the status quo. Those responsible for changes in social perceptions are forced to challenge the status quo, often at considerable risk to their social and economic wellbeing, as the following anecdote illustrates.

Mishra's pathway to self-discovery

Mishra was a visiting lecturer at an art college. She was in England for two years and came to therapy with me during the second of those years. She is from a non-western culture, born into a relatively privileged family; in studying art she had rebelled against her family tradition. She has two elder siblings, one a lawyer and the other a medical doctor. She was married at the time of her therapy (her husband was also a lawyer), they would visit each other every three months.

She initially came to see me on account of what she described as 'cultural confusion': she found life in England intriguing and in many ways rewarding, but it posed challenges in terms of her sense of who she felt herself to be. Essentially, her self-construct was being questioned, as she increasingly challenged her perceptions of how, as a woman, she might live her life. During the therapy she began a sexual relationship with a colleague. Her sexual activity became a major theme of our discussions, which she described as part of her "journey of self-discovery".

Shortly after a visit from her husband she described her responses to sex:

Sex with her husband:

"It felt like he was trying so hard to please me, I couldn't forget about myself, or him, I felt trapped in myself, I couldn't lose myself"

Sex with her lover:

"Feeling open, feeling passion and spontaneity, like there are no barriers, no walls between us, technique doesn't matter, I just go somewhere else"

During the time of her therapy, Mishra broke off the relationship with her colleague. She confronted her husband with her experiences and they agreed on a trial period of reconciliation on her return, during which time she would attempt to discover how she might find an authentic expression of herself within the cultural constraints of her home.

Mishra was already challenging the 'practico-inert', the status quo of her cultural context, through her decision to pursue a career in art, and to travel abroad. Her sense of the 'bad faith' of her lifestyle was apparent to her prior to her visit. In her search for authenticity she accepted the uncertainty of outcome. She openly used sex as a vehicle to lose herself, in order to re-discover herself. This was not a pre-meditated, reflective act, her body took her there. Through her sexual expression she began to know herself anew, to know the person who has always rebelled, who had felt uncomfortable with the perceived cultural constraints placed on her way of 'being in the world'; she sought and found the intimacy of merger in order to discover the possibility of authenticity, but to do so she felt compelled to challenge the social context that she was born into, and its way of being sexually. Her sexual expression became a pathway for her for the potential for greater self-knowledge and more authentic ways of relating.

Conclusion: the singular universal and the paradox of Bad Faith

In this chapter I have tried to chart a course from the individual and her relationship with the 'other' to the wider context within which that individual exists, and show how the former interacts with the latter in a continual dialectic. In this I have followed the trajectory of Sartre's thinking, moving from the individualism of his early work, to the more socially aware and integrating approach of the later writings. The discussion of authenticity and awareness of the 'other' owes much to his labours in searching for an ethical basis for human behaviour, and the paradoxical result that we can never find one, but are condemned to search.

So too with sex; if we are embodied minds, if we think with our bodies as a whole and not just with our brains then, given our physiological nature, our sexual potential is a part of that search. Sex is one means through which we seek to find ourselves through others. But we are not entirely free agents in this pursuit: the quotation at the beginning of this chapter highlights our social nature; that we are creatures of our worlds, and respond to this in a constant dynamic. It is within this process that any freedom in sexual expression arises. We are never original, only sometimes brave.

But this rather pessimistic note should not detract from the main theme of this chapter: sexual potential is available to us as a conduit for self-discovery, as beings who are sexual and who can, if we choose, express our search to know ourselves through our sexual expression. But this search is paradoxical; we cannot know ourselves as an object with its sense of certainty, we can only have a sense of this construct, a sense that is defined through that which gives meaning to our lives. But this seldom seems enough, it is too uncertain; and so we seek for the unobtainable; our existential paradox.

Sexual potential and the way we express it becomes part of this 'pursuit of ourselves'; the expression varies with our physiology; our experiences; and our social and historical context; but it is always part of that pursuit of meaning. But it can be very hard to be active in that quest and not to fall into bad faith; not to 'look' at the 'other' as object, or feel and act as an object for the other; vehicles in the games of others. It is inappropriate, though, to speak of inauthentic or authentic sex, as though the act itself had an existence independent of our 'being'. That would imply a moral judgement, an escape from the paradox, as though there were moral rules governing sexual behaviour. We can say only that, in the act of sex, we act in good faith, or not. And to be authentic in that act, as in any other act, I believe as an existential psychotherapist, creates the possibility of feeling more comfortable in the world.

And what feels comfortable in sex is not just 'in our genes', or in our conditioning, or even in the result of past images and experiences, but in all of these, all combining in an unfinished dance of our sexual dialectic. The last word belongs to Sartre.....

For a man is never an individual; it would be more fitting to call him a universal singular. Summed up and for this reason universalized by his epoch, he in turn resumes it by reproducing himself in it as singularity. [Sartre 1981, pp.ix]

Notes

¹ Excellent commentaries on Sartre's ontology can be found in Barnes (1992), and particularly in Catalano (2005). The latter elaborates on the term 'dialectical nominalism' that Sartre used in the Critique of dialectical reason (1960), an expression that he uses to describe the relationship between the abstract or universal and the particular or individual.

² The term 'lived experience' (Le Vecu) is used most effectively by Sartre in the study of Flaubert (Sartre, 1981) and refers to the experience that is described by the universal-singular dialectic.

³ In order to protect the confidentiality of client identity the vignettes taken from therapeutic experience are in all cases composites based on a number of clients' experience rather than the experience of individuals. Additionally, variables such as age, gender, sexual orientation and cultural background are also changed where appropriate to ensure anonymity. The essential features of the experience are then presented in a way that preserves the essence of that experience while disguising its source.

⁴ Sartre's later work generally refers to all non-fictional work published after his most well known philosophical treatise, Being and nothingness (Sartre, 1943). This includes the Critique of dialectical reason (Sartre, 1960); Notebooks for an ethics (Sartre, 1992); and the massive Idiot of the family (Sartre, 1981). Some of this material was unfinished and published posthumously, but nevertheless allows a more complete and less one-dimensional understanding of his early work.

⁵ See Sartre (1956, pp.47-70). See also Weber (2011) for a discussion of this theme and an elaboration of the concept of Bad Faith and the conceptual link to that other well-known Sartrean notion of 'The Look'. Weber also demonstrates implicitly an ethical basis for authenticity. A clear and helpful analysis of 'Bad Faith' is provided by Morris (2008, Ch. 4).

⁶ For an eloquent exposition of this awkward concept and its relations to Authenticity, see Rae (2009). Also Weber (2011) provides a comprehensive review.

⁷ Heidegger talked of the 'They' and Nietzsche of the 'Herd', similar conceptual categories that have some connection to allowing a subordination to the Sartrean 'Practico-inert'. Sartre's understanding of 'good faith', however, is less about individual will and more about living in a state of awareness or transcendence of that which is given.

⁸ Wider (1997), Chapter 5 provides a detailed view of the relationship between the body and consciousness; See also Morris (2008, Ch.5) for an interesting dialogue on the 'lived body'. Mirvish (1992) and Mirvish & Lechtin, (1999) highlight Sartre's distinction between the 'lived' body and the body as an anatomical entity.

⁹ Some commentators regard the concept of a 'fundamental project' as controversial and in conflict with Sartre's overall more fluid and non-determinist approach. Jopling (1992) provides an eloquent appraisal of the term, one that reveals a more dynamic and dialectical process, as developed in Sartre's study of Flaubert (Sartre, 1981). See also Borchers (2005).

¹⁰ Sartre talks of the ‘despair’ of authenticity in his *War diaries* (Sartre 1984, Notebook 12), notes which are reminiscent of his later work on ‘being for others’ and ‘bad faith’, and also foreshadow his concerns with regard to love and relations between individuals in the Notebooks for an ethics (Sartre, 1992)

¹¹ An interesting take on this topic can be found in Wider (1999).

¹² The reciprocal nature of our interactions with the ‘world’ in which we find ourselves is the underlying theme of Sartre’s Critique of dialectical reason (Sartre, 2004), which provides the theoretical underpinning for later themes in this chapter. Catalano (1986) provides a very clear and succinct outline of the main concepts of this work.

¹³ Martinot (2005) develops this theme with reference to the importance of dialogue, however Mirvish (2002) in an important article summarises other commentators contributions while adding his own invaluable commentary, drawing on Sartre’s Notebooks for an ethics as source of Sartre’s attempts to deal with the possibility of non-conflictual relations (see also Mirvish (1984). A further important contribution also drawing on the Notebooks comes from Anderson (1993). Other useful articles that helpfully address this theme include Heikens-Berenpas (2011); and Oliver (2001)

¹⁴ The question of ‘bodily awareness’ has long been an important one for psychotherapy. An interesting take on this subject is given by Johnson (2007)

¹⁵ The notion of the ‘felt sense’, although part of a different discourse developed by Gendlin (1997) is highly appropriate here, and broadly compatible with Sartre’s pre-reflective awareness.

¹⁶ Merleau Ponty (1962) was more explicit in his discussion of the way in which we are ‘beings with sexual potential’ than Sartre, but the notion is implicit in *Being and nothingness* (Sartre, 1956, Part Three).

¹⁷ Crittendon (2011) provides an interesting review of this concept, its development and its significance.

¹⁸ This approach encapsulates Sartre’s later work, from the Critique of dialectical reason to the Idiot of the family. It is outlined in the Search for a method (Sartre, 1968) which, although published separately in English, was originally published in French as part of the Critique. The dialectic is a central component of his later work, most elaborately discussed in Sartre (2004). Very useful discussions of this can be found in Catalano (1986); Morris (2008) and Farrar (2000). Ally (2010) provides a very useful synthesis of Sartre’s unpublished or unfinished works that demonstrate the significance of this method.

¹⁹ Of course Foucault’s History of sexuality (Foucault, 1998) provides considerable discussion on this point from a different perspective; see also Weekes (1985); and particularly Giddens (1992).

²⁰ Sartre’s later work saw the metamorphosis of the individual of Being and nothingness to the ‘Singular universal’ that is most clearly described in the pseudo-biography of Flaubert (Sartre, 1981).

²¹ The concept of ‘praxis’ is central to the Critique (Sartre, 2004); Catalano (1986) emphasises this in his analysis of the movement from the ‘totalised’ individual to the group or collective.

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