

Sex with Sartre

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What does it mean to be a sexual being according to one of the great icons of existentialism?

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Sartre famously said that he liked to masturbate women but did not think much of the sexual act. This was because, according to Simone de Beauvoir (his companion for many years, including intellectual companion), he could never let himself go and become incarnated in his body; he had to remain in control in his head. He wanted to remain active and could not stand being passive. Not to mention the fact that he infamously describes in *Being and Nothingness* the female sex organ as a 'voracious mouth which devours the penis and brings about the idea of castration: the sexual act is castration of a man but, above all, the female sex organ is a hole'.

In a letter to Beauvoir, Sartre admits that he does not know how to be sensual. According to the author of *The Second Sex*, sex with Sartre could be exhausting, waiting for him to climax. In a little-known text on courtly love, Sartre writes that entering into love is a form of death, explaining that when giving or being robbed of one's empirical self, as in any mystery, one dies. A contemporary literary theorist, Leo Bersani, writes: 'It is possible to think of the sexual as, precisely, moving between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of self.'

For Sartre, I want to appropriate for myself the freedom of the Other, and yet that freedom always escapes me because from the moment I want to appropriate the Other, I transform him/her into an object, an object that loses its liberty. In looking to solve this dilemma, I try and appropriate for myself the Other's body, but, Sartre says, all these attempts are doomed to failure. Sexual desire is the means to try and grasp the Other's subjectivity, notably through touch: 'Desire expresses itself through stroking like thought through language'. In the last interview between Sartre and Beauvoir in 1974, the conversation comes back to the question of sex. Beauvoir reiterates that because Sartre always wanted to be active, this attitude brought with it a certain detachment, a coldness, and Sartre

acquiesces that, because his sexual partners gave themselves whilst he did not, one could talk about a form of sadism in him.

Being and Nothingness delves into sadism, described as the non-reciprocity of sexual relations as the sadist gets his kick from being a free and appropriating power in front of the freedom of the Other enslaved through the flesh. And to possess this flesh, the sadist uses the caress, defined as being not a simple contact, but a shaping: 'When I caress the Other, I give birth to their flesh, underneath my fingers'. It is in Sartre's main philosophical treatise that one finds the way the sadist appropriates the Other's body; through the obscene, by making their body adopt obscene positions.



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Thus the role of the imagination comes into play, reminding us of Sade's dictum that the enjoyment of the senses is always regulated by the imagination. In fact, there are parallels between Sade and Sartre according to Beauvoir's *Must we burn Sade?* (1972). While the former narrates his fantasies before they are played out, the latter writes letters to Beauvoir where he describes what he has done. In both cases, 'through this splitting, the act becomes a spectacle that is perceived at a distance at the very moment it is being engaged in'.

We learn in *Being and Nothingness* that the embodiment of pain as a way to interact with the Other is a way of treating them as an object and to become a body that inflicts pain. We must ask the question: is sadism a satisfactory mode of living one's sexuality? For Sartre, it is doomed because the moment the Other has climaxed, he/she is nothing but a panting body and their flesh is there, object-like, and the only thing I can do is to stay paralysed in front of this flesh, or be overtaken by my senses; thus, at the very instant when it reaches its goal, sadism gives way to my own desire.

The problem with sex is the philosophical issue of object-relations, and of narcissism, an issue debated by Freud, Klein, Lacan and, most recently, by Bersani and Philipps in *Intimacies* (2010). Sartre did say that he wanted to revise his position in his first philosophical treatise, and especially the section on 'Relations with others' because he had left human beings too independent from each other. It is in *Notebooks for an Ethics*, published in 1983 after Sartre's death (a book he wrote mostly in 1947 and 1948) that we find a fuller expression of relations with the Other. Sartre argues that: '... I have to lose myself in order to find myself'. He now believes in reciprocity in love and that his 'sado-masochistic dialectic of enslavement in *Being and Nothingness* hinders love'. One must accept that we can be both freedom and object for the other and we must go beyond our being-object. Beauvoir says as much in *Must we burn Sade?* Through what she calls 'an ambiguous unity', each one transcends their presence in themselves and reaches instantaneous communication.

Do try this at home!

Jean-Pierre Boulé is Professor of Contemporary French Studies at Nottingham Trent University, UK. He is the author of various books on Sartre including *Sartre, Self-Formation and Masculinities* (2005), and three co-edited volumes: *Jean-Paul Sartre: Mind and Body, Word and Deed* (2011); *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema. A Sartrean Perspective* (2011); *Existentialism and Contemporary Cinema. A Beauvoirian Perspective* (2012). He served as executive editor of *Sartre Studies International* from 2008 until 2014. His latest article in *Sartre Studies International* (vol. 22, Issue 1, 2017) looks at eroticism, desire and sadism in Sartre.

