

Touch and Vision: Rethinking with Merleau-Ponty Sartre on the Caress

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Despite the proliferation of inquiries into the myriad facets of sexuality, and more specifically into those of sexual intercourse or intimacy, there remains little questioning of what are the basic structures of meaning of this phenomenon. This is the case despite the widespread recognition since Freud that sexuality is a pervasive current of existence vital to one's identity and relationship to others and the world at large. In this paper, sexual intimacy will be questioned in its constitution of distinctive possibilities of perception, interpersonal perception, embodiment, affirmation of finitude, and a realization of community. Given the confines of this paper, these meanings can only begin to be delineated, and can be best approached through a specific focus, chosen here as the caress. By focusing on the meaning of the caress, it will be shown that one comes immediately to the most distinctive possibilities of meaning of sexuality. Also, by focusing on the caress, the perspective to be presented here can be seen in its disagreement with that of Sartre's in *Being and Nothingness*—one of the few thoroughgoing and probably the most famous or infamous treatments of the pervasive significance of sexual intimacy. It is my contention that Sartre's descriptions of sexual intimacy are misguided. They are misguided by a set of assumptions that underlie Sartre's philosophy as a whole and which he imposes on the phenomenon of sexual intimacy, rather than allowing what is distinctive about this phenomenon to reveal itself.

It must be noted that it is my intention to investigate the structure of sexual intimacy in its fullest possibilities to be an expressive and revealing dimension of existence, as distinct from studying either the deviations from its distinctive significance or the diminutions of its power to reveal and express. Like language, which for the most part is not used in its power to reveal or arouse wonder or create authentic community, but rather is inexpressive and tranquilizing, as Heidegger puts it,¹ so too sexuality often appears having lost its distinctive expressiveness. Most avenues of expression and discovery are gained only with an awareness, effort, commitment, and loosening up of one's taken for granted world. This does not usually occur. However, this does not alter the unique possibilities that comprise its structure and can be recovered. This is what is sought here of sexual intimacy. Accordingly, deviations from these primary possibilities are of interest only in considering what they lack that might shed light by contrast on the primary possibilities we seek.

Retouching Sartre's Description of the Caress

Sartre views the caress as ultimately aiming at a possession of the other by passing through a "double reciprocal incarnation"² in which I reduce myself to "a *touched* passivity in such a way that my body is made flesh in order to touch the Other's body with its own passivity, that is, by caressing itself with the Other's body rather than by caressing her" (*BN*, 507). By caressing the other, according to Sartre, I begin a cycle where each consciousness is swallowed up by the heavy passivity of the body as enchanting object. This cycle continues as we each further sink down into this heavy passivity by becoming touched through the other. The ultimate aim of this process, Sartre states, is "that of being 'absorbed by my body as ink is by a blotter,' that of being reduced to my pure being-there" (*BN*, 513). Through this transformation I become like the rest of the "world of desire" which is "a destructured world which has lost its meaning, a world in which things jut out like fragments of pure matter, like brute qualities" (*BN*, 513). For Sartre, this means that the caress is a "shaping" in which I make the other be flesh in this sense: "the caress reveals the flesh by stripping the body of its action, by cutting it off from the possibilities which surround it; the caress is designed to uncover the web of inertia beneath the action—i.e. the pure 'being-there'—which sustains it" (*BN*, 507).

What is distinctive then about the caress is the utilization of the power of one's touch in revealing a certain dimension of existence called here by Sartre the "world of desire." However, what is striking in Sartre's initial conceptions of the power of touch is that his descriptions of its structure are informed by his previous analyses of the power of vision and, more specifically, that of the look.

The power to strip the person of surrounding possibilities, to cut through the web of action to a pure "being-there," and to drain the world of meanings in becoming reduced to brute qualities, is the power that Sartre has previously attributed to the look: "But in order for me to be what I am, it suffices merely that the Other look at me. . . . Thus for the Other I have stripped myself of transcendence. . . . I grasp the Other's look at the very center of my act as the solidification and alienation of my own possibilities. . . . But suddenly the alienation of myself, which is the act of being-looked-at, involves the alienation of the world I organize" (*BN*, 351–353).

This power of the look to strip away and appropriate which, as we shall uncover, stems from vision's characteristics becomes for Sartre the basis of his description of the caress. As a matter of fact, Sartre explains the significance of the act of caressing by making an analogy to the look: "similarly my look caresses when it discovers underneath this leaping which is at first the dancer's legs, the curved extension of the thighs" (*BN*, 507) which reveals the dancer's nakedness for the first time. Sartre also states that the caress has succeeded when not only is the other "flesh to my eyes," but is also "flesh in his own eyes"—both expressions emphasizing the visual. In considering the caress, Sartre seems to have overlooked the most striking characteristics of touch, and instead continues to describe this phenomenon using not only the phrases of vision, but also according to sight's characteristics. At this point, it would be helpful to delineate and contrast the differing significance of touch and vision.

Touch and Vision

Merleau-Ponty in his *Phenomenology of Perception* points to an understanding of the senses as distinct contributors of differing strands of meaning which nevertheless form a whole. He recognizes the importance of distinguishing "that touching is not seeing,"³ and that "the sense of touch is not spatial as is sight" (*PP*, 222). To admit that "the senses are distinct from each other," and also to admit at the same time that the distinct elements only appear within a whole, makes this distinction such that

"we can recognize it without any threat to the unity of the senses" (*PP*, 225). What is distinctive about touch became increasingly important to Merleau-Ponty: "There is a circle of the touched and the touching, the touch takes hold of the touching."⁴ In other words, the experience of touching is not unidirectional: one cannot neatly bisect the experience of touch into the act of touching and the passively touched object. In the very act of touching, one is touched in turn. Rather than the traditional dichotomy of activity versus passivity, one finds a reciprocity in touch.

To Merleau-Ponty, this was significant insofar as the reciprocity of tactile apprehension was a reservoir of significance that washes through the other senses in their unity of style. Although the senses are a whole in our perceptual grounding in the world, each sense has a founding role of depositing certain significances to which all the others will resonate and elaborate. As the previous quotation indicated, Merleau-Ponty believed that touch opened up a distinctive spatiality that uniquely leads to this reciprocity of the touched-touching, of the perceived-perceiving.

To touch or to be touched entails to be close to something or someone. This can be understood in purely physicalistic terms of being "up against." However, the phrase itself, "to be close to something or someone," has an interesting ambiguity that stems from its other usage which indicates a communing, an experienced loss of intervening boundaries, a sharing of worlds. It is interesting to note that the emotions are said to *touch* one, or that one feels this or that emotion. The language of emotions is a tactile one. The language of rational reflection or a distanced reflection is a visual one in which one *sees* things, something *dawns* on one as new *insight* is achieved. The world of vision, besides being a world most distinguished by distance and boundedness, is essential to the world of taking. Sartre states, "What is seen is possessed" (*BN*, 738). In other words, the experience of sight is marked by an agent acting to make something differentiated from himself his own. Insofar as our ways of knowing have followed this paradigm of vision, they have been an act of aggression or confrontation,⁵ for as Sartre states in full: "What is seen is possessed, to see is to *deflower*. If we examine the comparisons ordinarily used to express the relation between the knower and the known, we see that many of them are represented as being a kind of *violation by sight*" (*BN*, 738).

For Sartre, these characteristics of sight and of knowing as an appropriating of something in a confrontation to make it one's own, suggests to him "the idea of sexual intercourse," of a "carnal possession," a "violation," a "penetration" and "caress" (*BN*, 738–740). Sartre, in investigating the aggressive, appropriative aspect of sight, is led to sexuality, and in exploring sexuality, he is led to the confrontation of sight, of the

look. There is admittedly an opening up and penetrating into space given to one by vision that can lead it to have the characteristic that Sartre has pinpointed in his descriptions. However, it is touch which is essential to the caress, and it would seem to be more revealing of its significance to explore what is distinctive of touch and not of sight.

The distinct shared quality of spatiality involved in touching and being touched grounds a meaning which is inseparable from this dimension of experience:

my hand, which is felt from within, is also accessible from without, itself tangible, for my other hand, for example, if it takes its place among the things that it touches, and is in a sense one of them, opens up finally a tangible being of which it is also a part. Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate . . . and finally a veritable touching of the touch, when my right hand touches my left while it is palpating the things, where the "touching subject" passes over to the rank of the touched, descends into things, such that touch is formed in the midst of the world.⁶

In touch, the distinction between touching subject and touched object blurs: in other words, the distinction between activity and passivity dissolves. Rather than a confrontation and appropriation, there is a permeability of boundaries and an opening up of interpenetration, of communion.

This is the distinguishing possibility of touch, and like all possibilities can be achieved to a greater or lesser extent, and is never realized in an absolute sense—which would be a permanent, perfect reciprocity. Rather, the experience of touch hovers along a continuum that can approach the pole of activity and passivity, given the context of the experience. However, there is always this undercurrent of reciprocity with the world that is present in every experience of touch, no matter where it is along this continuum. Up to this point, we have spoken of touch in general, and not what is unique about the caress that is shaped by touch, and what in turn infuses this sense as a result of this founding phenomenon of the caress.

The Caress and Its Significance

The possibilities of touch we have pointed to fully emerge in interpersonal perception, and are uniquely realized in the caress, an experience in

which one's openness to the other becomes the theme. Each way the world can be revealed to us is altered and expanded when one begins to explore how I and the other are revealed to one another, and this interpersonal significance is an abiding possession of each mode of apprehension and structures them—often overlooked by philosophers. This is true of touch.

It was briefly mentioned that, although the tactile experience tends toward a reciprocity of touching and touched, often this circle is broken and leans to one side or the other:

To begin with, we spoke summarily of a reversability . . . of the touching and the touched. It is time to emphasize that it is a reversability always imminent and never realized in fact. My left hand is always on the verge of touching my right hand touching the things, but it never reaches coincidence: the coincidence eclipses at the moment of realization, and one of two things always occurs: either my right hand really passes over to the rank of the touched, but then its hold on the world is interrupted; or it retains its hold on the world, but then I do not really touch it.⁷

What Merleau-Ponty seems to be bringing to our attention is that at least insofar as the tactile experience comes to my attention as a focus of awareness, the reciprocity of the experience tends to be unstable and vacillate between becoming more passive or active. However, Merleau-Ponty's descriptions center on my apprehension of the inanimate world or of myself.

In the interpersonal tactile experience, it is the reciprocity of touching that is more stable, and any experiences of passivity or activity that are fleeting and unstable.⁸ One can through a deliberate act of consciousness or by attempting to adopt a certain impenetrable attitude toward the other approach not being touched by the other while touching the other, such as a doctor must assume in his examinations, or also approach not touching the other while one is being touched, the correlative stance of the patient while being examined by the doctor. However, outside of highly structured situations designed to forestall this, these are ephemeral attitudes that are washed away by the tide of reciprocity in the interpersonal tactile experience.⁹ Although this is the case in all interpersonal tactile experience, this is even more cogently the case in the situation that builds upon this characteristic of touch, affirms it, and brings it to one's existence as a foundational experience: the caress.

In sexual intimacy, the situation of desire gives the caress the opportunity to maximize and heighten the reciprocity of touch. It is the surpassing of the distinction of activity and passivity in the caress and

in the sexual act that can take place at the height of its expressiveness and lead to an overcoming of the confrontation between lovers, giving them the distinctive respite of community. Through the surpassing of the distinction of activity versus passivity in the touch of the caress, there is opened up within sexual intimacy a copresence with the other in which neither is subject or object. Rather, both are interlocking existences who can affirm their embodiment as medium of reciprocal contact through the shared project of desire, rather than sentenced to being isolated, alienated, and acted upon or retaliating.

It must be emphasized that this is not a coincidence, for there is an acute sense of self-awareness; but, if sexual intimacy is successful, it is not the distressing self-consciousness that scalds one in alienated rejection of being embodied, but rather the joyful affirmation of being delimited, and not limited, by this unique body. There is a self-aware acceptance or even celebration of being consciousness-inseparable-from-body that allows one to take up one's embodiment, as distinguished from a distancing self-consciousness of reflection that fights embodiment. In the caress, one is separated from the other, but only insofar as it is in the act in which my body assumes its most sweeping possibility of dissolving barriers of confrontation through reciprocity and being radically *with* the other. This is the magic of the world of desire, where self-identity and coexistence both reach their most feverish pitch, and yet contralogically permeate each other.

In returning to Sartre's characterization of the caress, there are several revisions to make. Rather than being reduced to a "*touched passivity*," as Sartre states, one becomes a touched-touching through the reciprocity of the loving caress of sexual intimacy. Rather than having one's consciousness absorbed like ink into a blotter by the body in order to "sink down" into "heavy passivity," one's consciousness shines within and through the flesh as an acceptance of one's possibilities as an embodied consciousness; for it is not the case that through the caress one is reduced to a fascinating object for the other as subject, but rather one is affirmed and affirming through this reciprocity as a separate coexistence. Rather than the caress being a reduction of the living possibilities from the flesh—a "stripping away" to make it "pure being-there," as Sartre said—it is an attempt to touch in both an emotional and literal way these possibilities as affirmed through the body.

This means that we are to take Sartre's use of the loving glance or visual caress in the opposite manner to the way he presented it. Insofar as Sartre turned to the power of vision to deflower, to strip away, to violate, and to possess, in order to describe the caress, he chose those characteristics of sight that were most opposed to the particular power of

touch that permeates the caress. Rather than a manipulative "shaping" of the body into mere flesh or a dominating "stripping away," the touch of the caress is a respectful opening up of the flow of possibilities through the flesh. In a visual sense, the touch of the caress sparks a translucency of the flesh that allows the lived body to reveal within itself the glow of the attributes and possibilities of the consciousness of the other that one is affirming. Insofar as vision shares in the possibilities of touch within the unity of the senses, one can bestow upon the other a caressing glance that affirms this aura of the other's attributes and possibilities as permeating the flesh in sexual intimacy.

This is the opposite of Sartre's claim that a caress would be like the look that suddenly divests a dancer of the aura of the grace and beauty of her body as an expressive acting out of possibilities in order to reveal her stark nakedness. Rather, the visual equivalent of the caress is precisely the way of regarding the dancer before she was reduced to stark nakedness: when her body appeared only within the web of significant action, glowing with possibilities that were born in her graceful movements. As Sartre did say of this type of regard, although he did not consider it a caress: "Nothing is less 'in the flesh' than a dancer even though she is in the nude" (*BN*, 506). It is the contention here that this is exactly how one is copresent with the other through the caress and in desire: one is nude with the other but is not seen as naked in the sense of merely being an inert body.

In the loving regard, one is seen within the web of one's actions and possibilities. Therefore, one can be comfortable or even pleased by this nudity, because it does not strip away one's identity and reduce one to a pure object. Sight borrows a lesson from tactile experience as here one uses vision not to register the other at a distance or deflower or violate or even unmask the other, but rather one *touches* the other with the regard of one's glance, and allows the other's visual appearance to *touch* one with the atmosphere of their entire being. Here, vision too approaches the surpassing of the distinction of activity and passivity in which, within one's loving regard, one is able to let the other be, to use Heidegger's phrase. As Sartre has rightly characterized, however, for vision this is a difficult balance to maintain without the particular spatiality of vision eventually making one aware of the possibilities of confrontation and alienation; indeed, one discovers in the visual caress of desire a pressing need to transform this visual exchange into a tactile one as the sustaining communication of a coexisting reciprocity.

We must note then that this description of the visual caress is in direct contradiction to Sartre's notion: "But the caress reveals the flesh by stripping the body of its action, by cutting it off from the possibilities

which surround it: the caress is designed to uncover the web of inertia beneath the action, i.e. the pure being-there—which sustains it . . . to caress with the eyes and to desire are one and the same" (*BN*, 507). It is my contention that insofar as one looks at the other in this way, reducing the other's body to mere flesh in the sense of a pure, passive being-there, one is not caressing, and is using sight's characteristics in a way antithetical to loving sexual intimacy. This is part of why Sartre's descriptions of loving sexual intimacy are doomed to contradiction and breakdown. Sartre's misunderstandings of this phenomenon, which extends to his assessment of one's relationship to embodiment, to the alterations in perceptions that creates a "world of desire," and to the place of rhythm, interpenetrating space, and play within sexual intimacy are all part of his basic assumptions that man stands first in confrontation with others and the world, in a flight from anxiety in the face of freedom. However, the delineation of these other phenomena within sexual intimacy are topics for further discussion.

Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 165, 214, 222–24.

2. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1966), 506. Hereafter *BN*.

3. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: The Humanities Press, 1962), 224. Hereafter *PP*.

4. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 143.

5. Indeed, this is how Sartre depicts the essence of one's relations with others. One can predict this view once vision is given primacy in interpersonal perception.

6. Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 133–34.

7. *Ibid.*, 147–48.

8. Note how this parallels Sartre's observations about the world of emotion. Sartre points out how one can describe the emotions as an activity or passivity in some cases, but when one considers the interpersonal realms these rational superstructures used to categorize situations "cave in when the magical aspect of faces, of gestures, and of human situations is too strong." Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Wisdom Library, 1948), 85. Sartre recognized that there was another level of experience that came to the forefront in the interpersonal situation that could not be described by our traditional distinctions and that in regard to the emotions he called "the world of magic."

9. It is significant in this regard to note that psychiatric patients may reach the extreme of a dissociation of the structures of their world that they may become alienated from feeling any reciprocity in the touch with the loss of what is normally constitutive of one's existence—showing both that one can turn away from this reciprocity, but also that it is an alienation: that the diminution of this reciprocity is part of the breakdown of the structure of existence.