

Sartre's Sexism Reconsidered¹

CONSTANCE MUI
Loyola University

In 1973, Margery Collins and Christine Pierce became the first critics to take issue with Sartre's philosophy on charges of blatant sexism. Their article, entitled "Holes and Slime: Sexism in Sartre's Psychoanalysis," has been reprinted in many reputable anthologies on women, gaining considerable recognition in the feminist community.² Michele le Doeuff, for example, reinforced its thesis by extending it to her own unfavorable reevaluation of Simone de Beauvoir's philosophy, which is founded on Sartre's ontology.³ Interestingly, whether it is due to indifference or uncritical acceptance, for some fifteen years since the article, Collins and Pierce have not received any public response from the Sartrean community. This rather long and unexpected silence means that they have put in the first and last word on an important and timely subject which deserves an open dialogue. Indeed, because of the value of Sartrean ontology for important feminist writings such as *The Second Sex*, it is time to reassess the authors' thesis so as to generate some much needed discussion on the issue.

To be sure, Collins and Pierce are on the right track in pointing out the unmistakably sexist language in Sartre's discussions of the slimy and the hole, which he associates with the breast and the vagina, organs that are distinctively female. What clearly comes through in the analogies is the utter repugnance that Sartre feels toward the female body-for-others (i.e., the female body as an object). There is no question that behind the unapologetically sexist language lies a grumbling misogynist. The more fundamental question, however, is whether his personal distaste for woman negatively affects the position of woman in his overall ontology. Such an inquiry will shed some light on whether we should reject the philosophy, and not just the philosopher, as sexist and hence defective.

¹I am indebted to Richard Schmitt and Richard Westley for their helpful comments.

²Margery Collins and Christine Pierce, "Holes and Slime: Sexism in Sartre's Psychoanalysis," *Philosophical Forum* (v. V, Fall-Win., 1973), pp. 112-127. For woman's anthologies, see, for example, *Women in Western Thought*, ed. by Martha Lee Osborne (New York: Random House, 1979), and *Woman and Philosophy: Toward a Theory of Liberation*, ed. by Carol Gould & Marx Wartofsky (New York: Putnam Press, 1976).

³Michele le Doeuff, "Operative Philosophy: Simone de Beauvoir and Existentialism," in *Ideology & Consciousness*, no.6, Autumn 1979, pp. 47-58.

This paper will argue that Sartre, in spite of himself, has set up a system which ironically committed him to giving woman an at least equal, if not more primordial, ontological status as man. This argument seeks to qualify Collins' and Pierce's original thesis by situating it within the broader context of Sartrean ontology. One cannot infer from the sexist analogies of slime and holes the claim that woman occupies an inferior ontological status. To do so would be to overlook the delightful irony in his ontology: in spite of his ill feelings toward woman, woman nevertheless prevails as a full-fledged consciousness in that ontology.

Collins and Pierce were careful to identify sexism only in Sartre's psychoanalysis. They charged that

Sartre's existential psychoanalysis ... offer(s) instances in which the In-itself is associated with distinctly feminine, or female, qualities, thereby implying that a typical female nature does exist and function. Moreover, this female essence is invested with an utterly negative value, making Sartre guilty of blatant sexism.⁴

However, like everything in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre's psychoanalysis is itself an integral component of his general ontology and can not be understood apart from it. This means his psychology must be seen in terms of the distinctive characteristics of *pour-soi* and *en-soi*, as well as the peculiar relation between them. The most characteristic feature of *pour-soi* is consciousness. Consciousness is not some kind of substance but a "nothingness", a pure flux. It is empty qua itself, but becomes a consciousness-of-something by throwing itself toward some thing-out-there. The thing-out-there, the thing which fills consciousness and gives it its content, is *en-soi*. *En-soi* can be any inanimate object, but it can also be another consciousness whose body is captured as an object in the eyes of the subject.

Clearly, then, in Sartrean ontology consciousness approaches every entity in the world, even other subjects, in a subject-to-object relation. The bond between *pour-soi* (subject) and *en-soi* (object) is a delicate one. As consciousness, I experience the world through a relation which turns everything around me, including other consciousness, into a passive unity of objects. But by the same token, I am quite dependent and vulnerable to these objects in so far as consciousness demands as its very support their being-there. It is through their objectification that my existence as

⁴Collins and Pierce, p. 117. The authors have also identified sexism in Sartre's literary writings, claiming that the sexism in his psychology is reflected in those writings. This paper will only address the sexism in Sartre's psychoanalysis, with the understanding that our interpretation of his literary writings will vary according to our interpretation of his philosophy.

consciousness-of-something is sustained.

Furthermore, because consciousness, as pure nothingness, is thoroughly translucent, *pour-soi* is in no position to posit the being of the substantial object of which it is conscious. Hence, the object must exist, as brute being, independent of and prior to its encounter with consciousness. It must have been already-there before the burst of consciousness onto it, objectifying it in the process. But for the same reason that consciousness cannot found the being of its objects, *pour-soi* desires being. It seeks to escape from its own nothingness and contingency by acquiring, without compromising its own consciousness, the substantiality and full positivity of *en-soi*. In short, it seeks in vain to preserve within itself the opposing characteristics of both *pour-soi* and *en-soi*, viz., God.

Even though this fundamental desire can never be fulfilled, *pour-soi* nevertheless engages in patterns of bad faith by acting in ways that symbolically place itself as the foundation of *en-soi*. A common pattern is appropriation, in which I attempt to completely possess the object so that it may become a part of me. Possession is therefore symbolic of the impossible union of *pour-soi* and *en-soi*. It is through this fundamental choice of being God that *pour-soi* identifies with the absolute positivity of *en-soi* and deceptively justifies its existence as the source of *en-soi*. In view of this choice, the primary relation between *pour-soi* and *en-soi* is one of appropriation.

This subject-to-object relation of appropriation provides the indispensable ontological context in which to assess both Sartre's psychoanalysis and Collins' and Pierce's critique of it. For Sartre, the aim of psychoanalysis is to comprehend the truth of human behavior by analyzing the person's particular choice of being. Every behavior, every action, presupposes a concrete choice. Such everyday choices, says Sartre, often manifest the person's fundamental desire "to have", which amounts to a hopeless project to be God.

This fundamental desire to appropriate objects is reflected not only in our actions but also in our "gut feelings" toward things. Our attitude toward a given object—e.g., whether we feel exhilaration or disgust—depends on whether or not it exhibits for us any possessable quality.⁵ Sartre notes that the things we find most revolting are those that offer the strongest resistance toward us. Such are objects with a "slimy" quality.

⁵In so far as the qualities found in the object is transcendent to *pour-soi*, there is, for Sartre, an "invitational" element found in each thing, which draws us to it and affects the way we feel about it. This mitigates the subjective aspect of perception. For Sartre, the existential (as opposed to empirical) psychoanalyst must accept an ontological starting point with respect to the objective characteristics in objects. This must be taken into consideration in her evaluation of the subjective meanings that those characteristics have for the subject.

It is in Sartre's discussion of the slimy that Collins and Pierce documented the first instance of sexism. Sartre points out that objects come in three general states: liquid, solid, and the ambiguous quality in between, slime. Liquid and solid things are ideal objects of possession. Water, for example, gives me the kind of satisfaction that comes with the appropriation of knowledge. As consciousness, I can internalize knowledge without compromising its objective character as truth. Like consciousness, water has the clarity to reveal something without changing its actual identity. On the other hand, solid things, such as a rock, have the compelling opacity which secure them as unevasive, accessible objects. The rock's concreteness allows me to modify it at will, making it identifiable both subjectively and objectively as *my* thing. But none of this can be said of slimy objects. To use Sartre's example of honey, when I dip my finger into a jar of honey, it clings to me and slowly slides down my finger like a snake. And when I try to squeeze it as though it were a rock, it oozes out like worms between my fingers. Collins and Pierce cited Sartre's description of this feeling of repugnance and submitted it as evidence of sexism:

The For-itself is suddenly compromised...I want to let go of the slimy and it sticks to me...it sucks at me...a moist and feminine sucking...I cannot slide on this slime...it is a trap...Slime is the revenge of the In-itself. A sickly-sweet feminine revenge which may be symbolized...by the quality sugary...symbolizing the sugary death of the For-itself.⁶

Collins and Pierce noted that "the sugary" thus "poses an ultimate threat" to *pour-soi*, one of nihilation or nothingness. What emerges from Sartre's description, they charged,

is a traditional concept of the feminine, a sweet, clinging, dependent threat to male freedom. Like... Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, Sartre identifies his concept of femininity with female and rails against these qualities in women as if they were natural characteristics, evidence of a given nature.⁷

In other words, Sartre is guilty of sexism on grounds that he 1) employs the traditional concept of femininity as sweet, clinging, dependent, etc.; 2) identifies this traditional concept of femininity with the female, making no distinction between the two; and 3) assumes that the feminine and therefore female qualities are natural characteristics indicative of a pre-determined female nature. With all due respect to the authors, these inferences cry out for substantiation both textual and theoretical. A

⁶Collins and Pierce, p. 117.

⁷Ibid.

consideration of some relevant points will bring out the difficulties in each of them.

Regarding the first inference, we must, to be fair to Sartre, bear in mind that in the passage cited, he is referring to *honey* as an example of the slimy. Hence, it is the honey, not the feminine, that is described as sugary, sweet, clinging, soft and sticky. Twice Sartre interjects the word 'feminine' to specify that it is a stickiness and a sickly-sweetness of the feminine kind.⁸ This makes the reverse of Collins' and Pierce's first inference more plausible: Sartre is not defining the feminine in a traditional manner as soft, sweet, clinging, etc., but the soft, sweet, and clinging as feminine. This juxtaposition makes it clear that Sartre has not committed himself to any universal claim about femininity itself. Notice that we are not merely fussing with semantics here. If I say that apples are red, I am making no universal claim about redness, only about apples. I have not said anything about redness that could be taken to apply to all things red. Similarly, Sartre's description of softness as feminine follows the same linguistic and logical principle. There, whatever is implied about the feminine can in no way be applied universally, such that femininity is necessarily clinging and soft, which, for Sartre, amounts to being slimy and repugnant. The fallacy of such application can be detected more poignantly if we turn Sartre's description into an argument form:

1. (All) soft, clinging things are (some) feminine.
2. Soft, clinging things are slimy.
3. Slimy things are repugnant.
4. Therefore, feminine things are repugnant.

Evidently, this argument amounts to a fallacy of the excluded middle. In his description of the Slimy, Sartre is committed only to the three premises, but not the invalid conclusion, which incidentally would make Sartre "anti-feminine".

This certainly raises some serious questions about Collins' and Pierce's overall thesis (see p. 2). Specifically, if it is logically invalid to infer from Sartre's discussion that the feminine is repugnant, it is not clear as to how Sartre can be guilty of "blatant sexism" for assigning a "negative value" (of repugnance) to the "distinctively feminine". Indeed, the thesis could not have been rescued even if we drop the universals from the

⁸The first 'feminine' describes "the stickiness which sucks at me"—this stickiness amounts to a "feminine sucking" according to Sartre. The second 'feminine' describes the "sickly-sweet revenge": we are told that it is a sickly-sweetness of the feminine kind. Furthermore, 'sweet' and 'sugary' are words that are particularly descriptive of honey rather than the slimy. Sartre's second example of glue as slimy makes this point clear (*Being and Nothingness*, p. 610).

argument above to yield the conclusion, "some feminine things (e.g., honey) are slimy and repugnant". If only *some* but not all feminine things are slimy, then surely it is not the feminine quality itself which makes those things slimy, since the qualifier 'some' already suggests that there can be other feminine things which are not slimy and repugnant.

But suppose Sartre really considers the feminine as slimy and repugnant, Collins and Pierce would readily acknowledge that this would only make Sartre anti-feminine, but not necessarily anti-female.⁹ This calls into question their second inference, which asserts that Sartre identifies his negative concept of femininity with the female. In the absence of textual evidence, it remains to be substantiated theoretically that Sartre has in fact passed from the feminine to the female. But nothing in his system would justify such a move, since it is a system which has consistently denounced the idea of a fixed human nature. For Sartre, being feminine does not and indeed cannot amount to being female because the person's femininity or masculinity is a choice which is not determined by her gender or anything else. In so far as there is no necessary connection between gender and behavior in Sartre's system, he cannot be accused of being anti-female even if he is anti-feminine. Furthermore, not every anti-feminine view is sexist. In a patriarchal society, many traditional feminine traits, including 'soft' and 'clinging', are in fact repugnant because they reinforce a woman's submissiveness and dependence. And so Sartre cannot be labelled a sexist any more than the feminist who finds those same feminine traits repugnant can be labelled a sexist.

Similarly, the third inference fails for lack of textual and theoretical support, even if we assume that Sartre is anti-female for the reasons Collins and Pierce indicated. At this point the authors promptly sought to strengthen their claim concerning the woman's "fixed nature" with evidence taken from Sartre's discussion of holes. In that discussion, they argued,

⁹The authors acknowledged the important distinction between feminine and female in a footnote (p. 126, fn. 15). They maintained, however, that in order to escape the charge of sexism, Sartre needs to make the distinction clear. And since he has not done so, he is therefore guilty of sexism. But this is hardly convincing given all the obscure and rambling passages throughout *Being and Nothingness*. His failure to make the distinction in question is probably not deliberate, and there are many other distinctions which he should have made, such as his multiple usage of the concept "being". All told, whereas we may have enough evidence to fault him for being ambiguous and sloppy here, there does not seem to be sufficient evidence to fault him for sexism.

it becomes clear that it is not culturally acquired or chosen qualities, but the actual female anatomy which constitutes the threatening In-itself. Here, the translation "feminine sexual organ" undoubtedly denotes female...In...(Sartre's) remarks on sexual organs only the female is labelled obscene.¹⁰

And so the authors concluded that, for Sartre, it is a woman's "given nature" to be soft, threatening, and obscene, since she does not choose but is born with a female body with those negative qualities. But if this is all it takes to conclude that woman is assigned a fixed nature in Sartre's system, what is to keep us from exonerating Sartre from charges of sexism by applying this theory to man, who, like woman, is also born with a body not of his own choosing? Would not man also have a fixed nature, perhaps a less obscene one, by virtue of having a body? Since in Sartre's ontology, any entity with a fixed nature is *en-soi*, what difference does it make ontologically if the man is *en-soi* of the "positive" sort and the woman "negative"? *En-soi* is *en-soi*! Indeed, this allegation of sexism amounts to a superficial reading of Sartre, since it assumes, as conventional language might allow, that whatever is "natural" to our being, such as our anatomy, must be "evidence of a given nature". It fails to take into account 1) the distinction Sartre makes among the different ontological dimensions of the body, and the particular relation between the self and each of these dimensions; 2) the fact that, in the discussions of holes, Sartre is giving a limited and very subjective account of the female body in one of its three ontological dimensions as being-an-object-for-others; and 3) on one level, *all* bodies, in so far as they are that through which the Other can have a hold on our being, are threatening and obscene as far as Sartre is concerned.

Apparently, Sartre does not deny that we have a material body subject to physical laws, a body-for-others that is viewed objectively and often negatively by the Other. However, what he does deny is the claim that our body-for-others is the only condition of our embodiment. He has taken pains to rescue us from determinism by accentuating a more fundamental dimension of our body, the "body-for-itself", whereby I engage in the ideal relation with my body by "living" it. In this relation, I experience no psychic distance between myself and my body, the kind found in any subject-to-object relation. And so the most authentic relation I can have with my body is not one in which I objectify my own body before the Other, or identify with the Other's objectification of my body. In light of this distinction between body-for-me and body-for-others, it seems rather irrelevant in our evaluation of Sartre's system what Sartre or anyone else has to say about the woman's body-for-others. That is because it is nothing more than an account of how the woman *appears* to Sartre, the woman's

¹⁰Collins and Pierce, pp. 117-118.

body-as-viewed-subjectively-by-Sartre. Here, Sartre would be the first to state the obvious: it could in no way be understood as constituting the woman's identity or fixed nature.

This discussion brings out the problems facing each of Collins' and Pierce's three inferences, problems which clearly undermine specific charges of sexism they leveled against Sartrean psychoanalysis. All told, if Sartre is sexist, it is not for the reasons the authors gave; and if there is sexism in his philosophy, it is not in the passages they cited as evidence. This of course does not automatically make Sartre less of a sexist, it only shows that Collins and Pierce have misfired. No doubt we are offended by Sartre's demeaning remarks about woman. Rather than making excuses for him, Collins and Pierce deserve credit for putting him on the defensive. In doing so they have made us all the more cautious about traditional philosophy, since even the most zealous philosopher of human freedom is himself a slave to sexual biases. But if we are to seize this opportunity to reform a discipline so deeply ingrained in sexism, we had better make ourselves credible by giving a well-founded, accurate account of Sartre's sexism—one that would promise a conviction without doing him an injustice.

Now any accurate account would require that we stay close to the text. In the analysis of the slimy Sartre's only reference to the woman appears in one of his examples, and it involves not her complete being but only a part of her anatomy: her breasts. In the analysis of holes, he again refers not to the woman as a person but only to her partial anatomy, this time her vagina, which he offers as an example of holes. Hence these two references show the consistency in Sartre's sexist treatment of woman. He points to specific female organs, as derogatorily as he himself would see them, as examples to illuminate his ideas of the slimy and holes. In both cases, there is little doubt that the examples reflect a very dark side of the philosopher himself. But they also allow us to separate the philosopher from his philosophy on an important issue: namely, that his sexism is not contained in the ideas themselves but is channeled into the examples used to illustrate those ideas. Here, we must ask the questions, need those examples be the ones Sartre chose, or will the theory work just as well with other examples? In other words, are those specific examples indispensable to the theory itself? The answer to both questions, in both cases, is no.

Consider first the slimy. In his description Sartre says,

(when) the slimy collapse(s)...(it) appears at once as a deflation...and as display—like the flattening out of the full breasts of a woman who is lying on her back.¹¹

¹¹Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), p. 608.

What immediately comes to mind is that the woman's breasts are neither the most obvious nor the most appropriate example of slimy substances. If the slimy is that ambiguous quality between water and solid, and if it represents a threat to consciousness much like the Other's body is a threat, then what can be a better example than the semen produced by man's body? Indeed, semen captures the slimy most symbolically: like consciousness, it bursts out in an explosion onto its object, but at the same time it represents en-soi by negating the very essence of consciousness as absolute lucidity. By avoiding this very obvious example Sartre is anything but objective, since objectivity would require that he employs this example for its effectiveness regardless of his own disposition.

In the analysis of holes, we see that, like the slimy, holes also offer a strong resistance to our fundamental project of appropriation. When we attempt to possess it by plugging it up, it devours us—we lose ourselves in it and become its object. To illustrate the horror in our confrontation with holes, Sartre refers to the vagina, corresponding obviously to heterosexual intercourse whereby the man is the subject and the woman the object of such horror. But this amounts to a male-oriented, hetero-centric account of consciousness and its ontological fear of holes, which does not exhaust the whole panorama of human sexual experience, both female and male, homosexual and heterosexual. For instance, there are sexual acts in which the object plugged up is not the female vagina but the anus or the mouth of either sex.

These considerations show that, in both cases, an example of the male anatomy taken from a female perspective should have been used instead of or in addition to the ones Sartre employed. Far from being indispensable, the sexist examples in Sartre's psychoanalysis are not even the most representative or effective ones that could be used. Sartre has chosen those examples for at least two reasons: his subjective repulsion toward woman, and the traditional male model adopted throughout his discussion. This model of the healthy, privileged adult male has been used uncritically and often unconsciously in the history of thought. And so it is not surprising that, in a male-centered analysis of appropriation, woman would be associated with the appropriated object, i.e., the slimy and holes.

Here the question arises as to how this traditional male model might affect woman's status in an ontology that is founded on the Cartesian split between subject and object. Is woman forever locked into the position of object/Other? The unacceptable implication of this position, Collins and Pierce cautioned us, is that woman "becomes...the personification of the In-itself".¹² Michele le Doeuff argues further that Sartre

¹²Collins and Pierce, p. 119.

finds an ontological hierarchy, on the basis of which, for all eternity, woman can be posited as the in-itself and man as for-itself. The ... roles deduced from this phenomenology place woman outside the subject.¹³

But these assessments are premature. First, the fact that woman is consistently treated as the object does not entail that she is in fact an object. The status of woman in the traditional male model is simply that of *pour-soi* becoming the being who is looked at in the mode of *en-soi*. All it takes to reverse this (male) subject-to-(female) object relation is a shift in our vantage point from the masculine to the feminine. Second, there cannot be a gender hierarchy in Sartrean ontology because, even as the object/Other, woman must nonetheless be a conscious *pour-soi* given Sartre's important revision of the traditional theory of intersubjectivity.

The tradition has long insisted on the primacy of the subject-to-object relation whereby the subject becomes aware of the Other through the Other's body. Sartre criticized this position for failing to uncover an even more primary relation: my subject-to-object relation to the Other is itself founded on the Other's turning me into an object through her "look". In other words, my making an object of the Other lies subsequent to her making an object of me (or my awareness that she could have made an object of me). I become aware of the Other not through her body, but my own awareness that *I* have a body which is being looked-at.

Not surprisingly, Sartre analyzes this phenomenon of the look in terms of *pour-soi*'s fundamental project of appropriation. He maintains that the look represents a threat to consciousness in that it immediately makes me aware of two simultaneous conditions: 1) there is a dimension of my being that is "out there" and in danger of being captured, in short a "being-for-others" that is neither accessible to nor controlled by me; 2) the Other has seized my being-for-others and turned it into an object of possession. Sartre claims that it is this terrifying awareness that motivates me to retaliate by turning the Other into a mere thing, a possession existing at my disposal (I can treat it as a slimy hole, etc.). This is done via the same mechanism: I look back at the look. This would not only make me a subject once again (specifically a subject before the Other-turned-object), but like any attempt at appropriation, it would also satisfy my desire to found the being of an object/Other which, as seen earlier, amounts to my desire to be God.

This description of appropriation through the look makes it clear that Sartre is not at liberty to relegate the Other to the ontological status of *en-soi*. By his own admission, it is because the Other is a subject, a *pour-soi*, who has initially turned me into an object that appropriation of the Other

¹³Le Doeuff, p. 51.

becomes for me a desirable attitude. In it I attempt to deny the objectness which the Other has conferred upon me. As Sartre notes,

The Other is in no way given to us as an object. The objectivation of the Other would be the collapse of...(her) being-as-a-look... (It) is a defense on the part of my being which, precisely by conferring on the Other a being-for-me, frees me from my being-for-the-Other. In the phenomenon of the look, the Other is in principle that which can not be an object.¹⁴

And so even as I am trying to turn her into an object-for-me, Sartre says that I nevertheless "experience the Other concretely as a free, conscious subject."¹⁵ Even if woman is always and only the Other in Sartre's system, she is nevertheless guaranteed the ontological status of *pour-soi* given Sartre's theory of intersubjectivity.

Furthermore, it is a theory in which the Other's consciousness is guaranteed *prior* to my own consciousness. My consciousness emerges only subsequent to the Other's consciousness: I am first an object before the Other can be made into an object. And since I cannot be an object for an inert thing but only to a consciousness, the Other, far from being an inert object, must have already been a consciousness prior to my awareness of her look.

This discussion clarifies the status of woman in Sartre's system, as it also puts his sexism in perspective. Because of his blatantly sexist language, we are apt to dismiss his philosophy as sexist, thinking that he is just another Freud or Schopenhauer. And so it is that Collins and Pierce began their article by comparing Sartre's psychoanalysis with Freudian psychology, implying that the two theories are defective for the same reason and to the same magnitude. However, this is not a fair comparison because, unlike Freud, Sartre is bound by his own ontology to ascribe to woman the same status he ascribed to man; namely, that of *pour-soi*. Despite his personal distaste for woman, in his system there is nothing missing in the woman which makes her a lesser being who is inferior to man. Whereas the sexism he displayed in his psychoanalysis undoubtedly reflects his character, it does not constitute an indispensable part of his theory. Ultimately, this is what really matters in our final evaluation of Sartrean philosophy. By clearing Sartre's ontology from any infection from his personal misogyny, we can once again justify a vast tradition of feminist writings, beginning with those of Simone de Beauvoir, which have adopted Sartre's ontology of freedom as a philosophical reference point.

¹⁴Sartre, p. 268.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 271.