

# Loving Existentially: Liaisons dangereuses & romantic love philosophies of Simone de Beauvoir & Jean-Paul Sartre

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Simone de Beauvoir's and Jean-Paul Sartre's life-long experiment for a new *mode d'existence* is a fascinating, inspiring, liberating and outrageously intense love story. In her recent account of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre's relationships, *Tête-à-Tête*, Hazel Rowley asks: Why settle for monogamy when you can have "freedom *and* stability, love affairs *and* commitment?" Why keep secrets when you have a best friend to whom you can tell everything? Who amongst us would not wish to frequent the cafés in Paris writing radical, controversial and prize-winning books and spend summers in Italy caught up in the ecstasy of dramatic foursomes?<sup>1</sup>

Through a fresh analysis of the lives and philosophies of the lovers Beauvoir and Sartre, making use of dramatic new evidence revealed in Rowley's book, this essay analyses what it means to love existentially.

Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre met in 1929 and became brilliant young competitors in philosophy. Beauvoir drew second place to Sartre in France's highly competitive teacher's exam, the *aggregation*. It was a hotly-contested jury decision that established Beauvoir's and Sartre's emerging reputations as intellectual equals who would inspire and challenge each other for the rest of their lives. They became highly admired philosophy teachers, writing about and discussing their unorthodox philosophical experiment with love in the cosy, smoky cafes of Paris. They remained at the forefront of France's intellectual avant-garde all their lives. In 1964, Sartre was awarded (but refused on political grounds) the Nobel Prize for his autobiographical narrative *The Words*. Beauvoir had already won France's top literary award, the Prix Goncourt, for her 1954 novel *The Mandarins*.

Sartre discussed all his developing ideas with Beauvoir. He relied on her to pinpoint flaws in his arguments because, Sartre said, she was at the same philosophical level of knowledge, and "she was the only one at my level of knowledge of myself, of what I wanted to do."<sup>2</sup> He was the first man she considered to be her intellectual superior. He understood and loved her, encouraged and supported her in her work, and wanted to help her become a strong and joyous Valkyrie.<sup>3</sup> Rowley describes Beauvoir's feelings about Sartre in glowing terms: "With him she felt extraordinary harmony. There was something incredibly vital about this man. He made her want to discover herself; he made her want to discover the world. With him, she knew she would never stagnate."<sup>31</sup>

As a teenager, Sartre realised he was unattractive and decided it would best to seduce women with his power of speech. He wanted to be "a scholarly Don Juan, slaying women through the power of his golden tongue."<sup>4</sup> His ardent language and passionate love letters proved to be highly successful in seducing many young women. Plus he was mischievous and loved the game: "I was less keen on the woman than on the play-acting she gave me the opportunity for – since I'd not have agreed to obtain her by just any old means...Possessing her counted for less than the prospects of possession."<sup>6</sup> He found

the conquests easy, but the game of seduction draining: "I'd come back from a rendezvous, mouth dry, facial muscles tired from too much smiling, voice still dripping with honey and heart full of a disgust to which I was unwilling to pay any attention, and which was masked by satisfaction at having 'advanced my affairs'."<sup>7</sup>

Freedom was of utmost importance to Sartre. After seducing a woman, he would insist that she not infringe on his freedom; that she must permit him to sleep with other women because he thought that a great man had to keep himself free. Not wanting to be a hypocrite, Sartre grandly offered the same precious gift of freedom to his girlfriends, saying "it is the most beautiful present I can offer you." The women were always grateful – or at least they pretended to be. However, says Sartre, "Happily for me...circumstances independent of my will would intervene in time to restore me (after a bit of drubbing) to that dear freedom, which I'd forthwith make haste to bestow upon some other young lady."<sup>8</sup>

As usual, after falling in love with Beauvoir (affectionately nicknamed "Beaver"), he offered her this gift of her freedom (as if he owned it to give). However, Sartre says, this time, "I was hoist with my own petard. The Beaver accepted that freedom and kept it."<sup>9</sup>

From this uncertain start they formed a new kind of love relationship, based on overwhelming transparency, strength, Olympian security and happiness.<sup>10</sup> It was an unconventional pact because although Beauvoir and Sartre were devoted intellectual loving companions for life, they did not marry or have children and were not monogamous. They referred to their love as "essential" or primary, but they were free to have other love affairs, which they saw as "contingent" or secondary love relationships.

They felt that jealousy would not be an issue because they promised to be completely honest and open with each other. To prove this, they entered a pact to tell each other every detail of the other relationships and deconstruct every sensation. Sartre called this transparency. "The notion of privacy was a relic of bourgeois hypocrisy. Why keep secrets? As they saw it, their task as intellectuals was to probe beneath the surfaces, plumb the depths of experience, debunk myths, and communicate untarnished truth to their readers."<sup>11</sup>

However, they found they could not be completely open because other people were involved so they shamelessly lied to their third-party lovers (and possibly to each other) to spare their feelings and keep them happy.

The physical side of Beauvoir's and Sartre's relationship did not last long because, as Sartre puts it, he preferred croissants. Beauvoir explains: "Love was not very successful. Chiefly because [Sartre] does not care much for sexual life. He is a warm, lively man everywhere, but not in bed. I soon felt it, though I had no experience; and little by little it seemed useless, even indecent, to go on being lovers."<sup>12</sup> When she realised her desires were stronger than his, she embraced the freedom to fall in love with other people.

Sartre and Beauvoir thought that although the individual is "thrown" into existence (i.e. one cannot choose how one enters the world), once a person is conscious, he or she must choose. This is the meaning of "existence precedes essence". Existential philosophies reject any pre-determined human nature. Humans exist first, starting out as "nothingness" and then define themselves through their choices and actions. We are free to define ourselves and we do so through our actions and projects. We are what we do. This is what Sartre meant when he wrote: "Man is nothing else but what he purposes, he exists only in so far as he realises himself, he is therefore nothing else but the sum of his actions, nothing else but what his life is."<sup>13</sup>

An existential existence is one which is, above all, free. The individual is free to make choices but is responsible for the consequences of those choices. Because every action is

a choice, we always have choices and are not pre-determined in any way, there is no escaping or, as Sartre put it, “no exit” from our freedom; the individual is “condemned to be free”.

Denying or evading one’s freedom or facticity is, according to Sartre, bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), and is the closest thing to an existential “sin”. One is in bad faith when one allows one’s role or situation to rule one’s choices and actions. Bad faith also arises through self-deception, i.e. lying to oneself by deliberately avoiding facing up to painful facts about ourselves.<sup>14</sup> One might wonder if Beauvoir’s and Sartre’s promise of total honesty to each other was bad faith because such a promise would constrain their freedom; or wonder whether Sartre acted in bad faith by justifying lying to his lovers on the grounds that he was “protecting” them, rather than accepting responsibility for his choices.

Virtue is a concept generally dismissed by existential thinkers. The only thing that comes close to an existential virtue is the personal concept of authenticity, which means being “true to oneself”. Individuals are true to themselves when they engage in projects which are their own and not governed by any externally imposed ideals.

Love is not an abstract concept for existential thinkers. Love exists only in the actions between two people. As Sartre said in his lecture *Existentialism is a Humanism*: “There is no love except that which is constructed, there is no possibility of love except that which is manifested in a loving relationship.”<sup>15</sup>

The ideal of an existential romantic love relationship is therefore one in which both partners apply existential principles in their lives and when interacting with each other. They do not act in bad faith or inauthentically because they do not appeal to any role, such as husband or mother, to justify behaviour. Furthermore, they do not appeal to an ideal, such as love, to escape freedom.

Romantic love relationships are among the most complex mysteries of human life. “Romantic love, closely tied to the sensual, has traditionally been seen as something akin to sickness, as a force of irrationality, as potentially anarchic, primitive and insane – the proverbial madman’s disease.”<sup>16</sup>

Despite well-meaning intentions and aspiring to lofty heights, love relationships also tend to involve suffering, failure, illusion and disillusionment.<sup>17</sup> Sartre, for example, maintains that: love relationships entail suffering by their very nature; are always conflictual; and are doomed to failure. Beauvoir takes us even further. She suggests that the existence of conflict within love relationships is only half the story and that a genuine equal symbiotic love is possible through emotion.

Sartre was building on Hegel’s idea that objects are what we want more than anything because it is through the recognition that one is different from other objects or people that a person realises he or she is conscious and individual: “Self-consciousness is primarily simple existence for self, self-identity by exclusion of every other from itself...and in this immediacy, in this bare fact of its self-existence, it is individual.”<sup>18</sup>

By this Hegel meant that it is via recognition of one’s self through others that one learns what it is to be human; or more specifically, what it is to be a subjective “consciousness” (or freedom). An individual *is* a consciousness, which *is* a freedom because one is able to make choices and is not determined by anything other than one’s choice.

The Other is extremely important because, Sartre says, “The other holds a secret – the secret of what I am.”<sup>19</sup> It is like a buddy system because one requires someone else to interact with in order to understand and define oneself. The Other evaluates one’s actions and gives the actions meaning. Sartre referred to this as “the gaze of the Other.” One

defines oneself through the gaze of another person because the freedom of the self has no way to understand itself except by way of another's freedom.

So in every human interaction, Sartre saw that each person was trying to understand and define his or herself through the Other. Now, in order to define my actions, I need you, the object. But at the same time, you (the object) are trying to do the same to me (the subject). The other wants to make me the object for his subject. According to Hegel and Sartre, you want to possess my subjectivity in order to define yourself. In objectifying me, the Other strips me of my subjectivity. Therefore in engaging with the Other, there is always a struggle over my subjectivity. As such, all relationships are contests or struggles, for which there is never a winner. The Other will always be an object to me. Two people will always be in some degree of conflict because it is always one's subjectivity against another's. "While I attempt to free myself from the hold of the Other, the Other is trying to free himself from mine; while I seek to enslave the Other, the Other seeks to enslave me...Conflict is the original meaning of being-for-others,"<sup>20</sup> according to Sartre. As such, "I am a slave to the degree that my being is dependent at the centre of a freedom which is not mine and which is the very condition of my being."<sup>21</sup> This is why Sartre said "hell is other people"<sup>22</sup>.

The more highly one regards the Other, the more important the interpretation of one's actions becomes. Sartre says: "The value of the Other's recognition of me depends on the value of my recognition of the Other."<sup>23</sup> Love relations are amplified because when I love someone, I confer upon that person the power of my self-recognition. The problem is that in giving someone the power to define me, "I become hostage to that person's view of me but I do everything I can to control that view".<sup>24</sup>

According to Sartre, romantic love is merely an attempt to regain control of one's own subjectivity by overthrowing the beloved's freedom.<sup>25</sup> It is also a strategy one employs to define oneself in the presence of a person whose freedom one attempts to possess.<sup>26</sup> However, ultimately, this is futile because a person can never possess another's freedom.

Because I can never experience or understand the Other's subjectivity, I can never know what he really thinks and therefore, "We are doomed to spend our lives in total individuality."<sup>27</sup> Although we try to get close to the Other, especially during sex, we cannot get close enough to understand the Other truly – or to let them understand us truly. While Sartre thought this was hell, Beauvoir took a positive view of the situation.

The Other is still as vitally important to Beauvoir as to Sartre. Through others, one learns to live out one's body, or facticity (everyday life situation), in a certain way. For example, one learns language, intonations and attitudes through others. This is what Beauvoir meant in *The Second Sex* when she wrote "one is not born a woman, one becomes a woman". Sex is biological, but femininity or masculinity is one's gender. Femininity is the cultural overlay that one adds to one's sex as one discovers what it means to be a woman in society.

Sartre does not recognise the debt to others in the same way that Beauvoir does. For Sartre, the Other is always a threat because he is constantly trying to get possession of the subject's freedom. The Other is dangerous and, therefore, there is no obligation to the Other. Beauvoir takes the Kantian approach that there are moral capacities inherent in freedom and that people are aware of the difference between one's will (or passion) and what is 'right'. For Beauvoir, we have a moral duty to others because if one values freedom for oneself, one values freedom for others.

Nevertheless, this is a defective argument because appealing to a moral claim to "love thy neighbour" could be considered bad faith. Moreover, this does not usually follow in

practice because one's freedom comes at the expense of others. However, the important thing for Beauvoir is the simple acknowledgement that we share the world with other people and that we live in society where everyone is to a large extent dependent on the community for survival and self-definition.<sup>28</sup>

Traditionally, Beauvoir thought, women submit to their lover in order to avoid embracing their transcendence (*pour-soi*). To transcend is to reach beyond one's facticity by actively doing things and constantly changing one's given situation (as opposed to passively accepting one's immanence).

Instead of transcending, the woman in love loses herself in immanence (*en-soi*), meaning that she idolises her lover and gives up her own transcendence for his. "She dreams of transcending her being towards one of these superior beings and of amalgamating herself with the sovereign subject."<sup>29</sup> (In Beauvoir's vocabulary, a "sovereign subject" is an independent self-governing human being.)

Instead of asserting herself and defining her own individuality, Beauvoir also says the woman attempts to merge her being with her lover by destroying her individuality: "The woman in love...feels a passionate desire to transcend the limitations of the self and become infinite, thanks to the intervention of another who has access to infinite reality. She abandons herself to love first of all to save herself; but the paradox of idolatrous love is that in trying to save herself, she denies herself utterly in the end. She wants to merge with him, to forget herself in his arms...the desire for a complete destruction of the self, abolishing the boundaries that separate her from her beloved...In order to realise this dream (of ecstatic union), what woman wants in the first place is to serve; for in responding to her lover's demands, a woman will feel that she is necessary; she will be integrated with his existence, she will share his worth, she will be justified."<sup>30</sup>

Without doubt, there are advantages to being a kept woman: "It is an easy road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence."<sup>31</sup> Beauvoir explains that such an arrangement can work out very well for a woman: "As one necessary to a being who is absolute necessity, who stands forth in the world seeking goals and who gives her back the world in necessary form, the woman in love acquires in her submission that magnificent possession the absolute. So long as she is loved by and necessary to her loved one, the absolute, she feels herself wholly justified: she knows peace and happiness."<sup>32</sup>

This kind of security means that a woman does not have to 'stick her neck out' in the world. She does not risk failure in her ventures because she takes on none of her own. Her man defines the world for her because "the measure of values, the truth of the world are in his consciousness."<sup>33</sup> Not only does she share her lover's prestige and sovereignty in the world, but she shares his identity. She gives up the task of defining herself: "The supreme happiness of the woman in love is to be recognised by the loved man as part of himself; when he says 'we' she is associated and identified with him, she shares his prestige and reigns with him over the rest of the world; she never tires of repeating – even to excess – this delectable 'we'."<sup>34</sup>

There are three major problems that arise from this state of affairs: bad faith, the risk of sado-masochism and disappointment. The first problem is bad faith because the woman, in loving idolatrously, denies her freedom. Women avoid their freedom and accountability by hiding in romantic love relationships. They may not be happy but they associate the love relationship with success in their life. A woman falls into the trap of bad faith by allowing her world, as Beauvoir describes, to "collapse in contingency, for she really lives in his."<sup>35</sup>

Bad faith can easily arise for both partners, however: "In loving a woman, what a man

wants is for her to love him. He must present himself to her as one to whom she would want to give her freedom. And she must present herself in such a way that he would want her to want him to want her to love him and so on, seeming to characterise the insecurity of many love affairs.”<sup>36</sup>

The crisis arises in the attempt to achieve a union with the loved one. “The supreme goal of human love is identification with the loved one.”<sup>37</sup> Identifying with a loved one implies an understanding or experience of the partner’s subjectivity. In other words, the object of the game is to contact the Other.

The second problem is that, as with Sartre’s philosophy, there is the risk of sado-masochism because the desire to be loved means affecting another’s freedom.<sup>38</sup> A woman in love desires her love to be requited and insists that the lover give himself to her in return. “Her generosity soon becomes exigence,”<sup>39</sup> and in generously becoming a slave to her lover, she takes possession of him: “It comes in the form of a gift when it is really a tyranny. Acceptance is in fact an obligation that is binding on the lover, without his having even the benefit of seeming to be a giver; the woman requires him to gratefully accept the burdens with which she crushes him and her tyranny is insatiable...there are no limits to woman’s exigent devotion.”<sup>40</sup>

This is simply another form of the power struggle that Sartre refers to. It is a strategy to gain possession of him, through allowing him to possess her – or at least persuading him that he possesses her. It is an endless game as to who possesses whom.

The third problem, disappointment, arises when the woman discovers that no one is perfect. The man she idolises, the absolute being she gains possession of, who has access to infinite reality, is not a god. He inevitably has faults and he sooner or later becomes “a searing disappointment”<sup>41</sup> to her. Beauvoir says “an authentic love should accept the contingency of the other with all his idiosyncrasies, his limitations and his basic gratuitousness.”<sup>42</sup> If a woman does not expect too much from a man when she falls in love, she can avoid the disappointment.

Beauvoir’s philosophy of the Other opens the way for a less hostile approach to romantic love relationships than Sartre proposed. While Sartre insists that the gaze of an Other (with whom one chooses to engage with, as opposed to an accidental stare, for example) necessarily involves an ontological struggle for possession of one another’s freedom, Beauvoir believes that in a trusting romantic love relationship, where the lovers recognise each other’s freedom as equal, the possibility for genuine self-discovery without a struggle exists.<sup>43</sup> Beauvoir concludes that once the free and equal couple moves beyond the battlefield described by Sartre, a genuine romantic love relationship is possible: “Let both men and women overcome their distrust, and they will find it is possible to restore, in freedom and in equality, the human pair.”<sup>44</sup>

The first step in achieving a free and equal romantic love relationship is for the woman to recognise herself as a free and equal being. The problem from Beauvoir’s perspective in *The Second Sex* was that women in 1949 were not socially free because of their historical situation. While men appropriated the role of subject, women were delegated to the inessential role of ‘the Other’ by subordinating themselves to men. Beauvoir builds on Hegel’s master-slave dialectic but explains that while the slave’s oppression is not voluntary, woman’s is.<sup>45</sup> As such, “males find in a woman more complicity than the oppressor usually finds in the oppressed.”<sup>46</sup>

For the existentialists, freedom is implicit in one’s consciousness; freedom is ontological. While women have always been *ontologically* free, their psychosocial freedom has been restricted, i.e. the social situation limited their perceived and actual freedom. However, up until recently, it was a rational decision given that the alternatives

and consequences were too costly or unsavoury, such as being ostracised from social circles (though existentialists do not claim to be rational).

Although Beauvoir said that “Everything influences her to let herself be hemmed in, dominated by existences foreign to her own”,<sup>47</sup> this is bad faith because women voluntarily gave up their freedom and allowed men to dominate them socially.

Women accepted the externally imposed limitations on their social freedom. They existed only in their facticity (their given everyday life situation), without ambition. By losing themselves in immanence, women gave up their own transcendence, their natural right of “becoming”. They defined themselves through their husband, becoming merely an extension of their husband. This existence without transcendence could be defined as “non-being” and is certainly not existential because transcendence is essential to affirming one’s own subjectivity and therefore embracing one’s freedom.

The first step in achieving transcendence, according to Beauvoir, is for women to assert themselves, stand up in the world, “unique and sovereign,”<sup>48</sup> severing themselves from their dependence on men: “One must first emerge from [the world] into a sovereign solitude if one wants to try to regain a grasp upon it: what woman needs first of all is to undertake, in anguish and pride, her apprenticeship in abandonment and transcendence: that is, in liberty.”<sup>49</sup>

Possibly accepting the context of a capitalist society, Beauvoir wrote that the only way for women to realise transcendence and liberty is through achieving economic independence: “When she is productive, active, she regains her transcendence; in her projects she concretely affirms her status as subject; in connection with the aims she pursues, with the money and the rights she takes possession of, she makes trial of and senses her responsibility.”<sup>50</sup>

With economic independence, Beauvoir contends that women can triumph over their designated subjugation and free themselves from their dependence on men: “It is through gainful employment that woman has traversed most of the difference that separated her from the male; and nothing else can guarantee her liberty in practice.”<sup>51</sup>

It must be noted that 50 years ago, there were very strong societal expectations for women to get married and have a family. Women did not originally choose to be mothers; it was their expected duty and role in society. Those who did have their own careers, or chose not to marry, were the exception to the rule.

These expectations exist today, but social circumstances have changed since *The Second Sex*. For example, now women have access to careers though higher education, supported by many years of anti-discrimination and equal opportunity legislation. Women in 2006 can be and often are financially independent. Women no longer need a husband in order to survive as a member of a social community or need children in order to fulfil their societally-imposed vocation as a woman. Marrying and having children, simply because it is socially expected, is bad faith.

Although women are free to choose to live how they please, according to Beauvoir, “there is only one way to employ her liberty authentically, and that is to project it through positive action into human society.”<sup>52</sup> It is not just about possibilities and intentions. It is about tangible achievements, being active and purposive.

For romantic love to be “genuine, authentic, it must first of all be free.”<sup>53</sup> This love requires of a woman that she lives existentially, seizes her liberty and is an independent sovereign person. So armed, she may love in liberty, as a man does, “without putting her very being into question – she must believe herself his equal and be so in concrete fact; she must engage in her enterprises with the same decisiveness.”<sup>54</sup>

Not only is it essential for a woman to be free, she must also be equal to her lover; “one not seeking submission to the other.”<sup>55</sup> An idyllic heterosexual romantic love relationship can then be achieved as follows: “When a woman finds in the male both desire and respect; if he lusts after her flesh while recognising her freedom, she feels herself to be the essential in the very moment she makes herself object; she remains free in the submission to which she consents...Alterity has no longer a hostile implication; it is in this sense of the union of truly separate bodies that makes the sexual act so moving; it is the more overwhelming as the two beings, who together passionately deny and assert their boundaries, are similar and yet different.”<sup>56</sup>

With equality between partners, the eternal conflict that Sartre describes becomes irrelevant. It is the *mutuality* and respect of the partners that renders a struggle obsolete. “She will have her independent existence and yet continue to exist for him *also*: mutually recognising each other as subject, each will remain for the other an *other*.”<sup>57</sup>

The woman in love has no need to take possession of her lover because he is no longer her salvation. She is actively engaged in asserting herself as an individual and does not need a man to define her existence. Beauvoir says, “Instead of wishing to put man in prison, woman endeavours to escape from one; she no longer seeks to drag him into the realms of immanence but to emerge, herself, into the light of transcendence.”<sup>58</sup>

According to Beauvoir, romantic love, tenderness and sensuality are possible between two free and equal beings: “Genuine love ought to be founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties; the lovers would then experience themselves as both self and as other: neither would give up transcendence, together they would manifest values and aims in the world. For the one and the other, love would be revelation of the self by the gift of the self and enrichment of the world.”<sup>59</sup>

For Sartre, erotic love intensifies the battlefield between the self and the Other because sexual love is one way that lovers try to overcome the hell of each other. While Beauvoir believed that this can be successful and lovers can experience a connectedness – or what she referred to as “intersubjectivity” – through great sex, Sartre thought it impossible. I cannot meet the other as freedom because through my gaze the other becomes an object and his subjectivity escapes me.<sup>60</sup> Sartre describes the experience as grasping a person who runs away and leaves his or her coat in one’s hands: “It is the outer shell which I possess. I shall never get hold of more than a body.”<sup>61</sup>

Because one’s freedom is manifested through the flesh, I make myself flesh to try to lure the Other into manifesting their freedom as flesh. Sartre explains that “In desire, I make myself flesh *in the presence of the Other in order to appropriate the Other’s flesh*.”<sup>52</sup> However, possession of the Other’s flesh is not the goal of sex. Rather, it is to trap the Other’s freedom within the facticity of his or her body in order to invoke transcendence (the *for-itself*): “Desire is an attitude aiming at enchantment...It is necessary that he be ‘caught’ in it as the cream is caught up by a person skimming milk. So the Other’s For-itself must come to play on the surface of his body; and by touching this body I should finally touch the Other’s free subjectivity. This is the true meaning of possession.”<sup>63</sup>

Unfortunately, even though one can summon the appearance of the Other’s freedom, it is impossible to possess it, even in bed. “Such is the impossible ideal of desire: to possess the Other’s transcendence as pure transcendence and at the same time as body.”<sup>64</sup> If possession of the Other’s freedom is the goal of sexual love, the entire rigmarole is pointless because the Other’s freedom is unattainable. And one cannot allow the Other to experience one’s subjectivity either, even if one wanted to. One cannot give away one’s freedom. There is always an irremovable radical separation between people.<sup>65</sup>



Sadism and masochism ensue: "Each one wants the other to love him but does not take into account the fact that to love is to want to be loved and that thus by wanting the other to love him, he only wants the other to want to be loved in turn...hence the lover's perpetual dissatisfaction."<sup>66</sup>

Although Beauvoir agrees with Sartre's "intellectual practical solipsism"<sup>67</sup> of never being able to know the subjectivity of the Other, she distinguishes between knowing the Other on an intellectual level to knowing or meeting him on a physical and emotional level. This can only happen when there is equality and generosity between the partners: "It is possible to avoid the temptations of sadism and masochism when the two partners recognise each other as equals; if both the man and the woman have a little modesty and some generosity, ideas of victory and defeat are abolished: the act of love becomes a free exchange."<sup>68</sup>

Beauvoir distinguishes between sex with and without the emotion of love. While accused of preaching sexual promiscuity (and of being nymphomaniac, lesbian, a hundred times aborted, unsatisfied, frigid, repressed, frustrated, among other things)<sup>69</sup>, she is not actually endorsing frequent wanton sex because for her, sex without the emotion of love is a reduced experience.

Through the emotional intoxication of great sex, one can achieve a blissful union with the Other because it is a process of understanding of the Other person as consciousness through the flesh.<sup>70</sup> The merging is achieved through self-forgetfulness because sex liberates one from one's own presence. The boundaries of the two individuals are dissolved and they become as if one merged consciousness, thereby creating the possibility of "intersubjectivity". Beauvoir explains that "Both partners undergo a metamorphosis into flesh through emotional intoxication, and experience themselves and the other simultaneously as subjectivity and passivity."<sup>71</sup>

In *Old Age*, Beauvoir describes sexual love as an adventure. Although the attempt to possess each other's consciousness through the flesh is doomed, it is not a fight because it is based on mutuality, equality and tenderness. The partners elevate themselves to a level beyond a battle, says Beauvoir: "In the turmoil and desire of sexual activity the consciousness and the body become as one in order to reach the other as a body and in such a way as to enthrall and possess him; there is a twofold reciprocal embodiment. The attempt at possession necessarily fails, since the other remains a subject; but before it reaches its end, the drama of reciprocity is experienced in the act of love in one of its most extreme and most revealing forms. If it takes on the character of a struggle then it begets hostility: more often it implies a 'togetherness' that encourages tender affection. In a couple whose love does away with the distance between the 'I' and the other, even failure is overcome."<sup>72</sup>

Beauvoir's and Sartre's erotic love rests on the assumption that our bodies are "manifestations of subjectivity, of freedom."<sup>73</sup> Even though the flesh is transcendence incarnate because the body is the conduit for implementing actions, to bring forth one's entire subjectivity in a moment of passion is ludicrous. It makes sense that sex is an alternate physical state where two people lose themselves together. However, can a couple's subjectivity be exposed by reducing them to the level of primal urges and facticity? More likely, it is a metaphor for the other-worldly sensation that one achieves from a heightened sense of one's own flesh and the closeness of the flesh of the Other. But how an abstraction such as transcendence can be revealed through the flesh (facticity) is difficult to comprehend.

If Sartre was right – that one can never completely understand the Other's subjectivity

– then it is justified that the objective of a couple in love is to get as close as possible to each other. However, it is still a lost cause because one can never know the Other as subject and even if one could, in a revealing moment, the Other is always “becoming” more than he is and therefore it is instantly lost again. Even if the attempt to understand the other is a lost cause, that does not stop us from trying.

However, perhaps Beauvoir’s focus on emotion refers to something more tangible in sex. Perhaps she was attempting to describe the euphoric experience of sex, where both individuals selfishly satisfy their own desires while amplifying each other’s pleasure at the same time, resembling what one could refer to as a ‘mystic’ or ‘spiritual’ experience. Then, great sex is simply another facet of the symbiotic nature of an existential romantic love relationship: the individual’s freedom to express his or herself comes first, but not at the expense of another’s freedom. Moreover, with an existential approach, the perceived limits of an individual’s pleasure through freedom can be surpassed.

Or perhaps sex is just something that we indulge in to distract our consciousness from reflection on a meaningless and horrible world. Sartre found it in croissants and the seduction of beautiful women. Beauvoir found it in the emotional intoxication of great sex and superlative intimacy.

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**Footnotes:**

- 1 Rowley p.xii
- 2 ibid p.335
- 3 ibid p.23
- 4 ibid p.23
- 5 ibid p.78
- 6 Sartre *War Diaries* p.284
- 7 ibid p.285
- 8 ibid p.75
- 9 ibid p.75
- 10 ibid p.274
- 11 Rowley p.xi
- 12 Rowley p.128, Simone de Beauvoir's letter to Nelson Algren Aug 8 1948, *A Transatlantic Love Affair* (New York: New Press, 1998), p.208
- 13 Sartre *Existentialism is a Humanism*
- 14 Honderich p.76
- 15 Rowley p.154
- 16 Brown p.24
- 17 Comte-Sponville p.238
- 18 Hegel p.231
- 19 Sartre *Being and Nothingness* p.475
- 20 ibid p.475
- 21 ibid p.358
- 22 Sartre *No Exit* p.45
- 23 Sartre *Being and Nothingness* p.320
- 24 Wagoner p.96
- 25 ibid p.96
- 26 Solomon & Higgins p.227
- 27 Vintges p.52
- 28 ibid p.54
- 29 Beauvoir *The Second Sex* p.653
- 30 ibid p.660
- 31 Rowley p.195
- 32 Beauvoir *The Second Sex* p.663
- 33 ibid p.662
- 34 ibid p.662
- 35 ibid p.662
- 36 Wagoner p.104
- 37 Beauvoir *The Second Sex* p.662
- 38 Barry p.299 on Sartre *WarDiaries* pp.255-61
- 39 Beauvoir *The Second Sex* p.666

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- 40 *ibid* p.666
- 41 *ibid* p.664
- 42 *ibid* p.664
- 43 *ibid* p.17
- 44 Bair pp.415-6
- 45 Card p.152
- 46 Beauvoir *The Second Sex* p.731
- 47 *ibid* p.721
- 48 *ibid* p.721
- 49 *ibid* p.720
- 50 *ibid* p.690
- 51 *ibid* p.690
- 52 *ibid* p.687
- 53 *ibid* p.491
- 54 *ibid* p.705
- 55 Bair pp.415-6, referring to the article "It's About Time" written for the American magazine *Flair*, in which Simone describes her idea of the "new face" of love (*Flair*, vol. 1 No. 3, April 1950 pp.76-77)
- 56 Beauvoir *The Second Sex* p.422
- 57 *ibid* p.740
- 58 *ibid* p.726
- 59 *ibid* p.677
- 60 Vintges p.49
- 61 Sartre *Being & Nothingness* p.511
- 62 *ibid* p.506
- 63 *ibid* pp.511-2
- 64 *ibid* p.512
- 65 Vintges p.54 on Beauvoir *Pyrrhus et Cineas* p.330
- 66 Rowley p.100
- 67 Vintges p.62
- 68 Beauvoir *The Second Sex* p.701
- 69 Beauvoir *Force of Circumstance* pp.196-200
- 70 Beauvoir *The Marquis de Sade* p.33
- 71 *ibid* pp.32-33
- 72 Beauvoir *Old Age* pp.318-9
- 73 Wagoner pp.98-99