

30. THE FAILURE OF LOVE AND SEXUAL DESIRE IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE

SANDER H. LEE
HOWARD UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT. For Jean-Paul Sartre, both love and sexual desire are necessarily doomed to failure. In this paper, I wish to briefly explain why Sartre takes this position. Both love and sexual desire fail, as do all patterns to conduct towards the other, because they involve an attempt to simultaneously capture the other-as-subject and as-object. This, for Sartre, involves an ontological contradiction which I demonstrate.

Furthermore, I wish to offer the outline of a criticism of this position, a criticism made from the perspective of an acceptance of the basic Sartrian approach taken in *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre's description of love implies an attempt to overcome ontological aspects of the human condition which are fundamentally insurmountable. I will show that this description is flawed even within the confines of a Sartrian ontology by pointing out unwarranted assumptions on Sartre's part as to the goals of these activities and their worth, as well as the worth of the emotional consciousness itself.

For Jean-Paul Sartre, both love and sexual desire are necessarily doomed to failure. In this article, I wish to briefly explain why Sartre takes this position. Furthermore, I wish to offer the outline of a criticism of this position, a criticism made from the perspective of an acceptance of the basic Sartrian approach taken in *Being and Nothingness*.

I

To begin with, both love and sexual desire are doomed to failure because they are, for Sartre, analogous to emotional realms necessarily entered in "bad faith". When one becomes emotional, one chooses non-thetically to enter a magical realm in which the world is seen as transformed simply by our desire to have it transformed. Belief in such a realm is always in bad faith (a self-deceptive state) in that the choice to enter the emotional realm involves a denial of our fundamental freedom.

In choosing to magically transform the world emotionally, I am spontaneously choosing to deny the fundamental and primordial activity of consciousness, in doing this I am attempting to deny what I am. In

emotional consciousness I sincerely believe in the magical realm which I create. I allow my belief to control my conscious activity. In this way, emotional consciousness "is its own captive in the sense that it does not dominate its belief".¹ It denies its own freedom so that "freedom has to come from a purifying reflection or a total disappearance of the affecting situation".²

Having pointed out the failings of the emotion consciousness in general, we can now specifically look at the analogous states of love and sexual desire.

There are three reasons for Sartre why love must fail. First, in love, the consciousness of the lover attempts to possess the consciousness of the beloved without reducing that consciousness to an object. In other words, the lover wishes to capture the freedom of the beloved while insuring that the beloved remains free. No lover wishes to be loved by an automaton. The lover seeks a situation in which the beloved freely chooses to view the lover as an "absolute choice".³

The lover's demand is ultimately an attempt to join in a unified transcendent consciousness, a consciousness which is both subject and object simultaneously. According to Sartre, however, the contingency of the Otherness of the consciousness of the beloved is insurmountable; "it is the fact of my relations with the other, just as my body is the fact of my being in the world. Unity with the other is therefore *in fact* unrealizable *in theory* for the assimilation of the for-itself and the other in a single transcendence would necessarily involve the disappearance of the characteristic of otherness in the other".⁴

In other words, the choice of love is an unreflective attempt to become just what consciousness knows *in fact* that it is not, a unified whole with the other.

Secondly, Sartre claims love must fail because at any point it is possible that the beloved might suddenly see the lover as only one object in a world of objects. The magic spell of love is very fragile. The strands of its web may be broken at any time. The lover is constantly aware of the possibility of the "awakening" of his beloved, hence the lover is tormented by a "perpetual insecurity" which itself leads to love's destruction.⁵

Finally, love is constantly threatened by the look of a third person. When the lovers become aware that they are objectified by someone else, the spell is again broken and each of the lovers is forced to see each other no longer as absolute transcendences, but merely as mundane objects. In other words, the spell of love is constantly under pressure because of the awareness of each of the lovers that others view them in ways different from those in which they view each other. According to Sartre, "such is the true reason why lovers seek solitude. It is because the appearance of a third person, whoever he may be, is the destruction of their love . . . even if nobody sees us, we exist for *all* consciousness and we are conscious of existing for all. The result is that love as a fundamental mode of being-for-others holds in its being-for-others the seed of its own destruction".⁶

The inevitable failure of love leads Sartre into a description of sexual desire which has as its goal the incarnation of the *flesh* of the

other. Where love seeks to possess the freedom of the other, sexual desire seeks "to possess the other's body, to possess it in so far as it is itself a "possessed"; that is, in so far as the other's consciousness is identified with his body".⁷

Sartre sees sexual desire as a primary attitude which characterizes our being for others and not just as a "psycho-physiological reaction". He points out that young children, elderly persons, and even eunuchs experience sexual desire. This desire is not contingent on the physiological possibility of achieving satisfaction, it is a fundamental structure of the way in which we relate to others. In other words, for Sartre, an account of sexuality is not simply what some might call a "phenomenology of genitalia". It is an account of sexuality which applies to all humanity. Thus, Sartre means his account to include female as well as male sexuality, and he treats them no differently.

In sexual desire, "I make myself flesh *in the presence of the other in order to appropriate the other's flesh*".⁸ In other words, where usually I experience my body as merely an extension of my consciousness which I utilize as an instrument to achieve everyday goals (e.g., fixing my car, writing with my pen, etc.), in sexual desire I experience my body as a tingling-mass of sensations, sensations which I savor in the way a gourmet savors fine food. Continuing the analogy, which Sartre himself suggests, sexual desire is a kind of hunger, a hunger which results from a *troubled consciousness*, a hunger which we try to satisfy initially by experiencing our bodies not as an instrument but as "pure facticity", the *feeling* of my skin and muscles, etc.⁹

For Sartre, "*the being which desires is consciousness making itself body*". But what is it that consciousness seeks in sexual desire? What is its goal? Sartre states that consciousness wishes to persuade the other to also transform his/her experience of his/her body from that of instrumentality in that of "pure facticity" as well. I want the other to feel his/her own body as flesh, to submerge his/her own consciousness into an identity with his/her body as felt experience.

The caress is the means by which this incarnation of the body of the other is attempted. In caressing the body of the other, I bring the other's flesh alive under my fingers, not just part of that body but all of it as an organic whole experience. The caress is a *shaping*, a communicating between my body and that of the other. The caress is to desire as language is to thought.¹⁰

Thus, the possession which is sought in sexual desire "appears as a *double reciprocal incarnation*".¹¹ It is not enough that I experience my own body as flesh. The other must also experience both his/her own and my body as flesh for the possession to occur.

Yet we still have not described the "motive" of desire, its meaning. Sartre resolves this issue by pointing out that desire also results from a choice to transform the world magically. This transformation comes about when I encounter the other but do not know how to react to the other's look. I am aware of *being-looked-at* and this sparks in me a desire to reach into the subjectivity of the other, it draws out of me some "vague memory of a certain *Beyond*".¹² This is when I start to make myself desire. I want to appropriate that special magical quality which I believe exists in the subjectivity of the other. I want to become

enchanted. I want to grasp the freedom of the other within the facticity of her body.

It is at this point that sexual desire becomes doomed to failure. This is because the ideal of desire is impossible, it is "to possess the other's transcendence as pure transcendence and at the same time as *body*, to reduce the other to his simple *facticity* because he is then in the midst of my world but to bring it about that this facticity is a perpetual appresentation of his nihilating transcendence".¹³ I cannot actually come to possess the transcendence of the other. As a matter of fact, Sartre points out, at the height of the sexual experience, I lose my awareness of the other altogether. At this point, I am aware only of the pleasure in myself, I lose touch with the incarnation of the other. This pleasure is "both the death and the failure of desire".¹⁴ With this pleasure comes the end of desire and in this pleasure I forget the very incarnation of the other which I hoped to possess.

Thus, we can conclude, both love and sexual desire fail for basically the same reason. They fail, as do all patterns of conduct towards the other, because they attempt to simultaneously capture the other-as-subject and as-object. This is something which cannot be done. I can never possess another person in any sense.

II

At this point, I wish to present an outline of a criticism which I believe can be made of the Sartrean position. In making this criticism I wish to remain within the context of a basically Sartrean perspective.

Sartre claims that both love and sexual desire have as their goals the possession of the freedom of the other. This goal, he claims, is fundamentally unachievable. I would have to agree with him that if his description of this goal is accurate then indeed both love and sexual desire are doomed to failure. However, while it is clear that some people do seek such a goal in their relations with the other, it is not so clear that love and sexual desire always have such an appropriation as their goal.

In other words, what I am suggesting is that Sartre's description of love and sexual desire is an excellent account of the ways in which people engage in these activities in *bad faith*, but that as a universal description of these activities Sartre's account is flawed. It is flawed, I suggest, in that I believe that there are other goals which people can, and very often do, choose for themselves as the goals of love and sexual desire.

Let us again separate these two issues and look at them individually beginning with love. I question Sartre's claim that all lovers seek to appropriate the freedom of the beloved. As Sartre describes it, love is unquestionably doomed, it is an attempt to control the subjectivity of the other without, at the same time, allowing my own subjectivity to be objectified by the other. Such a process is self-contradictory and in *bad faith*.

Love can be described differently, however. The most interesting other possibility, from our perspective, is that there could be love in

which the lover would not seek to possess the freedom of the beloved. The lover would recognize and accept the subjectivity of the beloved. Simone de Beauvoir describes such "genuine love" in this way:

Genuine love ought to be founded on mutual recognition of two liberties; the lovers would then experience themselves both as self and as other; neither would give up transcendence, neither would be mutilated; together they would manifest values and aims in the world. For the one and the other, love would be a revelation of self by the gift of self and enrichment of the world.¹⁵

Sartre's other points, those concerning the "perpetual insecurity" in which the love must live and the threat which the possibility of a third person presents, are important points which I cannot deny. However, these observations, important though they may be, do not indicate to me the absolute impossibility of love. What they do indicate is that love is indeed a fragile emotion which requires a huge investment of trust, or faith, on the part of the lovers.

The issue of faith is one that Sartre never raises, yet it is a crucial one for any serious description of love. Given Sartre's point that one cannot ever possess the freedom of the other, the choice to love must require a commitment from the lover to have faith in the independent subjectivity of his beloved. Love requires an emotional belief in the integrity and compassion of the beloved. Admittedly, love succeeds rarely and when it succeeds it is only through the strenuous and committed activity of the lovers. Furthermore, it seems to me, sexual desire can only succeed when it is part of an otherwise loving relationship. Again I disagree with Sartre that the goal of sexual desire is *always* the appropriation of the other. While this is certainly true of sexual desire in many instances, it is possible that sexual desire can also be used as a means of intense and loving communication.

Simone de Beauvoir discusses the roles of faith and love in authentic sexual activity in this description of a couple who have just completed the sexual act:

this is the moment when loves becomes a necessity. As when the child, after weaning, seeks the reassuring gaze of its parents, so must a woman feel, through the man's loving contemplation, that she is, after all, still at one with the Whole from which here flesh is now painfully attached . . . As for him, he no longer desires her; but she will not pardon this momentary indifference unless he has dedicated to her a timeless and absolute emotion. Then the immanence of the moment is transcended; hot memories are no regret, but a treasured delight; ebbing pleasure becomes hope and promise; enjoyment is justified; woman can gloriously accept her sexuality because she transcends it; excitement, pleasure, desire are no longer a state, but a benefaction; her body is no longer an object; it is a hymn, a flame . . . Abandon becomes sacred ecstasy.¹⁶

Yet, on the other hand, Beauvoir recognizes the dangerous tendency for lovers to inauthentically idolize their beloved. "An authentic love should assume the contingency of the other; that is to say his

lacks, his limitations, and his basic gratuitousness. It would not pretend to be a mode of salvation, but a human interaction".¹⁷ In discussing the need for the emancipation of women, Beauvoir again characterizes authentic love and desire in this way:

To emancipate woman is to refuse to confine her to the relations she bears to man, not to deny them to her; let her have her independent existence and she will continue none the less to exist for him *also*; mutually recognizing each other as subject, each will yet remain for the other an *other*. The reciprocity of their relations will not do away with the miracles--desire, possession, love, dream, adventure--worked by the division of human beings into two separate categories; and the words that move us--giving, conquering, uniting--will not lose their meaning. On the contrary, when we abolish the slavery of half of humanity, together with the whole system of hypocrisy that it implies, then the "division" of humanity will reveal its genuine significance and the human couple will find its true form.¹⁸

Sartre's description of the goal of sexual desire as a "double reciprocal incarnation" is, I think, an excellent one, as is his discussion of the caress. However, it seems to me, by again setting ontologically in-achievable goals for desire, he has distorted its meaning. By claiming that sexual desire *always* seeks to appropriate the subjectivity of the other in some kind of permanent fashion, Sartre ignores the possibility that the temporary "double reciprocal incarnation" which is possible may itself be the goal of desire. Sartre himself acknowledges the temporary success of desire at the height of passion when he states:

at this moment the communion of desire is realized; each consciousness by incarnating itself has realized the incarnation of the other; each one's disturbance has caused disturbance to be born in the other and is thereby so much enriched. By each caress I experience my own flesh and other's flesh through my flesh, and I am conscious that his flesh which I feel and appropriate through my flesh is flesh-realized-by-the-other.¹⁹

Sartre fails to recognize this possibility, i.e., that the temporary "double reciprocal incarnation" may itself be the goal of desire, because he insists on treating goals as though they must be stable to be achievable. Why he does this, and exactly how such a new phenomenology of desire would be constructed are important topics which remain to be explored.

ENDNOTES

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre. *The Emotions: Outline of a Theory*, translated by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 78.

² *Ibid.*, 79.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre. *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1975), 483.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 477.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 491.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 491.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 512.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 506.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 505.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 507.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 508.

¹² *Ibid.*, 511.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 512.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 515.

¹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by H.M. Parshley (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1953), 667.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 648-49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 654.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 731.

¹⁹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 514.