

Existential Philosophy, 2: (1), 1985, pp. 5-15.

SARTRE AND DE BEAUVOIR ON LOVE

Marion Tapper

Sartre's discussion of love in *Being and Nothingness* is prefaced by the statement that 'everything which may be said of me in my relations with the Other applies to (the Other) as well'.¹ Sartre is describing what he takes to be the essential structures of love. As part of his phenomenological ontology of human being it should, in principle, apply indifferently to men and women. In contrast, de Beauvoir's discussion of love in *The Second Sex* begins by stating that 'the word love has by no means the same sense for both sexes'.² Her account of these different senses reveals that the reason for the difference has to do with the different social position of women and men, the dependence of the one and the independence or autonomy of the other. Insofar as de Beauvoir's analysis is structured theoretically by Sartre's existentialism some explanation is required for this disagreement. My aim in this paper is to explore the basis and implications of this disagreement, indicating the points at which de Beauvoir implicitly challenges and moves away from Sartre's theoretical framework. I will do this by first setting out the logic of Sartre's analysis, and then comparing it with de Beauvoir's descriptions. I will conclude by offering some reasons for the tension between these two views of love, and suggesting how the tension might be understood.

Sartre's analysis of love occurs in the context of his account of the structures of being with Others. Being with Others is a relation of the for-itself with the in-itself in the presence of the Other — I am an object for the Other, the Other judges me, characterises me. This objectification of me by the Other alienates me from myself, and because I experience this I must assume attitudes towards it. My concrete relations with Others are governed by the attitudes I adopt with respect to the object which I am for the Other. For Sartre there are basically two attitudes I can adopt. The first is the attempt to deny what I am for the Other; I can assert my subjectivity and make an object of the Other, thereby destroying my objectness for the Other. This is the attitude of indifference and hate. Secondly, I can seek to recover my freedom by attempting to assimilate the Other's freedom to myself. To do this I must retain my object status in the face of the Other, for if I do not, if I assert my subjectivity, I objectify the Other and in the process lose my being for the Other — and it is precisely this which I wish to both retain and control. This is the attitude of love.³ Sartre says that the recognition of another subjectivity is a limitation of my freedom. When I become aware of myself

themselves and whose for-itself or consciousness is freedom. We cannot be 'looked' at by an object, an object cannot threaten our freedom.

To what extent does this model of relations with Others, and in particular love, fit de Beauvoir's descriptions of the different ways in which women and men love? Is it that women and men have the same project, the same aim and ideal of love, and that due to their different circumstances they adopt different tactics to achieve that aim? Before coming directly to these questions the context of de Beauvoir's account of love needs to be considered.

De Beauvoir's discussion is oriented by the fact of patriarchal oppression of women...It is important to be clear about what is involved in the notion of oppression for her. Without understanding this it can be difficult to see the way in which her analysis differs from Sartre's. De Beauvoir says that 'woman is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, that she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute — she is the Other'.⁴ Women experience themselves as the 'inessential', the relative, as by and for them-selves nothing. A woman does not 'sense the absolute (freedom) at the heart of her subjectivity'.⁵ Given the detailed description that de Beauvoir gives of the social and cultural processes by which this is produced and reinforced, I suggest that what de Beauvoir means by patriarchal oppression is the social and cultural denial of women's being-for-themselves, and women's internalisation of this denial.

Clearly this cannot mean that women are not conscious — not only does this not fit with de Beauvoir's description, it would make pointless any project of liberation. This would not be something that women could even envisage. To understand the sense of not being-for-herself, we need to locate it in the fuller existentialist sense of what it is to be human, in which being conscious is a minimal condition of being a for-itself. Briefly, human existence is experienced as an indefinite need for self transcendence in activities and projects that are a source of self affirmation and self creation. For Sartre and de Beauvoir, we are what we do. Further, the for-itself is that through which and for which things have meaning and value. Things have the meaning and value they do in terms of the projects we set ourselves.

In claiming that women are not for-themselves, de Beauvoir is suggesting that women do not choose projects, do not experience themselves as active, do not order the world around themselves, but experience the world as ordered by Others, for Others, and in which women are objects. Women live through Others, for Others, and in Other's terms. Her being-for-herself is fundamentally constructed by her being-for-Others. Whatever projects she has have an indirect (and hence distorted) basis. Women are objects for themselves

as an object for the Other, the Other reveals to me a being which is my being without its being chosen by me. In becoming an object for the Other the Other deprives me of my world, I become an object in the world of the Other. The Other, in apprehending me, in judging me, penetrates my being by making part of my being-for-myself a function of my being-for-Others. For example, I cannot control the judgement that the Other makes of me — and to this extent I am not in control of myself. Through love I can attempt to regain my freedom; it is a strategy in the project of becoming for myself my own foundation. If I can assimilate the Other's freedom to myself, identify myself with my being 'looked' at, with what I am for the Other, I can be both for myself and Other to myself, that is, autonomous. This says Sartre, is the motivation, the end, and the ideal of love.

It is important to notice that Sartre is talking about assimilating, appropriating, absorbing, the Other as freedom to myself. According to Sartre this can be achieved by becoming that through which the world has meaning and value for the Other, by becoming their *raison d'être* and the object limit of their freedom. But this limitation of their freedom must be freely chosen by them, otherwise they would be objectified by the lover. Sartre says that I achieve this by getting the Other to love me. Love is a demand to be loved. By loving me the Other stops seeing me as an object in their world, stops judging me; instead, I become that on the basis of which and for which the Other judges; my facticity, what I am, becomes part of the Other's facticity. I become the 'whole world' for the Other. In this way I avoid the Other's 'look' but at the cost that, when the Other loves me they require me to be pure subjectivity.

For Sartre love is necessarily self-defeating, as a result of the contradiction between what motivates love and what would be achieved if the project were successful. Love arises from a threat to my freedom from the Other's 'look', it aims to recapture that freedom by assimilating the Other's freedom to myself. It can only achieve this if the Other loves me, that is, accepts me as the limit of their freedom. But if the Other loves me they wish to be the limit of my freedom, and, insofar as I love them, I must accept this. I set out to regain my freedom and end up having it limited. If I succeed in getting the Other to love me, which is the only way I can recover my freedom, I fail to recover my freedom.

Love can also fail for contingent reasons. If, for example, in order to get the Other to love me I try to seduce them, presenting myself as a fascinating object, I may only succeed in being possessed as a precious object. In seducing I must not reveal my subjectivity to the Other as this would cause the disappearance of the Other's subjectivity which is precisely what I want to assimilate.

It should be noticed that the logic of relations with Others is only applicable for certain kinds of beings, that is beings who are for-

through the eyes of Others, they are Other to themselves.

De Beauvoir differentiates between bad-faith and oppression in the case of some-one confusing their for-itself with their for-Others. If it is consented to by the subject, (or chosen), it is in bad-faith. If it is inflicted on the subject then it is oppression. A great deal of *The Second Sex* is a description of the ways in which this 'confusion' is inflicted on women. Firstly, through the social and cultural denial of women's being-for-themselves. For example, the representations of what it means to be a woman (femininity), and the way this is interiorised. This is psychological oppression. Secondly, the socialisation process, and thirdly, women's lack of concrete means for self-affirmation and self assertion, for example, economic oppression, forms of discrimination, and social and economic dependence.

These last conditions are such that the possibility of realising projects, and transcending herself is constantly blocked. She is forced to experience her desire for transcendence as a desire to identify with a man's transcendence. Insofar as a woman cannot — and does not — assert her subjectivity then she cannot 'look' at a man. That is, she cannot threaten a man's freedom, she cannot make him be for himself what he is for her. And she cannot experience a man's 'look' as a threat to her freedom, as alienating her from herself. What do I mean by cannot? Not incapable of, (again, women are subjects), and not merely that it is not in women's interests to do so, although it certainly is not where a woman's survival depends on her compliance.

It has to be understood in terms of a structural analysis of the phenomenon of oppression, rather than in terms of an empirical generalisation. Socially and culturally speaking, what it means to be a woman is to be an object, and as Sartre has pointed out, we cannot be objectified by an object. Not all individuals might believe that women are objects — those who do would simply not acknowledge a woman's 'look', and hence it would fail. But even where it is acknowledged it does not have the same meaning as the 'look' of a man at a woman.

Sartre says that the 'look' 'makes me be' — since part of what it is to be a person is to be for Others, and I have to take attitudes towards this. My facticity is my body in the midst of the world, and the circumstances I find myself in are not of my own choosing. Though what I do have to choose, and am responsible for, is how I interpret those circumstances, what attitudes I adopt, what projects I choose.

The circumstances that women find themselves in are not merely not of their own making, but are ones that are antithetical to developing a sense of one's self as an agent with autonomous desires, values, and projects, much less realising those projects and having one's desires, values, meanings, etc., recognised as such.

The social relations in which this does not always hold are in those structured by other forms of oppression, for example, of class and race, or even more rarely, where a woman might objectively hold power over men. But this transformation of power relations only holds in particular situations and even there is insecure. It might be minimised through the struggle for a feminist consciousness, but, again this is insecure in a predominantly sexist society.⁶ However exploited and alienated men are in some respects they still live the world as their world, or at least believe that, or act as if they believe that, it is. There may be individual exceptions — but this does not undermine the structural asymmetry between men and women.⁷

It is in this context that we need to understand de Beauvoir's description of women and men in love. I will now outline her account. Since a woman does not experience herself as a subject (in the full sense), she cannot assert her subjectivity and cannot experience a 'look' as a threat to her freedom. Rather a 'look' makes her be, gives her a value.⁸ Since by herself and for-herself she is nothing, her desire to be loved is a desire to exist, to be self transcending. A woman in love cannot attempt to integrate a man into her existence, to assimilate his freedom to her, since not being free, her existence is valueless — it can only have a value if given one by a man. A man represents value, activity, freedom, power, etc., and a woman, in loving, attempts to assimilate, to integrate herself with a man. The aim is not to unite with him but in him, to become part of him. By this means everything that belongs to her escapes contingency and becomes essential, whatever value he has is transferred to her, and her existence is justified.

To realise this aim the woman wants to serve her lover; by satisfying his demands she becomes integrated into, integral to, his existence. And since for her the measure of all values and the truth of the world is in his consciousness he becomes not only the centre of the world for her, but his world becomes her world. She adopts his beliefs, ideas, values, gestures, interests, friendships, etc.

But while she wants to be identified with him she does not want him to be identified with her. In order for him to be able to justify her existence he must be capable of justifying himself independently of her. His value cannot derive from her since without him she is nothing. She cannot be the foundation of his being, for, if she were, he could not found hers. Having transferred her transcendence onto him he must bring it to bear on the world, otherwise they both collapse. Consider, for instance, the demand that women make of men that they be successful, prestigious, in whatever form of life they live.

This description of the way women in an oppressive society love, and the aim of that love, contrasts sharply with Sartre's analysis of the essential structures of love. Instead of wanting to assimilate the

Other's freedom in order to regain her own, the woman, not being for-herself and hence not being able to attain value for and through herself, assimilates herself to a man in order to gain some measure of freedom and value. She tries to save herself by annihilating herself, and this destruction of herself is self-destructive. For Sartre, the lover would be trying to augment what she is for herself by incorporating the Other's otherness; the man's 'look' would be a threat to her freedom which she must try to recover, and the attempt would involve conflict. But on de Beauvoir's account it is by being 'looked' at by a man that a woman exists; it doesn't threaten her but realises her, his 'look' is a gift. This means that love for women has a different origin and a different aim than that of Sartre's lovers. Women have already accepted their freedom as limited by their being-for-Others. Love arises for women from a need to be recognised; a man's 'look' is necessary in order for her to exist, it is not to be overcome. The aim is to transfer her subjectivity onto another, to identify with another's transcendence; but the condition of success in this enterprise is its failure. It is a project which is necessarily frustrated because the transcendence with which the woman wishes to identify must also transcend her. She loves the man for and in his alterity and transcendence, but if she really succeeded in identifying with him he would no longer be this. She needs to capture his freedom and not destroy it, and this contradictory ideal results in servility and fear.

Before elaborating on and attempting to explain this discrepancy between de Beauvoir and Sartre I will discuss de Beauvoir's description of the way men love. Men, she says, want to integrate a woman into their existence, but not to squander it on her entirely. They want to possess a woman, to capture her freedom but while leaving it free. Love is a part of a man's life, not the basis of it; love reveals to him a new aspect of himself but he remains himself, and the new aspect is integrated into the sum total of his personality. He seeks and finds confirmation through his transcendence in other activities. He is not threatened by her being preoccupied by other things for he has his own existence; he is not destroyed by her leaving him for he still has the rest of his life to live.

This suggests that there is a fundamental asymmetry between women and men. She wants a man to be the foundation of her being, the source of its value, etc. He does not want or need her to be that for him, but rather wants to be the foundation of her being, though perhaps he does not need this. His love cannot be the same sort of thing as a woman's; being immanent she does not have a world with which he could identify, she does not posit values from which he could achieve confirmation. Not only could he not get this from a woman, but he does not need to, having other interests, involve-

ments, projects, etc., which serve as a source of confirmation. At best she could be a supplement to him — an adornment, a servant — but not essential to his existence. Moreover, if he did need to identify with her he would be of no value to her and so she could not love him.

We have then three discrepancies. Firstly, between Sartre's analysis of love and de Beauvoir's description of women lovers. Secondly, a discrepancy between Sartre's analysis of love and de Beauvoir's description of men lovers. And thirdly, an asymmetry between men's and women's loving in de Beauvoir's account.

If de Beauvoir's description of women under patriarchal oppression is phenomenologically accurate then the attempt by men to integrate a woman into their existence, to possess her, cannot be the same sort of project that Sartre is analysing as the project of love, that is, assimilating the Other's freedom to oneself in order to overcome the alienation of oneself which is experienced as a result of the Other's 'look'. By de Beauvoir's description, men would not need to regain their freedom from women, since women, by not asserting their subjectivity, could not threaten it. Insofar as a woman's being-for-herself is already structured by, or as, her being-for-Others, insofar as she does not posit him as an object, how can he experience her as the key to his being? Insofar as she identifies with him and has accepted the denial of her freedom, how could he be the project of attempting to overcome her subjectivity in its Otherness? She relinquishes her freedom, how could he attempt to capture it?

This suggests that men cannot love women in Sartre's sense of love. That is, that their relationship to women cannot be based on the aim of capturing another's freedom. The peculiarity of this suggestion is that in a way this is precisely what men do achieve; women do accept men as the objective limit of their freedom, as the source of their value, as the basis of their world. But this achievement is not the result of conflict, this was the woman's aim. Even though a man might possess a woman in the sense that her life is integrated into his, his life does not derive its value from her, nor from his relationship with her; it does not depend on her; she is only one value amongst others.

Another way to understand this is that the man has the aim of love in Sartre's sense, but his attempt to capture the woman's freedom is illusory, it is based on a projection onto women's freedom as illusory, it is based on a projection onto women of a structure of experience that is only found in men's relationships to other men. If love is the project of making oneself loved, the man is making the error of presupposing that a woman could desire to be the objective limit of his freedom. He can desire to be that for her but, if she is oppressed, she cannot desire to be that for him.

A further possibility to be considered is that men are correct in

experiencing women as a threat. She may not be trying to assimilate a freedom to herself but she may be trying to capture a freedom — not in order to be her own foundation but in order that the man be the foundation of her existence. This is the effect of oppression on women — the Other is not a threat but a gift. Does she in this way threaten the man's freedom?

The woman does not feel her freedom threatened since she does not experience herself as free; she tries to gain access to the world and confirmation of herself through the man's access and judgement. This is itself a project, and one that may be threatening to the man's freedom. How? She demands that he be pure subjectivity, whereas if he recognises her subjectivity he must desire to be loved as an object and this she cannot allow. Further, it is demand, a demand that he assert his subjectivity in certain sorts of ways so that she can derive her value from him, so that her existence is justified. And she requires that he accept the burden of herself. In order to sustain the value, the transcendence, that she achieves through her identification with him she has to enslave him while demanding that he be free, that he exercise his freedom — otherwise his existence cannot justify hers. However, while these demands, if acknowledged, might constrain the man in some ways, they do not threaten his freedom in the fundamental Sartrean sense. The woman does not and cannot objectify him; she does not alienate him from himself.

It seems then as if the fundamental condition for love, according to Sartre's analysis, between men and women is missing in the situation of oppression. The man is the appropriate kind of being, but he is not confronting a subjectivity asserting its freedom. There is no independent freedom for him to assimilate, no objectifying judgement of him for him to need to control. The woman, in living the social denial of her subjectivity and lacking the means to enable her self affirmation and self realisation through her projects, can at best preserve her transcendence, albeit in a distorted and indirect form, by transferring it onto a man. Her project of survival is the inverse of what Sartre describes as the project of love, that is, of securing oneself as one's own foundation. Only a being which is for-itself can engage in, or need to, love according to Sartre's analysis.

Is de Beauvoir wrong then in describing the phenomena she does as love? Or is Sartre's analysis only appropriate for half the human race? Or only appropriate in a world where there is no oppression? Is it that Sartre's concept of love is inappropriate for women solely because women are oppressed, or does de Beauvoir's description implicitly indicate a more fundamental weakness in Sartre's theory? These questions can be approached by examining the background to Sartre's account of the need to love, and the reasons why he thinks that love has an unrealisable aim. In contrast, for de Beauvoir, love

would be realisable if women were not oppressed.

The perspective within which love needs to be understood, according to Sartre, is that of conflict. Where two subjectivities confront each other, both seek to free themselves and to enslave the Other. The relationship is necessarily one of competition; one either objectifies the Other or is objectified by the Other. Love, as a project to overcome this situation, is an unattainable ideal. Sartre says that it is in principle impossible for the Other to be revealed simultaneously to us as subject and as object, as freedom and as objectivity. We can never place ourselves on the plane of equality, that is, where the recognition of the Other's freedom would involve the Other's recognition of the Other's freedom would involve the Other's recognition of my freedom.⁹ Is Sartre accurately describing the structure of relations between men in a patriarchal society and projecting them onto human beings and human relations as such? He is certainly not describing relations between men and women in a patriarchal society, for even here, though it might seem as if women are objectified and men remain subjects, this is a situation that, according to Sartre, cannot be sustained.¹⁰

Either Sartre is projecting onto women male experience of relations between men or talking idealistically for non-oppressed conditions. Certainly Sartre cannot theorise oppression; for him, constraint can have no possible hold on a freedom. For example, feelings of inferiority derive from a free choice; one must consent to one's alienation and objectification and be morally responsible for it. The concept of oppression is in conflict with Sartre's notion of the freedom of the for-itself. But perhaps there is more to this theoretical lack than this. We have seen how de Beauvoir describes and explains the ways women love in terms of their objective conditions, and the effect this has on their sense of themselves and their relations with Others. The meaning love has for women, as a fundamental form of relating to Others, is a function of being oppressed people. Why should we not expect to explain the meaning that love has for men in terms of their objective conditions and the way this affects their sense of themselves and relations with Others? The point need not be that men experience themselves as oppressors, any more than many men experience themselves as oppressed, but rather that the difference between women's and men's experience and expectations of love and what constitutes each, is structured by patriarchal oppression. For example, that under such conditions a woman's being-for-herself is constructed by her being-for-Others, while a man's being for himself is constructed by a denial of being-for-Others. Given the nature of patriarchal oppression — in de Beauvoir's terms — we should expect to find significant differences in descriptions and explanations of relations with Others according to whether or not they are being theorised by a man or a woman. In the case of Sartre, the point is not

simply that his concepts, categories, types of relations, are oriented by male experience, but that this experience is itself structured by the facts of oppression — and it is this that cannot be acknowledged insofar as male experience is taken to be the norm for human beings.

By contrast, although de Beauvoir uses many of Sartre's concepts, in recognising that women's experience is structured by oppression, she sees the relativity of those concepts. I take it that this is why she thinks that with the overcoming of oppression, love would be realisable. She cannot mean that non-oppressed women would become Sartrean lovers, for in Sartrean terms the goal of love is unattainable, in principle impossible. For Sartre the recognition of another's freedom is experienced as a threat to my freedom, and this must be because of my sense of myself. I can only experience myself as pure subject or object. When de Beauvoir says that genuine love is founded on the mutual recognition of two liberties, that it accepts the contingency, limitations, and gratuitousness of the Other, such that the lovers experience themselves and the Other. Both self and Other, she must be expecting that the overcoming of oppression will transform our sense of self and Other.

Brisbane.

NOTES

1. Sartre, J.P. *Being and Nothingness*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes. Methuen, 1972, p. 364. This discussion of Sartre's views on love is based on *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 361-379, unless otherwise specified.
2. de Beauvoir, S., *The Second Sex*, translated and edited by H.M. Parshley. Penguin, 1972, p. 652. This discussion of de Beauvoir's views on love is based on *The Second Sex*, pp. 652-679.
3. Note the assumption that I can only be an object for the Other or have the Other be an object for me.
4. de Beauvoir, *op. cit.*, p. 16.
5. de Beauvoir, *op. cit.*, p. 653.
6. See, for example, Sandra Lee Bartky, 'On Psychological Oppression' and 'Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness' in Bishop, S., and Weinzwieg, M., *Philosophy and Women*. Wadsworth, 1979.
7. In Sartre's famous key hole example the chances are that if the peeper is a man and the by-passer a woman, rather than the man feeling ashamed, the woman will feel embarrassed.
8. In contrast to the general Sartrean sense in which the Other's 'look' 'makes me be', that is, produces my being-for-Others, the specific point being made about women is that a woman needs a 'look' from the Other in order to be for herself. The objectifying gaze structures what she is for herself rather than adding the dimension of the for-Others to what she already is for herself.
9. Sartre, *op. cit.*, p. 408.
10. *ibid.*