

## How de Beauvoir's concept of authentic love can describe and inform loving at a distance

*"neither time nor distance could divide them. There were, of course, streets, ideas, faces, that came into existence first for Pierre, and others first for Françoise; but they faithfully pieced together these scattered experiences into a single whole, in which 'yours' and 'mine' became indistinguishable."*<sup>1</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir did not think that friendship, or love, could be easy. In *The Second Sex*, she writes that the true nature of friendship "is that of a struggle unceasingly begun, unceasingly abolished; It requires man to outdo himself for every moment"<sup>2</sup>. True friendship is hard for us because it is hard to really accept our own freedom, and even harder to recognise the freedom of someone else. To be free for de Beauvoir is to be able to transcend the determined facts of our lives and reveal "values and ends in the world". It is the changes we make to the world, the people we help and the projects that we enact, which constitute our freedom. But it is also to accept our own vulnerabilities, as humans whose projects will often fail or fall miserably short.

To stand as a freedom before a freedom, as in friendship or love, will leave you vulnerable yet give you a chance at deep connection. On this, de Beauvoir writes that "Two separate beings, in different circumstances, face to face in freedom and seeking justification of their existence through one another, will always live an adventure full of risk and promise."<sup>3</sup>

In a time like this, when lovers are forced to live apart for reasons that - though jointly rational - can often feel individually absurd, we should listen to de Beauvoir and her lesson that love is difficult but full of promise.

Authentic love for de Beauvoir is "founded on reciprocal recognition of two freedoms"<sup>4</sup>. The recognition of both freedoms, yours and your lover's, is frustrated by communicating only at a distance. Being stuck in one place, with the outside world endlessly mediated through second or third-hand images and voices, it is easy to slip into solipsism. We follow small projects, or none at all. If we have a routine, it is all that exists for us. If we don't, what exists is just whatever is in front of us. Forced to live this restricted life—where we feel that we can have no impact on a world that barely exists outside of ourselves—it can be hard to practice our own freedom.

To break free from this solipsism, consider the words of Françoise, a character from de Beauvoir's novel, *She Came to Stay*: "If I were really everything there would be nothing beside me; the world would be empty."<sup>5</sup> We must will there to be other freedoms in order for anything we do to matter. Without this will to freedom we are not just lonely, our acts are nothing.

Authentically loving another is perhaps even harder than accepting the freedom in yourself. De Beauvoir recognises that we are partially cursed in that "all love requires the duality of subject and object"<sup>6</sup>. This means that it is all too easy to objectify our lover, either by raising them too high and forgetting their human vulnerability, or in treating them as a means to your own ends. We can overcome this, but only "if each individual freely recognises the other, each regarding himself and the

---

<sup>1</sup> Beauvoir, S. d. (1984). *She Came to Stay*. (Y. Moyses, & R. Senhouse, Trans.) London: Flamingo p.44

<sup>2</sup> Beauvoir, S. d. (1997). *The Second Sex*. (H. M. Parshley, Trans.) London: Vintage. p.172 (Hereafter TSS)

<sup>3</sup> TSS, p.278

<sup>4</sup> TSS, p.677

<sup>5</sup> *She Came to Stay*, p.76

<sup>6</sup> TSS:641

other simultaneously as object and as subject in a reciprocal manner”<sup>7</sup>. Authentic love is a case of constant struggle.

This struggle too is emphasised by the distance imposed during lockdown. Many of us can communicate with our loved ones only over video calls. Of course, it is wonderful to see the people we love, to be able to read their faces better than we could on a phone call. Yet there are many aspects of their lives and their emotional states which we simply cannot read. Distance from the situation of our lovers can make it harder to truly treat them as free subjects. We can slip into treating them as idols, or as means.

De Beauvoir’s character Francoise says of her friend/lover Xaviere that “hers isn’t a very pleasant affection [...] she treats me at one and the same time as an idol and a doormat [...] It’s quite understandable: an idol doesn’t get hungry, or sleepy, or suffer from headaches, it is adored without being asked its opinion on the form of adoration it receives”. Though most of us would not be as wilfully disrespectful as Xaviere, a time when you are distant from your partner is one in which you may lose sight of their human vulnerability. Seeing someone only through a screen could turn them into a two-dimensional character in your life. In *The Second Sex*, de Beauvoir explores this form of inauthentic love, when she imagines a woman that “offers [her partner] incense, she bows down, but she is not a friend to him since she does not realize that he is in danger in the world, that his projects and his aims are as fragile as he is”<sup>8</sup>. Authentic love is founded on a mutual recognition of potential, but also of fragility. In being distant from our partners, we must foster a truthful empathy, never reducing them to an exalted Idol.

If our solipsism is intense, and we really do act as if there is “nothing beside” us, then we may treat our partner as a means. Similarly to idolisation, this is inauthentic in that we fail to relate to our partner as to a subject. If you are calling your partner merely to reduce stress, as part of your daily routine or even because you feel that you need to feel loved then you must be careful. To expect specific behaviour from someone—and therefore being disappointed when you don’t receive it—can sometimes be a sign that you are not treating them as a freedom. De Beauvoir makes the edict that we must “treat the other [...] as a freedom so that his end may be freedom”<sup>9</sup>. We should always seek an authentic connection, and not allow the workings of our love to become routine.

De Beauvoir reminds us that the rewards of love are great, and that they require commensurate effort to reach.

## Bibliography

Beauvoir, S. d. (1948). *The ethics of ambiguity*. (B. Frechtman, Trans.) New York: Philosophical library.

Beauvoir, S. d. (1984). *She Came to Stay*. (Y. Moyses, & R. Senhouse, Trans.) London: Flamingo.

Beauvoir, S. d. (1997). *The Second Sex*. (H. M. Parshley, Trans.) London: Vintage.

---

<sup>7</sup> TSS, p.172

<sup>8</sup> TSS, 655

<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir, S. d. (1948). *The ethics of ambiguity*. (B. Frechtman, Trans.) New York: Philosophical library p.154