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AN EXISTENTIALIST LOVE

GARRETT T. HARRISON

Love is something that makes up, but goes far beyond, inter-personal relationships entirely. The Love I speak of is something that draws each of us in and unites us all under the absurd banner that is existence. This Love is something that is far older than any living organism on the Earth, and something that will outlive each of them in turn. The purpose of this paper is two-fold; to establish an existentialist concept of virtuous Love, and to assert that this Love is essential in order to salvage what is becoming of our modern Western society.

Jean-Paul Sartre is one of the most influential existentialist thinkers of the 20th century. He is widely regarded as one of the founders of the modern existentialist school of thought having taken the torch from Søren Kierkegaard and run it in the opposite, more religiously secular direction. Sartre's concept of the **free being** serves as the foundation upon which our Existentialist concept of Love is constructed. Sartre tells us in his essay *Existentialism* that one is a free being living an absurd existence devoid of externally derived reason. Sartre tells us that inauthenticity occurs when one partially or entirely gives over their freedom to anything other than themselves. Giving in to societal norms or pressures and shaping components of one's being around these constructs of the absurd would be a prime example. Sartre tells us that people most often want to give up their freedoms as they come with the incredible responsibility to **choose** one's existence, a responsibility that most fear. Here, Sartre hits on one of the major players in our concept of Love: Fear. I argue that Love is what drives one to live a genuine life, while fear, our antagonist, is what drives one into inauthenticity. Dualities are most often inaccurate and promote generalized thinking, but the duality between Love and fear underlines

our society and personal behaviors in significant ways.

Let us think about this duality in relation to the **absurd**, Albert Camus' term for the existentialist notion of existence devoid of externally derived reason. Sartre and other modern existentialists are critiqued for the 'depressing and anxiety inducing' nature of existentialism. He acknowledges this criticism in the opening remarks of *Existentialism*. I have never felt Sartre's descriptions of the absurd as depressing or anxiety inducing as I have always viewed them through the lens of Love rather than the lens of fear. The fearful existentialist would tell you that you ought to feel the wrath of **existential angst** overwhelming you as you grapple with the absence of meaning in your existence. This is one perspective of Sartre's existentialism, but I prefer an alternative, Love based one. This alternative, loving existentialist would tell you that having an externally derived, predetermined meaning for your existence would render you as alive as a doorknob. You would not exist for-yourself, rather you would only exist for-whatever the predetermined purpose or meaning may be. Living in the absurd, with no predetermined notion of meaning, liberates the being to derive meaning from each moment of existence while defining what that meaning is for themselves. They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but I would like to adapt that phrase to 'meaning is in the hands of the existentialist'. We have just witnessed how even Sartre's mighty existentialist angst can be viewed as positive and constructive when observed with Love rather than fear.

Now that we have established our notion of the duality between Love and fear, let us discuss how both impact the free being. Let us begin with fear as it is the most intuitive

to comprehend. Fear and ignorance lay at the core of inauthenticity. Ignorance is sometimes a result of the situation, and often a result of fear. Sartre discusses in *Anti-Semite and Jew* how the inauthentic are swayed by the formidability of **the stone**. This formidability is so appealing as it detracts from one's perception of their own **vulnerability**. Vulnerability is an immense generator of fear. Let us consult Bell Hooks' description of vulnerability from her book *all about love: new visions*. Hooks tells us that one of the most challenging things about being open to Love is that it makes you vulnerable. In order to connect with another person through Love, or with the greater collective Love in general, one must not reside within a metaphorical castle. One must tear down the walls that guard their being if they wish to let Love in. This opens the being to potential hardship as well. Love is not something that will come easily and without adversity. It takes time, constant effort, and a dynamic sense of self that promotes honest self-assessment at every major juncture of life. Montaigne promoted a similar notion of constant and vigorous self-reflection. It is this vulnerability, and the fear that it generates, that causes many to unknowingly choose fear rather than Love. What they do not understand is that we always have the power of **choice**, and by choosing to reside within fear they have chosen to reside within inauthenticity. By doing so they have chosen to surrender much of their basic human compassion, something based purely in Love.

Let us continue our discussion of how fear impacts the free being. For our purposes we will refer to the person who is complacent to the oppression and discrimination of others simply as 'the complacent'. The **complacent** does not will the oppression or discrimination of others, rather they refuse to acknowledge their part in permitting the oppression of these individuals by remaining complacent. It takes effort to consider the perspectives and hardships of others, and with this effort comes the emotional discomfort that accompanies any meeting of two free beings harboring altering beliefs and living different existences. For a white person to acknowledge that African Americans experience hardships that white Americans do not, they must come to terms with their own privilege. This incredibly minute discomfort is more than enough to incentivize the complacent Caucasian to remain at home within the walls of their metaphorical castle. They shut themselves off to the suffering of others, effectively removing this suffering

and the emotional weight that considering or combatting it carries from their own existences. Fear of discomfort or change enables and propagates ignorance, especially willful ignorance. When one becomes willfully ignorant, they distance themselves from reality and choose to reside within inauthenticity and fear. They exchange their compassion for comfort as they choose ignorance. Now that we have discussed some of what fear can do to the free being, let us revisit our friend Love and see what she has to offer us.

Love is the great destroyer of walls and boundaries. It resides within each of us and seeks to join our beings at their very cores. It is evident first on a personal level, then on an inter-personal level, and finally on a greater collective level. Love at either of the higher levels cannot exist in the absence of **self-love**. Often you hear cheesy advertisements for dating sites claim that all one needs in order to find happiness is find another who will 'complete them'. This other will be powerless to impact your happiness if you are first unhappy with yourself. Practicing self-love is not as simple as taking warm baths and engaging in meditation. It involves a constant process of reflecting on oneself as a free being and determining what brings meaning into one's life.

Sartre's existentialism tells us that meaning can be derived from every occurrence and encounter within our existence. This is the foundational edict of **self-love**. In order to love oneself, one must first get to know oneself. Reflect and analyze whether you are living authentically. By this we mean, objectively and harshly analyze your current desires and aspirations. Who has determined them? You are inclined to answer, "Well of course I have determined my ambitions," but I challenge you to be honest with yourself. Have your society, family, or friends impacted your perceptions of what is important to you? You will find that many people unconsciously surrender their freedom to societal norms or priorities. "Well, I chose to pursue medicine because being a doctor is a good career choice". Who defines 'good'? What makes it a **good** career choice? Is it a better career choice than perhaps pursuing a career in philosophy? Society would tell you yes, but Sartre would tell you that the answer is subjective, and each free being should hold their own answers to these questions. For one who does not find practicing medicine enjoyable, it would

be a bad career choice. A good exercise to assess the degree of authenticity within your aspirations is to ask yourself the question, "What would I do if success was guaranteed?" then ask yourself why you are not currently pursuing whatever interest came in the form of your answer to this question. This reveals to us what we view as hindering us from striving for the things we most desire or would most enjoy, and most times these are reflections of societal or familial influences on our aspirations.

When one practices genuine self-love, they are encouraging and motivating themselves to pursue the realization of their authentic being. This is not to say that loving oneself will release one from the confines of the **situation**. You may find yourself still hindered by the structure of your situation, but the power and responsibility to choose how to maneuver within or escape from this situation lays with you and you alone. When one begins to pursue authentic interests, they begin to bring into reality their authentic self. This process can be painful and difficult depending on the degree of domestication and influence at the hands of the situation. It may require the entire deconstruction of one's very identity, but a one-story shack built upon a sound foundation is infinitely more desirable than the most luxurious tower built upon a cracked one. Only when one has built their foundation authentically through learning to love oneself can they hope to share their love with another.

We have discussed how loving oneself brings into existence the authentic self. Now we must discuss what **authentic Love** looks like between two free beings. Simone de Beauvoir has much to offer our conversation. Skye C. Cleary discusses what Beauvoir has to say regarding this authentic, reciprocal Love in her paper *Simone de Beauvoir on Love*. Cleary tells us of Beauvoir's authentic Love as she has described it in her works *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir describes a reciprocal, virtuous Love that accompanies the mutual acknowledgement of each lover's freedom. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity* she describes what she calls maniacal love. This

love is obsessed with possession and power and is often propagated by various forms of oppression, but Beauvoir mostly discusses gender-based oppression in relation to maniacal love. She argues that many have not historically engaged in authentic, generous Love due to the oppressive beliefs and practices that have underlined feminine existence thus far. Beauvoir tells us in *The Second Sex* that authentic Love does not seek power or possession. Authentic Love does not entail the surrendering of individual freedoms or transcendence; rather it enables lovers to further discover and bring about their respective authenticities together. Beauvoir asserts that the authentic self is revealed as the free being offers itself to another through authentic Love.

We have discussed how Love can bring about authenticity and how fear generates inauthenticity. We have also discussed how fear is the breeder of ignorance and robber of compassion. When one chooses to shut themselves off from Love they choose to reside within fear. When one resides within fear, they close off their hearts to the suffering of their fellow humans and other co-inhabitants of Earth. This loss of compassion for fellow beings underlines many of the issues that currently ail our modern societies. Human and civil rights movements continue to fight for fundamental equality among humans all over the globe who still suffer from oppression and/or poverty. Ecologists and philosophers alike have labored over how to generate significant change in the way we view the environment as a society. In a world in which humans do not even respect and honor one another, it should be no surprise that they do not respect or honor the more-than-human environment either. We are currently at the crossroads of an environmental and cultural crisis and it is imperative that we propagate **compassion** through **authentic, virtuous Love** both at the individual and interpersonal levels if we wish to achieve a sustainable existence between humans and humans, as well as between humans and the more-than-human world.

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