

## EXISTENTIALISM AND ROMANTIC LOVE

SKYE CLEARY



*Existentialism and Romantic Love*, by Skye Cleary (Palgrave Macmillan), £19.50/\$34.99

Review by Shaun Miller

What must romantic partners do to qualify as good partners? Society has a lot to say about this. Anything outside of standard bounds is considered deviant or not really a relationship. Consider, for example, poly-amorous people, those who prefer short-term relationships, and those who enjoy romantic friendships.

Cleary's thesis is that existentialist philosophers "reveal to us the notion that once lovers free themselves from preconceived

ideals about how romantic lovers ought to behave, and free themselves from being slaves to their passions, they will be free to create relationships that complement and enhance their personal, authentic endeavors". We have the freedom to design our romantic relationships, which includes not just the content and boundaries of what we deem "romantic" or even what the relationship consists of, but also the meaning and importance of romance.

Cleary draws on five existentialist philosophers: Max Stirner, Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Simone de Beauvoir. What is appealing about Cleary's approach is how she frames each existentialist as recognising a problem with traditional romantic relationships, but as offering a unique solution.

We can read Cleary's book in two ways. The first way is as an exegetical account of the existentialist philosophers' account of love. On this reading, Cleary gives the reader the necessary background to the existentialist's philosophy and themes, and introduces us to problems with traditional romantic love. After seeing the problem, the existentialists offer a solution. Then Cleary offers an evaluation of the philosopher's view of love as a whole.

The second way to read Cleary's work is to read it as a self-help book. I don't mean to say her book is pop-psychology or hokey, but it can be appreciated as offering edifying existential advice. In one way or another, everyone has faced troubles in their romantic relationships. The difficulties can be hard to see if the troubles are at a deep level rather than being superficial. Cleary's book guides the reader to acknowledge and question their most fundamental assumptions

about love. By seeing what the troubles are, the reader can at least see a way out of the problem, perhaps even undergo an existential transformation regarding romantic relationships.

Despite nuances that distinguish them from each other, what the existentialists have in common is that they believe we must give up the ideals of love, not acquiesce to romantic expectations, and we must give up the power play of love. The way out of tradition is to be authentic and to be free. One can thereby have "true" or authentic romantic love. Authenticity – and existential romantic love – has a Kantian flavour: being authentic does not mean doing whatever you want; it means to carry yourself in a certain way, to "give laws to oneself", and to act under some authentic standard, where the standard is characterised by each existentialist. Cleary does not give explicit advice, but through the work of these authors, she offers suggestions on how one can aim for authenticity, and have the freedom to create romantic relationships on one's own terms. Which do you choose: to fit in, or to be authentic?

A few criticisms of the book. Cleary sometimes notes that existentialists had ideals that they did not put into practice. De Beauvoir allowed her lover Nelson Algren to pursue relationships with other women, but she playfully revealed that she would interfere with his freedom. She (and others) may have been hypocritical, but does this really undermine their arguments? I'm not so sure. De Beauvoir may have overestimated people's ability to have non-monogamous relationships, in which case Cleary may have a point. But on the other hand, people may be so used to monogamy as the

default that they can't bear to live in another way. De Beauvoir (and Sartre, for that matter) would respond that people can either authentically choose the default or psychologically acquiesce to the status quo ... or live up to their non-monogamous ideals.

Another minor criticism has to do with her exposition of Nietzsche. Nietzsche is well-known for his critique of Christian morality, where his solution is self-mastery. Cleary mentions passages about love from Nietzsche in this section, but I could not quite see how it related to self-mastery, especially in the context of critiquing Christian morality. She writes advice about how to master oneself and aim toward the *Übermensch*, but it was difficult to see the connection with romantic love.

Despite these criticisms, Cleary provides a masterly account of the existentialists' problems with traditional romantic love and offers solutions to these problems. She explores the dense texts of these authors and presents ideas in a way that is systematic but engaging, insightful, helpful, and readable. Her work not only gives readers more knowledge of these authors, but helps them look at their own relationships and see if their relationships are what they want, or if they could design a relationship of their own choosing. Cleary offers tools for doing that with the help of the existentialists.

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