

Existentialism and Romantic Love

Skye Cleary. (2015). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Romantic love is a profoundly complex and perplexing topic which is rich with pain, paradoxes and pleasure. Love is an arena where struggles with intimacy, the tension between merging with the other yet remaining autonomous, power dynamics and sexual passions can all play out. This is one of many reasons why struggles of romantic love are often brought to therapy. Existential philosophy has much to say on this topic which is neatly explained in Cleary's book, *Existentialism and Romantic Love*. Author and academic Skye Cleary has successfully undertaken an existential quest to understand the meaning and nature of heterosexual romantic loving relationships through a study of five philosophers. Her chosen philosophers are Stirner, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre and Beauvoir. Together they provide a wide and rich scope to the narrative. It's a delight to have these philosophies put together in one book with the focus on love. There seems to be a lack of literature in psychotherapy that focuses specifically on the topic of romantic love and existentialism. The book then succeeds in exploring and drawing out the complexities and flaws of romantic love despite the ideals and assumptions lovers may have. Cleary takes time to explain where these ideals and assumptions originate from.

Cleary's central argument is that existential philosophies challenge our implicit assumptions about romantic loving behaviours and expectations through highlighting flaws in the romantic ideals. This immediately gives the book a more cynical atmosphere which may appeal to some readers. Cleary argues her point clearly and successfully through drawing upon a wide range of sources and ideas that go beyond the five existential philosophers. Through an absence of mystifying jargon, Cleary, explains complex ideas with clarity. Anyone with a basic or no understanding of existentialism will appreciate how comprehensively she writes about the philosophies. Through the philosophy she explores relevant and important questions such as '*can romantic loving validly relieve anxiety by creating meaning in life?*' and '*to what extent can individuals be authentic within a romantic relationship?*' She doesn't offer answers to these questions or her own perspective, yet leaves it up to the reader to ponder. As an existential therapist, I can see the value in reflecting upon my own response to these questions.

Cleary offers a concise and useful introduction to what she means by existential love and existential philosophy. She introduces an interesting history on romantic loving and concepts such as merging, passion, intimacy, self-expansion and evolution. The existential themes which she briefly covers include choice and freedom, responsibility, anxiety, authenticity, being-with and leaping. She introduces the premise that romantic loving suggests images of perfect happiness, harmony, understanding and intimacy that make the

lovers feel as if they are made for each other. However, Cleary points out that however alluring this ideal is it is flawed as loving involves conflicts and disappointments. A sentiment I feel is often expressed in therapy. What I found myself curious about was her own motives to write on this topic. What were her ideals and disappointments? The lack of her own stories and experiences makes her writing seem a bit distant. There also is a simple formula to how she sets out her book and this adds to the impersonal and sometimes text book feel to the book. Whilst the book is academic with many references and ideas to bolster her argument, she often explains and describes rather than critiques. Perhaps so it can be left up to the reader to respond. Rather than responding critically to the philosophy she seems to be responding critically to the romantic ideals of love.

Now to the philosophers themselves. Max Stirner's chapter focuses on loving egotistically. Kierkegaard's chapter is on loving aesthetically. Nietzsche's chapter focuses on loving powerfully. Sartre's philosophy is on loving sadomasochistically and Beauvoir explores loving authentically. Cleary has approached romantic love from five different perspectives, which enriches the book's quest. I wasn't aware of the philosophy of Stirner, and although I found his ideas challenging and uninspiring, they didn't shed further clarity on my experience or that of my clients although I did appreciate Cleary's small and telling insights into the life and relationships of Stirner. His bleak approach to love and life made me feel resistant to really embrace his philosophy and at times I was more excited by the chapter on Kierkegaard's philosophy, a philosophy I am more familiar with. I found it thought provoking in the sense that the different approaches to romantic loving seem relevant to the narratives and assumptions I hear from clients. It provoked thought on the pitfalls of certain approaches to romantic loving. I found Nietzsche's philosophy on love thought provoking yet difficult at times to read. This is due to the fact that Kierkegaard and Nietzsche both share some challenging and misogynistic views on women. In fact, Cleary really highlights how negatively Nietzsche thought about women which, (as a female) turned me off his philosophy. I was surprised at how Cleary doesn't respond to this. As a female writer I would have appreciated her thoughts on these views. Yet she keeps to her script of simply using these philosophies to critique romantic love. I appreciated Cleary's inclusion of Simone de Beauvoir. The reason being that much of my training and reading in existential psychotherapy has been from a male perspective and with much less of an insight into the thinking of female philosophers. Her chapter was a refreshing change to the male voices of the text. This chapter resonated with me the most and I found Cleary's writing be more critical and passionate. What I found the most interesting in these chapters was the reflection on how philosophers struggled with romantic love in their own lives. I would have welcomed more of this.

I found it interesting how Cleary makes explicit that she is speaking about heterosexual love. At first I didn't understand why she made this so explicit. My initial thought was, what is the difference between heterosexual and homosexual love? Yet reading the philosophy I understand that Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and Beauvoir do bring in to their writings the dynamics and assumption between the genders. Cleary seems to want to really highlight this. How different the genders are and the roles that get played out. This left me wondering if these dynamics are so different between lovers of the same gender. Can this not also play out in homosexual relationships?

In her conclusion, Cleary, offers a good summary to the philosophies and what they add to the narrative around romantic loving. She concisely draws out the existential issues inherent in romantic loving such as the dangers of being a slave to our passions and drives, intimacy, merging with the other. These issues seem very relevant for working existentially with clients who are struggling with sex addiction for example. She then concludes her book with 'existential advice' for overcoming problems in romantic loving. Here she draws upon freedom; freedom from being a slave to one's passions, freedom from petty power games, freedom from pre-established romantic ideals, free to choose loving behaviour, freedom to choose priorities and freedom create authentically meaningful relationships. This section of the book has much to offer someone who is really struggling with having their freedom curtailed in romantic relationships.

What makes this book unprovocative for me was that the writing can at times seem dispassionate and dry. Cleary doesn't share with us stories of romantic love from her life or how the philosophies may have impacted on her. I would have been interested to read about what inspired her to make this study. Although I can't fault her exposition I find I learn more from personal experiences and stories than from abstract ideas. I found that whilst there is a focus on the problems of romantic love, I felt there was a lack of focus on how romantic love can also be enriching and inspiring. Cleary seems cynical about this attitude.

The book has much to offer anyone who is interested in what existential philosophy has to say on the subject of romantic love. Don't be put off by its initially dry and academic exterior. Underneath Cleary is wrestling with profound tensions and contradictions around romantic love. I would recommend this book to anyone interested in love and existential philosophy and work therapeutically with those who struggle with romantic love. Existential therapists will find the ideas in this book interesting and thought provoking. I certainly would recommend this book for students of existential psychotherapy and counselling as it does offer a comprehensive guide to what some philosophers say about romantic love. It would be a good companion with the book *Sexuality, Existential Perspectives* (Milton, 2014) which links romantic love and sexual passion to existential therapy and to life experiences.

References

Milton, M (ed). (2014). *Sexuality: Existential Perspectives*. Ross-on-Wye. PCCS.

Cristalle Hayes

Wittgenstein and Psychotherapy: From Paradox to Wonder

John M Heaton. (2014). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

This book follows hard on the heels of Heaton's previous *The Talking Cure* (Heaton, 2010) again focusing on his profession of psychotherapy; looked at in the style of Wittgenstein's thinking. I put it like this to emphasise at the outset that this is not the application of Wittgensteinian ideas to psychotherapy, with a view to suggesting that this is an improvement on competing explanations. Rather, Heaton, following Wittgenstein's example, is reminding us of the consequences of thinking in particular ways: specifically, of the difficulties and confusions that arise when psychotherapists allow their thinking to harden and coalesce into sheer belief. This is highly relevant for a practice which aims to help free people from this very state of affairs: how can a therapist help if he too is convinced to the point of bewitchment of the correctness of his viewpoint?

If Heaton focuses on Psychoanalysis and Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (CBT), he does so not to criticise these disciplines *per se*. After all there are plenty of practitioners of both disciplines who prove helpful for their patients. Rather, Heaton's examples show what can happen when the psychotherapist forgets that his practice is foremost an ethical one which, more like meditation than surgery, does not depend on technique. Heaton's friend and colleague, the late R.D. Laing, put it well by suggesting that treatment is concerned with how we treat people, and as psychotherapists how we treat or are treated is not just commensurate simply with the ideas or methods employed.

It is, however, easy to be mistaken about Heaton's aim here just as it is when reading Wittgenstein, notwithstanding the latter's warning about the 'craving for generalisation'. How difficult it is not to follow these ideas as if they were instructions to achieve a desired outcome! If this craving for generalization was what Heaton was aiming at, then his 'Wittgensteinian' therapy would swell the ever-increasing number of therapies appearing, each claiming certain defining features with evidence presented as to its winning effectiveness as a method of treatment.

The question of what counts as evidence is contemporaneous with the modern history of psychotherapy from the Enlightenment onwards. Such evidence has become largely an empirical matter, with a case study at the centre clothed not only in the language of the laboratory but considered