

# Being and drunkenness: how to party like an existentialist

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Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre in Paris, June 1977. Photo by STF/AFP/Getty Images

Existentialism has a reputation for being angst-ridden and gloomy mostly because of its emphasis on pondering the meaninglessness of existence, but two of the best-known existentialists knew how to have fun in the face of absurdity. Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre spent a lot of time partying: talking, drinking, dancing, laughing, loving and listening to music with friends, and this was an aspect of their philosophical stance on life. They weren't just philosophers who happened to enjoy parties, either – the parties were an expression of their philosophy of seizing life, and for them there were authentic and inauthentic ways to do this.

For de Beauvoir in particular, philosophy was to be lived vivaciously, and partying was bound up with her urge to live fully and freely, not to hold herself back from all that life had to offer. She wrote that sometimes she does 'everything a little too crazily ... But that is my way. I have rather not to do the things at all as doing them mildly.'

Sartre loved the imaginative playfulness that alcohol facilitated: 'I liked having confused, vaguely questioning ideas that then fell apart.' Too much seriousness hardens the world, pinning it down with rules, they felt, suffocating freedom and creativity. Taking parties too seriously dissipates their effervescence. Seriousness flattens them into institutions, hollow shams of gratuitously flaunted wealth and materialism, pathetic pleas for acknowledgement through the gazes of others, or

hedonistic indulgences in sordid ephemeral pleasures that serve only to distract participants from their stagnating lives. A serious party neglects the underlying virtues of playfulness and generosity that make a party authentic. De Beauvoir tried smoking joints but, no matter how hard she inhaled, she remained firmly planted to the ground. She and Sartre self-medicated with amphetamines to remedy hangovers, heartbreaks and writers' blocks. Sartre tripped on psychedelics for academic purposes: he took mescaline to inform his research on hallucinations. But alcohol would always be their drug of choice for partying.

A party isn't a party without others, of course, and, although Sartre is renowned for his line 'Hell is – other people!' in *No Exit* (1944), that was far from the whole story for him: both he and de Beauvoir discovered themselves in their relations with other people. 'In songs, laughter, dances, eroticism, and drunkenness,' de Beauvoir writes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947), 'one seeks both an exaltation of the moment and a complicity with other men.' For her, complicity and reciprocity are the foundation of ethical relationships because other people provide the context of our lives. And because our world is infused with the meanings that other people are giving it, our existence can be revealed only in communication with them.

Parties can cultivate our connections to others, bring meaning to one another's lives, and reveal the world with them. They can also confirm one another's existences, serving as a reminder to friends that they matter, and that one matters to one's friends. Moreover, the warmth and laughter that authentic partying sparks can help people cope with the chaos of life. De Beauvoir wrote of her wartime parties in occupied Paris: they saved up food stamps and then binged on food, fun and alcohol. They danced, sang, played music and improvised. The artist Dora Maar mimed bullfights, Sartre mimed orchestra-conducting in a cupboard, and Albert Camus banged on saucepan lids as if in a marching band. De Beauvoir wrote that: 'We merely wanted to snatch a few nuggets of sheer joy from this confusion and intoxicate ourselves with their brightness, in defiance of the disenchantments that lay ahead.' These were small acts of rebellion in the face of real fears for the future.

Critics of de Beauvoir and Sartre would try to discredit them with accusations of inspiring orgies, encouraging hedonism, and being what the philosopher Julia Kristeva in 2016 called 'libertarian terrorists' who formed a 'shock commando unit' to seduce their sexual victims. Nevertheless, they weren't encouraging all-out hedonism, because they didn't value personal pleasure over responsibility. For de Beauvoir, there's nothing philosophically wrong with having orgies, it's the same as with any other aspect of life: it matters how you approach the situation. If a person, she wrote, 'brings his entire self to every situation, there can be no such thing as a "base occasion"'. And it's true that de Beauvoir and Sartre had many lovers, but casual sex wasn't part of their repertoire. They thought that promiscuity was a trivial use of freedom and, instead, wanted intense love affairs and friendships. (Nevertheless, people were hurt in these relationships, and although de Beauvoir acknowledged

responsibility for this, neither she nor Sartre were ever held morally *accountable* by others in any meaningful way.)

Rejecting social norms is a process of destruction: refusing to be defined primarily by what others think you should be, how you are supposed to act, and the choices you are supposed to make. Partying can involve a similar act of destroying such expectations, as well as expending time, money, food, drink and brain cells. Some might call this a waste, but what are we saving ourselves for? A good life isn't always a long one, and a long life isn't necessarily a happy or fulfilled one. Rather, what's important is to embrace life passionately. Existence is a process of spending ourselves, and sometimes requires leaving our former selves behind to create ourselves anew, thrusting forward into the future, disclosing our being into new realms. We do this by opening ourselves to, and playing with, possibilities.

Yet partying like an existentialist also calls for caution. While it can be a reprieve from a world full of despair and distractions, it's bad faith to use it as a means to escape one's situation. Running away from life or succumbing to peer pressure reduces oneself to what de Beauvoir called an absurd 'palpitation'. For partying to be authentic, it must be freely and actively chosen, done purposefully, and in a way that reflects one's values. Furthermore, too much partying can become exhausting and monotonous when it siphons off the zest from life and becomes a repetitive and meaningless series of encounters, which is why existentialist parties tended to be only occasional events. Camus would ask de Beauvoir if it's possible to party as hard as they did and still work. De Beauvoir replied no. To avoid stagnation, she thought that existence 'must be immediately engaged in a new undertaking, it must dash off toward the future'.

Authentic existential partying, then, requires a kind of self-mastery: to hold oneself in the tension between freedom and responsibility, playfulness and seriousness, and to nurture our connections without denying our situations. It encourages us to create our own links with the world, on our own terms, vigilantly detaching ourselves from internal chains, including habits or dependencies such as alcoholism. Such partying also incites us to challenge external chains, such as institutional restrictions, and so the stubborn insistence on living life as one chooses and in ways that strengthen our bonds to one another can be an act of revolt. An existential approach to partying recognises that although life can be menacing, it can and should be enjoyable, and being with others in the playful mode of partying can help us bear the darkness through a shared sense of euphoria, harmony and hope.

Both de Beauvoir and Sartre spent their rich lives embracing new undertakings, but took their whiskey and vodka bottles with them. This led to serious health problems, including cirrhosis, but they never regretted their partying or drinking, and by their own philosophy, there is no reason they should have done. They chose it freely, did it on their own terms, and took responsibility for the consequences. That's what partying like an existentialist is all about.

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