THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT INEZ

Jonathan Webber

Hell is other people. This miserable-sounding soundbite, the moment of revelation in Jean-Paul Sartre's shortest play, must be the most quoted line of twentieth-century philosophy. Not even Jacques Derrida's claim that 'there is nothing beyond the text', fondly cherished in some regions of academia, has anything like the cultural reach of what is often taken to be the quintessential Sartrean slogan. And the analytic tradition hardly abounds in snappy lines: meaning just ain't in the head, to be is to be the value of a variable, and that's about it. You'll not sell many of those t-shirts. Part of the appeal of Sartre's slogan lies, of course, in the fact that we all regularly annoy each other. We think we can see better ways of doing what only other people have the power to do. Your schemes can clash with mine in ways that prevent me from achieving my goals and living my dreams. People can look down on me. Other people can and do thwart, defeat, constrain, disappoint, irritate, and distort us. When we dwell on all this at the expense of the love, inspiration, fun, co-operation, respect, and decency that characterise much of our social interaction, then we find Sartre's slogan neatly encapsulates our mood. Its wit helps us put the melancholia in perspective as we express it. We get it off our chest.

This all fits, moreover, with the popular view of existentialism as a depressing philosophy obsessively articulating only the negative aspects of our lives. Søren Kierkegaard wrote a whole book about anxiety and another one about despair. Albert Camus worried about how we should deal with the absurdity, or meaninglessness, of life and wondered whether we should just kill ourselves. Sartre's philosophical masterpiece, *Being and Nothingness*, is filled with

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analyses of anguish, self-deception, shame, alienation, conflict, mortality, the futility of love, and the gnawing awareness of inner emptiness. It doesn't get much darker than that. But these philosophers did not create the phenomena they describe and neither are they celebrating them. Like the ancient Stoics, the philosophers often grouped together as existentialists tend to give our deepest troubles careful consideration in the hope that greater understanding will help us to dispel them. Kierkegaard wants to show us the way out of anxiety and despair. Camus considers the correct response to the indifference of the universe to be not suicide but rebellion, creating our own meaning where before there was none.

Careful reading of *Being and Nothingness*, in my view, shows Sartre to stand in this therapeutic tradition. He does not consider us to be condemned to misery by the very nature of our existence. Those who read him as describing only the metaphysics of the human condition are mistaken. He is rather concerned to diagnose a malady underlying our more immediate and more obvious problems, both individual and social, and to show us that we can cure ourselves of this malady. He examines the nature of our existence as part of this larger project. The sickness we suffer, he thinks, is a distorted view of what human beings are like, a view we cling to but only because we are used to it. This is what he means by 'bad faith': an attitude towards the human condition that we freely maintain and that we would be better off without. It is this attitude that poisons our relations with one another, at both the personal and the social levels. Bad faith makes love futile. Racial hatred is a form of bad faith.[1]

If this is right, then Sartre does not think that our relations with one another are necessarily hellish, in whole or in part. The standard reception of the slogan misunderstands it. Which is indeed something Sartre pointed out some twenty years after the play was first published. 'It has been thought that what I meant by that was that our relations with other people are always poisoned', he said.

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'But what I really mean is something totally different. I mean that if relations with someone else are twisted, vitiated, then that other person can only be hell.'[2] Discussions of the play, however, tend not to see it this way. They generally describe each of the three main characters as frustrated by their inability to control the thoughts and actions of the other two, especially where these threaten their preferred images of themselves. They usually point out that the characters have died and so are incapable of adding to their life stories. From which they generally conclude that Sartre's message is simply that we should not be too concerned with the views others have of us at the moment, but should concentrate on developing ourselves through our future actions. We are not dead yet.[3]

But this standard reading does not seem to fit with Sartre's philosophy or with what he said about the play. For it is central to Sartrean existentialism that we cannot help but see ourselves through the eyes of other people. One of the themes of *Being and Nothingness* is that the characterisation of an individual as this or that kind of person is an inherently public affair. I simply cannot ignore or override the views of other people. Those who interpret Sartre as claiming that we are condemned to disastrous personal relationships by the very nature of our existence tend to emphasise precisely this aspect of his philosophy: that we cannot understand ourselves except through them. Sartre repeats this point in describing the message of the play: since 'other people are basically the most important means we have in ourselves for our own knowledge of ourselves', since the judgments of other people necessarily enter into whatever I think or feel about myself, 'if my relations are bad, I am situating myself in a total dependence on someone else. And then I am indeed in hell.'[4] The badness of my relations with others is therefore something additional to the structure of self-understanding. The problem is not our reliance on other people, but the combination of this with our relationships being 'poisoned'. Hell is neither the metaphysics of human existence nor excessive

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concern with one's image in the eyes of others. In order to see clearly just what it means to say that hell is other people, just what Sartre sees as poisoning our relationships, we need to rethink our understanding of the play.

Huis Clos was written within a fortnight towards the end of 1943, the year in which *Being and Nothingness* was published. The immediate impetus was that Sartre had been asked by three of his friends, including Camus, to write a play for them. Mindful of their vanity, Sartre wrote a play in which three characters have an equal number of lines. As it turned out, these three never played the parts written for them. The play opened in 1944, shortly before the liberation of Paris, under the title *Les Autres* (*The Others*), with a different line-up of actors. Its mixed reception may partly have been due to its claustrophobic atmosphere under the perpetual gaze of 'the others' being taken as an allegory of the occupation. Sartre does seem to have intended the play to have this political dimension as well as illustrating his ethical theory. Indeed, the enduring fascination with the play may well be due to its compact presentation of a wide range of themes and we should be wary of any interpretation that reduces such a masterpiece to a single simple and easily expressible message. It seems similarly unlikely, moreover, that such a strangely engrossing dramatic narrative could be wrought from a schema so simple as to involve three cartoon characters each facing the same basic challenge. So our interpretation of the play must not render the play's success too puzzling in either of these ways.

The title of the play has always presented a problem for English translators and producers, who have generally chosen between the more populist *No Exit* and the more technical *In Camera*, though have sometimes preferring to leave it untranslated.[5] The first of these involves a nice theatrical pun: although the three main characters enter the stage, none of them ever leaves it, even when the door is open and they are quite capable of walking out. But this is not a literal translation of the French title, nor even a

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figurative one. For the French title is taken from legal terminology, designating proceedings occurring behind closed doors, in the chambers, away from the open courtroom, with no public or media gallery. *No Admittance* might be a better rendering than *No Exit*. But fortunately the English language has its own phrase for the same kind of meeting: *In Camera*. The relative unpopularity of this title with translators and producers of the play is presumably due to its status as legal jargon rather than ordinary English, and perhaps also due to the fact that the play has nothing whatever to do with photography.[6]

The differences between these titles suggest differing interpretations of the play. A legal proceeding in camera is neither an eternal process nor a punishment, so seems an inapt metaphor for hell. Such a proceeding does end in an exit, though neither the timing nor the direction of this exit need be set in advance. Perhaps these three characters are not intended to be in hell at all, but rather in purgatory where sinners are punished until purged of their sins. Or perhaps they are facing the last judgment, at which eternal destinies are decided. The sole character who undoubtedly knows precisely what is going on, the valet who makes only minor appearances, gives nothing away about the status of this place. Two of the three main characters describe the place as hell, Garcin somewhat speculatively and Inez much more firmly, but this is hardly conclusive.[7]

Part of the reason why the characters are often assumed to be in hell might be the common view that there is no change, no progression, no quest or discovery during the play. Since the characters are already dead, the thought runs, there is nothing for them to do except contemplate what has been. But this simply does not seem right. Garcin begins the play exuding a false bravado about his exploits, but under questioning from Inez comes to admit that he is genuinely unsure whether his life story shows him to be courageous or to be cowardly. Sartre seems to have selected the events Garcin dwells on precisely for their ambiguity in this regard. The bickering between the

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characters reaches its apex at the moment when the door opens allowing any of them to leave but they all remain. This is another ambiguous action, at least for Garcin: is he courageously staying to face the music or merely afraid of ending up somewhere worse? Garcin soon comes to see that he is tortured by the divergence between the way he reads these ambiguous events and the way others do – that, for him at least, hell is other people – and the play then ends with his expressing an unambiguously courageous attitude to their situation: 'Well, well, let's get on with it.'

Garcin seems to be making progress. This helps to explain why Garcin is often seen as the central character of the play even though the three main characters have the same number of lines. His being the central protagonist of this narrative is also indicated by his uttering the first line, the last line, and the punch line. The play is not about three equally central characters at all: the other two are there to contribute to the story about him. What is more, such progress would suggest that Garcin is wrong about his current location. Rather than being tortured in hell, he is simply finding painful the process of coming to recognise, confess, and regret his sins. He contrasts quite neatly with Estelle in this respect, since she seems to be making no progress whatsoever. From start to finish she is concerned only with whether men find her physically attractive, whereas Garcin is concerned with finding his salvation. Estelle is the only one of three lacking in depth, but this is not the way she is drawn so much as the way she is. Sartre gives us here a rounded portrayal of a two-dimensional character, not a flimsy sketch of a character.

Inez is different. As readers often observe, she seems rather unruffled by the whole situation. Whereas the room seems designed to irritate the other two, it does not annoy her. Whereas the other two obsess about whether they really are what they hope that they are, which requires them to worry about whether people see them as they want to be seen, Inez seems to have a very solid idea of who

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she is, one that fits perfectly the way others see her. 'When I say I'm cruel, I mean I can't get on without making people suffer', she tells us, describing herself as a 'live coal in others' hearts. When I'm alone I flicker out.'[8] Inez presents a serious problem for those interpretations of the play that see the three characters as facing variations on the same predicament. For while it is clear what Garcin and Estelle each want, the same cannot be said of Inez. It is true that she has sexual designs on Estelle, who in turn is interested only in men, while Garcin prefers Inez to her. And it is true that the story unfolds partly under the pressure of this triangle of desire. But the serious problems that Garcin and Estelle face, the problems that dominate the play, are not sexual at all. They are concerned with identity, self-understanding, and public image. And in this arena, Inez seems to have no trouble at all.

Inez seems to know what is going on, moreover, whereas Garcin and Estelle seem only to surmise. It is no accident, she tells the others, that the room is too hot and contains only ugly and useless objects: 'I tell you they've thought it all out. Down to the last detail. Nothing was left to chance. The room was all set for us.' She is equally calm and clear about their situation: 'We're in hell, my pets, they never make mistakes, and people aren't damned for nothing'. It is Inez who first claims that the three will torture one another, much like 'in the cafeteria where customers serve themselves'.[9] But this latter claim, often echoed in descriptions of the play, seems just as disingenuous as her opening accusation that Garcin is the torturer: since she freely declares herself to be uncommonly nasty, surely she is aware that most of the pain will be caused by her.

Focusing on Inez in this way brings out the possibility that she is not in the same position as the other two and that perhaps she is a demon in disguise. If this is right, then she genuinely is, as she herself says, cruel right to the core, and her role is simply to torture the other two. She tells a tale of her past life, of course, but this could easily be part of her disguise, since being seen as a fellow

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inmate of hell would make her all the better placed to do her job. Sartre occasionally alludes to this possibility, as when Inez admires Estelle looking 'quite diabolical'. He even allows Garcin to come very close to making precisely this accusation at one point. 'You've given us quite enough hints', he tells Inez, 'you might as well come out with it.' Inez plays dumb in response, claiming to be 'as much in the dark as you are', but soon presses the torture onwards.[10]

So long as we see the play as set in hell, however, we cannot find any significance in Garcin's apparent progress and Estelle's contrasting inertia. For if nobody is going anywhere, change is insignificant. Our evidence that they are in hell is just that Garcin assumes so and Inez states it to be the case. Even if we take Inez to be a demon in disguise, and therefore to know exactly what is going on, we do not have to accept that she is telling the truth about their location any more than she is telling the truth about her own past. Describing their situation as hell is useful for getting the other two to focus on their sins. 'What have you done?', she asks Estelle. 'I mean, why have they sent you here?' Garcin picks up on this and insists they each 'bring our spectres out into the open' in the hope that doing so will 'save us from disaster'.[11] We need not accept that the characters really are in hell, therefore, since this could be merely a conceit promulgated by Inez. If the play is set in purgatory, then it is the painful exercise of diagnosing and confronting their basic sins that can save Garcin and Estelle, an exercise Inez insists upon. If this is the last judgment, on the other hand, then it seems that Garcin and Estelle are to pass judgment on themselves, or perhaps that the audience are to pass judgment, and Inez is playing the role of prosecutor. Either way, we can explain why it is Inez who drives the plot forwards with her relentless cruelty.

If this is the right way to understand the play, then it is clear that it is not intended to dramatise the necessary structures of relations between people at all. Other people

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are hell for Garcin at this time because of his sin that they, under the leadership of Inez, are forcing him to bring to light. This fits Sartre's claim that the play encapsulates the idea that relations with other people are hellish when they are poisoned, twisted, or vitiated in some way. It is Garcin's sin that is poisoning, twisting, vitiating his relationships with other people. If we are to understand precisely what this sin is, moreover, we need to respect Sartre's further point that Garcin's relationships with others are poisoned in such a way as to make him overly reliant on those other people. Sartre clearly sees this as compatible with the idea that we are necessarily reliant on other people for our understanding of ourselves. Garcin's sin cannot simply be seeing himself through the eyes of others, but must be something that makes him overly dependent on doing this.

Despite her lack of progress, Estelle's troubles parallel Garcin's in an important way, which suggests that they share a basic cardinal sin that is manifest in their other activities. Both characters are primarily concerned with the kind of people that they are, though for Garcin this is about being courageous where for Estelle it is about being beautiful. Garcin sees himself in terms of objective psychological properties that define him and his place in the world, Estelle sees herself similarly but in terms of physical properties. Both are therefore operating within the framework of understanding people in the way in which we understand physical objects, as possessing sets of properties that define them and determine their behaviour in given sets of circumstances. They see people as being courageous or beautiful just as they are tall or thin, just as objects are heavy or soft. This is the basic structure of the 'bad faith' that Sartre describes at great length in *Being and Nothingness*. The contrasting truth about human existence is neatly summarised by Inez: one is ultimately nothing but the projects one has chosen to pursue: 'You are –– your life, and nothing else.'[12]

The immediate sins of Garcin and Estelle are, of course, the abominable ways in which they treated the people

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around them during their lives, even though they seem to think of this as merely incidental to the perplexing question of the kind of people they really are. But their terrible behaviour is underpinned by their basic outlook, which we can therefore see as their basic state of existential sin. It is because they see people as having fixed properties that determine their behaviour that they have behaved in these ways, simultaneously trying to live the lives of the courageous or the beautiful while understanding this effort as simply the manifestation of their inner selves. This allows them to see their impacts on other people as the inevitable results of the interaction of their own natures with those of the people around them. And we can see how this attitude towards people renders one overly reliant on the views others have of one. Since objects are public and understood from a variety of perspectives, we take agreement between people to settle the nature of an object. Although we always need the eyes of other people in order to see ourselves, bad faith condemns us to be being reliant on seeing ourselves as this or that and therefore reliant on other people in a way we would not otherwise be.[13]

Estelle and Garcin both present themselves as objects. In the terminology of *Being and Nothingness*, they are engaged in masochism, the project of being seen and treated as a mere thing. Inez is the sadist before whom they prostrate themselves. Garcin finds other people to be hell because the sadist refuses to confirm his self-image and aims to enlist Estelle in this refusal. She threatens not only his self-image, but his preferred picture of humanity and thereby his excuse for his own behaviour. Estelle faces a similar problem, though she is not presented with quite so many challenges to her self-image during the course of the play, so does not make the progress Garcin makes. Through the presentation of ambiguous situations and actions, Garcin's confidence in his outlook is shaken. Across the play it is gradually dawning on him that actions cannot be agreed upon to manifest this or that property, that people are not to be understood in the same way as

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mere objects. His realisation that his hell is other people is a breakthrough, a major step forward. He is beginning to understand his problem.

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Notes

[1] This reading of Sartre is not uncontroversial. I argue for it in my book *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Routledge, 2009), especially chapters 6–10. I intend this discussion of the slogan and the play in which it appears to offer further support for it.

[2] *No Exit*, in *Sartre on Theater*, ed. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka (Quartet Books, 1976), p. 199. This is a transcript of a spoken preface Sartre gave to a recording of the play published by the Deutsche Grammophon Gesellschaft.

[3] See, for example: Gary Cox, *Sartre and Fiction* (Continuum, 2009), pp. 133–139; David Detmer, *Sartre Explained: From Bad Faith to Authenticity* (Open Court, 2008), chapter 4; Benedict O'Donohoe, *Sartre's Theatre: Acts for Life* (Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 72–88; Robert Solomon, *Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts: Experience and Reflection in Camus and Sartre* (Oxford University Press, 2006), chapter 7.

[4] No Exit, p. 199.

[5] These are the titles of published English translations of the text, though the current Penguin Classics edition retains the French title. The play has been performed under a variety of other titles, but these are usually variations on these two basic themes, such as *No Way Out* or *Behind Closed Doors*.

[6] Though a version set in the *Big Brother* house could nicely be entitled *On Camera*.

[7] Solomon points out that the characters might be in purgatory rather than hell, but does not seem to realise that this would make a significant difference to the entire narrative, since he goes on to say that the setting of the play means that 'nothing can happen and no one can ever do anything, ever again' (*Dark Feelings, Grim Thoughts*, p. 178). Sartre himself did say that it was the desire to give the three characters equal exposure, 'to keep them together, as if for eternity', that gave him the idea to 'put them in hell and make each of them the others' torturer' (*No Exit*, p. 199). But it does not follow from this that the final version of the play embodies that idea, rather

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than merely employing it as the way some of the characters view their predicament.

[8] *Huis Clos*, pp. 203–4. Translation by Stuart Gilbert. In Jean-Paul Sartre, *Huis Clos and Other Plays* (Penguin: 2000).

[9] *Huis Clos*, pp. 192, 194, 195.

[10] *Huis Clos*, pp. 198, 193.

[11] *Huis Clos*, pp. 193, 201. Inez taunts Estelle with the idea of hell on p. 194.

[12] *Huis Clos*, p. 221.

[13] I take this to be what Sartre meant when he said that the play portrays the 'living death' of a person 'encrusted in a set of habits and customs' with which they are unhappy but who 'do not even try to change them' and 'therefore continue in many cases to be the victims of judgments passed on them by other people' (*No Exit*, p. 200).

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