

EDITORIAL

Whenever two or more people are in relationship, the same question arises: what are other people there for? And this can be challenging for some people because they have to begin to understand and tolerate the difference and the freedom of the other. In his play *No Exit*, Sartre has one of his characters, Garcin, say that “Hell is other people”. This is often taken wrongly to be Sartre’s own judgment on human relations. In the play, the characters have died and are in hell and are therefore no longer free. They are fixed for eternity and this is what hell is: to be fixed, without freedom, at the mercy of other people’s judgment. Sartre’s own view was that because they have freedom other people may well be irritating, or warm, or exciting, or fascinating or puzzling and so on, but never hell.

The year 2024 has seen the greatest number of countries in the world hold elections in one year. Some of these will be freer than others. In some, any citizen is able to stand for election, in others they will need to belong to a party, but in others some people will find themselves silenced, disenfranchised.

One of the consequences of social media is the number of pseudonymous postings. These enable people not to be accountable for what they say – to have freedom without responsibility. It can be argued that this has promoted a dramatic rise in populism, in extremism, in polarisation across the world. In populism, a simple dramatic solution is put forward by a charismatic leader who claims to be able to solve a problem that is essentially manufactured by the leader himself. There are a number of strands to this strategy. Firstly, a particular group or ideology is identified as being so damaging to the leader’s new order that it must not be allowed a voice. It must be silenced, cancelled – if need be, by force. And, secondly, while the leader claims to want to return power to the electorate they actually intend to claim it for themselves and use it to silence dissent. Accordingly, there is a reduction in human freedom but, whether the silencing is done covertly or overtly, it can be so effective that dissident voices can seem to disappear. But the consequent consensus is an illusion. Existentially, human life thrives on debate, on dialogue, on difference. If everyone thought the same thing, this would be another sort of hell.

As if this was not bad enough there is another, even more toxic, strategy. It has been given the acronym DARVO. This stands for Denial, Attack, and Reversal of Victim and Offender. This an elaboration of the Victim, Persecutor, Rescuer dynamic. In this, the person identifying as Victim, usually the populist leader, claims a kind of moral high ground as martyr that gives them the right to become the Persecutor and allows them to

behave in just the way that they previously criticised. We can see versions of this on an international, national, organisational as well as on a domestic level. In a culture wars scenario where ideas are weaponised, this dynamic leads to a demand for the offending view to be cancelled. Totalitarianism is not the sole province of political systems; there is potential for it to occur wherever there is human discourse. But it is always at odds with the existential principles of dialogue and respect. Existentially this can never be good for humanity.

The personal is political, and national patterns of polarisation and cancellation can then become normalised and replicated in individual and professional relationships. In these cases, genuine dialogue disappears, battle lines are drawn, defensive positions get taken up and simplistic and value laden good/bad judgments start to be seen as acceptable conclusions to so-called debate.

Existentially though, the outcome is the withering of meaningful debate, since all views have become fixed. This is the nearest thing in life to Sartre's vision of hell. What was once a creative and open dynamic system becomes a closed system with a stable instability. The paradox is that while all parties are complicit, they also have responsibility for the solution. Mediation, the subject of one of the papers in this issue, offers a way out of this trap.

While academic discourse is not immune to these polarising trends, for this journal as for many others, the most important and valuable features are those of the editorial independence of individual authors and of a dialogue between differing viewpoints. Superlative adjectives, opinion, innuendo and demands provide no substitute for a coherent argument. The SEA as a whole shares these values and it is a task we as editors share with the contributors to maintain the existential principles of dialogue and respect for difference. We will continue to champion these values. No one person is in a position to ever say, "This is the right way to be" or "You must not believe that". None of us is exempt from having to debate their views. This is an existential obligation.

Each of the papers collected in this edition of the *Journal* makes a contribution to our stated aim to "provide a forum for the expression of views, and the exchange of ideas, amongst those interested in existential-phenomenological analysis and its application to therapeutic practice and everyday life". We open with four papers based on presentations given at the Fifth European Conference for Existential Therapy, held in Istanbul in May 2024. The topics addressed by the authors are wide-ranging, though the fourth, discussing a 'postmodern turn' in the existential therapies finds an echo in the first of our non-conference contributions, which seeks to set out what 'post-existential psychotherapy' might consist of. The papers that follow engage with a wide variety of topics, with several drawing on

Heidegger in innovative ways. Each of the papers offers stimulating perspectives on existential theory and practice, expressed via coherent argumentation. As usual, we conclude with a number of incisive and thought-provoking book reviews which go beyond simple description of the texts they address. We hope that the ideas set out in these papers and reviews will stimulate readers and promote further discussion and thereby contribute to the continued development of existential-phenomenological therapy.

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