

The Reality of Others: Is hell other people?

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Gary Cox has carved out a niche as Sartre's most accessible contemporary UK interpreter. He may be known to readers of this journal as the author of such books as *The Sartre Dictionary*, *Sartre and Fiction* and *How to be an Existentialist or How to Get Real, Get a Grip and Stop Making Excuses*.

In his latest book he takes on Sartre's line about hell being other people. The line itself is from his 1943 play *Huis Clos* which is usually translated as *In Camera* but is also known as *No Exit* or *Behind Closed Doors*. The play premiered in 1944 during the Nazi occupation and Sartre invited Camus to direct it. An English version of the play premiered in London in 1946 with the title *Vicious Circle*. There is also a 1962 film version called *Sinners Go To Hell* that was made without Sartre's knowledge. Since 1943 it has rarely been out of production. Other films and books with similar titles are nothing to do with Sartre's play.

The basic question Sartre is asking is 'What are other people there for and how can we live with them?'. And in order to understand it, Cox suggests rightly, it is important to know the line's context both within the play, in history and also in Sartre's work. Of all its titles, *In Camera* is most faithful to the original *Huis Clos*, which is a French legal term that refers to a legal hearing in private, without public or the press. To recap, in the play, three characters – Garcin, Inez (Inès in the original) and Estelle – unknown to each other in life, meet in a room after they have died. The way the title *No Exit* is appropriate is that there is only an entrance, the room has no windows or mirrors, the lights do not switch off and sleep is not possible. It is furnished in mid-nineteenth century style with only three sofas. The line is spoken by one of the three, Garcin, and goes like this, in French

Alors, c'est ça l'enfer. Je n'aurais jamais cru... Vous vous rappelez: le soufre, le bûcher, le gril... Ah! quelle plaisanterie. Pas besoin de gril: l'enfer, c'est les Autres.

And the usual translation is

So, this is hell. I'd never have believed it. You remember all we were told about the torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone, the 'burning marl'. Old wives' tales! There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is...other people!

Translation is complex because the original always involves meanings that do not exist in the second language. The translator must steer a line between accurately reflecting the original while knowing that this is not possible, and putting his own spin on things, which is inevitable. See Sarah

Richmond's (2022) notes on translating *Being and Nothingness*.

This line departs from the original in a number of ways because of the translator's additions, one of which is 'burning marl', which may have made sense to some audiences in 1946 as a reference to the 'hell' of World War I by the poet John le Gay Brereton but does not now. Another is the phrase 'old wives' tales'. This reference in the English to the 'fire and brimstone' of Old Testament Christianity (again, not so explicit in the French) implies that Garcin believes such stories to be superstitious nonsense. This may well be the case and may be what Sartre thought as well, but it is not what is written. What is written is something more everyday and secular and translates simply as the sarcastic 'What a joke'.

Also, '*les Autres*', with a capital A would imply something far more than the everyday 'other people' of the translation. It refers to other people as 'Other', as different, as not-me, as other freedoms, with all that that implies. But because '*les Autres*' is translated as 'other people', it has an additional implication not just of all other people in an everyday sense, but also Inez and Estelle specifically. If Sartre did indeed mean 'other people', as the translation says, he would have written, as he often does in *Being and Nothingness*, '*les autres*' and the absence of '*personnes*', or even '*gens*' is a conventional contraction. Having said that, if you were watching the play in English and, unless you knew both the script and *Being and Nothingness*, all these double meanings might well pass you by. If you were watching the play in French your understanding would probably be different.

For these and other reasons it is one of the most misunderstood of Sartre's lines, and often by people who ought to know better. It has taken on a life of its own. Hence Cox's book. It is so well known that you can buy it on mugs, socks, t-shirts, badges and the like. So, what does it mean? And what did Sartre himself believe? And is it so?

Although its first performance was in 1944, it was, unlike *The Flies* of 1943, not a direct commentary on the Occupation although its themes of confinement and conflict would have been familiar to its audiences. Simone de Beauvoir said that she learned more about freedom during the Nazi Occupation and the war politicised both her and Sartre. Instead, the play is a dramatisation of a theme of *Being and Nothingness* which was published the year before. Regardless of how often the phrase is used nowadays, by setting the action after death, he is clearly not talking about everyday life. He is not saying that other people are a right pain and the less you have to do with them the better and you would be better off living in a hut on a hillside in the woods so you can see other people coming. He is making a philosophical point that autonomy, agency, possibility, is only for the living because death puts a final stop to our freedom and to our projects. It is when we have to surrender our lives for eternity to the judgment of

those who are still living. We no longer, if we ever did, have any control over what others think. Although Garcin, Inez and Estelle did not previously know each other, the majority of the dialogue is about judging and being judged. People find it hard not to wonder how or if they will be remembered after they die and often try to influence this in various ways.

But, Cox says, another reading possible. Although Garcin and Estelle are concerned with judgment, they do not realise they are being judged. Inez is different, she knows it is happening but appears not to care. While Garcin and Estelle have some doubts amongst their certainty – that they could have been different, Inez has no such doubts about her fixed and true nature. She says, “When I say I’m cruel, I mean I can’t get along without making people suffer”. The name Inez is made from the last two letters of Garcin and the first two of Estelle, reinforcing that her role in the play is different. She is a demon, not human, almost a prosecutor, there to draw Estelle and Garcin both together, apart and out without them knowing. Moreover, this raises the possibility that rather than being in Hell, as Garcin thinks, they are in purgatory, and this means that there is still a chance that, for example, Garcin can choose to stop worrying about controlling what others think. Freedom may not be lost after all. In short, there is a chance to escape his conclusion that “Hell is...other people”, but Garcin does not realise it. People find it hard to live with freedom. This theme was to appear many times in Sartre’s work notably in the slightly later *The Chips Are Down* (1951). It also the subject of Matt Haig’s (2021) *The Midnight Library*.

In live performance there is a convention called the fourth wall. This is the imaginary wall that separates the actors from the audience and allows the audience to become passive observers of the action. Of course, it never works entirely because its purpose is paradoxical; it helps the audience members to be passive observers of the events unfolding at the same time as being active participants in the dilemmas being acted out, privately, *In Camera*, so to speak. We wonder, “What would I do in that situation?”. Sartre’s plays were not written to be read, they were written to be seen and engaged with. In *What is Literature?* (2001), Sartre says the purpose of literature is not to entertain but to challenge and provoke and if it does not do this it is a mere diversion – like most current media. To state the obvious, the characters in any play or book and so on are never real people, they are inventions, they stand for particular kinds of people or stances in particular contexts and, similarly, for groups of people. This is why at the end of a play the actors break through the fourth wall and shatter the spell of the drama and all appear on stage for the first time, out of character and usually holding hands in a line in front of the audience. That was then, this is now. I was, for example, Garcin, I am now just a person, like you. This does not happen in film – we can continue believing that the character

and the actor are the same. In the play, Sartre is setting up a particular situation as a thought experiment and to suggest that a single comment by a single character by any author encapsulates the world view of that author is to misunderstand the nature and purpose of fiction. In this way when we watch Sartre's play, we are being asked, even provoked, to engage and identify with at the same time as being the judge and jury in Garcin, Inez and Estelle's all too typical dilemma.

Another question often asked is, was Sartre expressing a personal view in this famous line? The short answer to the personal version of the question is no and the evidence is clear. It is well-documented that he was a people person, he knew an enormous number of people and spent most of his time in cafés with people. He was a city boy. He liked nothing better than a vigorous discussion about important issues. People were, on balance, exciting.

With respect to whether the line represents Sartre's philosophical position, Cox comes down on the side of no as well, and the reason can be encapsulated by the line that ends the play, again by Garcin, "Well, well, let's get on with it (*"Eh bien, continuons"*)". Sartre did not ever say or mean that other people are hell. Risky, infuriating, necessary and fascinating maybe, but not hell. Which begs the question, OK, so while we still have freedom, how do we get on with it then?

Philosophically, as we know, Sartre is concerned with the way people manage relationships – how people live in a world of others at the same time as being judged by others. We spend a lot of time on reputation management – trying to control what others think. We want to be loved. Much of the emphasis on this point has been on how judgment can constrain freedom. But part of the problem lies in what Sartre means by the word 'judgment'. When he uses the word in *Being and Nothingness* it is not a moral assessment of self or other, it is an ontological relation to the world, perhaps closer to discernment, or even simply perception. Relationships become complicated when we realise that others are not inanimate, they have freedom too. It may be that this perception develops into a negative moral assessment, as in Garcin's case, where one feels controlled by the three dimensions of the 'look', (Adams, 2018: 104) but this is not automatic. While we could say that other people's freedom is a threat, it is only a threat to our solipsism, otherwise it is challenge that we are free to make of what we will.

But staying with the conventional meaning of the word 'judgment' for a moment, not only do some judgments have a beneficial effect on our freedom, but they are also necessary for us to become whole beings. To continue the famous line, ...but they can be heaven too. Sartre wrote about this when he considered human development. He calls the child's need for visual, physical and verbal approval by parents and significant others 'valorisation' and he is unequivocal about this. He says,

This is not a matter of conjecture: a child must have a mandate to live, the parents are the authorities who issue the mandate. A grant of love enjoins him to cross the barrier of the moment – the next moment is awaited, he is already adored there, everything is prepared for his joyful reception; the future appears to him as a vague and gilded cloud. [...] If later on with a little luck he can say: “My life has a purpose, I have found purpose in my life”, it is because the parent’s love [...] has revealed his existence to him as a movement toward an end; he is the conscious arrow that is awakened in mid-flight and discovers, simultaneously, the distant archer, the target, and the intoxication of flight [...] If this happens living will be the passion – in the religious sense – that will transform self-centredness into a gift; experience will be felt as the free exercise of generosity.

(1981: 133-134)

If this does not happen, living will be the nearest thing to hell. The child will turn away from the ‘intoxication of flight’, from the openness and ambiguity of human relationships, to the fixity and certainty of relationships not based on trust.

This is the narcissistic option. When we ‘see’ phenomenologically, we become aware that we are doing the looking and realise moreover that our understanding is always relative to our viewpoint and also that we will always only ever have one viewpoint even though we may remember or imagine others. A complete view is not possible for mortals. Only God sees everything from all viewpoints simultaneously. Only God in an itself-for-itself. And we cannot be God.

Narcissism is the refusal to accept that one’s (current) view is only one view, that one is not the centre of the universe. In its most extreme form, it comes about when the person decides that “I have decided that I am all that I need, and if others are important at all, they are there to meet my needs. Other people cannot be trusted, and I am going to live my life accordingly”.

Relationships for such people are a zero-sum game. If not exactly hell, life is hellish and not just for the narcissist. Relationships are battles and winning is not enough, other people need to be beaten. And when in positions of authority such people reward loyalty and similarity rather than talent and difference. Such a strategy, although effective in the short term, because it is based as it is on individuality, is doomed to failure for two reasons. One, because cooperation will always win out over conflict and two, because sooner or later they will die. No person is immortal.

This applies to all attempts to control others because human freedom and agency can never be controlled and all those who try to do it know this.

Just as individuals can have different and habitual ways of solving the dilemma of what other people are there for then so can cultures and after *Being and Nothingness*, Cox notes, Sartre became gradually more interested in dialectical materialism, the process whereby we shape and become shaped by our environment. This links to narcissism because it can be seen as a cultural as much as a psychological trait. Lasch (1979) suggested that contemporary capitalist models of social organisation based on such things as politics as spectacle, consumerism based on the achievement of personal worth, and fear of ageing, all encouraged cultural narcissism. This is picked up by Cox who reserves a special place in hell for social media because of the ways the virtual world reinforces bogus fantasies of specialness, for example the myth of the sovereign individual, the trivialisation and polarisation of social relations (who can possibly have hundreds of friends?), encourages power without responsibility and gives a home to conspiracy theories. It also provides easy pickings for bottom feeders, grievance archaeologists and students of whataboutery. And it does this because it is an impoverished medium, devoid of subtlety, ambiguity and irony – all the things that make a person-to-person interactions so rich and rewarding.

So, to return to Garcin's final line, How do we get on with it? Having listed all the ways that we can make life hellish, Cox uses his penultimate chapter to talk about all the different ways we can, today, every day, treat other people so that life with others can be rewarding, even heavenly. These are, to be fair, all familiar, but just because they are familiar does not mean that we all do all of them all the time. We need to be reminded of them, because the most obvious things are often the most worthwhile and also the most difficult. It is, after all, our choice what we make relationships into.

In this book, Cox gives a thoroughly coherent and often entertaining interpretation and analysis of Sartre's philosophy of human relations and, although he makes little reference to psychotherapy as such, the implications are clear.

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