**No Exit** – Jean-Paul Sartre

Summary

*No Exit* is a play in which three people, Garcin, Inez and Estelle, find themselves in hell together. Garcin was a womaniser who treated his wife terribly and a coward who was shot for fleeing conscription, Inez was a lesbian (and self-confessed cruel person) who seduced her cousin’s wife, an event which contributed to his death, and Estelle murdered the unwanted baby she conceived with a man she was having an affair with, thereby causing him to commit suicide.

The entire play takes place in a drawing room. The three are cooped up there together and very quickly get on each other’s nerves. They find each other’s company so unbearable that Garcin is led to remark that everyone has it wrong about hell. It is not torture-chambers and fire and brimstone. Rather, he announces at the play’s denouement, “Hell is – other people!”

Philosophy

*No Exit* contains a number of overt references to some important themes in Sartre’s existential philosophy, particularly in relation to what he calls our *Being-for-Others*. Without a closer reading of Sartre’s philosophy (as detailed in *Being and Nothingness*) some of these themes may be misunderstood, most noticeably with regards to the line, “Hell is – other people!”, while others will be overlooked entirely. This section is an attempt to remedy that.

In this section I will outline two major themes (Being for others and bad faith) and two minor ones (action and death) that relate directly to Sartre’s philosophy.

*Being for Others*

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre makes much of the fact that we don’t exist independently and devotes a lot of the text to exploring how this aspect of our being affects us.

The first reference to this theme in *No Exit* is in the fact that there are no mirrors (“looking glasses”) in hell. Estelle remarks how if she can’t see herself in a mirror “I begin to wonder if I really and truly exist.” She would always try to watch herself talking to others because it, “kept me alert, seeing myself as the others saw me…”

We usually think of the Ego or the Self as something internal, intangible and deeply personal. Sartre, on the other hand, thought of it as something external, out there in the world, something *for others*. Inez argues that she is always conscious of herself in her mind, but Estelle replies that, “everything that goes on in one’s own head is so vague”. The idea here is that when others see us, they fix us in their gaze and define us, giving us substance and solidity as they do so.

It’s at this stage in the play that Inez offers to be Estelle’s mirror to help her apply her lipstick. Afterwards, Estelle confesses that she didn’t much like it; “You scare me rather. My reflection in the glass never did that…” This exchange demonstrates one of the central ideas of *No Exit*; that when others look at us, they not only give us substance, they do so in a way which lies outside of our direct control. They bequeath upon us status as a *bona fide* and real object, but in doing so, throw us from our ‘normal’ state of being, that of being for myself, into a new state, where I *am*, but not as I would like to be, rather, I *am* as the other sees me. In a very real sense, the other suddenly has control over who/what I am and I am nothing more than he or she makes me out to be. This realisation is what scares Estelle so.

Garcin also gets in on this theme when he notes with dismay that since he is no longer on Earth to defend himself from those who are accusing him of being a coward, “I’ve left my fate in their hands.” However, he then realises that as long as he can find someone, even just *one* person, to affirm his courage, then that “one person’s faith would save me.” So, he beseeches Estelle to have faith in him. Estelle doesn’t understand what Garcin wants and so affirms that she would love him even if he was a coward which doesn’t satisfy his existential craving to escape this label he feels burdened with thanks to the others back on Earth.

An interesting thing happens next. After Garcin, desperate to escape, rings the bell for the valet and the door opens, he refuses to leave. The reason he gives is that “I couldn’t leave you here, gloating over my defeat, with all those thoughts about me running in your head.” Estelle doesn’t understand what he is asking but Inez does. For that reason, only Inez can save him. Unfortunately, Inez is having none of it and, revelling in her power as the Other, says, “You’re a coward, Garcin, because I wish it… you’re at my mercy.”

This sense of powerlessness and the intrusiveness we feel in the presence of the Other is made clear in the middle of the play when Garcin recommends they just “sit down again quite quietly; we’ll look at the floor and each must try to forget the others are there.” Inez scoffs at this notion; “To forget about the others? How utterly absurd! I *feel* you there, in every pore. Your silence clamors in my ears… you can’t prevent your *being there*.” The mere presence of the Other changes everything and this is another key theme in Sartre. Amongst non-conscious things we can exist quite comfortably, but with the arrival of a conscious Other the environment suddenly takes on a different hue and set of meanings, a set over which we have no control. The world, which used to exist *for me* (grouped and organised according to my own set of meanings) suddenly has another focal point to organise itself around, completely independent of me. Inez captures this perfectly when she says, “…you’re everywhere, and every sound comes to me soiled, because you’ve intercepted it on its way.”

Finally, Garcin, giving voice to one of the central points of Sartre’s philosophy, the power of the Other to take our being and rework it for him or herself, remarks how he feels, “…all those eyes intent on me. Devouring me. What? Only two of you? I thought there were more; many more.” And now the real meaning of the line, “Hell is – other people!”, becomes clear. It is not that other people frustrate our desires or impede/annoy us in some way; rather, hell is other people because they have the power to take away the meaning we try to bestow on ourselves only to give it back as something foreign but something which nevertheless completely defines us and which does so in a way we have no control over.

*Bad Faith*

Bad faith is probably the single most misunderstood aspect of all of Sartre’s philosophy. It is not about being ‘authentic’ or ‘true to oneself’ (an expression that makes no sense in existential terms at all). Rather, it is a deliberate conflation of two things; our transcendence and our facticity. Very briefly, human reality is both transcendence and facticity. The former is apparent in our radically free consciousnesses which, since they are empty and able to take a position on everything they contemplate *must be* removed from those very things. E.g. I think I am a coward, but I cannot *be* a coward in the same way that this table is a table because I am able to posit myself as a coward, that is, I am actually *consciousness of being a coward* hence I can’t *be* a coward through and through. The latter, facticity, refers to unchangeable facts about us, one of which is our past.

Bad faith is then treating my transcendence as if it were facticity and my facticity as if it were transcendence. In other words, it is treating some aspect of my character or self[[1]](#footnote-1) as if it was fixed (for Sartre, we are totally free to determine ourselves in any way we choose) or treating some fixed fact about us (e.g. a past act) as if it was something we were free to deny or reinterpret on a whim.

All three of the characters are in bad faith. Garcin and Estelle both attempt to deny that they have done anything wrong. This is clearly bad faith of the kind in which they try to pass off their facticities (in the form of their pasts) as something transcendent they can freely determine. Garcin is so deep in bad faith that he can’t even determine the motive behind why he acted the way he did. In trying to decide whether he was a coward or not, Estelle asks why he ran away. Garcin says that he had reasons but then agonises, “…were they the real reasons?... I’d thought it all out, and I wanted to make a stand. But was that my real motive?”

Inez’s bad faith is not so clear. She asserts that, “I’m cruel… I can’t get on without making people suffer”, which seems to be the opposite of bad faith; total sincerity or honesty. However, she is treating her transcendence as if it was some unalterable fact about her. She is talking about herself (being cruel) as if she were a cruel thing through and through with no choice in the matter. This is false and constitutes her bad faith.

*Action*

In Sartre’s philosophy, actions are the most important things and only they stand to define us. In *No Exit*, Garcin (in bad faith) is trying to convince Inez that throughout his life he only “aimed at being a real man. A tough, as they say.” How could he then be accounted a coward, he wonders? Inez reminds him that thinking you are, or even trying to be, brave means nothing; “For thirty years you dreamt you were a hero… Then a day came when you were up against it, the red light of real danger – and you took the train to Mexico.” Only our choices and the actions which follow on from them reveal us to ourselves; “It’s what one does, and nothing else, that shows the stuff one’s made of.”

*Death*

For Sartre, death marks an absolute end and to the unique being of the human being. All through its life, human consciousness (despite its most desperate efforts) cannot *be* completely*[[2]](#footnote-2)*. A part of the reason for this is that it is always projecting itself into the future. My goals and desires make up a part of what I am and so I can never fully *be*; part of my being always lies ‘ahead of myself’, i.e. in the future. When I die though, I lose that future, undetermined aspect of myself and my whole life becomes past.

Sartre elucidates this theme in the play when Garcin is complaining that he “died too soon. I wasn’t allowed time to – to do my [courageous] deeds.” Inez responds by saying, “One always dies too soon – or too late. And yet one’s whole life is complete at that moment, with a line drawn neatly under it, ready for the summing up. You are – your life, and nothing else.” In other words, that fluid, undetermined being of consciousness (being-for-itself) has been lost and replaced with the fixed, unalterable being of things (being-in-itself).

1. I use these words with some trepidation but hopefully they will give a sense of what Sartre is talking about. Do not get caught up on the words ‘character’ or ‘self’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Sartre says the for-itself is what it is not and is not what it is. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)