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## TURNING SARTRE’S HELL INTO A TERRESTRIAL PARADISE THROUGH TRANSACTIONAL ANALYSIS AND COACHING<sup>1</sup>

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During interviews with team members (with Philippe) in preparation for a team coaching engagement before the Covid-19 pandemic, some members expressed their satisfaction about working for a reputable company offering a valuable service to society, but others complained about various issues with colleagues and with their management. While the former were grateful about their work circumstances and accepted the inevitable challenges, the latter seemed mired in frustration with a sense of powerlessness and injustice.

During the subsequent team retreat, the satisfied team members were the quickest to solicit feedback from their peers, welcoming the opportunity to learn from others and to grow. The unsatisfied team members made some effort to participate constructively and to open up, but didn’t solicit direct feedback from colleagues about their behaviors and the impact on the team. In their view, progress would be achieved when the organization and upper management were ready to change.

Failing to assume personal responsibility while expecting others to carry the burden of changing our lives for us, is a common problem. However, to what extent are we free to choose our actions and are we really responsible for them? For centuries, philosophers have debated this fundamental question about our human condition. Positions range from hard determinism, by philosophers such as Paul-Henry Thiry (1770), which eliminates human freedom, to the radical freedom at the heart of Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism, which holds that we are responsible for everything we do and are defined by the choices we make.

Sartre’s radical philosophy can be a source of inspiration for coaches who strive to promote personal accountability and who help coachees build and live a life they can truly call their own. His key concepts are outlined below.

Table 1. Key concepts in the existential philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre

Identity	We are what we make of ourselves. We are defined by our actions.
Freedom	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Our choices belong to us; we are free to make them as we see fit.</li> <li>• We have freedom of mind (to imagine what might be) and freedom of action (to try to make it happen).</li> <li>• People can transcend their cultural, social and historical contexts to shape their own identity through choice and action.</li> </ul>
Responsibility	We have total responsibility for our existence. “By creating what we want to be, we create at the same time an image of man as we believe he should be.”
Existential anxiety, “nausea”	Having to find our own meaning generates anguish and anxiety, called by Sartre ‘nausea’.
Bad faith	Those who do not exercise their responsibility have bad faith. They are either “cowards” who lack

	courage and fail to see their personal responsibilities, or “bastards” who commit bad actions in good conscience.
Relationship to others	The way we see ourselves is largely defined by how others see us: “Whatever I feel about myself, the judgment of others enters into it”. We can remain enslaved to these judgments, and suffer one’s own hell in the eyes of others. Alternatively, others’ views can drive us to change.

### Sartre’s hell

Sartre’s core views seem untenable given recent advances in genetics, neurosciences, psychology and sociology. Sartre did not know much, for example, about how the brain functions and how it can limit a person’s possibilities (Studebaker, 2012). He also discounted the importance of unconscious processes revealed by Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis. However, these constitute a form of psychic determinism that undermines our capacity to exercise our freedom. Sartre’s notions of freedom and responsibility do not seem to take these factors into account.

Even if we are unsure about the extent of our free will, not believing that we have individual responsibility in how we act can lead to the death of morality with catastrophic consequences (e.g., the Nazis committing atrocities without feeling responsible: they were “just obeying the orders”).

In Sartre’s play “No Exit” (Sartre, 1947, 1957) three characters (Estelle, Garcin and Inez) are shut in hell and condemned to stay there together forever locked in psychological games. Garcin acts harshly vis-à-vis Estelle, who keeps longing for his love. Estelle goes on refusing Inez’s advances with mockery and contempt, while Inez keeps reminding Garcin that he is a coward (Garcin deserted during the war). The moral and mutual torture of this “drama triangle” (Karpman, 1968) never ends. Everyone is both the persecutor, the victim and rescuer of the others and Garcin concludes that “hell is other people”.

### Terrestrial paradise

So how does this relate to coaching? Despite its limitations, Sartre’s appeal to be responsible for everything we do and exercise our freedom lies at the heart of the coach’s mission.

Sartre argues that “our responsibility engages the entire humanity”. Even this claim may not be as outlandish as it seems. Indeed, failing to recognize our individual responsibility can lead to the “Tragedy of the Commons”, when people consume more than their part of shared resources (including water, energy sources, etc.), each considering that their own actions have a negligible effect on the whole, yet causing together the ultimate collapse of the “commons” (Hardin, 1968; Myers & Twenge, 2019). Conversely, Wangari Maathai, founder of the Greenbelt movement and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, tells the story of a hummingbird taking action against a forest fire, choosing to act despite being mocked by other animals rather than passively watching the forest going down the drain like these other animals. She argues that “doing the best we can” to make a difference is the antidote against feeling overwhelmed and powerless (Maathai, 2007). This attitude is essential to overcome the “diffusion of responsibility” phenomenon (i.e., we tell ourselves that someone else will probably help and, in the end, no one does) (Darley & Latané, 1968).

We contend that the main problem is not that Sartre challenges us to be responsible but rather that he does not provide us with the means to discern psychological obstacles and to overcome them to liberate ourselves.

Coaches can often recognize their coachees (and maybe even themselves) participating in the type of psychological games dramatized in *No Exit* where individuals play shifting roles between persecutor, victim and rescuer.

Among the different psychological approaches that modern coaching draws on (see e.g., Stober & Grant, 2006; Rosinski, 2010), Transactional Analysis (TA), created by Eric Berne (1961, 1964, 1966) has proven to be particularly applicable to coaching (Brock, 2012). Moreover, Karpman's addition of the "drama triangle" (1968) effectively describes the dynamic of Berne's "psychological games" (1964). TA offers simple (but certainly not simplistic!) explanations about human behavior and provides a good complement to Sartre's philosophy in offering concrete ways to empower humans to assume their responsibilities and build constructive relationships.

While Sartre dwells on hellish, toxic relationships between the characters of "*No Exit*", TA and coaching offer a way out by proposing healthier alternatives to communication (Berne, 1964), which culminate with "intimacy" (open, personal and genuine interactions), modelled by effective coaches.

As Berne himself argued, if the characters in Sartre's play had known about Transactional Analysis, this experience could have been inspiring for them (1966). The same could be said about all too many people in real life families, organizations and countries, mired in toxic relationships and sterile conflicts, blaming others and abdicating personal responsibility, whose lives could be transformed with TA-informed coaching.

Replacing destructive interactions with constructive ones, fostering warm and fulfilling relationships means paving the road to happiness. Numerous research findings highlight indeed the primary importance of such positive social relationships and human connections for happiness (Gilbert, 2006; Vaillant, 2012), which is likely the nearest experience we can have of "paradise".

Looking beyond the small group of characters in interaction and taking a broad view, social psychologist Scott Plous (2020) and philosopher Roman Krznaric (2014) notice that the most important societal problems (e.g., war and terrorism, poverty, social injustice, violence and abuse, pollution, destruction of ecosystems and climate change) arise in part from a lack of empathy. They argue that, conversely, these problems "would be greatly reduced if people felt more empathy toward one another, across space and time (i.e., future generations)" and that bringing empathy into our everyday life would "create the revolution of human relationships we so desperately need". Coaches could actively contribute to this revolution by promoting caring and respectful relationships in place of destructive games, not only among their immediate coachees but also within the larger community they impact. Following Wangari Maathai's example, we don't need to be discouraged by the magnitude of the task and the seemingly paltry impact we can have, but instead play our part in bringing us all closer to a terrestrial paradise!

### **TA-informed coaching**

According to TA, we communicate from four main life positions ("I'm not OK, you're OK", "I'm not OK, you're not OK", "I'm OK, you're not OK" and "I'm OK, you're OK") and three ego states (Child, Adult, Parent).<sup>ii</sup>

The word "transaction" in TA refers to the basic unit in every social relationship. When two people come into contact, sooner or later, one of them will show, in a verbal or non-verbal way, that the other's presence is recognized. This constitutes a "transactional stimulus". The other, in turn, will react in a verbal or non-verbal way: "the transactional response". TA depicts these transactions and determines which ego state is in action (Harris, 1973). There are three types of transactions: complementary, crossed and ulterior. The type of

transaction used will determine whether an exchange between two humans will run smoothly or not (Berne, 1961, 1964).

Let us examine how these transactions are exemplified in Sartre's "No Exit".

- *Complementary transactions* happen when the message, sent by a specific component (or "ego state") of one's personality, receives the expected answer (from a specific component of the other's personality). It can happen between any ego state.

Example:

INEZ: Did you suffer much?

ESTELLE: No. I was only half conscious, mostly.

INEZ: What was it?

ESTELLE: Pneumonia.

In this case, the transaction stimulus is destined to Estelle's Adult and her transaction response comes from that activated Adult state.

- *Crossed transactions* happen when the message receives an unexpected answer, addressed to a different ego state than the one which started the stimulus resulting in a blocking of communication.

Example:

INEZ: (...) Are these the real reasons? You reasoned, you did not want to engage lightly. But fear, hatred and all the filth that is hidden are also reasons, come, search, question yourself.<sup>iii</sup>

GARCIN: Shut up! Do you think I've waited for your advice?

The transaction stimulus from Inez is from her Adult (even if there is a Parent component: "question yourself", the Adult dominates here). However, the transaction response comes from Garcin's Parent after his not OK Child has been triggered. He does not answer the legitimate question with his Adult but shuts the communication with his angry rebuttal.

A professional coach could have helped Garcin to step back and to consider healthier responses.

The coach could have asked: "How did you feel then?" (the coach highlighting afterwards that it was human to feel scared under the circumstances), "How could you forgive yourself for having run away?", "How could you accept your vulnerabilities?" (the coach could possibly share their own fallibility),... Eventually, Garcin would likely have realized that he could have replied with his Adult in the following manner (to Inez but most of all to himself): "No, you're right. These are not the main reasons. In truth, I was scared. I regret what I did and if could turn time back, I would stay". When his Adult takes charge by accepting his Child's vulnerability and fallibility, it paves the way for his growth.

- *Ulterior (hidden, covert) transactions* happen when the initial message is double. The real message is disguised in a socially acceptable transaction.

Example:

GARCIN: Wait a bit! I ran a pacifist newspaper. Then war broke out. What was I to do? Everyone was watching me, wondering: "Will he dare?" Well, I dared. I folded my arms and they shot me. Had I done anything wrong?

ESTELLE [laying her hand on his arm]: Wrong? On the contrary. You were—

INEZ [breaks in ironically]: —a hero!

Garcin's transaction stimulus comes from his Adult. Estelle's transaction response also comes from her Adult making the transaction complementary. On the surface, Inez's transaction response also emanates from her Adult. However, the irony in her reply reveals a masked Parent-Child transaction response destined to activate Garcin's not OK Child.

Here again, an experienced professional coach would have spontaneously asked constructive questions to Garcin, such as "How could you make peace with your past?",

“What permissions could you give yourself to stop beating yourself up about something you cannot change?”, etc.

Consequently, rather than being reinforced in his not OK position by Inez’s scathing irony – feeling a coward – Garcin could have forgiven himself with his Nurturing Parent (“You have done the best you could with what you knew at the time.”) and could have replied candidly with his Adult (“I’m not a hero and I’m not proud of what I did. Unfortunately, I cannot change the past but I do not intend to continue to beat myself up.”). He could have said the truth right away without lying and therefore perhaps avoided the unpleasant remark from Inez. Incidentally, she could have responded with her Adult, without judgment but with real coaching questions instead: “Wrong? What do you think? What could you have done differently?” This would have stimulated Garcin’s Adult rather than locking him into his not OK Child.

TA offers simple and yet powerful vocabulary to help coaches and coachees alike discern toxic transactions and replace these with healthier alternatives. This human development approach would have helped our three protagonists escape from hell and engage in OK-OK constructive exchanges instead.

TA shows that we always have choices, that we are not doomed, that the OK-OK position is always accessible to us. Other people are only hell to the extent we join them in psychological games.

It is salutary and probably necessary to challenge people to be fully responsible in their lives and to exercise their freedom. Otherwise, people could find excuses for the atrocities they have committed, arguing that they did not know or were not in charge. However, it may be ultimately ineffective to expect a sense of responsibility from everyone without helping them understand and overcome personal obstacles on the arduous journey to self-aware responsibility. Irvin Yalom (1980) considers freedom as one of the four existential challenges that we all face (alongside death, isolation and meaninglessness) and has devoted his life to devise a psychotherapy approach to help people deal with these complex issues. Yalom’s research shows that simply being told that we are responsible for everything we do is typically not enough to set us free.

When Sartre views Garcin and Estelle as not OK, it may paradoxically undermine his declared pursuit of freedom by making these people feel guiltier but still unable to assume their responsibilities. By contrast, TA would consider that the “coward” was perhaps a person with a not-OK, fearful Child, obeying his repressive Parent. TA would allow him to “decontaminate” his Adult.

Contamination refers to the Adult state fully or partially polluted by the Child or the Parent ego state, for example when someone confuses a belief (which belongs to the Parent state) and a fact, or when a fear goes out of proportion and prevents the person from thinking logically about a situation (the state of frightened Child). Only the autonomous person characterized by an emancipated (i.e., decontaminated) Adult is in a position to make a real choice and to exercise his freedom. A major contribution of Transactional Analysis has been to provide a thorough but still accessible examination of what prevents people from being fully autonomous and, most of all, it offers the means to develop their autonomy.

Both Sartre’s existentialism and TA insist that humans are fully responsible for their actions (Sartre, 1946). Harris wrote: TA “confronts the patient with the fact that he is responsible for what happens in the future no matter what has happened in the past. Moreover, it is enabling persons to change, to establish self-control and self-direction, and to discover the reality of a freedom of choice” (1973). He shows that TA provides the tools to help people change and achieve their purpose.

This outlook is very much needed in today's world where many people still prefer to blame others and attribute their failures to situational factors rather than taking the necessary actions to achieve progress and success, for themselves and for society overall. However, while Sartre confronts us with our responsibilities, TA and coaching empower us to fulfil our essence and to make the world a better place.

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## Suggested Readings

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<sup>i</sup> This article is adapted from Arielle Rosinski's International Baccalaureate Extended Essay "The Application of Transactional Analysis to Jean-Paul Sartre's Existentialism" (2019)

<sup>ii</sup> We refer readers to Eric Berne (1961, 1964, 1975) and Thomas Harris (1973) for these fundamental TA concepts, and to Philippe Rosinski (2003, 2010) for the application of TA to coaching. "I'm not OK, you're OK" is conducive to productive and fulfilling communication, in contrast with the other mental combinations "I'm not OK, you're OK" (submissive Victim), "I'm OK, you're not OK" (Persecutor, Rescuer or rebellious Victim) and "I'm not OK, you're not OK" (hopeless). The ego states constitute centers of internal resources. The Child refers to our emotions, intuitions and sensations. The Adult concerns our logic, objective analysis of facts and information, pros and cons. The Parent is about our values, opinions and beliefs. The Normative Parent gives and enforces rules, which protect but can become damaging (Critical Parent, Persecutor) when the rules are overly strict and constraining. The Nurturing Parent takes care, acting as an enabler but can become harmful (Rescuer) when this behavior is overdone (i.e., preventing the other person from acting and learning from experience).

<sup>iii</sup> The English translation by Stuart Gilbert puts more emphasis on the Critical Parent ("So carry on, Mr. Garcin, and try to be honest with yourself—for once.") than the original French version ("Allons, cherche, interroge-toi."). This is why the translation used here is not from "No Exit" but closer to the original.