

The Roots of Anti-Semitism: A Kafka Tale and a Sartrean Commentary

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ALBERT MEMMI HAS ACUTELY NOTED THAT though the word "Jew" does not appear in Kafka's published works, his diaries reveal his obsession with his Jewish identity.¹ The word may be absent, but the preoccupation with the theme emerges time and again. A case in point is afforded by the short tale, "Community." Accepting Sartre's view of the nature of anti-Semitism, (a view which will be illustrated in this paper), we find here a moving metaphor of the aetiology of Jew-hatred. If an underlying theme of Kafka's stories is the situation of the Jew in the world, and if Sartre has provided an accurate analysis of that situation, then the latter's insights should illuminate the former's meaning. In "Community" the reader senses a definite thematic unity, and yet the story's precise "meaning" remains obscure. I think that a Sartrean interpretation lessens the obscurity. The story is quoted in full below:

Community

We are five friends who once came out of a house, one behind the other. First one came out and stood next to the gate, and then the second came out by the gate, or rather glided as light as a ball of quicksilver, and stood not far from the first. Then the third, then the fourth, and then the fifth. Finally, we all stood in a row. People would openly wonder about us; they would point and say, "Those five have come out of this house." Since then we have lived together, and it would be a peaceful life if a sixth would not continually mix in. He does nothing to us, but he is burdensome to us, and that is doing enough. Why does he force himself into where he is not wanted? We don't know him and don't want to admit him among us. Earlier, we five hadn't known one another and, if you will, even now we don't know one another. But what among us five is possible and will be tolerated, is not possible and will not be tolerated in this sixth. Moreover, we are five and don't wish to be six. And, anyway, what is the sense of this continual togetherness; even among us five it has no sense, but we are already together, and will remain so. But we don't want a new unity, even if it stems from our experience. How can one get all this across to the sixth. Long explanations would practically constitute an admission into our circle. We prefer not to explain and will not admit him. However much he sucks up to us, we push him away with our elbows. But no matter how much we push him away, he comes again.²

1. Albert Memmi *Dominated Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 93.

2. The translation (literal rather than literary) is my own. The German text used is from *Sämtliche Erzählungen*, ed. P. Raabe, (Frankfurt am Main, 1970). I have been unable to find

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Let us look at how this “community” of five comes into being. To begin with, the original commonality of circumstances is minimal. Five people come out of a house, one after another, and stand next to each other by a gate. There is no reason, or at least none is given, why they were in the house or why they stand by the gate. Although, later in the story, the narrator will refer to the group’s togetherness, in the opening lines the group is not described as being “in the house together” or coming “out of the house together” or standing “by the gate together.” Instead, they come out “one behind the other,” “not far from” one another, and finally all stand “in a row.” The significance of this “next to one another” terminology as opposed to describing the five as together, is that the former description avoids constituting a group. “Being behind” and “being not far from” are external relations. They create no true unity among the people whom they relate. The five are not yet taken together. A similar point is made by having each individual come out separately, and come out as a mere number. Sam does not come out and join Joe and Tom but, rather, the third comes to stand by the second who stands not far from the first. The appearance of each person as a numbered individual presents one group as a mere quantitative aggregate. There is no cohesion to this group, no qualitative unity. They are not even an undifferentiated Five yet, but, instead, individuated, although interchangeable, ordinal units; we have the first, second, third, fourth and fifth, but not yet “Five.”

It is after they are standing by the gate that the group’s formative experience occurs. “People would openly wonder about us; they would point and say, ‘Those five have come out of this house.’ Since then we have lived together. . .” It is other people’s looking at them and considering them as a group which creates their group consciousness. They have become what Sartre calls “the Us-object.” The Us-object is made by Third Parties who “cause it to be born by their look.”³ In particular, the Third Parties’ look views the members of the “Us-object” as being in a common situation and, in so doing, makes them aware of their common situation, or, one may even say that, in some sense, creates their common situation. As Sartre points out, any objective situation that people are in can be turned into a common situation by the look of outsiders.

But if some situations thus appear empirically more favorable to the upsurge of the “Us” we must not lose sight of the fact that *every* human situation, since it is an engagement in the midst of others, is experienced as “Us” as soon as a third appears. If I am walking in the street behind this man and see only his back, I have with him the minimum of technical and practical relations which can be conceived. Yet once the third looks at *me*,

an English translation, since the story does not appear in most English Kafka collections. I assume that a translation appears in *The Complete Stories*, ed. Nahum Glatzer (1971), but I cannot be sure because I have not seen that volume.

3. *Being and Nothingness*, tr. by Hazel Barnes, (N.Y.: Washington Square Press, 1956 [Pocket Book, 1971]), p. 544.

looks at the road, looks at the *other*, I am bound to the other by the solidarity of the "Us."⁴

The people notice the simple, almost accidental, fact that "those five have come out of this house," but, by placing the five in this situation together, the people have created "the solidarity of the 'Us'" among the five. Their having come out of the same house may not originally have been of any significance to the five. But as soon as others look at that fact, the five are thrown "together." The people said that the five were from the house and "Since then we have lived together." The five's "living together" is their living of a common situation. From the time of the Third Parties' look they are in the same boat, and so they can date their "togetherness" from the moment of the Third Parties' objectification of their situation.

According to Sartre, this objectification of one's common situation with another, this being turned into an "Us," is an "experience of humiliation and impotence."⁵ Although Kafka gives us no explicit humiliation-connoting words, the image of being "openly wondered" at and pointed at has a humiliating flavor to it. Why should one feel humiliated and impotent when one is constituted as part of an "Us-object?" It is because one is "without recourse."⁶ You cannot protest that you don't know these other four standing by the gate. It is useless to claim that you just happened to be in the house with the other four; that it is really a fact of no importance. The Third Parties' remarking of this fact makes it of some importance, and we are forced to be an Us-object. This being helplessly turned into an individual object within a collectivity, which is also an object, is humiliation, as Sartre sees it.

For no reason, other than that others have decided to see them as such, the five have become a community. And now a sixth wants to join the group. This sixth's wanting to be a part of the group is seen as the sole cause of whatever problems the community has. "It would be a peaceful life" if it weren't for the sixth's continual interference. But right after we are told that it is the sixth's mixing in which causes distress, it is admitted that actually "he does nothing to us." He is simply burdensome. But how is he burdensome if he "does nothing" to the group?

Here we see the social psychological structures that Sartre outlined in *Anti-Semite and Jew*⁷ beginning to manifest themselves. The anti-Semite finds the Jew burdensome and blames all of the nation's problems on him, not for doing anything particularly harmful, but merely for his perceived attempt to assimilate into the community with which the anti-Semite wishes to identify. The form of this identification is pre-logical. The community is almost mystical, held together with bonds of "*blut und*

4. *Ibid.*, p. 543.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 542.

6. *Ibid.*

7. (New York: Schocken Books, 1948).

boden." The group's unity is irrational, and pride is taken in this irrationality. "We are five and don't wish to be six." No reason is given for preferring to be five rather than six. It seems rather arbitrary to insist upon being a group of five and not six. But the arbitrariness is just the point. The security comes from being part of a group whose identity is irrationally stipulated. Once you have been made part of the group, no reason can ever show that you don't really belong. You are simply part of the five. If, unlike the Jew, you are French, it doesn't matter that you speak French abominably, are unfamiliar with the nation's history or literature or that you are a Bordeaux farmer with almost nothing in common with a Parisian worker. You are French and you belong irrevocably to the French nation.

But what constitutes the French nation for the anti-Semite? It is the everpresent Jew who, like the sixth, "tries to force himself into where he is not wanted." The only real activity that the group of five seem to participate in as a group is keeping out the sixth one, and the only reason to keep out the sixth is that he is not one of the five. At first, there is an attempt to explain their refusal of the sixth. "We don't know him and don't want to admit him among us." This parallels the anti-Semite's initial attempt to rationalize his repugnance for the Jews. Jews are too greedy or tactless or ambitious or loud. They are too self reflective or too emotional. When one argues with the anti-Semite and shows his accusations to be unfounded or selectively made it is to no avail. Suppose you show that there are Frenchmen whom he accepts into the nation who are ambitious, loud or self-reflective. Are they to be excluded from the nation? Of course not. For it is not the purported ambition or loudness that is objected to, it is the Jewish ambition and the Jewish loudness that are particularly offensive. And so the narrator, after offering the sixth's unfamiliarity as the reason for his non-acceptance, confesses that "Earlier we hadn't known one another and, if you will, even now we don't know one another." Well, then, if the five do not know one another, what is the sense of pointing out that the sixth is unknown to them? How can the quality of being unknown be relevant to group membership? The answer is that ". . . what among us five is possible and will be tolerated is not possible and will not be tolerated in the sixth." Christian avarice and Jewish avarice are treated differently. What is tolerable in the one is intolerable in the other. Sartre says that it is not any positive qualities or circumstances of the Jews that make the anti-Semite hate Jews. On the contrary, it is his hatred of Jews which makes him hate certain qualities which they have or circumstances that they are in. Sartre notes that nobody would resent it if it turned out that Normandy provided an undue proportion of lawyers for France. However, if there are "too many" Jewish lawyers, the statistic becomes objectionable. "What among us five . . . will be tolerated . . . will not be tolerated in this sixth."

Sartre says that the anti-Semite requires non-rational links with the

French nation. This non-rational linkage is an attempt to form a unity which is not based on experience. If we base our unity on our common language or common history we can have a reasoned togetherness: Kafka's narrator concedes, one might almost say insists, upon this point; "What is the sense of this continual togetherness; even among us five it has no sense, but we are already together and will remain so." Their togetherness is a given. A senseless unjustifiable fact, or, rather, a brute fact that is somehow supposed to be its own justification. The five are already together and so they will remain. Moreover, they will not take the sixth in and create a new unity "even if it stems from our experience."

Here, again, Kafka's story reflects the anti-Semite's refusal to accept a community, a "new unity," that is based on actual common activity. No matter how much the Jew participates in the life of the nation, he is still not a real Frenchman. It makes no difference whether he has fought at Verdun, was a member of the resistance and speaks no language other than French. There is a refusal to make a "new unity" based on common experience. This refusal is important. For if the anti-Semite were to recognize that real unities arise from common activity and a common situation, he would be forced to recognize the true unities and true divisions in society. For Sartre, these true unities and divisions are, primarily, of class. So the anti-Semite seeks a mythical unity to avoid confronting the class-fragmented nature of his society.

In the final lines of the story the narrator declares the community's reluctance to make explanations to the sixth. Once again, the non-rational nature of the exclusion is underlined. There can be no explanation for the exclusion because there are no reasons for it. But there is a further ground to avoid explanations. "Explanations would practically constitute an admission into our circle." How does explaining your rejection of someone from your group amount to admitting him? The admission lies in the recognition of the rejecter's humanity, or, more specifically, his rationality. Explaining something to someone is a species of reasoning *with* him. In reasoning together we form a community of rational beings, a community that ignores the irrational particularities of existence. Hence, Sartre's analysis of a typical Jewish reaction to anti-Semitism. The Jew will everywhere and always try to reason with his fellow beings. He wishes to recognize only the reality of the universal, the rational. The Jews' "passion for the universal [is chosen] in order to fight the particularist conceptions that set them apart."⁸ Through reason, the universally valid form, the Jew veritably creates the "new unity" which the anti-Semite would deny. "The anti-Semite who follows his reasoning becomes his brother, despite his own resistance."⁹ Explanations do constitute an admission to the circle, when the circle is humanity. We don't explain ourselves to animals or things — only to persons.

8. Ibid., p. 111.

9. Ibid., p. 112.

The last line of the tale speaks of the continual need to push away the sixth. And, indeed, the maintenance of the outsider as outsider is a continual need if this group is to survive. For all that this group is, is a "community of five," i.e., that community which excludes the sixth. If the sixth is not around to be actively excluded, if he is not there to be "pushed away," the community falls apart. "Thus the anti-Semite is in the unhappy position of having a vital need for the very enemy he wishes to destroy."¹⁰

If the anti-Semite can create his nation of true Frenchmen only by regarding the Jew as the other, then the Jew's identity as the other is a result of anti-Semitism. Therefore, Sartre concludes that anti-Semitism does not exist because of the otherness of the Jew, but, rather, the Jew's otherness exists as a consequence of anti-Semitism. In other words, just as the look of the people originally made the group (although their continued community depended on exclusion of the sixth), for Sartre the look of the anti-Semite makes the Jew. Jews find themselves, then, in the position of the original five who come from the same house and, from the look of Third Parties, have been forced to live together ever since. Jews may have abandoned Judaism, speak no common language, share different class interests, but as long as they are viewed as "coming from the same house" they must live together and share a common fate. They must live their situation.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

