

7 Seinfeld, Subjectivity, and Sartre

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From its initial airing to its final episode, the sitcom *Seinfeld* captured the hearts and minds of millions of viewers. Though *Seinfeld* purports to be *about nothing*, its remarkable success demonstrates that the program strikes *something* with the viewing public. One thing that *Seinfeld* seems to have hit upon is a truth about friendship. Most people have friends. Friends are individuals with whom we share our time, our dreams, and even our insecurities. Friends are indispensable sources of support in our times of need. They are the ones whose company we seek in times of joy. We cherish our friends in large part because we feel we can be ourselves with them. It is my contention that we not only share ourselves with our friends, but that our *selves* are structured by our friendships. Our friends contribute to making us who we are. Our friends affect us in indelible ways. We would not be the same without them. The sitcom *Seinfeld* illustrates this point clearly. The characters in *Seinfeld* mutually define one another. Neither Jerry, George, Kramer, nor Elaine could be neatly separated out from the mix. They need each other to be who they are.

In the following, I shall argue that *Seinfeld* serves to illustrate the fact that personal identity is established relationally. An analysis of the characters in *Seinfeld* reveals that interactions with others are essential to the consolidation of a self. Throughout history, the self has been a topic of debate. For centuries philosophers have pondered the nature of this odd entity.

Though philosophers have tended to adopt the position that the self has some essential and autonomous core, alternative theories have garnered support recently. These theories deny the essentiality and autonomy of the self. They maintain that the self is something created through intersubjective activity. In an effort to bolster my claims about *Seinfeld* and the role that friends play in the formation of self, I shall draw from existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of subjectivity. I shall argue that what Sartre and *Seinfeld* reveal is that we find our selves in our relations with others. I shall suggest that what *Seinfeld* does more effectively than Sartre is demonstrate the positive role that friends play in identity formation.

Addressing the Skeptics or "Get Out! *Seinfeld* as Philosophy?"

Admittedly, my claims about *Seinfeld* and Sartre may surprise some readers. There are two major reasons why this is the case. The first is obvious. Certainly, some readers will think it a stretch to claim that a sitcom like *Seinfeld* could say anything expressly philosophical about the self. Second, readers familiar with Sartre's work and Sartre scholarship may wonder how a philosopher so suspicious of social relations can be seen as being an advocate of a relational theory of the self. Like Elaine, some readers may respond incredulously, "Get out!!!," when confronted with the claim that *Seinfeld* and Sartre illustrate the philosophic point that the individual needs others to have a fully formed and functional self. Thus, before I turn my attention to elaborating precisely what *Seinfeld* and Sartre can tell us about the self, I would like to try and address these concerns.

First, let me address the question of how a television sitcom like *Seinfeld* could provide information of legitimate philosophic interest. Undoubtedly, some people regard television viewing—particularly the viewing of television sitcoms—as an effort on the part of the individual viewer to find a temporary mental escape from the stresses of ordinary reality. Simply put, some people view sitcoms as thirty-minute respites from everyday life. While these individuals recognize sitcoms as forms of entertainment, they are skeptical with respect to the potential that sitcoms have to educate. Though they would accept that sitcoms

can make us laugh, they would be reluctant to admit that they can also help us learn. Ultimately, the suspicion of the instructive ability of sitcoms rests on two illegitimate assumptions. The first is that we cannot learn from fiction. The second is that levity and learning are mutually exclusive.

The belief that we cannot learn from fiction has been around for centuries. Indeed, ever since Plato declared that exposure to fiction distorted peoples' understanding and corrupted their moral character, philosophers have debated whether fiction could provide any legitimate form of knowledge. Today, the philosophical debate about fiction centers on the question of how works of *fiction* (such as novels, films, sitcoms) could offer individuals *factual* information. Those skeptical of the instructive abilities of fiction argue that it is logically impossible for works about characters or situations that are *not real* to provide individuals with pertinent information about the *real* world.

The problem with the skeptical analysis is twofold. First, it presumes too radical a separation between fact and fiction. Second, it ignores the fact that people have been using stories as a means to educate for hundreds—indeed thousands—of years. Centuries of success ought to count for something. Though there is certainly a difference between fact and fiction, between real people and the ones we see on “Must See TV,” the difference is not so great as to preclude us learning from fictional characters or events. While *unreal* in the obvious physical sense, our favorite fictional characters and events are generally the ones that impress us with their *realness*. Successful fictions resonate with us. They tell us something about reality. Through the characters and situations they present, works of fiction offer us useful insights about human nature, ourselves, or our times.

Here, the characters and situations presented in *Seinfeld* serve as excellent examples. One of the reasons for *Seinfeld's* success is the fact that viewers see a bit of themselves in the sitcom. After all, who doesn't know someone who is crazy like Kramer, or cynical like George? Who hasn't seen themselves in Jerry or Elaine? Whether we like it or not, there are people like Crazy Joe Davola, the Soup Nazi, and Newman in our lives. Like Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine, we know *close-talkers* and *sentence-finishers*. Each of us has had our share of inane experiences and absurd conversations. Most of us have spent more

time than we'd like to admit hanging out in friends' apartments and coffee shops. Albeit in caricatured form, *Seinfeld* offers viewers a reflection of everyday life in the nineties. Like each member of the *Seinfeld* gang, our everyday lives are comprised primarily of events and annoyances we consider too ordinary to inspire much interest. Apart from the occasional momentous event, one could say that our lives are also *about nothing*. *Seinfeld* reminds us how interesting and amusing everyday life can be. It helps restore our appreciation of the commonplace, of the million ordinary moments that together make up our lives. Far from transporting viewers into a field of fantasy, the success of the sitcom *Seinfeld* lies in the way it shows us—and make us smile at—ourselves.

Of course, one of the reasons *Seinfeld* is so successful at conveying its image of life to viewers is its ability to make viewers smile. Though there are still those who would contend that information has to be conveyed in a serious manner in order to be conveyed effectively, this assumption is not only without foundation, it betrays a pernicious intellectual elitism. Whether it offends one's intellectual taste or not, humor is an incredible pedagogical tool. Though serious speaking and writing will always have their place, they are not the only means of getting a message across. In the case of *Seinfeld*, the sitcom's humor suits the subject matter it presents. A comic phenomenology, *Seinfeld* offers its viewers an image of contemporary life. Though we tend to take our lives and ourselves pretty seriously, most of us will admit that life is incredibly funny at times. Each of our lives is filled with an abundance of trips, falls, mishaps and misadventures, embarrassing mis-statements and unforgettable funnies. The sort of life depicted by a sober *Seinfeld* would probably not be one most of us would recognize.

Though it may sound like a whole lot of *yada yada yada* to some, hopefully the contents of the previous paragraphs are enough to convince those skeptical of the instructive ability of fiction that even funny fictions like *Seinfeld* can offer individuals information that is of real interest and significance. However, when considering the initial plausibility of my claims about *Seinfeld*, Sartre and the self, one question remains. The question pertains to Sartre. Admittedly, those familiar with Sartre's work and Sartre criticism may wonder how I can claim that Sartre is

an advocate of a relational theory of the self. Indeed, Sartre's suspicion of social relations and his well-known declaration, "Hell is other people,"¹ would seem to make him an unlikely supporter of the notion that others are essential to the formation of the self. Though Sartre has been pegged by most critics as a dualist whose ontology preserves an essentialist understanding of the self, these interpretations result from misunderstanding Sartre's definition of consciousness and the nature of his distinction between consciousness and the world.

Sartre on the Subject

Until recently, essentialist understandings of the self were the norm in philosophy. Indeed, some of the most famous figures in philosophy have asserted that there is some essential or core self. For centuries, the tendency in philosophy has been to characterize the self as something independent of experience, unaffected by others, and impervious to material influence. However, as a result of the increasing amount of evidence supplied by research in the physical and social sciences, philosophers have begun to alter their understanding of the self. More and more, philosophers have come to regard personal identity as something that depends upon a host of experiential factors. Instead of seeing the self as an essential and autonomous entity, an increasing number of philosophers have come to regard subjectivity as something that emerges within a social and historical framework.

Sartre can be seen as a representative of this sort of relational theory of the self. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre offers his understanding of existence in exacting detail. One of the most important claims that Sartre makes in this text is that there is a radical distinction between consciousness and the world of which it is aware. Unfortunately, this claim has led many of Sartre's critics to assert that an essentialist understanding of the self is implicit in Sartre's ontology. These critics argue that by distinguishing consciousness from the world of experience, Sartre has established an essential, nonexperiential, and nonre-

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*, in *No Exit and The Flies* (New York: Knopf, 1954), p. 61.

lational basis for the self. The problem with this analysis is that while Sartre does think it necessary to recognize a distinction between consciousness and the world, it does not follow from this that he has committed himself to an essentialist conception of the subject. Instead, when one analyzes Sartre's theory of consciousness and how it relates to subjectivity carefully, it becomes apparent that he could advocate nothing other than a relational conception of the self.

The theory of consciousness that Sartre offers in *Being and Nothingness* is not particularly easy to understand. It is a conceptual masterpiece, but it is also replete with complex terminology and cast in nearly impenetrable prose. Since its publication in 1943, it has inspired as much frustration as fascination. Without question, what has confounded Sartre's readers the most is his claim that consciousness is a nothingness. Certainly, this claim seems odd. Consciousness is something we experience. It is something we have. It does not seem to make sense to say that consciousness is nothing. Ultimately, Sartre uses the term nothingness to describe consciousness because he feels that this particular term is able to capture several important phenomenological features of our awareness.

The main thing that the term nothingness does is draw our attention to the difference that exists between consciousness and its objects. According to Sartre, there is a necessary gap between consciousness and the world. He asserts that if we examine consciousness carefully we find that consciousness is predicated on a subject/object distinction. Simply put, Sartre argues that in order for *consciousness of* a particular object to exist, consciousness *must not be* that object. In the same way that the eye is separate from what it sees, Sartre argues that consciousness must be separate from its objects in order to have awareness of them. Since all *beings* or existing things are potential objects of consciousness, Sartre sees it necessary to characterize consciousness metaphorically as a *non-being*, or nothingness.

A second reason that Sartre uses the term nothingness to describe consciousness is because consciousness is not a *thing* in the way that chairs and tables are. Unlike most *things*, consciousness is notoriously difficult to grasp. It is elusive. It isn't something that we can get our hands on in the way we can get our hands on a ball or a book. With the term nothingness, Sartre

makes the paradoxical nature of consciousness clear. Though it is consciousness that gives us an awareness of things in the world, consciousness itself has *no-thingness*. By utilizing the term nothingness, Sartre is able to convey the unique intangibility of consciousness more effectively.

The final—and for our purposes most important—reason that Sartre uses the term nothingness to characterize consciousness is to make it clear that consciousness is neither an indication of, nor synonymous with, an essential or otherworldly self. Though Sartre thinks it necessary to recognize that a gap exists between consciousness and the world of experience, the separation that he identifies is simply the distance necessary for awareness. It should not be taken as a suggestion that consciousness is some essential entity. For Sartre, consciousness is something that exists in the world. He utilizes the term nothingness in connection with consciousness to emphasize that consciousness is *not something* that exists in a realm apart from experience. In Sartre's opinion, the world of experience is all that there is. There is nothing outside existence, no essences, no other realms.

Ironically, though one of the main reasons that Sartre characterizes consciousness as a nothingness is to reinforce his belief that consciousness is *nothing* other than the awareness that a concrete individual has of the world, this is not how he is interpreted normally. Instead, in most of the secondary literature, critics have taken Sartre's claim that consciousness is a nothingness to mean that consciousness is independent of the world of experience and equivalent to an essential self. However, a careful analysis shows these assessments to be inaccurate.

Throughout *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre makes it clear that consciousness is situated. Far from being an autonomous free-floating entity, Sartre asserts that consciousness is inseparable from "its situation."² He indicates that consciousness occurs exclusively in the world and states explicitly that consciousness can only occur in connection with a living body.

Sartre also asserts in *Being and Nothingness* that there is no such thing as an essential self. Though he acknowledges that

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956), p. 702. Further references to this work will be indicated in parentheses by *BN* accompanied by page numbers.

such things as selves exist, he finds the idea of an essential subject so implausible that he devotes the whole of *Transcendence of the Ego* to refuting the existence of such an entity. According to Sartre, a self is something that an individual develops through the course of her experience. It neither precedes the individual, nor persists after her death. It is linked, but not equivalent to consciousness. Consciousness is a necessary condition for the self's emergence, but consciousness alone is not sufficient to establish it. As Sartre explains, consciousness cannot be equated with identity because all that consciousness *is* is bare experiential awareness. It is *nothing* other than the awareness that the individual has of the world. It is *nothing* like what we call a self.

In order to have a self, Sartre asserts that the individual needs others. He contends that corporeal and linguistic interactions with others "[are] the necessary condition of all thought which I would attempt to form concerning myself" (*BN*, p. 362). In Sartre's estimation, personal identity is not something that exists independent of others. Rather, it is something that emerges within a social context.

The reason that the consolidation of self requires the input of others is because the individual is incapable of developing an objective sense of herself without assistance. Ultimately, a self is an idea, a concept that is formulated reflexively. What it means to have a self is to possess a sense of oneself as an object, or thing. To have a self is to apprehend oneself as an entity with concrete characteristics, definitive aims and aversions. A sense of self is essential to the individual because it makes it possible for the individual to make informed choices. Imagine trying to make a decision about a career if one had no sense of self, no sense of personal aptitudes and interests, no sense of personal dislikes and incapacities. It would be impossible. A sense of self guides an individual in her decision-making. Though individuals need selves, they cannot develop them in isolation. According to Sartre, individuals cannot develop selves independently because the consciousness that enlivens their corporeal frames resists objectification.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre emphasizes that consciousness is not a thing. Instead, he indicates that consciousness's ability to afford awareness *of* things stems from the fact that it is noncoincidental with them. Simply put, consciousness's "seeing" is predicated on separation from the "seen." The development

of a sense of self demands the presence and participation of others because others are the only ones that can make the individual fully apprehend her objectness. According to Sartre, individuals are unique composites of consciousness and body. Though individuals are not unaware of their object-aspect (for example, their bodies, appearance, and dispositions) in the absence of others, their consciousness is such that it makes them feel subtly but essentially separate from their material nature. This sounds a bit strange, but a moment of reflection confirms this insight. For example, think of the times one has caught the reflection of oneself in a window and felt somehow disconnected from that reflection. Think of the times one has looked at one's hand, or one's face in the mirror, and thought "That is not me." According to Sartre, though consciousness could not exist outside the objective situation of embodiment, it nonetheless cannot help but experience itself as not-object. As such, it is the nature of our consciousness to make us feel not quite coincidental with our embodied experience.

Because of the nature of consciousness, others need to be present in order for an individual to consolidate a sense of self. Sartre states, "the Other accomplishes for us a function of which we are incapable and which nevertheless is incumbent upon us: to see ourselves as we are" (*BN*, p. 463). We need others because it is exclusively through our interactions with them that we come to understand and accept our objective nature. According to Sartre, we don't have selves when we start out. Instead, selves develop reflexively in response to our relations with others. In Sartre's estimation, an individual's sense of self emerges as she assimilates or begins to identify with the roles or characterizations that others have ascribed to her. Sartre asserts that selves are created from the internalization of information that social relations provide. He maintains that our selves are continually influenced and altered by our relationships. According to Sartre, from the time we are small children, we look to others to learn not only about the world, but about ourselves. We search others' eyes and analyze their comments in an effort to glean information about who we are. Sartre believes that our interactions with others are the living mirrors that keep us continually informed of our selves.

Though French philosophers and NBC sitcoms might not seem to have much in common, Sartre and *Seinfeld* offer sur-

prisingly similar accounts of the self. Ultimately, both Sartre and *Seinfeld* demonstrate that personal identity emerges in a relational context. Interestingly, what *Seinfeld* does more effectively than Sartre is show how the particular relationship of friendship serves to influence the formation of self.

***Seinfeld* and the Role Friends Play in the Formation of the Self**

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre presents his theory that interactions with others are essential to the formation of self. Because Sartre's objective is to make a point about the role that others play in identity formation generally, he draws readers' attention to others as a class. He focuses on the influence of others in a general sense, not on the influence of individual others. Obviously however, others are individuals. Though it is true that we need others—in general—to develop selves, there are different types of others, and these types affect the development of self differently. *Seinfeld* illustrates this point and tells us something about the importance of a particular group of others. It informs us of the significance of friends.

As successfully as Sartre, *Seinfeld* reveals that an individual can only develop a self within a social context. The way that *Seinfeld* demonstrates this is by illustrating the inseparability of the identities of individual characters from the network of friends that these characters comprise. When one considers the characters in *Seinfeld*, it hardly makes sense to talk about them as anything but a unit. The identities of Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine are inescapably intertwined. Far from having discrete and impervious selves, the characters on *Seinfeld* define one another. The identities of both the main and supporting characters are structured by their relationships. The removal of any single character would affect the identities of the remaining ones.

The focus of *Seinfeld* is the life of the character/comedian Jerry Seinfeld. However, even occasional viewing reveals that Jerry's life and identity are tied irretrievably to other characters. Virtually every episode makes evident that what Jerry does, and more importantly *who he is*, are inseparable from his social network. In *Seinfeld*, the character Jerry achieves definition through his relationships with other characters. Jerry does not tell view-

ers who he is. He doesn't offer us information about his character through soliloquy. Rather, viewers come to understand Jerry's identity through his associations. Though all Jerry's associations shed some light on his character, his identity is revealed most clearly through his relationships with his friends, George, Kramer, and Elaine. Viewers come to know Jerry primarily through his relations with these individuals. We learn about his insecurities through the divulgences of George. We learn about his anal-retentive streak through his exasperation with the uncontrollable Kramer. We get a sense of what Jerry wants in a woman from his relationship with Elaine. We would know a different—indeed *bizarro*—Jerry, if any of these characters were to change.

Like Jerry, the identities of the other characters in *Seinfeld* are determined in and through their relations with others. We discover who George, Kramer, and Elaine are as individuals through their joint escapades and their run-ins with secondary characters such as Puddy, Mr. Pitt, and Poppie. Most viewers would attest that Elaine would not be Elaine if she wasn't browbeating George and pussyfooting around Peterman. Likewise, Kramer wouldn't be Kramer if he did not fling himself continually into Jerry's kitchen and then pilfer unapologetically from it. George would be a different George if he stopped whining to Jerry and took up with a new crew of friends. The identities of each character in *Seinfeld* are tied irrevocably to every other. We apprehend them as individuals by virtue of their relations.

Interestingly, the characters in *Seinfeld* seem to recognize that their identities are connected to others. Thus, not only do the characters' relationships with one another illustrate the fact that personal identity emerges and operates within a social framework, the characters themselves seem aware of it. Their persistent concern about what others will think reveals a certain level of recognition that their selves are mutable, socially susceptible entities. As many of us already have done, the characters in *Seinfeld* recognize that the way that they think of themselves is affected continually by what others say and do. It is this insight that motivates Jerry's concern about getting pegged for "a pick," ("The Pick") and George's anxiety that his dad might market "the Manssier" ("The Doorman"). Though these could be seen as minor incidents, Jerry and George take them quite seriously. They take them seriously because both

characters are aware that their selves can be sullied by the unfortunate public foray of finger into nose, or by an association with unconventional men's undergarments.

In addition to illustrating that individuals' identities are linked inescapably to others, *Seinfeld* also reveals that individuals' identities are influenced most concretely by those who are close to them. Specifically, the main characters in *Seinfeld* illustrate that friendships exert a powerful effect on an individual's sense of self. Like most sitcoms, *Seinfeld* has both main and minor characters. The main characters in *Seinfeld* are a group of close friends. Indeed, Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine are about as close as friends can be. Though many of the sitcom's minor characters are friendly acquaintances of the main ones, they are not friends in the way that the four main characters are. Even the intimacy that exists between the main characters and their various love interests never approximates the closeness that Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine have with one another.

As most viewers are aware, Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine are inseparable. Despite their persistent sparring with one another and their sometimes scathing sarcasm, it is obvious that these four characters care about and depend on each other. Whatever other associations and commitments Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine might have, it is clear that their first loyalty is to their joint friendship. Whether it means Kramer posing as Elaine's lover ("The Wallet") or George agreeing to assist Jerry with the impossible roommate switch ("The Switch"), whatever the situation, these four always come through for each other. Though typically not without comment, they put up with each other's oddities. Episode after episode reveals that they'd rather be together than with anyone else.

The friendship that exists between Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine binds them together in a deep and unique way. It sets them apart from other characters. Newman, for example, will forever be an outsider (a fact with which actor Wayne Knight had to reconcile himself). It causes their relationships with one another to be qualitatively different from the ones they have with other individuals. One interesting thing that the closeness between the main characters does is intensify the effect that they have on each others' identities. It makes them more influential with one another when it comes to matters of the self. In *Seinfeld*, we see repeatedly that Jerry, George, Kramer, and

Elaine are affected more by one another, than they are by other individuals. Though they are certainly concerned about and influenced greatly by what others think of them, what matters to them most is their standing with their friends. When it comes down to questions of their selves, what matters most to Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine are the assessments of the other members of the fabulous four.

Of course, this is not really surprising. Most of us would admit that we value the opinion of our friends more than the opinion of some stranger off the street. This is true especially when it's a question of who we think can offer the best account of our character. Unlike strangers or occasional acquaintances, we know our friends and they know us. Indeed, friends tend to know each other better than anyone else. It is my contention that friends know each other better because of the sort of relationship they have. Our friends know us so well not only because we disclose our identities more fully to them, but also because our identities are more closely linked to our friends. Though we have usually developed a sense of self by the time we enter into most of our friendships, once they are entered into these friendships affect—and typically alter—that understanding.

Like other close relationships, friendship is a relation that exerts a special influence on the self. This relation's unique capacity to affect personal identity results from the level of intimacy it encourages and the security that it offers the individuals involved. Though the effects of friendship on personal identity may not be as dramatic as the effects of the relations that individuals have with their parents or care-givers during their formative years, the friendships that individuals have in childhood and over the course of their lives do serve to shape their selves. As relational theories like Sartre's explain, a sense of self not only emerges within a social framework, it is something that is affected continually by social relations. Though our sense of self tends to achieve an increasing degree of stability as we move toward adulthood, our selves are never fixed. Rather, our selves are always evolving. As we grow and change through the course of our lives, so too does our conception of self. Our selves change subtly but constantly in response to our relations to others and the information these relations provide.

Friendships are especially influential when it comes to the self because we "let ourselves go" with our friends. Unlike in

other situations in which individuals may feel that they need to be on guard or otherwise unforthcoming with respect to personal information, individuals tend to tell and show all to their friends. Individuals are less reserved in their speech and behavior with friends than they are with others generally. Individuals tend to be more open with their friends because they feel safe with them. The open and honest communications that friendships encourage are important to the formation of self because selves are formed relationally. As Sartre argues, a self is an idea that an individual forms reflexively in response to the information she derives from her social relations. Our relations with others allow us to see ourselves. In order to show us ourselves, others need information. Without ample and accurate information, others cannot do that effectively. Without a reasonable degree of openness, the understanding of self that an individual can derive from her relationships is at best a superficial one.

Real friendships however are not superficial. We trust our friends and tend to be open and honest with them. We are able to derive a dependable sense of ourselves from our friendships because we share ourselves more fully with our friends and because we trust the information they offer. Our friendships contribute to the shaping of our selves because of the unique closeness and camaraderie that they promote. Unlike with other individuals, we share our deepest thoughts and dreams with our friends. The trust and closeness implicit in the relation makes it possible for us to tell our friends our most embarrassing secrets. Often without knowing what will result from the activity, we spill our hearts out to our friends. Often to our surprise, the relations we have with our friends make us realize things we never knew about ourselves. The conversations we have with our friends commonly compel individual insight. The unexpected arguments we engage in often expose deeply held personal principles. The experiences we share disclose to us interests and dispositions that were hitherto unknown. Ultimately, giving ourselves over to friendship gives us a fuller sense of ourselves. Friendships inform our sense of self because the journey to self is one of mutual discovery. Selves are forged through our associations with others. The structures of our selves are affected by each successive relation. Friendships influence the shaping of self more than other sorts of relations because we are so deeply invested in them.

The friendship between the main characters in *Seinfeld* illustrates these facts about friendship. The relationship that exists between Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine demonstrates that friends have both an indelible effect on the self and a more powerful effect than other sorts of individuals. Although we can assume that Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine had selves prior to their friendship, it is difficult to imagine what those selves were like. Indeed, the identities of the main characters in *Seinfeld* are so interrelated, we sense that they could not remain intact in isolation. Jerry would be a different Jerry without George, Kramer, and Elaine. Each of the main characters' identities would be altered dramatically by a change in their mutual relation.

Another way that *Seinfeld* helps viewers appreciate the special influence that friends have on personal identity is by illustrating that there is qualitative difference between the friendship that the main characters have and the relationships they have with minor characters. Though minor characters certainly give viewers added insight into the individual natures of Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine, the removal of these characters would not alter our understanding of the main characters in a dramatic way. For example, although Elaine's various romantic relationships give viewers a fuller appreciation of her character, her identity doesn't seem to be altered profoundly by these relationships. She is not changed by these short-lived relationships in the way that she would be by a change in her relationship to Jerry. As episode after episode reveals, minor characters simply don't exert as much influence on the identities of the main characters as the main characters do on one another. Though the assessments of minor characters are often sufficient to prompt a good degree of anxiety and self-doubt, Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine turn unfailingly to one another when they need assurance about their selves. Others may upset their understanding of who they are, but Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine appeal to each other for a decisive ruling.

***No Exit* and *The Vault*: Sartre and *Seinfeld* on the Inescapability of Others**

Ultimately, both *Seinfeld* and Sartre reveal that personal identity emerges exclusively within a social context. Both demonstrate

that our relations with others are essential to the formation of self. However, *Seinfeld* serves to supplement the work of Sartre with what it tells us about friends. Though Sartre admits that selves cannot exist save in relation to others, he is not an especially cheerful advocate of relationalism. Indeed, for someone who offers a relational theory of the self he is surprisingly suspect of social relations. Though Sartre recognizes our need for others, he worries that others often exert an unhealthy influence on the formation of self. He fears that relationships often foster understandings of self that oppress rather than assist individuals in the achievement of their potential.

Sartre's play *No Exit* illustrates his suspicions of others. In *No Exit*, Sartre offers an account of three characters in hell. These characters, Garcin, Inez, and Estelle, are imprisoned together in a room. They are sentenced to stay awake and in that room with one another for eternity. Over the course of the play, it becomes obvious that none of the characters is enjoying the situation into which they have been placed. Instead, the characters all feel anxious, threatened, and oppressed by the presence of the others. They feel as if they are being judged unrelentlessly by their companions and lament that they cannot escape one another's company.

Without question, the picture that Sartre paints in *No Exit* is an unsettling one. It is perhaps more disturbing when one realizes that Sartre intends it to symbolize the human condition. According to Sartre, we are like the characters in *No Exit*. Like them, we cannot escape the fact that we are social beings. Though we might want to, we cannot get away from the fact that we need others in order to have selves. In Sartre's estimation, individuals exist in a position of uncomfortable and inescapable dependency when it comes to the consolidation of self. We can develop a sense of self only in relation to others, but all too often the assessments they offer are shallow stereotypes or demeaning characterizations that fail to recognize our intrinsic capacity for growth and change.

While Sartre's concerns are not without foundation, he seems overly suspicious of social relations. Certainly there are occasions when we feel threatened by others, violated by their gazes, and subject to their unsympathetic appraisals. Unfortunately, we do have interactions with others that have a less than positive influence on our understanding of self. However,

our relationships are not all this way. *Seinfeld* shows us this. Ironically, even though the final episode of *Seinfeld* places the main characters in a situation that is surprisingly similar to the situation that Sartre describes in *No Exit*, it nonetheless succeeds in conveying a different assessment of social relations than the one offered by Sartre. In the same way that *No Exit* expresses Sartre's theory of social relations in a succinct and powerful form, the final episode of *Seinfeld* offers a concise summary of what that sitcom has to say about the effect that others have on the self.

In the spirit of *No Exit*, the last image that viewers have of Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine is the image of them seated together in a small prison cell. The final episode of *Seinfeld* recounts the circumstances of that imprisonment. In the last episode of the sitcom, Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine leave Manhattan to go on a trip. During that trip, they are arrested, put on trial, and imprisoned. The four friends are sentenced to spend a year together in jail for failing to come to the aid of an individual during an assault, thereby violating a local Good Samaritan law. The trial and imprisonment of the main characters encapsulates *Seinfeld's* message regarding both the influence of social relations on the self generally and the particular significance of friends.

During the trial depicted in the last episode of *Seinfeld*, the prosecuting attorney brings witness after witness to testify against Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine. Not surprisingly, the individuals brought to testify against the main characters are secondary characters who were slighted by one or more of the foursome in past episodes, individuals like the old lady Jerry mugged for a marble rye ("The Rye"). In statement after statement, these individuals offer damaging testimony about their relationships to the accused. Interestingly, in addition to helping the prosecution get a conviction, this testimony demonstrates the fact that personal identity emerges in a relational context. Specifically, insofar as the testimony refers to specific interpersonal relations and their effects, it not only illustrates how those relations have influenced the lives and identities of individual witnesses, it also reminds viewers of important events that have helped shape their conception of Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine. The testimony offered in *Seinfeld's* last episode reinforces the point that personal identity cannot be separated from social relations.

Another thing that the final episode of *Seinfeld* does is reiterate how important friends are to the development of self. Although virtually every episode of the sitcom speaks to the significance of friends, the events and images of the last episode are particularly effective in the way they draw our attention to the unique role that friends play in identity formation. In the last episode, two elements serve to confirm the point that friends exert a special influence on the self. They are the events of the trial and the closing image of the foursome in prison.

The trial reinforces the notion that friends are of unique significance to the self through the testimony it offers. Although the bulk of the testimony is from secondary characters, Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine also testify on their own behalf. What is telling about the two sorts of testimony are the different impressions they serve to evoke. Though the testimony of secondary characters convinces the judge and jury that Jerry, George, Kramer and Elaine are insufferable individuals, it doesn't convince viewers. It doesn't convince viewers because viewers have a more intimate understanding of Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine. Unlike secondary characters who know Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine from the outside—perhaps even from one incident—viewers know the foursome from the inside. We know the depth of their friendship and how they relate to one another. We know that while Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine have certainly done bad things, they aren't bad people. Although the testimony offered by secondary characters does say something about Jerry's, George's, Kramer's, and Elaine's characters, viewers know that it doesn't tell the whole story. The trial testimony demonstrates that in order to understand the main characters' identities completely, one needs to consider their friends.

Last but not least, the closing image of the final episode of *Seinfeld* illustrates the special relevance of friends to personal identity. Perhaps more powerfully than anything else, the image of Jerry, George, Kramer, and Elaine in prison solidifies our understanding that friends have an inalterable and inescapable effect on our selves. Where Sartre's message in *No Exit* is that we cannot escape the impact that others in general have on the formation of self, *Seinfeld's* message is more precise. By imprisoning close friends, not complete strangers, *Seinfeld* conveys the point that friends exert a more powerful influence on personal

identity than other individuals. The closing image of *Seinfeld* reveals that of all the others who inform personal identity the ones we really cannot escape are our friends. Where the animosity of the scene in *No Exit* suggests that our dependency on others is oppressive, the friendly chatter emanating from the foursome's cell in the last episode of *Seinfeld* suggests that our reliance on others might not be so bad.

In conclusion, both Sartre and *Seinfeld* reveal that others are essential to the development of self. Both Sartre and *Seinfeld* demonstrate that we discover our identities with others. They reveal that subjectivity is predicated on sociality. What *Seinfeld* does more effectively than Sartre is illustrate the positive role that friends play in the development of personal identity. The sitcom reveals that our friendships affect our selves more deeply than do other sorts of relations. It illustrates that friendship facilitates self-discovery. Instead of fostering apprehension about friendship, *Seinfeld* evokes an appreciation of the security that this relation provides. *Seinfeld* shows how much we depend on our friends for our identity. It makes us appreciate how much we need our friends to be ourselves.