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https://doi.org/10.15788/723023227

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The Inescapability of Bad Faith Instances

By Duncan Gentry

Abstract

Jean-Paul Sartre was a French existentialist whose book "Being and Nothingness" is regarded as one of the most influential and important works in contemporary existentialism and in philosophy as a field. The ontology proposed by Sartre is very problematic due to its ambiguous language. In his writings, he expands on what he calls bad faith, a form of deception that prevents the reconciliation of transcendence and facticity. Sartre says that in order to be outside of bad faith, people must begin to live with authenticity; consequently, living in bad faith could constitute living with what he refers to as "sincerity." I agree with a scholar named Ronald Santoni, in which sincerity must be reconfigured to be understood as "living self-consciously of the fact that one is a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is" (Santoni, 159). Simply put, one must configure sincerity to mean living with "honest self-awareness" (Santoni, 159). This reconfiguration prevents equivocation between two meanings of sincerity while preserving Sartrean terminology, but it still maintains that consciousness is susceptible to bad faith. I suggest reflection as a possibility of limiting the physical appearance of bad faith and elaborate on how the 'unreal' instances of bad faith are inescapable, given Sartrean metaphysics.

The Inescapability of Bad Faith Instances

John Paul Sartre was a French existentialist whose book *Being and Nothingness* is one of the most influential and important books regarding contemporary existentialism and philosophy as a field. Yet the ontology proposed by Sartre is problematic due to some ambiguous usage of language. Within his writings, he expands on what he calls bad faith—a way of deception that prevents the reconciling of transcendence and facticity. Sartre says that, to be outside of bad faith, people must begin to live with authenticity. Consequently, living in bad faith could constitute living with what he refers to as "sincerity." I agree with scholar Ronald Santoni, who argues that sincerity must be reconfigured to be understood as "living self-consciously of the fact that one is a being, which is, what it is not and which is not what it is" ("Bad Faith," 159). To simplify his conception, you must configure sincerity to mean that you live with "honest self awareness" ("Bad Faith," 159). This reconfiguration prevents equivocation between two meanings of sincerity while maintaining Sartrean terminology, but it still maintains that consciousness is susceptible to bad faith. I suggest reflection as a possibility of limiting the physical appearance of bad faith, and elaborate on how 'unreal' instances of bad faith are inescapable given Sartrean metaphysics.

I need to define a few terms that Sartre uses to make the reading somewhat accessible; he uses arguably arbitrary idiosyncratic language. Sartre has three conceptions of being that are applied to different aspects of nature and the things that constitute it. First, "being-in-itself" refers to a notion of non-conscious being applied to non-conscious beings, but one key component is that it does not require any negativity or negation. Simply, it just is. "Being-for-itself" is reserved for conscious beings that have the ability to project possibilities into the future; through destruction of the being-in-itself, being-for-itself is contradictory because it is not what it is and is what it is not. The final form of being expanded upon by Sartre is "being-for-others," a being reserved for conscious existence, and that has the understanding or awareness of its relational capabilities as objectionable to other beings. I exist as an object for you; you exist as an object for me. These conceptions of being will allow Sartre to define instances of bad faith. Bad faith for Sartre is the denial of transcendence and facticity.

What are transcendence and facticity? *Transcendence* is strictly attached and associated with being-for-itself because it refers to a projection of the for-itself in future time space. To use an example, transcendence for a free-solo climber is the understanding of the exercise of freedom to such an extent that they can visualize, or imagine, themselves as the being-in-itself as completing the route they attempt to climb. The climber exercises a notion of free will, which is a necessary condition for being-for-itself, and understands that this aspect of his being, the conscious aspect of himself, can freely decide to exist in future moments. *Facticity*, on the other hand, is the string between being-for-itself and being-in-itself. Facticity allows Sartre to justify beings-for-itself's existence *through* being-in-itself, and it could be considered understanding consciousness through existence. Simply, we are what we are. A free solo climber *is* a free solo climber because they wake up and constitute the attributes and perform that role, as restricted to the time space in which they exist. Facticity is completely time-bound and can only exist in a singular time space, whereas transcendence exists both in the present moment and is projected into future moments. The term use exists only with reference to facticity and transcendence in relation to being-in-itself and being-for-itself; these concepts do not *exist* as independent from beingness. They are non-independent concepts.

Consciousness is a fundamental aspect of ontology and needs further explanation. "Consciousness is translucent for Sartre. That is to say, consciousness is aware of itself, consciousness is consciousness of consciousness, it is a non-thetic self-consciousness" (Santoni, "Bad Faith," 151). Sartre and Santoni use *non-thetic* as referring to a conscious experience, but the agent is not currently attending to that experience.

When living in bad faith, the individual denies the reconciliation of facticity and transcendence; the individual acts in such a way that it denies the being-for-itself and reduces action to "existing in the mode of the in-itself" (Sartre, 98). Sartre gives an insensitive example of how someone exists in this mode, and due to apparent lack of sensitivity. I will provide a new example. Continuing with my climbing examples: a climber intends to solo another route in which they know that about a third of the way up there is an opportunity to bail, climb to the side, and give up. On their ascent, they become fatigued faster than anticipated, and when they reach the opportunity to go off route and climb to safety, they deceive themselves into thinking, "*I must finish. I will only be a real soloist if I complete the route.*" In this example, the soloist has denied themself the freedom of continued existence and has perceived their being-for-itself as a being-in-itself. They have treated for-itself as a fixed object in time that cannot be manipulated in future time space by current decisions. By choosing to identify the existence of themself as a soloist and not the essence of themself, they consequently deceive themself that the string that binds transcendence and facticity does not exist. The moment in time in which they decide to continue is when they live in "bad faith." In every instance, bad faith leads to the conscious being denying both a physical and metaphysical freedom that is forced upon them.

Sartre combats living in bad faith with what he calls "authenticity." *Authenticity*, for Sartre, "is that man should be *for himself* and only what he is—in brief, that he should fully and uniquely be what he *is*" (102). This is quite similar to his definition of being-in-itself, so in order to differentiate between the two, he expands further, positing that a sense of being, due to it being an ideal, does not belong in human-reality, and is a synthetic principle. Participating in bad faith requires that "human-reality is not necessarily what it is, and that it can be what it is not" (102). The distinction between being-in-itself and authenticity is that authenticity is actualized and belongs to "human reality." An example of this differentiation could be that authenticity can be self-constituted and actualized whereas being-in-itself cannot project temporally outside of itself. Being-in-itself is being in a non-conscious reality, and authenticity requires consciousness and appears to us through itself. Being-in-itself: A rock is a rock because it is a rock; it is what it is. Authenticity: A conscious being acknowledging the forced freedom and limitations that constitute their reality.

Sartre has a necessary condition for bad faith; he calls it sincerity. One scholar has critiqued Sartre and claims that he has equivocated two meanings of sincerity: one for his own ontological meanings, and one for the everyday usage of the term. "He seems to be juxtaposing an ordinary-language formulation of sincerity with his own idiosyncratic view of human consciousness" (Santoni, "Bad Faith," 155). Sartre could be doing this for a multitude of reasons. He could be taking advantage of the ambiguity to allow for a more coherent ontology, or he is completely unaware of this equivocation. When Sartre equivocates the term sincerity, he is doing it in reference to his conception of being-in-itself and traditional linguistic usage of his definition without explicitly or implicitly identifying the divergence between the two. Sartre defines sincerity as "to be what one is." But according to Santoni,

"The meaning of 'to be what one is' as intended by ordinary language cannot, prior to investigation, be identified with the meaning of that expression when it is used by Sartre technically either to define the in-itself or to characterize an individual's disingenuous move to objectify or 'tie down' human consciousness. Thus, Sartre's conclusions about sincer-

ity are rooted in an ambiguity and depend on an arbitrary, unjustified translation of an ordinary-language characterization of sincerity ("being what [or who] one is") into the pre-established terms and meanings of his technical phenomenological ontology."("Reconsideration," 143)

Santoni provides a solution to this ambiguity if we are to understand sincerity as "Living self-consciously of the fact that one is a 'being which is what it is not and which is not what it is," understanding this simply as "honest self awareness" ("Bad Faith," 159). This reconfiguration of sincerity prevents equivocation from occurring and still maintains honesty to Sartrean ontology.

Consciousness, to Sartre, is a translucent and non-thetic, as described above; consciousness is consciousness of consciousness. When acting in bad faith it appears as a lie, but "the duality of deceiver and deceived is not present here" (Sartre, 90). When lying to someone about something, it implies that the deceiver knows they are deceiving, but during bad faith this duality of knowledge disappears and the essence of bad faith implies "the unity of a single consciousness" (90). This means that bad faith instances do not come from outside forces, but rather from within consciousness itself; consciousness literally *becomes* bad faith. Now, to avoid this trouble, "many people blithely resort to the unconscious" (91). According to Sartre, this is a futile attempt that I will not elaborate on. Continuing, another necessary condition for the *appearance* of bad faith that I believe exists is *action* in a physical sense. Action is not required in the sense of bad faith's "unreal" attributes, but bad faith only *appears* to us as physical action. The reason action cannot be attributed to the unreal attributes is because consciousness constitutes bad faith, and when evaluating consciousness, the moment bad faith appears to consciousness is the moment that bad faith collapses; whereas in reality, the appearance can exist without the attentiveness to it. Thus, if you want to limit the appearance of bad faith, act less and reflect on the action to ensure it was not in bad faith. The unreal aspect of bad faith is consciousness; when trying to prevent individuals' unreal tendencies toward bad faith, the result is infinite regress. Consciousness is consciousness of consciousness; now, when limiting bad faith instances, your consciousness develops into a singular consciousness, and when trying to be conscious of that consciousness, that prior consciousness becomes the former, and the pattern continues. Because it is also a non-thetic property, once you become aware of the "unreal" instance of bad faith, you are no longer within bad faith; but if you are inattentive to the original instance of the conscious aspects of bad faith the current conscious state will digress into infinite regress. You are unable to escape consciousness's tendencies toward bad faith but are able to escape the appearance of bad faith through periods of reflection that dictate your future actions.



About the Author

Duncan Gentry is a Philosophy student at Montana State University, planning to graduate in December of 2026. In his free time, he enjoys being outside, snowboarding, climbing, reading, and being with friends. Duncan hopes to find a job after graduation, so if you know of anyone hiring, please contact him.

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https://doi.org/10.15788/723023227