

# From Nothingness to Authenticity:

## A Treatment of Sartre's Philosophy

Robert Tarantino

*McGill University*

*"Consciousness is a being the nature of which is to be conscious of the nothingness of its being."*[1]

The fundamental project of this paper is to make clear the above statement; it will be an attempt at understanding the nothingness of being and the role that this plays in Sartre's philosophy. The structure of this project is three-fold: (i) to explain the above statement in relation to both freedom and bad faith, (ii) to analyze the role of bad faith in Sartre's philosophy by coming to an understanding of how and why bad faith is an essential structure of consciousness, and (iii) to evaluate Sartre's position by examining the question of whether or not one can ever escape bad faith. This evaluation will, in turn, lend itself to a critical analysis of bad faith whereupon I will discuss the role of authenticity. I hope to show that while it is possible to escape bad faith, the essential structure of consciousness, as stated in the initial passage, limits one's ability to live an authentic life in the traditional sense. It will become clear that authenticity is possible, within Sartre's work, only by redefining what it means to live an authentic life.

### **I. Consciousness is**

Sartre's passage, used as a starting point for this investigation, purports to define the nature of consciousness. A preliminary analysis of this statement yields a rather simple, yet profound, explanation of this nature. By breaking down the initial passage into its logical components we first retrieve a simple identity claim: consciousness is a being. The second part of the passage qualifies the first by giving a property to the identity claim: a being that is *aware* of its own *nothingness*. We can now understand the initial claim as stating that consciousness is both being and nothingness. This much seems clear.

The initial statement, thus deconstructed, sets up the structure of one's consciousness as being and nothingness. We can see a reciprocal relationship between consciousness and being where consciousness is a being and being is, simply put, just consciousness. It is this structure of consciousness, set up as such, that allows for both freedom and bad faith to follow. The part of this structure that needs elucidation now is the concept of nothingness.

## II. Nothingness, freedom, anguish, and bad faith

Nothingness is first understood as a lacking in consciousness, i.e., that consciousness is empty, that it is not a thing, and therefore we say it is nothingness. Since consciousness is empty it is always consciousness *of* something and, in this sense, it is intentional. Intentionality describes the way in which consciousness seeks to become something by filling itself up with things outside of itself, by tending toward these things. The emptiness of consciousness is important because it means that consciousness cannot be its own motive since it is empty of all content. It is this property of consciousness that allows room for freedom in our lives but freedom understood as having nihilating consequences.

Freedom is a concept that is well understood in relation to anguish. Anguish is fear of my own possibilities and my own freedom in a given situation. Anguish reveals to me my consciousness as freedom by presenting before me the full range of my possibilities. Furthermore, these are all presented as equally possible paths to take and I fear myself in light of this truth. This becomes the basis for freedom as having a nihilating structure, as Sartre says, "freedom gnaws away at my possibles." [2]

In his example of the future, Sartre talks about anguish as experienced by a man who walks along a precipice and confronts his freedom by acknowledging all of the possibilities he has before him (i.e. to continue on walking, to throw himself over the edge, and so on). A decision must be reached and when it is, all of the unchosen possibilities fade away as no longer possible. Thus freedom nihilates my possibilities since I must choose one course of action over the others. Anguish is this moment of fear when you realize your consciousness as freedom, which allows you to grasp the nature of your being as having a nihilating structure: for every choice you make you necessarily nihilate the alternatives.

The structure of consciousness as both being and nothingness is what allows for this anguish. Nothingness, seen as empty consciousness, means that motivation comes from without. On the edge of the precipice my consciousness is filled with my present situation and my future possibilities. Anguish is knowing that I can choose to throw myself over the edge, and this is what presents to me my consciousness as freedom. Nothingness, seen as nihilation, is clear from this example of anguish. When I choose to walk away from the edge I nihilate that alternate possibility of having thrown myself over.

Moreover, freedom has a nihilating structure because it necessitates that a person exist always in the mode of not-being, which Sartre calls a "nihilating structure of temporality." [3] In regard to the future it is clear that I am not the self that I will eventually be. The self that I will eventually be is dependent upon the choices that I make presently. With regard to the past I am no longer the person that I was and I am now a self that I was not a moment ago. Thus, since I can only live in the present, I must by necessity always be a self in the mode of not-being—in the mode of not being what I was and not being what I will become. Thus freedom is seen as being nihilating since it always recreates the person that I am and continually keeps me in a state of not-being. This freedom, revealed to me through anguish, is possible as a consequence of my consciousness, which is both being and nothingness.

Nothingness in the mode of not-being can also be understood in relation to bad faith. Bad faith is described as a sort of self-deception, as anguish-in-order-to-flee-anguish, as an escape from myself. Similar to lying, I hide a truth from myself in an attempt to flee or escape the being that I am and in this sense bad faith is negation turned inward. I am saying "No" to myself in an attempt not to be the being that I am. Sartre calls this "being-in-order-not-to-be"[4]and "a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is."[5]

Bad faith is an essential structure of consciousness because the properties of a person in bad faith are like those of consciousness in general. Moreover, bad faith is essential because it puts the nothingness of consciousness into action. Consciousness has been described as an awareness of its own nothingness and bad faith as an attempt to flee oneself in order not to be. In both cases there is a negation: consciousness in the mode of not-being and bad faith as acting this out in the world. Bad faith is an essential structure of consciousness since it takes the nothingness of consciousness as a starting place for its own escape from itself.

Thus far, Sartre's definition of the nature of consciousness has been deconstructed into both being and nothingness. The structure of consciousness, as such, is what allows for our freedom and our susceptibility of falling into bad faith. *Being* is to be understood as consciousness, which holds the property of being aware of its own nothingness. Nothingness has been shown to take on several forms. First, nothingness refers to consciousness itself as being not-a-thing, as being empty of all content. Consciousness is nothing in that it is wholly made up of things outside of itself—a property which is termed 'intentionality.' Second, nothingness refers to our being (or consciousness) as (i) having a nihilating structure as revealed through the freedom of anguish, and (ii) being in the mode of not-being, viewed through a temporal lens. Bad faith is our response to situations that arise in which we attempt to flee our very being as a way of coping with the world thus presented. Bad faith implies a unified consciousness since I am attempting to lie to myself—it is negation turned inward. Bad faith is essential to the structure of consciousness since it is the acting out of the nothingness inherent within consciousness itself. If we are concerned at all with finding a way to live an authentic life, it is imperative now that we find a way to escape bad faith.

### **III. Escaping Bad Faith**

Knowing that bad faith is a sort of self-deception and a negation in the mode of not-being, it is imperative to consider whether or not one can escape bad faith itself. It seems that if one can escape bad faith they will be authentic because authenticity implies a certain honesty towards oneself and bad faith is quite the opposite. This might, however, imply a contradiction between authenticity and consciousness itself. Since bad faith has been said to be an essential structure of consciousness it implies that consciousness would not be what it is if it were not to have bad faith and it, therefore, seems that authenticity is opposed to consciousness in its most basic form since it is the antithesis of bad faith.

By defining bad faith as an escape from oneself, the question of whether or not we can ever escape bad faith is really a question asking if we can escape ourselves. Since we know that we can indeed escape ourselves through bad faith, it seems as though we can only escape bad faith by being in bad faith. This vicious circle seems highly problematic and certainly destructive, however there is a solution.

The way to escape bad faith is to live in good faith, or to live authentically. It is not clear, however, exactly what is meant by authenticity nor if it is possible to achieve an authentic life within Sartre's existentialist philosophy. It is critical, now, to define what is meant by 'authenticity' and to distinguish it from Sartre's use of 'sincerity'. It will be shown that while authenticity and sincerity are traditionally seen as meaning the same thing, sincerity, according to Sartre, is more closely related to bad faith. This causes problems for our understanding of authenticity.

Authenticity is said to be the antithesis of bad faith. To be authentic implies that it is possible not to be in bad faith, in other words, to escape bad faith. Authenticity is traditionally understood as one living genuinely, being honest to themselves, and so on. Sincerity is conventionally understood as being synonymous with authenticity, as Sartre puts it, "*To be sincere is to be what one is.*"[6] The problem is whether or not 'being what one is' is authenticity or bad faith.

We know that the structure of consciousness is both being and nothingness, a nihilating structure like the nihilating structure of bad faith. Since bad faith is an essential structure of consciousness, since fleeing oneself in bad faith is a necessary consequence of consciousness, it seems as though acting in bad faith is simply being what one is. If this is the case then sincerity is bad faith. If being sincere is simply being in bad faith then sincerity can no longer be synonymous with authenticity if authenticity is the antithesis of bad faith. The most effective example of sincerity that Sartre describes is that of shame and this will be used to better understand how one can escape from bad faith.

Shame is a recognition that I am as the Other sees me with respect to some act of my own volition. (Sartre uses the example of a person looking into a room through a key hole and being spotted by someone else in the hallway).[7] Shame is pre-reflective and it seems to be in the mode of being rather than not-being. In light of the Other I lose my freedom in that I cannot help being seen as an object. Freedom has been said to be nihilating and, in shame, since I lose my freedom, it seems as though a part of the nihilating structure of my being is temporarily lost. I have now become a *something* in the eyes of the Other, I am now filling up the nothingness of another's consciousness. I am something inasmuch as I am being that which I am—I am authentic, for I am no longer in the mode of not-being (bad faith) but rather in the mode of being. I can escape shame by falling into bad faith but since I am attempting here to find an escape from bad faith I will hesitate in falling back and rather stay for a moment in this authentic state. In this case I have now found an escape from bad faith in that I have freely chosen an action that, in light of the Other, constitutes me in such a way that I am authentically being.

*Prima facie* it seems as though I have escaped bad faith by being caught in an act that renders me an object of another's consciousness: a something in the mode of being. My nihilating ability is temporarily lost through a loss of my freedom in capture. I have escaped bad faith, only momentarily, by being caught as what I am. But this method of escape is a *faux pas*. Being what I am has already been defined as sincerity and sincerity, as we know, is nothing more than bad faith itself. The authenticity that is achieved through the look of the Other is really just sincerity—for I don't choose my shame, rather it is thrust upon me. If sincerity is simply being what I am and this occurs primarily through shame (though sincerity is also possible through pride), then my relief from bad faith is momentarily achieved, but it is not authenticity unless authenticity is actually sincerity. It is clear that bad faith can be momentarily suspended in an apparent bout of authenticity (i.e. good faith), but in this case authenticity fulfills Sartre's definition of sincerity (being what one is), which is really just bad faith.

The first attempt at escaping from bad faith proved circular and quite problematic. Escaping bad faith was shown to be an attempt at escaping oneself, which is achieved through bad faith. Moving onto an examination of shame and sincerity, it was hoped that an escape would be possible but it seems as though, once again, we are reduced to finding escape only through bad faith itself. These conclusions have disastrous consequences for authenticity. The project now is to figure out whether or not authenticity is a real possibility for human beings and, if so, how we go about achieving it.

#### **IV. Making Room for Authenticity**

I would like to believe that the structure of my very being allows me to live authentically, yet I fear that by necessity of the nothingness of my being I am limited to living a life primarily in bad faith and that, save moments of clarity, I generally live my life as a lie. It seems that Sartre's philosophy leaves little room for authenticity and this is both problematic and disheartening.

According to Sartre, consciousness is being and nothingness, it is a being that is aware of its own inherent nothingness. Bad faith is an essential structure of my consciousness, meaning that bad faith is inseparable from my consciousness. This implies that my consciousness embodies the properties of bad faith, or in other words, that my consciousness is essentially fleeing from its own being, that it continually tries to escape itself and if it cannot it merely resolves to live itself out as self-deception. The only chance I have to be authentic, within this framework, is to be caught in action by the look of the Other, whereby I lose a part of my freedom and am changed into an object of someone else's consciousness. It has been shown, however, that these moments of authenticity, of good faith, are really just moments of sincerity, which in turn is really just bad faith. I am faced with an unrelenting sense of dread, which whispers quietly into my ear that bad faith is inescapable. But do not let this sense of dread take over your sense of being, for it is possible not to be in bad faith.

First, it is clear from the writings of Sartre that one is not always in bad faith. There are moments of good faith, of cynicism, of anguish, and so on. If one is not in bad faith then there is no need to

escape it. During moments of anguish and moments of shame, bad faith is suspended. In anguish the true nature of your consciousness as freedom is a moment of utter truth, a moment of purity and clarity, that is undoubtedly not self-deception nor inward negation. In moments of shame (or pride) I am no longer existing in the mode of not-being, but rather I am existing in the mode of being. I can escape shame by attempting to fall into bad faith, but for that brief moment I am as the Other wishes to see me, in his or her world, like a deer caught in headlights. So it is possible not to be in bad faith, but what this has to say about authenticity is still unclear.

I want to define authenticity as one being true to him or herself, as being honest with others and with oneself, in a sense, being genuine to the true nature of one's being. Bad faith is opposed to this since it is self-deception. Sartre has defined sincerity as 'being what one is' and this seems to be exactly what I want to call authenticity, but there is a problem since Sartre likens sincerity to bad faith and opposes bad faith with authenticity. While sincerity is compatible with bad faith, authenticity seems not to be.

Bad faith has been shown to be an essential structure of consciousness for consciousness is simply a being that is nothingness—nothingness that is either nihilating or in the mode of not-being. If consciousness and bad faith are both in the mode of not-being, then it would seem that to live contrary to the structure of one's own consciousness (that which entails bad faith), would be inauthentic. Perhaps, then, bad faith is a more authentic way to live since it holds more strictly to the structure of one's consciousness.

Bad faith is, in a sense, living authentically because being in bad faith is adhering to a critical structure of your being. Self-deception seems inauthentic but if you are aware of the nature of your being on a grander scale (i.e. being conscious of and reflective upon the structure of your being, which causes bad faith; a sort of *meta* apprehension of your being), then it would seem as though you have gained some sort of authenticity—some sort of perspective about yourself that allows you to live genuinely whether in bad faith or not. Being aware of and accountable to your own being as a consciousness that is empty and nihilating, and that can and does resort to bad faith, is a genuine grasp of your nature and can be seen as an authentic way to live.

Good faith is not self-deception, but if naïve, is inauthentic in its own right. Living a life of ignorant good faith seems just to be a masked form of bad faith. In some sense a life of authenticity must be chosen or else everyone would be either authentic or inauthentic regardless of their choice to be one or the other. If everyone just *was*, if everyone just existed without ever questioning authenticity or its opposite, and if this was just the way humans were to live, then undoubtedly everyone would be authentically living: everyone would *be* what they *are*. In some sense authenticity must be a choice. I can choose to use bad faith as an escape from my world and from myself, surely I should be able to choose not bad faith, or in other words, choose authenticity.

It is not clear as to how authenticity is accommodated for in Sartre's work. He acknowledges that authenticity is opposed to bad faith, but keeping within this schema makes it hard to find room for authenticity in one's everyday life. It can be said that authenticity is only achievable through the look of (or presence of) the Other or in moments of anguish, but these options seem either too infrequent or too out-of-our-hands to be considered a justifiable way to include authenticity into a life.

But perhaps this is the way. Perhaps authenticity is not really what we traditionally believe it to be. If being authentic is simply being honest with oneself or being true to one's own nature, then bad faith might not be an inauthentic way to live given that it too is a natural and derivative aspect of consciousness. Perhaps, then, authenticity is nothing more than an interrelation with Others and a close acceptance of and adherence to the make-up of one's very being, which is simply being and nothingness. It seems as though denying the very structure of your being and its consequences—awareness, nothingness, anguish, freedom, responsibility, bad faith, and good faith—is a far more inauthentic way to live even if it be in bad faith; self-denial is a deception that penetrates far deeper than bad faith ever could.

Room for authenticity, then, is made in two ways. First, a form of authenticity is achieved in times of anguish, shame, and other non bad faith ways. But the problems with this form of authenticity have already been exhausted. The second and more promising way of living authentically is to live in full acknowledgement of the nature of your being. This approach might conflict with Sartre's position, but it seems justified given the defense above. Denial of your own nature seems far more inauthentic, far more self-deceiving, than bad faith itself. Being honest about your being and living in such a way as to account for this, whether you sometimes fall into bad faith or not, is a level of authenticity that can be lived consistently and can be accommodated for in the philosophy of Sartre.

## **V. Concluding**

Regardless of the possibility of authenticity within Sartre's philosophy, it has been shown that the structure of consciousness is indeed both being and nothingness. Furthermore, by examining the concepts of freedom and bad faith we can understand this nothingness as having both a nihilating structure and being a negation in the form of not-being. Bad faith is an essential structure of consciousness as it seeks to be that which it is not by attempting to flee that which it is. It is a negation turned upon its very being. It is possible to escape bad faith in light of the Other by being caught in a pre-reflective act whereupon my freedom is temporarily withheld insofar as I am given as an object to the Other. As well, there are times of anguish and good faith that relieve bad faith. Authenticity is possible but the room for a truly authentic life seems limited and confused in Sartre's philosophy. It just might be that we need to accept bad faith as an authentic way to live.

## Works Cited

Cummin, Robert Denoon (Ed.). *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*. New York: Vintage Books. 1972