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Successfully Lying to Oneself: A Sartrean Perspective

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Sartre rejects the Freudian unconscious and views consciousness as translucent. How then can he claim that we deceive ourselves? It would seem that any lie to ourselves would have to disintegrate beneath the clear light of awareness and to degenerate into cynicism.¹ But I think that Sartre is right; we do deceive ourselves, and I believe that he has presented a generally viable description of how self-deception occurs.

The text in question is the chapter "Bad Faith" in part one of *Being and Nothingness*.² Two things should be noted about the placing of this chapter in the context of the book. First, logically, it depends on the chapter before it, "The Origin of Negation," and second its full significance is not developed until the section "Existential Psychoanalysis" in chapter two of part four. Textually, the significance of this claim reduces to the fact that *Being and Nothingness* is not a collection of essays, but a book with a unified structure. This fact is seldom fully appreciated. There is a specific logic to the book as a whole; it proceeds from the abstract to the concrete in such a way that the concrete is more than an instance of the abstract. True, the work is a phenomenological ontology, and, as such, it aims at descriptions rather than syllogistic deductions. But the descriptions work within a very tightly controlled methodology.

To be precise, Sartre, in *Being and Nothingness*, never says more than is needed to make the specific point in question. This logic is so geared that the phenomenological descriptions pivots about the chapter on the body in part three, chapter two. It is there that we discover that the conscious-

¹ This article originated as a reply to Ronald E. Santoni's paper "The Cynicism of Sartre's 'Bad Faith'," given at the December 1987 meeting of the Eastern APA. Santoni's paper is forthcoming in the *International Philosophical Quarterly*.

² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 47-70. In the references in this article, this work will be cited as *BN*.

ness is not merely embodied, but that it is an organic body. And, more to the point of the present discussion, in part four, the notions of consciousness as prereflective and translucent are qualified by distinguishing between conceptualizing our awareness of an object and our nonthetic apprehension of an "object." I consider this qualification crucial for understanding how it is possible to lie successfully to oneself, and I will return to consider it throughout this paper.

Sartre's text introduces two sets of terminologies, one relating to bad faith, the other to self-deception. The relation of the two sets of terms is somewhat ambiguous. The term 'bad faith' is the more Sartrean term, and it appears to be more general than the term 'self-deception'. The way the chapter unfolds, self-deception is used to explain how bad faith can occur, but the possibility exists that some forms of bad faith are not self-deceptions. I believe that this possibility is developed in works after *Being and Nothingness*, where the social dimension of bad faith is examined, for example, in *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*.³ I think, however, that it is safe to claim that, in the chapter on bad faith, there is a practical identity of bad faith with self-deception.

The chapter opens by referring us back to the earlier chapter on nothingness. Sartre begins: "The human being is not only the being by whom *négalités* are disclosed in the world; he is also the one who can take negative attitudes with respect to himself." (BN, p. 47) In the first chapter, "The Origin of Nothingness," Sartre had, in a very general way, agreed with Heidegger that the fact of making negative judgments needs an ontological foundation, and that this foundation is the human reality.⁴ For the purpose of understanding Sartre's view of self-deception, it is important to understand why Sartre describes consciousness as a nothingness, but it is irrelevant whether he was fair to Heidegger.

³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: George Braziller, 1963). For a brief study of Sartre's study of Genet from the perspective of an authentic attempt to cope with an environment of bad faith, see my *Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Critique of Dialectical Reason' Vol. I, Theory of Practical Ensembles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 36-37 and 113-14. Also see my article "Sartre: On Action and Value," *Man and World* 21 (1988): 417-31.

⁴ For a detailed study of this chapter, see my *Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's 'Being and Nothingness'* (New York: Harper-Row, 1974; reprinted Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 53-77.

“A Nothing About Which Something Can Be Said”⁵

Admittedly, the notion of nothingness strikes one as mystifying. Why speak about consciousness in such a strange way? Actually, I believe that Sartre’s intention is to demystify our notion of consciousness. We tend, since Aristotle, to see consciousness as fitting in with a natural hierarchy of things: minerals, plants, animals, and humans. This hierarchy does indeed place the human reality on top, but only insofar as it possesses added faculties not possessed by the things below. We *are* animals, except that we can also reason. There is thus a natural ordering among things. But what could have established such an ordering? Only a Being or beings beyond Nature. Plato’s Other World thus haunts the Aristotelian world of natures.

Further, to conceive of consciousness as one force among other forces in nature is to claim a perspective on nature as a whole. We mirror nature; that is, we are born into a natural hierarchy of beings, and our intellect acts as a perfect mirror, reflecting back to us nature as it is in itself. Whatever part the active intellect has in the Aristotelian tradition, the distinctive union of knower and known terminates in the passive intellect. The Kantian intellect is, of course, active, but its activity is also natural; the categories not only constitute nature, they are also produced “by nature” and ultimately by God.

Consciousness, for Sartre, is said to be a nihilation in the sense that its active quality is not homogenous with any so-called “force” of nature. Indeed, the nothingness of consciousness constitutes the forces of nature, not merely conceptually, but ontologically. But the notion of self-deception does not require developing how, for Sartre, consciousness can give rise to an objective differentiation and order among things. The point is that a distinctive lack of identity is introduced into consciousness that provides the condition for the possibility of self-deception.

One of the most striking things about Sartre’s notion of being is that he maintains that the principle of identity is synthetic. A is A; a tree is a tree. True, Sartre claims, but this identity is constituted by its relation to consciousness.⁶ Consciousness is consciousness. False, Sartre claims, for who

⁵ This paraphrase of Wittgenstein is taken from the title of Kathleen Wider’s interesting paper “A Nothing About Which Something Can Be Said: Sartre and Wittgenstein on the Self,” forthcoming in *Sartre Alive*, ed. Ronald Aronson and Adrian van den Hoven (Detroit: Wayne State University Press).

⁶ I believe that this interpretation is supported by reading the chapter “The Origin of Nothingness” together with the very difficult chapter three of part two, “Transcendence.” Nevertheless, it is not crucial to my thesis; for what is absolutely clear in *Being and Nothingness* is that the principle of identity does not apply to consciousness. Or, if it does apply, it does so as a constituted phenomenon. Consciousness as a lack of identity of a

or what could constitute its identity over time. Who or what could hold it in existence? God? Perhaps, if he existed; but, I believe that a proper Sartrean answer is that not even God could create a knowing being that would *be* a knowing being; it would always have to be at a distance from itself to be aware of itself. Without this lack of identity, knowledge would collapse into an in-itself of a mechanical force.

Of course, Sartre is not simply denying the logical principle of identity; he is rather drawing our attention to two kinds of reality, conscious and nonconscious. A dualism? Perhaps, but not of the Cartesian type. There is only matter, although for matter to be aware it must lack coincidence with itself. It is indeed possible to reformulate the principle of identity so that it captures this division between a matter that can be aware of itself from matter that simply is. We can say that a consciousness not identical with itself *is* a consciousness not identical with itself. But, for Sartre, the paradoxical way of speaking has the advantage of reminding us of the distinctiveness of conscious matter. Sartre retains the paradox by always keeping together the “is” and “is not” when referring to the human reality. “Yet there is no doubt that I *am* in a sense a café waiter — otherwise could I not just as well call myself a diplomat or a reporter? But if I am one, this can not be in the mode of being in-itself. I am a waiter in the mode of *being what I am not*.” (BN, p. 60)

I take Sartre’s point to be that the very condition for the possibility of not-being a waiter is created simultaneously with the fact of being a waiter; and, in relation to other things of the world, tables, chairs, etc., it is this negative condition that characterizes the human reality. The reference here is not merely to my future possibilities and to the fact that I can change my occupation, but rather, to the ever present possibility of changing, even while I am acting in a chosen role. This waiter who is pleasantly serving me my coffee can suddenly storm out of the cafe, proclaiming “No more of *this!*” — hopefully after he serves me my hot coffee.

self with its own selfhood is examined in some detail by Sartre in chapter one of part two, “The Immediate Structures of the For-itself.” A fuller understanding of how self-deception is possible would have to take into consideration the distinct way the self is a presence to itself, the way it forms its own possibilities, and the way it attempts to achieve its own selfhood. I have only touched upon these here. Further, in self-deception, the temporality of consciousness is different from one on good faith. In good faith, we recognize the past to be sustained in existence by us; in bad faith, we attempt to disown responsibility for the past of our present. “Now the meaning of the past is strictly dependent on my present project. This certainly does not mean that I can make the meaning of my previous acts vary in any way I please; quite the contrary, it means that the fundamental project which I am decides absolutely the meaning which the past which I have to be can have for me and for others.” (BN, p. 498) In self-deception, we deceive ourselves into believing that the past that we sustain is rather an in-itself, something given by nature or accident.

Briefly, bad faith is an attempt to hide both from the responsibility of choosing and sustaining our present lifestyle and from the ever present possibility of changing our lifestyle. Also, I consider, along with Sartre, that the interesting cases of lying to oneself are related to our attempts to hide from our responsibility for our lives; in the concrete, the specific manifestations of these self-deceptions are determined by the social situation in ways that can only be hinted at in this paper. But the important point to keep in mind throughout this discussion is that real negations are not simply created by the individual without any foundation in one's real life. The individual confronts circumstances that limit its choices and condition its real possibilities. This waiter cannot realistically consider becoming the president of France, but he is still a waiter in the sense of not being one, for he can assume other roles in society. This point is relevant for our discussion, for while I shall maintain that the self-deceiver can fudge evidence for his self-deceptive beliefs, it does not follow that anything can serve as evidence.

Nothingness, for Sartre, is thus that distinctive characteristic of human consciousness by which it continually lacks coincidence with itself. The self is constantly seeking to be the self-that-it-would-be. This is not an infinite regress, but an activity of negating that my self is ever present in the world as a table is present. This applies to every aspect of the human reality precisely as it is human. I am indeed, for example, a male; I was born such. Nevertheless, precisely as I am human, my maleness is always in question; I am never a male in the sense that a table is a table. My biological constitution does not characterize the meaning of my being a male. If I choose to be celibate, homosexual, or heterosexual, if I choose to be passionate, indifferent, or rational, in relation to my maleness, I determine, in each case, the meaning of my maleness precisely as it is a human characteristic. We are not concerned here merely with different conceptualizations about the body, but with the different ways the body "exists itself," to use a Sartrean phrase. In each case of maleness, the walk, the gestures, the talk, are all affected, and a good existential psychoanalyst could, in theory, see manifestations of one's sexuality in every aspect of one's life.

But the same nothingness that allows us to structure the meaning of our selfhood prevents this constitution from being a once in a lifetime effort. If I am heterosexual, I am also not identified with my heterosexuality. The principle of identity fails to hold. My maleness is indeed a structure, a web of behavior that I constitute in order to enter into it, and as such, it is relatively stable. But I have not only constituted my maleness by my past behavior, I also now hold this structure in existence. Further, as a consti-

tuted structure, it can be undone by the same efforts that constituted it. It is thus always in question. I always face the possibility of having a different relation to my biological maleness; or, to be more exact, I can always reconstitute the structure of my maleness, for my biological maleness is never an in-itself, which is then accidentally modified by my behavior or conceptualizations. We are here on the level of being.

In the above sense, the term 'nothingness' indicates an "elsewhereness" of consciousness; that is, even as I am engaged in my customary mode of maleness, the possibility of change always exists. This is my anguish, which I can never lose, but which I can attempt to hide from by deceiving myself about my condition. I can claim to *be* heterosexual as a biological constitution; I can attempt to hide from the choice of my sexuality. The condition for this possibility exists, because to be free is have a free relation with our freedom itself. That is, we never face our freedom as a thing; it is the nothingness of consciousness, the elsewhereness of our awareness. I seldom directly face the possibility of changing, but this possibility exists in my everyday behavior. No matter how much I claim that I never had any desire to be a homosexual, this possibility is clearly a viable structure for me; it is my heterosexuality precisely as it can be other than it is even as it is what it is.

Bad faith is simply one of the manifestations of the nothingness of consciousness. Of itself, negation, in a Sartrean context, is not necessarily "negative" in the ordinary sense of the term. Freedom may be a burden, but it is also what distinguishes us from the rest of the things of the world. In this sense, negation is something "positive." Nevertheless, for Sartre, the character of freedom as negation is particularly evident in our attempts to hide from our own freedom and limit unduly the freedom of others. Indeed, to be precise, our first awareness of ourselves is already affected by the way others see us.

My consciousness is not restricted to *envisioning a negatite*. It constitutes itself in its own flesh as the nihilation of a possibility which another human reality projects as its possibility . . . it is as a Not that the slave first apprehends the master, or that the prisoner who is trying to escape sees the guard who is watching him. (BN, 47)

The point is that the practical limits of our freedom arise, to a great extent, from the way others see us. The slave sees himself in the eyes of his master as having a subhumanity. It is this image that he naturally interiorizes and makes his own, even as he may demand to be treated "more humanly."

I have tried to show in these introductory remarks that, given the Sartrean conception of consciousness, the condition for the possibility of self-deception is already established. The two aspects of a Sartrean notion of consciousness that makes self-deception possible is the lack of coinci-

dence of the self with its own selfhood, and the fact that to be aware does not necessarily imply that we have thematized or conceptualized that of which we are aware. I will try to develop both aspects so that the condition for the possibility of lying to oneself is made evident. I am thus only aiming at describing a very abstract state of lying to oneself without bringing into discussion the social conditions that make this lie to oneself rather than some other to be possible. Here I think that I follow Sartre's own procedure.

Translucency and Objectification

In beginning his analysis of bad faith, Sartre says, somewhat indifferently, "Frequently, this is identified with falsehood." (BN, p. 48) In the context of the section, "Existential Psychoanalysis," in chapter two of part four of *Being and Nothingness*, it is clear that one of the advantages of portraying bad faith as a lie to oneself is that it enables Sartre to give an alternative to the Freudian explanation of neurosis and psychosis. I shall come to this shortly. For the present, let us follow Sartre in distinguishing a lie in general from lying to oneself. "The ideal description of the liar would be a cynical consciousness, affirming truth within himself, denying it in his words, and denying that negation as such." (BN, p. 48) Sartre's example makes the meaning of this last phrase clear. The ideal liar not only denies what he believes to be true in words, but he denies that his words are lies. "I'd never want to deceive you! This is true! I swear it!" (BN, p. 48) This ideal cynical lie presents no special problem. Even a substantive notion of the self could handle it, without recourse to splitting the psyche. There is, however, one important point to note. This liar does not succeed in deceiving himself, and the evidence is that his "secondary behavior" is not in line with his lie. That is, once the immediate situation involving the lie is absent, the liar acts in accord with his true convictions.

Lying to oneself, however, is a more difficult phenomenon to explain. It is clear that we can attempt to lie to oneself, but can we succeed? Can we believe our own lies to ourselves, so that our own secondary behavior is determined by our lies. I think that such lies are a part of our experience, and further, I see the Sartrean explanation of why they occur and how they are possible as generally viable.

Sartre sets the stage by admitting that the Freudian explanation makes lying to oneself easy to understand. Granting some sort of division between the id and the ego, one can claim that a "truth" lies hidden in the id that is not known by the ego. I may believe that I suffer from claustrophobia or that I have an inferiority complex. But I am deceived. My real problem, according to Freud, results from some early traumatic experience, probably sexual, that my fragile ego could not handle. This problem

remains repressed in the unconscious. Since I have no privileged access to my unconscious, I am as the “other” in relation to the id, I can easily be deceived. Sartre objects to this Freudian view on the grounds that it divides consciousness, and that the phenomenon of resistance is impossible to comprehend. How can I resist the analyst’s questions when they are getting to the truth, if I do not consciously know the truth?

Sartre returns to discuss Freud, and gives a much more sympathetic study in the section on existential psychoanalysis, and in his later works. What he says at this point about Freud, however, seems valid enough, and it does help focus the issue of how we can lie to ourselves successfully. Sartre’s rejection of Freud, however, confronts us with the problem of understanding how we believe our lies to ourselves. If we reject the unconscious and claim that consciousness is translucent, how can we deceive ourselves?

Part of the paradox is solved by clarifying exactly what Sartre means by calling consciousness “translucent.” Primarily the term is meant to be a rejection of the Cartesian thesis that ideas are the immediate object of knowledge. There is, on the prereflective level, no mediation between knowing and that which is known. I perceive red, not my sensation of red. I perceive Peter coming towards me, not my image of Peter. This rejection of mediation also implies that nothing can be perfectly hidden from consciousness. To be conscious, for Sartre, is to be aware. But, and this is crucial, *this awareness does not have to be a thematic comprehension*. Sartre’s claim that consciousness is translucent does not imply that we always have a correct understanding of that of which we are aware, whether this be our own internal states or external objects. Translucency does not guarantee that I will always correctly conceptualize that of which I am aware. For example, I perceive Peter coming toward me; but I am shocked, it is not Peter. A Sartrean explanation would note that I perceived what was there at that distance from me, namely a Peterlike object. In this particular case I conceptualized the perception of this object erroneously, a state of affairs that could not be corrected if consciousness was always mediated.

I do not mean to imply that our prereflective understanding is always of something indistinct, but only that it does not have to be distinct. Whether distinct or indistinct, on the prereflective level there is no mediation. I am having a conversation with Peter and now I have a clear prereflective awareness that this is Peter with whom I am talking. I do not first know my concept or impression of Peter and compare this with some external object. On the other hand, there is also no mediation, when my prereflective awareness is indistinct. I perceive an indefinite thing in the

mist, and it is still true that consciousness is translucently aware of this indefinite thing. I am not aware of an indefinite perception but my perception is of an indefinite thing.

The important thing to note is that the translucency of consciousness does not guarantee either that something is clearly present in consciousness or that what is in consciousness is correctly conceptualized by us. In relation to Sartre's text, I think that the entire section "Existential Psychoanalysis" would be meaningless if translucency implied that what is translucently present to consciousness is *always* clearly and correctly conceptualized by us.

Translucency, for Sartre, is a natural byproduct of intentionality, and, as such, it is indebted to Husserl. Sartre, however, breaks from Husserl by insisting that intentionality reaches not merely the structure of a thing but its existence. Here again, translucency must be understood correctly. For while existence is not a noumenal quality, it is also not a structure. Existence, for Sartre, is that quality that makes a thing to be *there* independently of me. In human existence, this quality is the elsewhere-ness of consciousness that allows it at any time to become other than it is; it is Peter's friendly voice as it is here and now also capable of denouncing me.

The above discussion implies that we have to be careful when using the term 'object' or 'objective' in relation to prereflective awareness. First, as already indicated, we do not conceptualize or thematize everything of which we are immediately aware. Second, the fact that something is objective in the sense that it is the intentional object of consciousness does not imply either that the objectification, if conceptualized, will be done correctly or unbiasedly. This distinction is particularly relevant in relation to our understanding of ourselves and the others' understanding of us. We can have an "objective" understanding of ourselves in the sense of knowing ourselves as an intentional object, but this understanding may not be 'objective' in the sense of 'unbiased'.⁷ I will attempt to bring out the interplay of these two meanings. Specifically, I will attempt to show we can be in error about our own states of consciousness when nothing is hidden from consciousness. I will then examine how we can lie to ourselves successfully.

Translucency and the Ego

The answer to the question of how we can misunderstand the states of our own consciousness is found in Sartre's view of consciousness as expressed in his early work, *The Transcendence of the Ego*: We encounter our ego *first* as a structure in the world and we then interiorize this structure. Con-

⁷ I am grateful to a reader for this distinction.

sequently, Sartre notes: “My I, in effect, is *no more certain for consciousness than the I of other men*. It is only more intimate.”⁸ Unlike Gabriel Marcel, for example, Sartre insists that we do not have an inner core of our being that the other cannot taint and which is accessible to us in a privileged introspection. Rather, for Sartre, the self is always vulnerable. I know my self as the other knows me. I am not in a privileged position when I attempt to understand myself. True, I have a more intimate awareness of myself, but not a more objective one, in the sense of an unbiased view.

Thus, while Sartre rejects both Freud’s dynamic unconscious and Husserl’s transcendental ego, it does not follow that we always have a clear understanding of our behavior and our own self. There is, for Sartre, no unconscious in the sense of a force that acts on us with apparent motivations of its own. Nor is there a transcendental ego in the sense of an a priori structure of consciousness that predetermines the unity of beliefs and perceptions. All the unity and structure of consciousness comes from that of which we are aware. Nevertheless, this unity of the self, or what Sartre calls ‘the project’, can be understood on many levels, for it is affected by the way others see us and the way we interiorize their perception of us.

This project refers neither to a noumenal self nor to a totality existing apart from our individual acts. Sartre writes:

Thus if I am rowing on the river, I am nothing — either here or in any other world — save this concrete project of rowing. But this project itself inasmuch as it is the totality of my being, expresses my original choice in particular circumstances; it is nothing other than the choice of myself as a totality in these circumstances. (BN, p. 564)

On the ontological level, there is only this concrete act of rowing; but this act is oriented in the world in a special way. If one could properly interpret my bodily movements, the way I am related to fatigue, whether I complain or not about the effort of rowing, how I look at others in the boat or look at the sea about me, one would understand the meaning I am giving to my existence. But this meaning arises from a complex web of relations; it is myself in the midst of the world before others. None of this proves that we always lie successfully to ourselves about the meaning of our acts. We may, at times, be fairly on the mark; we may be mistaken in good faith. But the fact that the I is a transcendent object in the world, the fact that I do not have a privileged knowledge of my states of consciousness does establish the condition for the possibility of lying successfully to oneself.

⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*, translated and annotated with an introduction by Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, The Noonday Press, 1957), p. 104.

This point is crucial and it is worth attempting to restate. On the ontological level, the ego is nothing else than the act I am performing at this time. But this act is very distinctive; it exists in the world differently than the way a table exists. A table simply is what it is; but the act of rowing, for example, is what-it-is and is not what-it-is. This act of rowing *is* my selfhood. At this moment of history, I am this act of rowing. But this act is something that occurs over time, and I am this temporality. My project is nothing else than the way I sustain in existence a certain kind of behavior over time. I am now moving the oars in the water in this way: I really do not want to be doing this rowing; I want rather to impress my companion. I am smiling a smile that is not a smile, rowing with a strained effortlessness, in the face of the other's ambiguous admiration. This game is usually understood as such by both parties; I know the meaning of my effort and I see that the admiration of the other is for my effort to impress and not for my ability at the oars. But this game is acceptable to both of us.

But the situation can be otherwise. I can be here and now deceiving myself about the meaning of my project; or, to be more accurate, a particular human act can be self-deceptive. For example, I am living a false idea of manliness that makes me believe that I am rowing easily and that the other is admiring my rowing. As my body moves over time, I think that I experience a smoothness of my muscles that is simply not there. I believe in my ability, just as I believe in the other's admiration. This self-deception is possible because my I is my interiorization of the way I see myself in the world before others. I see a sparkle in the other's eye that I *choose* to interpret as admiration for my ability at the oars, but which any unbiased observer would recognize as admiration for my effort to impress my companion.

To an unbiased observer, my rowing exhibits a tension that is my effort to sustain an effortlessness that is not present. For me this tension is understood as my effort at rowing. There is, for me, no strain in my smile; there exists, for me, only what I consider to be the natural effort of rowing, and the smile appropriate to such natural exertion. Thus tension is indeed present in a successful self-deception, but it is nothing else than the self-deceptive act itself.⁹

In the chapter "Bad Faith," Sartre has not rejected the insight gained from his earlier work, *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Since I do not have a privileged comprehension of my self, only a more intimate awareness, I can fudge evidence about myself. The value of both my intimate awareness and the other's objective awareness of me are not given as apodictic. I

⁹ I am indebted to another reader for criticisms that led me to bring out this aspect of self-deception.

can make the value of my intimate awareness to count for more than the other's objective understanding of me. Needless to say, I do this by making my intimate awareness to be the true objective one. This is always possible, since the other may indeed be the one to be in bad faith.

Does this mean that anything can count as evidence? Yes and No. A person in good faith seeks critical evidence for beliefs. I believe in good faith that I acted honestly, and I give you my reasons. Let us assume that you are also in good faith, and you see that I bypassed certain important considerations. In good faith, I may indeed admit that I acted precipitously, if not consciously dishonestly. I am at least willing to change or modify my beliefs about myself in the face of new evidence. In bad faith, however, almost anything can count as evidence, although even here we have to be realistic and see the manufactured evidence as at least relating to the belief. For example, what is the evidence for a justified belief in anti-Semitism or that the poor are naturally lazy. There is none; that is, there is no unbiased evidence. And yet there are anti-Semites and people who live in fear and hatred of the poor. These people give reasons for their beliefs, but if every claim is proved wrong, the belief remains as strong as before. Even in bad faith, however, these claims must be apparently relevant qualities about people; for example, that they are too clever.

It is not merely the objects that one believes in that differ in good and bad faith, but it is the faiths or beliefs themselves that differ. The distinction between a critical and an uncritical belief may appear to be one of degree, but we are involved with two radically different attitudes toward the evidence of one's beliefs.

Bad Faith and the Ideal of Faith

The "mechanism" that allows a good and bad faith form of belief can be described partly as follows: The fact that belief is always a question of degree of evidence points to the possibility of a truly justified belief. An ideal of belief emerges, not necessarily explicitly, but as a question that can always be asked about belief. This "ideal belief" would be one that is so justified that we would never have to reevaluate our belief. This ideal is, of course, impossible to achieve, but it can still be taken as the ideal of what a justified belief should be like. It is the *ideal of a perfectly justified belief that bad faith takes as the ideal of good faith; that is, bad faith has a bad-faith view of good faith.*¹⁰ Sartre writes:

The ideal of good faith (to believe what one believes) is, like that of sincerity (to be what one is), an ideal of being-in-itself. Every belief is a belief that falls short; one never wholly believes

¹⁰ I gave a detailed examination of Sartre's ideal of faith in my article, "On the Possibility of Good Faith," *Man and World* 13 (1980): 207-28.

what one believes. Consequently the primitive project of bad faith is only the utilization of this self-destruction of the fact of consciousness. (BN, p. 69)¹¹

For bad faith, good faith should be perfectly justified. But no faith is capable of such justification. Therefore, for *bad faith*, any evidence is as good as any other, and “a peculiar type of evidence appears; *non-persuasive* evidence.” (BN, p. 68)

The uncritical evidence of bad faith is thus seen by the person in bad faith to be as valid as the critical evidence of good faith. Further, bad faith can maintain itself in being without conceptualizing its bad faith, since it sees itself as at least desiring an ideal of faith. The ideal that bad faith seeks is itself in bad faith; it is an attempt to flee the burden of a self seeking to become a selfhood.

Is this attempt to flee freedom successful? Yes and No. Yes, in the sense that the person in bad faith can successfully use freedom against itself, forging an essence that then appears to arise from “nature.” For example, a child may study for its first mathematics examination and fail. The significance of this one failure is clearly ambiguous, but *this* child chooses not to face a world that might condemn its best efforts in mathematics. The child chooses to see its failure as arising from a natural inability to do mathematics, and thus genuine efforts in the future are seen as useless. The subsequent failures resulting from this project confirm the child in the project itself and provide the needed evidence to believe even more firmly in its “nature.” In this respect, the child’s flight from freedom has been successful. But, the tension of a self at odds with itself is present. It may appear as a feigned interest in literature precisely as this is opposed to mathematics and in cavalier remarks about mathematics and science. The self-deception *is* these strained attitudes. This self-deceiver, however, comprehends this strain as the natural attitude a lover of literature has towards mathematics. This misjudgment is not a mere mistake, but the way the self-deception is maintained.

¹¹ I do not think that Sartre’s claim that sincerity is in bad faith presents a special problem for two reasons. First, we do use the term in Sartre’s sense, and second, this use is clearly in bad faith. The sincerity spoken of refers to seeing our way of life not as something chosen, but as given by nature. The person who admits that he is lazy, but does nothing about it is in bad faith. He expects people to take him as he is, but this is not to mean that he has chosen his bad faith. Further, such a person is very particular about the “faults” he picks; he will let us know his faults, and he will not thank us for mentioning the faults that we see in him. One can always attempt to “rehabilitate” the meaning of sincerity. I myself have made such attempts in the works cited here. I believe all such attempts dubious in value. In the final analysis, I believe that we should not need the reflective and thematic assurance that is supposed to come with sincerity. Our actions should indicate our intentions. Of course, sincerity about one’s past as past is not at issue here. I can, of course, admit that I *was* lazy.

Sartre summarizes the main difference between good and bad faith when he writes: "Bad faith does not hold the norms and criteria of truth as they are accepted by the critical thought of good faith." (BN, p. 68) The characteristic of good faith is that it recognizes, either implicitly or explicitly, *that the ideal of faith is in bad faith*.¹² Belief cannot avoid its essential ambiguity; belief is a question of degrees, and cannot be guided in its critical sense by any supposed ideal of belief. How does this good-faith rejection of the need for an ideal of faith manifest itself? It is seen in the fact that good faith always confronts the evidence first, or at least is willing to examine the evidence of its beliefs. The fact that there is no absolute norm does not prevent one in good faith from seeing that there can be a critical difference between having more or less evidence about belief.

A controversial example from Sartre's own life illustrates, I believe, the nature of good faith. Sartre at first defended Russian communism. Between 1952 and 1953 in a series of articles for *Les Temps Modernes* that later became incorporated into *The Communist and the Peace*, Sartre defended his belief in communism, even in the face of communist repression both in Russia and in France. His line of defense is interesting. The question was not some elitist notion of freedom. The French worker, he notes, "wants liberation. But her freedom doesn't resemble yours; and I think that she would gladly do without the freedom of expression of which such fine use is made in the *Salle Gaveau* if she were freed from the throbbing rhythm of the machine."¹³ Sartre also drew attention to the

¹² I am convinced that there are two notions of both good and bad faith operating within *Being and Nothingness*. There is a general sense in which we are all in bad faith. I call this the weak notion, because of its wide extension. In Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, it is clear that this pervasive bad faith is caused and sustained by group action; it is the concrete way we determine and hold on to our history. Briefly, we have created and sustained a hierarchal order in which some people are seen "by nature" to be on top. There are innuendos of this position in the chapter on bad faith, where Sartre refers to the way we see certain people as a Not. There is, however, a strong sense of bad faith, and self-deception is of this type. That is, despite the historical bad-faith structures, there are patterns of self-deception. Also, there can be a viable "good faith," even though the individual is in bad faith, in the weak sense of the term. I made a detailed study of this distinction in my article "Good and Bad Faith: Weak and Strong Notions," *Review of Existential Psychology and Psychiatry* 17 (1984): 79-90. Also for a study of the way we forge bad-faith structures on an historical level, see commentary on Sartre's *Critique*, particularly, pp. 108-20. For a recognition of the need to see bad faith as a social structure, see also, Robert V. Stone, "Sartre on Bad Faith and Authenticity" contained in *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, ed. Paul A. Schlipp (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1981), pp. 245-56.

¹³ Jean-Paul Sartre. *The Communist and Peace with a Reply to Claude Lefort*, trans.

fact that he had never supported the dogmatism of dialectical materialism, that he always defended the right of everyone to speak. The oppression against the elitist members of the society was not to be condoned; but, if the lives of the common people were improving, then the oppression could be temporarily tolerated.

When Russia invaded Hungary in 1956, Sartre again wrote a series of three articles in *Les Temps Modernes* that was to become the *Ghost of Stalin*. Now the situation is changed. Whatever socialism may become in the future, the invasion of Poland shows that Russian socialism had lost its roots with the people. The invasion could not be justified, since “nothing is served by arresting the free development of a country by force; it is up to it to overcome its contradictions.”¹⁴ Oppression was here not merely directed against the intelligentsia, but the common person, and such a socialism is hopelessly lost. Sartre rejected Russian socialism.

One can quarrel with Sartre’s early defense of Russian communism. Perhaps he should have seen what was coming sooner. But it is clear that his belief in the practical viability of international socialism, spearheaded by Russia, was based on his assessment of evidence. When, for him, the evidence changed, his belief changed.

Bad faith, on the contrary, does not really change in the face of new evidence, because it is not really about evidence. Bad faith aims at a stability of beliefs that evidence cannot provide. It is thus more a belief in belief itself rather than a belief arising from evidence. What makes it “bad” and self-deceptive is that it sees itself as of the same type as a belief that arises from evidence. Our self-deceptive rower chooses to see his strain as evidence for his ability to row well. Let us imagine that his companion points to the meaning of his effort, by remarking, “Why don’t you take it a little easier?” Our self-deceiver can respond in several ways. He could suddenly see himself as he appears before others, and become a less “serious” and more honest person. But there can be a great deal at stake in his view of himself, and our self-deceiver may rather choose to interpret the remark as referring to his companion’s desire to be rowed more gently. Or, if this interpretation is obviously not the case, for even self-deception needs the appearance of evidence, then the person may indeed recognize a certain unnaturalness in his rowing. But this is interpreted as a minor misunderstanding rather than a project to deceive himself about the meaning of his behavior. He tells his companion that he slept poorly last night, and that

Martha H. Fletcher and Philip R. Berk (New York: George Braziller, 1968), p. 228. For an analysis of this and the following work of Sartre see my commentary on Sartre’s *Critique*, pp. 24-31.

¹⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Ghost of Stalin*, trans. Martha H. Fletcher (New York: George Braziller, 1968). Published in England as *The Spectre of Stalin*, trans. Irene Clephane (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1969), p. 61.

he must be more tired than he realized. Later that day, when driving home, his companion notices the same kind of strain to attain an effortless driving that is simply not there. Nothing has changed. The evidence of a few hours ago counts as nothing.

Self-Deception as Neurosis and Prejudice

There are two important areas of life where bad faith manifests itself as a self-deception, the first in many deep-rooted prejudices, the other in many neuroses and in some psychoses. In both cases a web of evidence is created in order to justify a belief that is contrary to the real state of affairs. This evidence is sufficient to convince the subject. A few examples may illustrate how this occurs.

In the *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Sartre makes it very clear that the anti-semite is in bad faith because he has determined in advance to hate the race of Jews. Objectively, it is clear that no evidence has brought him to this conviction. If one disproves every bit of evidence that he presents to support his anti-Semitism, the belief remains just as strong as before.¹⁵ The anti-semite believes, however, that he has evidence. The other has just tricked him; tomorrow he will remember the real reasons that justify his belief. Or he may claim that the arguments of his opponents merely prove that an individual Jew may escape the general contamination of the race. But this he admits. Each Jew, however, must prove to be the exception.

The anti-Semite believes that his belief is justified. He perceives himself as a misunderstood crusader. This race, the Jew, has become historically tainted, and the race of Jews is at the core of all the essential evils of our society. Sartre sees anti-Semitism, correctly, I believe, as a contemporary form of Manicheism. For the Christian heretic, Manes, evil and good are equal co-principles in the formation of the world. Evil is thus a positive force preventing the manifestation of good. The Manichean believes that the elimination of evil allows good to happen of itself. After evil is eliminated, there will come a time for cooperating with the forces of good. The Manichean has deceived himself, because it is the hatred of evil that is loved. The time for good will never come. When anti-Semitism is no longer popular, other forms of racism will take its place.

The anti-Semite does indeed experience tension; the tension is nothing other than the self-deceptive belief about the Jew. This tension is the hatred that needs no reason but itself. The anti-Semite chooses to see his hatred as a crusade against evil. He holds this hatred in existence so that

¹⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker (New York: Schocken Books, 1948). Published in England as *Portrait of the Anti-Semite*, trans. Eric de Mauny (London: Secker & Warburg, 1948).

evidence is seen always on the horizon. He is indeed aware of his effort at maintaining his hate, but he conceptualizes this effort as the energy that should go into hating a natural evil.

There may of course be times when one has to concentrate on the elimination of evil, but the person in good faith recognizes that this is temporary and that the task of doing good, of altering the world for the better, is never brought about by simply eliminating an evil. It is this ambiguous task of doing good that the person in self-deception flees. The person in bad faith, the racist, for example, does not have to face the task of determining who he is and what he will become, since his basic goal in life is given by his hatred.

Many forms of neurosis and psychosis exhibit the same form of self-deception. An inferiority complex, for example, can prevent someone from attempting to attain goals that he would otherwise seek. But it is frequently this very lack of effort that the subject initially seeks to justify, while retaining the goal. An inferiority complex can thus be a project to be superior. For example, this individual wishes to be different, to be noticed, to be exceptional. But success in such a project is always in question. If one wants to be a writer, a lifetime of effort may not lead to recognition. In good faith, one seeks to enjoy the writing, attempts to get published, makes the efforts, and lives the gamble that recognition, in the present state of our society, may never come, even if it is deserved. For our person in bad faith, however, this risk is too great; but this individual does not wish to abandon the project of being superior. He believes that he would be superior, if nature had not cursed him with an "inferiority complex." He cannot work, because he sees his efforts to be doomed in advance. He claims that he needs self-confidence. But this individual does not need self-confidence; he is lazy. His neurosis is the "intelligent" choice of believing in his superiority and being able to be lazy at the same time. Again the tension is misunderstood. His effort at sustaining the self-deceptive project of superiority is conceptualized as his struggle against an inferior nature.

But how can one deceive oneself about one's project in life? Sartre's answer is to remind us that prereflective awareness is nonthetic. "But if the fundamental project is fully experienced by the subject and hence wholly conscious, that certainly does not mean that it must by the same token be *known* by him; quite the contrary." (BN, p. 570) The 'quite the contrary' is important. Reflection is not privileged. To repeat, we have an intimate awareness of ourselves, but not necessarily an objective understanding, in the sense of unbiased. We learn about ourselves objectively only through others. The issue is complex because both we and the other

may be in either good or bad faith. If we are both in good faith, our objective understanding attempts to be unbiased. Thus in good faith we are open to balance our intimate awareness of ourselves with the way the other interprets the meaning of our behavior. In bad faith the value is given almost exclusively to our intimate awareness. In bad faith, our reflections work within our bad-faith project, so that when we reflect upon ourselves we see the value of our intimate understanding as automatically providing us with a view of the way we appear before others. In bad faith, we consider that if others do not recognize what we see to be our true objectivity, then there is something wrong with their perception of us. Since our reflections are in bad faith, we may need “help” to get out of our self-deceptive condition, assuming that we have a willingness to do so.

Evidence to justify one’s self-deceptive belief is generated differently, in different cases. In kleptomania, for example, people may steal something that they do not need. They choose not to pay attention to what they are doing. At first they cannot succeed. They know what they are doing; there is too much effort, too much explicit awareness of oneself in the process. But one chooses not to think very much about the strange object in one’s pocket or how it got there. The self that took the object is out there in the world, moving arms and legs, but it is not the real self. Next time the effort needed to take the unneeded object is easier. Finally, it becomes habitual, and a stage is reached where one does not know that one is taking objects. The distraction has become perfect. One is now a “kleptomaniac.” But why would anyone want *to be* a kleptomaniac? Again, it could be a bad-faith project to be “superior.” The individual wants to be different, and to guarantee his exceptional status in society. How many kleptomaniacs are there in the world? Besides, one always has a built-in excuse for failure: Great things would happen, if only I did not have this “illness.”

Suppose that the kleptomaniac now wishes to be cured of his cursed affliction. The “existential analyst” asks him why he *wants* to be a kleptomaniac. It is here that the existential approach is different from the Freudian. The existential approach recognizes the translucency of consciousness; the neurosis does not point to some hidden truth. It is itself the problem. *Only it is not conceptualized correctly by the individual, and this misjudgment is chosen and sustained.* The person, of course, denies that he has chosen to be a kleptomaniac; indeed, he has tried to stop himself, and he is coming here for help. The existential analyst must now bring the person back to those early years to face the steps by which kleptomania was chosen as a bad faith way of defining his existence. Practically speaking, the person cannot do this on his own, for all his reflections are within his bad-faith project.

R. D. Laing pushes this insight to cover psychosis. A child brought up among parents that make it known that he is unwanted, may, particularly if he has no friends, find the real world unbearable. There are only a certain number of options. The child might find the strength to hate his parents. But more likely he sees his objective self as unwanted. His intimate awareness of himself is of someone desirable. But what is the value of this awareness when weighed against the objective value of himself that he sees in the eyes and behavior of his parents. Here good faith might lead to suicide. But, in this tragic situation, bad faith can be blessing. His intimate knowledge, his private world, is, for him the real world of value. All children love to daydream, and the child gradually gives himself to the evidence that his private world is the world of value, and thus the real world. A point is reached when a gestalt is formed. The child believes in his world, and becomes "insane." This insanity is a way out of an impossible situation, and it would not work unless the child completely believed in the product of his own creation. Laing's therapy consists in treating the now insane adult as someone who made an intelligent choice in a tragic situation.

On Waiters and Flirts

Sartre's own examples in the chapter "Bad Faith" can now be handled easily. He says "Let us consider this waiter in the cafe." (BN, p. 59) There are waiters and waiters. Some people are waiters because the pay and hours are good. The job does not mean that much to them. But others define themselves by their job so that they encounter the rights and duties of their task as some greater-than-human structure that they must obey. Indeed, it is this that they seek. *This* waiter makes his role to be his salvation. He would enter any job in the same manner. If he were a soldier, he would push the button that would unleash the bomb without a second thought or moment of hesitation or qualm of consciousness. The job, for this individual, defines the man, and humans are not made to question their roles in society. Freedom to such an individual is seen as dangerous. Freedom is wild, chaotic; he will bridle his, even if the other does not do so. "He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and rapidity of things." (BN, p. 59) Of course he knows what he is doing. He is playing at the role of being a waiter. But he accepts the role as that which should define him so as to remove from him all responsibility. This is his self-deception. He knows that he is play acting, and that he can never perfectly achieve the essence of being a waiter. But this play acting is all that anyone can expect from him. Society wants him thus, and he accepts society's demands.

There are indeed many precautions to imprison a man in what he is, as if we lived in perpetual fear that he might escape from it, that he might break away and suddenly elude his condition. (BN, p. 59)

There may indeed have to be roles in society, but every individual is free to question the meaning of a role. There are times when a soldier must say no to shooting, and there are times when a waiter must say no to serving. But *our* waiter has chosen his job precisely in order to avoid the responsibility of questioning his role in society. He deceives himself into believing that one should aim at being a waiter as a pure function that does not criticize itself. The tension of sustaining this self-deception is nothing other than the overly tense way he waits on his customers.

In the same way, Sartre's example of flirting should be interpreted as referring to a woman for whom flirting is a way of life. Any woman can flirt now and then, and be aware of what she is doing. But for this woman flirting is a way of defining her relations with both sexes. This holding of hands is never, as a human act, a mere contact of body with body; it is always meaningful. But what is the meaning? Is the closeness of bodies essential to the conversation? This flirt has managed to believe that the conversation is the human event. Her body is getting closer to the other, but this awareness is kept on the horizon of consciousness. She does not see the touching of flesh upon flesh as a delineated object in the world. She has an intimate awareness of herself as wanting this conversation. She believes that this is what she wants, and is surprised when the conversation ceases. She can succeed, because it is indeed true that this meeting *could be* about a conversation, and that the holding of hands *could be* accidental to the event. Two people could be so engrossed in conversation that they are not aware of their bodies touching. This possibility becomes for this woman the true state of affairs. If her friends call her a flirt, then they do not see things as they really are; that is, as she sees them. She cannot help it if her body moves thus and thus. There was probably a time when she was explicitly aware of what she was doing, but gradually a gestalt was formed, a pattern of behavior, that, while now sustained, has nevertheless a momentum of itself. She sustains this momentum by choosing to see her flirtation as the natural effort that a woman experiences when talking to a man.

Conclusion

Following Sartre, I see two distinct attitudes that we can have toward the evidence of our beliefs, a good faith attitude and a bad faith attitude. In the concrete, the attitudes, the evidence and belief are one and the same; there is no common ontological characteristic of belief shared by these two modes. Ontologically, good and bad faith are two radically different

kinds of things; the same name of 'belief' is used, since they both have something to do with evidence. A good-faith belief is actually based on specific evidence, while a bad-faith belief does not need this or any other specific evidence. Thus, while both good and bad faith can be said to be a nothingness and a lack of identity of a self with its selfhood, ontologically, this nothingness and lack is different in each case. In good faith, I attempt to achieve a critical understanding of the way I appear before others and the way I have interiorized this objectivity. If people consistently tell me that I am rude to strangers, then I am willing to try to see myself as such. I may not succeed in getting a perfect knowledge about myself, but I can achieve an increasingly better understanding of the objective meaning of my behavior. In bad faith, and specifically in self-deception, I have no real interest in altering my understanding about myself, since my belief is aimed at sustaining a certain attitude whatever the cost. I have chosen to see myself as incapable of change, for it is change that I fear. I wish to see myself in the world as a table is in the world, having a stable, unalterable essence. I achieve this attitude by restructuring for myself the very nature of belief. A belief emerges that has no necessary relation to any specific evidence. This belief attempts to bridge the gap between itself and a critical belief by viewing the ideal of belief to be impossible of achievement. Since no belief can be *perfectly* justified, bad faith appears to itself as a justified belief. Thus a person in bad faith can hide from conceptualizing its bad faith as "bad" and as self-deceptive.

This substantive way of referring to belief is convenient, but it can be misleading. There is no structure of belief over and above the person acting. The critical attitude of good faith, and the self-deceptive attitude of bad faith are the individual existing here and now in the world before others. The self-deceptive rower is the tension of an awkward body that attempts to appear naturally capable of rowing well. The self-deceptive rower experiences this tension as the natural effort of rowing, but others see that most of the effort is going to the creation of an ease-of-rowing that is simply not present. Is this self hidden from this self-deceiver? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that he manages to conceptualize his tension as the natural effort that appears when rowing vigorously. No, in the sense that he does indeed experience a tension that is not normally present in a properly coordinated act of rowing. But this tensed act of rowing *is* the self-deceiver; it is a self maintaining itself in a self-deception as it keeps from itself the possibility of change.