

## **Good People and Bad Faith: A(n open) Letter to John Dowell**

Roman Briggs

Dear John<sup>1</sup>,

I received your manuscript via courier the afternoon of the fourth of last month, and read through it immediately, in a sitting. I was scalded. After steeling myself for a second consideration, I reread it more carefully that Sunday. I decided, then, that I must give all that you wrote a good deal of careful thought before responding with anything other than the note of condolence that I sent off right away. (You received that, I hope.) I apologize for the delay, as much as, in my estimation, it couldn't be helped. To be completely honest, I considered leaving my answer at that, indefinitely. Having never experienced anything approximating such horrendous loss and general adversity, I initially thought I should leave these delicate matters to more capable hands. (I'm assuming you distributed the document to others.) Then, ironically, I thought of Teddy. I became ashamed of my inaction. I couldn't just allow a friend to drown simply because I'm not the most capable swimmer.

As your parcel arrived, I was so pleased to see that you'd finally kept your word about corresponding, but crushed, immediately, by – well – *all* of it. This was the first I'd heard of the death of either Florry or Teddy. And, of course, the news of both came as

a complete shock. (After returning to Turin, I lost touch with most of the Nauheim group, aside from Herr Häuser and Maike.) As I'm sure you recall, I didn't know the Asburnhams to the extent that you and Florry did. But, I was always fond of both Ted and Leonora, despite their peccant tendencies. Of course, as you know, I absolutely adored Florry. I'm so sorry, John. Words fail. I had no idea that much of this was transpiring at Hesse. (I confess, I had vague suspicions about Florry, though.) I have so many questions, if, at some point, you feel that discussing things in person might help you to process.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps I can visit later this summer. For the time being, I'll table my inquiries in the interest of saying some things that, I feel, need to be said here and now.

Towards the conclusion of your manuscript, you remark that part of what makes all that has happened so intolerably sad is that the principal desires of each of you were perpetually frustrated. Each desideratum was available, but – absurdly – fell into the lap of some party not interested in *it*, in particular. 'Leonora wanted Edward, and she has got Rodney Bayham', you inform. 'Florence wanted Branshaw, and it is [you] who have bought it from Leonora. [You] didn't really want it: what [you] wanted mostly was to cease being a nurse-attendant [. . .] Edward wanted Nancy Rufford and [you] have got her. Only she is mad [. . .] Why can't people have what they want?'<sup>3</sup> As much as our circumstances differ, I do understand your exasperation and disaffection here, John. All too well. And, I'm responding, in part, to offer you something which, I believe, you also strongly desire. Let me explain.

Much earlier in the document, you share your approach to reconstructing all that has happened: ‘I shall just imagine myself . . . at one side of the fireplace of a country cottage, with a sympathetic soul opposite me. And I shall go on talking’ (GS 18). A few pages later, you lament: ‘You, the listener, sit opposite me. But you are so silent. You don’t tell me anything’ (GS 19). It seems to me that, now, you really just want to secure an empathetic confessor who’s willing to respond honestly. Well, I have listened, making every effort to understand it all; and, I’m responding with a mind to offer some advice that might, eventually, bring a degree of relief. Still, I’m concerned that much of what I hope to articulate will come off as patently glib. A missive probably isn’t the best conduit for the particular ideas occurring to me. But, there you are at Branshaw, and here I am in Turin – and so, here we are.

Much of what I feel the need to say has to do with your striking construal of the world, and the nature of the people – yourself, certainly – populating it. Now, you might object, perhaps justifiably, to my focusing on such abstract matters in response to your very tangible losses. While my sympathies are certainly heartfelt, I won’t have much more to say about Florry and Ted throughout the remainder of this letter. That feels wrong, I know. I remember experiencing a similar unease when I first read Seneca’s *De Consolatione ad Marciam* – a letter written to a grieving mother, Marcia, which centers on appropriate mourning according to Stoic assumptions generally, and which pays little attention to the recipient’s unique anguish.

I remember making my way through Seneca's letter, thinking that the approach is wholly inappropriate, and verging on being immoral in its callousness. In determining which course to take in responding to you, though, I think I better understand Seneca's motivations. In considering what he perceived to be the viciousness of Marcia's mourning, Seneca located the root of her lingering distress not in the immediate tragedy, but in her existing worldview. Similarly, I believe that much of your own agony stems from, of all things, a wrongheaded metaphysics. *I know, I know* – I can't believe I have the audacity to suggest this, either. But, before rejecting the assertion out of hand, please allow me to make a case for it – again, I assure you, with every intention of mitigating your suffering – by drawing attention to certain passages from your manuscript, and framing discussion of these with insights culled from the works of the continental analyst, Cade French.<sup>4</sup> If after reading on you still feel that I've been awful here, I'll understand. I mean well – but, there's that old saw about good intentions.

In the interest of clarity, allow me to briefly catalog the concepts central to what I hope to express below: essentialism about identity; self-deception and French's conception of 'bad faith'; conceiving the passions as actions. While I'll introduce these in turn, there will be, as with all else in life, nonlinear interplay throughout.

One motif of your interpretation of the events is *essentialism*: the notion, for our purposes, that entities possess confirmed characteristics which make them what they *are*, as opposed to being anything

else. We can talk about the essences of things in terms of the universal, i.e., the functional design of, say, the ashtray is what makes each individual ashtray a token of that particular type. Or, we can talk about essences in terms of the singular, i.e., *this* thing, here in my hand, is my ashtray in virtue of its function and in virtue of the fact that it was given to me by Noemi, last Feast of Saint Stephen. Talking of artifacts in this way is sensible. However, as French points out, we ignore the crucial distinction between things and persons when we speak of the latter as though they were the former. In the case of persons, to borrow a phrase from one of French's lectures, 'existence precedes essence'.<sup>5</sup>

Assuming you haven't become somehow steeped in French's work since we last conversed, let me unpack this. Borrowing, himself, from his Prussian antecedent, Otto Graf, French notes that we are 'thrown into the world' (*Essays* 41).<sup>6</sup> Like all else which furnishes reality, we simply find ourselves here.<sup>7</sup> Unlike all else, though, we have the capacity, *a fortiori* the *responsibility*, to make of ourselves what we will through deliberation and choice. I feel that your description of persons fails to express this.

When you write of persons and their respective lineages, for instance, you seem to suggest that something essential is somehow in the bloodline: The Ashburnhams, you assert repeatedly, were 'quite good people'. They 'descended' after all, 'from the Ashburnham who accompanied Charles I to the scaffold [. . .] Mrs. Ashburnham was a Powys; Florence was a Hurlbird of Philadelphia' (*GS* 12), and, in

your mind, was ‘a little too well-bred, too American’ (*GS* 15). Later, you invoke Florry’s American heritage again, this time as evidence, curiously, of her moral culpability: ‘[She] need not have done what she did. She was an American, a New Englander. She had not the hot passions of these Europeans’ (*GS* 58-59). She had an inherent coolness in her favor, I guess. Elsewhere, you endorse – or perhaps this is so for Miss Rufford, whose ideas you purport to communicate – a rigid class essentialism: ‘There were, no doubt, people who misbehaved – but they were poor people – or people not like those she knew’ (*GS* 167). In this case, it is presented as being inconceivable that persons of a certain pedigree could engage in acts as unsavory as marital infidelity.<sup>8</sup> And, there are the many instances of gender essentialism: Florry, you observe, ‘was a riddle; but then, all other women are riddles’ (*GS* 25).<sup>9</sup>

As troubling as the assertions of group-essentialism are the countless instances where you imply that individuals possess fixed essences. Consider your appraisal of a statically inconstant Florry, keeping in mind your ultimate condemnation of her: ‘Florence was vulgar; Florence was a common flirt’ (*GS* 144). She was a ‘contaminating influence’ (*GS* 143), and a ‘whore’ (*GS* 59). Contrast this with your appraisal of and absolution of Teddy. Despite his part in various affairs, you describe him as, innocently, a ‘sentimentalist’ (*GS* 49). But then, ‘all good soldiers are sentimentalists,’ you remind me (*GS* 28). The Kilsyte Incident wasn’t Teddy’s fault – ‘he was *driven* to it’—to ‘comforting’ the young woman on the train—‘by the mad passion to find an ultimately satisfying woman’ (*GS* 44-45, empha-

sis mine). Moreover, you lay at the feet of a posited God ‘those desires, those madnesses’ which precipitated Teddy’s unscrupulous actions (*GS* 44). Setting aside inconsistencies involving your essentialization of both, but exoneration of one, this sort of metaphysics of identity seems wholly at odds with our – or, with *my* – intuitions about responsibility. In fact, French describes the will to fix identity in this way as an attempt to flee from moral liability. If one is *essentially* a sentimentalist, then how can he deserve blame for acting as sentimentalists, by nature, act?<sup>10</sup>

French suggests that those who are essentialists about the self are falling into what he calls *bad faith* – *mauvaise foi* (*Essays* 148). This is the tendency, common to each of us, to deceive ourselves about our own makeup and agency. This is the desire to become a mere object. But, why would we want that? French’s collaborator, Noelle Alix, puts it this way:

Along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also the temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it – passive, lost, ruined – becomes henceforth the creature of another’s will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence.<sup>11</sup>

*Transcendence* is French’s term for the innate capacity all persons have, through willing – through deliberate choice and consequent free action – to

overcome his individual facticity.<sup>12</sup> While thrown into existence, we, thereafter, are ‘condemned’ to the yeoman task of authoring ourselves at each moment (*Essays* 41). While obviously having no say over the circumstances into which we initially find ourselves, we, once we’ve reached the age of accountability, become responsible for all ensuing states of affairs related to us, including the complexion of our passions. Conversely, you and the others populating your record, seem to self-objectify, over and over, shrugging off responsibility in the name of given and set identity. This metaphysical bend isn’t innocuous, John. It adversely affects our conception of our place in the world, and it taints our interaction with it. In order to illustrate this, consider Miss Rufford’s telling reaction to learning that couples married by the Church sometimes divorce:

She felt a sickness—a sickness that grew as she read. Her heart beat painfully; she began to cry. She asked God how He could permit such things to be [. . .] Perhaps, then, Edward loved someone else. It was unthinkable. If he could love some one else than Leonora, her fierce, unknown heart suddenly spoke in her side, why could it not be herself? [. . .] Her blue eyes were full of horror: her brows were tight above them [. . .] In her eyes the whole of that familiar, great hall had a changed aspect. The andirons with the brass flowers at the ends appeared unreal; the burning logs were just logs that were burning and not the comfortable symbols of an indestructible mode of life [. . .] suddenly she



thought Edward might marry someone else; and she nearly screamed . . . 'I thought . . . I never imagined .... Aren't marriages sacraments? Aren't they indissoluble? [. . .] I thought you were married or not married as you are alive or dead. [. . .] Oh, yes . . . the [divorcing] Brands are Protestants.' She felt a sudden safeness descend upon her, and for an hour or so her mind was at rest. (GS 167-168)

This is as informative as it is powerful. Here, you've reconstructed a line of thought and tandem emotion which typifies the person living in French's bad faith. First, Miss Rufford self-identifies as *essentially* Catholic. This is taken as an incontestable aspect of who she, at core, is and will always be. Along with this comes the assumption, in self-deception, that there are certain actions which are metaphysically beyond her, qua Catholic – divorce, in this case. While this self-conception places, within Miss Rufford's mind, rigid limits on possibilities for action, in divesting her of truly free agency, it also soothes. In her unfreedom, she feels safe from herself – from her own carnal desire to become involved with Teddy. But then, *crisis*. She learns that others – others belonging to her class and who've been conferred respect within her circle – take part in extramarital affairs. If *them*, why not *her*? (At the consciousness level, this petrifies her; unconsciously, it excites.) But, doesn't her essence render wicked action impossible? Doesn't this tether her to probity? Or no? She panics at the prospect that she, like Miss Lupton and Mr. Brand, might be capable of action inconsistent with her perceived identity.

Interestingly, Miss Rufford questions God, here. *How could He allow this? Hadn't He set the identities of Miss Lupton and Mr. Brand in ethereal amber – even before He'd created a universe?* So, there's a kind of localized Argument from Evil surfacing. Miss Rufford's pronounced consternation at the thought of all of this is then immediately quelled, though – not by her having come to terms with the open-endedness of human will, but in her coming to recall that the Brands are Protestants. So, *of course*, she reasons, their actions are out of bounds with what's right and what's godly – they're *essentially* not Catholic. God had saved her from herself, after all. Later, though, it dawns on poor Miss Rufford that, like the Brands, Teddy is a Protestant. Perhaps, then, Teddy loves someone other than Leonora. Is it her? Trepidation returns as Miss Rufford contemplates Teddy's freedom and its attending vertigo; meanwhile, she clings desperately, in self-deception, to her conception of the fixed self.

With such ensconced essentialist thinking on the part of Miss Rufford, it should probably come as little surprise that Leonora ultimately objectifies her – and that Miss Rufford doesn't resist.<sup>13</sup> '[Y]ou must belong to Edward,' Leonora asserts, with an air of omnipotence (*GS* 174).<sup>14</sup> Even after learning of Teddy's myriad trysts, Miss Rufford complies: 'I can never love you now [. . .] I will belong to you to save your life. But I can never love you' (*GS* 184). Not surprisingly, even at this stage, Miss Rufford continues to use the language of hard determinism: I can never love you. Of course, she can't – she's *essentially* Catholic, and developing such feelings for one who's *essentially* a philanderer (a 'sentimen-

talist') is beyond her (thankfully, she feels, privately). Sadly, coupled with the impending calamities, it's no significant leap from this sort of fused objectification and self-objectification to: 'Shuttlecocks!' (GS 191).

It's too late, it seems to me, for Miss Rufford, John – just like it's too late for poor Florry and Teddy. But, I sincerely believe that it's not too late for you, dear friend. What I'm going to say now may come off as especially curt, but, I think, necessarily so, given the depths of your self-deception and your propensity for self-objectification and shrugging off of personal responsibility. Very early on in your manuscript, you recall meeting Florry and merely *drifting* and *desiring* (GS 20). If I had had to describe you, vaguely, as I knew you at Nauheim, I might have come to these very words, too. This might sound paradoxical, but, over the years, you seem to have deliberately strengthened your passivity; and, to have knowingly reinforced your inclination towards self-deception. In disowning your thoughts, passions, and actions, you've come to view yourself as nothing more than the plaything of the universe. And, in acting in accord with this, I feel that you are complicit in your own sustained torment.

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I used to wince when you'd say things, even – I *thought*, then – mostly in jest, like 'I am the attendant' (*GS* 180). As if there was, or could be, nothing more to the story. I know you must realize that that served almost as a sort of mantra for you, while we were together at Hesse. Similarly, I was always bothered when you'd make claims such as, 'I don't believe that for one minute [Florry] was out of my sight [during the twelve-year marriage]' (*GS* 14). Just as often as you'd self-objectify, you'd engage in this sort of hyperbole about your attention to Florry – and, more times than not, I should add, out of nowhere. Meanwhile, we all had suspicions about Florry, as much as we cared for her. I know that you did too, John, based on conversations which we've had at the baths. Contradicting this, later in your manuscript you write: 'I have *unintentionally* misled you when I said that Florence was never out of my sight. Yet that was the impression that I really had until just now' (*GS* 72, emphasis mine). But, John, if you're being honest with yourself, you'll admit that you came to this realization some years back.

I'm bringing up your proclivity for self-objectification and for self-deception because, as French suggests, these dovetail in many instances, yours being no exception. Allow me to draw attention to just one more series of events in your manuscript which supports this. There seems to be a conflation of your self-deception regarding nascent romantic feelings you'd developed for Miss Rufford, and Teddy's self-deception regarding his similar feelings. You recall regaining consciousness mid-sentence, at some point, observing to Leonora that, since

Florry was gone, you may now marry Miss Rufford. But, you insist sentences later that '[you] had never had the slightest conscious idea of marrying the girl; [and] never had the slightest idea of even caring for her' (GS 85). Compare this with Teddy's encounter with Miss Rufford in the park:

. . . *something happened* to Edward Ashburnham . . . until that moment *he had no idea whatsoever of caring for the girl*. He said that he had regarded her exactly as he would have regarded a daughter [. . .] But of more than that *he had been totally unconscious*. Had he been conscious of it, he assured me, he would have fled from it as from a thing accursed. (GS 90, emphasis mine)

Pages later, you pick things up:

. . . in speaking to her on that night, [Ted] wasn't, I am convinced, speaking a baseness. It was as if his passion for her hadn't existed; as *if the very words that he spoke, without knowing that he spoke them, created the passion* as they went along. Before he spoke, here was nothing; afterwards, it was the integral fact of his life. (GS 93, emphasis mine)

Here we have the marriage of self-objectification – Teddy is depicted as *something* which things happen *to*, and not as an agent performing deliberate actions – and self-deception – Teddy is not taking ownership of his thoughts or feelings, which absolves him, within his mind (and yours), of personal responsibility. Now, let's connect this up with

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what you report of yourself a bit later: ‘I was in love with Nancy Rufford [. . .] *I had never thought about it until I heard Leonora state that I might now marry her.* But, from that moment until her worse than death, I do not suppose that I much thought about anything else’ (GS 97, emphasis mine). But, John, as you admit above, Leonora’s assertion regarding the possibility of marriage was said *in response to your* ‘unconsciously spoken’ observation: ‘Now I can marry the girl’ (GS 85). This is not my reconstruction of the order of events; I’m pulling, here, directly from the chronology which *you* offer in the manuscript. So, you can see, self-deception is at work, here.

The adjoining self-objectification is equally conspicuous. In your rendering of Teddy’s coming to understand that he has romantic feelings for Miss Rufford, you sap his agency, transferring it to words escaping his mouth, but not said by him. Your version of the events leading up to your realization reduces your own agency to an even greater extent. Your words, it seems, materialize from the mouth of Leonora. You’re Othering your passions.

Citing French, I suggested before that many fall into bad faith in attempting to alleviate the anxieties associated with the robust responsibility which issues from living freely. There’s a weight to responsibility, no doubt. In *choosing* objectification you bear a different burden, though: the weight of the universe. While French describes the dread associated with authenticity, there’s a unique two-pronged hardship which accompanies living in bad faith: here, you’ve chosen to live in service to

facticity, and to forfeit a special dignity earned by agents actively engaged in and responsible for their projects. You need not be a nurse-attendant, John – just as Teddy needn't have been a sentimentalist. Your story is not *essentially* sad; take responsibility for your part in making it that way. I pray that this is more helpful than hurtful.

Yours,

C. Freund

**Notes** [Acknowledgement: I would like to thank Les White for providing extremely helpful comments on an earlier draft of this work and for encouraging me to locate a home for it in print.]

1 These notes are not intended to be interpreted as the work of Conrad Freund—my contrived friend of John Dowell, and the author of this letter—and so are directed to the readers of this journal, and not to Dowell. They exist exclusively in the actual world.

2 Samuel Hynes writes: 'The problems involved in the interpretation of *The Good Soldier* all stem from one question: What are we to make of the novel's narrator? Or, to put it a bit more formally, what authority should we allow to the version of events which he narrates?' See Hynes, 'The Epistemology of *The Good Soldier*', *The Sewanee Review*, 69, 2 (1961), 225. To put a point on things, Hynes could have referred to the versions of events which Dow-

ell narrates. If we couple the fact that Freund had known the principals for a time at Nauheim with the fecund inconsistencies of Dowell's account, it's easy to imagine the former's astonishment and pronounced confusion in reading through the 'kaleidoscopic' account which arrived at his doorstep: see John Tytell, 'The Jamesian Legacy in *The Good Soldier*', *Studies in the Novel*, 3, 4 (1971), 365. If we, Ford's readers, have questions regarding what actually happened, imagine how Freund must feel. On the other hand, having known Dowell, perhaps he was better prepared than we for such incongruities in the story being told. Determining the authority allowed to Dowell has been a fruitful topic among critics, and for obvious reasons. In reaching out to Dowell here by proxy of Freund, however, I'm allowing the latter to explore a matter which is overlooked when the attention becomes fixed on parsing the details of the story: what Dowell's interpretation of the events can tell us about him and his worldview. And so, here questions pertaining to what actually happened will be bracketed in favor of those pertaining to what Dowell's rendering can tell us about him and his plight. As Nietzsche remarks, false accounts (to whatever degree) are often invaluable in helping us to diagnose their authors.

3 Ford Madox Ford, *The Good Soldier: A Tale of Passion* (1915; edited by Max Saunders, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 181; hereafter *GS*.

4 This is a reference to Jean-Paul Sartre. However, since Sartre *qua* philosopher doesn't exist in Dowell's 1910s, I will attribute his ideas within Freund's



letter to the fictitious academician, Cade French – aside, of course, from in-text citations within parentheses. In the interest of keeping the details of Freund’s letter contemporaneous with Dowell’s 1910s, I will relegate all references to other critics to these endnotes.

5 Sartre, *Essays in Existentialism*, translated by Wade Baskin (Seacaucus, NJ: Carol Publishing Group, 1999), 34; hereafter *Essays*.

6 Graf will stand in for Martin Heidegger, who didn’t introduce the notion of *thrownness* and its pull towards inauthenticity – *falling* – until our 1920s.

7 Sartre writes: ‘[M]an exists, turns up . . . and only afterwards, defines himself . . . At first he is a nothing’: *Essays*, 36.

8 Compare with Dowell’s own offhand generalization regarding the good and the moral: ‘Good people, be they ever so diverse in creed, do not threaten each other’ (*GS* 57).

9 Compare with Leonora’s generalizations regarding men: ‘[Leonora] saw life as a perpetual sex-battle between husbands who desire to be unfaithful to their wives, and wives who desire to recapture their husbands in the end [. . .] Man, for her, was a sort of brute who must have his divagations, his moments of excess, his nights out, his, let’s say, rutting seasons’ (*GS* 144).

10 The same, of course, can be said of the essential whore; but, no one ever accused Dowell of being overly fair in his assessments.

11 Alix will stand in for Simone de Beauvoir: see her 'Introduction to *The Second Sex*', in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, edited by Linda Nichols (New York: Routledge, 1997), 16-17.

12 I decided to include sexist language, since Freud would have also during the period in which his letter was written. It took all the *will* – speaking of which – that I could muster not to 'correct' this.

13 This procuring of women by Leonora for Edward – and, in order to retain possession of Edward qua thing – is another intriguing pattern in the novel. I don't think it's by accident that the character demonstrating the most agency routinely objectifies those around her (Charlie and Maisie Maidan; Florence; Nancy). While Leonora's tendency is to reify others, there are moments where she, too, gives in to essentialism regarding her own identity. At one point, perhaps due in part to her ongoing close proximity to Nancy, the pair perform a kind of call-and-response involving the assessment of each, that she is essentially morally bad: '[Nancy:] "We're no good – my mother and I" . . . [Leonora]: "No. No. You're not no good. It's that I am no good"' (GS 165).

14 This precedes a kind of judgement offered by Leonora, where Nancy is seemingly being punished, but, ironically for how her essential being (wholly passive fact) had affected Edward: 'It was the price

that the girl must pay for the sin of making Edward love her . . . The girl must become an adulteress; she had wronged Edward by being so beautiful, so gracious, so good. It was sinful to be so good. She must pay the price so as to save the man she had wronged' (*GS* 176). As with Dowell's judgment of Florence, here Nancy is handed down a punishment of sorts for being no more than, it is suggested throughout, what she essentially is and must be: *so beautiful, so gracious, so good*. How could a sentimentalist like Edward be expected to resist? He'd been trapped by her many pleasing traits.