

Sartre and the Modality of Bad Faith: The Contingency Debate

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Abstract: This article investigates the nature of Sartre’s bad faith by analyzing the concept’s modal dimensions. It focuses, in particular, on the discussion of how frequent bad faith is in our everyday lives. On one side of the debate is the reading that bad faith is temporary, avoidable, and contingent. Sartre’s well-known examples of the woman and the waiter in the chapter “Bad Faith” in *Being and Nothingness* support this reading of bad faith as a state that we come in and out of, as something we can refrain from doing or succumb to and fall into. Bad faith is in this way interpreted to be a normative, ethical concept. However, on the other side of the contingency debate is the reading that bad faith is a constant in our lives. I borrow an argument from Schopenhauer to investigate how having bad faith about the ultimate goals of life presents us with the most prevalent variation of bad faith. This article offers a topography of this debate, thereby underscoring one of the main topics about the modality of bad faith, which has not yet been fully articulated in the literature on Sartre, but which is vital to understanding the concept.

Keywords: Sartre, Schopenhauer, bad faith, modality

As a byproduct of the motif of nothingness in his major work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Jean-Paul Sartre presents bad faith as the activity of lying to oneself. This activity is central to the general ontological project of the book, as the prominent placement of “Bad Faith” as the second chapter of *Being and Nothingness* indicates. Because it is that type of deception that one does to oneself, bad faith resembles Descartes’s act of doubting in the *Meditations*. It also resembles a specific mode of Husserlian

intentionality (that consciousness is consciousness of) in that the agent of bad faith is both the act and the object of the deception, leading to a paradox about agency and to questions about the role that bad faith plays in Sartre's theory of consciousness. Because of its prominence and the excitement surrounding this concept, there have been many excellent commentaries and critical treatments of bad faith, ranging from discussions of the social conditions of bad faith,¹ to its applicability for psychoanalysis,² to its value for phenomenological descriptions of everyday life.³ However, there has not yet been a study that focuses on the modal dimensions of bad faith. This article contributes to filling in this omission in the literature.

There are three fundamental questions that help to advance a productive analysis about the nature of the modality of bad faith: (1) How is bad faith possible at all given that it places us in the paradoxical position of being both the deceiver and the deceived? This question leads to a modal inquiry into the basic existence or impossibility of bad faith. (2) Is bad faith a necessary condition of the structure of consciousness, according to Sartre? This question leads to a debate about the formal necessity of bad faith as a condition of self-consciousness. And (3), how common is bad faith and how often are we in it? This question leads to a debate about the degree of contingency or prevalence of bad faith. The scope of this article is limited to (3), but I will briefly address (1) and (2) as a way to establish the parameters of this piece and outline other related research directions.

(1) On the face of it, bad faith is puzzling, if not problematically inconsistent, in that it requires the agent of bad faith to simultaneously play both the role of the liar and the role of the lied to. Lying to others does not cause this seemingly paradoxical act of self-reference since normal structures of deception compartmentalize the act and the object of the lie. But the person in bad faith has to deceive the same person who is acting out the deception, thus calling into question whether it is truly possible to be in bad faith. This line of inquiry uncovers a basic debate about the modality of bad faith in that it brings into question whether the existence of bad faith is possible at all.

¹ Discussions about the social conditions of bad faith are modal discussions in that they talk about necessary requirements that allow for the emergence of bad faith. For this discussion, see Jonathan Webber, "The Project of Bad Faith," in *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Routledge, 2009). See also Ronald E. Santoni, "Is Bad Faith Necessarily Social?," in *Sartre Studies International*, 14 (2008), and Matthew C. Eshleman, "Bad Faith is Necessarily Social," in *Sartre Studies International*, 14 (2008).

² For a book-length commentary of Sartre's relationship to psychoanalysis, including a treatment of bad faith, see Mary L. Edwards, *Sartre's Existential Psychoanalysis: Knowing Others* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023).

³ For an examination of bad faith from within the phenomenological and existential traditions, see Thomas Flynn, "Authenticity," in *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

Some commentators are suspicious of whether bad faith is a consistent concept, citing the seemingly paradoxical nature of bad faith as evidence of the contradiction and therefore impossibility of any kind of genuine self-deception.⁴ Other commentators attempt to prove that bad faith is possible by disarming the paradox of bad faith, by demonstrating that there is a division in the self, and that such a division allows for self-deception.⁵ Since there have already been a number of commentaries that address the possibility or impossibility of bad faith as a concept,⁶ this article will not focus on this debate, other than to assume that bad faith is coherent enough to be possible.

(2) Does Sartre think that, in some respect, bad faith is a necessary condition for the emergence and stability of consciousness? This question leads to the necessity controversy about bad faith and requires a thorough investigation into Sartre's distinction between the ego and consciousness in *The Transcendence of the Ego* (1936) as well as the formal modal suppositions about the concept of nothingness in relation to the self in *Being and Nothingness*. This is a worthy discussion and an important piece of the project of outlining the modal nature of bad faith, but I save this topic for another article in the future.

I will focus, instead, on (3), a set of fundamental questions about the contingency and frequency of bad faith. How often are we in bad faith? How prevalent is it in our everyday lives? Is it a contingent, normative state that we come in and out of and should avoid if we can? Or is it a prevalent condition of everyday life that we are constantly, or nearly constantly, involved with? In some of Sartre's discussions, especially in his popular examples of the woman on a date and the waiter in the café, bad faith would seem to be quite temporary. As these examples suggest, bad faith is an activity that we are only sometimes engaged with. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre also talks about bad faith in normative terms as a state that

⁴ According to Phyllis Sutton Morris, M.R. Haight holds this view. See Phyllis Sutton Morris, "Sartre on the Self-Deceiver's Translucent Consciousness," in *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 23 (1992). See also M.R. Haight, *Self-Deception and Self-Understanding: New Essays in Philosophy and Psychology*, ed. by Mike W. Martin (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1985), 53–54. In addition, Ronald E. Santoni argues that bad faith is only possible in a very qualified sense. Ronald E. Santoni, "Bad Faith and Lying to Oneself," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 38 (1978).

⁵ For an elucidating discussion of the various strategies for how to compartmentalize the deceiver and the deceived, thus leading to arguments that bad faith is possible, see the Stevenson–Gordon–Hymers debate from the 1980's. Leslie Stevenson, "Sartre on Bad Faith," in *Philosophy*, 58 (1983), 254–256. Jeffrey Gordon, "Bad Faith: A Dilemma," in *Philosophy*, 60 (1985), and Michael Hymers, "Bad Faith," in *Philosophy*, 64 (1989), 397.

⁶ For example, see my own work on this topic, Nahum Brown, "How Is Lying to Oneself Possible? The Dialetheism Reading of Sartre's Bad Faith," in *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy*, 17 (June 2023).

we can free ourselves from and overcome. These accounts give us the resources to argue that bad faith is only sometimes present in our lives. These arguments make up what I call the “weak interpretation” of the contingency debate, since they direct us to the conclusion that we are only temporarily, or even rarely, in bad faith.

However, in one of the most revealing statements of the chapter “Bad Faith,” Sartre claims that “for a very large number of people it can even be the normal aspect of life.”⁷ This statement opens the path for a different way of thinking about bad faith. What if bad faith is so prevalent that it should be understood as a constant, or nearly constant, condition of our everyday experience? What if Sartre’s point is not that we should avoid bad faith, but is, rather, that we should recognize it and diagnose it so that we can live with it? These questions lead to the strong interpretation of the contingency debate. To explore the strong interpretation, I briefly introduce a comparative study between Sartre and Schopenhauer. If we apply bad faith to Schopenhauer’s provocative argument in volume 1, section 29 of *The World as Will and Representation* (1818) that we have no ultimate reason for willing, we find ourselves in bad faith constantly through every act of volition. This leads to a content version of the strong interpretation, that is, to the thesis that we are all constantly lying to ourselves about the ultimate purpose of existence.

The point of this article is to explore the topology of this modal debate, rather than to argue in favor of the weak or strong interpretation. Still, in the working out of this exploration, arguments are given for both sides, some better than others.

The Woman, the Waiter, and the Argument that Bad Faith is Contingent

In the second division of the chapter “Bad Faith” (“Forms of Bad Faith”), Sartre claims that we can “resolve the difficulty”⁸ of how to come to terms with bad faith as a unity of opposites, that is, as being both the deceiver and the deceived, if we establish examples that illustrate bad faith. To this end, Sartre presents a series of memorable examples, including one of a woman on a date and another of a waiter at a café.⁹ These examples are emblematic of Sartre’s tremendous gift as a literary figure as much as a philosopher, and they also open the way for “weaker” interpretations of bad

⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge, 2018), 91.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁹ Sartre also presents a third example, the homosexual. *Ibid.*, 108–109.

faith in that the examples help to demonstrate the contingent, temporary nature of bad faith.¹⁰

Sartre offers, as a first example, a psychological portrait of a woman on a date with a man for the first time: “She knows full well the intentions entertained, in relation to her, by the man speaking to her. She also knows that sooner or later she will have to make a decision. But she does not want to feel its urgency.”¹¹

The woman commits bad faith to delay the inevitable decision she will have to make about whether to go further with the man or not. She is in bad faith because she both knows the man’s intentions and the urgency that this creates but acts as if she does not know or does not fully realize these intentions, thereby causing a double-position that allows her to escape, for a moment, the existential responsibility of the decision she faces with the man.

She does not see his behavior as an attempt to make the so-called “opening moves”; in other words, she does not want to see the possibilities of development over time that his behavior presents; she confines his activity to what it is in the present, and has no wish to read, in the sentences he addresses to her, anything but their explicit meaning.¹²

By fixating only on the present and choosing to read into his actions only the most literal meaning and not the full meaning of the situation, the woman deceives herself. Sartre is careful here to limit the scope of the woman’s bad faith: it is not her intention to deceive the man—she is not lying to another—in the way that ordinary deception is typically organized, with its clean, categorically distinct dualism of the deceiver and the deceived as separate people. Her bad faith is, instead, a specific kind of self-deception where she simultaneously understands and does not understand the context and future direction of the man’s intentions.

The underlying concept of bad faith generated in this way makes use of the twofold property of human beings, of being a *facticity* and a *transcendence*. These two aspects of human-reality are, in truth—and ought to be—capable of being validly coordinated. But bad faith does not want to coordinate them, or to resolve them by means of a synthesis. From its point of view, it is a matter of affirming their identity, even while preserving their differences. Facticity must be affirmed as *being* transcendence and transcendence as *being* facticity, in a way that allows us, at the moment we apprehend one of them, to find ourselves suddenly faced with the other.¹³

¹⁰ Two articles that have guided my analysis of these examples are D.Z. Phillips, “Bad Faith and Sartre’s Waiter,” in *Philosophy*, 56 (1981) and Jonathan Webber, “Bad Faith and the Other,” in *Reading Sartre: On Phenomenology and Existentialism* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

¹¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 97.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 99.

Sartre often characterizes bad faith, as he does in this subsequent passage about the woman, as the uncoordinated interplay between facticity and transcendence. We can think of facticity as having the character of identity, actuality, and presence as it connects to Sartre's terminology of "being-in-itself." In contrast, we can think of transcendence as having the character of potentiality, projection, in other words, an attitude that looks forward into the future and tracks something beyond and thereby connects to Sartre's terminology of "being-for-itself." By fixating on the present moment and interpreting the man in only the most literal way, the woman does not allow the twofold property of facticity and transcendence to resolve itself, as it normally would, but suspends and delays this resolution. When he touches her hand, she neither withdraws nor accepts, but simply leaves it there as if she had forgotten it. The identity of facticity as imbalanced with its corresponding transcendence is embodied in the double-position of her noticing and not noticing his hand on hers, and in the way that she allows herself generally to separate from her own body. Yet, by lifting herself and the man up to the most intense conversations about life,¹⁴ she also affirms the identity of transcendence in an unresolved way without fully aligning it with the facticity of the situation, drawing them far beyond the projections of the moment. Through an array of bad faith tactics, she gains for a moment an otherwise impossible and unsustainable position of an ambiguity between her facticity and transcendence, where she neither accepts nor denies the man, but suspends them in the in-between of the decision.

One consequence we can draw from this analysis of the woman is that her bad faith is as temporary as the suspension effect it brings about. Bad faith may appear to be a necessary element of flirtation, since it enables the double-position of withholding without denying the man's intentions. And yet its prevalence as a condition for the ambiguity of the moment is overshadowed by its fleetingly temporary status. Sartre describes it as a set of tactics that the woman makes use of to navigate the situation. But as the situation resolves so too goes the bad faith. Bad faith is, in this sense, clearly contingent.

Let's turn to Sartre's second example of the waiter and attempt to measure the extent of the contingency of bad faith in this example. There is more confusion in this text about how prevalently this character is in bad faith. In some passages, Sartre makes it sound as if only some waiters are in bad faith, while others are not. And even if a waiter is in bad faith some of the time or is in it to some degree and with some amount of intensity, the waiter may eventually emerge out of it. Sartre's descriptions of a shaky waiter

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

boy who has not yet found his way in the world suggest this temporary state of bad faith:

Consider this café waiter. His movements are animated and intent, a bit too precise, a bit too quick; he approaches the customers with a bit too much animation; he leans forward a bit too attentively, his voice and his eyes expressing an interest in the customer's order that is a bit too solicitous. Finally, here he is, on his way back, and attempting in his attitude to imitate the inflexible exactitude of some kind of automaton, while carrying his tray with the recklessness characteristic of a tightrope walker, holding it in a constantly unstable and constantly disrupted equilibrium, which he constantly restores with a light movement of his arm and hand.¹⁵

Sartre describes the waiter as someone who does not quite fit in with what he is doing. The waiter's movements are out-of-place. His body is ahead of itself. He is overly focused on each activity and movement. Here, Sartre makes bad faith appear to be part of the process by which we come to realize ourselves in a given vocation. The overactions of his body betray the underlying conflict that the waiter has not fully made a decision about who he is. For Sartre, it is of our utmost freedom that we have to decide for ourselves and make our own way. We cannot have these decisions made for us. But we can, nevertheless, delay the inevitable decisions that we must make. This delay, where we both are and are not, is expressed as bad faith. It is an expression of the complexity of freedom and of our desire to avoid this complexity. But this interpretation of the waiter also suggests that we grow out of bad faith as we settle down and embody the vocation. Moreover, it suggests that coming of age might not always require being in bad faith at all. Sartre describes a shaky waiter boy who suffers from the symptoms of alienation from a vocation. Not all waiters are like this.

However, the next passage in the text offers a different, more prevalent interpretation of bad faith. Here, Sartre suggests that the profession of being a waiter always requires being in bad faith; he goes even further in the extreme that the waiter is just an example, and really all tradesmen are in bad faith insofar as their social roles appear to be fixed when they are not.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 102–103.

[The waiter] is playing, amusing himself. But what, then, is he playing at? One does not need to watch him for long to realize: he is playing at being a café waiter. Nothing in this should surprise us: play is a type of research and investigation. The child plays with his body to explore it, to take stock of it; the café waiter plays with his condition in order to actualize it. This obligation is imposed in the same way on all shopkeepers: their condition is entirely ceremonial, and the public demands them to actualize it as a ceremony; there is the dance of the grocer, the tailor, the auctioneer, through which they try to persuade their customers that they are nothing more than a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor.¹⁶

In contrast to the shaky young waiter in the first description, who is temporarily in bad faith by tricking himself into thinking he knows what he is doing when he does not, Sartre here presents bad faith as a prevalent condition for being a waiter or being a tradesman in general. As with the woman on the date, there is once again an unbalanced interplay between facticity and transcendence. To be a waiter, one must take up the attitude of being a waiter, but this attitude then stands against what one really is as a facticity that does not fully embody the whole truth of the situation. As much as we embody it, having a vocation equally stands against us as an overly-sedimented facticity that we inherently transcend insofar as we are not only a waiter, a grocer, a tailor, etc. The waiter is not only a waiter but fundamentally transcends this characterization; nevertheless, society limits the waiter to only this characterization in its immediate facticity. We can draw an even larger consequence from this, which is that we are in bad faith whenever we play the part of a social role (e.g., a waiter, a grocer, etc., but also a father, a Parisian, etc.). This interpretation leads to a much more prevalent version of bad faith. How often are we playing at social roles? How pronounced is our self-deception when we posture as if we exist only as the role we are currently assigned to in our social settings. Certainly, there may be periods of rest where we feel alive and genuine and engaged with our work and our place in society, without self-consciously pretending to play roles that we do not fully embody in our inner being. Sartre may have also overexaggerated the extent of this discordance between the roles that society places on us and our transcendence of these roles. We also may go through periods in our lives where we refuse to play the game of upholding social roles and embrace instead a momentary resolution of our facticity and

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

transcendence. But it is also clear that this broader function of bad faith uncovers a more prevalent form, which while not entirely constant in our lives, may account for a portion of our life energy.

Both of Sartre's examples—of the woman and the waiter—imply various degrees of contingency. Since she merely uses bad faith as a tactic, the woman's bad faith has a high degree of contingency to it. The example of the waiter, on the other hand, is a bit more complicated to analyze. If we interpret Sartre's description as a coming-of-age story, then the double-directions of bad faith that emerge out of choosing one's vocation from a multitude of possibilities present a slightly different register of contingency from the woman's, but nevertheless present a temporary state of bad faith. Although the further interpretation—that implicates all waiters, all tradesmen, and all social roles in bad faith insofar as we are playing a part that we are not fully embodying—offers a much more prevalent version of bad faith, even this interpretation falls short of being a completely constant state of bad faith. It is the closest Sartre comes in these examples to the claim that bad faith is prevalent, but our analysis should stop short of the conclusion that bad faith is a permanent fixture in our lives, since it emerges from the limited sphere of social roles and since Sartre builds into the description a confusion about whether the waiter, or anyone in any vocation, can eventually come to embody that vocation harmoniously in good faith.

As further textual evidence for the argument that Sartre thinks bad faith is at least somewhat contingent, let's look at a noteworthy passage from *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946):

We ... judge a man when we assert that he is acting in bad faith. If we define man's situation as one of free choice, in which he has no recourse to excuses or outside aid, then any man who takes refuge behind his passions, any man who fabricates some deterministic theory, is operating in bad faith. One might object by saying, "But why shouldn't he choose bad faith?" My answer is that I do not pass moral judgment against him, but I call his bad faith an error. Here, we cannot avoid making a judgment of truth. Bad faith is obviously a lie because it is a dissimulation of man's full freedom of commitment. On the same grounds, I would say that I am also acting in bad faith if I declare that I am bound to uphold certain values, because it is a contradiction to embrace these values while at the same time affirming that I am bound by them. If someone were to ask me: "What if I want to be in bad faith?" I would reply, "There is no reason why

you should not be, but I declare that you are, and that a strictly consistent attitude alone demonstrates good faith.”¹⁷

Here, Sartre clearly presents the view that bad faith is a temporary state that we come in and out of. Even if it is an important part of our everyday lives, as the examples of the woman and the waiter suggest, Sartre claims here that bad faith has normative implications. By calling bad faith an “error,” and by being critical of people who actively seek out bad faith and even of people who subsist in bad faith through negligence, Sartre here takes up an ethical stance and talks about bad faith as something that we should avoid. We should avoid it whenever we can, and for those of us who are in bad faith, we should try to climb out of it. Moreover, we can demonstrate “good faith” by acknowledging that we are in bad faith. The worst position is to be in such a deeply-sedimented state of bad faith that we are unwilling to fully acknowledge it, even though we know we are in it since we are the ones lying to ourselves. This passage from *Existentialism Is a Humanism* is striking and revealing, but it also conflicts to some extent with the more positive aspects of bad faith that Sartre draws up in the chapter of *Being and Nothingness*,¹⁸ where he demonstrates how bad faith is used to create productive ambiguities and to suspend us, momentarily, in positions which are not only in error, but are also transformative for the embodiment of our existential freedom.

Having Bad Faith about the Ultimate Goals of Life

Although Sartre’s literary examples of bad faith are significant and powerful in their own way, do they fall short of exhibiting the momentous philosophical significance that the bad faith concept implies? What if bad faith is more deeply rooted in us than Sartre’s examples and the passage from *Existentialism Is a Humanism* imply? What if the human condition is, at its core, mixed up with bad faith, not in a sinister way where we try to deceive and get over on another and take advantage, but in a lying-to-oneself kind of way, where we sustain and delay and cover over the full recognition that being is not something that can be reconciled? What if we are in bad faith about being itself?

¹⁷ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 47–48.

¹⁸ Because Sartre gave it as a public lecture without intending to publish it as is, some commentators are wary that *Existentialism Is a Humanism* is a hasty work that does not fully represent Sartre’s mature views.

Socrates's radical questioning of the basic assumptions of reality comes to mind here. Most of us behave as if we know this or that about reality. What if this attitude of knowing things is a farce? What if the only true knowledge is that we do not know? What if knowing that you do not know is the only way out of bad faith? As a continuation of the radical questioning that the Socratic method exemplifies, let's analyze the strong interpretation, the branch that views bad faith to be very prevalent, even constant, in our lives. This branch hinges on the question of whether there is something in our day-to-day experience that we are constantly in bad faith about. Let's explore this version of the idea of bad faith by arguing that we are constantly in bad faith whenever we engage in any act of the will—that every purpose or goal is done in bad faith—that the meaningfulness of determinate being is only possible because of bad faith. This version of bad faith comes from an argument from Schopenhauer in section 29 of *The World as Will and Representation*:

Every will is the will to something, it has an object, a goal of its willing: now the will that is presented to us as the essence in itself of the world: what does it ultimately will, or what does it strive for?... Everywhere, a ground can only be given for appearances as such, for particular things, never for the will itself or for the Idea in which it is adequately objectified. So we can look for a cause for every individual movement or alteration in nature... but never for the natural force itself that is revealed in this and in countless other similar appearances: and it is real ignorance, born of a lack of clear-headedness, when people look for the cause of gravity, of electricity, etc.¹⁹

Here, Schopenhauer recognizes that all willing is a willing towards some goal or object, but that, at the same time, our constant willful striving has, in its essence, an empty underside. There is an underlying, inexplicable aimlessness to our will in an ultimate sense. We strive in determinate ways, and we often know what we are after; sometimes we reach a given goal; sometimes we fail to reach it; but, nevertheless, each goal is concrete and obtainable. The problem arises, however, when we think more deeply about what it is we are really doing when we strive. Can we ultimately say why we will? Schopenhauer's examples of gravity and electricity explain this distinction well. It is easy enough to give an account of such principles in

¹⁹ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation: Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 187.

nature, and even to give an account of how they function, their underlying laws and causes-within-causes, etc. But when we try to give an account of the reason why these laws are in an ultimate sense, we either fail altogether or, like people of “real ignorance,” according to Schopenhauer, think that we can seek out and find an ultimate origin, where there is none. Schopenhauer continues:

Every human being always has purposes and motives guiding his actions, and always knows how to account for his particular deeds: but when asked why he wills in general, or why in general he wills to exist, he would not have an answer and in fact the question would make no sense to him.²⁰

Instead of the woman and the waiter, proponents of the Schopenhauerian branch of the strong interpretation think that it would have been better if Sartre had given more radical examples. The business person who constantly puts off the lurking question of the real reason why she desires to earn money is in bad faith. Of course, on the surface, there are many reasons. She might want to start a family or save money for the future or buy luxuries and live a life of convenience in the present. Certainly, these are reasons, and arguably good reasons, to earn money. But if she reflects more deeply on her situation, will she not come to the unsettling thought that beyond the local, short-sighted goals of promotion, living a lifestyle, saving for the future, etc., there is no real, ultimate goal to any of this? We maintain life for as long as we can, but eventually, inevitably, we die. The business person reaches goal after goal, collects wealth, buys luxuries; but what is the real point of doing this? She carries on and grows old, but because that underlying question is always there and is not properly addressed, she carries on in bad faith. We all carry on in bad faith. We eat, sleep, give birth, raise families, relate to each other, and get ready to die without being able to give a proper account of why we do these things that we do. Certainly, we can say that it is for the sake of health, or it is for the sake of our children, or it is simply because nature compels us. But to give these answers to that question is to continue to deceive ourselves in the most basic way about that which we are constantly doing in affirming our lives. This is the perspective from the proponent of the Schopenhauerian branch of the strong interpretation.

We are constantly pretending, like Hamlet plays a part, that our willful actions have some ultimate reason to them, when they do not. We hide behind religious and metaphysical stories about the afterlife so that we can

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 188.

carry on and continue to pretend that our lives have meaning, beyond the relative circular meaning we attribute to them when we do not look too closely at what we are doing. We hide behind career goals and financial benchmarks so that we can continue to deceive ourselves. We play games of chance and immerse ourselves in consuming forms of entertainment so that we can put off for later the underlying meaningless of it all. We are constantly spurred on by a multitude of local and sometimes competing aims, which drive us to continue in this way and that way to reach for something. But since we do not really know in an ultimate sense what we are reaching for, we live in a constant state of bad faith.

Let's apply what we know from Sartre's examples of the woman and the waiter to this strong interpretation. By being in bad faith, we delay and suspend making a decision, which, in the case of the strong interpretation, is a decision we usually delay until death. On the one hand, in the back of our minds, we know the whole time that there is something deeply missing from our comprehension of why we ultimately will. And yet, on the other hand, we continue to will in bad faith.

Likewise, the bad faith of the strong interpretation takes on many forms. (1) We can lie to ourselves by pretending that we are in fact seeking out the truth of our will, or, even, that we have found the source of the will, for example, in nature or God. According to Schopenhauer, this is one of the ways that we lie to ourselves. We cover over the underlying suspicion that this answer does not really solve the problem, since we are just as well unable to grasp the ultimate reason for nature or God as we are unable to grasp the real reason behind our individual will. Or, (2) we can console ourselves that the underlying rationale of the will should not really matter to us. A common form of bad faith is to simply shrug and say, "let's live and not worry about why we ultimately will." This form of bad faith ignores the fact that comprehension of the will is the driving force behind the meaning in our lives. Our lives are meaningful in terms of the goals we establish to support the reason why we will for this or that. When we immerse ourselves in the reasoning behind the will at an everyday level, while casting off the larger question of why we will at all, we live according to a double standard and thus in bad faith. Ignoring the problem leads to bad faith just as much as falsely declaring the problem to be solved by positing an abstract concept and then not asking further for the reasoning process behind it.

How prevalent is the bad faith of this Schopenhauerian interpretation? Since it establishes bad faith about the basic conditions of life—sleeping, eating, procreating, etc.—it becomes nearly impossible to avoid being constantly implicated in this version of bad faith. Perhaps one way to avoid bad faith is to follow Schopenhauer's theory to its logical endpoint, to his primary solution to the problem of suffering, which he

establishes in Book 4 of *The World as Will and Representation*, the complete denial of the will to life. In this case, the ascetic monk who ceases to will at all likewise emerges out of this pernicious form of bad faith by refusing to engage in the basic conditions that maintain life. We thus find an element of contingency in this strong interpretation after all, insofar as there is some way, however extreme, to cast off one's bad faith.

But we can also argue that the constancy of the strong interpretation challenges us to change our attitude about bad faith. Rather than viewing it as "an error" that we should avoid or overcome if we can, the strong interpretation helps us to think about how to diagnose bad faith and live with it. The question of how frequent bad faith is in our daily lives predisposes us to assume that bad faith is something that can be overcome, even if it takes the most radical disposition of an ascetic monk. But maybe this is the wrong approach. Maybe, instead, the aim should be to acknowledge bad faith as an inevitable structure of fundamental reality in that we aim to attribute meaning to the basic tasks of life, where, at the same time, we can find no ultimate goal or reason. In other words, if we break from Schopenhauer's prescriptive project of denying the will but borrow his argument that there is no ultimate goal or reason to why we will, we are left with, arguably, the most unsettling, all-encompassing register of bad faith. We are all in bad faith constantly insofar as we attribute meaning and have goals where the reason for the meaning and the goals cannot be truthfully established. And yet the point would not be to deny the will nor to find our way out of this completely sedimented self-deception, as Schopenhauer thinks we should. The point, instead, would be to describe and analyze the condition of being in bad faith about the basic structures of affirming our lives.

Conclusion

Sartre probably wants his reader to interpret bad faith as at least somewhat contingent. There is clear textual evidence for the weaker interpretation, such as Sartre's examples of the woman and the waiter, as well as the normative undertone of his discussion of bad faith in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. And yet, Sartre sometimes complicates the matter by claiming that there is an ontological dimension to bad faith, and that it acts as a condition for truth, such as when he writes: "Bad faith determines the nature of truth ... the ontological characteristic of this world of bad faith, in which the subject suddenly immerses himself, is that, in it, being is what it is not, and is not what it is."²¹ Moreover, it is one type of question to ask whether Sartre himself intends the concept of bad faith to be contingent; it is another type of question

²¹ Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 114.

to ask whether bad faith should be recognized as contingent, beyond whether Sartre himself intended the concept to be this way. There are, arguably, valuable insights to be drawn from the concept of bad faith when we distance ourselves from what Sartre actually thought and wanted his reader to understand about bad faith and, instead, embrace how the concept can be applied and what ramifications emerge from this application, especially if we look beyond Sartre's examples of the woman and the waiter to the more disturbing example of someone in bad faith about the ultimate goals of life.

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