

Critically assess the concept of bad faith?

The feeling that we are all playing a part, a role in life is not a foreign idea at all. But what if these roles we play in society, how we define ourselves causes us to bring ourselves harm? This harm, otherwise known as the concept of bad faith, will be the focus of this essay, aiming to provide an overview of the concept before critically assessing bad faith in greater detail to highlight the strengths and weaknesses within Sartre's theory.

Renowned philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre was famous for his works in existentialism and perhaps most notably the problem known as bad faith. In his book *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre identified a problem which plagued modern life and this problem was bad faith. 'Bad Faith is defined by Sartre as a flight from anguish, from freedom and from responsibility.' (Palmer, 1995, p.78). Bad Faith occurs when we lie to ourselves about how free we truly are, we do this to spare ourselves from short term pain, or distract ourselves from realising how free we are but in actuality we are only causing ourselves to suffer greater in the long term. But why would we deny our freedom? After all, we are often taught that freedom is a good thing. Sartre answers this by saying freedom is a burden, a human is a being for itself but we desire to be beings in itself. In other words, humans desire to be instructed, be told our purpose. Our desire to be determined by another drives us to conform into a certain role, one that is predefined, which in turn allows us to get a taste of that desire, however that desire does come at a price, as it causes us to live in inauthenticity.

However, what does living life inauthentically mean? To live life inauthentically means that we live our lives in Bad Faith, conforming the predefined societal roles and denying our freedom. Being able to live life authentically is what we gain once we liberate ourselves from the deception of bad faith. Sartre emphasises that we must resist the temptation of giving into the predefined roles, instead we should be free, not limiting ourselves down to what is simple and easy. Whilst resisting the temptation may feel wrong and be a challenge, Sartre emphasizes that we shouldn't be afraid to take responsibility for our freedom, as it will only save us from the long-term suffering that we would continue to experience if we remained in denial.

Bad Faith often happens at work as we tend to play a role to fulfil the job we are doing. Sartre uses the analogy of a Waiter to further explain this concept. In this analogy Sartre describes what he sees, a waiter. The waiters

movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid...He bends forward a little too eagerly...Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automation while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker. (Sartre, 1943, p.82).

Sartre then goes on to say that as we watch the waiter we feel a wave of uncanniness wash over us, as we realise that something is off with the waiter, something isn't quite right. The precision in the waiter's actions, the attention to detail in his every movement, it doesn't

seem natural, that's when Sartre makes the realisation of what is wrong. '*We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing **at** being a waiter in a cafe*' (Sartre, 1943, p.82). What Sartre means by this is that the waiter, so intent to perform perfectly in his role, has defined himself as just simply a waiter. Which in turn has caused him to suppress and lose parts of himself, therefore he has unknowingly hindered his ability to live his life authentically as he is limiting himself to just the definition of a waiter. However, this analogy can just simply be interpreted that the waiter is just doing his job and is so intent on the perfection of the role as he wants to succeed. But Sartre emphasises that this isn't actually the issue. The problem with the waiter defining himself so simply is that he is reducing himself down to a fixed identity, a predefined societal role. To the extent that he is not only ignoring other parts of himself but completely unrecognising that humans are always changing, growing and maturing. If the waiter defines himself as simply a waiter then he believes he is such, therefore making him guilty of having **bad faith**. To emphasise Sartre's argument '*the waiter is not guilty because he has a job as a waiter; in Sartre's example, the waiter is guilty because that's all he thinks he is.*' ([Maden, 2023](#)). But then the question arises of why Sartre is presenting this notion, what is the purpose? The waiter serves as an example, a device to create a relatable character experiencing something we are all guilty of, which is of course, bad faith. Akin to the waiter we are all guilty of reducing ourselves down to a predefined societal role and more often than not, our lives grow to become shaped around said role. For instance; a student shapes their time around their academic work, scheduling activities around lectures or study hours, similarly a waiter's free time is scheduled around their work rota, often instructed when they will be working and not having much choice in the matter. All of this, the definitions, the scheduling, the control that the predefined roles have over our lives, conditions us into certain behaviours, forcing us to deny our own freedom. We give up, bowing down to social pressures and giving in to the roles, denying even the possibility of the other options that we have, in turn causing us to lie to ourselves about how free we actually are. Thus we live life inauthentically in bad faith.

Sartre's *Bad Faith* serves as a powerful explanation of self-deception. He succeeds in explaining how humans avoid responsibility, even if the reasoning behind it is controversial to some degree, it forces us to acknowledge the responsibility in which we all hold and face the outcomes head on. We are '*condemned to be free*' (Sartre, 1943), meaning that we always have a choice, no matter the circumstances, according to Sartre we always have other options. Even if we choose unwise options that result in bad situations there will still be other ways to be free, other paths to take. When we realise our true freedom and take responsibilities we are forced out of the roles we hide in i.e; the waiter, we are encouraged into a life of authentic living. Sartre using the analogy of a waiter creates a relatable everyday example, one that most can see in themselves. Thus causing the example to be easier to accept to everyone. The analogy is also rather different to others within

philosophy as it stems from reality. As the example came from Sartre's own experience of sitting in a cafe and observing those around him, a realistic element is added to his concept, once again causing it to be easier for us to understand. However, that is not to say that the concept is easily accepted as we may deny or ignore the reality of the concept to avoid short-term pain. The concept of bad faith also had a huge influence on existentialism, growing into a key idea that later shaped discussions about authenticity, freedom and identity. It also had influence in the worlds of psychology and existential therapy.

Whilst these strengths provide some degree of merit to Sartre's concept, there are still some major flaws that highlight the problems and imperfections behind the concept of bad faith.

First of all, Sartre's notion that we can simply choose to be free and change the path we are leading to live life authentically, severely overestimates human freedom. It is evident that Sartre seems to overlook the constraints and limits individuals face every day, hindering them to certain jobs or life paths, hence Sartre has made the mistake of underestimating struggles that can affect a person's ability to not have to conform to societal roles. Struggles such as poverty, trauma, mental illness and domestic abuse can all factor into how much freedom an individual can hold. For example; a woman is in an abusive relationship with a man, she finds herself coerced, manipulated and gaslit. Her partner has isolated her from her family and friends, he has also caused her to become financially dependent on him. Sartre's notion that she would still have a choice to be free, to step out from the role is now not only extremely hard to do but also incredibly ignorant. The woman has no family, no friends to ask for help, she has no money to use to get housing or access support and finally the amount of emotional strength she would need to escape, especially after needing to rebuild her confidence and self worth back up after years of abuse. Thus, Sartre's idea that there are other paths for freedom, seems to be proven wrong, or not as easy as he says.

Linking to the previous criticism that Sartre is overestimating human freedom, bad faith also falls into having the problem of victim blaming. For if everyone is always free and we are responsible for our actions, even if we have no choice in our actions, we are still responsible for the outcomes and consequences. That would mean those who are oppressed would have to be responsible for their oppression. For instance; a homeless person would be responsible for their homelessness, which in some cases might be true to some degree, however this view is extremely short sighted. Overlooking circumstances such as income, traumatic living experiences and other factors that add up to cause an individual to fall into such poverty. The view also creates the idea that people in bad situations have just chosen badly, once again being responsible for their choices, this connects back to the previous example of a woman in a domestic abuse relationship. It seems inherently wrong and ethically problematic to say that she would be responsible for ending up in such a bad situation, especially since due to the coercive nature of the

relationship, the woman wouldn't have known the situation she was getting into until it was too late. This seems to be unfair as it puts the blame on the victim in that scenario, surely the blame should be on the abuser not the victim? But according to Sartre's concept this would be incorrect, the woman would be fully responsible for her actions and the consequences she was facing as part of the relationship.

Another flaw in the concept is that the nature of self-deception is rather paradoxical. For how can someone both know and not know something at the same time? If bad faith is lying to yourself then who is lying? And who is being deceived? If we know we are lying to ourselves then how can we possibly be deceived by that very same lie? Surely we can only be deceived if we don't know the lie is a lie. One possible work around this is that we deceive ourselves so strongly that we actually trick ourselves into believing the lie, we fall so far into the pits of denial that the lie we are telling ourselves about our freedom becomes our reality. However, this attempt at a solution does also have its flaws as it could lead to a regression of lies, if we deceive ourselves about bad faith, so flawlessly that we don't even realise then what else could we be deceiving ourselves about? Everything we know would have to be called into question as we wouldn't know what to trust anymore.

Similarly to the paradoxical problem, another arises, do we actually hold the power and capability to choose whether we believe in something? Carole Haynes-Curtis writes in their article 'The 'faith' of bad faith' *'The idea that we can in some way choose whether we believe something or whether we know something is alien to our tradition according to which whether we know or do not know depends on what is the case. In order for us to be said to know p, p must be true.'* ([Haynes-Curtis, 1988](#)). This point that Haynes-Curtis makes is a valid one, as for us to know something then it must be true, even if it is a subjective topic our opinion would be true to us. Hence if Sartre is arguing that we are in denial and living in bad faith by conforming to social predefined roles which may be true to us then he would be wrong in his concept to some degree. For if a waiter enjoys his role as a waiter, it was his dream, therefore making it in turn his truth, as he knows he has always wanted to be a waiter, which he is, then surely he would be living authentically, as he would be living in truth as opposed to Sartre's idea of freedom which would be false in the waiter's eyes. This raises the question of whether bad faith could be subjective, as individuals may have conflicting views of freedom. Sartre views the waiter as living in bad faith as they are conforming to a predefined role and ignoring their freedom, whereas the waiter feels they are living their lives freely, fulfilling his dream job and being good at it. However, it is likely that Sartre would argue that the waiter is deceived into believing that it was his dream job, to ease the short-term pain of realising his freedom.

The final criticism that will be discussed in this essay is that Sartre's explanation of self-deception causes us to call into question psychological realism. His explanation is often criticised for being too philosophical and not empirically grounded. Modern psychology does a more thorough and widely acceptable job of defining self-deception. Defining it as consisting of cognitive biases, defense mechanisms, unconscious processes and most

importantly not being deliberate. This definition seems much more realistic as it accounts for trauma and goes against the idea that self deception is deliberate, instead it is more unconscious, accidental even. This could serve as an argument against Sartre's concept as if self deception is not deliberate, then we would not be able to deceive ourselves into bad faith, however Sartre could argue that the deception is unconscious, a defense mechanism that we automatically make to protect ourselves from pain.

Furthermore, Sartre's concept of bad faith provides a powerful explanation of self deception and highlights the importance of responsibility and freedom. However, it does have multiple flaws. Sartre severely overestimates human freedom by underestimating social influences and struggles, whilst also placing blame on victims experiencing bad situations. The concept also holds paradoxical issues, which result in us questioning what we know as true and finally Sartre's explanation of self deception does not fully align with modern psychology's definition, which provides a much more compelling and realistic notion than in comparison to Sartre's. Hence, whilst Sartre's concept of Bad faith is interesting and does highlight the importance of freedom and responsibility, the weaknesses seem to outweigh the strengths, resulting to some degree in a problematic concept.

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