

# Existentialism and Phenomenology

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# What does Sartre mean when he contends that humans are “condemned to be free”?

## Introduction:

This essay addresses the question: What does Jean-Paul Sartre mean when he claims that human beings are ‘condemned to be free’ (Sartre, *Existentialism and humanism*, 1948, p. 34)? I begin by arguing that this claim cannot be understood in isolation from Sartre’s ontology. Accordingly, I will first reconstruct his distinction between ‘being-in-itself (*l’etre-en-soi*)’ (Sartre, *Being and nothingness: An essay on phenomenological ontology*, 1943/1956, p. 25) and ‘being-for-itself (*l’etre-pour-soi*)’ (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 25) to show how freedom arises structurally from the nature of consciousness itself. To clarify this, I will present Sartre’s position in the form of a dialogue to allow the core concepts – nothingness, facticity, transcendence, and responsibility – to emerge through sustained questioning.

From this ontological starting point, I shall explain why Sartre describes freedom as inescapable, why he links it to a feeling of abandonment and anguish, and why bad faith is our way of trying to escape this situation. In the second half of the essay, I turn to two critical objections drawn from secondary literature. First, I examine the concern that Sartre’s account of radical freedom risks incoherence, especially in his treatment of bad faith and self-deception. Second, I consider the objection that his concept of freedom strays too far from social and historical determination, potentially overstating individual responsibility. The aim is to assess whether Sartre’s ontology successfully grounds his claim that we are ‘condemned to be free’ (Sartre, 1948, p. 34), or whether the concept collapses under frivolous scrutiny.

## A dialogue on being and freedom:

**Sceptic:** You say Sartre thinks we are 'condemned to be free' (Sartre, 1948, p. 34). That's a bit dramatic... Also, why condemned? Why not just say free?

**Ertras:** Because freedom is no gift. For Sartre, it is a condition we cannot escape. As he writes, 'man is condemned to be free' (Sartre, 1948, p. 34) because once 'thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does' (Sartre, 1948, p. 34).

**S:** But how can freedom be something inescapable? Surely freedom means having options?

**E:** Freedom is deeper than merely having choices between options. It arises from what consciousness *is*. That is why we must begin with Sartre's ontology.

**S:** Ontology, it is then. What are his basic distinctions, and what does he apply these to?

**E:** Two modes of being are distinguished, being-in-itself and being-for-itself (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 25). The 'being-in-itself is never either possible or impossible. It is' (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. xx). It is full positivity and self-identical. It contains no negation and does not transcend itself. A rock is what it is; It is not a *dangerous* rock, it's just a rock.

**S:** And the latter?

**E:** That is consciousness. Unlike the rock, 'consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question' (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 24). Think of consciousness as a kind of rupture or gap in being; it introduces distance between what it is and what it takes itself to be.

**S:** Hold up, does Sartre view the human being as consciousness? And consciousness is but a gap, you say?

**E:** Yes, to both. Sartre adopts from René Descartes the grounding of philosophy in the self-certainty of consciousness. As Herbert Marcuse describes it, 'like Descartes, this philosophy finds the foundation in the self-certainty of the Cogito, in the consciousness of the Ego' (Marcuse, 1948, p. 309). This is where Sartre can state that consciousness introduces *nothingness* into the world; it is but a gap. By this, he meant it can step back from what is given, it can negate, it can say, I am not this. In Sartre's words, consciousness is 'a being which constitutes itself as lack' (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 272).

S: So... Freedom comes from this nothingness?

E: Exactly. Because consciousness is not identical with its current state, it is never fixed. It is always beyond what it is (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. Part Two). Sartre calls this *transcendence*. Consciousness transcends its facticity – it's given situation (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. Part Four).

S: Wait, what is facticity?

E: Facticity is everything about us that is given and not chosen: our past, our body, our social position, and our history. Sartre does not deny these, but he insists that facticity does not determine our meaning (Sartre, 1943/1956, pp. 127-133).

S: So even if I'm poor, sick, or oppressed, I'm still free?

E: Free in a structural sense. You are unable to choose your starting point, but you can choose what it means to you. Sartre writes, freedom is what you do with what's been done to you (Sartre, Between existentialism and Marxism, 1975, pp. 34-35).

S: Sounds like he's overstating responsibility.

E: That is one objection to his work. But first, we must see why freedom is inescapable.

S: Go on.

E: Refusing to choose is itself a choice. Sartre says, 'I can always choose, but I must know that if I do not choose, that is still a choice' (Sartre, 1948, p. 48). There is no neutral ground; even surrendering to pressure is an act of endorsing that surrender.

S: Ah, so I cannot escape freedom by blaming my character?

E: No, you cannot. Your character is something you sustain. Sartre argues that we are responsible not only for our actions, but for our way of being (Sartre, 1943/1956, pp. 708-711). We are what he calls a project (Sartre, 1943/1956, pp. 722-725).

S: A project?

E: Yes. Each person organises their life around a fundamental orientation – what Sartre calls a ‘fundamental project’ (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 724). This project is not consciously chosen in a single moment; rather, it is an ongoing structure of how one interprets the world (Sartre, 1943/1956, pp. 724-725).

S: And my past actions express this project?

E: They reveal it. But because consciousness is never identical with itself, even this project is not fixed like a thing. It is continuously sustained.

S: I see – so we are condemned because there is no solid self to hide behind, only a continuous projection beyond what I am not and what I have yet to be.

E: Precisely. That is where *anguish* comes in. When one realises that nothing outside us determines our values, it unsettles us. Sartre writes that anguish arises when we recognise ourselves as the sole source of values (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 34).

S: That sounds lonely.

E: It is. Sartre calls this condition *abandonment*. If God does not exist, there is no pre-given moral law. Man is abandoned, because he finds himself alone, without excuse (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 34).

S: So, there’s no inherent human nature either? Were humans not supposed to come into being as consciousness?

E: Not in the traditional sense. Sartre’s formula is that ‘existence precedes essence’ (Sartre, 1948, p. 28). We do come into being as consciousness – as being for itself – but consciousness does not have a fixed nature or blueprint. There is no content built into consciousness for us to use. We first find ourselves existing as consciousness in the world, and only afterwards define ourselves through what we choose and do.

S: That seems empowering.

E: And terrifying, because we are the source of meaning, we are responsible for it. This is where bad faith comes into the picture.

S: Bad faith?

E: Bad faith is our attempt to escape this responsibility. It is self-deception.

S: How can I deceive myself? Wouldn't I know I'm doing it?

E: That is the classic objection. Here, Sartre describes bad faith as lying to oneself (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 89). But unlike ordinary lying, the deceiver and the deceived are the same person.

S: That sounds incoherent...

E: As many critics would agree. But Sartre's point is subtle; Consciousness is not a solid object; it is divided between facticity and transcendence. In bad faith, we identify entirely with one side and deny the other.

S: Give me an example.

E: His famous example is the waiter who acts as though he *is* nothing but a waiter (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 102). He performs his role as though his identity is fixed. And if I asked him why he isn't a chef, and he replies with, I only have the skills to be a waiter. This is bad faith.

S: But the waiter really does have those skills, is that not a fact?

E: Yes, and that is his facticity. The mistake here is not having skills – it is treating those skills as his entire being. He is both what he has become and what he can still become. In bad faith, he subjects himself to the role and forgets that he can exceed it.

S: So bad faith is not simply lying about the facts – it is freezing oneself into them and trying to escape into being-in-itself?

E: Exactly, we try to become like things – solid, determined, and defined to escape the burden of having to choose what is next.

S: And this is why freedom is inescapable?

E: Yes. Even self-deception presupposes this freedom.

S: How so?

E: Because to deceive myself, I must already be able to take a position toward what I am. A *thing* cannot flee from itself; only a being that is not identical with itself can distance itself from what it is – can attempt to hide from the truth.

S: So even my attempt to escape freedom is an exercise of it?

E: Precisely. Bad faith is not the absence of freedom – it is freedom misused. And that is why freedom is inescapable.

## Objections and Replies:

The dialogue above reconstructs Sartre's central claim: that human beings are 'condemned to be free' (Sartre, 1948, p. 34) because consciousness, as being-for-itself, is structurally non-identical with itself. Freedom is not a faculty we possess but the very mode of our being. However, this radical account of freedom attracts two major objections from secondary literature. First, critics argue that Sartre's account of bad faith and self-deception risks incoherence. Secondly, others claim that his idea of radical freedom neglects social and historical determination, overstating individual responsibility.

The first objection concerns the coherence of bad faith. Sartre defines bad faith as a form of self-deception: a 'lie to oneself' (Sartre, 1943/1956, p. 89). Critics have questioned how such a phenomenon is possible. If I deceive myself, do I not both know and not know the truth at the same time? If so, does Sartre's account collapse into contradiction?

Mary Warnock interprets Sartrean freedom as a form of uncaused spontaneity (Warnock, 1965, pp. 54-55), in which the self is radically free at every moment. By this, Warnock means

that we are not determined by our past, our character, or our psychology, but continually recreate ourselves through fresh, undetermined acts of choice. With this view in mind, bad faith appears unstable: if the self is pure spontaneity, how can it sustain a stable self to deceive? The tension lies between freedom as sheer spontaneity and the structured, recognisable patterns of behaviour Sartre describes. Similarly, David Rose argues that many interpretations overemphasise Sartre's libertarianism, portraying him as asserting absolute and unconditioned freedom in a way that risks severing action from any continuity of self (Rose, 2003, p. 5). If the self is nothing but an uncaused spontaneity, then the unity required for self-deception becomes difficult to explain. Who is deceiving whom?

The strength of this objection is its focus on logical consistency. Ordinary deception needs a clear distinction between the deceiver and the deceived. If both roles collapse into a single consciousness, then the structure appears paradoxical. However, Sartre's defenders argue that this objection is a misunderstanding of his ontology. Dan Zahavi's phenomenological account of self-awareness clarifies how a single consciousness can relate to itself without positing two separate subjects (Zahavi, 2003, pp. 87-91).

Bad faith does not require two separate subjects; it requires only one consciousness that can take itself as object and adopt a stance toward what it is. The waiter example illustrates this structure. The waiter is not blind to his freedom; rather, he performs his role as if it exhausts his being. The deception lies not in ignorance but in selective identification. Consciousness brings its facticity to the foreground and backgrounds its transcendence. This is no contradiction in logical terms, but a structural evasion made possible by the *for-itself*. Thus, rather than undermining freedom, bad faith presupposes it. Only a being capable of distancing itself from its own situation could attempt to freeze itself into it. While the objection highlights real tensions, it does not entirely refute Sartre's claim that freedom is structurally inescapable.

The second objection is that Sartre's account of radical freedom insufficiently takes note of social and historical constraints. If we are wholly responsible for what we make of ourselves, does this not risk ignoring structural injustice, material conditions, and institutional forces? Rose observes that Sartre's philosophy appears to assert an extreme libertarianism, one that

rejects determinism without adequately integrating social dynamics (Rose, 2003, p. 5). This suggests that Sartre risks presenting the self as detached from its material and historical context, underestimating the extent to which social structures shape the field of possible action. The worry is refined by considering facticity, whilst Sartre insists that we are always situated – in a body, a history, a class – he also claims that they never determine us. Freedom is what grounds human essence. We become what we are through our choices (Sartre, 1943/1956). Does this leave enough room for genuine constraint? One critic, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, provides a powerful phenomenological counterpoint. He criticises Sartre for overemphasising transcendence whilst ignoring embodiment. For Merleau-Ponty, subjectivity is never disembodied negation, ‘the body is our general medium for having a world’ (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 169). Consciousness is always already incarnate; it is a body-subject situated within a perceptual field and a shared world. For Ponty, freedom then is no abstract power of spontaneous self-creation but a situated capacity that emerges from one’s embodied involvement in a meaningful context. For Ponty, I do not stand in front of my body as an object; I exist as a body-subject already in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, pp. 159-161). Our projects arise within pre-reflective habits, social structures, and perceptual horizons that both enable and limit them. This suggests that freedom is not a complete breakaway from our situation but something that operates from within it. If freedom is always mediated by embodiment and intersubjective structures, then Sartre’s model risks appearing too abstract and detached from lived reality.

However, Sartre does not entirely deny these constraints. In *Being and Nothingness*, he emphasises that freedom always operates within situations. We do not choose our facticity; we choose how to interpret and respond to it. Later, in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (Sartre, Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1, 1976), Sartre explicitly weaves in historical materialism, acknowledging the structuring force of social institutions. The key question then is whether Sartre’s earlier frameworks can adequately account for these constraints without collapsing freedom into determinism. Sartre replies that even under extreme oppression, one remains responsible for one’s stance (Sartre, 1943/1956, pp. 708-709). This doesn’t mean limits and pressures do not exist; it’s saying those limits do not completely remove our ability to choose how we respond. Still, critics argue that this position risks demanding more moral responsibility from someone than is fair or realistic. Saying that a person is completely

responsible for their attitude during every situation might ignore how deeply social and structural forces shape them. Sartre clearly shows how we are free in a basic sense, but he may struggle to explain how much freedom we actually have in difficult real-world situations.

## Conclusion:

This essay has argued that Sartre's claim that human beings are 'condemned to be free' (Sartre, 1948, p. 34) cannot be grasped apart from his ontology of consciousness. In distinguishing being-in-itself from being-for-itself, we found that Sartre grounds freedom not in a faculty we possess, but in the very structure of consciousness as self-transcending and non-identical with itself. From this ontological starting point follows the phenomena of anguish, abandonment, and bad faith. Freedom is inescapable, as consciousness cannot become a fixed thing; even attempts to flee from freedom presuppose it. However, secondary literature revealed genuine tensions within this framework. The problem of self-deception challenges the coherence of bad faith: if the self is radically free, how can it sustain a stable pattern of evasion? Likewise, concerns about social and historical determination question whether Sartre's account overstates the individual responsibility whilst underestimating structural constraint.

Neither objection decisively collapses Sartre's position. The problem of self-deception can be acknowledged by appealing to his non-substantialist account of consciousness, in which bad faith is not a logical contradiction but a structural evasion made possible due to the divided character of the for-itself. The social objection is more hard-hitting, but it does not negate the core ontological claim that consciousness transcends its facticity, even if it complicates how that transcendence is expressed in lived reality. Thus, Sartre's ontology does succeed – at least his earlier works – that ground the claim that we are condemned to be free. Whether this formal freedom fully articulates the depth of historical and social conditioning remains open for debate. But the concept does not collapse under scrutiny, instead it brings to light the demanding, unstable, and often unsettling condition of human existence that Sartre sought to describe.

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