

## AUTHENTICITY IN SARTRE'S EARLY WORK

William G. Smith

Sartre is ordinarily portrayed as a pessimistic philosopher. Risieri Frondizi wrote: "Sartre provides no clues as to what are the relevant facts and valid reasons to be considered in making a moral decision. Instead, he projects a jaded pessimism" (Schlipp 390). From P. M. W. Thody, we have:

The pessimism of *L'Être et le Néant* is still perhaps the best-known feature of Sartre's work, and it has been so frequently described and discussed that there is really little new that can be said about it. Right action, for the early Sartre, is impossible. . . . Like the more extreme theologians among his Protestant forebears, Sartre seems so anxious to inculcate a sense of sin that he denies any possibility that human beings could improve matters by actually doing something either about their own salvation or about their relationship with their fellows. (Schlipp 423-24)

Marjorie Grene also passed judgment on *Being and Nothingness* by saying that it "seems to feed on perverseness" (Grene 93).

Those who hold that Sartre was a pessimist can readily find evidence to support their view. There is the famous analysis of "bad faith" (or inauthenticity) in *Being and Nothingness*, but no comparable section on authenticity is included. In his presentation of "fundamental attitudes toward the Other" (BN 363), Sartre lists indifference, hate, and sadism. In *Nausea* (note the title), Roquentin is surrounded by the nauseating world of the in-itself. There never seems to be a release or exit from absurdity for characters in any of Sartre's plays or novels.

In spite of this evidence to the contrary, I will argue that there is a side of Sartre's philosophy that is usually missed. Though he never stressed it to the degree that he stressed bad faith, I will show that Sartre wanted the door kept open for authenticity. It would then be proper to question whether the term "pessimistic" adequately represents Sartre's philosophy. We should note that in the chapters on bad faith, Sartre

*Nothingness*, Sartre contrasts bad faith with "good faith." Good faith is *not* identical to authenticity because good faith "seeks to flee the inner disintegration of my being in the direction of the in-itself . . ." (BN 70). One would never achieve authenticity by moving "in the direction of the in-itself."

The genesis of Sartre's notions of bad faith *and* authenticity can be found in his early works on emotions and imagination. The following, in outline, traces that genesis. Sartre had decided on a literary career but took a turn to philosophy after a teacher required him to read Bergson's *Essai sur les donnés immédiates de la conscience*. Though he would shortly become highly critical of Bergsonianism, it is obvious that seeds sown by Bergson provided Sartre with the foundation for his distinction between reflective and unreflective consciousness. For Bergson, an "inauthentic" life would be one that is guided by reflection to the exclusion of the intuitive mode of knowledge. We are basically intuiting creatures, but reflection is so useful in solving practical problems that it--and not intuition--becomes the dominant faculty of knowledge. For Sartre, as we shall see, authenticity is essentially related to an awareness and acknowledgment of the spontaneous upsurge of the unreflective consciousness. For both Bergson and Sartre, free will resides in that side of consciousness that is not reflective. Both stressed that there is a danger in admitting real existence to the inert objects that are objects of reflection, since there is no such thing as a stable, inert object in existence.

Bergson often used the example of a musical piece to show how things are not composed of inert elements. Sartre used the same example:

If we take a melody, . . . it is useless to presuppose an *x* which would serve as a support for the different notes. The unity here comes from the absolute indissolubility of the elements which cannot be conceived as separated, save by abstraction. (Trans 73)

Bergson expressed the same point in the following manner: "There are changes, but there are underneath no things which change: change has no need of a support" (CM 147).

Sartre utilized the notion of the impossibility of real inert elements to criticize the Husserlian "transcendental ego."

What is wrong with the idea of an ego-substance is that it would indicate an ego that is "indifferent to the psychic qualities it would support." The ego, according to Sartre, can *never* be indifferent to those qualities. That is one reason he argued that the ego is not *behind* consciousness; rather, the ego, or personal unity, is only to be found in the world that one projects.

Since the ego is not substantial, but is merely the result of spontaneous projections, one will never encounter the ego in unreflective thought (Schlipp 11). If one thinks one is encountering a substantial ego, then one is guilty of bad faith, one is lying to oneself. Security and substantiality are being discovered where there is none.

In *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre has what later will be termed "bad faith" arising when "impure reflection . . . remains . . . tied to consciousness of states and actions," i.e., tied to consciousness of inert elements. By choosing to become captivated by the reflective process, one begins to forget that one is *not* identical to the process. Rather, the reflective process itself is grounded in something more fundamental--the free spontaneous upsurge of unreflective consciousness. *That* is what one is.

Thus, for the most part, reflection is an alienating force. But, here we get a clue to the nature of authenticity. Reflection *could* be pure. This pure reflection would "deliver . . . consciousness to itself as a non-personal spontaneity" (Trans 91). This pure reflective act would not yield consciousness of personal ego or consciousness of *any* inert element. It would show us what we are--"a non-personal spontaneity." By being in the mode of pure reflection, one does not lie to oneself, i.e., one is not in bad faith.

In a later section of *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre draws some further distinctions between pure and impure reflection, and thus between authenticity and bad faith. Of impure reflection he says:

Everything happens . . . as if consciousness constituted the ego as a false representation of itself, as if consciousness hypnotized itself before this ego which it has constituted, absorbing itself in the ego as if to make the ego its guardian and its law. (Trans 101)

Sartre here speaks of "self-hypnotization," but the idea he is

expressing is none other than that of self-deception, which is similar to Heidegger's notion in *Being and Time* of "tranquillization."

However, one does not have to remain in the hypnotized, inauthentic state:

... it can happen that consciousness suddenly produces itself on the pure reflective level. Perhaps not without the ego, yet as escaping the ego on all sides, as dominating the ego and maintaining the ego outside the consciousness by a continuous creation. (Trans 101)

The ego ceases to be one's "guardian" and self-hypnotization is halted. One is no longer deceiving oneself.

Thus far, I have centered on quotes from *The Transcendence of the Ego*. Sartre retained the distinction between pure and impure reflection in *Being and Nothingness*. In that work, he defined "pure reflection" as "the simple presence of the reflective for-itself to the for-itself reflected on" (BN 155). The "for-itself" is another name for the spontaneous upsurge we have been mentioning. Pure reflection hands to the for-itself the for-itself as it really is.

By the time he wrote *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre used the term "being-in-itself" for what is complete, inert, and substantial. Humans desire to be both complete (in-itself being) and conscious (for-itself being). In other words, humans desire to be God. But, for Sartre, as we saw earlier, conscious being can never be complete. Thus, one who desires to be a for-itself-in-itself is one who is in bad faith.

Pure reflection discloses the fact that consciousness is "the being which is always only as itself and which is always this 'self' at a distance from itself, in the future, in the past, in the world" (BN 158). Here the only difference from Sartre's earlier account of consciousness in *The Transcendence of the Ego* is the substitution of the word "self" for "ego."

Though Sartre clearly states that impure reflection is in bad faith (BN 161), there still may be some doubt whether Sartre would think "pure reflection" is as closely related to authenticity as I have portrayed it. There is an additional argument that can be given to support my claim. In *The Transcendence of the Ego*, Sartre indicates that one who engages in pure reflection will become "suddenly anguished" (Trans

102). In pure reflection, one utilizes the Husserlian epoché in order to bracket those assumptions of our everyday life that provide us with security. For Sartre, such assumptions would be held by people in bad faith. The epoché requires us to set aside those assumptions. Anxiety follows.

[If] "the natural attitude" appears wholly as an effort made by consciousness to escape from itself by projecting itself into the *me* and becoming absorbed there, . . . and if a simple act of reflection suffices for conscious spontaneity to tear itself abruptly away from the *I*, then the epoché is no longer . . . an intellectual method, an erudite procedure: it is an anxiety which is imposed on us and which we cannot avoid. (Trans 103)

The epoché unveils the utter lack of foundation for any of our most precious beliefs. We are forced to realize that *we* are responsible for those beliefs, and that realization, according to Sartre, brings on anxiety. Anxiety arises because one "can not help escape the feeling of [one's] total and deep responsibility" (EE 38).

The connection between bad faith and anxiety lies in the fact that most people "are hiding their anxiety, . . . they are fleeing from it" (EE 38). Authenticity would consist in not fleeing from anxiety.

What are we to make of the Sartrean notion of authenticity? Though I admit some sympathy for that notion, as well as for the notion of bad faith, there are some serious gaps in Sartre's theory.

First, Sartre presents short but inadequate hints concerning how it is possible to turn away from bad faith. If it is not enjoyable to be anxious and responsible, why would everyone not continue fleeing from anxiety and responsibility, and thus perpetually remain in bad faith? How could an awareness of the possibility of authenticity even be possible? I suspect that Sartre would accept the Heideggerian position that if one flees from something, one must be aware of that from which one is fleeing.

The inadequate answer Sartre gives to the question, "What leads one to an authentic state?" is that "a negligible circumstance (reading, conversation, etc.)" suddenly opens one to "a vertigo of possibility" (Trans 100). Sartre gives the

example of a young bride who unexpectedly realizes she could be a prostitute--this in spite of the fact that she had never before thought that being a prostitute was compatible with her character. She finds herself "monstrously free" (Trans 100).

The notion that "negligible circumstances" lead one to an awareness of one's freedom does not tell much about the necessary conditions for the possibility of authenticity. Sartre's remarks in *Being and Nothingness* also are not helpful. Pure reflection, he says, results in a "modification" and a "katharsis." The modification is the movement from bad faith to authenticity. Likewise, the cleansing implied by the notion of "katharsis" indicates a return to an authentic awareness. But of the conditions necessary for the possibility of the katharsis, Sartre merely says, "This is not the place to describe the motivation and the structure of this katharsis." He seems merely interested in describing impure reflection (BN 159-60).

In an interesting footnote at the end of the chapter on "bad faith," Sartre says:

If it is indifferent whether one is in good or in bad faith, . . . that does not mean that we can not radically escape bad faith. But this supposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted. (BN 70)

At that point Sartre *again* begs off the issue: "This self-recovery we shall call authenticity, the description of which has no place here" (BN 70). Likewise, at the end of the section on "Concrete Relations With Others," Sartre puts off a discussion of authentic relations with others by saying that "the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation . . . can be achieved only after a radical conversion which we cannot discuss here" (BN 412). Sartre keeps holding the bait out, but when we would like to grab it, he pulls it back. (See also BN 581, 626.)

A second problem arises from Sartre's notion that being anxious and accepting responsibility are essentially related. According to Sartre, if one is not anxious, that implies a refusal to accept responsibility. If one refuses to accept responsibility, that implies that one is not accepting the fact of one's radical freedom. I have no problem with the link between free will and responsibility. It does not seem as certain, however,

that anxiety must necessarily arise if one accepts one's radical freedom. The existence of anxiety perhaps provides a criterion by which to establish the fact that one is not hiding from responsibility. However, it is not self-evident that one is in bad faith if one is not anxious.

A third problem arises out of the apparent inconsistency between the Sartrean notions that (a) there is no human nature or self, and (b) there can be an authentic relation to oneself and an inauthentic state in which one deceives oneself. If there is no self, as Sartre consistently asserted, how can one lie to oneself? Sartre tried to supply an answer to this question:

If bad faith is possible, it is because it is an immediate, permanent threat to every project of the human being; it is because consciousness conceals in its being a permanent risk of bad faith. The origin of this risk is the fact that the nature of consciousness simultaneously is to be what it is not and not to be what it is. (BN 70)

Does Sartre get out of the bind he puts himself in? It is doubtful. In an article entitled "Self-consciousness and the Ego," Phyllis Berdt Kenevan summarizes the main argument against the possibility of authenticity and bad faith if there is no self:

Impure reflection, since it posits an ego as in-itself, is doomed to give us a false object, inasmuch as the ego is only an ideal unity of states and actions. In fact, by a positing of consciousness, self-knowledge is impossible, since one would need a substantial self that could be posited as an object. But the self is not substantial and furthermore cannot be posited as an object. (Schlipp 209)

Kenevan points out that, if consciousness were substantial, then it would be an in-itself-for-itself. Since self-knowledge is impossible, it follows that it is also impossible to lie to oneself or authentically relate to oneself.

In reading Sartre, it becomes obvious that he was aware of the above difficulties. However, just as Plato refused to drop the Theory of Forms merely because he was aware of difficulties connected with the theory, so too, at least until

1948, Sartre remained committed to a theory that incorporates bad faith and authenticity. He apparently did not stress authenticity because he held that, for the most part, humans are in bad faith. "A reflective apprehension of spontaneous consciousness as non-personal spontaneity . . . is always possible in principle, but remains very improbable or, at least, extremely rare in our human condition" (Trans 92).

If one defines the pessimist as one who stresses the belief that the inauthentic always outweighs the authentic, that is, that the authentic is "extremely rare," then Sartre was a pessimist. However, there certainly is no pessimism connected with the notion that authenticity *is* possible nor with the attempt to outline the conditions for that possibility.

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