

SARTRE'S COQUETTE: IN DEFENSE OF HER VIRTUE

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The recent flurry of interest in self-deception has its ultimate source in the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre. Given his natural affinity for paradox and dialectical turns, it is not surprising that he would have emphasized the paradoxical nature of this phenomenon and insisted on characterizing it as "a lie one tells oneself." What is surprising is that it has taken several decades for this emphasis and this treatment to attract the attention of English-speaking philosophers, for whom, typically, the word 'paradox' does nothing but provide whatever first-hand experience they have with existential angst. In this brief paper, I shall bring some small and perhaps only temporary succor to mine English-speaking brethren. For Sartre, the phenomenon of self-deception presents us with a *problem*. But has he in fact shown us that there is a problem here?

Deception (Sartre teaches), normally a dyadic relationship, is, in *mauvaise foi*, a monadic one. The liar and the lied to are one and the same. But how, Sartre asks, can this be? To lie, one must be in possession of the truth. But to be the dupe of a lie, one must not know the truth. How can I at the same time both know the truth and not know it? The question I will raise here is whether Sartre's characterization of the phenomenon is correct, whether the phenomenon we refer to with the term "self-deception" does in fact involve a lie one tells oneself.

Here, as elsewhere, much of the persuasive power of Sartre's characterization of the phenomenon derives from his brilliant and elaborate development of examples. There is probably no more famous example in the entire Sartrean opus than the case of the "young coquette." If we are inclined to think of self-deception as fraught with paradox, it is largely as a result of this witty and perceptive illustration of an easily recognizable human foible. My ambition here will be modest. I will try to cast doubt on Sartre's treatment of self-deception as a problem by showing that nothing in the case of the young coquette supports the view of self-deception as a lie one tells oneself, nor indeed as anything else problematically paradoxical.

Let us recall the case. It concerns a young woman who goes out for the first time with a certain man. She is aware of his intentions and knows, too, that it will be necessary for her sooner or later to make a decision. But she does not want to realize the urgency of the situation. She confines her attention only to what is respectful and discreet in the conduct of her suitor. She does not apprehend in this conduct a "first approach," does not want to see the possibilities for development in his fond gaze, his soft voice. She

is profoundly aware of the desire which she inspires, but the desire cruel and naked would frighten and humiliate her. Yet she would find no charm in a respect which was only respect. Now the man takes her hand. To leave her hand within his is to consent to flirt. To withdraw it is to break the troubled and unstable harmony which gives the hour its charm. The aim is to postpone the moment of decision as long as possible. But what shall she do?

We know what happens next; the young woman leaves her hand there, but she *does not notice* that she is leaving it. She does not notice because it happens by chance that she is at this moment all intellect. She draws her companion up to the most lofty regions of sentimental speculation; she speaks of Life, of her life, she shows herself in her essential aspect—a personality, a consciousness. And during this time the divorce of the body from the soul is accomplished; the hand rests inert between the warm hand of her companion—neither consenting nor resisting—a thing (*Being and Nothingness*, Barnes translation, pp. 55, 56).

Sartre has certainly captured something both subtle and familiar here: a social behavior having at once the suggestion of an intentional ploy and the suggestion of guilelessness; an 'innocent strategy' we should perhaps wish to call it, were it not for the overly enigmatic ring of this phrase. And since intentionality seems to imply that one is in the know, and innocence, that one is not, Sartre's contention that we have here a classic case of *mauvaise foi* — of a lie told to oneself — has initially a certain plausibility. On analysis, however, I think we discover that this characterization is not at all plausible, that no matter how hard we search, we shall find no reasonable candidate for the *lie* in this example, that in fact it is only with the most imprecise use of the concept of self-deception that this case can be construed as an instance of that phenomenon at all.

For all the wit and insightfulness of the example, can it be an instance of self-deception in the strict sense Sartre himself has delineated? That is, do we have here strong evidence that our subject holds a certain conviction or engages in a certain strategy, and do we have equally strong evidence that she remains in some sense ignorant of this fact? Sartre's analysis of the case will tempt us to think so only if we take his undoubted metaphor for literal truth. The young woman will be in bad faith only if two conditions obtain: first, that she be aware that leaving her hand within his encourages her suitor's sexual ambitions and, second, that she in some sense be genuinely persuaded that her hand is an inert object detached from herself and now resting within her companion's — a mere thing. Suggestive as this latter depiction may be of an attitude one may adopt toward one's body on

such and similar occasions, it is surely inconceivable, short of pathology, that the young woman *actually believes* this in any sense whatsoever. That she is *acting* as though this were her belief there can be no question. But "acting as though . . ." is not enough to establish bad faith: it is not a lie that gulls oneself.

I think we are forced to understand the case quite otherwise. The young woman is fully aware of the significance of the fact that her hand now rests within his, that it is a mild assent to his romantic interest, though, indeed, the mildest of assents, precisely the degree of encouragement she is at this moment willing to offer, and far less dramatic, after all, than an array of responses she might have made—the gentle caress of his hand with hers, for example. Her conversation, suddenly lofty and intellectually rarified, is a further check on his ambitions, a sign to him of her hesitation, a gesture intended to balance the unmistakable significance of her hand remaining within his. The young woman is not prepared just yet to make her decision; and her behavior, which skillfully sustains the tensions of this hour, allows her the time she requires.

There is no need to reconstruct the scene in such a way that the young woman emerges as a cynical manipulator in order to show that this is not plausibly a case of bad faith. We must certainly recognize that her intention to delay the moment of decision while at the same time forfeiting none of the hour's charm is not a fully conscious one, that it is of a very different kind from, for example, her intention to order *coq au vin*. We must certainly recognize that the specific responses she makes—her hand, her conversation, the probable comportment of her body, her tone of voice—are not parts of a carefully elaborated strategy which at some level of consciousness she represents to herself as she would, for example, a strategy in chess. But to admit that her project is not fully conscious, that it is at no level of her awareness explicitly laid out, is not enough to render it a case of bad faith. What we have here is a skillfully unselfconscious use of cues to communicate to her suitor precisely what she wishes to say without offending him, or chasing him off: "This is too soon. I am uncertain. You must wait." Apart from Sartre's failed attempt to locate it, where in this case is there any hint of the lie, literally understood? Does the young woman deceive herself about her suitor's intentions? Does she literally believe that he is interested in her only as a consciousness, that his eagerness in being with her this night would have been undiminished if she had been, say, disembodied? Does she lie to herself about her own desires? Given the fact that they are not as yet clear, how would this have been possible? Does she lie, then, about the possible future of this encounter? Everything in her behavior gives clear evidence that she is intimately aware of this possible future. But does not her bad faith consist in the fact that she studiously avoids spelling out this future for herself in image or in thought? A case for bad faith could

be made along these lines only if there were some reason to believe that such explicitation were necessary or appropriate or somehow called for in the normal course of things, so that avoiding it would require some special effort and dark motivation. But what could be more clear in the present instance than that such explicitness would be altogether *superfluous*, since the possibility of romance suffuses the atmosphere like a poignant vapor?

Furthermore, I think it would be a serious mistake to confuse the failure to make a project explicit with bad faith, even where the failure is motivated and hence intentional. A host noticing what he takes to be the beginning of an argument between two of his guests finds himself making his way across the room to where they are; he engages his two old friends in distracting repartee, laughs with them heartily, then moves on to other guests, the tension decisively broken. At no point was it necessary for him to spell out his activity. On the contrary, it was probably necessary that he *not* do so, lest his behavior be too self-conscious and obviously manipulative to be effectual. Does the fact that the man does not spell out his project, that he even intentionally avoids doing so, show him to be self-deceived?

But, it will be said, the case of the young woman is different from this: she avoids spelling out the possible future of this encounter in order to sustain the illusion of her innocence; she conceals the truth from herself in order to sustain a favored lie, and hence she is in bad faith. But if the so-called "illusion of her innocence" requires that she deny even the possibility of physical desire, we have left the plane of bad faith for that of pathology. In doing so, it is true that we will have revived the paradox that seems otherwise to elude us in this example. But what will be lost is the familiar ring of the situation, the aspect of the case that could persuade us of the commonality of bad faith in human experience, precisely the aspect that Sartre would wish to retain. I think we must conclude that short of the introduction of pathological elements, elements that form no part of the case as Sartre presents it, the celebrated example of the "young coquette" is *not* a case of *mauvaise foi*.

To show that one imaginary case is not in fact illustrative of anything paradoxical (or philosophically problematic in any way) is not to show that there is no such thing as a "paradox of bad faith." But given the prominence of this famous example in Sartre's treatment of the subject, I think my demonstration is sufficient to cast doubt on Sartre's claim that human beings do have and commonly indulge the capacity to propound lies whose innocent victim is themselves. As a matter of fact, I think the same demystification can be accomplished with respect to all the other cases Sartre (and others) have adduced as philosophically problematic examples of self-deception. A demonstration of this, however, would take me well beyond the limited scope of this brief paper. Since the mere raising of doubt was my modest ambition here, I take my work now to be completed.