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Into the root of Ethical Inquiry: The role of Sartre's concept of the Other and Bad Faith

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Abstract

The present research paper is primarily concerned with a critical inquiry into the root of ethical issues that arise in our lives. This is carried out through an ontological analysis of the other and bad faith from the Sartrean existential perspective. At the very heart of all three concepts: the other, bad faith, and ethics, freedom plays a significant role. Here, we examined how the freedom of an individual becomes meaningful, confronted by the objectification of the other. This analysis further identifies the other and bad faith as two genuine ontological grounds of the ethical issues of human existence, without interpreting them as intrinsically unethical. Here, we examine that ethics is not an ideal to achieve but a continuous endorsement of freedom. The paper ultimately examines authenticity as an ethical exposure that requires us to undergo the process of self-recovery, which consists of affirming the tension of the ontological interplay between freedom and facticity that structures human existence. It finds self-recovery as a continuous process that explores the notion of the ethics of imperfection.

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1. Introduction:

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) is widely acknowledged as a great twentieth-century French existential philosopher. Existentialism is a renowned philosophical movement that primarily concerns itself with analysing human existence from the standpoint of lived experience, emphasising individual freedom, choice, responsibility, and the search for meaning. Although it is centrally concerned with the individual, it does not collapse into individualism. The method of analysis involves a relational process between the for-itself and the world in which it is situated. The external world is the practical sphere in which freedom is exercised, and existence is shaped through continuous engagement. Any kind of engagement or practice that projects into the shared world, whether personal or public, shapes it. Thus, it generates ethical questions. Ethical questions have always occupied a central place in philosophical inquiry, but from an existential perspective, their origin is closely tied to the structure of human existence. However, we are conversant with a variety of systematic moral philosophies that provide precise criteria for ethical conduct. Having said this, traditional systems of morality often fail to examine the fundamental conditions that lead to unethical behaviour. It is well known that Sartre's existentialism primarily focuses on the ontological account of human existence, from which ethical concerns emerge. The present discussion seeks to address why every meaningful form of engagement, which is in some aspects associated with the other, raises ethical demands. In this journey, we will discuss about the root of the ethical issues through his ontological analysis of the concept of the other and bad faith. We argue that bad faith is not merely an individual phenomenon of self-deception. Rather, it is deeply associated with the other, as it often emerges as a response when one confronts responsibility in the presence of the Other. As a result, both concepts make a profound contribution to ethical inquiry, illuminating the sense of responsibility and ethical dilemmas in human existence. After that, we will examine how Sartrean ethics is grounded on the notion of ethics in existential freedom and connect it with authenticity.

2. The Other: A Determinate Objectification and the Crisis of Freedom:

Human existence, as characterised by Sartre, is a continuous engagement of the human being with the world. Sartre introduces existence through two realities: ***being-in-itself*** and ***being-for-***

itself, which correspond to the being of non-conscious things and the being of humans or consciousness, respectively. The ***being-for-itself*** or consciousness is defined as a transcendence or a structure of lack by Sartre, from which the phenomenon of radical freedom is derived. Therefore, consciousness can be characterised as a continuous projection towards its object, which Sartre calls *intentionality*. It is a constant engagement in transcending beyond what is immediately given to the consciousness. One may argue that Sartre's radical freedom risks collapsing into *solipsism*. To avoid this, he introduces the notion of "***the other***" as a phenomenological requirement that enhances the gravity of the freedom of the for-itself. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), the other is designated as "being-for-other". One may object to the above claim by citing Sartre's statement from his novel *No Exit* (1944), "hell is other people…" (Sartre, 1955, as cited in Mirvish, 1996, p. 77), which seems to depict human relations as fundamentally negative. In his writings, Sartre expresses a *negative* sense of the other. In *Notebooks for an Ethics (*1992), he also remarked that "the Other's look finds me as *an* object, so I find myself as an other-object" (Sartre, 1992, p.362). This is how he introduces the other as an ontological locus of determinate objectification of the for-itself. The phenomenological condition of being objectified by the other is introduced in *Being and Nothingness* with the concept of the look. The look designates the lived experience of being objectified by another for-itself, who is equally ontologically free. Sartre expresses the phenomenon of the look with the awareness of shame. For example, our consciousness is simultaneously directed towards its objects, such as thinking about a car, planting a tree, or a person peeping through a keyhole (as stated in No Exit). In this stage, consciousness is not reflecting on itself; the world is just a field of projection, but suddenly everything changes when a vague voice is heard or sensing a simple sliding of curtains or footsteps is imagined. The self feels exposed to the other and discovers its being as objectified. For Sartre, the other has the magical capacity to change the sense of the being of the for-itself. This is the unavoidable *bi-conditional* reality of human existence, where the other objectifies the for-itself and vice versa. It is unavoidable, because the for-itself does not possess the ability of not being objectified by another for-itself. We are ashamed in front of others. We accept the meanings others give us about ourselves and become ashamed. The individual is ashamed of themselves because they know someone is observing them. Others see the individual as an object of their freedom. They freely give the individual an ultimate status, as he or she is a waiter, an honest person, selfish, moody, etc. The meaning they give to the individual is not something fixed; it is contingent. It

varies with changes in consciousness. The meaning that others give to a person may not be qualified as apprehensible to himself; despite that, he accepts the meaning given by other people and becomes ashamed of that. Thus, Sartre maintains that "conflict is the original meaning of the being-for-others". The being-for-others appears to be an insurmountable problem for being-for-oneself. We encounter in the world inhabited by others. An individual is forced to see themselves through the other's prediction. They appear to me as a subject to whom I am the object of their consciousness.

This account of human relations is fundamentally shaped by its conflictual structure, a position that follows from his rejection of ontological monism. Thinkers such as Hegel and Heidegger respectively admit an ontological monism and an ontological unity of consciousness. Sartre rejects both by rejecting ontological monism and the unity of consciousness, insisting on the plurality of consciousnesses and on ontological conflict. In *Being and Nothingness*, he argues, "No logical or epistemological optimism could put an end to the scandal of the plurality of consciousnesses" (Sartre, 1956, p.244). As long as consciousnesses co-exist, separation and conflict among consciousnesses persist. Thus, Sartre argues that the most basic bond between consciousnesses is negative.

Sartre describes this relation through what he calls a "***synthetic connection***," which indicates a negative form of dependency that is difficult to grasp. This dependency can be illustrated using the term "***I***." To say "***I am***" is already to distinguish oneself from others. My self-identity is constituted through a negation of the other self. This negative relation does not imply mutual understanding but rather separation. For Sartre, no one can control how others evaluate them; such evaluations depend entirely on others' freedom. Likewise, one is free to judge others as one sees fit, yet one cannot entirely understand how one is considered in return. For this reason, Sartre claims that human relations are marked by a constant tension in which each individual is concerned with maintaining their freedom in encountering others' gaze. This structural condition makes struggle and conflict unavoidable. However, while the way one is perceived by others—as rude, kind, jealous, or otherwise—lies beyond one's control, such judgments cannot alter one's pre-reflective awareness of oneself. No matter how much one is objectified or degraded by the other, one never entirely loses self-awareness. Because there is no fixed meaning attached to how others see oneself, human relations remain essentially ambiguous, and this ambiguity grounds their conflictual character.

Here, a question may arise: if human relations are necessarily dominating or conflictual, why do we engage in ethics at all? One possible answer is that ethics offers a way for human beings to live with this inescapable hostility or bitterness without denying it. It appears to me that we have an illusion that ethics is only a tool for eradicating all kinds of conflict and bringing peace and good to society. It is the traditional ethical model. I think, for Sartre, to understand ethics only in terms of these determinate specific criteria is to moralise the ethical. This kind of apprehension can go with morality, which means a particular set of principles *of* acting ethically. In my view of Sartre, ethics is the responsible commitment to confronting the unavoidable conflict. Thus, Sartrean ethics can be seen as a reflective endorsement of one's radical freedom and responsibility. Therefore, the ontological conflict of human relations does not reject the scope for ethics, but rather makes it inevitable.

Critics may also hold that Sartre's exposition of negative human relations is overly *abstract*. This criticism arises because Sartre's analysis of the conflict is ontological rather than social. When Sartre speaks of objectification and alienation, he is referring to ontological structures rooted in consciousness rather than to material coercion, though these structures may be reflected in social life in the form of domination, enslavement, etc. Slavery, in this sense, depends on an individual's awareness of being treated as an object. Yet even here, freedom is not abolished: one remains free to choose the meaning of one's situation. Sartre therefore maintains that relations between consciousnesses cannot be genuinely subject-to-subject. Instead, either one becomes an object for the other, or one objectifies the other. This ontological tension defines the tragic yet unavoidable structure of human relations.

Sartre, in his *Being and Nothingness* (1943), says, "I must obtain from the Other the recognition of my being" (Sartre, 1956, p.237). The other is a *structural condition*, not only a psychological or social dimension of existence, without which the notions of freedom and responsibility do not make any sense. One should not conceive freedom as a solitary phenomenon; rather, it is fully comprehensible through both the positive and negative dimensions of our relationships with others. The phenomenon of the other enriches and illuminates our freedom. It is my understanding that, although Sartre often portrays the other as a source of constraint or negativity, this very tension opens the potential for a more constructive and optimistic understanding of human relationships. Through the other's gaze, man becomes aware that he is not only a for-itself spontaneously projecting meanings but also a being that can be seen,

judged, and interpreted. Through this awareness, one recognises responsibility for all free projections and for the way one appears in the world. Therefore, freedom becomes meaningful through the crisis of objectification by the other. The role of the other in relation to the root of ethics will explicitly be clarified in the next point, where we will discuss how bad faith is interlinked with the other. I understand bad faith as a core point from which several ethical issues arise. In addition, although fundamentally bad faith is an individual phenomenon, it manifests explicitly by fleeing from one's freedom while encountering the other. Therefore, both concepts are interlinked and make a major contribution to ethical inquiry.

3. Insight into the ground of Bad Faith:

In the foregoing discussion, we have argued that individual freedom is at risk of being exposed to another freedom and faces the challenge of coping with objectification. In this case, the individual experiences a burden *of* being ontologically free. It's a burden because he is compelled to be free and become responsible for all his projections. Whenever I choose myself, I inevitably choose men. Every choice a man makes influences society. Thus, a person is confronted by the responsibility of his choice. For instance, if one chooses to become a doctor, this decision arises from one's freedom within particular circumstances, yet its consequences extend beyond the individual. If one practices medicine responsibly and skilfully, society benefits from this commitment; if one acts carelessly or incompetently, society likewise suffers from the effects of those actions. Similarly, as the leader of a military unit, one may be free to decide which soldiers are sent into battle, but this freedom carries serious responsibility, since such decisions can influence the fate of individuals and the wider nation. Confronted with this irresistible responsibility, the individual experiences anxiety in relation to their engagement with the world. Our lucid awareness of radical freedom emerges here as anguish. It can be counted as a reflexive apprehension of responsibility. So, it is an ontological tension. The tension of bearing the dual structure of existence: ***facticity*** and ***transcendence.*** In this regard, it is also true that man naturally seeks to avoid this tension. This flight from freedom leads to a fall into ***bad faith***, in which the individual denies or disguises their own freedom and responsibility. According to Jonathan Webber, bad faith is "a reflective defence against anguish" (Webber, 2009, p.45). Thus, bad faith is interlinked with the other.

Sartre, in his *Being and Nothingness* (1943), characterises "bad faith as a project of selfdeception." He introduces the two modes of bad faith: sincerity and bad faith in a restricted

sense. For Sartre, bad faith is not naturally a lie; rather, it recognises a false belief about oneself as permanent, where the agent is pre-reflectively aware of its falsity. Bad faith is a constant switching between facticity and transcendence. Sartre argues that sincerity is a form of bad faith, since the person pretends to become a definite kind of being as he thinks he already is. Doing this, he engages in self-contradiction because man cannot be 'something' or a fixed essence. By contrast, in the general sense of bad faith, a person tries to be something they are not by denying the fundamental conditions of their existence. Human reality is of two aspects: *Facticity and Transcendence.* A person in bad faith deliberately shifts from one aspect of reality to another in response to the demands of particular situations. Sartre uses several instances of bad faith, most famous of which is the case of the waiter of a café. The waiter acts in such a way that matches his role as a waiter. He looks towards the customer and humbly communicates with them. He walks swiftly, and his body language is very polite. Moreover, he acts like a doll. Sartre argues here that the waiter of this café deliberately deceives himself about the truth of his existence. Despite acknowledging his "existential freedom", he finds himself identical with the role of a waiter. He denies his nature of transcendence and accepts only his facticity.

Bad faith performs a significant role in Sartre's ethical discussion. Generally, a lie means a person deliberately tries to hide the truth. One cannot speak lies without knowing the truth. So, lying is simply a negative attitude. Sartre says lying is a falsehood. There exists a duality between the liar and the person lied to, the deceived and the deceiver. However, in the case of bad faith, the duality between the deceived and the deceiver vanishes. A person in bad faith presents to himself a pleasant untruth as a truth instead of a displeasing truth. We can say that bad faith is a free decision an individual makes to remain in it. It is not something imposed upon oneself from outside. As Thomas C. Anderson argues,

> "Furthermore, bad faith is not only fully conscious; it is a free decision. One puts oneself in bad faith," Sartre says; it is not something that is forced upon one from outside. Thus, my responsibility for being in bad faith is total, for I both choose it and am perfectly aware (pre-reflectively) that I am doing so" (Anderson, 1993, p.16).

Thus, an individual has to bear full responsibility for remaining in it, as it is not an ontologically structured condition that is unavoidable. We have to acknowledge the conflictual reality of human relationships and strive to live with complete lucidity. Initially, most human beings live in bad faith, like practising several meaningless customs in the name of a significant ritual, considering that the quality of care and home service is the main work of women, assuming a

teacher would always behave like a teacher, expecting recognition of others after doing something, etc., are associated with bad faith. It is my understanding that anything in front of which I give up my individual freedom and make myself an object is bad faith. Neither the objectification of the other nor bad faith is itself unethical, but they are the root from which the ethical issues arise. Thus, it is both necessary and possible to overcome bad faith.

However, one may argue that, in this regard, is overcoming bad faith itself necessary? If an individual freely chooses to persist in bad faith, does this choice entail any genuine existential loss? Does surrendering one's freedom to others and refusing responsibility for one's actions place one's very existence at risk? Finally, what force or motivation makes possible the transcendence of bad faith? Here, I realise that overcoming bad faith is not a necessity but a choice. It is a free choice to assume the truth of our existence in freedom and cease to persist in an evasive way of being. Although bad faith is not, in itself, unethical, it raises genuine ethical issues by obscuring the assumption of freedom and responsibility. Therefore, to acknowledge and assume one's freedom, an ontologically free being require to resist bad faith. To speak of resisting bad faith, thus, is not to issue a moral prescription but to point toward an ontological demand implicit in human existence as freedom. Such resistance signifies a sustained attentiveness to the truth of one's being, understood not as a metaphysical essence but as existential lucidity regarding the inseparability of freedom and facticity. This is the ontological relevance. A subject who persists in bad faith, by refusing to assume responsibility for itself, undermines not only its own freedom but also the conditions under which the freedom of others can be meaningfully affirmed. In this sense, bad faith acquires a political relevance: the inability or refusal to take a responsible stand for oneself fosters passivity, domination, or complicity within social relations. In this regard, Sartre mentions authenticity as the opposite of bad faith, which can be examined as an ethical exposure.

4. An Ethical Exposure:

An ethical exposure does not function as a private ideal but as an ethically charged mode of existence. In this sense, authenticity can be seen as an ethical exposure. One must not be confused by acknowledging authenticity as a moral ideal; thereby, one should act ethically. Sartre suggests in this respect, "***if you seek authenticity for authenticity's sake, you are no longer authentic"*** (Sartre, 1992, p.4). Through this statement, Sartre refuses to provide

authenticity as a fixed state of moral ideal and also criticises any absolute moral ideal in general and Kantian morality in particular. This raises a significant question concerning what ethics and authenticity mean for Sartre. Sartre rejects moral absolutism, which is recognised as a fixed and objective system of values. He says-

> "My freedom is the unique foundation of values, and that nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable" (Sartre, 1956, p.38).

For Sartre, ethics may be understood as the continuous respectful acceptance of our freedom. In this sense, being ethical and being authentic are the same. One cannot achieve perfection in ethics because, by rejecting any determinate moral system, Sartre also refuses the very idea of moral perfection. The desire for perfection is a natural human tendency in which man seeks to be being-in-itself-for-itself, a condition Sartre refers to as God. This desire to become God arises from bad faith and is inevitably *doomed* to failure. We cannot be perfect; that is why ethics is there. For Sartre, one cannot offer an ethics to God. In this sense, Sartre spoke of the "ethics of imperfection" (Sartre, 1992, p. 8), which I understand as a continuous process of embracing one's own freedom and the freedom of the other. Thus, for Sartre, ethics is grounded in existential freedom, and to understand this, man must undergo a process of *self-recovery*. Sartre connects authenticity with self-recovery in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), which is as follows-

> "If it is indifferent whether one is in good or bad faith, because bad faith re-apprehends good faith and slides to the very origin of the project of good faith, that does not mean that we cannot radically escape bad faith. But this supposes a self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted. This self-recovery we shall call authenticity, the description of which has no place here" (Sartre, 1956, p.70).

For this, many critics like Jonathan Webber and Linda A. Bell, in works such as Jean-Paul Sartre: Key Concepts (2013) and Sartre's Ethics of Authenticity (1989), has raised objections to Sartre's notion of authenticity, arguing that he left an uncertain definition of it in *Being and Nothingness*. Thus, the concept remains intangible and ambiguous. Moreover, many contemporary thinkers like Charles Taylor and Theodor W. Adorno in their respective works *The Ethics of Authenticity* (1991) and *The Jargon of Authenticity* (1973), also criticise Sartrean authenticity for allegedly risking moral relativism and failing to ground a coherent moral philosophy. In response, I suggest, first, that Sartre's refusal to define authenticity does not

undermine its ethical significance but rather enriches it by emphasising the process of selfrecovery. The quotation from *Being and Nothingness* clearly acknowledges the human tendency to slip into bad faith even while striving for good faith. Authenticity, therefore, requires a continuous struggle of self-recovery. Second, Sartre's notion of authenticity does not entail moral relativism, since it does not appeal to external norms but instead emerges from the ontological structure of human existence itself.

It has already been discussed that authenticity involves a clear comprehension of the human condition, constituted by two inseparable dimensions: freedom and facticity. An authentic person acknowledges this dual structure and refuses to envisage the self as fixed or static. While recognising the capacity to transcend one's situation, the individual simultaneously assumes responsibility for the given conditions of existence. In this sense, authenticity lies in affirming freedom through the courageous acceptance of facticity and responsibility. Here, a possible objection may be raised, as David Detmer pointed out-

> "The Authentic Torturer" problem. He says, James Collins argues that "what authenticates an individual's act of choice so that it becomes a humane act? Perfect lucidity and acceptance of responsibility cannot be sufficient conditions for a good action. Malicious action may be performed based on unblinking honesty" (D. Detmer, 1988, p.166).

Regarding this issue, we can argue that if a person's act is counted as malicious, it will be on the principle of undermining man's radical freedom. When freedom is undermined, the objection of an authentic torturer problem collapses, since authenticity is grounded in freedom. Therefore, authenticity can be regarded as a way of being, not a moral ideal, but an ethical exposure.

5. Concluding Remarks:

The paper critically examines the concepts of the other and bad faith from a Sartrean existential perspective. I examined the concept of the other advocated by Sartre, which plays a significant role in the thoughtful apprehension of one's freedom. The presence of the other, paradoxically, makes the individual's freedom meaningful and threatens it as well. However, it appears paradoxical. In reality, freedom enhances its meaning in the face of adversities and obstacles that appear through the objectification of the other. Human freedom and the awareness of responsibility will be empty without the reality of "being-for-others". Then how does it contribute to ethics? Before discussing it, we need to identify the root of the ethical issues. I

found that the root of several ethical issues may be our bad faith, which Sartre characterises as "*self-deception*". When my freedom is exposed in front of others, it heightens my sense of responsibility. It is the inescapable responsibility that is attached to my existence as a way of being. The for-itself experiences, confronted by his radical freedom and inescapable responsibility through anguish. In this case, human beings initially try to escape from this anguish, leading to bad faith. The ethical issues arise from this phenomenon of bad faith. Next to it, we have examined authenticity as an ethical exposure. I am comfortable calling it an ethical exposure for systematically understanding how ethics is grounded in the ontology of human existence. This paper discusses existential ethics only briefly, focusing instead on the roots of ethical issues. However, in the end, we have acknowledged that being ethical and authentic are the same. Here, for better clarification, I argue about what exactly motivates us towards authenticity? I think the motivation of being authentic comes from the challenges we face in our lives to remain in bad faith. It is not the case that the person who chooses to be authentic does not face challenges; rather, he faces more challenges. Importantly, the form of the challenges that emerge from the choice of being an authentic person is different. The existential challenges we face in bad faith undermine our freedom, making us slaves of the other's objectification, but the challenges we face in authenticity make us bold. Authenticity is the mark of embracing self-determination, which is the implicit meaning of accepting responsibility.

Therefore, the method of self-recovery amounts to embracing the ontological tension of the meaningful interplay between freedom and facticity of our existence. At last, from the above discussion, we can arrive at the conclusion that Sartre's ontological engagement with human existence rightly challenges the traditional illusion of seeking a permanent or perfect solution to ethical dilemmas. By examining the very structure of human existence, he shows that ethics is possible, yet always marked by incompleteness and imperfection. This is because, in the *realm* of perfection, there is no need for ethics, and, for Sartre, ethics is not an ideal that can be achieved once and forever; rather, it is a continuous endorsement of our freedom. Thus, the "***ethics of imperfection***", as revealed through existential analysis, invites further research and critical reflection within the field of existential ethics.

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