Sartre: Nothingness and Bad Faith

Really, this handout is just about Sartre's conception of Bad Faith. On the surface, this conception appears not too difficult, but there are some major subtleties. If bad faith were so simple, it would then be easy to deny that I am in bad faith or maintain that bad faith is not a serious possibility for me (of course, if I do this, I am then in bad faith). So to understand bad faith, it is first necessary to understand why Sartre believes we are nothingness. That is, he must explain in detail what it means for humans not to have an essence, but only existence.

Nothingness

In his seminal work *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre considers (as Heidegger did before him) the question of being ("What is being? What is existence?"), particular the Being (or existence) of humans, which he calls being-in-itself. He notes that this line of questioning is not usually a concern for people. Following Heidegger, Sartre recognizes that people generally are absorbed in their everyday activities, not asking such questions. For instance (using Sartre's example), when Sartre counts his remaining cigarettes, he is only conscious of the cigarettes – he only has a tacit, background sense of his activity of counting. However, when people become reflective and their own existence becomes a focus of questioning, then ***human consciousness requires a space in which the "not" can arise***. This occurs in two ways:

(1) A *negative* reply might be the only correct answer, e.g., "a human being is ***not*** an *X*" for some *X* or even any possible *X* you might suggest, and

(2) The answer will be "a human being is this" and therefore, "a human being is ***not*** that".

Negation and nothingness is always involved in the process of questioning and answering. Thus human consciousness requires these concepts in order to be able to differentiate things in the world (e.g., a chair is ***not*** a table). Hence, all human experience is involves negation and nothingness, according to Sartre. This leads him to conclude that all distinctions come from how consciousness applies negation and nothingness based on human projects and concerns.

Interestingly, these distinctions are not found in the world itself! Sartre gives an example of going to a café to meet his friend, Peirre. When arriving at the café, he is unable to find Peirre. Certainly there is not "nothing" in the café – it is full of patrons, tables, coffee cups, etc… – but there is ***no*** Peirre. The world itself cannot account for this nothingness, it only comes from the concern Sartre has at Peirre's absence. Furthermore, without consciousness (and its application of nothingness) there would be no experience of destruction. Earthquakes and storms merely modify the distribution of masses and bodies – there is nothing less after the storm than before. Instead, it takes consciousness, of say a concerned farmer, to recognize that a field of wheat is ***no*** longer present after the storm. Or it takes the consciousness of a concerned rancher to recognize that his cattle are ***no*** longer alive. Even the distinction between the sexes is based on consciousness. The existence of males depends on conscious beings thinking that males are ***not*** female. Otherwise the distinction is meaningless or irrelevant (like the number of hairs on Bush's heads versus Gore's).

Given this, Sartre finally posits that consciousness at it very core is itself a nothingness. First of all, it is impossible to say what consciousness *is* exactly. It is much easier to say what it ***is not*** (e.g., it is *not* an object like any other object in the world). And secondly, given our ability to transcend our (past) facticity through our (future) possibilities of transcendence (***recall this from***

our discussion of Heidegger), "you *are not* what you *are*" (i.e., you are not merely your facticity, since you can transcend it through future action) and "you *are* what you *are not*" (i.e., you have the possibility for transcendence, but you are not these possibilities because the future has not happened yet). ***Hence humans are the sum of these dual negations.*** Below (in patterns two and three) we also see two additional dual negations that being human entails. By being these dual negations, being human inevitably involves being in a state of bad faith.

Three Patterns of Bad Faith

Most people do not recognize that they are comprised of dual negations. This phenomenon is understood as bad faith. This article from *Sartre Online* explains some patterns of bad faith and why they are possible:

> A ***first*** pattern of bad faith is what Sartre calls the "metastable concept of transcendence-facticity". On the [everyday] level, this consists primarily in deferring the moment of decision. When a person is confronted with the challenge to choose, the usual tendency is to postpone the moment of decision for in so doing, he avoids the responsibility corresponding to his choice. He does not want to take accountability for his existence and this he does by means of indulging in life-patterns devoid of commitment. On a deeper level, such a pattern of bad faith consists in confusing transcendence and facticity. The possibility of bad faith of this kind is rooted in man's being at once a facticity and a transcendence [***again, this should be familiar from Heidegger***]. Man is a facticity in so far as he is condemned to be in the world; he is transcendence in so far as he is free to project himself [into the future]. This model of bad faith is committed when one considers facticity as transcendence, and transcendence as facticity. [***That is, one is used to negate the other in order to avoid commitment: use transcendence to escape responsibility for facticity or use facticity to escape responsibility for transcendence***].

> A ***second*** pattern of bad faith is rooted in an interplay between man's being for himself and his being for others. Every human act has a double aspect; it can be seen both by the one who performs the act and the Other [***the other is "other subjects", like* das Man*, "the crowd", or "the Public"***]. This duality of human action makes possible the phenomenon of bad faith. This we find when Sartre says, "The equal dignity of being, possessed by my being-for-others and by my being-for-myself permits a perpetually disintegrating synthesis and a perpetual game of escape from the for-itself [***that is, being a free subject***] to the for-others [***that is, being a tool and object for other subjects***], and from the for-others to the for-itself."

> The ambiguous interaction between the for-itself and the for-others is made manifest in affirming at once that one is what he has been and one is not what he has been. On the one hand, man "deliberately arrests himself at one period in his life and refuses to take into consideration the later changes." By absolutizing his facticity through considering himself an immutable and finished product, he then refuses to face the responsibility for his existence. [***For instance, consider the all-star football player from high school who is now 35, but still thinks he is back in high school and the same person he was then.***] On the other hand, man "in the face of reproaches or rancor dissociates himself from his past by insisting on his freedom and on his perpetual re-creation." He then flees from

answering for what he has been by seeking refuge in the absolutization of his transcendence. [*This is like a convicted murder maintaining that he should not be punished because he "can change in the future".*]

A *third* and final pattern of bad faith is one of viewing one's self as Other by permanently assuming one's role, thereby transforming oneself to the mode of being-in-itself. Society demands that each member have a role to play in the proper functioning of society. Sartre presents as an example a waiter in a café who has applied himself to a portrayal of his role as a waiter. The waiter is guilty of bad faith because "the waiter in the café can not be immediately a café waiter in the sense that this inkwell is an inkwell, or the glass is a glass." The waiter cannot assume the being of a waiter because he is primarily more than just a waiter; he is man. [*That is to say, a person is always nothing, not an object, not even a waiter.*] Sartre explains:

> It is precisely [the waiter] who I have to be (if I am the waiter in question) and who I am not. [*I need to fulfill the social role as a waiter, so I have to act like one, but I still do not have the essence of a café waiter.*] It is not that I do not wish to be [a waiter] or that I want [a waiter] to be different. But rather there is no common measure between [a waiter's] being and mine. It is a "representation" for others and for myself, which means that I can be [a waiter] only in representation. But if I represent myself as [a waiter], I am not [a waiter]; I am separated from [a waiter] as the object from the subject, separated by nothing, but this nothing isolates me from [a waiter]. I can not be [a waiter], I can only play at being [one]; that is, imagine to myself that I am [a waiter]. And thereby affect [being a waiter] with my nothingness.

All three patterns of bad faith have one thing in common: they are rooted in a contradiction that inheres in consciousness [*we are dual negations of nothingness, seen in the previous section*]. The human reality is one characterized by a dialectic of facticity and transcendence, of being what it is not and not being what it is, of a relation to the Other and a relation to the Self. The resulting synthesis is a murky amalgamation of contradictory phenomena. The human person thus perpetually becomes a battleground between opposing forces. The resulting instability becomes itself the very condition for the inevitability of bad faith. Whatever position man takes, he is haunted with the said phenomenon.

All Faith is Bad Faith—Bad Faith as Inevitable

Continuing from *Sartre Online*:

> What complicates the problem of bad faith is the fact that bad faith is itself faith. Sartre holds that taking into consideration the nature of consciousness, belief and non-belief are but two sides of the same coin:

> > To believe is to know that one believes, and to know that one believes is no longer to believe. Thus to believe is not to believe any longer because

that is only to believe. [*For instance, say that I believe that Peter likes me. Then I know that I believe this. But I also am aware that there is no external evidence for this belief because Peter could just be pretending. Hence I also believe that Peter does not like me. The same arguments hold for the belief in God, as we saw in Kierkegaard. This is why belief (like faith) is different from knowledge.*]

Is bad faith then a [trivial and unimportant] phenomenon? At first glance, this may seem to be the case. On the contrary, the very contradiction that exists in bad faith [*that is, of trying to be something that I am not, i.e., something with an essence*] is itself the very possibility of bad faith. The unitary structure of consciousness makes feasible the phenomenon of bad faith. [*That is, to be consciousness is to be in the grips of bad faith. This is because consciousness is constantly escaping itself. Consciousness exists (so has facticity), but then it passed beyond itself (through transcendence). So it transforms belief into non-belief in an instant. I believe I am X now, but I instantly transcend this X and am now not-X. Damn! It sucks being this dual-negation!*] Is there a way out of this impasse? Early Sartre holds that there is none. [*That is the early Sartre believes that we cannot avoid being in bad faith. This is because good faith requires us to believe only what we believe and not what we do not believe---but to believe is not to believe! Ungh! See consciousness is so contradictory (through the dual-negation) that its destructiveness inevitably leads to bad faith.*] Still, he paradoxically admits the possibility of good faith, even if this is just on a [ideal] level:

> Bad faith does not succeed in believing what it wishes to believe. But it is precisely as the acceptance of not believing what one believes that it is bad faith. Good faith wishes to flee the 'not-believing-what one-believes' by finding refuge in being. Bad faith flees being by taking refuge in 'not-believing-what-one-believes.' [*'Not-believing-what-one-believes' means that through consciousness, I am aware that while I (for instance) believe in God, I also do not believe in God. This is why there is Fear and Trembling all over the place!*]

Sartre explicitly stated the recurring possibility of bad faith in the concluding portion of the chapter dealing with bad faith in Being and Nothingness:

> 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. [*In sum, being a dual negation means that bad faith is always a possibilty!*]

According to Sartre all humans have the passion to be God, that is, a completed thing and not a no-thing. However, as we know, this is not possible. Therefore, Sartre concludes, "*Man is a futile passion*".