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Sociality, Seriousness, and Cynicism: A Response to Ronald Santoni on Bad Faith

Jonathan Webber

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Abstract

This paper is a clarification and development of my interpretation of Sartre's theory of bad faith in response to Ronald Santoni's sophisticated critique, published in the same issue. Santoni rightly points out that the central claim of my interpretation is that bad faith is a fundamental project manifested in all our other projects. This paper therefore begins with a clarification of Sartre's conception of a project, followed by an explanation of his claim that one project is fundamental, grounding an elucidation of the idea that bad faith is a fundamental project. The paper then uses this to address the central themes of Santoni's critique of my interpretation. I argue that Sartre does not consider us to be ontologically and congenitally disposed to bad faith. The prevalence of bad faith is explained, on my reading of Sartre, by the social pressure to conform to it, which is inherent in the project itself. Santoni is right that this cannot really explain the prevalence of bad faith, but this is a problem with Sartre's theory, not a problem for my interpretation of it. I then defend my claim that Sartre's notion of seriousness is merely a strategy of bad faith by outlining an alternative strategy that Sartre does not consider. Finally, I argue that Sartre is right to deny that bad faith is an inherently cynical project, even though it is manipulative and self-serving, and even though it can be cynically motivated.

Ronald Santoni was already firmly in the firmament of stellar Sartre scholars by the time I started reading and puzzling over Sartre's philosophy more than two decades ago. My understanding of Sartre's theory of bad faith is deeply indebted to Santoni's cautiously analytical and acutely insightful writings. He is among the handful of Sartre scholars who set the agenda and the standard for anglophone Sartre scholarship that I have tried to follow. I am honoured that he has turned his patient and focused mind to my contribution to this scholarship, even more so that he has found it helpful. In this response, I aim to clarify and develop my interpretation of Sartre's theory of bad faith in the light of Santoni's sophisticated critique.

The idea that bad faith is a fundamental project manifested in all our other projects is central to my interpretation, as Santoni points out (2020: ##). Indeed, one might even say that it is my interpretation's fundamental claim manifested in all its other claims. This paper therefore begins with a clarification of Sartre's conception of a project, followed by an explanation of his claim that one project is fundamental. We are then in a position to see clearly what it means to call bad faith a fundamental project. With this in place, we will turn to the central themes of Santoni's critique of my interpretation: the idea that we are ontologically and congenitally disposed to bad faith, the social dimensions of bad faith, the role of seriousness in bad faith, and finally Sartre's denial that bad faith is cynical.¹

¹ Santoni's critique is a response to my 2009 book and 2011 paper, which together articulate my reading of Sartre's theory of bad faith. Rather than pepper my response with all the relevant references to *Being and Nothingness*, references to my book, and references to my paper, which I suspect would be far too much pepper for anyone's palate, my strategy is primarily to summarise the arguments of my book without references, since the book has clear relevant chapter titles and a good index. I will refer to the 2011 paper only when necessary and will leave the reader to follow up Sartre's text itself via the more detailed articulations of my reading in those publications. I will, however, cite my more recent publications where this seems helpful.

1. Projects

Sartre's concept of a project (*projet*) is central to his phenomenology and his existentialism. It is therefore rather unfortunate that he does not formulate an explicit definition of it. However, his examples and applications of the concept allow us to trace its contours. A project is defined by its end (*fin*). An end is a goal but it is not necessarily something that needs to be brought about: a project can aim at maintaining something that is already the case, as with the project of staying alive (B&N: 574). Moreover, the end need not have been explicitly or deliberately adopted as an end. Most people have the project of staying alive, regularly acting to preserve their lives, irrespective of whether they have ever considered doing otherwise.

For something to be an end, or a goal, it must be valued. A project therefore has a value (*valeur*) at its core. A value is a *negativité*, a French neologism for which Sarah Richmond has introduced the translation 'negativity'. It is an instance of nothingness. It has no being-in-itself. For this reason, values exist only as supported by consciousness (B&N: 573-5). This is why a project persists only if the agent remains committed to it. When the agent no longer supports the value at the core of a project, that project dissipates. It is not clear precisely how Sartre understands commitment to a project. But it is clear that he considers us to have the freedom to commit to a project and the freedom to withdraw that commitment. Projects themselves can offer no resistance to such changes in commitment, since they have no being of their own.²

Projects influence our behaviour by structuring our conscious experience. The world that we perceive comprises objects whose material existence consists in their being-in-itself. We also experience them as having structures of meaning or significance. A sign that says 'keep off the grass', for example, has a linguistic and social meaning. Those words are an order to keep off the grass. Their presence indicates a social context in which you might be reprimanded or even ejected from the public park if you walk on the grass. In addition to these structures of meaning, we experience objects as having a particular directive force. That is, we

² On the close conceptual connection between being-in-itself and resistance to consciousness in Sartre's philosophy, see Webber 2020: §§ 3 and 6. I argue that Sartre's conception of radical freedom precludes any satisfactory account of commitment at Webber 2018: 3.6 and Webber forthcoming: § 5.

experience the world not merely as a set of objects with meanings, but as a field of reasons. And it is this aspect of experience that depends on our projects.

Whether a sign that tells you to keep off the grass, for example, is a reason for you to keep off the grass depends on your projects. If you value defying authority or if you value exercising your freedom to use public spaces, then the sign that tells you to keep off the grass might present you with a reason to stride purposefully across the lawn. If your projects do not give you any reason to obey such a command or any positive reason to disobey it, then whether you walk on the grass will depend on your aims at the time, such as whether you are in a hurry to get across the park. The sign will give you a reason to keep off the grass only if you value conforming to such social norms, either directly or as a means to other ends.

What matters here is not simply the idea that one's reasons depend on one's projects. It is essential to Sartre's philosophy that this is a phenomenological claim about our experience of the world. We experience the world itself as a field of reasons, inviting us to behave in some ways, discouraging us from behaving in other ways. Some possibilities even seem compelling, others completely forbidden. Our behaviour can seem to be merely responsive to the reasons we find ourselves confronted with. But we only find ourselves confronted with those particular reasons because of the projects that we have. And we only have those projects because we remain committed to their core values.³

2. The Fundamental Project

As these examples already suggest, Sartre does not think of projects as discrete items, logically distinct from one another. Rather, they interact with one another in a variety of ways. The most important for our purposes is that one project can be a way of pursuing another project. Somebody might accept a job with low pay and poor working conditions in order to stay alive. In this case, the project of earning money

³ For a more detailed articulation and defence of this reading of Sartre as holding that the field of reasons we experience is dependent on our projects but the field of meanings we experience is not, see Webber 2018: ch. 3.

through that job is a way of pursuing the project of staying alive (B&N: 574). But the project of earning money this way is not entailed by the project of staying alive. In principle, if not always in practice, there are other possibilities. Even if no other job is available and there is no welfare state, one could try to live by stealing, begging, or borrowing.

We can generalise this point by saying that projects form a vertical system. The project of staying alive is deeper than the project of earning money from that job. The deeper project does not necessitate this way of pursuing it. We can therefore call the less deep project a 'strategy' for pursuing the deeper project. The job with bad pay and poor conditions is a strategy for pursuing the project of staying alive. What makes the job seem attractive despite its drawbacks, what explains how the offer of such a job seems a reason to accept and to turn up to work, is the deeper project of staying alive. The directive force of reasons that one experiences in the world depends only on one's own projects, so if one seems to have a reason to undertake some project, then that can only be because of some other project that one already has.

This relation between projects, where one project is a strategy of pursuing a deeper one, is not limited to pairs of projects. Rather, it allows us to identify chains of projects, each being a strategy for pursuing the next one down. Getting out of bed when the alarm clock goes off, making oneself presentable, sweeping the floor and setting the coffee pot going, and taking customers' orders politely and efficiently are all small-scale projects. They are all intended to achieve ends that are valued. And they are all strategies of pursuing the deeper project of being a waiter, which may in turn be a strategy for earning money, which itself is a strategy for staying alive. The alarm clock is experienced as a reason to get out of bed only because of the project of being a waiter, ultimately because of the project of staying alive.

Once we see projects as systematic in this way, we can readily see what Sartre means by a 'fundamental' (*fondamental*) project. To call something fundamental is to say that it is at the foundations. A fundamental project is therefore a project that is not a strategy for pursuing another project. It is a project at the foundations of one's whole system of projects. This does not directly entail that there is only one fundamental project, that there can only be one that is not a strategy for a deeper project. There seems no

immediate conceptual reason why one cannot have a set of fundamental projects that one's other projects are strategies for pursuing. Sartre clearly does think that each person can pursue only one fundamental project at a time, but he does not give any clear reason for this.

For a project to be fundamental in Sartre's sense, it would need to be very general. Even large-scale projects like being a parent or being a philosopher cannot be the foundation of all one's other projects, because it is perfectly possible to pursue both of those without either of them being a strategy for pursuing the other one. Moreover, it would be odd to suggest that such a project could shape everything that one does, as Sartre himself points out in a different connection, mocking the idea that you could 'be a hero your whole life, and eat and drink like one' (EH: 39). A fundamental project manifested in all one's other projects would need to be an outlook on one's life or existence in general. If one's existence is really structured by one's projects in the way that Sartre describes, then in order to be genuinely fundamental a project must be a general attitude towards this reality.

3. Bad Faith as a Fundamental Project

Bad faith is a fundamental project, because it is a denial of the reality of our existence. It is defined by its end, which is to deny that one's motivations are rooted in projects that one can change and to affirm instead that they reflect a fixed nature. Because this project is defined by its claim about one's own existence, it must include an attitude towards evidence. The open-minded attitude that Sartre calls 'science', in which one draws conclusions proportionate to the evidence, will not serve the purpose of establishing a conclusion specified in advance. Instead, we need the epistemic attitude that Sartre calls 'faith', in which we draw conclusions with an absolute certainty despite the evidence not warranting such certainty. This basic structure of the project of bad faith allows for four different kinds of conduct, since each of the end and the epistemic attitude can be served in either of two ways.

The end of bad faith can be served either by claiming that the character traits that one does in fact possess – the patterns of thought, feelings, and behaviour rooted in one's projects – are aspects of one's fixed nature.

Or it can be served by denying that one possesses a trait one really does possess, and instead affirming some merely possible contrary trait as part of one's fixed nature. Sartre calls the first of these 'sincerity'. The waiter is an example: he does have the traits his behaviour exhibits, but he treats them as fixed aspects of himself rather than manifestations of his projects. Sartre's example of the second of these is the man whose sexual experiences have all been with other men, but who denies that he is homosexual and proclaims himself to be heterosexual and adventurous. Sartre calls this 'bad faith', even though both this and sincerity are varieties of the larger project he also calls 'bad faith'.⁴

This confusing use of the term 'bad faith' is compounded by his description of the two varieties of faith. Sartre calls 'good faith' the attitude that is sensitive to the content of the evidence, but which holds its conclusion with certainty even though this is not warranted by the strength of the evidence. For the attitude that draws with certainty a conclusion that is not even sensitive to the content of the evidence, Sartre uses the term 'bad faith'. Thus, good faith and bad faith are the two varieties of faith, which is the epistemic attitude essential to the project of bad faith. Good faith supports sincerity about one's character, whereas bad faith supports bad faith about one's character, where sincerity and bad faith are the two forms of achieving the end of the project of bad faith.

So far as I know, this use of the term 'bad faith' is the most extensive example of metonymy in Sartre's philosophical writing, but it is not the only one. It is echoed later in *Being and Nothingness*, for example, when he describes shame and pride as two varieties of shame (B&N: 394). I assume the inspiration for this comes

⁴ I have described Sartre's label for the denial of a trait one does possess and affirmation of some contrary trait as part of one's fixed nature as 'bad faith' in a 'restricted sense' and contrasted this with 'a more general sense', which is the affirmation of a fixed nature (2009: ch. 6). That terminology is not entirely clear, not least because this more general sense of the term is not its most general sense, since it names only one aspect of the overall project of bad faith. (The other aspect is the attitude towards evidence that Sartre calls 'faith'.) Santoni describes my view as holding that Sartre uses 'bad faith' in the restricted sense to label what Sartre also calls 'sincerity' (2020: ##). However, on my reading, Sartre uses 'bad faith' in this restricted sense to label one of the two varieties of bad faith in the more general sense and uses 'sincerity' to label the other variety. I provide a diagram of the relations between Sartre's different senses of 'bad faith' at 2009: 96.

from biological taxonomy, where it is common to use the same name for both a class and the paradigmatic example of a class. For example, the term 'lupus' is used at the species level to name the wolf species and at the subspecies level to name the Eurasian wolf. Even better, the term 'gorilla' is used to name the gorilla species, the western subspecies, and the lowland variety of that subspecies, giving the western lowland gorilla the delightful biological name gorilla gorilla gorilla.

Sartre is not simply being playful or mischievous, therefore, in his multiple uses of the phrase 'bad faith'. He recognises that the most obvious and paradigmatic form of bad faith is where one denies what is true and does so against the evidence. He calls this 'bad faith' in both its content and its epistemic attitude. But he argues that 'sincerity', where one admits to a particular motivation, and 'good faith', which seems sensitive to the evidence, are really ultimately in the service of the same project that this paradigmatic bad faith serves. This is the project of aiming to confirm a fixed nature through an overall epistemic attitude of faith, which he considers to be the fundamental structure of all bad faith. Even so, he does not present this complex idea sufficiently clearly to avoid the confusion that his multiple use of the same phrase is likely to engender.

4. Radical Conversion and the Desire to be God

Sartre confuses this matter in two further ways. One is that he describes the inferiority project as an individual's fundamental project (B&N: 618, 621). This is the project of seeing oneself as having the fixed nature of being inferior, which makes it seem like a strategy for the deeper project of seeing oneself as having a fixed nature. However, there is no contradiction here. What has been outlined in section 3 above is only the form of the fundamental project of bad faith. Any particular instance of this fundamental project must have that form, but it must also have some content. It must have the end of ascribing to oneself some fixed nature in particular. This can include being inferior, being a waiter, or being heterosexual but adventurous. The inferiority project is therefore an instance of the fundamental project of bad faith.

Indeed, one person's fundamental project of bad faith could include in its end all of being inferior, being a waiter, and being heterosexual but adventurous, and more besides. This allows us to see that one can

vacillate between the two basic strategies of this fundamental project, the strategies of sincerity and bad faith, with their attendant epistemic attitudes of good faith and bad faith, in pursuit of the single fundamental project. One can be sincere about being a waiter, but in bad faith about one's inferiority and sexuality. The slippage between different epistemic attitudes needed to maintain this combination is within the ambit of the overall fundamental project. What matters is that the end of this fundamental project is not compromised. This is why a project does not necessitate its strategies: one can switch between mutually inconsistent projects, so long as each of these can serve as a strategy for some deeper project.⁵

One's fundamental project is therefore manifested in all one's other projects, since these are all constrained by its end even if they are not consistent with one another. Santoni rightly points out that Sartre considers a radical conversion from one fundamental project to be possible (2020: ##). So it is only true that a fundamental project is manifested in all one's other projects while one still pursues it (B&N: 626-7). A radical conversion from bad faith, it seems to me, must be a conversion to the project of authenticity. Going beyond Sartre's published work, I would suggest that such conversion must be the adoption of the epistemically responsible attitude that he calls 'science'. Being sensitive to both the content and the strength of evidence should ultimately bring one to understand that our characters consist in projects that we can change. And being rationally sensitive to argumentation should bring one to valuing this basic structure of human agency.⁶

⁵ Simone de Beauvoir makes a similar point in 'Existentialism and Popular Wisdom', where she argues that people regularly slip between idealism and scepticism about the possibility of human virtue precisely because each of these serves the purposes of bad faith in response to different scenarios (EPW: 206, 211, 213).

⁶ Sensitivity to the content and strength of evidence should lead us to the truth that we are free to change the projects that shape our experience and behaviour, because that fact is evident in our experience of the world as a field of reasons that can be accepted, rejected, compared, prioritised, and so forth. Sartre thinks that this is hidden from us when we reflect on our experience from within the project of bad faith, but revealed in reflection unsullied by the project of bad faith. I say more about this contrast between different forms of reflection in section 7, below. See also: Webber 2018: § 3.4; Webber 2020: §§ 4-5. For a defence of the claim that Sartre thinks that sensitivity to rational argument should bring us to seeing the basic structure of human agency as objectively valuable and the foundation of all other values, see Webber 2018: § 9.7 and ch. 10; Webber forthcoming.

Sartre's argument that 'man fundamentally is the desire to be God' (B&N: 735) further confuses this aspect of his philosophy. He defines 'God' as a conscious being with a fixed nature, an impossible synthesis of being-for-itself and being-in-itself (B&N: 735). Sartre argues that this aim is essential to 'human reality' (B&N: 734). Santoni describes it as a 'rudimentary project' aimed at suppressing our freedom, the 'congenital' ground of bad faith (2020: ##). As I read Sartre, the 'desire to be God' is simply another name for bad faith, one which emphasises the impossibility of its end. But as I read him, Sartre is here describing an essential project of 'man' or 'human reality', not of being-for-itself. The former is the current empirical reality of our existence, the latter is the ontological structure of our being.⁷ Sartre considers bad faith to be widespread and deeply embedded in our culture. A radical conversion to authenticity is possible for a being-for-itself. It would be a conversion away from the current human reality.⁸

Santoni offers one further reason to think that Sartre considers bad faith to be rooted in 'our primitive ontological condition': the direct awareness of our freedom is felt as anguish, a negative emotion that immediately disposes us to flee from, or to deny, that freedom (2020: ##). Sartre does describe the awareness of freedom as anguish, of course, but the idea that this is necessarily how our freedom appears to us contradicts the theory of affectivity articulated in *Being and Nothingness*. According to this theory, feelings structure the field of reasons we encounter in the world. They are therefore dependent on our projects. Negative feelings repel us from things that conflict with our projects (B&N: 785-91). If the awareness of our freedom is experienced as anguish, therefore, this must be because it contradicts some project. It can only contradict a project that aims to deny that freedom, which is the project of bad faith.

⁷ Santoni points out that Sartre describes 'being-for-itself' and 'being-for-others' as two distinct and mutually irreducible aspects of our being (2020: ##). But he overlooks Sartre's uses of 'being-for-itself' to name the whole of our being, as I have used it in this paragraph. This seems to me another instance of metonymy: the two distinct aspects of our being (being-for-itself) are its appearance in the world (being-for-others) and its self-conscious perspective on that world (being-for-itself). I briefly trace some scholarly disagreement over Sartre's theory of shame to confusion generated by this metonymy at Webber 2011: 188.

⁸ For the exegetical detail of my reading of this passage, see Webber 2009: 106-111.

Anguish therefore can sustain bad faith by keeping us from confronting our freedom but cannot motivate the initial adoption of that project.

5. Social Dimensions of Bad Faith

We are now in a position to see why Sartre thinks a person can only have one fundamental project at a time. Since it is not a strategy for some deeper project, a fundamental project must be a very general outlook on one's existence. It can be the project of affirming the true structure of one's being, one's specific projects and the freedom to change them, which requires an epistemic attitude of sensitivity to the content and strength of evidence about this matter. This is the project of authenticity. The only alternative is to deny the true structure of one's being. This project can only be built around the end of ascribing to oneself a fixed nature. This is the project of bad faith, which requires an attitude of faith. These two options are mutually incompatible. Moreover, the project of bad faith can incorporate a wide range of traits in the fixed nature one ascribes to oneself.

This leaves us with an important question. If we are free to change any project, since it is built on a value, which is an instance of nothingness, then we are free to pursue either of these fundamental projects. We are not ontologically or congenitally disposed to bad faith, nor to anguish at the recognition of our freedom. Rather, there is a 'permanent risk of bad faith', because bad faith is always a project that we can freely adopt (B&N: 117). In that case, should we not expect roughly equal amounts of bad faith and authenticity in the world? Sartre clearly thinks of bad faith as a pervasive phenomenon, authenticity as unusual. This is what he means, according to my interpretation, in describing the desire to be God as essential to human reality. But how can he explain this? Why should bad faith be more common than authenticity, if not because of our ontological structure?

We should bear in mind two aspects of the project of bad faith. The first is that projects structure one's perception as a field of reasons. If one is engaged in the project of bad faith, then one experiences one's own freedom in anguish and experiences the behaviour of other people as flowing from their fixed natures.

The second important aspect of bad faith is that this expectation is not merely predictive, but also normative. Behaviour that does not fit a person's expected fixed nature challenges the project of bad faith. The person in bad faith will therefore exert pressure on others to conform to their expected natures, just as they will avoid the anguish of confronting their own freedom directly. Bad faith is necessarily social in the sense that one cannot be in bad faith without it shaping one's experience of other people in this way.

Sartre argues that this is why 'there is the dance of the grocer, the tailor, the auctioneer, through which they try to persuade their customers that they are nothing more than a grocer, an auctioneer, a tailor'. 'A grocer who dreams is offensive to the buyer,' he continues, 'because he is no longer completely a grocer'. Social life is replete with measures 'to imprison man in what he is', as though 'we lived in the constant fear that he might escape from it, that he might burst out and suddenly elude his condition' (B&N: 103). We often need to play along with such expectations in order to navigate social life sufficiently smoothly to achieve our goals, though in some cases we need to resist expectations that constrain us. I agree with Santoni, however, that this cannot explain why people adopt the project of bad faith (2020: ##). For one can act in accordance with the expectation that one has a fixed nature from within the project of authenticity. One can play along with other people's expectations without sharing the worldview that grounds those expectations. And one can resist other people's characterisations of oneself without agreeing that one must have some fixed characteristics.

This is a major problem for Sartre, because he wants his theory that bad faith is socially pervasive to ground his explanation of why members of a social group can have an evaluative outlook in common. He argues that a common evaluative outlook is developed in response to a common situation. However, an environment is constituted as a situation, as a field of reasons, according to Sartre's phenomenology, only through the lens of projects. The shared project that explains how a shared environment is experienced as a common situation, according to Sartre, is bad faith. But it does not really matter which project he considers to play this role. For we can always ask the same question: why is that project common among these people? Any answer that cites a reason for adopting the project implicitly refers to another common project. Ultimately, therefore, the explanation must rest on an unexplainable coincidence. This is perhaps why Sartre

later altered his theory of freedom in a way that does allow social pressure to explain the widespread adoption of a project (Webber 2018: ch. 7).

6. Seriousness as a Strategy of Bad Faith

Sartre's phenomenological claim that the reasons we find ourselves confronted with really reflect our own projects leads to a further aspect of the project of bad faith. For that project would be threatened by any experience of those reasons as dependent on projects that we can change. And our experience of reasons, according to Sartre, does indicate our freedom over them. We do not experience reasons simply as motivations pulling and pushing us around. Rather, we experience them as directive claims that we can question, consider, and compare, then affirm, reject, reassess, refine, override, or even ignore in thought or in action. We experience reasons, that is, as exerting directive force on us only to the extent that we accept that force. If we were to reflect on this experience honestly, we would discover that the force exerted by the reasons we find in the world is dependent on our values and that we can, through our reassessment of those reasons, change those values.

The project of bad faith therefore requires that we do not admit that we can shape the reasons we experience through our responses to them. Sartre's description of *l'esprit de sérieux* is intended to articulate this aspect of bad faith. Hazel Barnes and Sarah Richmond agree on translating this phrase as 'the spirit of seriousness', which has a nice poetic quality. I have suggested, as Santoni points out, that 'serious-mindedness' might better capture Sartre's idea. I mean this to resonate with the ideas of being 'open-minded', or willing to consider new ideas and reconsider one's existing ideas, being 'narrow-minded', or unwilling to consider ideas one does not oneself accept, and their antonyms 'closed-minded' and 'broad-minded'. Serious-minded people consider the reasons they experience to be objective features of the world, part of its being-in-itself like its material structure.

Since we do not experience reasons as resistant to our efforts, we do not experience them as part of the world's being-in-itself. We experience them as exerting a directive force dependent on our acceptance of

them as reasons. The spirit of seriousness, therefore, requires the epistemic attitude of bad faith. It requires that we affirm something that the evidence in our own experience does not support. And for this we need the certainty of faith, rather than the evidence-sensitivity of the scientific attitude. This epistemic attitude towards reasons is motivated by the goal of seeing reasons as features of being-in-itself. Serious-mindedness is therefore itself a project, one whose end motivates the epistemic attitude of bad faith. Its end, in turn, is motivated by the fundamental project of bad faith: serious-minded people value seeing reasons as part of the being-in-itself of the world because they value denying their own freedom over their projects.

Sartre does not, however, develop his account of the spirit of seriousness through an analysis of the project of bad faith. He does describe the serious person as ascribing a fixed nature to themselves, as Santoni points out (2020: ##). But he does not consider the converse question of whether the person who ascribes a fixed nature to themselves must be serious-minded about reasons. He defines seriousness primarily as ‘conferring a reifying substance on values’ and as seeing the world ‘as if it constituted my obligations’ (B&N: 79). Fundamentally, seriousness ‘regards values as transcendent givens that are independent of human subjectivity’ and ‘transfers the character of being “desirable” from the ontological structure of things to their simple material constitution’ (B&N: 809). It is only in relation to these reified reasons that he describes serious-minded people as seeing themselves as having fixed natures, which make them be pushed and pulled around by the directive forces of the world (B&N: 752-3).

It is because Sartre proceeds in this way that he overlooks a different attitude towards reasons and values available within the fundamental project of bad faith. For the end of seeing oneself as having a fixed nature does not require serious-mindedness about reasons and values. One could instead see the reasons one experiences as expressions of one’s own fixed nature. This would entail accepting that reasons and values differ from one person to the next while still denying that we have any freedom over them. Like seriousness, this would require the epistemic attitude of bad faith. Within the fundamental project of bad faith, therefore, there are two possible projects with respect to the being of reasons and values. Indeed, one could perhaps vacillate between the two, just as one can vacillate between sincerity and bad faith about one’s own character.

This is what makes seriousness a strategy of bad faith: it is a non-fundamental project that serves as a way of pursuing the fundamental project of bad faith, but which is not necessitated by that fundamental project.⁹

7. Cynicism and the Project of Bad Faith

Sartre famously contends that bad faith is a form of self-deception but cannot be ‘a cynical lie’ (B&N: 113). He argues that ‘if I deliberately and cynically attempt to lie to myself, I must completely fail in this undertaking’, since nobody can successfully lie to me if I am aware that they are lying (B&N: 90). Santoni has argued, however, that Sartre’s analyses of bad faith and the structure of projects together entail that the project of bad faith is indeed cynical (1995: ch. 3). Santoni claims that my own analysis of Sartre’s philosophy agrees that bad faith is a cynical project (2020: ##). This was initially surprising, since I have not previously considered this question in published work. But seeing why Santoni ascribes this view to me has clarified the issue for me. In this final section, I will argue that Sartre is right to deny that bad faith is a cynical project, even though it can sometimes be cynically motivated.

Santoni’s argument rests on his contention that bad faith is a reflective project, not merely something that occurs entirely unreflectively (2020: ##). He draws on my analysis of Sartre’s distinction between ‘pure’ and ‘impure’ reflection to argue that ‘bad faith is cynical by involving reflection of the impure type’ (2020: ##). As I understand the distinction, impure reflection is the form that reflection takes within the project of bad faith. Sartre’s view that projects shape our conscious experience is not only a claim about our experience of the material and social environment. It is not just our awareness of the world that is shaped by our projects.

⁹ Santoni objects to my claim that seriousness is not another form of bad faith alongside sincerity and bad faith (2020: ##). He is absolutely right that the serious person ascribes to themselves a fixed nature, so seriousness does instantiate the basic form of bad faith (2020: ##). What I meant, however, was simply that seriousness is not a third kind of bad faith alongside the two kinds that ascribe to oneself a fixed nature, sincerity and bad faith. Rather, it is a strategy for pursuing either of these varieties of bad faith (Webber 2009: 91). It is a strategy because it is itself a project that is not necessitated by either of these varieties of bad faith, but which is one of the only two possible attitudes to reasons and values that are consistent with either of these varieties of bad faith.

All of our awareness is shaped by our fundamental project, including our reflective awareness of our own experiences and decisions. From within the fundamental project of ascribing a fixed nature to oneself, therefore, reflective awareness presents one's own experience as a relation between the objects in the world and one's own fixed nature.¹⁰

Bad faith is indeed deceptive in pursuit of its end. Bad faith distorts the evidence. It shapes experience of other people so that their behaviour seems to emanate from a fixed nature. It makes reflection impure, presenting our own behaviour as emanating from a fixed nature and misrepresenting our own experience of reasons. But this is all just due to the way projects function, according to Sartre's phenomenology. All projects shape our awareness in accordance with their ends. There is nothing peculiar to the project of bad faith here. Moreover, cynicism is not merely self-serving deception. Cynicism is clear-eyed. The cynical person manipulates for a purpose in the explicit knowledge of doing so.

When he denies that bad faith is cynical, Sartre denies that it includes such explicit knowledge. 'There is no cynical lie in bad faith', he tells us, 'or any knowing preparation of misleading concepts' (B&N: 117). For my bad faith to be cynical would require that I 'represent it to myself as bad faith' (B&N: 114). I cannot do that, for then I would no longer be duped by my own ruses (B&N: 90). This is why the 'decision to be in bad faith dare not speak its name' (B&N: 114). Sartre, of course, holds that every conscious experience includes non-thetic awareness of that conscious experience. We therefore have non-thetic awareness of the influence our projects have on our experience (B&N: 11-12). Bad faith does include this non-thetic awareness (B&N: 90). But this is not the explicitly articulated self-knowledge that characterises cynicism.

Does bad faith ever involve pure reflection? This would make the person in bad faith explicitly aware of the influence their project of bad faith has on their experience of the world. Pursuing a project, however, does not require pure reflection. We can pursue the project of staying alive, for example, experiencing the world

¹⁰ For my full analysis of pure and impure reflection, including the development of this distinction across Sartre's publications up to *Being and Nothingness*, see Webber 2020: §§ 4-5.

in the light of our end of being alive, without ever engaging in the pure reflection that would be required to recognise that we freely maintain this project or to recognise the ways it shapes our experience.¹¹ But neither is pure reflection strictly ruled out by the project of bad faith. We might be prompted to reflect in that way by some experience or by someone's comments. It seems to me that this is why Sartre describes bad faith as consistent with occasional 'sudden awakenings of cynicism' (B&N: 91). We might occasionally explicitly recognise that we are doing it, just as we may occasionally experience our own freedom directly in anguish.

These experiences could be taken as revelatory. They could motivate a radical conversion to authenticity. Or they could motivate a retreat into bad faith. Such an explicit choice of bad faith would be cynical. But the project of bad faith does not require any experience of this kind. One can live in bad faith without ever having considered it explicitly. Indeed, if bad faith is socially prevalent, then we are unlikely to be prompted to face up to our freedom or our project of bad faith. One of Sartre's aims in *Being and Nothingness*, as in some of his literary works, it seems to me, is precisely to awaken his readers from the dogmatic slumbers of bad faith. He wants to bring us to the explicit knowledge that our lives are marred by a serious-mindedness and a desire to be God-like and that these are merely features of a socially pervasive but entirely unnecessary project of denying the true reality of our existence. He wants to cure us of bad faith.

¹¹ Santoni has argued that adopting the epistemic attitude of faith, which is essential to the project of bad faith, as we saw in section 3, is also a cynical aspect of bad faith (1995: 55-57). Like the whole project of bad faith, this epistemic attitude is indeed, as Santoni points out, something that the individual freely adopts and maintains, not something that simply happens to them. Even so, this would be cynical only if the individual explicitly decided to adopt and maintain this epistemic attitude. As with the rest of the project of bad faith, all that is required, according to Sartre's analysis, is non-thetic awareness of doing this, which falls short of clear-eyed cynicism.

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