

24.01 Classics of Western Philosophy

Prof. Rae Langton

VII. Sartre

Lecture 24. Existentialism is a Humanism, contd.

1. *Bad faith*. Given how unpleasant anguish is, we all try to escape it, by acting as if we don't, after all, have this terrifying freedom. In the excerpt of our anthology, Sartre alludes to this in the passages about how we flee from our anxiety (1221); but see also *Being and Nothingness*, 1210-1211, 1213. We try to avoid anguish as best as we can, through bad faith. Bad faith is a kind of pretense to yourself that you are more thing-like than you really are: that you are being-in-itself instead of being-for-itself, that you have an essence, that you have no choice about something, that there is something determining, or guiding, you to do what you do.

2. *Bad faith is paradoxical*. It is a kind of dishonesty that has a paradoxical quality. One aspect of the paradox is that it involves *choosing to believe that you cannot choose*. Furthermore, since it involves somehow lying to oneself, it involves ascribing ignorance and knowledge of something at the same time to the same agent:

I must know in my capacity as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me
in my capacity as the one deceived. (1210)

Sartre throws up his hands: 'Our embarrassment then appears extreme, since we can neither reject nor comprehend bad faith'.

2. Example: the woman and her hand (1210-11)

3. Another example: the waiter playing the role of waiter (1213).

4. *The existentialist notion of conscious experience*. Recall the two existentialist slogans: not only that existence precedes essence, but that 'subjectivity' is the starting point' for existentialism. What is this subjectivity? Part of Sartre's account is that it concerns not only the freedom we have discussed, but also awareness of *other things* and *other people*. Consciousness is thoroughly intentional: there is no consciousness without consciousness of things other than consciousness—no Self without an Other. Furthermore, consciousness includes among its objects other people—not merely as figures in hats and coats (cf. Descartes in Meditation II), but as subjects. For Sartre, the experience of e.g. The Look—the experience of shame when you realize that someone is looking at you, while you are looking through a keyhole—is as central to the structure of experience as are the colour patches of Hume's impressions, or Russell's sense data.

5. *Questions about existentialism: How plausible is the claim that there is no human nature?* Recall Aristotle's claim that there is a human function, just as there is a function for a flute player; and that our flourishing, and our happiness, coincides with the fulfillment of this function. Has Sartre refuted Aristotle?

6. *Questions about existentialism: Is there an ethics of existentialism?* Despite his claims that there are no objective norms to guide us, Sartre apparently thinks that existentialism in a certain sense affirms the value of humanity, it is a 'humanism' —he thinks that our consciousness of our own freedom should lead us to affirm the freedom of everyone. Furthermore, he affirms the value of honesty: bad faith is not just a psychological phenomenon—it is a moral failing, according to Sartre. Is Sartre entitled to affirm that there are no objective norms, and that bad faith is wrong?