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# Jean-Paul Sartre: The Bad Faith of Empire

Megan Henricks

Empire is a phenomenon that is anything but simple. Although its outward appearance is easily described as “power without boundaries”, the inner causes and legitimators of the imperial mindset are extremely complex and various. Empire can be seen as stemming from a perverted understanding of Christianity, gaining its motivation from the determinations of the global economy, or resulting from centuries of irrational prejudice and hatred – wherever we look, explanations and descriptions of Empire abound. However, many of these fail to get at the very mindset that allows something as powerful as Empire to exist in our world, and when they do discuss that mindset, they seem to do so too narrowly and without real clarity. The works of Jean-Paul Sartre reveal an understanding of human consciousness and motivation that both clarifies and augments many aspects of the kind of thinking that leads to and perpetuates Empire, thereby revealing Empire’s fundamental flaws. Sartrean bad faith provides significant elucidation of the Imperial mindset, linking together the works of Kelly Brown Douglas, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, Mark Lewis Taylor, and Jean Bethke Elshtain to reveal the pervasive harmfulness of Empire to human beings as such.

## Sartrean Bad Faith

Our first task is to explore Sartre’s concept of “bad faith”. In order to understand what Sartre means by “bad faith”, we must recognize his distinction between “being-in-itself” and “being-for-itself”. A “being-in-itself” simply “*is what it is*” (Sartre Being 28) – it is an object of consciousness, a thing, and it is nothing more than its current identity. “Being-for-itself”, on the other hand, “is defined . . . as being what it is not and not being what it is” (28), meaning that a “being-for-itself” cannot be defined by its current identity; it has a potentiality – a freedom to change – that makes it able to, in a sense, be what it is not. The former type of being refers to things in the world, while the latter refers to subjects with consciousness and potentiality, i.e. human beings. A human, as a being-for-itself, “is at once a *facticity* and a *transcendence*” (98) – this means that a being-for-itself has a “necessary connection with the In-itself, hence with the world and its own past” (802), i.e. it is a *facticity*, but it is also a *transcendence*, which means that “the For-itself goes beyond the given in a further project of itself” (807).<sup>31</sup> In other words,

the human being-for-itself contains a paradox: it can be defined as a facticity (i.e. an identity, like a being-in-itself), but it is at the same time transcends that facticity in its potentiality, its ever-present freedom to no longer be its facticity. As a result, "[c]onsciousness or conscious man or man simply is fundamentally *projective*, and . . . he is restless in essence, existing always towards a future possible which he is now not" (Earle 94) – thus, a human being as such always strives to project himself beyond what he currently is.

Bad faith is, most simply, a lie to oneself – it is the most fundamental form of self-deception (Sartre *Being* 87). As a conscious being-for-itself, the human being has the capacity to lie, which "implies . . . that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding" because he must know it in order to be able to hide it; thus, a "man does not lie about what he is ignorant of" (87). Therefore, in order to be in bad faith, one must somehow hide from oneself something that one already knows – in other words, one who deceives him/herself must sometimes, at least, know the truth. In recognition of this fact, Sartre allows that bad faith is an extremely unstable state for a human being, one in which s/he "vacillates continually between good faith and cynicism" (90): s/he is in good faith whenever s/he recognizes that self-deception is occurring, but then s/he cynically decides to continue the process of self-deception, returning to bad faith. Not all self-deception, however, counts as bad faith – a lie that is in bad faith is one that allows us to "slide at any time from naturalistic present [i.e. facticity] to transcendence and *vice versa*" (99). This means, simply, that we are in bad faith when we choose to think of ourselves as *either* a facticity or a transcendence – not as both – whenever it is most convenient to us, so that we either try to avoid projecting ourselves beyond our current identities or, alternatively, seek to hide from truths about ourselves as facticities that are shameful or even incriminating.

Along with being in bad faith with regard to ourselves, we can also be in bad faith in our relations with others. We must always remember that "[t]he *Other's* consciousness is what it is not" (Sartre *Being* 105) – the Other, too, is a being-for-itself, and we must never forget the paradox of the Other's simultaneous facticity and transcendence, his/her projective existence. In his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth*, Sartre points out the bad faith that is involved in the mistreatment of others that occurs in colonialism, although he does not use those words exactly: he refers to colonization as a "dehumanization process" (53), and

<sup>31</sup>Sartrean transcendence does not refer to transcendence of the human realm of existence, i.e. the supernatural. It refers, instead, to transcendence of oneself within the human realm of existence – it means, simply, becoming better or more than one was, not going beyond the bounds of human existence.

he points out the necessary colonial “principle that the colonized subject is not a fellow man” but is nothing more than a “beast . . . of burden” (Sartre *Preface* 50). It is clear, then, that by limiting those who are colonized to existence in the facticity of a laborer and ignoring their human potential to ever be anything more, “oppression – as freedom negating itself, or as freedom’s destructive act against freedom – is both dehumanizing and in *bad faith*” (Santoni 30). Thus, bad faith can be directed inward (toward oneself) or outward (toward others), and it can take the form of either objectification (i.e. recognition of the current facticity only) or a lack of responsibility for past and present actions (i.e. recognition of the projective freedom for transcendence only). All of these forms of bad faith are extremely perilous, and they are often present within the phenomenon of Empire.

### Looking at The Bad Faith of Sartre

Our next task is to look at the writings of Douglas, Moe-Lobeda, Taylor, and Elshtain through the lens of Sartrean bad faith. Sometimes in the form of agreement, other times in the form of criticism, Sartre’s ideas provide significant illumination of the themes of these books.

*What’s Faith Got to Do with It?*, by Kelly Brown Douglas, provides an understanding of Empire through the development of themes that confront issues of race and class – these themes can be greatly clarified by the application of Sartrean bad faith. The most pervasive recognition in Douglas’s book of what is, effectively, bad faith is the idea of the objectification of human beings, of treating them as though they consist of just being-in-itself, thereby failing to recognize their full being-for-itself status, i.e. their freedom to exist projectively and become more than what they are. This horror is made possible by the existence of Platonized Christianity, which places the body in dualistic opposition to the soul and considers “[s]exual desire nothing less than diabolical and a reflection of humanity’s fallen state” (Douglas 35). By valuing the soul over the body, this perverted form of Christianity “provides the means to theologically justify [oppressed people’s] demonization and concomitant dehumanization” (52) by characterizing them as beings that are only physical and bodily. More specifically, Douglas refers to the sexualization of black bodies – black people are considered sub-human and fit for oppression because they are construed in the minds of white oppressors as overly sexual, non-intellectual existents who must be harmed and even destroyed to remove the physical hindrance to unity with God that the white Christians hate so much: their bodies and their sexuality (123). Sartre’s description of the sexual attitude of the anti-Semite toward Jews provides clarification by means of analogy

insofar as “one of the elements of [the anti-Semite’s] hatred is a profound sexual attraction toward Jews” (46) – in other words, the sexualization of the Jews in the anti-Semite’s mind contributes to his hatred of them, and the murders of Jews are, thus, “symbolic murders” that seek “to extirpate Evil by doing Evil” (Sartre *Anti-Semite* 49-50), just as white Christians sought to symbolically destroy the evil of their bodies by lynching black men (Douglas 147). By deceiving themselves into believing that black people are nothing more than their sexuality and do not exist projectively beyond their sexual identities, white oppressors are in bad faith, as are black people who come to agree with the judgments of their oppressors and see themselves as nothing more than sexual objects.

Sartrean bad faith is also relevant to Douglas’ ideas about the deceitful vacillation between human factuality and transcendence, specifically in her criticism of the Evangelical Protestant revival churches and their relationship with black people. The revivals were not all bad: they embodied a revolutionary inclusiveness of all people of all races (they sometimes even allowed black people to act as ministers), and they incorporated some of the physical spirituality that characterizes African religious culture (Douglas 158-159), but they certainly had their faults. Although blacks were included as equals in the religious ceremonies and even told that they were “free”, this so-called freedom did not apply outside of the church doors; in fact, blacks were told “that the freedom offered in the gospels was spiritual, not earthly, freedom” (154) so that they would be content to return to their lives of oppression as soon as church let out. Sartre would indubitably condemn this situation as an instance of bad faith because of the obvious vacillation between facticity and transcendence (i.e. being-in-itself and being-for-itself) with regard to the black people who attended the revivals: when they were at church, they were considered free – their transcendence, as freedom to project themselves beyond their current identities, was recognized – but as soon as they left, they were no longer allowed to remember their freedom and were forced to think of themselves only as the facticity, the being-in-itself of the hyper-sexualized, laboring, black object. In other words, black people were only allowed to recognize their transcendence when it was convenient for their white oppressors; as soon as they were needed as workers, they were once again considered nothing more than a facticity. This dehumanizing treatment, as Sartre would surely agree, is a deplorable instance of bad faith.

In *Healing a Broken World*, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda condemns Empire from an economic perspective, pointing out what Sartre would call the bad faith that underlies the Imperial economic system and mindset. The most salient similarity to

Sartrean bad faith in Moe-Lobeda's writing lies in her recognition of the forced limitation of human transcendence in *Empire*, specifically in the debilitation of moral agency: "moral agency", for Moe-Lobeda, refers to "the power to embody active love for creation including self, others, and non-human creation" (Moe-Lobeda 65) – it is the power to act for the good of all. Because transnational corporations have all of the money, they are able to determine the choices from which people living in democracies can choose – unfortunately, acting on behalf of others is not one of those options, so Christian moral agency is effectively disabled (67). When their choices are so limited by the profiteering transnational corporations, Christians are unable make choices to improve themselves toward their potential as better Christians, i.e. they are forced to be only *what they are*, and they are preventing from projecting themselves to become *what they are not* and what, in fact, they believe they *should be*, because those options are simply not available to them. The bad faith in this situation is already astounding, but it gets even worse: people living in the globalized world become so entrapped by the system that they are unable to conceive of anything different because "[t]he ideology underlying the prevailing model of globalization undermines the capacity to imagine and perceive more socially just . . . alternatives" (4-5) – they are unable to even *imagine* a potentiality for themselves, let alone *achieve* it in any way. This sort of captive imagination is an especially dangerous form of bad faith because its victims are not aware that it is there; their lack of awareness is, after all, its essential characteristic. By forcibly reducing human beings to be nothing more than their facticity, the globalized economic system forces them into a state of bad faith with regard to themselves by making them forget their freedom for projection of the self.

Mark Lewis Taylor, author of *Religion, Politics, and the Christian Right*, takes a more general look at the way in which religion and politics interact to cause the phenomenon of *Empire*. He and Sartre share a common understanding of the problems of what Taylor calls "contractual liberalism", which ultimately seems to be another instance of bad faith. Sartre insightfully realizes that in Europe, although "humanism claims to be universal" (49), it is not, and those who are subjected to unfair treatment in the name of humanity will eventually come to realize that Western "humanism wants to be universal [but the] racist practices are differentiating" (Sartre *Preface* 44) who gets to be free (i.e. who is recognized as a transcendent being-for-itself who is able to live projectively into the future) and who does not. Similarly, Taylor defines "contractual liberalism" as that supported by so-called liberals who assert "that liberalism, even when speaking about liberty and freedom and while claiming to maximize those values, [should] always be .

. . . practiced in a restricted manner – restricted to a select body of people” (Taylor 74) – both thinkers realize that those who act in the name of human freedom do not always mean for it to apply to *all* humans and that, in Sartre’s terminology, they are often willing to limit others to objectified facticity in order to keep the transcendent freedom to project all to themselves. Sartre also recognizes that “[c]onsenting to [demands for integration from those who are outside], of course, would be out of the question: we would ruin the system, which, as you know, relies on gross exploitation” (Sartre *Preface* 44). In this statement, Sartre points to an inherent danger of contractual liberalism: contractual liberals are terrified of any sort of rearrangement of society because they might become the ones who are left out of the contracted space of human freedom. Taylor makes a similar assertion when he notes that contractual liberals are “threatened by the post-9/11 instability” (Taylor 83), and they even are willing to ally themselves with their former enemies, the neo-conservatives, in order prevent their beloved contract from being disturbed. Both Sartre and Taylor recognize the bad faith at work behind contractual liberalism: by stating that freedom does not apply to everyone, one is necessarily dehumanizing and ignoring the projective transcendence of all those who are left out.

Although the previous authors have all found favorable analyses in light of Sartrean bad faith, such is not the case for Jean Bethke Elshtain in her book, *Just War Against Terror*, which makes the case for the necessity and goodness of American Empire. Elshtain’s ideas are themselves examples of the bad faith that so often lies behind Imperial attitudes – the most glaring instance of this flaw is Elshtain’s consistent tendency to objectify the Islamist terrorists and to allow herself to think of them as only facticity, ignoring their transcendent ability to freely project themselves beyond what they are. Elshtain labels the terrorists as fundamentally evil, as utterly unchangeable, and she even goes so far as to call them “an implacable foe with whom it is impossible to have a diplomatic ‘sit-down’” (Elshtain 153). She does not consider the fact that the terrorists are human beings who possess the qualities of every being-for-itself: they are always free to change their behavior, and they are able to make choices; they may very well have concrete reasons for behaving as they do. Elshtain is clearly in bad faith throughout her analysis because she recognizes only the facticity of the terrorists, ignoring their transcendent capacity for change and labeling them fully determined by what she calls their one defining characteristic: their hatred of America.

Her objectification of the Islamist terrorists is not Elshtain’s only instance of bad faith – she is also in bad faith with regard to herself and the United States as

a whole. For Elshtain, the principles on which the United States was founded are wholly good and noble, and the fact that we are striving to realize them effectively justifies all of our actions: we can always use “a founding *principle* to defeat *practices* that violate . . . that principle” (Elshtain 27), so the principle is *who we really are*, while the harmful practices are just unfortunate but ultimately irrelevant errors. In other words, because we have the potential of someday living up to our founding principles, what we are doing now is irrelevant to our goodness – it is enough that someday we *could* be wholly good. The bad faith involved in this position is almost overwhelming: Elshtain is allowing herself to conveniently think that she and the rest of the United States are just transcendence, and their facticity is irrelevant to who they are. This bad faith is of the sort that uses self-deception as a means of evading responsibility for the past and the present; because Elshtain finds value in the transcendent potential of the United States – what they project themselves to be in the future – she pretends that the past and the present do not matter at all: she fails to take responsibility. To summarize, Elshtain’s position is eerily analogous to that of an anti-Semite:

[The anti-Semite] is a man who is afraid. Not of the Jews, to be sure, but of himself, of his own consciousness, of his liberty, of his instincts, of his responsibilities, of solitariness, of change, of society, and of the world – of everything except the Jews. He is a coward who does not want to admit his cowardice to himself (Anti-Semite 53).

Elshtain effectively asserts that the United States is justified in, like the anti-Semite, fearfully fleeing its own responsibility for the past and the present, focusing instead on an all-consuming hatred of the enemy, but it is clear that this position is one of bad faith rooted in cowardice.

### Unique Implications of Sartre

Although Sartre’s idea of bad faith seems to fit quite nicely with most of the ideas about empire explicated above, Sartre draws out implications concerning violence that none of the other authors would be so likely to embrace. There is a very distinct “tension, or dialectic, that seems to mark Sartre’s overall discussion of violence” (Santoni 5), but it seems fairly reasonable, especially in light of Sartre’s Preface to Fanon’s work, to assume that Sartre found violence to be appropriate in at least some, albeit very specific, situations. Sartre poignantly writes that “we only become what we are by radically negating deep down what others have done to us” (51), and it is clear that he does not mean for these words to be taken lightly – he later says that “in a time of helplessness, murderous rampage is the collective



unconscious of the colonized" (Sartre *Preface* 52). For Sartre, "[v]iolence, like Achilles' spear, can heal the wounds it has inflicted" (62), so violence is entirely justified and even a means of salvation for those who have been violently dehumanized by any form of Empire. None of the authors with whom Sartre seems to agree would join him in his embrace of violence as redemptive; they would probably be quick to condemn him on the basis of the Christian principle of non-violence. Sartre, however, as a staunch atheist, has no such qualms about violent acts – his willingness to embrace violence is at least more understandable when we realize that he adhered no religious system that provided him with injunctions against violence. Thus, despite the many points of agreement between Sartre and the other authors (excluding Elstain), violence would most likely be a point of fierce contention among them, as atheist versus Christians.

The Sartrean concept of bad faith makes for an interesting lens through which to view the problem of Empire, and his similarities and differences with Douglas, Moe-Lobeda, Taylor, and Elstain serve to provide further clarification of the all-important topic of the causes and significance of Empire, American and otherwise. Empire is not a phenomenon on which we should passively report – conversely, it is something we must challenge and seek to understand on the most fundamental level. The great minds have done their work, and now it falls to us to make sure that Empire will stop before it is too late for true humanity, or any at all.

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