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SARTRE, DIALECTIC, AND
THE PROBLEM OF OVERCOMING BAD FAITH*

ABSTRACT

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre affirms a circle of relations between oneself and another. This circle moves between the relations of love and desire and results from the fact that both love and desire are attempts to capture the other who always remains out of reach. Sartre denies that there can be a dialectic of such relations with others: never can there be a motivated movement beyond the frustrations and failures of each of these attempts to relate to the other. The only way out of this circle is, therefore, according to Sartre, a radical conversion.

Like the master in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, each individual caught in this circle wants what cannot be attained: the assimilation or the negation of the freedom of the other. He is thus, like Hegel's master, impervious to any reasons that could count against what he is seeking; his failures cannot in any way motivate him to want what can be. From the point of view of such desires, any negative evaluation of these desires must seem arbitrary. Therefore, to the extent that Sartre's earlier writings indicate no other possibilities of human existence except those premised on such impossible demands, Sartre's negative evaluations concerning the bad faith of these individuals must seem arbitrary.

My conclusion is not, however, simply negative since I argue that in *Saint Genet* Sartre presents Genet's life as a dialectical movement beyond failure to triumph. This is not a dialectic of bad faith. Rather it is a dialectic based on a very different desire from the desire for what cannot be. If Sartre thus develops another level, another fundamental desire, from which the level of bad faith can be judged to be wrong, then at least from this level the judgment is not a merely arbitrary one.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre affirms that the relationship between the self and another must be seen as a circle and not as a dialectic. This circle moves between the relations of love and desire and results from the fact that both love and desire are attempts to capture the other who always remains out of reach. As the failure of love becomes self-conscious,

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THE PROBLEM OF OVERCOMING BAD FAITH

love collapses and gives way to desire; similarly, desire fails, collapsing and giving way to love. Sartre denies that there can be a dialectic of such relations with others: never can there be a motivated movement beyond the frustrations and failures of each of these attempts to relate to the other. Not even indifference and hate, though themselves attempts to go beyond the failures of love and desire, would accomplish any such movement since these, too, are failures. According to Sartre, they leave the individual no alternative but to re-enter the circle of love and desire. Thus, the failure of love or desire eventually motivates only the adoption of the other, and an individual moves around this circle unless and until a "radical conversion" from the bad faith of these attempts occurs.

In rejecting a dialectic and affirming instead a circle of relations with others, Sartre makes a philosophical move which requires that the only way out of the circle would be a radical conversion. Sartre’s analyses indicate not only that the individual caught in this circle will not and cannot be motivated by the failures and frustrations of his various attempts to relate to another but also that this individual will be impervious to any reasons that could count against what he is seeking. These analyses leave the individual with no possible motivation for a conversion, for a movement out of these frustrating relations with the other. Moreover, these analyses make it possible to raise the following question: is not Sartre’s criticism of the bad faith of such relations a fundamentally arbitrary criticism?

The plight of the individual caught in this circle can be illumined by a more detailed consideration of several of Sartre’s analyses, particularly his analysis of the two opposed sets of attitudes: love, masochism and indifference, sadism, hate. According to Sartre, shame is the fundamental attitude through which the existence of the other is revealed and involves the recognition of the other as the subject who sees me as an object. It gives rise to one of two possible opposed attitudes: either I attempt to transcend the other’s transcendence, in other words, I look at him and turn him into an object for me, thereby destroying my object-ness for him; or I try to assimilate the other’s freedom, incorporating that transcendence within me “without removing from it its character as transcendence.”

Thus, having, in shame, been revealed to myself, in the experience of the look, as a being-for-others, it may happen that I try to recover this being which I am for others by assimilating or absorbing the other. In order to assimilate the other as the other-looking-at-me, I attempt to see myself