Is there a place for authenticity in Sartre's ontology?

1 Introduction

In *Being and Nothingness*[1] (BN), Sartre says about authenticity:

> [Our discussion] does not mean that we are unable radically to escape from bad faith. But that would require corrupted being to reclaim itself. We will call this 'authenticity': *its description does not belong here.* (BN 106n, my emphasis)

Thus, it is no surprise that Sartre barely mentions authenticity in BN, even though he discusses inauthenticity (or bad faith) in depth. In this essay, I focus on reconstructing an account of Sartrean authenticity which is compatible with Sartre's ontology in BN. I argue that individuals cannot be authentic but that their choices can be authentic. In other words, on my reading of Sartre, authenticity is a property of choices, not of individuals. It cannot be attributed directly to individuals because this would involve a denial of radical freedom. However, we can make authentic choices in certain situations, so long as we keep in mind radical freedom.

To support this position, I begin by justifying my focus on BN when examining authenticity before introducing some key concepts from Sartre's ontology (§2). Next, I discuss the connections between bad faith, good faith and authenticity (§3). Lastly, I present my own interpretation of authenticity as authentic choices (§4).

[1] I work with Richmond's translation (Sartre, 2018) but the page numbers refer to the original edition (Sartre, 1943) since the translation provides them.

2 Sartre's ontology

2.1 Why BN?

As promised, Sartre does not explicitly analyse authenticity in BN but he does talk about it in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (ASJ, 1948) and *Notebooks for an Ethics* (NE, 1992) written in 1945 and 1947-1948, respectively. So, why should we bother with reading BN when discussing Sartrean authenticity? The main reason is that Sartre's philosophical outlook changed considerably in the mid-1940s which affected his understanding of authenticity. To grasp this change, we need to introduce Sartre's distinction between *ontological* and *practical* freedom (BN 527, 529). Ontological freedom is our ability to choose how much value we attach to different aspects of our situation whereas practical freedom refers to how constrained we are in our ability to bring about particular outcomes (Detmer, 1988, p.65). A gay person[2] might still be constrained by social norms to openly express her sexuality, even though she can choose how she responds to it. So, she has ontological freedom but lacks practical freedom.

Early Sartre emphasised ontological freedom whereas late Sartre focused on practical freedom (Flynn, 2013, §4). This matters because authenticity for Sartre depends on his understanding of freedom (see §3-§4 below). We can see the change in Sartre's outlook by studying how he sees the limits to Jews' freedom in an anti-Semitic society. In BN he seems to claim that being-Jewish will only be a limit to my situation if I (ontologically) choose to accept my Jewishness (BN 569). However, ASJ suggests that Jews can never escape from the Jewishness imposed by society (ASJ 103). One way to explain this change is that Sartre rejected his ontology and focused on political action after the mid-1940s (Golomb, 2012). For this reason, he considered NE to be a failed attempt to fulfil his promise (BN 676) to provide an ethics inspired by his ontology (Anderson, 1993, p.43). Given our objective of examining authenticity within Sartre's ontology, focusing on BN and ontological freedom seems justified.

[2]Sartre uses *homosexual*, but many find it offensive, so I prefer *gay*.

2.2 Key concepts in BN

Let us now introduce some key concepts from BN that are helpful for thinking about authenticity. In Sartre's ontology, there are two irreducible modes of being: being-in-itself and being-for-itself (BN 30). Broadly, being-in-itself is 'what it is' (BN 32) and refers to non-conscious things that have pre-defined essences. A paper-knife is manufactured with the idea of being a sharp object which can be utilised for cutting paper: its essence precedes its existence (Sartre, 2001*b*, pp.27-28). In contrast, being-for-itself roughly denotes (human) consciousness, i.e., I am a transcendent thing that ask the question(s) of being (BN 57). Due to its ability to ask questions, the for-itself introduces nothingness into the world which is not otherwise present, e.g., it can give negative answers to its questions (BN 41). So, the for-itself is defined by its intrinsic ability to negate (Priest, 2002, p.137) which allows it to transcendent the in-itself. To illustrate this point, Sartre provides the example of entering a café and expecting to see his friend Pierre (BN 43-45). However, Pierre is not there, so Sartre experiences a feeling of absence. The organisation of the objects in the café is being-in-itself, but the absence of his friend (none of these objects is Pierre) is experienced only by Sartre. Unless Sartre is a transcendent for-itself, there would be no such feeling of absence (BN 45).

Sartre considers being-for-itself as (i) 'being what it is not' and (ii) 'not being what it is' (BN 32). We can read (i) as saying that I am defined by my future projects that are not yet realised such as my plan to write a metaphysical treatise. To grasp (ii), we need to introduce the notion of facticity which can be defined as the part of being-in-itself that is relevant for me such as my geographic location and my sexuality (BN 119-120). So, (ii) suggests that I am not completely determined by my facticity and I always have some choice over how to respond to it.[3]

This interpretation shows how ontological freedom enters Sartre's system: I choose how much value I attach to different aspects of my facticity. A gay person has agency over how she interprets the fact that she derives pleasure from certain sexual acts. Once she recognises this fact, she may still marry a man but the important thing is that she has the

[3]Webber (2009) provides a different reading.

choice how to react. In that sense, her freedom is absolute or radical (BN 554): she is always free to decide how to interpret her facticity even when her practical freedom is virtually non-existent. However, freedom has a more fundamental role in Sartre's ontological system because the for-itself's freedom is a precondition for its negating ability (BN 59). Unless the for-itself is free, it is unable to negate its facticity and be conscious (BN 63).

At this point, we might wonder how facticity and freedom are related. Their relationship is dialectical (Anderson, 1993, p.47). When I make choices, I change my facticity and when my facticity changes, I have new choices to make (BN 541). We can see this relationship in the novel *Age of Reason* (AR) (Sartre, 2001*a*). Daniel is born with certain homosexual tendencies that form his facticity (AR 294). Despite being fully aware of them, he decides to marry a woman (AR 291). Being a husband becomes a part of his new facticity which now requires making choices that were not present before, e.g., how to treat his wife. So, Daniel's decision causes a change in his facticity which, in turn, affects his choice set.

3 Bad faith, good faith and authenticity

Using the concepts in §2, we can now investigate if we can define authenticity and inauthenticity within Sartre's system. Let us begin with bad faith which for Sartre is the opposite of authenticity (Webber, 2013, pp.131-132). Sartre defines bad faith as a mental state, in which we fail to coordinate our transcendence as a for-itself and our facticity (BN 91). He differentiates two main patterns of bad faith that can result in self-deception.[4] First, we can reject our facticity and imagine that we are just transcendence (BN 92). Sartre gives the example of a gay person who rejects the need to make a choice about her sexuality by pretending to be unaffected by it (BN 98). Second, we can reject our transcendence (BN 91). For instance, a gay person might accept her homosexuality and decide that it determines her character. This would still be bad faith, as she would be denying her absolute freedom to always choose how to respond to her facticity. After all, nothing is stopping her from entering a heterosexual marriage. The second pattern of bad faith also includes sincerity:

[4]For other bad faith patterns, see BN (92-93).

a sincere person accepts her facticity and tries to live honestly by it (BN 93,100). Such a person is in bad faith because she fails to recognise her freedom to interpret her facticity differently (Reynolds and Renaudie, 2022, §4.2.).

Sartre thinks that people often adopt bad faith in response to the anguish following the insight about absolute freedom (BN 79). Once I realise I am absolutely free, I also realise that I am not a being-in-itself and so have no essence or fixed character. This leads to anguish, from which I would like to 'flee' by adopting one of the two bad faith patterns 'whose purpose is to fill in the nothingness that I am in my relationship to myself' (BN 79). In Sartre's example, a gay person in bad faith either accepts her impulses and makes homosexuality her essence or denies her impulses to avoid making a choice about them. We can now see why Sartre thinks that 'the real problem of bad faith arises from the fact that bad faith is *faith*' (BN 103). Bad faith amounts to taking a decision to reject the evidence in favour of radical freedom which means that bad faith is similar to a leap of faith. While it is not entirely clear what evidence Sartre refers to, he does think that rejecting absolute freedom is not epistemically rational (BN 103).

Instead of adopting bad faith, we might think that adopting *good* faith can lead to authenticity. To understand Sartre's conception of good faith, it is useful to compare it to sincerity:

> The ideal of good faith (to believe what one believes) is – like the idea of sincerity (to be what one is) – an ideal of being-in-itself. No belief is ever enough of a belief. (BN 105)

Sartre's understanding of belief is crucial for grasping good faith. He thinks that we can never be certain in our beliefs (BN 104-105). Sartre can never *know* if Pierre is actually his friend, as he can only *believe* that Pierre is his friend (BN 104). In that sense, believing what I believe means that I honestly uphold my beliefs, despite knowing that they might be incorrect. Nonetheless, I might successfully convince myself into believing something that is false. On the surface, it seems that in this case I might still hold my belief in good faith. Similarly to the case of sincerity, a gay person may convince herself that her essence consists in being gay, i.e., she treats the belief in her sexuality as an in-itself. So, good faith allows her

to honestly believe a claim about her essence. Even though she believes what she believes, she is still deceiving herself, however. The problem is that she uses her belief to escape the anguish following the insight of absolute freedom. Good faith represents just another form of self-deception, from which Sartre concludes that bad faith is 'at the heart of' good faith (BN 105).

While Sartre is not making this explicit, he cannot be saying that *all* beliefs in good faith involve bad faith. When he looks for Pierre in the café, he believes in his belief that he has entered the café but there is no bad faith underlying this belief. In my view, what Sartre objects to are beliefs that attribute essences to a for-itself (e.g. character traits) or, more generally, beliefs that contradict radical freedom. This is why he objects to a gay person who believes with absolute certainty that her essence can be found in her homosexuality.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to say much more about good faith, given how short Sartre's discussion on the subject in BN is (BN 84,104-106). In later works he offers a different definition of good faith which equates it with authenticity (Zheng, 2002, p.127). In any case, we can conclude that in BN good faith entails bad faith (BN 106n) and so does not represent authenticity.

4 Authentic choices

Our discussion above suggests that authenticity for early Sartre necessitates a conscious recognition of radical freedom. Otherwise, we will be fleeing into bad faith. On the other hand, if I actively pursue authenticity, I might convince myself that I am authentic. However, believing even in good faith that I possess a particular character trait such as authenticity entails bad faith, as I am rejecting radical freedom. Thus, it seems like we can never be authentic, if we accept radical freedom. In other words, what makes authenticity difficult to define within Sartre's system is the requirement to recognise both radical freedom and the absence of character traits.

Nevertheless, this requirement does not necessarily imply that my choices cannot be au-

thentic. To make such choices, we need to accept our facticity, including radical freedom. This includes recognising not just all relevant aspects of our situation but also that no particular factor can serve as a sufficient reason to act in a certain way. Using our negating ability as a for-itself, we can reject the pull of any motivation: even when I am tortured, I can choose the level of pain, at which to start confessing (BN 443-444). Then, we can take a leap of faith and make a choice, knowing full well that all our options are equally unjustifiable.

To illustrate this idea, consider the undecided student in *Existentialism and Humanism* (EH) (Sartre, 2001*b*). Following the killing of his brother by the Nazi in 1940, he must choose between joining the Free French Forces abroad to fight the Nazi or staying at home and taking care of his old mother (EH 33-35). The 'morality of sympathy' provides a reason to do the latter whereas a 'morality of wider scope' recommends the former (EH 33). However, on their own, none of these moralities provides sufficient reason for action. In my view, the student can still make an authentic choice once he recognises that nothing can guide his action. It is entirely up to him to take a leap of faith and do one of the two things. In that sense, he would neither be denying his radical freedom, nor convincing himself that he possess authenticity. So, his choice would be authentic.

This interpretation might seem unsatisfactory at first: the student is making a life-changing decision for no particular reason, i.e., his choice is random. However, not all random choices involve a recognition of radical freedom, meaning that they will not be counted as authentic. The anguish that the student feels when making his choice is evidence that he has truly internalised radical freedom. His choice is not merely random but also authentic. On the other hand, authentic choices also suggest how a gay person can have an authentic response to her homosexuality. Having recognised her absolute freedom, she knows that she cannot avoid making a choice regarding her homosexuality and that making homosexuality her essence would be bad faith. So, by choosing one of the actions available to her, she will be making an authentic choice, assuming she recognises all relevant aspects of her facticity.

There is also textual support, suggesting that Sartre will not object to our interpretation:

> [In anguish] we apprehend our choices – which is to say ourselves – as being *unjustifiable*, which means we grasp our choice as something that does not derive from any earlier reality and as having, on the contrary, to serve as the foundation of the set of meanings which constitute reality. (BN 509)

When we truly internalise radical freedom and experience the ensuing anguish, we also experience our choices as unjustifiable. However, we simultaneously realise that these unjustifiable choices serve as the foundation of our fundamental project (recall the dialectical relationship between freedom and facticity). Sartre understands our fundamental project as the lenses through which we presently interpret our facticity (BN 501). Since we have chosen this project ourselves and we are radically free, we can always change it: we are 'constantly *threatened* with choosing ourselves ... other than what we are' (BN 509). A gay person who suddenly realises her homosexuality might completely change the interpretation of certain events in her past. In that sense, we can choose to change our fundamental project without denying our radical freedom or pretending we are an in-itself. Thus, in such cases, we are making an authentic choice similarly to the student above.

We can characterise authentic choices as choices that require a recognition of the relevant aspects of our facticity, including all the implications of radical freedom. One might object that this definition is too wide: it classifies as authentic certain choices which most would consider as random, not authentic. For example, Sartre might be in a Parisian tabac, contemplating which brand of cigarettes to buy. While he usually smokes Gauloises, he realises that he has no particular reason to choose one brand over another. However, he also realises that he needs to make a choice because there is a long queue. Assuming Sartre recognises radical freedom, this situation would satisfy the requirements for an authentic choice, but one can argue that such a mundane activity like buying cigarettes does not reveal anything too deep about oneself. Usually, we think of authentic choices as genuinely expressive of who we are (Varga and Guignon, 2020, Introduction). If we accept this intuition about authenticity, we need to qualify our definition of authentic choices further to exclude cigarettes buying.

In my view, authentic choices can only occur in situations where the set of available actions contains at least one action that can radically change our fundamental project with a sufficiently high probability. For most people, choosing a different cigarettes brand will have very little (if any) effect on how they interpret their facticity. However, if the student decides to go fight the Nazi, he might be sent to battle immediately or he might get stuck in a boring administrative job abroad (EH 33). In any case, not only will his facticity change, but also his fundamental project. While the student might decide not to go fight the Nazi, the presence of a high stakes option means that his situation satisfies the requirements for authentic choice. Thus, choices can be authentic (i) only in situations, in which the stakes for our fundamental projects are sufficiently high, and (ii) only when we consciously recognise radical freedom and all other relevant aspects of our facticity. This definition also allows us to see how authentic choices are different from standard random choices, e.g., choosing which number to bet on in a fair low-stakes roullette game. In particular, authentic choices are a subset of random choices, in which we recognise radical freedom and some options involve high stakes.

5 Conclusion

Given the aforementioned, authenticity for Sartre should be understood as a property of choices, not of individuals. Recognising this helps us to differentiate it from bad faith which amounts to attributing a fixed nature to ourselves or denying key aspects of our facticity. In contrast, authentic choices assume the explicit recognition of radical freedom and all important aspects of our facticity. An element of randomness is inherent in authentic choices but not all random choices are authentic. We can only make authentic choices in situations where one of the options available to us can significantly change our fundamental projects. Defining authenticity within Sartre's ontology is not trivial, but it is possible to find room for it once we recognise that it is a property of our choices.

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