The Intersections between Self-Deception and Inconsistency: An Examination of Bad Faith and Cognitive Dissonance
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Abstract: The relationship between the concepts of bad faith, coined by Jean-Paul Sartre, and cognitive dissonance, developed by Leon Festinger, is often misunderstood. Frequently, the terms are over-generalized and equivocated as synonymous ideas. This paper attempts to clarify the intricacies of these two concepts, outlining their similarities and differences.

> *Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.*
> — *Aldous Huxley,* Proper Studies

Introduction

This paper is an exploratory work into the interrelation between Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological concept of bad faith and Leon Festinger's psychological theory of cognitive dissonance. Throughout this paper, I unpack the similarities and differences between the two concepts. To accomplish this, I first examine the concepts of bad faith and cognitive dissonance individually to provide a necessary foundation to their understanding and eventual comparison. This requires looking at the framework and methodologies in which the concepts are constructed. After the individual examination, I proceed to a discussion about the relationship between the two, framed in the authors' understandings of the concepts. Specifically, I question if cognitive dissonance only results from instances of bad faith and, conversely, if bad faith always produces cognitive dissonance. If bad faith *does* always result in cognitive dissonance, what implications are revealed?

Bad Faith

Sartre's conception of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) is directly influenced by his phenomenological background. Bad faith is framed in Sartre's ontological assumptions about the dualistic nature

of human existence as consciousness and ego. His ontological examination begins with the lived experience of the self, and, in this way, his ontology is grounded in the phenomenological approach. He examines consciousness and the ego through the lens of the primary and reflective experiences. For him, consciousness is singularly present in the primary experience. The ego is unavoidably within the reflective experience to limit the absolute possibilities of consciousness by creating a static identity from previous experiences. Based on this understanding, he concludes the human condition is paradoxical. It tries to simultaneously refuse its consciousness, which entails radical possibility, and its ego, which attempts to define the self as a static object.

Sartre's ontology begins by considering the structure of consciousness. For him, consciousness is "a connected series of bursts which tear us out of ourselves" and towards the world.[1] The world is not fully graspable by consciousness since it is necessarily beyond it, but at the same time the experiences of consciousness are situated within the world. Sartre describes, "Consciousness and the world are given at one stroke: essentially external to consciousness, the world is nevertheless essentially relative to consciousness."[2] Consciousness is constituted by the world, and, at the same time, the world is founded by the existence of consciousness.

Consciousness is also inherent in every experience because experience would not be possible without it, but it is solely present during the primary experience. Consciousness is externally directed, and, therefore, the "reflecting consciousness" is never the object of itself.[3] As we know from Edmund Husserl's structure of "intentionality," to be conscious is to be conscious *of* (something). Yet when approaching an object in the primary experience, one does not think, "I am approaching the object." The object is simply approached. It becomes evident that the ego does not exist during the primary experience because it would be redundant and even destructive.

The ego is created in the reflective (as opposed to *reflecting*) experience. Reflection, for Sartre, is an inherent part of consciousness; thus, the ego is inevitably created as an object of consciousness. But why is reflection intrinsic to consciousness? This

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[1] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl's Phenomenology," in *The Phenomenology Reader,* eds. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney (New York: Routledge, 2002), 383.
[2] Ibid., 382.
[3] Jean-Paul Sartre, "The Transcendence of the Ego," in Moran, *The Phenomenology Reader,* 389.

originates in the feeling of anxiety produced by the absolute freedom of consciousness. Consciousness is beyond its own grasp and is in constant flux, producing the feeling of a "vertigo of possibility."[4] There is no certainty for the next moment; anything can be decided from the freedom that is consciousness. The indeterminacy of each moment is overwhelming and produces feelings of anxiety and unsettledness. To cope with this anxiety, consciousness must construct a static identity by reflecting on and interpreting previous experiences. The ego is the product of this reflection. It is created by internalizing our past experiences, qualities, and states. It is tantamount to a static self, being some-thing. The ego grounds the radical uncertainty of consciousness by creating a self that is defined and bounded. But this construction is limited in that it is only an edifice.

The ego does not actually limit the possibilities of consciousness. It simply creates *an illusion* that certain possibilities are beyond it. Consciousness recognizes it is not limited by the facticity of the ego and attempts to negate this facticity by extending beyond the static, defined self. Although the self does not want to be completely objectified as some-thing, neither does it want the anxiety of endless possibility, being no-thing. This, for Sartre, is the paradox of the human condition.

The concept of bad faith emerges from the paradoxical condition of being neither fully transcendent nor fully immanent. The self attempts to negate either its transcendence or its facticity. It tries to reduce itself to pure transcendence or pure immanence: I am only what I have been or not at all what I have been. This simplification fails to recognize the duality of the self as both constructed by its past experiences *and* open to innumerable future possibilities.

Because the self recognizes it is irreducible to either state, bad faith is essentially self-deception. One simultaneously becomes the deceiver and the deceived. To lie, one must be aware of the whole truth that one is hiding. As Sartre describes, "The essence of the lie implies in fact that the liar actually is in complete possession of the truth which he is hiding. A man does not lie about what he is ignorant of; he does not lie when he spreads an error of which he himself is the dupe; he does not lie when he is mistaken."[5] How, then, can one be the deceiver—who, by definition, knows

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[4] Ibid., 403.
[5] Jean-Paul Satre, "Bad Faith," in Moran, *The Phenomenology Reader,* 408.

the truth—and the deceived—who inherently does not? Bad faith, therefore, produces another paradoxical situation.

Cognitive Dissonance

Leon Festinger's psychological theory of cognitive dissonance is constructed within the rationalist assumption that people strive to be logical and consistent. For him, cognition is primarily influenced by reality—that is, the outside world. Festinger speculates:

> …elements of cognition correspond for the most part with what the person actually does or feels or what actually exists in the environment. In the case of opinions, beliefs, and values, the reality may be what others think or do; in other instances the reality may be what is encountered experientially or what others have told him.[6]

He frequently terms elements of cognition as "knowledges."[7] This is not knowledge in the Platonic sense of absolute truth, but rather knowledge is "…the things a person knows about himself, about his beliefs, and about his surroundings."[8] Knowledges can be facts, opinions, actions, or reactions.

When one knowledge (x) contradicts another knowledge (y), a feeling of discomfort is produced. This discomfort is cognitive dissonance. Reality, instead of being consistent, is interpreted as illogical and contradictory. Festinger, therefore, reasons people attempt to avoid cognitive dissonance by resolving contradictions and restoring reality to its desired logical state.

Relationships between knowledges can be understood as irrelevant, consonant, or dissonant.[9] In irrelevant relations, x has no impact on y. For example, knowing, "You must be eighteen to vote," and, "North Dakota is a state," are examples of two irrelevant knowledges. Conversely, consonant and dissonant knowledges have direct relations and imply some sort of impact. In consonant relations, y follows from x. An example would be, "She is

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[6] Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance,* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1957), 11.
[7] Ibid., 9.
[8] Ibid.
[9] The following analysis is based on the relationship between two knowledges. In reality, every knowledge is related to an infinite number of other knowledges; therefore, this is a limited analysis and must be recognized as so.

heterosexual, so she is attracted to men." Dissonant relations occur when y is inconsistent with or contradictory to x. For instance, "She knows she should prepare for class, but instead she goes out with friends," is an example of this relationship.

Dissonant relationships are produced in many types of circumstances, but here I focus on two main instances. First, dissonance can emerge when new information is learned or new events are experienced and these contradict previous information or experiences. For instance, a man assumes eating dairy is necessary for a healthy diet, but then he hears arguments for a vegan diet. The new information is dissonant with his previous assumption and produces discomfort. Second, dissonance can be created when making decisions that are ambiguous or require compromise. Decisions produce dissonance because both choices usually have benefits. When one choice is rejected, the positive aspects associated with that decision are also discarded, producing dissonance. As an example, a man is buying a home and likes the structure of one house more but the location of another better. He chooses the home with the better location, but discomfort occurs when he considers the advantages of the other home.

It becomes apparent that momentary dissonance is inevitable. New knowledge is continuously being learned, new events are experienced, and decisions and compromises are constantly being made. The resulting dissonance is initially uncomfortable; as a result, there are usually attempts to resolve it. Dissonance can be reconciled by changing a behavior to become consistent with a knowledge. Y can be altered so it follows from x. Likewise, knowledge can be changed to support an action. X can be manipulated so it precedes y.

To elaborate on this concept, I examine the hypothetical example of a woman (termed "the smoker") who smokes cigarettes daily but, at the same time, knows smoking is dangerous to her health. The smoker is faced with dissonance because she wants to smoke but simultaneously does not want to damage her health. The dissonance created can be resolved by changing either her actions or her beliefs. She can choose to stop smoking; then her actions will fit with her belief that smoking is bad. On the other hand, she can choose not to believe smoking is harmful to her health and continue to smoke. In addition, she can also choose to change the type of relationship between the two knowledges. She can convince herself that she does not care about her health; therefore, it is irrelevant if she continues to smoke.

In cases when dissonance is not or cannot be resolved, attempts can be made to reduce it. The magnitude of dissonance is related to the importance of the elements.[10] As the significance of each knowledge increases, so does the amount of dissonance produced when it is contradicted. Therefore, dissonance can be reduced by changing the importance of one or both of the knowledges involved. The smoker may acknowledge smoking is bad for her health but argue it is not as harmful as some people say. Similarly, she might continue smoking but reduce the amount she smokes; therefore, rationalizing it is not as bad for her health.

Why would a person resist removing or reducing cognitive dissonance if it produces discomfort? Festinger lists several circumstances in which one may resist the change of knowledge. First, change may be perceived as more uncomfortable than the dissonance caused by the contradiction. In the example of the smoker, it is uncomfortable to quit smoking, and she may interpret this discomfort to be greater than the dissonance she experiences. Second, change may be avoided when the behavior or knowledge is immensely satisfying. Smoking is enjoyable for the smoker, and this pleasure may be greater than the discomfort of the dissonance. Only when the discomfort of dissonance outweighs other discomforts and/or satisfactions does a person feel compelled to change behavioral or cognitive elements.

Comparison

Knowledge

Sartre and Festinger employ different approaches to knowledge. Sartre's approach begins with the lived experience and then results in an ontological claim. Festinger, on the other hand, employs psychological studies and theory.

For Sartre, knowledge is one mode of being towards the world. Knowledge cannot be perfect because the object of knowing is always beyond consciousness. It is neither fully graspable nor digestible, but rather it is continually experienced by consciousness reaching out toward it. Knowledge must be based in the experience of the world because experience without consciousness is not possible. Sartre rejects the rationalism of thinkers like Descartes and follows the phenomenological tradition by positing that knowledge

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[10] Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance,* 16.

is only possible through lived experience. He approaches bad faith through this lived experience. He does not presume its existence but instead questions how the paradox between transcendence and immanence manifests itself and how we humans respond to this paradox.

Festinger's approach to knowledge, on the other hand, is based within rationalism and the scientific method.[11] Festinger's argument is founded on the metaphysical assumption that people attempt to be logical and consistent. Festinger employs established social psychological theory and experimentation to ground his claim. He not only relies on the social experiments of others, but in 1959, along with the help of James Carlsmith, published the results of his experiments concerning cognitive dissonance.[12] This experimental, research-based method drastically differs from Sartre's phenomenological approach to knowledge that is based in the lived experience.

Unity of Consciousness

Both Sartre's and Festinger's concepts are understood within the framework of a unified consciousness. This implies consciousness is aware of itself and its existence. It is understood as a whole rather than disparate parts. The implications for this understanding result in the possibility of bad faith and cognitive dissonance. Since it is completely aware of itself and its parts, a unified consciousness must perceive self-deception and inconsistent knowledge. This differs from a Freudian view of the psyche as composed dually of the ego and the id, or a consciousness and an unconscious.[13] From the viewpoint of a divided consciousness, completely realized self-deception is possible, and inconsistent beliefs can be held without producing discomfort. One part of a consciousness can conceal knowledge from the other; one part can be the deceiver and the other the deceived. The idea of the divided consciousness is rejected by both Sartre and Festinger.

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[11] This knowledge differs from the term "knowledges" used in the previous section; in this context, it refers to factual understanding of the world rather than cognitive elements.
[12] Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith, "Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance," *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58, no. 2 (1959): 203-210.
[13] Sartre, "Bad Faith," 410.

Discussion

Cognitive Dissonance Resulting from Bad Faith

Cognitive dissonance arises from many different situations as elaborated on above, but these circumstances are not inevitably an enactment of bad faith. Bad faith is the result of an attempt to negate the self's transcendence or facticity, but cognitive dissonance can be produced from situations where both states are affirmed. The smoker experiences cognitive dissonance because of the inconsistency between her knowledge that smoking is bad and her continuation of the behavior. This is not necessarily bad faith because this knowledge does not reflect her outlook towards existence. She is neither maintaining that she cannot quit smoking because of some innate, definite characteristic, nor is she rejecting the real impact smoking has on her health. She can, in fact, recognize the adverse effects of smoking and the possibility of quitting but simply *choose* to continue to smoke and be in good faith, albeit while still producing dissonance.

Bad Faith Resulting in Cognitive Dissonance

On the other hand, although cognitive dissonance does not automatically produce instances of bad faith, bad faith necessitates dissonance because of the inherent, paradoxical state created though its condition. Within the framework of a unified consciousness, the truth cannot be known and fully hidden within one entity. This is a logical inconsistency inherent to bad faith. As a result, bad faith always results in cognitive dissonance. This dissonance, however, can be reduced. Rationalization and avoidance or denial are two techniques employed to reduce the dissonance produced by bad faith. Behaviors are rationalized through negating the importance of either transcendence or facticity: I *cannot* quit smoking, *I* will not get cancer, etc. Certain thoughts or actions may be avoided that remind the person of one's radical freedom or one's limitations by reality. The smoker may not read an article about tips to quit smoking since it reminds her it is, in fact, possible for her to quit. These reactions to bad faith are produced because of the dissonance that is inherent to it.

Implications

What implications follow if bad faith inevitably results in cognitive dissonance? If this question is placed within the previously constructed framework of Sartre's and Festinger's concepts, the result of bad faith is a turbulent state in which discomfort is continually avoided but always encountered again. I term this state "the cycle of discomfort." Sartre claims bad faith results from trying to avoid our paradoxical human condition, but bad faith then produces cognitive dissonance because we recognize our self-deception. Festinger posits that people will attempt to remedy cognitive dissonance, which, in this case, implies the termination of bad faith. This again places a person in the ambiguous condition that is neither fully transcendent nor fully imminent. The cycle is again enacted in order to continually flee the discomfort associated with paradox, ambiguity, and uncertainty.

Does this mean human existence is destined to continually enact the cycle of discomfort? In her book *How Are We to Confront Death?* Françoise Dastur discusses the anxiety she claims characterizes the human relationship with death and, thus, is inherent in life itself.[14] She describes ways in which people attempt to overcome, neutralize, and finally accept death. She concludes that death cannot be accepted by attempting to overcome the anxiety associated with it, since, for her, anxiety is inherent in our relationship with death– an ungraspable phenomenon by definition. Instead, it is anxiety, rather than death itself, that must be accepted. She describes, "This calm before death…is less the work of asceticism than of detachment, and we may be able to achieve it not by situating ourselves beyond anxiety, but rather by accepting the possibility that we can remain within anxiety, as in the still zone at the center of whirlwinds."[15] When the impossibility to escape the anxiety of death is accepted, we become able to view death as an inherent and unavoidable aspect of the human condition. It is no longer a limiting characteristic but essential to life. We no longer need to flee from death and the anxiety associated with it, but instead we can recognize the anxiety, accept it, and "achieve that moment when it changes into joy."[16]

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[14] Françoise Dastur, *How Are We to Confront Death?,* trans. Robert Vallier, (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).
[15] Ibid., 43.
[16] Ibid., 42.

In the same way, it may be possible to accept the discomfort associated with our inherently paradoxical human condition. Our ambiguous relationship with consciousness as both transcendence and facticity and the discomfort that arises from it does not need to be resolved or negated but rather accepted. We do not need to escape this state by enacting bad faith and thereby perpetuating discomfort; instead, we can sit in this ambiguity and accept it as an essential part of the human existence. In this way, we can recognize the possibilities for both transcendental and immanent experiences that arise from this state. It is not a limitation to human existence but instead constitutes it.

Conclusion

This paper explains, compares, and synthesizes two frequently misunderstood concepts within philosophy and psychology in order to provide insight into the human experience of the world. I demonstrate that bad faith and cognitive dissonance are not synonymous, but bad faith's logical inconsistencies do necessitate the experience of dissonance. Bad faith originates in consciousness's anxiety-provoking, ambiguous nature. As a result, we attempt to negate either our facticity or our freedom, thereby initiating a cycle of discomfort in which we continually deny, and again are forced to recognize, our dualistic, paradoxical being. But this cycle of discomfort is not intrinsic to the human experience. Instead of fleeing from the discomfort of paradox and ambiguity, we must accept these qualities as characteristic to our experience of the world rather than a limitation to it. In this way, we are able to simultaneously recognize both the endless possibilities for the future and the realities of the past. We are no longer condemned to recurrent self-deception and inconsistency but are able exist in the world in good faith.