

# The nature of bad faith

Philosophy



The Nature of Bad Faith Jean-Paul Sartre was a French novelist, existentialist, and philosopher. Throughout his life, he created several important writings. One of them is his Play: *The Flies*, where he depicts his philosophy and ideas. *The Flies* relates the story of Orestes, son of King Agamemnon, who returns to his native city fifteen years after Aegistheus murdered his father. In the play, Orestes meets his sister Electra, who has waited for his arrival in order to avenge their father's death. Eventually, Orestes kills King Aegistheus and his own mother, Queen Clytemnestra. Therefore, he and his sister see themselves confronted with the Furies, the goddesses of remorse. Only Orestes is capable of resisting their influence. However, this play has a much more profound meaning embedded within it. For instance, Sartre wrote it as a reaction to the German occupation of France. He also included much of his philosophy, and existentialist point of view. Existentialism makes an emphasis on the concept that "existence precedes essence"(Kaufmann 295). In addition, Sartre's existentialism states that man is always free, and completely responsible for himself. In his freedom, man is faced with several choices, choices that may cause anguish, anguish that we must face (294). "It is when we flee our responsibilities, when we deny our freedom and our anguish, that we are lying to ourselves"(Lafarge 102). Accordingly, when we lie to ourselves, we fall into bad faith: a central concept in Sartre's play. However, by taking responsibility for our actions, and remaining true to ourselves, we are in good faith. Thus, *The Flies* depicts several examples of bad and good faith, which Sartre embodies in most of the characters and situations of his play. In *The Flies*, bad faith can be clearly appreciated in the character of Electra. As we can see, during the play she earnestly desired to take revenge on Aegistheus. She wandered in the palace, condemning him

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and wishing the arrival of Orestes, whom she expected to avenge the death of Agamemnon. At this point, she did not take action; she wanted someone else to take revenge for her. “ But some day he will come, the man I’m waiting for, carrying a long, keen sword”(Sartre, *The Flies* 62), she said. However, later in the play, when Orestes murders his mother and Aegistheus, she hesitates and blames Orestes. Electra repeatedly refuses to take responsibility for her actions, denying her anguish and her freedom, hence falling into bad faith. Given the nature of this condition, which is translated from the French words *mauvaise foi*, it can also be understood as self-deception, which seems more accurate to some authors (Kaufmann 222). Bad Faith consists of lying to oneself, refusing to see the facts as they are, and rather as a person wishes them to be (Kaufmann 243). When Zeus appears and talks Electra, she listens to him and allows herself to believe she is innocent. By relying on the words of a god to comfort her, she falls into bad faith (Sartre, *Existentialism* 31). Throughout the play, we also see a great similarity between Electra and her mother. Their similarity relies on their Bad Faith, for neither of them is strong enough to accept their anguish. Clytemnestra, like Electra, did not directly take place in a crime; nevertheless, she is responsible for it. Clytemnestra escapes her anguish from the murder of Agamemnon by acting as a victim herself, always telling the story of her sorrow. By deceiving herself, although the evidence supporting the lie is insufficient, she is in bad faith (Kaufmann 267). King Aegistheus is also a character who falls into bad faith. In his case, he kills Agamemnon and seizes control of the city of Argos. After doing this, he makes up a myth, a myth designed exclusively to keep the people of Argos under control. He tells them that they are all sinners, and that they shall

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forever repent for their sins. Eventually, this lie backfires on him, and he becomes the most miserable victim of his actions. He also begins to believe in his own lie. In the play, Clytemnestra says to him: “ The dead are underground and will not trouble us for many a long day. Have you forgotten it was you yourself who invented that fable to impress your people? ”(Sartre, *The Flies* 96). Aegistheus deceives himself in order to have a secondary behavior to cover the original lie he made (Kaufmann 242); he then “ becomes the victim of his [own] lie, [a lie] that half persuades [him] of it”(243). Consequently, he too falls into bad faith. This lie also keeps the people of Argos in self-deception; by allowing the King to define them, they act inauthentically. They keep telling themselves that they are sinners, unworthy and damned people. At one point, when Electra tries to change them, they have the chance to recover from their bad faith, but they choose to remain in their state of self-deceit and unhappiness (Sartre, *The Flies* 85). They lie to themselves, not realizing that they too are free. Finally, we come across the main character of the play, Orestes: the only person in the play who does not fall into bad faith. Throughout the play, he sees himself confronted with several situations in which he could have acted falsely towards himself; however, he remains firm and in good faith. Orestes arrives at Argos as a free man, due to his freedom, he sees himself immediately confronted with a choice. He had to choose between leaving and forgetting about Argos, or staying and avenging his father and sister. To help him choose, he seeks advice from the gods, but right after he receives the command of leaving, he decides otherwise. Orestes chooses to believe that the gods are wrong, and what Zeus defines as “ right” would be incorrect to him. He is in good faith, for even “ If a [god] speaks to him, it is still he who

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must decide whether it is [correct] or not"(Sartre, Existentialism 31). Later in the play, when Orestes has committed the murders, he feels no remorse, for he sees his actions as justified. Unlike Electra, Orestes takes full responsibility for his actions; he accepts his anguish and realizes he acted freely. He tells his sister, " I am free", to which she answers " I don't feel free"(Sartre, The Flies 105) for she is in bad faith. Even when Zeus and the furies attempt to define him, Orestes stands his ground. He remains true to himself, even though Zeus tries to define him as a criminal, and tries to make him regret his actions. He accepts his anguish and remains consistent to himself, and, " If a man is what he is, bad faith is forever impossible and candor ceases to be his ideal and becomes instead his being"(Sartre, Being 101). Good faith relies on the fact that man is " no thing". Unlike other objects, which cannot affect their own being; that is, that they are one thing and one thing only. " Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself"(Kaufmann 291). After existing man defines himself, and becomes what he wills to be. In the end, Orestes leaves Argos forever, as a free man, untouched by the threats of the gods and by his people. He leaves as a genuine human being for he defined himself, rather than being defined by others as a fixed, unchangeable object. The play contrasts the concepts of good faith and bad faith in a very effective manner. Bad faith is represented in most of the characters of the play, in different aspects and levels: From self-deception, to refusal of anguish and freedom. Moreover, Sartre contrasts the character of Orestes with the rest of the characters, as a person in good faith. He makes him the main character and an example of what an authentic human being ought to be. In addition, he depicts what actions lead humans to be considered as inauthentic beings. Hence, his play illustrates a

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good example of bad faith, its nature and its consequences. Works Cited  
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