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A Feminist Perspective on Radical Freedom

In Jean-Paul Sartre's philosophical works, primarily *Existentialism Is a Humanism* and *Being and Nothingness*, he argues that humans are only defined by their choices and actions, rejecting the idea that there exists any sort of predefined human nature. This idea of radical freedom means that individuals create themselves through their actions, and Sartre famously claims that we are "condemned to be free" (*Existentialism Is a Humanism* 29). While reading, I noticed that this aspect of Sartre's existential philosophy closely parallels Judith Butler's ideas about gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that "gender" is not an innate quality of a person, but a strongly rehearsed act which is only upheld by the individuals who repeatedly choose to actualize it. However, while Sartre's idea of freedom suggests that individuals are always free to choose their identity (and they have an obligation to do so lest they act in bad faith), Butler complicates this idea by showing how societal norms restrict this freedom, particularly in terms of gender expression. Based on Butler's analysis, I argue that radical freedom, as Sartre defines it, is not equally accessible to all, as societal norms regarding gender expression impose significant limitations on the identities individuals can choose.

Sartre's famous claim that "existence precedes essence" is foundational to his philosophy. He believes that humans are born without any sort of predetermined fate, essence, or nature, and we are defined solely by our choices and decisions. In this view, identity is not something we inherit from birth—it is something we actively bring into being over time. For Sartre, this radical

freedom implies that individuals are free to determine who they will be and how they will live their lives. Judith Butler echoes Sartre's argument that identity is constructed through actions rather than preexisting in a static form. However, they apply this argument specifically to gender. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler argues that gender is not an internal, immutable trait but a social performance that is produced and sustained through human action: "The view that gender is performative sought to show that what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (Butler 16). This means that what we perceive as one's "gender identity" is not an innate characteristic but a constructed one. Sartre would probably agree with this argument, as both suggest that identity is shaped through action rather than predetermined.

Although Sartre emphasizes the freedom to define oneself, he also cautions against "bad faith"—where individuals deceive themselves by denying their absolute freedom. In Sartre's framework, accepting imposed identities from society, such as gender roles, without recognizing your own freedom, is to act in bad faith. To Sartre, individuals who conform to these socially defined roles without questioning them are deceiving themselves about the true extent of their freedom—they are allowing society to define them rather than consciously asserting their own agency in shaping their identity. However, Butler challenges Sartre's idea of freedom by highlighting the extent to which social norms shape and restrict our choices, particularly in the case of gender. While Sartre may argue that individuals are free to reject societal expectations for gender expression, Butler points out that social norms exert coercive power, significantly limiting the freedom Sartre envisions. Butler writes: "Gender is a performance with clearly punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what 'humanizes' individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, we regularly punish those who fail to do their gender

right…Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions…The construction 'compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness" (Butler 108). In other words, individuals who do not conform to societal expectations about gender are often punished and marginalized.

Even more striking is Butler's point about how the construction of gender compels and necessitates the belief in its necessity and naturalness. We are so deeply entrenched in the binary system of gender that we often fail to recognize that there are possibilities outside of it. The binary is presented as such a fundamental truth that many people are unaware that other options even exist, and this erasure of alternative possibilities severely limits individual freedom, regardless of whether one has the power to act. Sartre's framework of radical freedom assumes that individuals have an open field of possibilities from which to choose, even if some of these possibilities are more difficult to achieve for some compared to others. However, Butler's idea fundamentally challenges Sartre's view of absolute freedom because the erasure of alternative possibilities severely limits the freedom of those who may not fit within the prescribed binary categories. Additionally, the social and cultural pressures to conform to this system complicate the idea of freedom even further, because the risk of punishment often leads individuals to internalize societal expectations and limit their own self-expression in order to avoid repercussions.

For transgender individuals, Sartre's bad faith might not be as clear-cut as it initially seems. Imagine a transgender woman who presents more masculine at work or in public due to fear of harassment or violence. Sartre may argue that this constitutes bad faith because she is denying her authentic self and conforming to societal pressures. In this case, the woman is aware

of her true identity, but societal norms and the very real threat of violence compel her to perform masculinity in certain spaces. This survival tactic is not characterized by personal deception—it is a strategic response to societal pressures that punish deviations from the gender binary. Perhaps this person feels that acknowledging their identity to themselves is enough for them to feel like they are living authentically, or perhaps they value economic and social freedom over the ability to be open about their identity. While there are external factors involved, they are still making a choice given the society they live in. Isn't that enough to be free?

Another example could be found in the case of a non-binary person who may use binary pronouns ("he" or "she") in situations where non-binary pronouns are not socially acceptable or understood. Sartre may call this an example of bad faith, as the individual is denying their non-binary identity to conform to the expectations of others. However, this might not actually be bad faith as Sartre describes. The individual may still deeply identify as non-binary but recognizes the fact that challenging the gender binary may lead to social and professional consequences. In this context, their choice to use binary pronouns is not an act of self-deception, but an awareness of the social structures that limit their freedom to act.

Additionally, a transgender man may feel that transitioning medically is crucial to his identity, but he delays starting hormone replacement therapy and surgery because of financial constraints and a fear of rejection by his family. Sartre might interpret this as bad faith, suggesting that the man is not living authentically and allowing external factors to dictate his choices. However, though, this decision reflects how societal and economic factors may constrain one's ability to freely choose their gender expression. Arguably, the transgender man may not be acting in bad faith but instead navigating a world where his freedom is restricted by financial and social barriers. Sartre's idea of freedom is not necessarily about the ability to act on

one's desires but one's acknowledgement of their own agency. Would he really be acting in bad faith if his transgender identity remains intact, just because he acknowledges that the options available to him are shaped by external forces beyond his control?

These questions parallel a situation in *Being and Nothingness*, where Sartre gives the example of a homosexual man who denies his homosexuality. Sartre describes this man as living in bad faith: "The homosexual acknowledges his misdemeanors, but he fights with all his strength against the crushing perspective from which his mistakes constitute for him a destiny" (*Being and Nothingness* 108). Sartre's point is that the man does not take responsibility for his choices, attempting to convince himself and others that his sexuality can remain hidden despite his engagement in homosexual behaviors. This example may seem similar to the examples involving transgender people mentioned previously, who behave in ways that seem inauthentic to conform to societal expectations. However, there is a key difference, as these people are not deceiving themselves about their true identities like the homosexual man—they are painfully aware of their identities but must navigate a world that severely restricts their ability to live openly. In these cases, the idea of bad faith becomes more complicated. Sartre suggests that the homosexual man has the ability to embrace his true desires and live authentically, but the reality, even today, is more complicated. For many people, the ability to freely choose and express their gender identity and sexuality is often constrained by factors such as violence and social rejection. Social structures can severely restrict the freedom of marginalized people, making it difficult and even dangerous for them to reject these norms. While Sartre's existential framework emphasizes individual responsibility and freedom, a different perspective suggests that this freedom is often limited in the context of gender norms, suggesting that bad faith is not always a clear-cut matter

of self-deception, but can be shaped and influenced by external forces beyond an individual's control.

In examining Sartre's concept of radical freedom alongside Butler's analysis of gender performativity, we see that while Sartre promotes the idea that individuals are free to define their identity through their actions, this freedom is not always as absolute as it seems. Gender norms and societal expectations can impose significant constraints on one's ability to freely express their identity, complicating Sartre's views on bad faith and personal responsibility. Butler's perspective challenges the idea that everyone has the same access to freedom. I think that it would be unfair to say that a closeted person is acting in bad faith, because our society enforces rigid gender binaries which limit the range of possibilities open to individuals. The reality of the situation is that society compels conformity with the threat of marginalization, forcing some people to make choices about their gender identity in a world where rejecting societal norms can come with severe risks.

While Sartre emphasizes the importance of freedom and authenticity, I believe that it is crucial to recognize that, for many, this freedom exists within a context shaped by external limitations, and it is disingenuous to claim that a closeted gay man, who suppresses his true identity due to societal circumstances, is acting in bad faith. The idea of true authenticity becomes far more complex in situations where there is such an intense pressure to conform to societal expectations, because our environment influences the very ways in which we think about ourselves and our place in the world. Overall, by drawing from Butler's feminist critique, I argue that Sartre's notion of radical freedom must be reconsidered. True freedom cannot exist in isolation from the harsh reality of oppression and cultural norms. Therefore, while I agree with

his views about human nature, I believe that Sartre's existentialism must account for the complex social dynamics that limit individual autonomy in the context of gender identity.

Works Cited

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