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Existentialism

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On Freedom, Bad Breath, and Love

A is walking through the park on a sunny spring afternoon. He looks about him at the trees, at the squirrels, at a nearby pigeon. Reaching into his pocket, he takes out a crumb of bread, kneels down, and tosses it towards the bird, which snatches it quickly and flies away. Upon rising from the ground, A notices a new object in his environment. B has been looking at A from across the park for some time now. Suddenly, something tremendous happens to A that no other object in his environment save B could have induced. In the following pages an attempt will be made to explain exactly what crucial difference B has made in A's life, and how A and B can conceivably enter into a relationship of mutual love.

But before this discussion of A and B, I'd like to introduce C. C was abandoned as an infant on a desert island in the South Pacific. In his entire life he has never once been conscious of another human presence. He has subsisted on his own for some twenty years. How does C look at the world? How does he decide what actions to take, and what constraints, if any, to place on these decision-making processes? It can be argued that C has no sense of what actions are morally correct and what actions are incorrect. His morality can only stem from that which he chooses to act upon. In other words, if he deems an action he has performed "good" and another "bad" this must only mean that he prefers to perform the first act over the second. C does not have to reflect on his actions and ascribe to some lofty morality, as his only knowledge of the world is as he sees it himself. In Sartreian terms we can say that C is authentic (to) himself. He recognizes exactly and only his freedom for possibilities. His for-itself is constrained by nothing. He knows nothing but himself-in-the-world. Thus he understands his facticity as the culmination of his past actions, and he understands that at any moment he is free to take on any project he wishes, never thinking to reflect upon whether this project was forced upon him from an outside force, as there exists no outside force to act upon him. Thus, his projects are chosen by him and him alone.

Now that all our characters have been introduced, let's return to the park in which A and B are walking. As A sees B looking his way, he is curious as to why. "What impact am I having on B?" he wonders. "Why is B choosing to look at me? There must be a reason he is singling me out, as there are so many other objects around him." And so A becomes self-conscious. He becomes aware of another consciousness in the world, and attempts to reach out to it—to *become* it. In this attempt, he hopes to separate himself from himself so that he may look at himself objectively, as the viewer, as B, to find out exactly why B is looking at him.

This is A's first action in Bad Faith, for he is attempting an impossible objectification of his inherently subjective self. He not only attempts this self-objectification, but also fails to realize the eternal other-subjecthood of B. B's nature, like A's, is one of complete otherness to the rest of the world. Complete subjectivity is inherent when B makes the distinction between himself and the rest of the world.

A, in his curiosity about B's opinion of him, attempts to leave his own subjectivity behind and enter B's. Yet this is precisely what can't be done! Attempting this quantum leap in point-of-view is both an impossibility and an insult to (a failure to recognize) B's subjectivity. It is treating B as an object, one whose freedom can be captured and imprisoned by A. And it is also indicative of A's evasion of his own freedom. By thinking B's actions are capable of being understood and hence anticipated, A is evading his own freedom. He is pretending that there exists a common constraint among consciousnesses that can be understood by reaching out to B. But of course, no such constraint on B's (nor A's) freedom actually exists. Thus, A's self-consciousness upon noticing B's look is a make-believe artifact constructed to evade A's own freedom. By thinking he can understand B's intentions in his look, A is attempting to instantiate a code of behavior on his own actions as well. By thinking he can anticipate B's thoughts, he is attempting to anticipate his own. This is Bad Faith.

Of course, this case is only one example of an attempted escape from freedom. Let us take a look at another example: bad breath. This example is good for at least two reasons. First, it is an everyday phenomenon to which we would rarely otherwise give much consideration. Second, it is indicative of the absurdly trivial extent to which we evade our freedom.

What goes through A's mind when he thinks he has bad breath? He will worry what B will think of him upon a face-to-face interaction. He might cup his hand around his mouth and nose and think to himself, "Uh-oh, my breath is bad." But is this really what he thinks to himself? Is he not really thinking, "Uh-oh, although my breath is inoffensive to me, it smells like it usually does when it is offensive to B." And to take our analysis of A's absurd behavior a step further, even the actions described would not have occurred if A did not have some pre-worrimment about B's reaction to him: He would not have concluded that his breath was bad if he had not initially thought to cup his hand over his nose and mouth. A is again insulting B's freedom. If B does not want to deal with A's breath, B has the freedom to do something about it. He can walk away, or offer A a Life Saver, or whatever. So again, A is instantiating a code by which he feels he can anticipate B's behavior.

Let's go back to our desert island for a moment and think about what C might do if his breath were smelling as A's did before his meeting with B. First, C would never think to cup his hand over his face to check his breath: since his breath doesn't bother him, it is not a bother at all. It would never occur to C to worry about his breath, and no one is present to instigate a self-conscious analysis. Thus, C's breath, though chemically the same as A's, is never evaluated; it is never labeled good or bad, as C's own sublime indifference to anything but his own being is supreme in his worldview. C only assigns meaning to events in his life when he chooses to. Since his breath doesn't affect his life, he does not assign it meaning. This is what A denies to himself when he meets B. He denies his own freedom and B's freedom as well, by pretending that social norms absolve him from responsibility to only and exactly his own concerns.

This example of bad breath, however trivial, leads to questions of much greater importance. As stated, unlike A and B, C never assigns any value to his own breath. He has neither "good" nor "bad" breath, as such value judgments can only have relevance if there exists a common thread among others to appreciate it. But even between A and B there does not exist this common thread. A could conceivably ignore social norms and walk around town with breath that is labeled bad by others, but since A is not affected by his breath, he assigns no value to it. This idea can be taken further. If breath can be shown to be unaffected by

the terms “good” and “bad”, “right” or “wrong”, at what point should these labels start to affect human action? As C has shown, solely because he chooses a project, this project is “good” and “right”, right for C, as C is all C knows. But now we know that A is all A knows as well, so any attempt on A’s part to pretend that he does not know himself, that he is not responsible for his own essence, in an attempt made in Bad Faith.

Therefore, the only constraints on A’s freedom are these social norms that are only of concern to A in his Bad Faith: when he attempts to enter B and objectively analyze his own behavior. Hence, we are forced to conclude that freedom is amorality. It is not assigning value judgments to one’s own actions or another’s. Rather, it is choosing to live life as the purely subjective being that one actually is. It is negating all that which is not A, and recognizing the inherent other-subjecthood of B. It is defining A as the culmination of his actions, to become whatever it is A wants to become, unconstrained by the false belief that B’s thoughts or actions are in any way capable of being understood, and hence anticipated. This is when A is authentic to himself.

Now that we have some understanding of what A and B are conceivably capable upon the look, we can begin to discuss the notion of love. As stated earlier, when A becomes self-conscious upon noticing B’s look, he is insulting the freedom of both. He is failing to recognize the inherent other/subjecthood of B, and hence his own self/subjecthood. But we also know that this evasion of freedom is resistible when pre-recognition of one’s own worth to oneself is obtained.

Can A and B ever come to think about each other the way C thinks about himself? Upon first noticing B’s look, all A knows about B is that he is choosing to look his way. B is still very much an object-in-the-world for A, as A attempts to understand the “why” behind B’s action. But let us extend our little scenario. Let’s suppose that A responds to B’s look with a smile. This, remember, is his choice, for just as easily could A have ignored B and walked on. Thus A has displayed in a free action to B, and has thus asserted his freedom onto B. Now B has reduced his own objecthood in A’s eyes by asserting his own subjectivity, his freedom.

And so their relationship goes. As A and B get to know each other they assert their freedom on each other more and more. Through their actions they display their interests to each other, and convey to the other what is important in their lives. And A and B grow to love each other, an existential love: a love not of the other’s body or of the other’s habits, but a love of the other’s freedom. When A and B assert their freedom to each other, the other/subjecthood is made clearer and clearer, until all that the two have left is a mutual respect for their mutual freedom, the other’s decisions about how to define himself. This is a love of the other’s self-defined facticity, not because of the in-itself of this facticity, but because of its for-itself. A’s and B’s is a mutual love of no possession. Indeed, it is a love of the inability to possess, a love not of the decisions of the other, but rather of the very fact that the other decides.

This authentic love also implies that at any moment A may freely choose to leave B, or to sleep with X, Y, or Z, and that B will experience no love lost. B will love A’s freedom to create his own essence, and if A chooses to rid himself of B, then B will love this decision as well.

Let’s think for a moment about the down-to-earth elusiveness of this authentic love. As already noted, authentic love for the other can only exist when the lovers are authentic to themselves. How does one obtain this authentic state? How easy it is for A to evade his freedom by attempting to reach out to B and

find a common ground for interaction. Man always tries to make sense of his world. He attempts to instantiate laws of behavior in order to make his world more predictable and hence more secure. If love is nothing else, it is predictable. It is the that the loved one will always be there when needed, will be there for sex when desired, and in fact, it encompasses the belief that the one will give up his own freedom for the sake of the other. But of course, this cannot be true love, because man's nature is one of pure freedom, and genuinely true love entails loving what is genuinely true. Thus, any attempt to instantiate a predictive model on the rampant whims of this freedom is a quest in vain. But don't tell the lovers, because they won't believe you. They fool themselves into thinking that theirs is a free love, unencumbered by the desire to be anything but devoted to the lover, and an expectation of the devotion of the other.

But what do the lovers do? They love *for* the other. They dress *for* the other to appreciate. They smile *for* the other. They compromise *for* the other. Each attempts a being-*for*-the-other, absolving himself from his responsibility to himself. The interdependence of this relationship is based on Nothingness. There is no substantiality to the lovers' feelings, and that is exactly the source of their bliss. Since there is Nothingness supporting the structure of their relationship, then nothing can be removed to collapse the walls of love. The love-structure is supported only by its own Nothingness, and the lovers are blind to their own freedom. This is love in absolute Bad Faith.

The temptation to fall into Bad Faith is obviously very great, and can only be evaded by being authentic to oneself. But authenticity is painful, and so is very difficult to achieve. This pain is rooted in the authentic one's knowledge of his own freedom, and knowledge of the other's freedom. This is painful because the authentic person, in every moment of his life, must confront the responsibility inherent in this freedom, and must respect the responsibility the other has to *himself*. Each of his actions contributes to his essence, thus he must constantly decide; constantly, constantly decide, without the luxury of attributing his decisions to some non-existent constraints on the law of human nature. Human nature is freedom, and freedom is unconstrained by law. When he recognizes the amoral nature of his own being and the being of the other, he is at last capable of true love. Unencumbered by the look of B, A will love B in his sublime ignorance of B's being.

Therein lies the absurdity of the human condition: to love is not to care. To love is to be true to one's own freedom, which entails a respect for the loved one's capacity for the same. Yet man's eternal struggle with his true condition so rarely surfaces, for the luxury inherent to social living makes Bad Faith an effortless escape. But there are rare instances in which people have been provided the opportunity to confront their own freedom.

A recent example of such an opportunity was graciously provided by the Germans to the Jews. In his book *Man's Search for Meaning*, psychiatrist and Auschwitz survivor Victor Frankl relates how his worldview became authentic in the suffering he endured at the hands of the Nazis. Through his suffering he came to realize that his entire life until that time had given him no indication whatsoever of what was to come, and hence he was forced to confront his existence in Auschwitz as his sole struggle. By stripping away all signs of identity—his profession, his clothing, his hair, his loved ones—Frankl's only sense of worth was his own being, his very existence. Soon, even such deeply rooted tendencies as emotions gave way to flat affect, of not reaching out to form bonds with others. In his ineffable aloneness, Frankl obtained an understanding of his own capabilities. His own freedom to decide how to think about his own worth the Nazis could not quell. And with that knowledge, Frankl justified his own existence to himself.

Nietzsche said “He who has a *why* to live can bear almost any *how*.” It was only as Frankl confronted this *why* when authentic love could manifest itself. Whatever decision he made in Auschwitz, were his and only his decisions to make. Their worth came from that which he and only he assigned to them. In doing so, he also understood others, letting them decide how to cope with their suffering in their own way, and loving their freedom to do so.

Let’s one last time return to the park in which A and B are walking. A and B are now authentically free people, each with a deep love of himself and the other. Each recognizes that only he can decide how to create his essence, and that whatever he decides, he must assume responsibility for that decision, as no moral code exists to cushion his actions, to instill pride, or, rather, to make him feel shame or guilt. A and B are people who don’t pretend to be able to predict the actions or the thoughts of the other, as the only law governing human nature is that man is condemned to a life of freedom.

Now, as A rises after feeding the pigeon, B looks his way. Now what do you suppose A thinks to himself?