

Bleeding Fingers:

An Existentialist Lament Regarding Technological Evolution

“I am ashamed of myself *as I appear* to the Other” (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*).

As the contemporary sojourner takes a stroll through any place where people congregate, they will encounter an extraordinary number of faces buried in phones. This is of course, on the condition that the sojourner is not entranced by a device themselves. The prevailing function of the smartphone, especially while in the hands of those born past the turn of the century, is to be a mobile access point to digital society, or social media as it is typically nominalized. Does social media increase the preponderance of bad faith in the modern being? In this inquiry I will establish the reality of the claim that bad faith, as Jean-Paul Sartre described it, has reached a point of incomparable historical precedence due to the psychological integration of the internet in the form of digital interaction and profile building, creating the illusion of freedom in the face of determinably diminished possibilities. Throughout this paper, I will elucidate the three dimensions of bad faith as I see them, and conclude my endeavor with a well-deserved lamentation.

The genealogy of the Homo Sapien has been intertwined with the cultivation and implementation of non-biological tools since the first humanoid skull was bashed in with a rock. As our species developed so did our technology, and we eventually made machines so complex that they replaced human laborers as the active cogs of industrial production

lines, at least in the process of direct creation.¹ Flowing from the Industrial Revolution like a burst dam came the nearly indescribable speed of technological advancement that eventually churned out the smartphone, the first true step in the trans-humanization² that is to only grow more apparent as father time continues to stretch out his hands. According to an analysis by *eMarketer* (formerly Insider Intelligence), the average United States citizen spent approximately three hours and forty-six minutes a day on their mobile device in 2019, a report which hilariously theorized that “[smartphone] use will plateau by 2020, as consumers become increasingly uneasy about overuse of mobile devices” (Amy He). Unfortunately for He’s prediction, the bats had other plans for 2020; the year that weathered the globally disastrous COVID-19 Pandemic which forced the majority of conscientious citizens indoors and in front of their screens. Statistics presented by *Gitnux* showcase a sixty percent increase in general screen time during the Pandemic (Lindner), and although our average daily allotment has not remained at the mountain peak that it climbed to during 2020, the use of electronic technology, especially the smartphone, is an action just as natural as breathing for the modern Homo Sapien. Following our inseparable relationship to the digital world is the consequence that online social experience has become equally if not more impactful to the modern psyche than organic social interaction, at least in regards to the creation and maintenance of one’s self-image.

¹ The Industrial Revolution still required an immense amount of human labor, including that of children, only the kind of labor being performed was dramatically altered by the development of factorial technology.

² Trans-humanization is the active form of the word trans-humanism, which broadly refers to the phenomenon of technological integrations into human life. A trans-humanist philosophical theory, for example, speculates about the implications of technology in regards to evolution, consciousness, or anything else that is foundational to human existence.

Writing in a time period far before the dramatic sea change that is the development and widespread use of social media, the 20th-century existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre was deeply fascinated with the ways in which people present themselves, both externally to their society and internally to their own consciousness. In his 1943 classic titled *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre formulates the concept of bad faith, a psychological phenomenon that will prove to be peerless in analyzing the profound effect that social media has on one's self-realization and relationship to the world. To grasp what Sartre means when he says bad faith, imagine a kleptomaniac; Marie from Vince Gilligan's *Breaking Bad* for example. Before and during her compulsive thievery, Marie internally justifies her actions by diminishing her felt sense of freedom, apologetically thinking *I have no choice, I have a condition, or this is my nature, therefore I cannot resist*. As a consequence of this rationalization, Marie conceives of herself as a causally determined object, specifically when it is circumstantially convenient for her to do so, as is the case when she feels the urge to steal. Upon being caught in her thievery and having to externally justify her actions to an outside observer, she suddenly shifts gears in her internal evaluations, claiming that she is capable of changing and desires to do so. In this occurrence of Protean self-representation Marie is both the deceiver and the deceived, necessarily aware of the alternative truth she is dissuading herself from yet unaware of her active self-deception. This is Sartre's paradoxical notion of bad faith. It is a consequence of the dualistic nature of human consciousness or the default psychological condition of an active being existing in a perpetual state of reaction to their environment. Crucially, this being does not react to

its environment in the same manner as a slab of obsidian.³ Quite distinct from a mere object like an obsidian slab, which has no capacity to deny its existence as a rock, Sartre says of human consciousness that “it must arise in the world as a *No*” (*Being and Nothingness*, section 1). What he means by this is that the human being is capable of negating the very quality that allows for such a negation in the first place: their freedom. This deceptive negation of freedom in one’s passive interpretations and active decision-making is in essence, what constitutes Sartre’s bad faith.

To further preface my elucidation of bad faith’s expression in social media, I will briefly explain Sartre’s example of the waiter. The restaurant steward, or service worker more broadly, performs a specific social role in exchange for a set wage. They dress in a uniform, engage customers with a friendly and amiable demeanor, and abide by a certain number of action constraining policies maintained by their employer. They act in bad faith in the sense that they hang their individuality and self-determination on the coatrack when they come into work, identifying as a kind of object that follows a determined mode of action for as long as they are clocked on. The role-playing element of bad faith emphasized in this example is omnipresent in the 21st -century, considering the fact that modern beings not only present themselves in direct organic interactions as was primary in Sartre’s time, but the majority of us juggle various online personas on top of our immanent social roles,⁴ and the divisionary line between these distinct modes of presentation grows fainter every

³ A rock’s *reactions* to its environment are not active in the same sense that a being’s reactions are. A rock’s reaction would simply be breaking upon contact with a pickaxe, for example.

⁴ The inhabiting of a social role is an act of bad faith for Sartre because it involves inherent objectification, and an intentional identification with this externally determined quality.

day. It is crucial to note that social presentation is always in bad faith because of its objectifying quality, but I am arguing that the digital realm allows for more extensive engagement in bad faith than the mere act of identifying as an object in an other's world.

In the first section of his classic, Sartre says “the one who practices bad faith is hiding a displeasing truth or presenting as truth a pleasing untruth” (*Being and Nothingness*). Any reader who has used a social media application to any extent can already perceive the almost prophetic description of an Instagram profile within this quote, and recognize the profound implications of applying such an idea, most crucially when regarding one's freedom. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre defines a free act as something that “involves [one] in a new setting where the very material of [one's] being is the unpredictable freedom of another.” What this means is that to act freely one must necessarily be an object of another's subjective interpretation, a paradoxical being that is both an object and a subject for themselves.⁵ Because we can modify the nature of our external appearance both organically and digitally, we engage in a further act of bad faith when we present ourselves in an inauthentic manner. This is a further act of bad faith because being an object of an other's consciousness is already a diminution of one's freedom, and letting this external objectification influence one's presentation intensifies the already present effect.

⁵ For Sartre, we are beings-for-ourselves as opposed to beings-in-themselves. This means that we have the freedom to determine our own projects and accept the full weight of such a responsibility.

When one is constructing a recorded presentation of themselves,⁶ whether in an internet profile, a resume, or even a drawing of themselves in elementary school, one aims to portray their *best* qualities. The qualities one perceives to be *best* are decided by an exhaustive multitude of factors, including one's environment, pre-existing dispositions in personality, and even necessarily existent structures of thought if one is to take Kant's Critiques as psychological dogma.⁷ All the same, we are prone to skewing our self-portraits to varying degrees, consequently transcending what we are in favor of what we aspire to be. Due to the reifying properties of social media, in a very real sense, we are able to become what we aspire to be while remaining what we are. To restate this highly obscure sentence in layman's terms, social media allows the modern being to create an intentional and selective digital identity that can never be exactly representative of who and what they are in the organic world. The modern being then, is both what they are organically by nature and what they are digitally by intentional presentation.⁸ A significant portion of one's organic identity is intentionally presented as well, but the level of bad faith possible in digital representation far exceeds the possibilities inherent to mere role-playing and cosmetic decisions. Sartre outlines this element of bad faith when he says "We have to

⁶ There is technically a pronoun disagreement here between "one" and "themselves," but I much prefer the flow of the word "themselves" to "oneself," and have chosen to take the liberty to use them instead. I operate this way with the words "they" and "their" as well.

⁷ Immanuel Kant theorized that all rational beings form thoughts according to a pre-existing psychological structure. If one accepts Kant's theory, it could be another factor in determining what qualities one considers to be their *best*.

⁸ Sartre claims that we are nothing in our original pre-presentation state, and only become beings once we recognize the fact that we are being looked at. All I mean by *organic identity* then, is the physical makeup of a person that is looked at by others. Although they are both subject to modification, one's *organic identity* is distinct from one's *digital identity*, the latter of which they have far greater ability to present in bad faith.

deal with human reality as a being which is what it is not and which is not what it is” (*Being and Nothingness*, section 3).

Social media creates a distinct realm of identity, wherein one can have a photoshopped abdomen and really look that way so far as their digital audience is concerned while looking completely different as their organic un-altered self-presentation. Although photoshop serves as a stark and common example of this ulterior reality, one does not need to take such an extreme measure to misconstrue their identity online. Even the attentive selection of particularly attractive photos and boastful portrayal of one’s activities paint a subtle and non-representative picture of one’s identity in its totality. Especially where the portrayal of one’s subjective experience is concerned, the contrast between a picture on one’s social media profile and the person staring back at them in the mirror highlights bad faith brighter than any marker ever could. Just as Marie does when she justifies her theft, or as the waiter does when they button up their shirt, creating and consequently modifying a social media profile turns one into a kind of object, an *other* by which their fellow beings can distinguish themselves. This notion of being an *other* is an essential piece to Sartre’s existentialist qualification of the self, and is explicated rather poetically in the following passage from *Being and Nothingness*: “Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure – modifications which I can apprehend and fix conceptually by means of the reflective *cogito*.” When one realizes that they are an external object in the experiential world of other beings, they recognize their own ability to modify this externality. Once this realization has occurred and contrasted with one’s felt

sense of freedom, further bad faith becomes possible. This happens organically in both the kleptomaniac and the waiter, and digitally in anyone who has created a digital self-representation. In Sartre's judgement, it is this recognition of one's objecthood that produces shame, and given the terrifying correlations between self-image, social media use, and teen suicide, the effects of such a universal objectification of the human being have already proven deadly.

Imagine that you are trotting down a forest path with a gapless boundary of trees on either side of you. Aside from a mild paranoia that you have quelled with relative ease, you are confident that no one is watching you. You walk in the way you feel naturally inclined to, as conscious of the way you step as you are aware of your heartbeat; it is not a thought in your mind. As you march along, you approach an endless swell of travelers hugging the leafy margins on both sides of the path. They all march in unison, muttering "*nil*" after every third step. As you catch up with the roving mass they apathetically acknowledge your presence, spit out their monotonous "*nil*," and continue to contact the forest floor in routine pattern. Not only has the presence of ulterior consciousness immediately introduced a new layer of understanding to your self-conception, that being social judgement, but now your unique style of walking is brought to the forefront of your consideration, and nine times out of ten you will fall in with the rhythm and abandon your individuality. I have just described the Sartrean picture of organic society and its innate disposition towards bad faith and conformist action, but to ponder the imagery of digital society and its consequences, I must first describe it in more analytical detail.

Technology may be a soul-less⁹ tool that reflects the values of its user, and this might mean that inanimate technology is indeed morally neutral,¹⁰ but social media is not just a piece of metal that can be wielded for heroic or villainous purposes. It is a quasi-animate program that codifies the digital objectification of its users, and it is designed to be addictive for the sake of profit. As its name aptly implies, *social* media generates entertainment from the vanity of mankind's worst impulses to deliberate bad faith and adds a third dimension to the compounding dogpile of dishonesty plaguing the modern world. The first dimension of bad faith, as I have already explained, occurs as soon as an individual's lonesome train of thought is confronted by a being they intuitively know to be capable of similar thought processes. Because this individual sees the being as an object that is also a subject, they know that the same objectification is taking place in the external being's consciousness. When you were walking in the woods in the earlier example, this first dimension was made manifest as soon as you encountered the other travelers, judged them to be similar creatures, and felt a reciprocal judgement that was their own objectification of you. The second dimension of bad faith occurs when an individual modifies their behavior, appearance, or any other outward quality in response to their initial objectification. This was made manifest when you began to walk in unison with the travelers, joined in their continuous expression of negativity, and followed the herd in the only direction they will ever travel, blindly forwards.¹¹

The third dimension of bad faith has arisen exclusively in the 21st-century, and

⁹ For now!

¹⁰ This statement is debatable in regards to the telos of weapons, but this is not the subject of this inquiry.

¹¹ None of the marchers question this direction, for they have always moved forwards and always will.

occurs when one extends the activity of the second dimension into the digital realm, which not only increases the preponderance of this second kind of bad faith, but of their initial objectification as well. As you are stomping along with the pack of wandering souls, you begin to collect twigs and leaves along the path in compliance with the sudden and universal interest of your peers. Following the travelers around you, you twist together the most beautiful and endearing self-portrait you can muster with the contents of the forest floor, and hold it out in front of you. As you periodically look up from your wooden reflection, which you frantically tweak and adjust in conformity with the trends of your hiking companions, you notice billions of other stick people appearing in every nook and cranny of the surrounding greenery. Although you can clearly discern the expanding number of stick people from your full-bodied neighbors, they still appear to be watching you, and when you eventually fall away from the group due to an injury on the trail, you remain surrounded by millions of twigs and do not feel alone in the same way you did before you fell in with the travelers. As the adept reader has already suspected, the wooden self-portraits are our digital identities and the trail injury represents organic social isolation. Even when separated from their organic society, the average contemporary citizen still feels watched by their fellow conscious beings through the internet, yet this third dimension of bad faith is much more harmful as continuous fidgeting with sticks often leads to cuts and arthritis. In the internet age we not only modify both our organic and digital appearances, but we are looked at by an incalculable number of eyes, wooden or otherwise. Thus, the third dimension of bad faith has dramatically increased the preponderance of the first two.

Many of us hold our twig reflections with bleeding fingers and cannot even bear the thought of discarding them to let our broken bodies heal. The bloody pain of frantic twig manipulation mixed with separation from their peers due to various trail injuries, presents the modern traveler with the serious danger of suicide, an unfortunately realistic option in a world so starved for meaningful connection. According to the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention, 48,183 weary travelers intentionally left the forest of the United States in 2021, and this death count only continues to grow in world-record numbers with the passing of each year. I will leave the following space after this paragraph in remembrance of those lost to this social hecatomb:

This leads me to my lamentation and support for the second part of my thesis, which is the claim that social media creates the illusion of enhanced freedom whilst diminishing one's actual options, and ultimately has a disastrous effect on self-expression and organic social interaction. Setting aside the insidious design of dating apps for the sake of brevity, the social media giants that allow for the creation of a profile and continual photo updates in the form of a *story* such as Instagram, Snapchat, and many others, are responsible for the general diminution of social ability observable in the present-day youth. Not to mention the concentrated for-profit effort to abolish the attention span, a contagion that has even afflicted me despite my greatest attempts to avoid it. Prior to the internet, human beings constantly interacted in bad faith, as we necessarily inhabit objective social

roles and aim to present our *best* qualities by default. In a world with a digital realm of identity overlayed onto the pre-existing organic sphere of self-presentation, the opportunities for bad faith are increased two-fold, and what appears to be an increase in available methods of unique self-realization is only a larger prison of objectification in actuality. In so far as being objectified makes free action possible, there are, strictly speaking, more avenues by which one can create a self-representation.¹² However, since the scope of one's objectification is relative to the size of their audience, and the will to be accepted leads to conformist action, the development of one's digital identity is often an extremely fine-tuned and deliberative process that creates shame and bad faith on an unprecedented scale. When one looks out at the forest of external reality and sees not one, but a possibly infinite number of subjective interpreters ready to objectify them, their decisions of presentation have a possibly infinite number of external influences, and they consequently have significantly less freedom of genuine self-expression. Because the digital realm has become so psychologically intertwined with the modern being, prosperous organic relationships suffer in quality as well as quantity. Sartre's confused state of bad faith has become multi-dimensional in its realization, and until there is a definitive movement to take these effects seriously, the modern being will continue to grow more depressed, socially lethargic, and suicidal. A being that is digitally overextended yet organically isolated is a different beast than the primeval Adam and Eve, and if we have any

¹² One can express themselves in a greater variety of ways using social media, i.e. photoshopping themselves, using pictures of other people as their own, etc. The introduction of the digital realm itself presents a new avenue for self-expression. Because an increase in the variety and quantity of the ways in which one is objectified increases their opportunities to criticize their identity, they technically have more opportunities to recognize their freedom in the face of this objectification. As I hope to have developed, this is rare, if even possible.

hope of returning to a state of sustained psychological well-being, it rests in the thinkers of the new generation. That means you. And that means me.

With Peace,

-Blessed and Happy

Works Cited:

Centers For Disease Control and Prevention. *Suicide Data and Statistics*. November 29th, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/suicide/suicide-data-statistics.html>

He, Amy. *Average US Time Spent with Mobile in 2019 Has Increased*. eMarketer. June 4th, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.emarketer.com/content/average-us-time-spent-with-mobile-in-2019-has-increased>

Lindner, Jannik. *Screen Time Increase During Covid-19 Statistics [Fresh Research]*. Gitnux. December 16th, 2023. Retrieved from: <https://gitnux.org/screen-time-increase-during-covid-19-statistics/>

Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*. 1943.