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Sartre and the problem of self-creation: Freedom, Choice and the Making of the Self

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Sartre's account of self-creation and asks whether, and in what sense, human beings make themselves. It begins with Sartre's principle that existence precedes essence and examines its ontological basis in his conception of consciousness as a being that does not fully coincide with itself. The paper then analyses freedom, choice and projects as the central means through which individuals continually shape themselves. It further examines the relationship between facticity and transcendence, showing that self-creation always takes place within concrete circumstances that individuals do not choose. The discussion of bad faith demonstrates how individuals may evade responsibility by treating themselves as fixed beings or by denying their capacity for change. The paper argues that Sartrean self-creation should not be understood as unlimited self-invention, but as an ongoing process of self-definition through choice and action within historical, social and material conditions. Drawing on criticisms of Sartre and his later revisions, the paper develops the concept of situated freedom, according to which human agency is real but conditioned. It concludes that self-creation is neither the discovery of a predetermined essence nor creation from nothing, but the continuing process of making something of oneself from circumstances one did not choose. This understanding also extends responsibility for self-creation from the individual to society.

1. Introduction

Few philosophers of the twentieth century placed the question "who am I?" as squarely at the centre of their thought as Jean-Paul Sartre. Writing in the aftermath of the Nazi occupation of France, and against the background of a Europe whose inherited certainties about God, human nature and moral order had been badly shaken, Sartre offered a philosophy that refused to hand the individual a ready-made identity. His major philosophical work, *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1956), and *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (1946/2007), both advance the claim that human beings are not manufactured according to a prior design. We first exist, find ourselves in the world, and only afterwards become whatever we make of ourselves. This is the meaning of his well-known formula that existence precedes essence. As he noted:

> What do we mean here by "existence precedes essence"? We mean that man first exists: he materializes in the world, encounters himself, and only afterward defines himself. If man as existentialists conceive of him cannot be defined, it is because to begin with he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. Thus, there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into

> existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism (Sartre, 2007, 22).

Sartre's statement that "existence precedes essence" means that human beings do not come into the world with a fixed nature or predetermined purpose that completely defines who they are. Unlike manufactured objects, which are produced according to a prior design, the human person first exists and only subsequently develops an identity through choices, actions and projects. Thus, when Sartre says that human beings initially are "nothing," he does not mean that they have no existence or value. Rather, he means that they do not possess a predetermined essence that fixes what they must become. The individual therefore participates in the making of the self through the exercise of freedom and choice. Thus, Sartre offers a philosophy of human possibility, one that insists the individual is never simply the product of destiny or circumstance (Onebunne, 2021; Okechukwu & Okereafor, 2025).

According to Sartre, that man is free because man first of all exists, encounters the world, surges up in the world and makes himself what he wants to be through his freedom. Okechukwu and Okereafor (2025) argue that since man's essence is not immanent prior to existence, since he is not pre-determined or pre-defined by any destiny, the human person carries the full burden of self-definition. However, Sartre's claim raises some questions. If the self is made rather than given, one must ask how far this making really extends. No one chooses the body into which they are born, the language they first speak, the family that raises them, the historical moment they inherit, or the economic and political conditions that shape their options. Sartre himself called these given features of existence facticity, and he did not deny them. The problem, then, is not whether Sartre recognised limits, but whether his account of freedom can take those limits seriously without either collapsing into determinism or inflating into a fantasy of unlimited self-invention. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012) and Simone de Beauvoir (1948) noted precisely this point (Toadvine, 2023; Burke, 2023). However, questions have been raised that Sartre's early writings seem to grant human beings a freedom that social reality does not always support (Aho, 2023). Onebunne (2021), notably, argues that many readers misconstrue Sartre because they attend only to the early works; in the later *The Family Idiot*, he accepted a kind of limitation to man's freedom when he said that we are to remake ourselves from what is already made of us.

This paper addresses the tension between Sartre's conception of self-creation and the conditions within which human freedom is exercised. It asks what Sartre means by self-creation, how that idea stands in relation to the conditions of existence that no one chooses, and what follows when individuals refuse their freedom by treating themselves as fixed and finished beings, which Sartre calls bad faith. The paper aims to clarify the ontological foundations of Sartrean freedom; examine the relationship between freedom, choice and responsibility; analyse the tension between facticity and transcendence; assess bad faith as a flight from self-creation; and evaluate Sartre's position and its relevance to contemporary questions of self-creation. Methodologically, the paper adopts textual and interpretive analysis. This work argues that, for Sartre, self-creation is best understood not as inventing a self out of nothing, but as a continuous process of self-definition carried out through choices made within concrete, often unchosen circumstances.

2. Sartre's Existentialist Foundation

Sartre's account of self-creation does not float free of the rest of his philosophy; it rests on an ontology, a theory of what kinds of being there are, which he worked out under the influence of Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's *Being and Time*. In *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, Sartre claims that existence precedes essence. He illustrates this with the example of a manufactured object, a paper-knife, whose purpose and method of production exist in the artisan's mind before the object itself comes into being. As he noted, "The paper knife is thus both an object produced in a certain way and one that, on the other hand, serves a definite purpose. We cannot suppose that a man would produce a paper knife without knowing what purpose it would serve" (2007, 22). For the knife, essence comes first. The human being, Sartre argues, is the one case in which this order is reversed, because there is no divine craftsman holding a concept of human nature in advance. Scholars have tended to read this passage as the hinge of Sartre's entire system. Obi and Ebeagu (2024), for instance, note that Sartre builds his whole thought around this claim and that, for him, there is no God who created us with a clear goal in mind, and no universal human nature of the kind classical philosophers assumed (see also Omoregbe, 1993; Okechukwu & Okereafor, 2025). This interpretation is accurate as far as it goes, but it can leave the impression that "existence precedes essence" is merely an atheistic slogan. A more convincing interpretation is that the formula summarises a structural claim about consciousness, and it is to this that we must turn.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre distinguishes between two fundamental modes of being: being-in-itself (*l'être-en-soi*) and being-for-itself (*l'être-pour-soi*). Being-in-itself refers primarily to the mode of being of things that simply exist without consciousness of themselves. The in-itself is what it is: it is complete, self-identical and does not stand outside itself in order to question or change its being. A stone, for example, does not reflect on what it means to be a stone, reject its present condition or imagine becoming something else. It simply exists as the thing that it is. In this sense, being-in-itself has no awareness of possibilities and does not create a distance between itself and its own being. It is therefore characterised by full coincidence with itself: what it is and what it is are the same (Sartre, 1943/1956; Barnes, 1992).

Being-for-itself, by contrast, refers to the mode of being characteristic of human consciousness. Unlike the in-itself, consciousness does not completely coincide with itself because it can take itself as an object of reflection. A human being can ask, *Who am I?*, *What have I become?*, or *What can I become?* This capacity to question oneself means that the human being is never simply identical with the condition in which he or she presently exists. The for-itself is therefore characterised by self-awareness, openness and possibility. It is not a fixed thing with a predetermined essence but a being that continually relates to what it has been, what it is and what it may become. Sartre's distinction is therefore not merely between two kinds of objects; it is a distinction between two fundamentally different modes of existence: the fixed, self-identical mode of the in-itself and the conscious, self-questioning, possibility-oriented mode of the for-itself.

Following Husserl's phenomenology, Sartre maintains that consciousness is always consciousness of something. Consciousness therefore has no fixed inner content or permanent self that exists independently of its relation to the world. It is directed toward objects, situations and possibilities. The for-itself is a being whose relation to itself is marked by nothingness. This nothingness does not mean non-existence or absolute emptiness. Rather, it refers to the distance that consciousness establishes between itself and what simply is. Since consciousness does not completely coincide with itself, the human being can recognise that the present self is not the whole of what one can become. This explains Sartre's claim that the human being is what he is not and is not what he is. A person may be a student today, for example, but is not permanently defined by being a student because he or she can imagine and pursue other possibilities. Nothingness is therefore expressed in the human capacity to distance oneself from an existing condition, question it and project alternative possibilities. As Sartre explains, "I go into a cafe, expecting a friend, Pierre, and discovers through my perception immediately that he is not there. The cafe and all the other people fall immediately into a background, against which I expected to see Pierre stand out, but he does not" (Sartre, 1943/1956, pp. 40-44). Consciousness does not merely observe what exists; it can also recognise what is absent, negate what is given and imagine what could be. In this sense, nothingness creates a gap between what is and what could be. This openness distinguishes human beings from things such as rocks or trees and provides an ontological basis for freedom, choice and the continual formation of the self. For Sartre, freedom is not a property that human beings happen to have, alongside height or temperament. Freedom is the very being of the for-itself. Since consciousness is never simply identical with its past, its body or its situation, it is always already beyond them, projecting itself towards possibilities. This is why Sartre says we are condemned to be free: we did not create ourselves, yet we cannot stop choosing (Sartre, 1943/1956). Scholars within the existentialist tradition have charged that Sartre's early account is "far too abstract, interiorized, and influenced by Cartesian assumptions" (Aho, 2023). On this view, a critical weakness of the ontology is that if consciousness is pure nothingness, it becomes difficult to explain how a stable self, with a character and a history, can form at all. This work argues that the difficulty is real but not fatal. Sartre never claimed the self is nothing; he claimed it is not *given*, and must be constituted through action over time.

3. Freedom, Choice and Self-Creation

In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre noted: "I am condemned to exist forever beyond my essence, beyond the causes and motives of my act. I am condemned to be free" (Sartre, 1956, 440). Sartre's claim that human beings are "absolutely" or "totally" free is sometimes interpreted to mean that individuals can do or become whatever they desire, as though freedom gives them unlimited power over reality. According to Sartre himself, however, this is a misreading. In *Being and Nothingness,* he carefully separates freedom of choice from success in attaining what one chooses. The prisoner, he insists, is always free to attempt escape, even though he is not free to be released; freedom concerns the self-determination of choosing, not the power to obtain its object (Sartre, 1943/1956). In *Being and Nothingness,* Part Four, Chapter One, Sartre explains that "success is not important to freedom" and that the technical and philosophical concept of freedom means only the autonomy of choice, not the ability to obtain what one has wished. He noted:

> it is necessary to point out to "common sense" that the formula "to be free" does not mean "to obtain what one has wished" but rather "by oneself to determine oneself to wish" (in the broad sense of choosing). In other words, success is not important to freedom. The discussion which opposes common sense to philosophers stems here from a misunderstanding: the empirical and popular concept of "freedom" which has been produced by historical, political, and moral circumstances is equivalent to "the ability to obtain the ends chosen." The technical and philosophical concept of freedom, the only one which we are considering here, means only the autonomy of choice. It is necessary, however, to note that the choice, being identical with acting, supposes a commencement of realization in order that the choice may be distinguished from the dream and the wish. Thus we shall not say that a prisoner is always free to go out of prison, which would be absurd, nor that he is always free to long for release, which would be an irrelevant truism, but that he is always free to try to escape (or get himself liberated); that is, that whatever his condition may be, he can project his escape and learn the value of his project by undertaking some action (1956, 483–484).

Building on this passage, Obi and Ebeagu (2024) distinguish between ontological freedom, understood as the basic capacity to set our life projects and give meaning to our circumstances, and practical freedom, understood as the capacity to actually realise our goals in a world that may frustrate them. A similar distinction is drawn by Detmer (1988), who argues that critics who accuse Sartre of naïve voluntarism have usually run the two senses together. Liu (2022) proposes a threefold framework that separates ontological freedom, psychological–practical freedom, and what he calls the psychologistic misinterpretation of freedom. From his perspective, the apparent absurdity of Sartre's claim that freedom is total arises only when one confuses the ontological sense with the practical one and then mistakes the practical sense for something absolute. Liu goes further, arguing that Sartre's critique of the psychologistic view, which treats consciousness as though it were a thing, makes the traditional quarrel between free will and determinism largely beside the point, since a freedom detached from action would be either capricious or powerless. This explains why Sartre could hold, without contradiction, both that we are wholly free and that the world constantly resists us (see also Landau, 2012; Poellner, 2015).

For Sartre, freedom is inseparable from responsibility. Since there is no human nature to consult and no God to issue commands, whatever I choose, I choose without excuse. Sartre adds the further and more contentious claim that in choosing myself I also choose an image of what a human being ought to be, so that my choices carry a kind of universal weight. According to Sartre, "I am therefore responsible for myself and for everyone else, and I am fashioning a certain image of man as I choose him to be. In choosing myself, I choose man" *(2007, pp.23–25).* The awareness of this responsibility is what Sartre calls anguish. It is not fear of an external danger but the unsettling recognition that nothing outside me guarantees my choices, that I sustain my values by my own continuing commitment to them (Sartre, 1943/1956). Onebunne (2021) develops this point in an interesting direction, arguing that the sense of responsibility attached to every choice is itself already a limitation on the notion of absolute freedom. However, this study argues that responsibility should not be understood as a limitation of Sartrean freedom. Rather, responsibility is an essential part of freedom because a person is free precisely because he or she must take ownership of choices and their consequences. For Sartre, to be free *is* to be the author of one's acts; responsibility is freedom viewed from the side of its consequences. Akinbode (2023, p. 16) captures this link when he writes that, for Sartre, man "is condemned to be free; because once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does."

The question of how choices build a self brings us to the notion of the fundamental project. Sartre does not picture the human being as making a series of isolated decisions, each disconnected from the others. Individual choices are organised by what he calls a fundamental project, an original and largely pre-reflective choice of oneself that gives unity and direction to a life (Sartre, 1943/1956). Sartre illustrates this with the example of a hiking excursion with friends, in which one member of the party, overcome by fatigue, throws down his pack and gives up. Sartre's question is whether he could have done otherwise, and his answer is that he could, but only at the price of a wider transformation of his whole relation to his body, to effort and to the world (1956, 453–455*).* As Anderson (1993) observes, this gives Sartre's theory a coherence that is often missed when existentialist choice is understood as arbitrary or random. The self is not simply a collection of separate actions; rather, these actions form a continuing pattern based on a basic orientation toward life. This also explains Sartre's emphasis on judging individuals through their actions rather than through what they merely claim they could have done.

In *Existentialism Is a Humanism,* Sartre argues that "Man is nothing other than his own project. He exists only to the extent that he realizes himself, therefore he is nothing more than the sum of his actions, nothing more than his life" (37). Two consequences follow for the problem of self-creation. First, self-creation is never finished while one lives. Since the for-itself is always ahead of itself, no single action definitively settles who I am; the coward can still become brave, and the hero can still betray (Sartre, 1946/2007). Only at death, Sartre argues, does a life acquire a fixed character, and then it passes into the hands of others to interpret. Each decision can be understood as a stroke in the continuing formation of the self, with the picture becoming complete only at death. Second, the self-Sartre describes is not a thing one possesses but an activity one sustains. This second point, however, invites an important qualification that scholars have recently brought into focus. If the fundamental project is freely chosen and can in principle be changed, why is changing one's life so hard? Liu (2025) addresses precisely this question, arguing that Sartre's own account of the temporality of consciousness explains why a radical conversion to a new fundamental project meets resistance, a resistance rooted in the for-itself's failure ever to coincide with itself and in the delay built into its original choice. On this perspective, self-creation is continuous but not weightless; the self we have already made tends to persist, and remaking it takes time and sustained action. Sares (2026) similarly presents Sartrean freedom as a dialectic between external determination and self-determination, a freedom exercised within and through limiting conditions. This provides a useful correction to popular interpretations of existentialism that suggest that individuals can simply reinvent themselves at any moment. Nevertheless, a significant criticism remains concerning the basis of Sartrean choice. Merleau-Ponty, in Aho (2023), holds that the options open to a person are already embedded in a sociohistorical situation before any personal decision is made. Akinbode (2023), following Plantinga (1958), raises a related concern: if every choice defines both value and rationality, it becomes impossible to make a wrong choice. Sartre therefore explains the form of self-creation more convincingly than its content. Human beings continually choose and shape themselves, but they always do so from particular circumstances, relationships, histories and social meanings that they did not create themselves.

4. Facticity and Transcendence

Sartre's notion of facticity and transcendence is a fundamental aspect of understanding how human freedom operates within real conditions. Human beings are never completely free from circumstances because everyone exists within situations that they did not choose. At the same time, these circumstances do not completely determine what a person can become. Sartre therefore understands human existence as a tension between facticity, which refers to the conditions that are given to us, and transcendence, which refers to our ability to go beyond these conditions by choosing possibilities and projecting ourselves toward the future. The human person, Sartre argues in *Being and Nothingness*, is at once a facticity and a transcendence, and the question of self-creation unfolds in the relation between these two dimensions (Sartre, 1943/1956).

Facticity refers to the concrete features of human existence that an individual does not freely choose. In the chapter on "Freedom and Facticity: The Situation," Sartre groups these under several headings: my place, my past, my environment, my fellow human beings, and my death (Sartre, 1943/1956). I did not choose to be born in this country rather than another, into this family, with this body, in this century, among these people who already speak a language and hold values before I arrive. My past, too, belongs to my facticity: what I have done is done, and no later choice can make it not to have happened. Obi and Ebeagu (2024) describe facticity simply as the unchosen conditions of one's existence, and they note the tendency among many young Nigerians to regard the mere fact of being Nigerian as a kind of curse, as though facticity were a definitive obstacle. The example is apt precisely because it shows how facticity presents itself in lived experience. It rarely appears as a neutral list of facts; it appears as a weight, a limit, sometimes a fate.

On the other hand, transcendence names the opposite movement. It is the for-itself's capacity to go beyond whatever is given towards possibilities not yet realised, to surpass the present situation in the direction of a project. Since consciousness never coincides with what it is, it is always already beyond its body, its past and its circumstances, relating to them from the standpoint of what it aims at. Human beings can take a position toward their circumstances, interpret them differently and act in ways that alter their situation. A person born into poverty, for instance, cannot change the fact that poverty formed part of his or her past. However, that person can choose how to respond to that condition and can pursue possibilities that may transform his or her circumstances. Transcendence therefore does not mean escaping reality; it means relating to existing conditions through projects and possibilities (Sartre, 1943/1956; Liu, 2022).

The important question is how facticity and transcendence relate. Human beings do not create themselves from nothing. They begin from a particular situation that includes a past, a body, relationships, social conditions, and other forms of facticity. Self-creation occurs when the individual responds to these conditions through projects, choices and actions. Thus, the self is formed neither by circumstances alone nor by unrestricted choice. It emerges through the individual's continuing attempt to transcend a given situation while remaining situated within it. Sartre does not argue that facticity is an illusion or that transcendence floats free of it. Rather, he argues that facticity only shows up *as* a limit, an obstacle or a resource in the light of the projects through which we transcend it. His best-known illustration is the crag. A large rock is not, in itself, "too difficult to climb." It becomes an obstacle only for someone who wants to climb it; for someone who wants to admire the landscape, the same rock may be a welcome vantage point, and for a painter it may be a subject (Sartre, 1943/1956). From this Sartre draws what he calls the paradox of freedom: there is freedom only in a situation, and there is a situation only through freedom. Onebunne (2021), quoting Sartre, makes the point that without facticity, freedom would lack anything to nihilate and choose among, while without freedom, facticity would never be discovered or acquire meaning. This work argues that the paradox is best understood not as a denial of limits but as a claim about their *meaning*. The rock remains a rock; the past remains the past. What remains open is how these facts are taken up, what place they are given in a life, and what they are allowed to signify.

Sartre's discussion of bodily disability illustrates both the possibilities and limitations of his account of facticity and transcendence. He argues that even a disability becomes part of one's existence through the way it is lived and taken up in relation to one's projects. In this sense, an individual is not simply defined by a physical condition but can determine the meaning that condition has within his or her life (Sartre, 1943/1956). Onebunne (2021), drawing on Jopling's interpretation of Sartre's moral psychology (Jopling, 1992, as cited in Onebunne, 2021), argues that facticity does not completely determine how individuals understand and respond to their circumstances. The facts of a situation do not automatically determine their meaning. Thus, a person with a disability cannot be reduced simply to a medical condition, since the significance of that condition is also shaped by how the person lives and responds to it. However, this position raises an important concern. If too much emphasis is placed on the individual's ability to give meaning to a disability, it may overlook the role of social conditions. The difficulties associated with disability are not produced by the body alone. Social attitudes, physical environments, institutions and unequal opportunities can also determine what a person is able to do. Sartre's account is therefore strongest when facticity is understood as including not only bodily conditions but also the social circumstances within which those conditions are experienced. This tension reveals an important challenge for Sartre's theory of self-creation: individuals have freedom to respond to their circumstances, but the possibilities available to them are also shaped by the world in which they live.

Simone de Beauvoir (1948), whose thinking developed in close dialogue with Sartre's, accepted that human beings are free in the ontological sense but insisted that oppression can narrow a person's possibilities so much that the practical exercise of transcendence is stifled (Burke, 2023). Thus, the slave and the oppressed are not less free in principle, but their situation may deny them the concrete possibilities through which freedom becomes effective. This perspective has been developed in contemporary work that sees Sartre's freedom as always mediated by the world rather than exercised over it (Toadvine, 2023; Sares, 2026). A more convincing interpretation of Sartre, on this view, is that facticity and transcendence are not two separate zones, one belonging to circumstance and the other to choice, but two aspects of a single movement in which the self is continually made out of what has already been made of it. Thus, individuals, then, create themselves within given conditions not by escaping those conditions but by taking a stand towards them. Self-creation, in this sense, is less an act of invention than an act of appropriation: the ongoing work of giving the unchosen facts of one's life a place in a project one can own. Sartre himself says that facticity and transcendence ought to be capable of a "valid coordination" (Sartre, 1943/1956). The trouble is that human beings are adept at avoiding this coordination, either by collapsing into their facticity or by fleeing into an imaginary transcendence. That flight is what Sartre calls bad faith.

5. Bad Faith and the Denial of Self-Creation

Bad faith is the negative image of self-creation. It shows what happens when a being that must make itself pretends that it has already been made, or that it need not be made at all. It is (*mauvaise foi*) Sartre's term for the way a person deceives themselves in order to avoid facing their freedom and responsibility. It occurs when an individual treats himself or herself as if they were a fixed thing with a predetermined identity, rather than a free consciousness capable of choosing and changing. Sartre's analysis of it in *Being and*

Nothingness remains one of the most discussed passages in twentieth-century philosophy. According to Sartre, bad faith resembles lying but differs from it in a crucial respect. The liar knows the truth and hides it from someone else; in bad faith, the deceiver and the deceived are one and the same consciousness. This creates an apparent paradox, since it seems impossible to hide from oneself a truth one must know in order to hide it. Sartre's solution is that bad faith is not a clearly formed belief but a project, a kind of evasive posture that consciousness adopts towards evidence it prefers not to face (Sartre, 1943/1956). Bad faith can be seen as a condition possible only for the for-itself, in which the person is both deceiver and deceived. Nweke & Dibia (2023) connect it directly to anguish, because the realisation of freedom brings a heavy burden of responsibility; it is natural that people should try to flee that anguish, and bad faith is precisely this flight. Akpa et al. (2023), writing on authenticity and African development, likewise characterise inauthentic existence as a failure to recognise that existence means exercising one's freedom.

The most common form of bad faith consists in treating oneself as a fixed essence, as though one were a thing rather than a freedom. Sartre's famous example is the café waiter whose movements are a little too precise, a little too eager, who plays at *being* a waiter as though the role could exhaust who he is (Sartre, 1943/1956). The waiter's fault is not that he works diligently or takes his job seriously. It is that he uses the role to escape the recognition that he could, at any moment, act otherwise, and that he sustains the role by his own continuing choice. The same logic applies to statements such as "that is just how I am," "people like me don't do that," or "my background made me this way." Each converts a history of choices into a nature, and so relieves the speaker of responsibility for continuing it. Bad faith can, however, run in the opposite direction. Sartre's second major example, the woman on a first date who leaves her hand in her companion's while pretending not to notice, illustrates a flight into transcendence. She treats herself as pure consciousness, above the situation, to avoid acknowledging what her body is doing and what the moment means (Sartre, 1943/1956). Similarly, a person who says "I am not really a liar; that was not the real me" uses the openness of the future to disown the past. Obi and Ebeagu (2024) capture this dual structure by distinguishing between absolutising facticity, seeing oneself as fixed and unchanging, and absolutising transcendence, disowning one's past actions in the name of freedom. This study argues that the value of this double analysis lies in showing that bad faith is not simply the opposite of freedom. It is a misuse of freedom, in which one aspect of human reality is played off against the other.

Seen in this light, bad faith is fundamentally an evasion of self-creation. Okechukwu and Okereafor (2025) characterise it broadly as self-deception, evasion of responsibility, procrastination, indecisiveness and other forms of stagnation that hinder human access to freedom and progress. Obi and Ebeagu (2024) apply the concept to contemporary Nigeria, arguing that many young people attribute their failures to economic hardship, poor governance and social pressure rather than owning their responses to them, while acknowledging that these challenges are real and significant. Balogun (2018) likewise argues, from a Yorùbá perspective, that authentic existence consists in "doing the world" (ayé ṣíṣe) rather than merely living in it, and that culture, religion and social pressure can promote bad faith. Thus, it is here that a critical caution is needed. A critical weakness of applying bad faith too readily is that it can turn a philosophical diagnosis into a moral accusation, placing on individuals the full blame for conditions they did not create. Fanon (1952/2008) offers an instructive corrective. His description of the Black subject as "overdetermined from the outside" suggests that bad faith is not only something individuals commit against themselves; others can also fix a person as an essence, as though race, class or origin determined who he could be. From this perspective, the refusal to see others as free is itself a form of bad faith. This extension matters for the problem of self-creation, since it reveals that the conditions under which people create themselves are partly shaped by how others regard them. The person who blames "the system" may be in bad faith; but so may the society that insists he is nothing more than what the system has made him.

A more convincing understanding of bad faith should take both freedom and limitation into account. Sartre is right to argue that human beings can avoid their freedom by hiding behind fixed roles, personal characteristics or circumstances. However, bad faith is most useful when it helps us understand where individuals still have the freedom to choose and where their freedom may be restricted by social and historical conditions. The important question, therefore, is how far individuals can create themselves while living within these limitations. This question leads to the next section, which examines the limits of self-creation.

6. The Problem of Self-Creation

According to Sartre, the self is not given but made; it is made through choices organised by projects; these choices always take place within a facticity the individual did not choose; and human beings frequently flee

this task through bad faith (Sartre, 2007). The question now is therefore: can the individual truly create the self? Or does the weight of history, society and circumstance reduce self-creation to a comforting illusion? In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre appears to push freedom to its limit. His claim that even a prisoner or a tortured person remains free, since each retains the power to assign meaning to his situation, has struck many scholars as not merely bold but implausible (Sartre, 1943/1956). Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), whose chapter on freedom in *Phenomenology of Perception* is largely a reply to Sartre, argues that if freedom is everywhere, it is nowhere, and then it may lose its real meaning. Toadvine (2023) summarises the objection as directed against the Sartrean position that freedom is either total or null: for Merleau-Ponty, freedom emerges only against the background of our "universal engagement in a world," which involves us in meanings and values that are not of our choosing. Merleau-Ponty himself writes: "We may say in this case that it is everywhere, but equally nowhere" (507, Trans., Colin Smith). Thus, if a person is considered just as free while being tortured as when living freely, then freedom no longer shows a meaningful difference between different human situations. Merleau-Ponty instead argues that our past choices gradually become part of our habits, attitudes and ways of understanding the world. As a result, some choices are easier or more difficult for us than others. Human beings are therefore neither completely determined nor completely free. Rather, we live within a range of possibilities that has already been shaped by our past experiences and circumstances before we make new choices.

This argument, however, has been developed in a more explicitly social direction as noted earlier by Simone de Beauvoir (1948), who argued that oppression does not abolish ontological freedom but can reduce a person's concrete possibilities available to that person. In such situations, the ability to move beyond one's circumstances can become severely restricted. On the other hand, Frantz Fanon (1952/2008) takes this argument further in his discussion of the colonised Black person. He describes the Black subject as being "overdetermined from the outside" (Fanon, 1952/2008, p. 95), meaning that society can impose an identity on a person through the way others see and treat him. The person is therefore defined by others in ways that he did not choose. For such a person, self-creation is not simply a matter of refusing bad faith; it requires struggling against a world that has already decided who he is. Fanon's criticism of Sartre's essay *Black Orpheus* shows that he considered even sympathetic European existentialist interpretations to be too quick to explain oppression mainly in terms of individual freedom and choice (Fanon, 1952/2008). From a Nigerian perspective, Akinbode (2023) warns that this emphasis on unconstrained individual choice "threatens the possibility of a moral endeavour." Lamola (2022), in turn, reads Sartre's own life as an enactment of self-creation, arguing that a bourgeois, white French intellectual came to stand in solidarity with the Negritude movement and the anticolonial struggle. Although these scholars focus on different issues, they share a common concern: Sartre's early account gives too much importance to the individual's independence and does not give enough attention to the influence of history and society on human life.

It is important to note that Sartre himself later addressed many of these concerns. His later writings show a significant, although not complete, revision of his earlier position. Onof puts the change this way: "the infinite freedom of the earlier philosophy is now narrowed down by the constraints of the political and historical situation." In *Saint Genet* (1952) and *Search for a Method* (1957), Sartre pays greater attention to the social and historical conditions that shape human freedom. In *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr,* he argues that what matters is not simply what others make of us, but what we make of what they have made of us. This suggests that although individuals are shaped by external conditions, they can still respond to and transform those conditions through their actions. Onebunne (2021) draws attention to this shift and argues that Sartre is sometimes misunderstood when his philosophy is considered mainly through *Being and Nothingness* while his later works are given less attention. In works such as *The Family Idiot*, Sartre recognises that individuals remake themselves from conditions that have already shaped them. For example, a person may overcome a neurosis, but cannot completely separate himself from his own history and personality. Character traits may change, while biological conditions and social influences continue to form part of the individual's existence. This development is also evident in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), where Sartre introduces the concept of the *practico-inert*.

The *practico-inert* refers human-made objects, language, class relations, ideas, social and institutional structures that are produced through human action but subsequently acquire a degree of independence and limit the possibilities available to individuals. Human beings therefore enter a world already shaped by previous actions, institutions, economic relations and historical conditions. These structures can restrict freedom, but they can also provide the material conditions through which new forms of action become possible. Engels (2018) explains how this concept develops from Sartre's earlier account of being-in-itself. Importantly, Engels argues that the practico-inert does not only restrict freedom; it can also support freedom

because human beings depend on existing structures and resources in order to achieve new possibilities. Sartre himself acknowledged the extent to which his later position differed from some of his earlier claims. In a 1969 interview, he recalled his wartime view that a person is always free to choose regardless of circumstances and expressed surprise that he had once held such a position (Sartre, 1969). In the same interview, he summed up the limit he would now accord to freedom: "a man can always make something out of what is made of him" (Sartre, 1969). His later philosophy therefore provides a more complex understanding of freedom, in which human beings remain capable of self-creation while also being deeply shaped by biological, social, historical and material conditions.

What, then, remains of self-creation once these limitations are acknowledged? This work argues that what remains is not the idea of absolute independence, but a more defensible conception of situated freedom. Human beings do not choose the conditions into which they are born, and many of the possibilities available to them are shaped by social, historical and material forces beyond individual control. However, within these conditions, the way individuals respond to their circumstances, the projects they pursue and the meaning they give to their experiences are not completely predetermined. Liu's (2025) argument is helpful here. He argues that the self already formed through previous choices tends to persist, meaning that changing one's fundamental way of living requires time and sustained effort rather than a single decision. Sares (2026) similarly understands Sartrean freedom as a dialectical process that develops through continuous engagement with a world that both enables and limits human action. Aho (2023) likewise stresses that authenticity, on the existentialist view, is a matter of what one does rather than of what one is. Self-creation, therefore, should not be understood as creating oneself from nothing. Rather, it is the continuing process of responding to given circumstances, adopting projects and transforming one's possibilities through action. Sartrean freedom is consequently best understood as freedom within a situation: individuals are shaped by conditions they did not choose, but they can still take a position toward those conditions and participate in determining what they become.

The tension between freedom and determination is therefore not resolved by choosing one side. Determinism fails because it cannot account for the difference that human commitment makes, the fact that two people in similar circumstances may respond in very different ways (Sartre, 1943/1956; Obi & Ebeagu, 2024). But radical voluntarism fails too, because it cannot account for how history, class, race and colonial legacy shape the possibilities available to individuals (Beauvoir, 1948; Fanon, 1952/2008). A more convincing interpretation is that freedom and determination are two aspects of human existence. What has been made of us sets the terms; what we make of it is our contribution. From this perspective, self-creation is real, but it is neither completely individual nor created from nothing. It is an ongoing and often difficult process of making something of oneself from circumstances that one did not choose.

7. Conclusion

This paper examined Sartre's account of self-creation and asked whether, and in what sense, human beings make themselves. It began with the principle that existence precedes essence and traced its roots in Sartre's ontology of consciousness as a being that never coincides with itself. It then showed how freedom, understood primarily as the power to give meaning to one's situation rather than to control it, becomes the medium of self-creation through choices organised by projects. The analysis of facticity and transcendence revealed that this freedom is always exercised within conditions the individual did not choose, while the discussion of bad faith showed how readily people evade their freedom by treating themselves as fixed beings or by fleeing the weight of their own past.

The central argument of the paper has been that self-creation, for Sartre, is not unlimited self-invention. Interpreted in light of his critics and his later revisions, it is better understood as a continuous process of self-definition carried out through choice and action within concrete, historical and often unchosen circumstances. The self is neither a fixed essence waiting to be discovered nor a blank page on which anything may be written. It is an ongoing achievement, made out of materials inherited from one's body, one's past, one's society and one's history, and remade through the stand one takes towards them. This is why the formula Sartre arrived at in his later work, that what matters is what we make of what has been made of us, captures his position more faithfully than the claims of *Being and Nothingness*.

The work draws implications for understanding human freedom and responsibility. Freedom, on this account, is real but situated; it never operates from nowhere, and it is always shaped by conditions that can enlarge or constrict it. Responsibility follows from freedom, but it must be assessed with attention to those conditions rather than in abstraction from them. The concept of bad faith remains a powerful tool for self-examination, but it should be used to open possibilities rather than to assign blame. Finally, if the making of a

self depends in part on the world in which it takes place, then responsibility for self-creation is not only individual but also social: societies bear a share of responsibility for the range of selves their members are able to become. Understood in this way, Sartre's philosophy does not diminish human agency. It locates it where it actually lives, in the continuing and unfinished work of becoming someone amid circumstances one did not choose.

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