

What is Wrong with Conforming to Social Norms? A Sartrean perspective

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Abstract:

This paper examines Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialist critique of social conformity, Sartre's critique reveals the cost of societal conformity: it exchanges our most precious freedom and the possibility of authentic self-creation for fleeting comfort and a sense of belonging. This philosophical analysis invites us to examine moments of "self-deception" in our daily lives and encourages us to courageously exercise our freedom, shaping a unique life through sincere choices. The paper engages with recent scholarship, including Anderson's work on Sartre's two ethics and contemporary applications to digital identity performance. Through examination of Sartre's waiter example and the concept of "the look," the analysis reveals how social conformity operates through both external enforcement and internalized objectification. The paper addresses key objections, distinguishing between necessary social coordination and rigid conformity, while clarifying how Sartre's later ethics incorporates collective responsibility alongside individual authenticity. Ultimately, the paper argues that authentic existence requires critical reflection on inherited social patterns and the courage to resist norms that limit human flourishing, demonstrating increasing relevance for contemporary challenges including digital alienation and systemic inequality.

Keywords: authenticity; bad faith; social norms; radical freedom; existential ethics.

1. Introduction

Jean Paul Sartre's existentialist philosophy revolves around the fundamental principle that "existence precedes essence". This principle indicates that humans first exist without any predetermined nature or purpose, but instead have to create their essence through the decisions and actions that they make throughout

their lives. This foundational concept reframes how we understand human freedom and responsibility, positioning the individual as the only one responsible for creating their own meaning and identity.

Another central piece to Sartre's philosophy is the idea of radical freedom. Sartre famously wrote humans are "condemned to be free," meaning that we are forced into freedom, and cannot escape the

responsibility of choosing our path in life. This vast freedom comes with Sartre posits that individuals do not possess an inherent „script“ or fixed role; rather, we are akin to „creators“ cast into the world, compelled to define ourselves and inscribe the meaning of our lives through our choices and actions. This perspective starkly contrasts with many traditional notions that prescribe predetermined roles and objectives. This concept is particularly prevalent in contemporary life. For instance, fewer people now believe that a job should be pursued „from start to finish.“ A programmer may choose to transition mid-career into a psychological counselor, while an office worker might resign to establish a social enterprise. Such transformations exemplify their rejection of being defined by a singular identity and actively creating their own essence.

Similarly, in the construction of personal identity—especially in the era of social media—individuals shape and express “who they are” by selectively sharing content, focusing on specific issues, and joining various communities. This also elucidates why modern individuals frequently experience anxiety: each choice feels like casting a vote for self-definition, carrying significant responsibility.

Sartre employs the potent phrase „condemned to be free“ to describe humanity’s predicament. This implies that freedom is not merely an option but rather an inescapable fate. Even choosing “not to choose” or blindly following trends constitutes a choice itself, necessitating accountability for its consequences. Such fundamental recognition of freedom engenders profound “anxiety”—a disorienting sensation arising when we realize we possess irreplaceable agency over our choices while bearing full responsibility for all outcomes.

In modern society, this phenomenon of “freedom-induced vertigo” is ubiquitous. Consider facing thousands of film series on a major streaming platform yet feeling paralyzed by indecision; ultimately succumbing to fear of making the wrong choice leads one to abandon viewing altogether. The paralysis stemming from this “choice overload” epitomizes the micro-experience of anxiety Sartre describes.

A deeper illustration lies within the frequent existential dilemmas faced by contemporary individuals regarding life paths: Should one remain in their hometown pursuing stability or venture into bustling cities embracing uncertainty? Is it preferable to adhere strictly to societal timelines concerning marriage and parenthood or explore non-traditional lifestyles and relationship models? Each significant decision appears as if standing at a crossroads without absolute correct answers; such uncertainty compels individuals confront both the weightiness and solitude inherent in freedom.

Immense responsibilities, which creates what Sartre calls

“anguish”, the dizzying recognition of our absolute freedom when making decisions in our lives, aware that we have the responsibility for all actions, even self-destruction.

Sartre further distinguishes two modes of being: “being-for-itself” and “being-in-itself.” Consciousness, which is characterized as being-for-itself, possesses the traits of awareness, freedom, and the lack of a predetermined essence. The consciousness in “being-for-itself” brings “nothingness” into the world through its ability to question, deny, and imagine alternatives to what exists in the world. This nothingness represents not just the absence, but the human freedom that is made available to us through the genuine choices we make.

However, the freedom of life comes with the weight of absolute responsibility. The absolute responsibility, Sartre argues, drives individuals towards “bad faith”, a form of self-deception where people deny the freedom to avoid the anxiety of choice and absolute freedom. Bad faith manifests when people convince themselves that their actions and choices are out of their control, determined by external circumstances, social roles, or predetermined essence. Sartre famously presents this concept through his depiction of the waiter, where the waiter’s actions were exaggerated, his mannerisms identifying him as the role of a “waiter”. The idea that the waiter was first identified by his occupation, exemplifies the idea of bad faith. By being first a waiter, and placing his individualism second, he denies the fundamental freedom to conform to his professional role.

On the opposite end of bad faith, Sartre offers the idea of authenticity. For Sartre, to live authentically, one has to acknowledge their radical freedom, and accept the heavy responsibility of one’s choices. The authentic individual experiences what Sartre would refer to as “existential vertigo”, the stark realization that their life is completely in their own hands.

2. Recent Research

More recently, writings on the topic of Sartre’s existentialism expand towards more applicable fields, particularly on the implications of existentialist philosophy for modern social life and collective action. Such researchers include Thomas Anderson’s seminal work “Sartre’s Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity” helped reveal the evolution of Sartre’s philosophy from a starting focus on individual authenticity to a more complex understanding of collective responsibility. Anderson does this through identifying two distinct periods in Sartre’s work. The first period places an emphasis on individual authenticity and bad faith, while the second helps to develop a dialectical

ethics based on collective action [1].

Another Researcher, Hazel Barnes who is Sartre's leading English translator, helped to coin the term "humanistic Existentialism". This term helps to distinguish Sartre's philosophy from more pessimistic interpretations. Through her work, Barnes was able to emphasize more of the social dimension of authenticity, arguing against interpretations that showcase Sartre's work as inherently anti-social and individualistic. Her work helped improve understanding of how authenticity can coexist with human relationships and social networks.

Newer developments on the topic from recent years bring Sartre's ideas to more contemporary issues. Some of these studies include "Freedom and Responsibility in the Digital Age" which help to reinterpret Sartre's core concepts for understanding digital alienation and identity fragmentation in the context of a post pandemic society [2]. Another piece of research named "Authenticity and Social Media" examines the performative online identities and how they represent new forms of bad faith, where individuals create false selves for public consumption [3].

Another form of prominent interpretation are Materialist perspectives, particularly in "The Distinction between Law and Social Norm and the Deprivation of Freedom" [4]. This applies concepts of serial praxis and group praxis to criticize how social norms serve dominant class interest rather than human flourishing. The research helps to distinguish between laws that serve the community collective, and social norms that protect the freedom of dominant classes while constraining others.

Some real world phenomenological applications were done through scholars such as Lisa Guenther [5]. They applied Sartre's praxis theory in order to analyze situations such as the 2013 California prison hunger strikes, demonstrating how through individual actions, collective resistance can occur. Antony Aumann's work on the other hand helps articulate existentialist frameworks to understand social resistance [6].

In recent years, research on Sartre's existentialism has exhibited a clear shift: scholars are no longer content with repeatedly interpreting its philosophical core but are instead dedicated to applying existentialist theory to broader contemporary social contexts, particularly focusing on its implications for modern social life and collective action. This shift is marked by a transition in research focus from the ethics of individual authenticity to an exploration of collective responsibility and social practice. Understanding this evolutionary trajectory is crucial for analyzing the explanatory power and limitations of Sartre's thought within contemporary societal contexts.

Firstly, academia has laid a theoretical foundation for subsequent applied research through a reinterpretation of

the evolution of Sartre's own ideas. For instance, Thomas Anderson's groundbreaking study in "Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Wholeness" clearly reveals how Sartrean philosophy transitioned from an early emphasis on individual authenticity and "bad faith" toward later efforts aimed at constructing a dialectical ethics based on collective action. This division into "two periods" critically argues that Sartre's existentialism inherently contains profound concerns regarding social dimensions rather than being strictly individualistic.

Following this line of inquiry, researchers such as Hazel Barnes have further distinguished Sartrean philosophy from more pessimistic ontological interpretations by introducing the term "humanistic existentialism." Barnes emphasizes the social dimension inherent in authenticity, opposing simplistic reductions of Sartrean thought to anti-social extreme individualism; thus theoretically providing possibilities for coexistence between authenticity and interpersonal networks or social relationships. This foundational research offers direct theoretical support for this paper's argument that Sartre's notion of "free choice" does not lead to isolation but must be considered within the context of social relations.

Building upon this theoretical framework, recent studies have advanced further by applying key concepts from Sartre—such as "freedom," "responsibility," and "alienation"—to analyze new dilemmas arising in the digital age. For example, works like "Freedom and Responsibility in the Digital Age" reinterpret Sartrean concepts to understand increasingly prominent phenomena such as digital alienation and identity fragmentation in post-pandemic society. Meanwhile, "Authenticity and Social Media" delves into how online performative identities can manifest as a new form of "bad faith," where individuals create false selves for public consumption. These cutting-edge discussions provide timely analytical frameworks and vivid case references for examining contemporary youth's identity crises within virtual worlds along with their resultant anxieties.

Moreover, another significant avenue of research manifests itself through materialist perspectives focused on social critique and practical applications within specific social movements. The former is evident in studies like "The Distinction Between Law and Social Norms: Deprivation of Freedom," which utilize Sartre's theories on series practices and group practices to critique how societal norms serve particular class interests rather than universal human flourishing while distinguishing between laws serving communal collectives versus those maintaining ruling-class freedoms at others' expense. The latter is represented by scholars such as Lisa Guenther who directly apply Sartrean notions of practice to analyze concrete so-

cietal phenomena—for instance, California prison hunger strikes in 2013—which vividly illustrate how individual actions can coalesce into mechanisms for collective resistance. Antony Aumann’s work aims at elucidating an existentialist framework for understanding movements resisting systemic oppression.

These studies emphasizing socio-political power structures alongside real-world struggles provide robust theoretical support along with rich analytical tools necessary for exploring how individuals confront unjust societal structures through choices made during interventions aimed at reclaiming freedom and dignity.

In summary, recent academic inquiries not only deepen our understanding of the dynamic development inherent within Sartrean ethics but also transform it into a powerful analytical tool capable of diagnosing core contemporary issues such as digital alienation, online identity recognition challenges, oppressive normative frameworks, alongside logics governing collective action dynamics.

This trend clearly indicates that Sartrean existentialism retains formidable vitality when responding to modern society’s complexities—a central direction that this paper aims both to inherit and develop: fostering deep dialogues between philosophical theory and real-world dilemmas.

3. The Inherent Contradiction of Social Conformity

From the perspective of Sartrean existentialism, the core critique of social norms does not lie in the content of the norms themselves, but rather in the relationship between individuals and those norms. The essence of „self-deception“ is not merely „adhering to a certain norm,“ but rather „abandoning the fundamental premise of free choice.“ A conscious process of selection may manifest in various forms:

Conscious Compliance: After reflection, an individual may actively choose to comply with certain norms (for instance, accepting team processes for enhanced cooperation or adhering to etiquette out of respect for others). In this case, compliance results from a free choice rather than being its antithesis.

Conscious Divergence or Resistance: An individual may also choose to deviate from or challenge specific norms after careful consideration (for example, pursuing non-traditional lifestyles or refusing to conform on principled issues). This directly embodies the authenticity advocated by existentialism.

Thus, the profundity of Sartrean existentialism lies in its provision of a metric for assessing an individual’s state of existence rather than offering a simplistic checklist for

evaluating normative goodness or badness. It prompts us to examine: To what extent are we using social norms as excuses to evade freedom and responsibility? Can we courageously acknowledge that even while living amidst numerous regulations, it is ultimately our own choices that imbue these norms with meaning in our personal lives?

Social conformity constitutes a systematic denial of human freedom, transforming free beings into objects that merely follow predetermined scripts [7]. When individuals conform to social expectations without critical examination, they engage in the most pervasive form of bad faith—convincing themselves that they “have no choice” but to follow established behavioral patterns.

Social norms function as instruments of bad faith by providing ready-made identities that individuals adopt to avoid the anxiety of authentic self-creation. Similar to Sartre’s waiter description, who exaggerates movements, and fits so well in his professional role to convince himself that his essence is determined by his role. His conformity reflects how conforming individuals over-identify with social expectations to escape the burden of freedom ([7], 59-60). They transform themselves from being-for-itself into being-in-itself, adopting the mode of objects rather than subjects.

The issue with normalization functions through what Sartre calls “the look” of others. According to Sartre, Social conformity is enforced not just through the external punishment of the society, but through the internalized shame that occurs when individuals are judged as objects in the eyes of others ([7], pp. 252-302). The objectification and internalized shame encourages the conformist behavior we see in society today, where individuals attempt to control how they appear in the eyes of others, instead of living authentically to themselves.

Digital Life’s Phenomenon of „Bad Faith“

Social norms in the digital environment often serve as tools for „bad faith,“ providing individuals with ready-made identity templates that allow them to escape the anxiety associated with authentic self-creation.

Persona Performance on Social Media: Many users meticulously craft and overly identify with an “idealized self” or an image that meets specific community expectations (such as “foodie,” “travel enthusiast,” or “disciplined individual”), akin to Sartre’s depiction of a “waiter.” This excessive investment in digital identity is fundamentally a means to evade confronting existential anxieties about “who am I really?” Individuals reduce themselves from being a multifaceted, potential-laden „being-for-itself“ to a fixed, object-like „being-in-itself.“

Algorithmic Conformity of Opinions: In terms of information acquisition, people tend to excessively rely on and even internalize the values and worldviews implied by algorithmic recom-

recommendations (such as news feeds or short video content), unconsciously accepting the constructed „information cocoon“ as given, thereby avoiding the cognitive burden associated with active exploration and critical thinking.

Mechanisms of Digital Conformity

The operational mechanisms of digital conformity profoundly reflect Sartre’s concept of the disciplinary power of the „gaze of others.“ In digital spaces, this gaze operates in more subtle and pervasive ways.

Quantified Social Validation: Metrics such as “likes,” “shares,” “comments,” and follower counts become tangible embodiments of the „gaze of others,“ continuously judging individuals. People subconsciously adjust their behaviors based on feedback from these metrics (for instance, receiving positive reinforcement for posting certain content that garners high likes or facing negative comments after expressing dissenting opinions) in an attempt to manage their image in others’ eyes rather than genuinely expressing themselves.

Data-driven Self-Monitoring: Platforms and algorithms collect user data that can accurately depict and predict user preferences. This form of „digital gaze“ not only emanates from others but is also internalized by individuals into a mechanism for self-censorship. For example, before sharing opinions, one might preemptively consider whether it is appropriate to post something or worry about losing followers; this anticipation and avoidance related to feelings of shame further encourage conformist behavior. In light of peer pressure and temptations toward conformity brought about by digital environments, several strategies may be employed:

Regularly Engage in Digital Detox: Set aside time each week to actively distance yourself from your phone and social media platforms. This practice creates space free from continuous disturbances caused by the gaze of others while allowing you reconnect with your genuine inner feelings and needs.

Consciously Read Outside Your Echo Chamber: Actively seek out several quality sources that present viewpoints different from your own or regularly search for topics unrelated to algorithmically recommended themes. This approach helps break down information cocoons and filter bubbles while fostering more comprehensive independent judgments about the world.

Value Offline Experiences: Engage deeply in offline activities capable of inducing flow experiences (such as sports, crafts, or face-to-face conversations). These activities emphasize authentic sensory experiences along with direct interactions which help affirm those life experiences that cannot be fully quantified.“

This revised text maintains fidelity to its original meaning while enhancing clarity suitable for academic writing

standards.

However, the authentic individual must be willing to question and reject social expectations that don’t line up with their chosen values. One important note is that the act does not involve rejecting all social participation, but instead refusing to collapse one’s entire existence into predefined social roles [8].

Later works by Sartre discuss how individual authenticity cannot be separated from collective concerns. Social norms often serve the interest of small dominant groups rather than prioritising the human flourishing for all. When social conformity perpetuates inequality limits the potential of individuals, living authentically may require the collective resistance. ([1], pp.95-120).

4. Possible Objections and Responses

Some arguments against the issues of conformity include the idea that social norms are necessary structure for human society, without which chaos would ensue. However, this objection combines the idea of social coordination with rigid conformity. Sartre’s critique primarily targets unreflective acceptance of social roles, not all forms of social participation. Authentic individuals are still able to engage in social coordination while maintaining their authenticity and freedom to question the social arrangements ([7], pp.73-84). The issue of conformity is the uncritical acceptance of inherited social patterns that may no longer serve human flourishing.

Another objection will argue that complete freedom through individualism leads to social chaos, and weakens the bonds within the communities. This objection however misunderstands Sartre’s later ethics which highlights the importance of collective responsibility alongside individual authenticity. Authentic choice also requires consideration on its impacts on other people’s freedom. When properly understood, rebelling against conformity actually enhances rather than destroys social cohesion by creating space for more genuine human relationships which are actually based on chosen cooperation ([1], pp.140-165).

Some would argue that people aren’t able to handle the psychological burden of absolute freedom, and would need societal roles to give them a form of security.

Facing the viewpoint that „the psychological burden brought by absolute freedom is difficult to bear, necessitating social roles for a sense of security,“ several practical and actionable methods can be proposed to assist individuals in enjoying their freedom while simultaneously constructing an inner sense of security. This, in turn, enables them to navigate freedom with greater ease. The following are some feasible strategies:

Constructing a Personal Support Network

In both professional and personal social circles, consciously establish a trust-based and open small group consisting of 3-5 like-minded partners. Within this safe environment, members can regularly exchange feelings, share confusions, and seek emotional support as well as practical experiences. Such deep connections within a limited scope can effectively alleviate the isolation and anxiety stemming from absolute freedom while providing a sense of stability.

Practicing Micro-Freedom Experiments

There is no need to make significant life changes all at once, as this may lead to decision-making pressure. Instead, one could allocate short periods—daily or weekly—of completely self-directed „free time“ (e.g., 15-30 minutes). During this time frame, engage in non-instrumental activities such as cloud watching, casual writing or drawing, or simply allowing oneself to daydream—essentially “intentionally wasting time.” This practice aids in learning how to coexist with oneself without external directives while gradually adapting to the sensation of freedom and exploring genuine interests.

Implementing Personal Rituals and Visualizing Progress

To counteract the potential disorder associated with absolute freedom, it is beneficial to create simple rituals or rules for oneself actively. For instance, joining online virtual study rooms or employing techniques such as the Pomodoro Technique can provide external structure for work or study sessions; alternatively, using tools like LEGO blocks or progress charts can help visualize abstract goal advancements. These „scaffolds“ offer necessary boundaries and references for one’s freedoms while reducing anxiety arising from uncertainty; thus enabling individuals to maintain autonomy alongside a sense of control over their circumstances.

This objection however, treats bad faith as a natural human incapacity rather than something that is learned. Sartre’s analysis shows that the inability for an individual to handle immense freedom is a result of social conditions that discourage authentic existence. These conditions therefore can be able to be changed through education and consciousness-raising ([2], pp.78-92).

Finally, critics contend that some social norms reflect genuine human values, and therefore deserve the respect and preservation. This objection however fails to distinguish between the origin and authenticity of such values [9] [10]. The values that emerge from the authentic collection are different from those of unreflective traditions. The same values such as honesty or compassion can be authentic or inauthentic based on its results from genuine choice or conformity. Critical reflection can transform inherited norms into authentically chosen principles.

5. Conclusion

The paper reaffirms Sartre’s viewpoint that conforming to social norms without proper reflection is a representation of denial of human freedom and dignity, an act of bad faith. This denial is an act of bad faith because it reduces free beings to objects, denying the potential of their authentic existence ([7], pp.47-70). Social conformity is particularly an issue when it limits human flourishing, and reduces genuine collective wellbeing.

To help reduce the problem, both individuals and the collective society need to change. Individuals must develop the ability to question social expectations, and stick to their own values that they create.

Within the framework of Sartrean existentialist philosophy, uncritically adhering to social norms is regarded as a denial of individual freedom and dignity, constituting an act of ‚self-deception.‘ This self-deception reduces free individuals to mere objects, negating their potential for self-creation through authentic choices. Consequently, it may hinder human flourishing and undermine genuine collective well-being. To address this issue, transformative efforts must be pursued collaboratively at both individual and societal levels.

Individual-Level Practical Pathways To overcome ‚self-deception‘ and move towards a ‚real‘ existence, individuals need to engage in conscious self-examination and courageous practice.

Cultivating Daily Reflection Habits: Regularly engaging in self-reflection—such as maintaining a journal to document decisions made during daily work, consumption, or social interactions—can prompt critical inquiry into whether these choices stem from genuine beliefs or are primarily influenced by social pressure or fear of deviating from norms. This ongoing reflection aids in identifying internalized societal expectations while distinguishing between what one truly desires versus what society dictates one should desire.

Conducting ‚Micro-Experiments‘ in Safe Environments: Individuals can begin by challenging non-mandatory informal norms within relatively safe domains. For instance, when selecting career paths or leisure activities, prioritizing personal interests and values over blindly following so-called ‚trendy‘ or ‚standard‘ routes can foster autonomy. Through these small-scale practices, individuals can gradually build courage and experience the sense of control that comes with making independent choices.

Proactively Building Supportive Networks: Actively seeking connections with others who value critical thinking and authenticity is essential. Engaging in groups focused on philosophical dialogue, personal growth, or specific social issues—whether online or offline—allows for ex-

changes with like-minded individuals that provide emotional support and diverse perspectives. Such interactions effectively alleviate feelings of isolation stemming from being 'different,' thereby bolstering one's commitment to authenticity.

Societal-Level Supportive Transformations As systems for producing and maintaining norms, both the structure and culture of society require transformation to accommodate rather than suppress individual authenticity and diversity.

Educational Reform: Integrating Critical Thinking into Core Competencies Educational institutions should transcend mere knowledge transmission by incorporating critical thinking skills alongside philosophical enlightenment as fundamental components of basic education. By introducing resources such as existentialist philosophy into curricula, students are encouraged to scrutinize the assumptions underlying social norms rather than passively accept them; this includes discussions about the historical context of norms along with their potential impacts on individuals and communities.

Encouraging Diverse Narratives & Public Dialogue Media producers should strive to present varied lifestyles alongside multiple standards for success that enrich public imagination. Communities may establish spaces for public discourse—for example forums centered around themes like 'the meaning of work,' 'definitions of happiness,' or 'what constitutes a good life'—to ensure diverse voices are heard while loosening rigid societal scripts.

Institutional Design: Accommodating Flexibility & Individual Differences At organizational management levels as well as within policy frameworks there needs scrutiny regarding overly standardized systems emphasizing conformity; workplaces could explore more flexible arrangements concerning work schedules along with evaluation criteria that respect differences among individuals related to creativity pace-of-work preferences along life priorities thus avoiding forcing people into fixed role molds providing structural support for expressing individuality whilst showcasing authenticity Combining conscious self-empowerment at an individual level together with purposeful structural adjustments at a societal level will effectively combat 'self-deception' steering toward greater authenticity which respects human freedom dignity ultimately fostering conditions conducive towards human prosperity . Such transformations do not occur overnight but necessitate sustained effort shared commitments.“

While on the other hand society must evolve to support authentic choices made by individuals rather than conformist compliance. The end goal is not social anarchy, but an authentic relationship between the individual and society, where decisions are truly free ([1], pp.170-190).

In the contemporary context these ideas are increasingly important. The digital age worsens conformity pressures and consumerist culture through social media, where new forms of bad faith are created. Environmental social inequalities as well as political issues demand authentic responses from individuals. Authentic existence and conformist bad faith represents not merely personal preferences, it also represents the decisions that create a world we want to create.

Ultimately, Sartre's philosophy reminds us that what appears as "normal" social behavior may actually represent a profound betrayal of human potential. Each individual's commitment to authenticity contributes to collective human freedom, affirming the possibility of freedom for all ([8], pp.lxiii-lxvii). In choosing authenticity over conformity, we choose not only our own freedom but affirm the possibility of freedom for all.

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