

A SARTREAN ANALYSIS OF THE AFRICANS' DENIAL OF FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY IN POLITICS

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Abstract

Africans are experiencing a crisis of authentic freedom. The prolonged deprivation of freedom through enslavement, colonialism, and neo-colonialism has been sustained by the denial of both freedom and responsibility among political leaders and citizens alike. During the colonial era, which followed the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, Africans were deprived of their political, social, and economic freedom as foreign powers and multinational companies exploited the continent's human and natural resources. The decolonization movements sought to restore this lost freedom. However, despite achieving political independence, many African societies continue to experience the loss of authentic freedom. Internally, this is reflected in despotic and irresponsible political leadership that abuses human rights and undermines democratic principles. Externally, neo-colonial structures continue to limit Africa's political and economic freedom. From Jean-Paul Sartre's existential perspective, this persistent loss of freedom can be understood as a consequence of 'bad faith'—the denial of one's own freedom and responsibility. Sartre argues that authentic freedom is inseparable from being responsible, and that any genuine struggle to reclaim freedom requires individuals and leaders to acknowledge both their freedom and their responsibility for shaping their own destiny. Therefore, this study employs the critical hermeneutical method to examine how Sartre's notion of 'bad faith' can contribute to the struggle against the denial of freedom and responsibility in African politics.

Keywords: Bad Faith, Authentic Freedom, Responsibility, Politics, Africa

Introduction

Postcolonial African politics, shaped by enduring neo-colonial influences, reflects a decline of authentic freedom and has contributed to a profound crisis of political life. This situation creates an urgent need for a philosophical framework which can promote authentic freedom in African politics. Sartre's existential philosophy, particularly his notion of 'bad faith' offers such a framework. According to Sartre, authentic freedom is attained through the acceptance of both freedom and responsibility, whereas it is lost when individuals deny their own freedom and responsibility—a condition he calls bad faith. In this sense, 'bad faith' represents self-deception that allows individuals and societies to escape accountability.

The pursuit of authentic freedom in Africa continues to be restricted by authoritarian political leadership, neo-colonial domination, corruption and embezzlement, abuse of human rights and democratic principles, nepotism, tribalism, favouritism, electoral

manipulation, the suppression of opposition parties, the militarization of politics, unjust laws and constitutions, restrictions on freedom of speech and the press, the repression of human rights movements, and the decline of morality in politics. These challenges are sustained not only by institutional failures but also by the unwillingness of both leaders and citizens to assume responsibility for political transformation. Overcoming these restrictions requires a collective political commitment to freedom and responsibility. Africa's political challenges can be addressed by Africans themselves if they cultivate a political culture of assuming existential authentic freedom and responsibility. Conversely, these problems will persist as long as leaders and citizens remain in a state of *bad faith* by denying their own freedom and responsibility. For Sartre, freedom and responsibility are inseparable and constitute the very essence of human existence. Therefore, this study examines Sartre's notion of bad faith as a philosophical lens for understanding the

crisis of authentic freedom in African politics and demonstrating how the escape of accountability by both leaders and citizens perpetuates political stagnation. The study argues that reclaiming authentic freedom through the acceptance of freedom and responsibility can provide a transformative paradigm for governance in African politics.

1. Sartre an Notion of Bad Faith as the Denial of Freedom and Responsibility

Sartre understands *bad faith* as a form of self-deception rooted in the denial of one's own freedom and responsibility in what one goes through in his or her life. He develops this concept extensively in *Being and Nothingness*.¹ Unlike conventional lying, which involves deceiving others, bad faith is an internal act of self-deception in which individuals convince themselves that external forces dictate one's personal and social life. In doing so, they escape the burden of freedom and responsibility. For Sartre, human beings are fundamentally free and are not determined by any fixed essence or predetermined nature. Freedom and responsibility enable an individual to create his own essence—that is, to define his meaning and purpose in the world as a being-for-itself, rather than as a being-in-itself. However, this freedom carries choice anxiety—responsibility as it requires individuals to bear full responsibility for their choices. To avoid this existential discomfort, individuals often escape into bad faith by pretending that their actions are constrained by external factors such as social, political and economic systems. In this way, they shift responsibility away from themselves and attribute their existential situations to forces beyond them.

Ones' denial of freedom involves denial of his or her ability to choose and change. According to Sartre, bad faith partially aligns with determinism and essentialism doctrines that partly seem to enable individuals to escape freedom and responsibility.² From a deterministic perspective, individuals attribute their actions to biological, environmental, cultural forces, socio-political and economic systems thereby escaping

accountability for their existential situations. In this vein, people who accuse external influences or predetermined socio-political and economic systems are less likely to accept responsibility for their existential situations.

Bad faith also reflects an essentialist outlook, which disregards the interconnection between freedom and responsibility in human existence as it maintains that individuals possess fixed and unchangeable essences—a set of defining characteristics that limit them to transcend beyond what they are. Sartre challenges this view by arguing that human beings are not bound by a predetermined essence but are instead defined through their choices. Thus, Sartre's notion of bad faith invites critical reflection on whether such claims about determinism and essentialism are valid or whether they function as mechanisms for escaping freedom and responsibility. He argues that individuals often flee from the burden of freedom by pretending that they are constrained by fixed roles, identities, or social expectations.³

2. Bad Faith and the Quest for Authentic Freedom and Responsibility

For Sartre authentic freedom and authentic responsibility are inseparable. Authentic freedom leads to authentic responsibility and authentic responsibility leads to authentic freedom. Authentic freedom necessarily entails responsibility, just as authentic responsibility presupposes freedom. Emphasizing this Olafson observes that “freedom without responsibility sounds dangerous and responsibility without freedom is hard to imagine.”⁴ Sartre describes authentic freedom as the ability of individuals to rise above imposed identities and fully own their decisions knowing that one is not chained to any essence or role.⁵ There are always possibilities for choosing, even under restricted conditions. For Sartre, to be authentic one has to be able to live with the discomfort of freedom and accept that there are no excuses for his or her responsibility because of external or internal socio-

¹. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), 48. (Hereafter referred as: Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*.)

². Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (Philosophical Library, 1956), 86–90.

³. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48

⁴. Frederick A. Olafson, “Freedom and Responsibility,” in *A Companion to Phenomenology and Existentialism*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 263.

⁵. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48

political or economic powers telling one what to do. Sartre thus considers freedom not just as a privilege but also a basic aspect of human existential nature and for him living in bad faith is living by refusing one's freedom and escaping responsibility.⁶

Sartre reaches the point of claiming inseparability of man's freedom and responsibility after offering a distinctive understanding of human existence, freedom, and responsibility. On his view, unlike other beings, whose essence precedes their existence, human beings are characterized by the principle that existence precedes essence. While the essence of other beings is predetermined, the essence of man is not predetermined. Instead, man is responsible for creating his own essence. Consequently, freedom is indispensable because it enables individuals to define who they are through their choices and actions. For Sartre, freedom is not merely one human attribute among others; it is the very foundation of human essence. He argues: "it is freedom which is the foundation of all essences since man reveals intra-mundane essences by surpassing the world toward his own possibilities."⁷ Likewise, he maintains that "freedom is identical with ... existence"⁸ implying that to affirm existence precedes essence is also to affirm that freedom precedes essence. Sartre equates human existence with freedom, arguing:

Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom. What we call freedom is impossible to distinguish from the being of 'human reality.' Man does not exist first in order to be free subsequently; there is no difference between the being of man and his being-free.⁹

For Sartre both human freedom and responsibility are ontologically embedded in the very nature of being human because man is a being-for-itself, not a being-in-itself. Since the two are ontological Sartre argues that man cannot escape from

them except through suicide. For him Human beings are responsible not only for themselves but also, through their choices and actions, for others and the world.¹⁰ Sartre considers that being free is authentically being human. To this juncture, any trial to escape freedom and responsibility is an escape from being human. Apparently, any restriction or denial of freedom is consequently a denial of one's humanity.¹¹ In his *Being and Nothingness* Sartre says "we are a freedom which chooses, but we do not choose to be free. We are condemned to freedom, as we said earlier, thrown into freedom or, as Heidegger says, 'abandoned.' And we can see that this abandonment has no other origin than the very existence of freedom."¹² He further argues that refusing freedom is an attempt to live as *being-in-itself* rather than as *being-for-itself*. He states, "the refusal of freedom can be conceived only as an attempt to apprehend oneself as being-in-itself."¹³ Such a refusal constitutes bad faith because it represents an effort to escape the responsibility that necessarily accompanies freedom.

According to Sartre authentic freedom and responsibility is the courage to accept one's own freedom and responsibility. It is facing one's fear of choice and taking responsibility rather than hiding behind blaming others as an escape to one's own freedom and responsibility.¹⁴ Sartre views bad faith as a self-deception leading people to act as though they are not free to avoid the burden of freedom and responsibility such as by identifying oneself with a fixed role for example by excusing oneself that 'I am only a teacher' or 'I had no choice' blaming circumstances for one's own actions.

3. The Crisis of Authentic Freedom and Responsibility in African Politics

Postcolonial and neo-colonial African politics reveal a profound crisis of the decline of authentic freedom and responsibility. Although some African countries have made significant progress toward

¹⁰. Robert C. Solomon, *Existentialism*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University, 2005), 208.

¹¹. Stephen Merrill, *Jean-Paul Sartre's Concept of Freedom*. (Boston University, 1961), 90.

¹². Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 602.

¹³. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 553.

¹⁴. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48

⁶. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 48

⁷. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 552.

⁸. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 557.

⁹. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 99.

political freedom, democratic governance, and accountability, many others continue to experience a steady decline of political freedom. This decline is reflected in authoritarianism, corruption, embezzlement of public resources, unfair laws and constitutions, suppression of opposition parties, restrictions on freedom of expression, electoral manipulation, militarization of politics, media censorship, abuse of human rights, arbitrary arrests, abductions, and detention of democracy activists, as well as assassinations of political critics.¹⁵

The crisis is further manifested in widespread tribalism, nepotism, favouritism, the decline of morality in politics, civil wars, rising public debt, increasing numbers of refugees, and inadequate educational, health, transport, and economic infrastructure. These challenges demonstrate not only institutional weaknesses but also a deeper ethical and existential crisis regarding the exercise of political freedom and responsibility to both political leaders and citizens.¹⁶

The crisis cannot be attributed solely to political leaders. Citizens also bear responsibility for the quality of governance they voted for. In many instances, voters choose leaders based on ethnic identity, religion, regional affiliation, or social status rather than competence, integrity, and commitment to the common good. After elections, many citizens distance themselves from responsibility by blaming political leaders alone for governance failures, despite having contributed to the election of those leaders.¹⁷ Such attitudes reflect what existentialist philosophy describes as *bad faith*—the refusal to acknowledge one's own freedom and responsibility.

Recent evidence confirms the decline of political freedom across the continent. According to the Liberalist Center's *Freedom in Africa Report 2025*, the average political freedom score in Africa declined

from 51 percent in 2020 to 47 percent in 2025.¹⁸ This decline has been driven by military coups in countries such as Mali, Burkina Faso, and Chad, alongside increasing media censorship, suppression of opposition parties, and persecution of human rights and democracy activists.

Bad faith has therefore become a major obstacle to accountability and good governance in Africa. Political institutions and social structures are frequently blamed for poor governance, yet individual citizens often overlook their own responsibility in sustaining these systems. Similarly, many Africans explain the continent's poverty exclusively through colonialism and neo-colonialism. While the historical and continuing effects of external domination cannot be ignored, attributing Africa's present condition entirely to these factors represents another form of bad faith. Such a perspective neglects the responsibility of contemporary African societies to shape their own political, economic, and social future. Consequently, there is a growing need for a Sartre's philosophical framework capable of promoting authentic freedom and responsibility in African politics. His philosophy may encourage both leaders and citizens to acknowledge their freedom, accept responsibility for their political choices and actions, and work collectively toward accountable governance, justice, and sustainable development.

4. Reimagining Sartre in Resolving the Crisis of Authentic Freedom and Responsibility in African Politics

Africa is in crisis of bad faith. This crisis is reflected in the tendency of both political leaders and citizens to deny or escape their freedom and responsibility in addressing the continent's socio-political and economic challenges such as poor educational, health, transport, and economic infrastructures, as well as abuse of democracy and human rights.¹⁹ From a Sartrean perspective, these challenges are not merely structural or externally

¹⁵. Jean-François Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly*, 2nd ed. (Polity Press, 2009), 1–15;

¹⁶. Moeletsi Mbeki, *Architects of Poverty: Why African Capitalism Needs Changing* (Picador Africa, 2009), 3–9.

¹⁷. Claude Ake, *Democracy and Development in Africa* (The Brookings Institution, 1996), 132–134

¹⁸. Liberalist Center, *Freedom in Africa Report 2025* (Liberalist Center, 2025), <https://www.liberalistcentre.org>

¹⁹. MbayVunza, *Bad Faith and Underdevelopment in Africa: The Case of the Democratic Republic of Congo* (University of the Free State, 2021), 1–15.

imposed; they are also sustained by the refusal of individuals and societies to assume responsibility for their political choices and actions. Africa possesses the human and natural resources necessary for transformation, but meaningful progress depends on the willingness of both leaders and citizens to exercise their freedom authentically and accept responsibility for shaping the continent's future.

Several scholars argue that Sartre's existential philosophy, particularly his concept of bad faith, provides a valuable framework for rethinking African politics. Lamola, for example, maintains that Sartre's call to reject imposed essences resonates with the need to decolonize African political consciousness from neo-colonial dependency, resist authoritarianism, and strengthen participatory democracy.²⁰ Within Sartre's philosophy, authentic freedom is attained through the acceptance of freedom and responsibility, whereas bad faith emerges when individuals deny or escape these obligations. Consequently, attributing Africa's underdevelopment solely to colonialism, neo-colonialism, or foreign powers, or expecting external actors to solve African problems, represents a form of bad faith because it shifts responsibility away from Africans themselves.

Reimagining African politics through Sartre's philosophy therefore requires overcoming bad faith by cultivating a culture of accountability to both leaders and citizens. When individuals acknowledge that they are responsible for their political choices, governance can become more authentic, democratic, and responsive to the common good. Such a transformation would also encourage African societies to utilize their abundant human and natural resources for sustainable and self-directed development rather than relying excessively on external assistance.

Sartre's conception of freedom and responsibility also empowers citizens to become active participants in political life rather than passive observers. It encourages them to resist authoritarianism, abuse of human rights and democracy; to challenge political status quo, to

promote civic engagement, and strengthen democratic accountability. Moreover, it supports policies that prioritize the effective utilization of Africa's local resources to improve the well-being of its people.

Akinola argues that Sartre's emphasis on existential freedom enables African states to pursue qualitative human development beyond the limitations of economic determinism.²¹ Likewise, Felix et al. contend that Sartre's notion of bad faith offers a critical lens through which Africans can examine educational and political systems that suppress genuine freedom of choice and perpetuate social maladjustment.²² Their analysis suggests that many inherited institutional structures continue to discourage authentic responsibility, thereby reinforcing the very conditions that sustain political stagnation. Ultimately, Sartre's call for authentic freedom and responsibility offers an important philosophical foundation for reimagining African politics. By rejecting bad faith and embracing responsibility, African leaders and citizens can transcend inherited historical, political, social, cultural, and economic constraints. Such an existential approach promotes self-determined governance, democratic accountability, and political liberation while empowering individuals and communities to create a future consistent with their own values, aspirations, and collective vision.

Conclusion

This study has shown that Africa is in crisis of authentic freedom and responsibility rooted in the historical legacies of enslavement, colonialism, and neo-colonialism. Although decolonization restored political independence, authentic freedom continues to be undermined by irresponsible leadership, abuse of human rights and democracy, and persistent neo-colonial influences. This crisis calls for a philosophical response. Through a hermeneutic analysis of Sartre's

²⁰. Malesela John Lamola, "Jéan-Paul Sartre and the Agenda of an Africanist Philosophy of Liberation," in *Method, Substance, and the Future of African Philosophy*, ed. Edwin E. Etieyibo (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 313–333.

²¹. Festus Adegboyega Akinola, "An African Appraisal of Sartre's Existentialism and Its Implications for Human Existence in Africa," in *OCHENDO: An African Journal of Innovative Studies* 4, no. 1 (2023): 97-107.

²². OyenugaOlukayode Felix, SurakatAjibolaMoruph, Adeferasin Victor Olusegun, Oladele Idowu Daniel, and Godwin Okon Asuquo, "Sartre's Philosophy of Authenticity and Intellectual Development: Lesson for Africa," *Journal of Philosophy and Culture* 12, no. 1 (2025): 1–5.

concept of bad faith, the study argues that the crisis persists because many African leaders and citizens deny or escape their freedom and responsibility. It concludes that Sartrean notion of bad faith may awaken African leaders and citizens who renounce their own freedom and responsibility in politics to address socio-political and economic challenges that face their countries including poor educational, health, transport, and economic infrastructures, as well as abuse of democracy and human rights.

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