FACING OUR BAD FAITH

The Challenge of Personal and Spiritual Growth

Robert J. Wright, Ed.D.
Gordon Medlock, Ph.D.

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Overview

The search for meaning, wholeness, and satisfaction in our culture is intensifying. Many people feel a growing urgency for guidance in personal and spiritual development. Yet for most of us, neither traditional religion nor psychology provides a compelling life vision. Secular philosophies often fail to satisfy our need for purpose and values.

This paper explores a central issue that runs through psychology, spirituality, and philosophy: **bad faith**. We view bad faith as a common—often normal—feature of human development. It shows up in our inner division, our dissatisfaction, and our disconnection from others.

We proceed in five parts:

- **Part I** introduces bad faith through an example from our consulting work.
- **Part II** explores theological metaphors of bad faith, including the myth of original sin.
- **Part III** examines the philosophical "quest for certainty" as a form of bad faith.
- **Part IV** turns to existential philosophy, where bad faith becomes a central concern, including its forms of self-deception and the ideal of good faith.
- **Part V** presents our existential developmental model and the dynamics of bad faith as they appear in personal growth work.

Our aim throughout is practical and personal: to deepen inquiry into how bad faith operates in our lives—and what it requires to grow toward increasing **good faith** with ourselves, with others, and with the world we inhabit.

PART I

Introduction: Bad Faith in Everyday Life

The dictionary defines **bad faith** as “falseness, treachery, intent to deceive,” and contrasts it with **good faith** as “honesty of intention, sincerity” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1979).

Bad faith is fundamentally an issue of **intention**. It involves duplicity: appearing to intend one thing while—at least in part—intending something else. In psychological terms, we define bad faith as a **lack of congruence** between stated intention and actual behavior, often accompanied by a hidden agenda to deceive, diminish, or harm. Most often, bad faith is unconscious (or only barely preconscious). If it were fully conscious, it would usually collapse under self-scrutiny. That is why it is protected by defenses such as denial, rationalization, and minimization.

Bad faith is a failure of integrity. Something is held back. Behavior may look ethical on the surface; the letter of the law may be followed; yet something is missing. There is a lack of genuineness—almost as if the person is performing rather than fully acting. What remains hidden, even from the actor, is a trace of hostility that undercuts the apparent good intention.

Bad Faith Is Pervasive

Bad faith appears in ordinary life whenever people present themselves as charitable or cooperative while acting from self-serving or hostile motives. We see it in gossip, broken agreements, passive-aggressive resistance, and the quiet sabotage of good intentions. We see it when employees withhold effort. We see it when employers exploit. We see it in families, in institutions, and in friendships.

Bad faith often arises where there is **covert hostility**—where people do not express anger, dislike, or resentment directly. Frequently the person acting in bad faith experiences themselves as a victim and believes they lack power in the relationship. They resent those they experience as stronger, and then act out hostility indirectly.

Bad faith is not limited to the powerless. People in positions of authority can also act in bad faith when they “help” from a position of superiority. Under the mask of caring, they remain “one up,” keeping others dependent or diminished. This pattern can appear in the helping professions, where the act of “helping” may conceal motives such as the need to feel important, to avoid vulnerability, or to cover low self-esteem.

Encountering Bad Faith in Organizations

During consulting work with a Chicago-area educational organization, we encountered a crisis that illustrates how organizational bad faith develops.

The CEO brought us in to work with the executive team after a serious breakdown of trust. The team had been working with another consultant who—according to their report—colluded with the president and several senior staff against the senior vice president. The result was a painful internal rupture.

This organization had a strong purpose statement: it intended to be a vehicle for clients' and employees' growth and fulfillment. Two operating agreements were central:

1. **Stay clear and current with each other.**
   "Staying clear" meant not keeping things hidden and taking responsibility for one's feelings rather than stopping at blame. "Staying current" meant expressing judgments, concerns, and withheld reactions openly.
2. **Include each other in decisions that significantly affect the relationship.**

During the consulting process, the president and senior staff became increasingly critical of the senior vice president. She was powerful, direct, and strongly opinionated, and others felt intimidated by her. Instead of staying current with her, they spoke about her in meetings where she was absent—first due to illness, later due to emergency surgery.

In one such meeting, resentment surfaced openly—without her present. The consultant agreed with the group's judgments and reinforced their concern about her "negative impact." The meeting ended with an agreement: the concerns would be brought directly to the senior vice president at the next meeting.

Two weeks later, the team met again—still without the senior vice president. No one had communicated the issues to her. This was a clear violation of the team's agreements about inclusion and openness.

The group moved forward anyway, discussing "a more compassionate business environment" while implicitly casting the senior vice president as the obstacle to compassion. They claimed they would include her when she returned—but their actions already contradicted that stated intention. A hidden agenda was forming.

When she finally returned about a month later, she found the group operating with a new direction that had been developed without her. Neither the consultant nor the senior staff had expressed their judgments directly. She was shocked. What became visible was not simply disagreement—it was what she experienced as a **palace coup**, led by people she trusted.

After a period of uncertainty, she confronted the situation directly. She fired the consultant and demanded that the staff face their bad faith, specifically their refusal to honor agreements about inclusion and open expression. One staff member refused, insisting the real issue was her intimidation and claiming he was acting “for the good of the organization.” He was ultimately dismissed when the group could not reestablish its basic agreements.

In the aftermath, our work focused on repairing trust and clarifying responsibility on both sides. The senior vice president had feedback to consider about the impact of her style. The senior staff had feedback to face about their failure to take responsibility for their feelings and be direct.

This experience sharpened our awareness of how pervasive bad faith is—not only in organizations but also in families and intimate relationships. We also saw the value of explicit agreements in creating a context for good faith, and the necessity of learning to recognize bad faith as it occurs—then owning it and moving toward more honest relationship.

As our existential model of growth developed, bad faith emerged as a central issue. We turned to theological and philosophical traditions to deepen our understanding while staying anchored in lived experience. That interplay—between theory and practice—has helped us develop a model that clients find conceptually clear and practically useful.

We now turn to theological and philosophical interpretations of bad faith as it appears in spiritual and intellectual life. In the final section we return to psychological and developmental dynamics.

PART II

Theological Metaphors of Bad Faith

Bad faith has been recognized in every culture and era. Norse mythology expresses it in Loki, the trickster. Greek mythology is filled with deception among the gods. The myth of Oedipus symbolizes a son living out an unconscious betrayal.

Judaism and Christianity: The Fall From Grace

The Judeo-Christian myth of original sin is one of the clearest stories of bad faith. The serpent persuades Eve that disobedience will bring no harm and promises a new form of power: “your eyes shall be opened… knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:4–5).

Eve eats and draws Adam into the act. Their eyes are opened; they experience shame; and they cover themselves. God confronts them. Adam blames Eve. Eve blames the serpent. The pattern is familiar: blame, rationalization, minimization—classic marks of bad faith.

The story displays several themes: betrayal of covenant, distortion of truth, the desire to "be as gods," passive collusion, and hostility masked by avoidance. Shame emerges as a consequence of the breach, and shame becomes a barrier to trust.

A common structure appears across many religious traditions: an ideal state of union with the divine or ultimate ground of being, then alienation, then a path toward restoration (Smith, 1968). In Christian terms, alienation is defined as sin—often rooted in pride, hubris, and excessive self-will (Niebuhr, 1964).

Buddhism and Hinduism: Karma

Buddhism tends to frame the human problem less as sin and more as ignorance and error. Hindu traditions do not emphasize a "fall" in the same form, but do emphasize **karma**—the consequences of actions that are not in harmony with the deeper order. Karma carries forward, shaping conditions of life, until it is completed and no new karma is generated (Eliade, 1973).

Faith, Belief, and the Temptation of Certainty

These traditions lead directly to the question of **faith**. Faith is not the same as belief. Belief concerns what one takes to be real; faith concerns what one trusts and lives by. Faith implies choice and openness; belief often functions as certainty.

James Fowler contrasts belief (holding particular ideas) with faith as an orientation of the whole person—an active response to life grounded in what one holds to be ultimately significant (Fowler, 1981). Faith is not primarily knowledge; it is trust and relationship. It acknowledges not knowing.

From this perspective, original sin can be read as the temptation to replace faith with knowledge—to escape the anxiety of not knowing by claiming certainty. Seeking certainty can therefore be understood as a form of bad faith: an attempt to eliminate vulnerability and replace trust with control.

Many contemplative traditions share a distrust of purely conceptual knowing as the guide to spiritual development. The Zen koan disrupts the mind's demand for rational closure. Yogic practices quiet the mind so that something deeper can emerge (Sri Swami Rama, 1982).

Yet most people struggle to live in openness. We look for certainty in intellect, wealth, security, comfort, addiction, distraction—anything that keeps us from the vulnerability of faith. Or we adopt dogmatic religious or political certainty as "THE answer," closing ourselves to questioning. Either way, we substitute fixed certainty for living relationship, and we trade openness for control.

This raises the question: Is good faith simply surrender? Is there a place for intellect and reason in a life of faith? Are attempts to "know good and evil" always bad faith?

To explore this, we turn to Western rationalist philosophy.

PART III

Secular and Religious Philosophical Metaphors of Bad Faith

Bad faith is not limited to religion. It also appears in the secular quest for certainty—our desire to camouflage what we do not know.

Christian Theology and Fundamentalism

Christian theology can fall into bad faith when fundamentalism claims absolute access to "God's Word," eliminating interpretation, choice, and uncertainty. When certainty becomes total, openness disappears. The result is often exclusion and persecution of those who differ. Hostility is masked as righteousness; living relationship becomes formula.

Rationalist Philosophy: Certainty as a Substitute for Faith

Similar patterns appear in Western rationalism. From Plato through Descartes, Hegel, and Marx, philosophers have at times claimed knowledge of an absolute reality that supposedly determines how we ought to live. Plato's "Idea of the Good" becomes accessible to the philosopher, who then governs from a position of superior knowing. The promise is that reason can replace the anxiety of uncertainty.

Descartes begins with doubt, but he seeks an end to doubt—certainty. John Dewey argued that this "quest for certainty" reflects bad faith: an unwillingness to live with the basic perplexity of life and settle, at best, for relative goods (Dewey, 1960).

Hegel and Marx also offered large explanatory systems—claims that history follows an inherent logic that can be grasped and acted upon. The danger is that such systems can become substitutes for responsibility, dialogue, and the difficult work of choosing without guarantees.

At the same time, there is another strand of rationalism that supports good faith: Socrates. Socratic dialogue uses reason to expose false certainty and bring people to the knowledge of not knowing—an opening for genuine inquiry (Polansky, 1992). Gadamer describes authentic dialogue as a process that requires openness, humility, and the willingness to risk being wrong (Gadamer, 1993).

PART III (continued)

Secular and Religious Philosophical Metaphors of Bad Faith

Bad faith is not only a religious problem. It is also philosophical. The need to know can become an attempt to disguise what we do not know.

Rationalism: Certainty as a Substitute for Faith

Western rationalist philosophy often promises an escape from uncertainty. In Plato, the "Idea of the Good" is treated as something reason can grasp. Once grasped, it supposedly tells us how individuals and societies should live. In this view, there is a "right way," and philosophy can identify it. The temptation is obvious: reason becomes a replacement for faith and not-knowing. The good becomes something we "know," rather than something we must continually question, interpret, and embody.

Descartes begins with doubt, but he does not stay in doubt. He seeks a foundation that ends uncertainty. John Dewey argued that this **quest for certainty** is a form of bad faith—a refusal to live with the basic perplexity of existence (Dewey, 1960). We tolerate questioning only until we can establish a thesis; then we build as if we know. We trade the living freedom of inquiry for the comfort of closure.

Hegel and Marx offered large interpretive systems of history. In different ways, both argued that history has an inner logic that can be grasped. Once grasped, it clarifies what must be done. The danger is that the individual abdicates responsibility for dialogue, ambiguity, and choice. "Truth" becomes a system that relieves us from the anxiety of being human.

The Other Side of Reason: Socrates and Real Inquiry

There is, however, another strand of rationalism that supports good faith: Socrates. Socratic dialogue does not promise certainty; it exposes false certainty. It brings people to a clear recognition: *they do not know what they claim to know* (Polansky, 1992). That recognition is not defeat. It is the beginning of authentic inquiry.

Gadamer describes the structure of experience as the structure of a question. The openness essential to experience is the openness of "either this or that." Genuine

questioning leads to what he calls a "radical negativity"—the knowledge of not knowing—which paradoxically opens the door to deeper understanding (Gadamer, 1993).

Gadamer also distinguishes authentic dialogue from inauthentic dialogue. Inauthentic dialogue is argument disguised as inquiry: a person questions only to prove they are right. Authentic dialogue involves risk. It requires a willingness to be changed by what emerges.

In this sense, reason can serve good faith when it becomes a discipline of humility—an instrument that exposes self-deception rather than defending it.

Hegel: Recognition, Master–Slave, and Mutual Bad Faith

Hegel's master–slave dialectic offers one of the strongest metaphors for good and bad faith (Hegel, 1967). The master seeks recognition through domination. He appears independent, but his status depends on the slave's recognition and labor. The slave's recognition is empty because it is not freely given by an equal. The master lives in a lie: the illusion of independence.

The slave, in Hegel's story, becomes more human through facing fear and through labor. Over time, the slave gains a deeper consciousness than the master. Yet both are trapped until the relationship is transformed into **mutual recognition**—two free consciousnesses recognizing each other fully.

This dialectic is not only political. It describes internal struggle in the person and relational struggle between people. It suggests that bad faith is not rare. It is woven into the ordinary human struggle for recognition. Good faith is something we must fight for.

Hegel's problem was absolutizing his own historical moment—treating the state of his time as the culmination of Spirit. Marx's critique kept the dialectic alive by refusing to accept any final settlement.

Marx: Ideology as Social Bad Faith

Marx's good-faith contribution is radical critique. He exposed how "universal truths" often function as the disguised interests of power. Claims of neutrality are often masks. "Natural laws" of markets are frequently ideological tools that justify the status quo and obscure exploitation.

Marxism becomes a method for uncovering social bad faith: how knowledge serves hidden interests. It forces a sobering conclusion: in human affairs there is rarely purely disinterested knowledge. The best we can do is become clearer about what interests a theory serves.

Rorty: The Philosopher's Bad Faith

Richard Rorty argues that the philosopher's special bad faith is the attempt to offer a kind of knowledge that relieves moral responsibility (Rorty, 1979). The philosopher wants to give the moral agent a guarantee—an "objective" foundation that eliminates anxiety and choice. But the guarantee itself is the problem. It replaces honest inquiry with pseudo-certainty.

In the end, philosophy cannot save us from being human. We are responsible for our choices without ultimate justification. No system can remove the anxiety of freedom.

This returns us to the existentialists, for whom bad faith becomes a central theme.

PART IV

Existential Analysis of Bad Faith

Bad faith becomes explicit in the existential tradition—especially in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, and Sartre in the twentieth.

Kierkegaard: Bad Faith as Avoiding the Self

Kierkegaard criticized Hegel for omitting the individual's subjectivity. No system can remove the personal anxiety of having to choose what kind of self one will be. To believe a system can do that is a form of bad faith.

For Kierkegaard, the true self is grounded transparently in the power that created it—God (Kierkegaard, 1973). Faith is not knowledge. It is a relationship beyond proof. His "knight of faith" embodies the willingness to surrender what one most cherishes and still trust that what is ultimately right will be given back in the appropriate form. Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac becomes his central image of faith: not as certainty, but as radical trust (Kierkegaard, 1973).

Kierkegaard does not use the phrase "bad faith" the way Sartre does, but he describes forms of self-deception through the idea of despair. Despair shows up as:

- refusing to be a self (avoiding responsibility), or
- willing to be a self in the wrong way (grounding oneself in external principles rather than owning subjectivity).

Even for readers who reject Kierkegaard's theology, the psychological insight holds: we often try to escape responsibility—either by avoiding choice or by hiding behind some external authority.

Kierkegaard's path offers no easy comfort. It requires facing our deepest anxiety: letting go of control and living without guarantees.

Nietzsche: The Bad Faith of Life-Denial

Nietzsche offers a radically different diagnosis. For him, much of nineteenth-century Christian morality is itself bad faith—life-denying, hostile to vitality, and built on disguised resentment (Nietzsche, 1968).

Nietzsche argues that human beings express a will to power—a will to preserve and enhance life (Heidegger, 1977). When morality becomes hostile to life—despising the body, condemning pride, elevating weakness as virtue—it becomes nihilistic. The ideals look "good," but they are secretly hostile to life.

Nietzsche's version of good faith is not simple indulgence. It is honesty: refusing hypocrisy, refusing masked hostility, and refusing the lie that we can deny the "dark side" and remain whole. When people deny pride, desire, anger, or power, those energies reappear indirectly—often in moralistic cruelty. This is bad faith: covert aggression wearing the mask of virtue.

Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, despite their differences, share one goal: exposing hypocrisy and calling for a deeper honesty about what it means to live as a human being.

Sartre: Bad Faith as Denying Freedom

Sartre intensifies the existential position: we are free, and therefore responsible (Sartre, 1978). Bad faith is the attempt to deny that freedom—to pretend we are defined by roles, expectations, or external "facts" that relieve us from responsibility.

Sartre calls this attitude the **spirit of seriousness**: treating social roles as if they define who we are (Sartre, 1978). We become a job title, a family role, a label stamped by others. In his biography of Jean Genet, Sartre shows how Genet was defined as "a thief" in childhood and then lived out that identity as if it were destiny (Sartre, 1963).

Against seriousness, Sartre proposes the **spirit of playfulness**—the capacity to imagine, create, and act beyond what society prescribes. Playfulness is not childishness. It is the ability to live in the realm of the possible. It is a refusal to let the world's labels become your identity.

Sartre does not fully develop a mature theory of good faith, but his work implies it: the person who becomes the author of their life through creative action is moving beyond bad faith. Genet rewrites himself through writing—transforming the social definition into a self-created project (Medlock, 1986).

The existential theme is consistent: to live in good faith is to accept the anxiety of freedom and respond with authorship rather than avoidance.

PART V

Our Existential Developmental Model for Working With Bad Faith

Our work with clients is guided by an existential developmental model. We begin with a basic assumption: each person is engaged in a **life project of self-creation**. Our work is to help people see where they are in that project, where they are blocked, where they want to go, and what must be done—or undone—to move forward.

We use existential theory as a way of describing development as **transformations of consciousness**. Hegel's phenomenology and Kierkegaard's stages suggest parallel ideas: growth is not only skill acquisition. It is the reorganization of identity, responsibility, and meaning.

Our model arose from clinical work rather than directly from Hegel or Kierkegaard, but important parallels exist. We describe development as a progression through levels of consciousness—from bodily survival and trust, through selfhood and belonging, into purpose, responsibility, authority, and ultimately spiritual integration.

Good Faith as Ongoing Practice

Psychologically, good faith is not a permanent state. It is a practice: an openness to growth, a willingness to confront self-limiting beliefs, and a repeated choice to tell the truth about where we are. Good faith means facing what we deny, taking responsibility, and moving forward.

The Progression of Levels

We describe development as moving through predictable arenas of struggle:

Level I: Bodily existence (scarcity and trust).
The basic question is survival: safety, stability, and trust.

Level II: Self-existence (hunger and affirmation).
We need nurture, emotional recognition, and affirmation. We begin forming a self-image.

Level III: Family existence (reactivity and assertion).
We develop will by resisting. "No" comes first. Healthy "yes" follows. When will is shamed or crushed, reactivity becomes chronic.

Level IV: Group existence (belonging and truth).
We struggle to belong without losing ourselves. The key skill is expressing truth and difference while staying connected.

Level V: Purpose and commitment.
We form goals and commitments. Bad faith often appears as rigid striving, denial of ambivalence, or pursuing goals to fill unmet hunger.

Level VI: Responsibility and authority.
We begin leading. The key capacity is owning the gap between ideals and behavior—without denial, blame, or superiority.

Level VII: Spiritual integration.
Ideally, life becomes aligned with love, forgiveness, acceptance, and truth. Bad faith decreases as the person integrates earlier unmet needs rather than bypassing them.

How Bad Faith Operates Developmentally

Bad faith is not mainly the fact that we regress. Everyone regresses. The problem is **fixation**—becoming organized around denial and deception.

Bad faith typically involves:

- denying a real need (scarcity, hunger, fear, anger, desire), and
- presenting ourselves as being where we are not.

When we deny fear, it often converts into hostility. When we deny hunger, it becomes contempt or blame. When we deny reactivity, it becomes passive aggression and sabotage.

The False Self and Shame

Many of these patterns are rooted in early mirroring. Certain qualities were affirmed; others were ignored or punished. The result is shame and a “false self” that magnifies what was approved and denies what was not. Anger, fear, dependency, vulnerability, grief—these often receive negative mirroring. The child learns to hide them and build a persona.

A common example: boys often learn to deny emotional need (“don’t be a sissy”) and build identity around toughness. When loneliness or dependency arises, it threatens the persona. The person repairs the image through contempt, attack, or moral superiority. That repair is bad faith: the denial of what is real in order to protect a fragile identity.

Examples From Practice

Men’s Work: Hostility Masked as “Just Joking”

In men's groups we sometimes see hostility hidden under humor. When confronted, the men may deny hostility and insist it is "all in fun." In deeper work, buried hurt may surface—often connected to early abuse or humiliation. The present hostility is frequently displaced: old pain expressed toward safer targets. Bad faith becomes a survival strategy—understandable, but costly.

When families deny abuse and pretend it did not happen, the entire system colludes in bad faith. That collusion tends to reproduce itself in later relationships.

Father–Son Work: Blame as Bad Faith

In father–son work, sons may bring resentments with the stated intention of "truth," yet without any willingness to move toward mutuality. Some sons refuse apology because the blame protects them from the harder task: becoming their own man. As long as the father remains the explanation for their suffering, they can avoid full authorship.

Here the Hegelian pattern reappears. The "slave" carries the next level of consciousness. Growth requires surrendering the identity of victim and taking responsibility for life.

Existential Principles of Transformation

We see growth propelled by several guiding principles:

Aliveness (Level I).
Denied feeling often produces emotional deadness. Hostility can become a substitute for aliveness. Growth begins when a person risks feeling again.

Play (Level II and beyond).
Play is not trivial. It is the capacity to interact in new ways that nourish development. Sartre's "playfulness" is a core engine of transformation.

Intention and will (Level III).
Will develops through "no." If "no" is crushed, "yes" becomes false. Healthy dedication requires real choice.

Truth (Level IV).
Truth is the practice of expressing what is real while staying connected. It is rare and difficult, but it is the gateway to integrity.

Commitment (Level V).
Commitment can be good faith—or it can be bad faith when it becomes rigid striving to escape pain, deny ambivalence, or fill hunger through achievement.

Responsibility (Level VI).
Responsibility means owning failure and gaps without blame. Leaders who cannot do this regress into superiority and dependency needs. Authority is responsibility embodied.

Integration (Level VII).
Spiritual consciousness does not come from bypassing earlier needs. It comes from completing and integrating them. One of the most common spiritual bad faith patterns is skipping the hard stages and building a premature spiritual persona.

Closing Humility

We see bad faith as operating throughout development. Each new level often exposes unfinished business from earlier levels. Without openness and truthfulness, we easily slip into denial, superiority, conformity, or striving.

A final irony: even writing about bad faith can become bad faith. The map can be used as "THE answer," a way to escape not-knowing. We have not found a perfect way out of that trap. Still, we believe it is worth attempting to name what we do, to laugh at ourselves where possible, and to keep moving—tentatively—toward faith.

With that spirit, and with humor about the absurdity of our condition, we accept that we fear not-knowing, that we act as if we know, and that we still must choose. If we can acknowledge that honestly, we may take at least a small step beyond our compulsion to certainty toward a deeper kind of faith.

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