Bad Faith and Marketing Ethics: Towards Existential Theory of Authentic Marketing Management

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ABSTRACT

We focus on lived experiences of marketing managers to develop the existential theory of marketing ethics. We argue that Sartre’s existentialism is particularly useful in providing a rich descriptive theory of what happens in managers’ consciousness at the time of decision-making. In contrast to the general theory of marketing ethics propounded by Hunt and Vitell, this research suggests that objective factors, values, and attitudes (facticities) do not influence action in the ways it has been proposed.

Keywords: marketing ethics, existentialism, phenomenology, bad faith, marketing management

Marketing ethics is a fundamental and essential part of marketing management theory and practice (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006; Smith & Quelch, 1993), although it is often treated as an after-strategising add-on test of conformity to rules. In general, marketing ethics is directly related to a relatively more general field of inquiry, business ethics and ethics (Smith, 2001). Following Hunt’s (1976) dichotomy, the field of marketing ethics is divided into two subfields: positive and normative. Positive marketing ethics is primarily descriptive, focuses on what is, and attempts to describe, explain, and possibly predict ethical marketing decision-making processes. Examples are research on conceptualising and testing the general theory of marketing ethics (Hunt & Vasquez-Parraga, 1993; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Hunt & Vitell, 2006; Mayo & Marks, 1990; Sparks & Hunt, 1998). Normative marketing ethics is prescriptive, focuses on what ought to be, and attempts to provide guidelines, rules, and norms of what courses of action are (or might be) considered to be acceptable at different situations (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). Research within both subfields is largely based on third-person descriptions and prescriptions about marketing ethics; no research known to the authors investigates the “lived” experiences of marketing managers in making ethical decisions.

In marketing, the existential-phenomenological approach in its general form that focuses on first-person, lived experiences has been applied in consumer research (Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1989;
Thompson, Locander, & Pollio, 1990). However, existentialism is a fragmented tradition with many related but opposing perspectives. In the business ethics literature, a stream of articles has been devoted to Sartre’s existential-phenomenological insights and their application to business ethics (Jackson, 2005; Liedtka, 2008; West, 2008), yet there seems to be no research in the marketing discipline that employs Sartrean existentialism to investigate marketing ethics. In general, the works in business ethics expose the relevance of Sartre’s writing in a normative ethics context, despite Sartre’s writings being mostly descriptive of first-person experiences (Detmer, 2008). This may be due to these works emphasising and interpreting Sartre’s notion of authenticity as a normative prerogative. There is no doubt that Sartre’s conviction – that people should fully embrace their human condition and be authentic – relates to virtue ethics and it is prescriptive (Heter, 2006; Jackson, 2005). However, this convection is the result of phenomenological analyses of lived experiences, the process which in itself is extensively descriptive.

The purpose of this research is to conceptualise the process of ethical decision making as experienced first-hand by marketing managers. In doing this, we would like to draw on Sartre’s existential philosophy to investigate lived experience of ethical marketing practice.

SARTRE’S EXISTENTIALISM

Sartre (1992) contended the commonly held notion of human character or nature being a defining cause for an action or choice. As Sartre convincingly argued from an existential perspective, one does not have to deal with, for example, character traits such as virtues and psychological dispositions. Rather, one needs to understand human condition that is played out at each instance of making choice or taking action. Hence, according to Sartre, the fundamental human condition is freedom: “Man is condemned to be free” (Sartre, 2007). The freedom that Sartre talks about is not “freedom” in a practical sense as being free of oppression or coercion; rather it is an ontological freedom, i.e. freedom of consciousness. People are free not only to decide how to react to surrounding events and factors but also to make meaning of their given bodily functions, character traits, and psychological nature. Sartre (2007) says that man is
“...condemned, because he did not create himself, yet is nevertheless at liberty, and from the moment that he is thrown into this world he is responsible for everything” (p. 353). However, freedom of consciousness is not absolute. Man is not free to be free; he/she is “thrown” to a situation and must start somewhere (Sartre, 1992). Consequently, the human condition inherently includes the necessity to exercise freedom while facing a particular set of unique circumstances.

BAD FAITH

Sartre (1992) argues that the human condition is fundamentally ambiguous due to two important experiential elements: facticity and transcendence. Facticity, in simple words, is the collection of brute facts about a person (Detmer, 2008). Some facts may relate to a person’s physical nature such as height, weight, colour of hair, etc. Some facts relate to his/her life history – born at a particular geographic location, brought up at a particular city or town, or similar. The individual’s race, culture, occupation, gender, and interests can be taken as facticities too. Yet, consciousness has an ability to go beyond such facticities. This occurrence is labelled as transcendence. For instance, one can take his/her own height as an object of his/her deliberation. In this case, this person is his/her height from the facticity point of view, and is not his/her height from the transcendence point of view. In this vein, Sartre says “I am what I am not and am not what I am” (Sartre, 1992). In transcendence one divides him/herself into two: “that internal eye” that looks at a facticity; and the facticity that has nothing in common with “that internal eye”. To summarise, transcendence refers to the ways of experiencing and living facticities, interpreting them in one or other ways, or even forming projects in reference to them (Detmer, 2008).

Bad faith occurs when a person acknowledges only one side (either facticity or transcendence) of his/her condition and evades the other side. Sometimes continuous toggling between these two might happen. What is interesting is that a person would not experience contradiction or controversy in such situations. Hence, Sartre (1992) defines bad faith as self-deception (he also gives an extended rationale for this
argument). Bad faith might happen for example when a person plays up his/her facticity and denies transcendence. The famous example given by Sartre is of a waiter:

His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope-walker by putting it in a perpetually unstable, perpetually broken equilibrium which he perpetually reestablishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other, his gestures and even his voice seem to be mechanisms, he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things (p. 101-102).

The waiter is immersed in his facticity, i.e. being a waiter. As a free person, not strictly defined by the role, he has many options to exercise his freedom. Yet he restricts himself to the role and could even give a number of reasons why he should be (seen as) a waiter and waiter only. Sartre argues that transcendence means freedom but most people are frightened of freedom, especially, freedom that makes one make choices and feel responsible for them.

Not only facticity, but also transcendence can be emphasised. This happens when one examines his/her negative behaviour. For example, one might often treat his/her colleagues in a rude manner. But this person may not be willing to accept this facticity, but deny it via exercising transcendence: “this might have happened a couple of times but I was forced to behave in that way because of given circumstances; I am beyond this now; actually I can call myself a good person because I am contemplating about improving my character”.

The sense of time is created when facticities are consolidated as the past and the process of going beyond facticities creates the future (Sartre, 1992). The dynamics of the progress from past to the present can be imagined as a life story being played out in consciousness. Sartre (1992) explains that the awareness of the “story” is non-positional. It is like consciousness is observing facticity-transcendence dynamics as a third-person (the internal eye). The present - a choice or an act that the person focuses on - is positionally apprehended.
MARKETING ETHICS

The general theory of marketing ethics presupposes that ethical judgments are constructed to resolve ethical problems only when a marketing problem is perceived to involve an ethical content (Hunt & Vitell, 2006). It is suggested that the ethical content triggers an involved process of evaluation based on deontological (rules or duty-centred) and teleological (consequences centred) norms. In contrast, other researchers argue that every marketing practice, irrespective of its apparent or salient ethical implications, involves ethical dimensions (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006; Smith & Quelch, 1993; Varey, 2011).

Sartre’s existentialism quite elegantly resolves the debate. The first thing we must note is that judgment of whether to pursue a certain action or not is not treated as a one-off process (Sartre, 1992). Rather, the human condition (here the marketing manager’s condition) is dynamic; it is set within a set of limiting circumstances. Decision-making is a continuation of a particular way of being (existing). This situation is depicted in Figure 1. The figure shows that the individual positionally facing a particular choice or action is non-positionally aware of own facticities and transcendence.

Figure 1. Marketing Manager’s Existential Condition

In Figure 1, facticity represents the totality of objective facts that pertain to the decision-maker and other similar decision-makers. Facticity is comparable to the causal elements that feature in the general theory of marketing ethics such as the factors found in the cultural, professional, industry, organisational
environments and personal characteristics (e.g. values, beliefs, moral character) (Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Hunt & Vitell, 2006). Transcendence depicts the way the manager interprets facticity and develops a vision of the future involving the self, organisation, industry, and relevant stakeholders. Positionally, the manager focuses on the current situation where he contemplates whether to take or not to take action. For Sartre, this situation stands for the thrust of consciousness towards possibilities (Sartre, 1992). Sartre thoroughly argued against the notion that choices are made based on some kind of rational deliberation (Jackson, 2005; West, 2008). He thus rejects that action is driven by reasons, motives, or values: “...when I deliberate, the chips are down” (Sartre, 1992, p. 581). Instead, at the fundamental consciousness level, Sartre sees intentionality (he equates consciousness to intentionality) constructing possibilities by carving out negatites (nothingness) from the observed world. To act, the current situation should be seen as a negation or a lack.

In general, marketing practice, by analogy, can be seen as the set of acts that imply the managers’ state of mind. This state of mind, under the influence of neo-classical economics assumptions and orthodox marketing philosophy, structures the situation as lacking in the light of profit maximisation and constant growth (Kilbourne, et al., 2009; Kilbourne, McDonagh, & Prothero, 1997; Varey, 2010). We can thus define marketing action as taking on possibilities constructed by the managers’ consciousness that apprehends the situation as a lack of additional profit, sales, expected growth, or shareholder value. More of more is a good, in this mindset.

BAD FAITH OF MARKETING

Model of Existential Marketing Ethics

Figure 2 represents Sartre’s view of the conditions in which bad faith occurs. Based on the given matrix, we realise that marketing managers can perceive a decision-making situation in two basically different ways. First, in the condition of perceived amorality the manager emphasises facticities and denies transcendence. Here, it would seem that every action is taken to uphold the claim that the individual is
wearing “the hat of marketing manager”, hence, he/she is not more or less than this role. Second, in the condition of perceived immorality, the manager denies facticities and accepts transcendence. Some actions or commitment to certain courses of actions might be perceived as more or less immoral; however, such facticities are de-emphasised in the light of positive self-reflection.

**Figure 2. Bad Faith in Marketing**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACCEPT</th>
<th>Facticity</th>
<th>Transcendence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DENY</td>
<td>Facticity</td>
<td>Potential Authenticity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Transcendence</td>
<td>Perceived Amorality: I’m this role only</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Both denying and accepting either facticity or transcendence might potentially lead one to authentic existing, however, in his writing, Sartre did not deliberate much on how this becomes possible (Detmer, 2008; Heter, 2006).

**Ethical Neutrality or Amorality**

In dynamic settings, ethics requires reflection, assessment, and change, while bad faith functions as an impediment to change. In other words, bad faith in marketing can be understood as a phenomenological reason to why some patterns of marketing behaviour (both ethical and unethical) are dominant and recurring. As in Sartre’s example of a waiter, one would find marketing managers immersed in the pragmatics and expediencies of the role. The mainstream assumption is that, in general, marketing practices are free of ethics or morality (Crane & Desmond, 2002). The task of marketing is seen to be technical and amoral, that is, the translation of consumer needs and wants into products and services (Desmond & Crane, 2004) and the cultivation of consumers (Smart, 2010). Marketing practices are apprehended as micro-level actions directed at improving the effectiveness and efficiency of marketing
and business only (Laczniak & Murphy, 2006). Marketing managers play up this facticity. They would like to become marketing professionals only and evade the possibilities of transcendence. In Figure 2, this attitude is represented in the left bottom cell of the matrix (“just doing my job”).

Amorality does not mean the non-existence of morality or ethical judgment. The definition of the role comprises the assumption that it is morally right to be moral-free (i.e. have a “rational” attitude). This unavoidable necessity of morality is a meta-level fact. Bad faith arises when managers wholeheartedly embrace the facticity of requisite micro-managerial practices which, for instance, might include applying “ethical checks” as just one more of a set of requisite management tools such as profitability check, efficiency check, strategic check, and similar. Hence, overreaction to the role requirements leads managers to use ethics as an external criterion for gauging the feasibility of marketing practices. The question arises on whether the marketing manager proper in his/her professionally defined role can generate inherently ethical practice. Is the “extra growth/profits lacking” intentionality would make marketers to consider ethics as one of many similar factors that should unwillingly be taken care of in the process of conscious thrust towards seemingly better future?

Fromm (1955) explains that, in order to function as a part of a society, a person becomes adjusted to their social role at the price of giving up part of their own will, originality, and spontaneity. The idea of work and success as the main aims of life in Western society became powerful and appealing to modern man on the basis of his aloneness and doubt upon being freed from the domination and exploitation by the elite during medieval times. Has the person proper become an appendage to his/her socio-economic role?, asks Fromm (1947, p. 128). The biggest cost to the self of the advent of capitalistic social organisation is the loss of authentic relating through the adoption of a “marketing character” or self-promoting persona. This is not genuine in a social milieu in which everything, including the self, is for sale and rational calculation becomes pervasive in all spheres of life, with attendant depersonalisation of social relations, particularly in work. The resulting superficial attachment constitutes detachment in the sphere of deeper emotions. The ideas by which contemporary man explains his actions .. self-deception, sales talk ... are the kind of
insincerity which Riesman (1961) describes as the state of mind of a man who habitually believes his own propaganda.

Man has then become a commodity. He not only sells commodities, he sells himself and feels himself to be a commodity - he sells his ‘personality’ - it is the market which decides the value of human qualities. If a quality is not in demand it has no value. Thus the feeling of the ‘self’ is merely an indication of what others think of the person. Value is not constituted by human qualities or powers, but by success in selling them. Self-esteem depends on conditions (of the market) beyond our control. The pseudo self is an agent, according to Fromm (1942, p. 177) who represents the role a person is supposed to play, in their thinking, feeling and willing, but who does so under the name of the self. This notion is echoed in recent work on ‘emotional labour’ where social acting suppresses or fakes real emotions in order to create a synthetic display, for example of friendliness or compassion, resulting in depersonalisation of interactions (see Mann, 1997, for a comprehensive study of this emotional control in communication roles). We have no firm ego - “I am as you desire me”. We have become other-directed. We have ‘evolved’ a pseudo self - the feeling of “I Am Who I Am” has become replaced by the experience of the self as the sum total of expectations others have about me - of the person I think I am supposed to be. I sell myself and this has overridden, for most, the bond of social brotherhood. But this is not deviancy. Fromm calls it “pathology of normalcy”. The individual’s ideal of normalcy may contradict the aim of the full realisation of himself as a human being. Some scholars have argued that neutral marketing activities can still have spill-over effects. The macro-societal impact of marketing is mostly ignored by the majority of marketers. In essence, most professionals believe that considering societal issues does not come under the responsibilities of marketing managers.

**Unethical Behaviour**

Another possibility is when marketers are aware that they are involved in practices with potentially negative ethical consequences. What might happen is that marketing managers would evade such facticity
and emphasise transcendence. This is the upper right cell in the matrix (Figure 2). In this situation, another kind of bad faith, the denial of facticity, is practiced. Marketers may choose to continue with particular practices even though they might have reasonable doubts about the ethical viability. There are situations where the incidence of immorality can be clearly established, yet the marketing manager may refuse to consider such an action to be part of the role. No business would dare to see itself or allow itself to be seen as ‘knowingly’ a polluter, as ethically retarded, as dissolute, as a fraudster, or as the promoter of addictives. Even though similar unethical actions might be performed on a regular basis, these facticities are not embraced as in the case of perceived amorality. The marketing manager can always transcend the facticity and deny that such a role (e.g. chronic polluter, addicted con-man) could ever exist in society.

Managerial Implications

The essence of Sartrean existentialism is often reduced to its normative advice: be authentic and avoid bad faith. This side of the theory is mostly emphasised and prescribed in existing business research (Jackson, 2005; Liedtka, 2008; West, 2008). We suggest that it is the descriptive aspect of the theory that needs to be thoroughly understood and applied to marketing ethics. Although Sartre was not too specific on peculiarities of how one may attain authenticity, he was very specific in describing the process through which bad faith might arise. Hence managers should pay attention to the suggested ways of avoiding bad faith rather than embarking on a ambiguous quest of becoming authentic (some argue that these two practices are similar). The formula for accomplishing the former is very specific. To become more ethical, managers should reverse the dominant logic of self-definition. Instead of embracing the facticity of perceived amorality they should become open to the possibility of embracing perceived immorality. Similarly, instead of transcending perceived immorality they should consider transcending perceived amorality on a continuous basis. If one wishes to have a single concept to represent such an attitude then “humility” can possibly serve the purpose.
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