

# There is No Good Answer

## The Role of Responsibility in Sartre's Ethical Theory

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The initial impetus behind writing this article was to respond to a certain criticism of Sartre's so-called ethical subjectivism. T.Z. Lavine states this objection as follows:

A [...] criticism of Sartre's existentialist ethics is that since the only rule it provides me with is the rule to avoid self-deception, and to act authentically, then I have done all that is required of me so long as I follow this rule and avoid bad faith and acknowledge that I alone freely choose what I do and am responsible. But then anything that I freely choose to do meets the requirements of authenticity: one freely chosen act is as good as another, and there is no way of discriminating among my freely chosen acts.<sup>1</sup>

The problem I see with this objection is that it presents a long list of requirements for moral action, then suggests that the ease of meeting them renders Sartre's existentialist ethics unable to differentiate between good and bad actions. On the contrary, a careful reading of some central Sartrean texts reveals that if we were to examine what is called for by each of these stipulations (authenticity, avoiding bad faith, accepting responsibility) as Sartre describes them, we come to see that Sartre is setting an impossibly high bar for moral action. This does not mean that we cannot discriminate between good and bad acts. Indeed, we do this all the time. What this impossibly high bar for moral action does imply, however, is that the goodness or badness of any particular action can never be settled once and for all. Indeed, it seems to me that under a Sartrean framework, any moral judgment we make regarding our own action is never final, rather, the meaning of our past actions, and along with this, their moral value, always remains reinterpretable in light of what unfolds in the future.

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The purpose of this article is to sketch out what is involved in the experience of just one of these requirements, as Lavine lays them out, for judging an action good: taking responsibility. What I hope to show is that, although we subjectively encounter our responsibility as a “consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object” (*BN*, 707) by virtue of positing values in the world through our projects, our interactions with other people reveal that we have authored far more than we had initially supposed ourselves to be choosing when we began our project. This requires us to take responsibility anew. Through this discussion, we come to see, that it is in fact impossible to ever finish taking responsibility completely. There is thus, no single good answer in any dilemma. Rather, Sartrean responsibility calls for an ongoing process of interpretation of ourselves, our world, and our relation to the other people who populate it. Taking responsibility is thus an ongoing project that is never finished, and thus, no action can ever be said to be good once and for all.

This article falls into three parts. I will begin by examining sections from *Being and Nothingness* in order to demonstrate the way in which we encounter the world as a call for action. Responding to this call is itself a kind of taking responsibility for negative values of which we are the incontestable authors. I will then examine Sartre’s concept of the coefficient of adversity as it is discussed by David Detmer in *Freedom as A Value*. This discussion will be used to show how the world resists my taking responsibility for it by virtue of it containing the perspectives of others. I will then discuss Sartre’s description of going on a diet in his *War Diaries* as a way of demonstrating that we are responsible not just for what we explicitly choose, but also for values (of which we are unaware) implicitly placed in the world by our projects in such a way that they become objectively real in how they matter to other people. These objective values are then revealed to us by the perspectives that others take on us. Finally, I will close by suggesting that as a consequence of our being responsible for “the whole world and for [ourselves] as a way of being,”<sup>2</sup> we can never hope to take responsibility once and for all. Instead, responsibility takes on a dialectical structure between subjective values we explicitly choose and more objective values revealed to us in our interactions with others.

### Responsibility from a subjectivist standpoint

In understanding responsibility conceived of as incontestable authorship of a situation, it is perhaps best to begin with Sartre’s discussion

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of looking for his friend Pierre in a crowded café from *Being and Nothingness*. In this scenario, Sartre enters a café and encounters a setting in which the café's objective features are not what he notices. The café itself, with "its tables, its booths, its mirrors, its light, its smoky atmosphere and the sounds of voices, rattling saucers and footsteps which fill it" (BN, 43) serve only to denominate the absence of this friend for whom he is searching. All of the objective, positive features of the room are immediately encountered as "not Pierre" rather than as objects.

In analyzing this phenomenon, Sartre writes that "in perception there is always the construction of a figure on a ground. No one object, no group of objects is especially designed to be organized as specifically either ground or figure, all depends on the direction of my attention" (BN, 41). For Sartre, what is particularly telling about the experience of looking for a friend in a café is that the figure of experience which stands out against a ground as a result of his attention is precisely something which is not there. Sartre's attention in the café is directed by his project of finding Pierre, so the quality of the café that he is directed towards is precisely that it is a ground without a present figure. What grabs his attention – that is, *what he sees* — is precisely the lack of Pierre's face among the many people and objects present in the café. For this reason, Sartre does not really *see* any positive thing present in the café – he is focused on Pierre, who is not here. Thus what he *sees* is Pierre's absence.

Sartre contends that this negative value is a feature of the world that is entirely different from the sort we could manufacture through sheer abstract judgment. Attending to Pierre's absence is of a demonstrably different character than the sort of absence denominated by statements like "Wellington is not in this café, Paul Valéry is no longer here, *etc.*" (BN, 42). While it is true that neither of these men are in the café, in these cases there is merely a logical relation between Wellington or Valéry and the café. Their absence does not order Sartre's perception of the café in the way that Pierre's absence does. What this demonstrates is that consciousness of the world is already a kind of self-consciousness. The world I encounter already contains evidence of me insofar as it contains traces of my projects, encountered as values that are more immediate to my perception than the wholly positive, objective qualities of the situation.

With this in mind it becomes clearer what Sartre means when he says that we are always totally responsible for the world insofar as we always have a "consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object" (BN, 707). Our projects are what reveal the

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world to us as a site for potential action by appearing to us as containing negative values or lacks. Thus our perception of the world is also a perception of ourselves in and through a perception of our projects. Therefore the world, as it appears to me in a determinate way, is a product of my own free activity, with my various projects and the values connected to them at its center. In this sense I am the author of the world I encounter. It is *because of me* that Pierre is not in the café and that I encounter his absence as the most immediately salient feature of my situation. For this I am responsible.

‘It is important to note that such lacks do not simply appear as static features of the world the way an object might appear to a disinterested observer. Rather, they demand that we take action. Precisely through their character of showing us what is missing from the world, they suggest to us ways of realizing the projects which constitute them as values in the first place. In the case of looking for Pierre, we could say that the action demanded by the situation is something like the continued search for Pierre, a redirecting of our attention from place to place in the café until we find what we are looking for. In doing so, we take responsibility for the world by filling in the lack that we have placed there. It is as though we “put the world right.”

But since we are investigating a project already underway in this scenario, it seems difficult to say that a new sort of action is suggested to me by the world. Rather, it is more as though the world sustains and supports my project of which I am already in the midst. We could however, easily imagine a scenario in which something more obviously identifiable as a determinate action is suggested to us by the situation we encounter. Indeed, Sartre provides us with just such an example in his discussion of encountering a crag as either an obstacle or an aid in the completion of a project. According to Sartre’s analysis, when we encounter a crag, the sorts of actions available to us do not depend solely on the crag’s objective characteristics, but more fundamentally, upon the project we intend to carry out. As Sartre writes, “a particular crag, which manifests profound resistance if I wish to displace it, will be on the contrary a valuable aid if I want to climb upon it in order to look over the countryside” (BN, 620). Thus, encountering a crag as ‘to be climbed’ suggests to us a method for doing so. We notice features of it we might not if we wished to displace it, for instance, there, a place to put my hand; halfway up, a flat spot that could serve as a resting place. Thus, because I intend to climb the crag, features of it stand out as valuable in aiding the completion of this project. These features are encountered as possibilities for action to be carried out in the pursuit

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of a project of looking over the countryside. They are revealed to me as prominent in my situation by this very same project.

Similarly however, our project could reveal the crag to us as a limit to what we can do. I am not free to move the same crag that I am free to climb. I encounter it as too big or too heavy and immediately recognize that I do not have the strength, tools or manpower at my disposal to complete this project. I am equally responsible, however, for the appearance of both of these sets of features of the crag, because it is me and my projects which make them appear to me in the way that they do. It is only because I intend to *do something* that I encounter the crag as helpful or as an obstacle in this pursuit. I am thus still the incontestable author of this situation and subjectively experience myself as such in and through the way that the crag is revealed to me.

### **The Coefficient of Adversity and a Move Towards the Objective**

So far, we have recognized that we are responsible for the world as it appears to us subjectively. The world appears to us as thematized or weighted according to our projects. As the source of these projects, we are responsible for the way they order our perception. Thus we are the incontestable authors of the world we encounter. In order to take responsibility for the world then, one possibility would be to act in such a way that serves to bring our chosen projects to completion. We are responsible for the lacks that we encounter as demands for action in the world, so we take responsibility for them by acting to complete the world. But in completing any given project we choose for ourselves, we have not taken responsibility for the world completely. Once I reach the top of the crag, for example, I will encounter a new set of possibilities perceived as negative values or calls for action. In this way, the world does not allow me to take responsibility for it absolutely, that is, to put it right once and for all in a way of my choosing.

In *Freedom as a Value*, Detmer makes much of the crag example as a way to make a similar point. He argues that it demonstrates how our freedom is not all powerful in the subjectivist sense that Sartre sometimes seems to suggest. In encountering a crag, I am free to decide whether I wish to move it or climb it, but I am not free to determine how easy it will be for me to do so. This is what Sartre calls the coefficient of adversity of the crag, which shows us that

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while it is true that the crag cannot dictate to me what project to undertake with regard to it...what the crag can determine is whether it “will or will not lend itself to scaling. This is part of the brute being of the rock”<sup>3</sup>

So while I am free to take up any stance I wish towards the rock, that is, regard it as “to be climbed” or “to be moved,” I may still be met with resistance to this project to the point that I may not actually succeed in seeing it through to completion. Indeed, there are even some projects to which the coefficient of adversity of the rock is so great, that they may be impossible to get off the ground. The brute being of the rock poses such great resistance, for instance, to regarding it as “a poached egg which is singing an aria”<sup>4</sup> that such a project could never sensibly be undertaken. In this way, although I am free to consider the crag as significant in a variety of ways, there are some modes of significance that are completely closed off as options by the coefficient of adversity of the crag. Thus, I cannot take just any attitude that I wish towards it.

On Detmer’s reading, this is also true in ethical situations. Suppose you come across a cat being lit on fire by a group of children. Detmer contends that such a situation does not “present itself to us indifferently with respect to whether we consider it as exemplifying kindness or cruelty.”<sup>5</sup> Just as I cannot see the crag as a poached egg singing a song, I cannot see the torching of a cat as exemplifying kindness. Following through on this interpretation then, it seems that dilemmas like that described in *Existentialism is a Humanism*,<sup>6</sup> wherein a student must decide between fighting for the free French or staying home with his ailing mother, also admit of a coefficient of adversity. While the student may be free to choose either of the two options presented in the example, and in his choosing, constitute them as the right answer, he is not free to choose just anything and by so doing make it right. He could not choose, for instance, to join the Nazis or to murder his mother. If he did, it would be obvious that he was acting malevolently or sadistically. Evaluating these values as good seems to itself run into a coefficient of adversity. In Detmer’s words “such a claim would appear to involve the denial of some of the most fundamental givens of our experience.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, malevolent or sadistic actions do not lend themselves to positive interpretations in the same way that the crag does not lend itself to being regarded as a poached egg, or at least in the way that a very heavy crag might make the project of moving it next to impossible and so such a project would be quickly abandoned.

From this, Detmer concludes that a certain ethical subjectivism, wherein the very choosing of a course of action is what makes it

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right, cannot hold. There appear to be objective values that we encounter in the world in the same way that we encounter crags. I would like to suggest that understanding these objective values, as we encounter them in the world, is best done through an examination of being held responsible for our choices by other people. It is through our interactions with others that we are met with the consequences of our actions in such a way that values we did not choose - values which exist in the world - are brought to our attention. What we find is that although we did not choose these values, it is through our choices, and the actions they involve, that these values appear in our situation.

### **Responsibility From an Objective Standpoint**

Suppose one day, I notice that, due to neglect of eating well and a sedentary lifestyle, I'm getting flabby around my midsection. I immediately recognize that it is not the job I have or an innate predilection for fast food that has made me this way. Rather it is my own freely chosen project of becoming a better writer which has led me to spend hours at a time sitting at a desk, occasionally rewarding myself for a job well done, with French pastries and beer. My flabbiness reveals to me an unintended consequence of this project that is encountered as "weight to be lost." Recognizing that I am the one who is the incontestable author of my situation, insofar as my projects are what give rise to demands for actions in this way, I accept that this flabbiness is my fault. I also realize that I am actually committed to keeping up a trimmer figure. This project is what reveals the extra pounds around my waist as "weight to be lost." I thus make a pledge to put more effort into this project. I will take up my responsibility for the state of the world as I encounter it, both my unintended weight-gain and my desire to be rid of it, and lose the weight. "From here on in, there will be no more croissants and beer for me," I declare.

In December, 1939, Sartre made a similar pledge, swearing off wine and bread. He describes and analyzes this experience in his *War Diaries*, and in doing so, sheds light on how we are not only responsible for the way in which the world subjectively appears to us, but also the way that our projects and associated values are taken up and revealed to us by other people. This first becomes apparent to him when he visits a restaurant where he is a regular and his usual waitress brings him a flask of wine without him having ordered it:

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So there I was, with that full flask on the table and an empty glass next to my plate. But it's not ended, for if I leave the flask untouched, she'll express surprise at the end of the meal, she'll say 'Wasn't it good, then?, etc.' What am I to do? Drink up, thinking: 'I'll start my diet tomorrow, today it's impossible, nobody's obliged to do what's impossible?' Drink up, out of human respect? In short, I was almost resolved on doing so and was on the point of giving in. My decision concerned only those material objects in a dead world: 'Of my own accord, I shall never order a bottle of wine.' But I hadn't foreseen the case where somebody might bring me the bottle without my ordering it. Because I'd not envisaged that eventuality, I hadn't made any preparations for the case in which it might occur. I was in virgin territory, and my commitment was failing. I was even vaguely thinking how, with that draconian decision, I was giving myself enough personal bother without into the bargain running the risk of saddening a waitress's heart—that wasn't part of my contract.<sup>8</sup>

What is interesting about this situation is that Sartre initially took himself to be making a pledge that represented a completely legitimate and authentic way of taking up his responsibility for the situation in which he found himself. His flabbiness presented itself to him as weight to be lost, revealing his current mode of engaging the world to be insufficient and requiring determinate action in order to be put right. Not content to sit idly by and watch himself grow fatter, Sartre pledged to no longer eat bread or drink wine. From a purely subjective standpoint, Sartre recognizes himself as the incontestable author of his situation and made a responsible decision to take up this authorship in a way more in line with his values. What he had not counted on was that this would have ramifications beyond his own subjective experience of the situation.

In making a choice that he thought concerned only himself, his will power, his diet, and his midsection, Sartre was actually putting in motion a chain of events beyond his explicit control. Sartre is still the incontestable author of the decision, and thus still responsible for its consequences. He could not, however, have anticipated what would come of his decision. So, in attempting to take responsibility for his situation from a subjective standpoint, we see that it was impossible for him to do so in full. His action extends beyond him. It has effects over which he does not possess the same degree of control. So while he is completely responsible for the situation he later finds himself in, at the moment of choosing, there was no way he could possibly have taken responsibility for himself in full. He had no way of knowing the meaning of his actions for which he was responsible in advance.

In order for this to be revealed, Sartre required the perspective of another person — in this case, his waitress. She serves to bring to



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Sartre's attention a new side of himself for which he must now take responsibility. He comes to see that he is committed to a certain level of politeness and for this reason he reaches a compromise with himself. He decides he will simply take a few sips of wine so as not to offend the waitress, but still (more or less) sticking to his earlier commitment. In doing so however, he still finds that he has failed to fully live up to his absolute responsibility. The situation resulting from the compromise reveals a new fold in his existence that he could not have known about in advance. He finds that he enjoys the few sips of wine he takes a little too much for this act to be solely about being polite:

I concentrated my attention on the wine's bouquet, on the fresh taste of that gulp of liquid—a furtive, sly pleasure reminiscent of a doctor who “takes advantage” of auscultating a beautiful patient to transmit all his sensuality to his fingertips, and who enjoys her via his fingers without halting his professional explorations (WD, 127).

Sartre has thus, once more learned something new about himself that he could not have anticipated. Namely that, for him, “there is no act without secret weakness” (WD, 127). In a world that was solely determined by his freely chosen projects, Sartre could not have determined this. What was required was that the consequences of his actions and commitments escape beyond what is subjectively determined. His actions affect the world in a concrete way, which he is later forced to confront. Thus he is responsible for the entire world that he encounters, not simply in the way that he can examine his experience and determine which of his commitments have lent it the determinate shape it has taken on. Rather he is responsible for things beyond what is possibly comprehensible at any given moment because they have yet to happen. He has yet to encounter others for whom his actions matter and who hold him responsible for his choices. Only once he has done so can he then re-examine his situation and chosen projects in a way which attempts to take up this absolute responsibility which has been revealed to him.

### **Conclusion: Responsibility as Dialectic**

We are now in a position to describe the dialectical structure of taking responsibility in a Sartrean framework. Responsibility begins as a subjective recognition that all my consciousness is a form of self-consciousness. Every situation I encounter as demanding action from me is a result of my freely chosen projects. I encounter a rock as “to

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be climbed,” a café as “missing my friend,” or a flabby midsection as “weight to be lost.” Acknowledging that I am the incontestable author of these action-demanding values, I attempt to take responsibility for them by acting in such a way as to bring these projects to completion. I climb the rock, search for my friend, or pledge to go on a diet.

But in attempting to take responsibility for my situation through action, I author a new situation in a different way. My action exceeds what was revealed about my project in the initial act of perception. I see that I have affected the world in such a way that I will now have to confront the consequences of my choices in new and unexpected ways due to the existence of other people who my projects affect. These others serve to show me new sides of myself that I could not have been aware of when I made my choice. I thus could not have taken responsibility for them in that past moment.

The objective world, populated by others, resists my choice when I find myself in a situation where I will again need to take up my responsibility for the values I encounter within it. I am thus not only responsible for my own projects and the values I choose along with them, but also the way in which the world is affected by them and the values that this brings to my attention. I must then take responsibility anew, reinterpreting myself and my choices in light of these un-chosen consequences which my projects have brought about. This leads me to make a new choice and embark on a new course of actions. By following through on my choices, the dialectic begins again. I encounter a new situation and recognize that I am responsible for the world as the incontestable author of this situation. But once again, this situation contains aspects I could not have chosen when I set it in motion. I am thus totally responsible for both the way in which the world appears to me as a result of my freely chosen projects, but also the unexpected consequences of these projects that I did not choose. In this way, I remain completely responsible, but at the same time, I am never able to take responsibility completely.

## Notes

1. Lavine, quoted in David Detmer, *Freedom as a Value: A Critique of the Ethical Theory of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Lasalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1988), 166.
2. Jean-Paul Sartre, 1984. *Being and Nothingness*. Trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 707. Hereafter, BN.
3. Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 45, quoting BN, 620.
4. Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 45.



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5. Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 168.
6. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Trans. Carol McComber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).
7. Detmer, *Freedom as a Value*, 169.
8. Jean-Paul Sartre, *War Diaries: Notebooks from a Phony War*. Trans. Quinton Hoare (New York: Verso, 1999), 126. Hereafter WD.

