

No, We Are *Not* All Murderers  
Sartrean Ethics and Collective Responsibility

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Sartre is known for his demanding notion of responsibility. Indeed, while contemporary analytic philosophers ask whether Kantian and Utilitarian ethics ask too much of us, requiring sainthood of average citizens, the same question ought to be asked of existentialist ethics. An ethics premised on the claim that each individual carries “the weight of the world on his shoulders” may indeed be *overly demanding*. In this essay I distinguish three different senses of moral responsibility which might license Sartre’s demanding claim that as individuals “we are all responsible” for the collective evils of our world. After distinguishing “metaphysical” notions of responsibility from “causal” and “role” notions of responsibility, I argue that, indeed, the metaphysical dimension of Sartrean ethics is overly demanding and thus indefensible. My hope is to carve out a more defensible notion of existential moral responsibility, even at the cost of jettisoning some of Sartre’s published claims.

To give a sense of Sartre’s view of moral responsibility for collective harms, let me take a sample of quotes from different time periods. Perhaps the most memorable one-liner in this context comes from a *Les Temps modernes* piece published in 1958 with the simple title “We are All Murderers.” This quote, I believe, sums up Sartre’s view as well as any. The “we” is all French citizens. Sartre’s point is that every French citizen bears individual responsibility for the action of the French government and the French *colons* in Algeria.

In *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1945) Sartre wrote “There is not one of us who is not guilty, even criminal; the Jewish blood the Nazis shed falls on all our heads.” Note that Sartre, somewhat uncharacteristically, uses conventional moral and legal language here, writing of the “criminal” nature of the collective action. Further, the accusation of “guilt” is meant to imply moral and legal culpability.

A few years after *Anti-Semite and Jew* Sartre would explore the topic of collective moral liability in his posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics*, writing that “A young bourgeois is an oppressor without exercising any violence on a worker. This *in no way* signifies that he is not morally responsible for the oppression in question.” The individual who participates in oppression may have no malice in his heart, no evil intention and no purpose of wrong-doing. Nevertheless, Sartre argues, he is responsible because the cumulative effect of his action is to disadvantage another class of humans. Note again that Sartre uses the term “moral responsibility” to refer to the cost that must be borne by the “young bourgeois” who is complicit in oppression. The individual must bear the cost of the acts of the collective.

Quite a few years later, writing about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, Sartre would extend his notion of collective responsibility to the whole world population, not just domestic populations tolerating evil at home. “When a peasant falls in his rice paddy, mowed down by a machine gun, everyone of us is hit...This crime, carried out everyday before the eyes of the world renders all who do not denounce it accomplices of those who commit it, so that we are being degraded today for our future enslavement.”<sup>i</sup> The notion of an “accomplice” surely cuts to the heart of Sartre’s view of collective moral responsibility. Those who tolerate evil are as culpable as those who commit evil. Each of us is an accomplice of all of the world’s evils.

These quotes, culled from different periods of Sartre's life, express the sentiment that he put so bluntly in the non-political work of 1943. "Man condemned to be free carries the weight of the world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being." Despite the shifting political and philosophical commitments Sartre held in the 40's, 50's and 60's, there remains a guiding thread: *individuals ought to bear great personal responsibility for the evils of their world*. Despite the differences between the social ontology of *Being and Nothingness* and *Critique*, Sartre held fast to a demanding, personal view of morality that required authentic individuals to accept liability for the harms committed by their fellow citizens and fellow humans.

Standing behind these ascriptions of collective guilt are several very different basic notions of moral responsibility. I distinguish three different notions, which I would like to summarize here for clarity. First, we might all be co-responsible for the suffering of others because there is an implicit bond between all human beings which compels all of us to be our brother's keeper. I call this the *metaphysical notion* of responsibility. I will argue that the metaphysical view is objectionable for a number of reasons.

Second, we might be responsible for the world because we have failed to live up to the standards of a social role that we occupy. I call these our *social role responsibilities*. I will argue that the role of citizenship may indeed license the claim that we are morally responsible to prevent the suffering of our fellow citizens.

Last, we might be responsible for the evils of the world because our actions or inactions have caused evil. I call this the *standard causal view of moral responsibility*. While Sartre fails to reign in the scope of causal liabilities, the basic concept goes some distance towards an effective theory of collective responsibility.

Let me now analyze in more detail the distinction between types of responsibility and make the case against metaphysical responsibility, and in favor of role and causal responsibilities. (As an interpretive matter, I believe that Sartre indiscriminately floated between all three of these notions of moral responsibility.<sup>ii</sup>)

Sartre's ethical and political writings are permeated by the claim every individual is obligated to "will the freedom of others."<sup>iii</sup> More specifically, Sartre argues that every individual must "combat oppression" and "fight injustice in all its forms."<sup>iv</sup> Curiously, this existential obligation resembles a natural duty rather than a role obligation or a causal liability, since the obligation binds all humans, regardless of their social roles, and irrespective of whether they have voluntarily accepted the duty.<sup>v</sup>

I label this a "metaphysical" notion as an allusion to Karl Jaspers, who coined the notion of "metaphysical guilt" to characterize the post-Holocaust feeling that all human beings ought to feel solidarity with all human beings.<sup>vi</sup> The type of guilt or responsibility is *metaphysical* in that the connection between humans is imaginary, conceptual and imposed from the outside. There are no real, active social relations among the ostensible "members" of the human species.

There are several substantive reasons to reject a metaphysical view of collective responsibility.

First, if conflated with criminal and/or moral liability, the metaphysical notion of collective responsibility unfairly holds *everyone equally responsible* for evil. Fairness requires that we punish the guilty, not the innocent. If, by contrast, we only hold those responsible for a harm that have a clear causal connection to the harm, we have adopted the causal notion of liability and the objection no longer holds. But then we are *not* all assassins.

Second, it might be argued that the expansive notion of responsibility has the beneficial practical effect of encouraging virtuous action. Sartre, of course, hoped to “shame” his readers into political engagement. The problem is that for everyone who is shamed into action, there are just as many that are depressed and debilitated by the overwhelming scope of evil in the world, for which they might be liable.

Similarly, one might argue that the expansive, metaphysical notion of responsibility would deter future harmful acts, since *everyone* would be held liable for *anyone’s* actions. But presumably deterrence works by making a potential criminal fearful of the consequences that s/he will bear when s/he is held accountable for his acts. If s/he is going to be held liable *no matter what*, then deterrence fails.

Last, as H. Arendt warned in a 1968 paper on “Collective Responsibility”, “where all are guilty, none are.” Ascribing blanket guilt would “whitewash” a crime, erasing or diminishing the costs to the true culprits.

So, we have several practical reasons not to adopt a metaphysical view of collective responsibility.

I will also add that metaphysical responsibility contradicts Sartre’s anti-Kantianism and anti-Humanism. In *Notebooks for an Ethics* Sartre argues those obligations are social relations, grounded in person to person contact.

Further, Sartre’s accusations of collective guilt contradict his ontological distinction between genuine groups and mere collectives. Collectives (for example, all the citizens of a given nation state) are marked by “serial impotence,” or the inability to affect the direction of the whole. To hold one member of a collective liable for the cumulative effects of the collective

(“we are all assassins”) is to claim that I am responsible for what I am powerless to control. Sartre makes no distinction between *collective* and *group* responsibility.

Also, assume that Sartre’s claim “we are all murderers” applies only to *groups* (in the technical sense). Such a claim would still be a blanket ascription of liability for each member of the group, irrespective of role, rank, or causality. This claim would fail, for example, to distinguish between principals and accessories within groups (as is commonly necessary in domestic criminal liability).

Last, if each member of the group is blamed *equally* for the actions of the group as a whole, then has not Sartre committed the “organicist” fallacy? He reduces the group to an organism, namely each member of the group. Since individuals “incarnate” their world, they are personally, individually responsible for all evils of the world; each member of the group/collective becomes the group in miniature, responsible for all the actions of every other member.

In conclusion, the attempt to cash out collective responsibility in terms of a solidarity between all members of the species, or what amounts to the same thing, an obligation to “will the freedom of all others”, is, I believe, doomed to bad metaphysics. I should not be held accountable for the evils of the world simply on the basis that I, like the victim of injustice, am a human being.

I now turn to a second notion of responsibility, namely role responsibilities. A role responsibility is an obligation that attaches to an agent because she occupies a social role.<sup>vii</sup> In the Sartrean classic *What is Literature?* (1947) writers are said to have a unique responsibility to

become politically engaged. Writers qua writers (not writers qua humans) must *combat oppression* and “confront injustice in all its forms.”

While Sartre did not discuss it, there is a relationship between role obligations and collective responsibility. Some collective responsibilities just are role responsibilities, ex. the legal notion of “vicarious liability.” Parents are legally and morally responsible for the actions of their dependent children. Many formal institutions also define liabilities explicitly in terms of roles (for example military chains of command). Since these cases present no special difficulty, I do not dwell on them.

The real issue is whether social role responsibility can illuminate tougher cases like a citizen’s liability for war. Let me present several intuitions regarding the limits of Sartre’s claims about role responsibilities. First, *writers* have no special obligation to agitate against oppression or prevent war. Further, *most* social roles can be described independently of a generic obligation to combat oppression or maximize the freedom of others.

However, I submit, the role of democratic *citizenship* does require a basic respect for other fellow citizens. No citizen could consistently assert her own rights of citizenship without implicitly recognizing that other citizens deserved the same treatment. If I demand justice as a citizen, then I demand equal justice for other citizens. On its face, then, role obligations can ground responsibilities *to* other citizens (at least for minimal fairness).

What about responsibility for what “we” Americans do to others? The social role of citizenship would make us responsible since in a democracy the people rule; a national act is an expression of the general will. But as the size of the state increases, the power of my vote diminishes, and so does my liability for the national act. In large bureaucratic states

(“collectives”), there is less direct power to control national acts, and thus less individual moral responsibility.

In conclusion, the role account is powerful and can explain, in a limited sense, how each can be responsible for the whole. This responsibility might be a semi-contractual obligation, taken on through the voluntary assumption of a social role. We might be co-responsible for the suffering of others because this responsibility is part and parcel of the very meaning of democratic citizenship.

Lastly I turn to the standard causal view of moral responsibility, according to which a person is morally responsible for some event X if he intentionally causes X. (Some scholars would dispute my claim that Sartre employs a “standard” notion of causal liability.<sup>viii</sup>) In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre defines responsibility: “We are taking the word ‘responsible’ in its ordinary sense as ‘consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or of an object.’”<sup>ix</sup> Further, Sartre’s polemics against colonialism, racism and domination involve the accusation that some individual or group is *blameworthy* because of some harmful action they have caused. When he says “there is not one of us who is not *guilty and even criminal*; the Jewish blood the Nazi’s shed falls on all our heads” Sartre is blaming Europeans for committing genocide. Oppressors are liable for the harms they cause to their victims. As Sartre says, “The prisoner is always free to try and run away, if it is clearly understood that he risks death in crawling under the barbed wire. Is his jailer any less guilty on that account?”<sup>x</sup> The jailer is “guilty” because of the harm he has caused to the prisoner.

Further, Sartre blames agents for omissions. But an omission is just a round about ascription of causal liability. Admittedly, in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre implausibly claims

that responsibility goes far beyond what any individual (*or indeed any group*) has the power to control. “Man condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being.”<sup>xi</sup> In other works Sartre reigns in the scope of liability: “One is always responsible for what one does not try to prevent.”<sup>xii</sup> In three works Sartre uses the example of a citizen whose nation is at war, claiming that a citizen’s passivity (that is, omitting the act of protest) amounts to *causing* the war; the citizen is thus liable for the existence of the war.<sup>xiii</sup> Sartre’s war case is a claim about *negative collective liability*. Had we acted as a group, we could have prevented the harm. But we didn’t. Therefore, as individuals we are liable for the harm.

Sartre fails, I believe, to limit moral liabilities to actions that are both (1) within the power of individual agents and (2) reasonably demanding of those agents.

Blaming all French citizens *equally* for the actions of the French government makes sense only on the social role account, according to which as citizens we must all be willing to make the same sacrifices to guarantee the basic rights of citizenship to all citizens. But as a causal liability, we must be concerned with the details of causal mechanisms, that is, with the power one has to prevent a harm or the agency one has exercised in carrying out a past evil. Sartre says we avoid being accomplices in evil if we “denounce” the evil, but this erases the difference between being a head of state and being a lone, impotent voice. Each is responsible for the whole only in proportion to one’s power to affect the whole.

I would conclude my discussion of the causal view by noting that this view avoids the problems associated with metaphysical responsibility (fairness, deterrence, character shaping, etc.) The scope of our causal responsibilities must be reigned in through two conditions: power and reasonability. Each is responsible for the whole in proportion to one’s power and within

reasonable limits. (I am not responsible for the war if the only way to stop the war is public immolation.)

Let me at this point take stock. I have argued a metaphysical view of collective responsibility, which assumes that empathy with other humans or a conceptual connection between member of the human species is a good reason to hold oneself responsible for others' suffering. Each is not responsible for the whole merely on the basis of membership in the human species.

On the other hand, the social role of citizenship provides a compelling rationale for caring about the basic wellbeing of others, and for actively working to prevent gross injustices from befalling these fellow citizens. I can be blamed for failing my fellow citizens. It is enough for them to say "Are we not fellow citizens?"

Finally, the causal view of responsibility is also defensible, when its basic conditions are specified: knowledge, power and reasonability. Yet the causal view would not license the claim that each is responsible for the whole; responsibility would depend on power, increasing as power increased.

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<sup>i</sup> “On Genocide”, 1967.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas R. Flynn, in his important work Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) catalogues and analyzes several different concepts of ‘responsibility’ found throughout Sartre’s corpus. I wish to explain why my view of Sartrean responsibility differs from Flynn’s. Flynn argues that Sartre’s basic concept of responsibility is a non-legal, non-causal and non-standard notion according to which responsibility is ‘authorship’. (13) Flynn offers an original schema for categorizing the senses in which Sartre uses the term responsibility; for example, Flynn distinguishes ‘noetic responsibility’, ‘dispositional responsibility’, and ‘ontic responsibility’ as different variations of the ‘authorship concept’. (13-16) Flynn’s discussion is illuminating, but I disagree with Flynn on three substantial matters. First, Sartre is not opposed to the common, causal notion of responsibility as Flynn suggests. The blame that attaches to agents who commit crimes such as racism and oppression can best be understood according to the common causal notion of responsibility. Second, by claiming that Sartre does not adhere to a causal notion of responsibility, Flynn underemphasizes the ambiguity, indeed contradictions, in Sartre’s view of responsibility. Sartre frequently states that a person’s responsibilities extend as far as that person’s power (this clearly a statement of a causal view of responsibility). Sartre just as quickly turns around and says that a person is responsible for some effect, absent awareness and ability to prevent the effect. Because the latter type of claim not only contradicts the causal notion of responsibility, but because it is highly dubious in its own right, I choose to defend Sartre’s causal theory of responsibility and jettison what Flynn eventually admits is an overly demanding, indeed ‘angelic’ theory of responsibility. (197) Third, if Flynn is correct, that Sartre’s view diverges widely from the ‘common’ notions of responsibility, then Flynn (and Sartre) cannot appeal to common intuitions about the implications of ‘being responsible’ for some effect. On the view that Sartre has a non-causal view of responsibility, the claim that person X is ‘responsible for Y’ is stripped of its normal meaning. An ascription of responsibility implies that specific moral and legal judgments are appropriate. Praise and blame, punishment and reward attach to responsibility. Flynn writes, for example, that ‘...Sartre is saying, the serialized individual is responsible for the violence that his leaders choose to exercise against the Other’, but without a description of praise/blame, punishment/reward or the particular moral judgments that apply to the serialized individual, claiming that this individual is ‘responsible’ does not help advance a moral theory of responsibility. (149, emphasis added)

<sup>iii</sup> See ‘Existentialism is a Humanism’ in Essays in Existentialism (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1977).

<sup>iv</sup> See What is Literature? and Other Essays (Harvard: 1988).

<sup>v</sup> ‘Now in contrast with obligations, it is characteristic of natural duties that they apply to us without regard to our voluntary acts. Moreover, they have no necessary connection with institutions or social practices’. J. Rawls, A Theory of Justice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971) 114.

<sup>vi</sup> 1947 “Question of German Guilt.”

<sup>vii</sup> On the notion of role responsibility see M. O. Hardimon, ‘Role Obligations’, Journal of Philosophy (Vol XCI, No. 7, July 1994).

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viii As stated above, Flynn disagrees, claiming that Sartre chooses “‘authorship’” in place of “‘causality’” as the core meaning of responsibility. (14) Note that if ‘authorship’ is used in the ordinary sense, then ‘authoring’ X amounts to intentionally causing X. The basic case of responsibility is, I submit, responsibility for some event, effect or consequence. Assume the event is a war (one of Sartre’s favorite cases). To ‘author’ the war is to bring about the war through one’s purposeful actions, for example, by voluntarily joining the military. Even when Sartre stretches the notion of responsibility to cases of collective action (no single individual can cause a war), he need not abandon the basic concept of causal liability in favor of a non-causal notion of ‘authorship’. Further, most of the plausible ascriptions of responsibility that Sartre makes, for example, responsibility for one’s selfhood or values (see Flynn, Sartre and Marxists Existentialism 14, footnote 29) can be understood as liability for one’s character, which is consistent with the causal sense of responsibility. Undoubtedly, Flynn would charge that my view does not account for the ‘pervasive’ character of Sartrean responsibility, that is, the idea that one is responsible for ‘the world and every feature in it’. (14) First, the pervasiveness of responsibility can be an extension of the causal notion; witness Sartre’s frequent claim that if a person does nothing to stop a harm (a war, for example), then she is responsible for the harm. Causal responsibilities can indeed be pervasive. But second, as I have emphasized from the outset, I have no investment in defending the wildly implausible thesis that humans have a ‘total’, all-pervasive responsibility, even if Sartre himself, at some point or another, defended this thesis. Flynn admits that his own work ‘refrain[s] from critical assessments of Sartre’s work’ yet he also claims that Sartre has a ‘coherent and adequate theory of collective responsibility’. (196 and xi, respectively) I suspect even had Flynn carried out a serious criticism of Sartre’s view of responsibility, he would be more sympathetic to the ‘total’ view of responsibility that I reject. In sum, what we would gain by adopting Flynn’s ‘authorship’ concept, we do not want, namely a view of responsibility that makes us liable for what we do not cause, answerable for what are powerless to change, and responsible for what is not ours.

<sup>ix</sup> BN 707.

<sup>x</sup> ASJ 75.

<sup>xi</sup> BN 707.

<sup>xii</sup> WIL 232.

<sup>xiii</sup> BN 708-9, NE 490 and WIL 232.