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**Creating the Anthropocene:  
Existential Social Philosophy and Our  
Bleak Future**

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## **Creating the Anthropocene: Existential Social Philosophy and Our Bleak Future**

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### **Abstract**

About three decades ago, scientists began debating use of the term “Anthropocene” to capture the arrival of an age in which humans are having a distinct and potentially catastrophic effect on the earth’s ecosystems. The popularization of the term has been advanced by writers such as Elizabeth Kolbert, who featured it in two decidedly bleak works of science journalism—*Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* (2006) and *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014). The term has also found its way into philosophy, with perhaps its most notable appearance being Dale Jamieson’s *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle to Stop Climate Change Failed—and What It Means for Our Future* (2014). Jamieson’s book is novel for arguing that understanding how we got here (the Anthropocene) requires descriptions of not only the usual suspects—politics and economics—but also psychological and philosophical challenges. Regarding the latter, he points out that “climate change has the structure of the world’s largest collective action problem. Each of us acting on our own desires contributes to outcomes that we neither desire nor intend.”

Few philosophers have thought as rigorously about the problem of collective action as the existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre. He coined a term—“seriality”—to capture the social condition in which each individual is acting on their own desires and another term—“counter-finality”—to capture the phenomenon of reshaping the world in unintended ways. In this paper I argue, first, that Sartre’s conceptual tools help us better understand the problem of collective action and, second, that this better understanding allows us to fully appreciate the challenges of diverting the march towards the Anthropocene. In the end I argue that our obligation to resist the Anthropocene must rest on rejecting complicity rather than anticipating success.

**Keywords:** Anthropocene, Sartre, Bad Faith, Seriality, Counter-Finality, Collective Action.

## Introducing the Anthropocene

Following how geochronologists name epochs in the ongoing Cenozoic Era, the Nobel Prize winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen has proposed use of the term “Anthropocene” to capture the arrival of an epoch in which humans are having a distinct and potentially catastrophic effect on the earth’s ecosystems. The proposal, made in a 2002 article in the journal *Nature*, has been influential. Elizabeth Kolbert has featured it in two decidedly bleak works of science journalism—*Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* (2006) and *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014). The term is also gaining a foothold among scientists, exemplified by the Anthropocene Working Group—an official part of the International Commission on Stratigraphy—which is dedicated, among other things, to determining whether a formalization of the term within the Geological Time Scale is scientifically justified and, if so, identifying when this new epoch began. (Suggested beginnings include the Industrial Revolution and the arrival of the nuclear age.) The term has also found its way into philosophy, with perhaps its most notable appearance being Dale Jamieson’s *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle to Stop Climate Change Failed—and What It Means for Our Future* (2014). Evidently, as the geochronologists deliberate, the term is spreading throughout not only the scientific community but also the broader academic community. Perhaps it will soon be part of the popular imagination.

Regardless of whether the term Anthropocene stays or fades, the facts that motivate its current usage are not being welcomed. This begrudging attitude toward the Anthropocene is an abandonment of an optimism that was held by some previous scientists. As Kolbert notes, the nineteenth century geologist Antonio Stoppani and early twentieth century geochemist Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky both looked forward to the dawn of what they called, respectively, the “anthropozoic era” and the “noosphere.”<sup>1</sup> Our moment to exert mastery over the universe had come. The human species was realizing a potential. But as we have since learned, the potential we are realizing is an unintended and damaging one. We are changing the climate in ways that are increasingly anticipated to be catastrophic for human societies and, more broadly, earth’s ecosystems. Through other ecological impacts such as land use, we are accelerating what Kolbert and others are identifying as a new mass extinction on a global scale. She writes: “Right now, in the amazing moment that to us counts as the present, we are deciding, without quite meaning to, which evolutionary pathways will remain open and which will forever be closed.”<sup>2</sup> Whether we are already adapted for looming changes is not clear. Taking a longer view, whether an evolutionary pathway will be open for us is not clear either. Paradoxically, then, the dawn of the Anthropocene might mean the dusk of *anthropos*.

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<sup>1</sup>Elizabeth Kolbert, *Field Notes from a Catastrophe: Man, Nature, and Climate Change* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), 181.

<sup>2</sup>Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2014), 268.

## Introducing the Obstacles

There are many obstacles to curtailing the damage promised by the Anthropocene and they are formidable. Jamieson offers a list eight deep: scientific ignorance, the politicization of science, problems with linking scientific facts and values, problems with linking science and policy, organized denial,<sup>1</sup> partisanship, ill-equipped political institutions, and our cognitive limitations. He identifies our cognitive limitations as “the hardest problem.” He writes: “Climate change must be thought rather than sensed, and we are not very good at thinking. Even if we succeed in thinking that something is a threat, we are less reactive than if we sense that it is a threat.”<sup>2</sup> Jamieson’s list is probably enough to squash any optimism (though he insists on being called a realist rather than a pessimist). Yet, if we get to the heart of the organized denial obstacle, we see another obstacle that might better deserve our recognition as “the hardest problem”—economics.

The journalist Naomi Klein deserves recognition for speaking plain about the economic obstacle. The subtitle of *This Changes Everything* (2014) is “capitalism vs. the climate.” She writes: “the things we must do to avoid catastrophic warming...are now in conflict with the fundamental imperative at the heart of our economic model: grow or die.”<sup>3</sup> At the moment, we are witnessing a lopsided victory for capitalism.

“[Capitalism] wins every time the need for economic growth is used as the excuse for putting off climate action yet again, or for breaking emission reduction commitments already made. It wins when Greeks are told that their only path out of economic crisis is to open up their beautiful seas to high-risk oil and gas drilling. It wins when Canadians are told our only hope of not ending up like Greece is to allow our boreal forests to be flayed so we can access the semisolid bitumen from the Alberta tar sands. It wins when a park in Istanbul is slotted for demolition to make way for yet another shopping mall. It wins when parents in Beijing are told that sending their wheezing kids to school in pollution masks decorated to look like cute cartoon characters is an acceptable price for economic progress. It wins every time we accept we have only bad choices available to us: austerity or extraction, poisoning or poverty.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For information on the organized denial, I recommend Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway’s *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2011).

<sup>2</sup>Dale Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time: Why the Struggle Against Climate Change Failed—and What It Means for Our Future* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 103.

<sup>3</sup>Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), 21.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 23.

On the assumption that the one-percenters would not break historical precedent by voluntarily giving up the privileges necessary for some non-capitalistic economic alternative,<sup>1</sup> we can agree with Klein's claim that "only mass social movements can save us now."<sup>2</sup> This being the case, we can also agree with Jamieson's remark that "Climate change poses the world's largest collective action problem."<sup>3</sup> Jamieson opts not to dwell on the problem, choosing instead to focus on the question of how to live a meaningful life in the Anthropocene. Klein surveys the current landscape of these social movements, but shies away from thinking about the nature of collective action. In the following remarks, I aim to clarify the scope and significance of our choices in the Anthropocene. I employ conceptual tools available in existential social philosophy, a choice made for pragmatic reasons but also because of existentialism's emphases on freedom, responsibility, and—perhaps most importantly—failure.

### Creating the Anthropocene

Existential social philosophy is not, of course, monolithic. So at the expense of alternatives, the conceptual tools I employ here are drawn from Jean-Paul Sartre's social theory. This choice reflects my general respect for his theory, which is based on agreements and, when that is not the case, on pleasures from the interesting ways in which Sartre could fail the truth. This choice also reflects a simple fact: Sartre provided a more extensive social theory than any other thinker associated with existential philosophy. His theory is both fractured and systematic. It is molded by the magnum opuses—*Being and Nothingness* and the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*—and the shorter works. Even so, the theory is held together by master concepts. Two of these—bad faith and seriality—orient the following remarks.

Sartre's theory of bad faith argues that we are prone to self-deception. There are at least two overarching reasons for this proclivity toward inauthenticity. One is human reality, which provides a glut of means. For example, we can deceive ourselves by exploiting the fundamental ambiguity at the heart of human existence. That is, we can alternately trade between our facticity and our transcendence. We can also deceive ourselves by exploiting human consciousness, which can be done in at least two ways. One way is to cunningly assume either the pre-reflective or reflective mode of consciousness. Another way is to cunningly assume eitherthetic or non-thetic awareness. Through these means, bad faith is an obstacle to collective action against the various threats presented by the Anthropocene.

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<sup>1</sup>In fact, this is more than an assumption, as shown in Klein's criticism of the so-called Green billionaires in the seventh chapter of *This Changes Everything*.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 450. She adds: "And let's take for granted that we want to do these radical things democratically and without a bloodbath, so violent, vanguardist revolutions don't have much to offer in the way of road maps" (Ibid., 452).

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, *Reason in a Dark Time*, 105.

Unfortunately, the Anthropocene is exactly the kind of stage where our proclivity for bad faith is going to be fed. Consider some familiar views of ourselves in relation to the creation of the Anthropocene. We sometimes view ourselves as natural pillagers, unstoppably seeking absolute technological mastery over the universe. When we take this view, we are trying to sell our transcendence. We are trying to evade our freedom to be other than what we have chosen ourselves to be up to this point. Conversely, we sometimes view ourselves as not being pillagers at all, ephemerally detached from the material meaning of our choices. When we take this view, we are trying to sell our facticity. We are trying to evade the facts of what we have chosen ourselves to be up to this point. Both attempts to sell are in bad faith, since they both try to hide the full picture of the reality we have before us.

Consider, further, our awareness of climate change. Even for those who accept the scientific data, our awareness remains non-thetic. In other words, our awareness remains vague. As Jamieson points out, we have difficulty sensing it as a threat even if we can think it. Consequently, we are persistently distracted back to those things of which we are thetically (or penetratingly) aware. Again, insofar as we are not facing up to the full picture of the reality we have before us, we are in bad faith.

Consider, finally, our standard modes of consciousness in regard to our contributions to the Anthropocene. When we recycle, ride our bicycles rather than our cars, and pay more for energy-efficient lightbulbs, we assume the reflective mode of consciousness. The object of consciousness is ourselves and we shower ourselves with praise for reducing our carbon footprint. However, when we fly thousands of miles to discuss philosophy, we assume the pre-reflective mode of consciousness. The object of consciousness is something external and we do not burden ourselves with our responsibility for the carbon emissions of the airliners.<sup>1</sup> Once again, our choice of the incomplete picture puts us in bad faith.

The previous example uncovers the second overarching reason for our proclivity for bad faith. Willed ignorance and other such choices, Sartre recognizes, aim to limit or deny our responsibilities. In *Truth and Existence*, he writes:

“[The will to ignore is] the refusal to face our responsibilities. Since indeed, Being appears, in principle, as that for which we have to assume responsibility without having wanted it, the For-itself can project the veiling of Being in order not to be obliged to assume it. As a bourgeois I want to ignore the proletariat’s condition in order to ignore my responsibility for it. As a worker, I may want to ignore this condition because I am in solidarity with it and its unveiling obliges me to take sides. I am responsible for everything to myself and to everyone, and ignorance aims to limit my responsibility in the

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<sup>1</sup>Elisabeth Rosenthal, “Your Biggest Carbon Sin May Be Air Travel,” [www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/sunday-review/the-biggest-carbon-sin-air-travel.html?_r=0), [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/sunday-review/the-biggest-carbon-sin-air-travel.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/27/sunday-review/the-biggest-carbon-sin-air-travel.html?_r=0).

world...Ignoring = denial of responsibilities. And conversely: the fewer the responsibilities the less we need to know.”<sup>1</sup>

From this we can see that even if we can overcome our cognitive limitations, we are still prone to deceiving ourselves. Neither the bourgeois nor the worker faces cognitive limitations. In fact, they ignore because they know. More precisely, they ignore because (a) they know and (b) they do not want the responsibilities that come with knowing.

The forces behind the organized denial of climate change and other disastrous promises of the Anthropocene could be what Sartre calls cynics, that is, people who are not trying to shirk responsibility but simply do not care. But another plausible explanation is that they are like the bourgeois in Sartre’s example. They want to ignore, through denial, in order to evade responsibility. Even more plausible is that those who buy the denial do so because they are “in solidarity with it” and do not want the responsibility of having to take sides. After all, who wants the burden of being free to either accept or reject the creation of the Anthropocene? Accepting it means bearing responsibility for all the potentially devastating changes. Rejecting it means bearing responsibility for all the praxes that need to be urgently undertaken.

Armed with a denial of our responsibilities, our bad faith can now be reinforced. As Sartre points out, we can easily rationalize ignorance when we are not responsible—or when we deceive ourselves about not being responsible. For example, Rick Scott—the current governor of Florida in the United States—eliminated the Energy and Climate Commission recently created under his predecessor. Despite the fact that Florida is widely identified as the state most urgently affected by climate change, Governor Scott—who cagily avoids explicit denial of the scientific facts—also allegedly pressured scientists at the state’s Department of Environmental Protection to avoid use of the term “climate change.”<sup>2</sup> The reasoning is exquisite. If “climate change” is a propagandistic term not connected to anything for which we are responsible, then taxpayers should not be paying for a state commission to accumulate knowledge about the climate and its relation to energy. Our ignorance has been rationalized. Our bad faith has been reinforced. Collective action has been thwarted. The social arrangement remains serialized and, as such, we continue to create the Anthropocene as a death by seven billion cuts.

Sartre’s concept of seriality is the collective analogue to bad faith. Whereas bad faith is inauthenticity on the level of individuals, seriality is inauthenticity on the level of social arrangement. Serial social arrangement comes in two forms: the collective and the institution. Sartre’s examples of serial collectives include commuters at a bus queue, listeners of a radio broadcast, and voters in an election. As each case demonstrates, the deception of seriality—also in play with the institution—is that it tries to limit the realm

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Truth and Existence*, trans. Adrian van den Hoven (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1992), 52.

<sup>2</sup>Tristram Korten, “In Florida, Officials Ban Term ‘Climate Change’,” [www.miamiherald.com](http://www.miamiherald.com/news/state/florida/article12983720.html), <http://www.miamiherald.com/news/state/florida/article12983720.html>.

of the possible through separation, passive activity and, ultimately, powerlessness. To underscore the last point, Sartre identifies powerlessness as “a real bond between members of a series.”<sup>1</sup>

In a series there is a shared object of interest, but there is no recognition of a joint project. The commuters are united by a shared interest in a bus seat, the radio listeners by the broadcast, and the voters by the election. However, there is no interdependent cooperation. No one is helping anyone outside their sphere of private concern. An attitude of indifference reigns unless there is not enough of the collective object to meet the collective interest. If scarcity is shaping the situation, feelings transform from indifference into hostility. Such is the case if there are more commuters than available bus seats. Voting, for its part, is often characterized by self-interest, distrust, and hostility toward fellow voters. Radio listeners, separated into their individual homes and cars, are not even present for each other. Despite their potentially large numbers, they are powerless to affect the broadcast. Worse, they are susceptible to passive activity which, as Thomas Flynn notes, “is basically flight from freedom-responsibility.”<sup>2</sup> Their praxis is serialized, merely being instances of habit or influential otherness as when, in another of Sartre’s examples, a consumer buys whatever music has made it to the top of the popularity charts solely because it is at the top of the charts.

Serialized or not, praxis alters inorganic matter into what Sartre calls the practico-inert.<sup>3</sup> Mediated by the practico-inert, praxis can become anti-praxis. That which we infuse into matter can become inverted, effectively making that matter resistant to the original praxis. To put it differently, praxis often includes what Sartre calls counter-finality as its “hidden meaning.”<sup>4</sup> The rotation of crops in agriculture is a simple example. If we do not rotate, the nutrients in the soil become imbalanced enough to make future growth of that crop difficult. Sartre offers an example that is a rare but potent rebuttal to those quick to condemn his philosophy as anti-green. More importantly, the example is conveniently analogous with the Anthropocene in terms of both timescale and devastation; namely, the deforestation of China over thousands of years by serialized individuals simply trying to survive and which has resulted in devastating flooding. Sartre writes:

“If some enemy of mankind had wanted to persecute the peasants of the Great Plain, he would have ordered mercenary troops to deforest the mountains systematically. The positive system of agriculture was transformed into an infernal machine. But the enemy who introduced

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<sup>1</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (New York: Verso, 2004), 277.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas R. Flynn, *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 96.

<sup>3</sup>Sartre concisely describes the practico-inert as “simply the activity of others in so far as it is sustained and diverted by inorganic inertia” (Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1*, 556).

<sup>4</sup>Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1*, 166.

the loess, the river, the gravity, the whole of hydrodynamics, into this destructive apparatus was the peasant himself. Yet, taken in the moment of its living development, his action does not include this rebound, either intentionally or in reality.”<sup>1</sup>

Sartre proceeds to say that the existence of counter-finality hinges on three conditions. “The first [is] that it should be adumbrated by a kind of *disposition* of matter...Second, human *praxis* has to become a fatality and to be absorbed by inertia, taking on *both* the strictness of physical causation *and* the obstinate precision of human labor...Last, and most important, the activity must be carried on *elsewhere*.”<sup>2</sup> Sartre’s account of the deforestation of China meets the three conditions. The first is met by “the geological and hydrographic structure of China.” The second is met by the guarantee that the deforestation will lead to flooding and the systematic nature of the fatality. The third is met by the fact that Chinese peasants “*everywhere*” are contributing to the deforestation and are unified through the matter they work.

With respect to the creation of the Anthropocene, the three conditions for counter-finality to exist as a hidden meaning are met by a distressing number of praxes. This is trivially true in praxes that are undeniable contributors to its creation. Our extractions of fossil fuels, our industrial productions of meat and dairy, and our industrial production (especially in peat soil) of ubiquitous ingredients like palm oil are high-impact examples. They meet the first condition by the greenhouse effect of the Earth’s atmosphere, the second by the guarantee that the release of massive amounts of carbon dioxide will warm the planet and the systematic nature of the fatality, and the third by the fact that, as producers and consumers, people everywhere are contributing to the creation of the Anthropocene and are unified through these praxes. So, by meeting the conditions for counter-finality, our extractions of fossil fuels and our various industrial productions of consumer goods include the hidden meaning that such praxes are eventually producing “the opposite of what they hoped for” as a material necessity.<sup>3</sup>

Also troubling is that our everyday, serial praxes—not widely recognized to contribute to the creation of the Anthropocene—still meet the three conditions for counter-finality to exist as a hidden meaning. Klein points out about climate change, “we don’t have to do anything to bring about this future. All we have to do is nothing. Just continue to do what we are doing now, whether it’s counting on a techno-fix or tending to our gardens or telling ourselves we’re unfortunately too busy to deal with it.”<sup>4</sup> The material disposition of our atmosphere is inescapable, most of our everyday praxes leave a carbon footprint, and, of course, all of it is happening elsewhere.

This is also true for many praxes that are intended to be ecological solutions. Those privileged enough to afford them may buy electric cars but, as

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 162.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 162-163.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 175.

<sup>4</sup>Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 4.

Klein says, “if these sorts of demand-side emission reductions are to take place on anything like the scale required, they cannot be left to the lifestyle decisions of earnest urbanites.”<sup>1</sup> In other words, serial praxes, ecologically-conscious or not, are exercises in powerlessness. Ecologically-conscious serial praxes such as driving electric cars and recycling may be sufficient for authenticity, but they still leave us, in all important respects, powerless. Even worse, our commitments to ecologically-conscious serial praxes might serve as an obstacle to the collective action that we truly need—in this sense mirroring Bill Martin’s Sartrean argument that our commitments to voting serve as an obstacle to the type of direct democratic collective action that we truly need for significant political change.

If we are to expose these counter-finalities and pursue praxes with analogous but sustainable purposes, we need to, according to Sartre, negate seriality through collective action. He writes: “It is seriality which must be overcome in order to achieve even the smallest common result.”<sup>2</sup> Just as individuals can convert from bad faith to authenticity, the social arrangement can be converted from serial to common. This conversion takes place when a series becomes a group-in-fusion. In the group, serial feelings and thoughts yield to what Sartre calls a “deeper kind of thinking,” a kind of thinking that embraces interdependent cooperation and removes limits on the possible. But, in Sartre’s descriptions, external pressures always serve as the catalyst for this social conversion to take place. If that is always, or too often, the case, groups—which occupy the protagonist role in Sartre’s theory of history—are not going to emerge except as marginal resistance to the creation of the Anthropocene. By the time, say, climate change is effecting changes that serve as a catalyst for a group to overcome seriality, a threshold has been crossed and the devastation is already imminent. The devastation, in turn, will probably only accelerate what Sartre already identifies as the destiny of any group, namely, a return to seriality in one of two forms: the collective or the institution.

The serial collective, as we have already seen, is impotent. The institution is no less so. In Sartre’s descriptions, groups that resist returning to a serial collective can do so only through a “sclerosis” that relies on the violence of oaths, threats, and the like as the bond and results in a hierarchical social arrangement. The institution represents the apex of the sclerosis. To pin our hopes on the institution is to reintroduce all the obstacles that Jamieson documents so well, while adding the point that a serial social arrangement is too impotent to combat those obstacles. Worse, to do so is to present ourselves with an ugly dilemma: ecological devastation or oppression. So our only option is pin our hopes on the type of collective action effected by the group-in-fusion.

Unfortunately, bad faith and seriality remain as ever-present possibilities for either thwarting or undermining the collective action of groups. We must

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>2</sup>Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1*, 687.

admit, then, that we will likely continue, in all important respects, to create the Anthropocene. Painting an accurate picture of life in the emerging Anthropocene is difficult and prone to what will prove to have been inaccurate speculation. However, we know enough to say that the prospects for humanity are, more or less, bleak.

### **Breaking Complicity with a Bleak Future**

In lieu of this bleak conclusion regarding our ecological future and our resources to fight it, a reasonable reaction might be adherence to The Doors front man Jim Morrison's call to "get my kicks before the whole shithouse goes up in flames."<sup>1</sup> However, such a cynical reaction is unwarranted. From an existentialist perspective, there are two opposing reasons. The first is that to say we have a bleak future is not to say we are powerless to mitigate some of the dehumanizing and ecologically devastating effects. The emergence of the Anthropocene is not analogous to the dying of the Sun. After all, we are *creating* the Anthropocene, albeit with a heavy amount of counter-finality as a hidden meaning. So to the extent that we can mitigate, the responsibility is on our shoulders.

The second reason is that to do nothing is to be complicit with the dehumanization and ecological devastation. Silence and other choices of inaction imply complicity with the status quo and its destinies. As Sartre says, "every word [the writer] utters has reverberations. As does his silence. I hold Flaubert and the Goncourts responsible for the repression that followed the Commune because they didn't write a line to prevent it."<sup>2</sup> This aspect of Sartre's theory of responsibility is woven throughout his thought. For example, Gomez—a character in Sartre's fictional trilogy *The Roads to Freedom*—says "You don't fight fascism because you're going to win. You fight fascism because it is fascist." We can say the same about the Anthropocene. We do not fight it because we are going to win. We fight it because it demands being fought. So, if we do nothing, we are saying yes to the dehumanization and ecological devastation. We must act against it to break our complicity.

I will conclude with some brief remarks on a lengthy passage from Sartre's introduction to *Les Temps modernes* that suggests an apparent tension with the starting point of this paper, namely, the effort to describe the creation of the Anthropocene using tools from existential social theory. He writes:

"there is a vague, conceptual future which concerns humanity in its entirety and on which we have no particular light to shed: Will history have an end? Will the sun be extinguished? What will be the condition of man in the socialist regime of the year 3,000? We leave such reveries to future novelists. It is the future of *our* time that must

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<sup>1</sup>The Doors. "American Night." *An American Prayer*. Elektra/Wea, 1995. Audio CD.

<sup>2</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, "Introducing *Les Temps modernes*," in *What Is Literature?* and *Other Essays*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 252.

be the object of our concern: a limited future barely distinguishable from it—for an era, like a man, is first of all a future. It is composed of its ongoing efforts, its enterprises, its more or less long-term projects, its revolts, its struggles, its hopes...No doubt some authors have concerns which are less contemporary, and visions which are less short-sighted. They move through our midst as though they were not there. Where indeed are they? With their grandnephews, they turn around to judge that bygone age which was ours and whose sole survivors they are. But they have miscalculated: posthumous glory is always based on a misunderstanding...How might one expedite current business if one saw it from such a distance? How might one grow excited over a battle, or enjoy a victory? We write for our contemporaries; we want to behold our world not with future eyes—which would be the surest means of killing it—but with our eyes of flesh, our real, perishable eyes. We don't want to win our case on appeal, and we will have nothing to do with any posthumous rehabilitation. Right here in our own lifetime is when and where our cases will be won or lost.”<sup>1</sup>

This passage prompts us to ask if showing concern for the Anthropocene is too detached from our time. Are we miscalculating? Can we not get excited over this battle? I readily admit that our self-judgments cannot be made through the gaze of distant future generations. However, we must still answer to the near future. The ecological regime of the year 3000 may not be part of the near future, but the emerging Anthropocene certainly is. It is intimately linked with the struggles and hopes in relation to our current projects. The struggle might be too much, but by breaking our complicity we can at least win our case with the living history that we are making. With this in mind, I return to Klein, who concludes her ecological call-to-arms by recollecting a dinner “with some newfound friends in Athens” who she requested advice from for her upcoming interview with then-opposition leader Alexis Tsipras. “Someone suggested, “Ask him: History knocked on your door, did you answer?”” Klein noted: “That’s a good question, for all of us.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Sartre, “Introducing *Les Temps modernes*,” 252-254.

<sup>2</sup>Klein, *This Changes Everything*, 466.

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