

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

‘No one around to shut the dead eyes of the human race’: Sartre, Aron, and the limits of existentialism in the Nuclear Age

Benjamin Zala* 

Department of International Relations, Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

*Corresponding author: benjamin.zala@anu.edu.au

(Received 3 June 2022; revised 26 January 2023; accepted 29 January 2023)

Abstract

The Nuclear Age is said to be defined by the notion of existential threat. The ability to destroy human societies in their entirety with a single class of weaponry raises profound questions about human existence. It even gives us a new form of species extinction – ‘thermonuclear omnicide’. Unsurprisingly, existentialism was a philosophy that found its feet in the shadow of the bomb. This article explores the possibilities and limits of an existentialist approach to nuclear dangers. It contrasts the views of two figures central to early existentialism: Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron. Sartre responded to the existential threat of nuclear war with moral outrage about the ‘unreality’ of the Cold War politics driving the arms race and an existentialist call to reject militaristic social norms. Aron, a key figure in early IR realism, famously rejected existentialism and turned instead to outlining norms for an international society that might better restrain nuclear-armed decision-makers. Bringing Sartre’s and Aron’s post-Second World War discussions into the new century, this article argues that the ongoing, and even growing, threats posed by nuclear weapons highlight the limits of Sartre’s approach as a guide to authentic existence in modern life. Instead, it supports Aron’s more conservative approach but also draws on Existentialism to extend it, strengthening the nuclear taboo for the sake of human survival as a persistent but urgent political project. At a moment in IR when scholars and other analysts are once again critiquing the fragile norms of global order and speculating about the dawn of a ‘Third Nuclear Age’, theoretical reflection on the politics of existential threats and the hard choices they entail remain indispensable aspects of IR’s theoretical toolkit. While Sartre and other existentialists argued convincingly that existence precedes essence, Aron reminds us that survival remains a precondition for both.

Keywords: Aron; Deterrence; Existentialism; Nuclear Taboo; Nuclear Weapons; Sartre

Introduction

Every man, woman and child lives under a nuclear sword of Damocles, hanging by the slenderest of threads, capable of being cut at any moment by accident, or miscalculation, or by madness.

John F. Kennedy, 1961¹

¹Address by President John F. Kennedy to the UN General Assembly, 25 September 1961, available at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/p/io/potusunga/207241.htm> accessed 13 May 2022.

The development of science and technology is rapidly changing the realities of human existence; one does not need to be a Marxist to say that this change in existence must entail changes in consciousness.

Editorial, *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 1960²

Along with the effects of runaway climate change, the threat of a large-scale nuclear exchange is often referred to as one of the very few genuinely existential threats to humanity.³ The antecedents of what would become the existentialist tradition long pre-date the invention of nuclear weapons. But it is perhaps not surprising that as a philosophical and cultural movement, existentialism came to global prominence in the shadow of the anxiety and fear created by the Nuclear Age. For the first time in human history, the use of a weapon could end tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of lives in a single blow.

This moment so clearly called for serious reflection, not only on the human condition, but on its very existence. In the 1953 editorial of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, which accompanied that year's announcement of how many 'minutes to midnight' humanity was on what it calls the Doomsday Clock, co-founder of the journal and biophysicist Eugene Rabinowitch wrote: 'The continued existence of the urban, technological Western civilization will soon hang in a precarious balance, resting almost entirely on a highly irrational and unreliable fear.'⁴ In less than a decade since the first use of this new form of weaponry, Rabinowitch and others had correctly diagnosed that the task of avoiding mass suicide already hinged on the extent to which fear would grip the minds of decision-makers. While human societies had feared each other for centuries, never before had humanity as a whole feared itself.

Today, the reawakening of this fear in public discourse is evident in the widespread media speculation about whether Russia's nuclear threats aimed at limiting the Western, and particularly NATO, response to its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine may translate into the first use of a nuclear weapon in war since 1945.⁵ Having been subordinated to a focus on a wider 'nuclear security' agenda (including proliferation, black market trade, and fears of nuclear terrorism) for the better part of three decades, the prospect of nuclear use by a state has once more returned to centre stage in world politics. Seventy years after Rabinowitch's editorial, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists'* Science and Security Board announced in January 2023 that they had set the Doomsday Clock at 90 seconds to midnight – the closest it had ever been set.⁶

For a philosophy inspired by sentiments such as that of Martin Heidegger that 'Being-in-the-world is being towards death,'⁷ existentialism was in many ways an open door for the post-1945 reckoning with the meaning of the bomb. Having lived through the destruction and misery of two major power wars in just over as many decades, this class of philosophers, novelists, and cultural

² Editorial, 'The dawn of a new decade', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 16:1 (1960), p. 5.

³ See Bryan R. Early and Victor Asal, 'Nuclear weapons and existential threats: Insights from a comparative analysis of nuclear-armed states', *Comparative Strategy*, 33:4 (2014), pp. 303–20; Bentley B. Allan, 'Second only to nuclear war: Science and the making of existential threat in global climate governance', *International Studies Quarterly*, 61:4 (2017), pp. 809–20. For a wider view of existential threats in world politics, see Nathan Alexander Sears, 'International politics in the age of existential threats', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 6:3 (2021), pp. 1–21. For Sartre's phrase used in the title of this article, see Jean-Paul Sartre, *Vérité et Existence* (Gallimard 1989), p. 132.

⁴ Eugene Rabinowitch, 'The narrowing way', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, 9:8 (1953), p. 294.

⁵ See, for example, Masha Gessen, 'Why Vladimir Putin would use nuclear weapons in Ukraine', *The New Yorker* (1 November 2022), available at: <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/why-vladimir-putin-would-use-nuclear-weapons-in-ukraine> accessed 13 November 2022; Daniel Immerwahr, 'Forgetting the apocalypse: Why our nuclear fears faded – and why that's dangerous', *The Guardian* (12 May 2022), available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/12/forgetting-the-apocalypse-why-our-nuclear-fears-faded-and-why-thats-dangerous> accessed 13 November 2022.

⁶ Gayle Spinazze, 'PRESS RELEASE: Doomsday Clock set at 90 seconds to midnight', *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (24 January 2023), available at: <https://thebulletin.org/2023/01/press-release-doomsday-clock-set-at-90-seconds-to-midnight/> accessed 25 January 2023.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 151.

critics articulated a vision of human existence as solely defined by the contingent choices made by individuals rather than some transcendent or fixed essence. Existentialist writing would become associated with arguments about the importance of individual freedom in the face of unquestioned societal expectations and the responsibility to create authentic meaning in a world without inherent purpose.

The most prominent of the postwar existentialists was Jean-Paul Sartre who alongside his partner, Simone de Beauvoir, and others such as Albert Camus and Maurice Merleau-Ponty were not only some of the most prominent global thinkers and writers of their day, but also played the role of engaged public intellectuals in their own national context.⁸ The full implications of what in time would become known as the ‘nuclear revolution’⁹ set in, alongside what would soon be dubbed the ‘Cold War’ confrontation between the Soviet Union and the United States and their respective allies, as this set of writers came to worldwide attention. Their roles as public commentators meant that the chief proponents of existentialist ideas could no more escape the moral and political issues raised by considering the nuclear ‘sword of Damocles’ that hung above the world than could their devotees or critics in the postwar era.

By way of exploring some of the ideas associated with the notoriously intellectually murky world of existentialism,¹⁰ this article will highlight the possible contributions to grappling with the ethical and political dilemmas presented by living with nuclear weapons in the works of two figures in particular: Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron. Both were ‘present at the birth’ of existentialism as a semi-coherent philosophical project in the early 1930s.¹¹ It was Aron who encouraged Sartre and Beauvoir to take phenomenology seriously, thereby helping to set them on the path towards existentialism. Friends since their school days, Sartre and Aron were intellectual sparring partners who would later – as in many of Sartre’s friendships – have a personal falling out over their political differences. Aron would go on to be a prominent critic of the existentialist movement. Sartre would return the favour with his own critiques of Aron’s work. Their dispute was both personal and political but the latter at least (possibly the former too) ultimately had its roots in differences of philosophical outlook. However, they did remain joined via direct public debate and were often, and have continued to be in the years since, juxtaposed and compared.¹² This juxtaposition is continued here as a way into exploring the possibilities and limits of an existentialist contribution to thinking about questions of freedom and responsibility in the Nuclear Age.

In comparing their responses to the ethical and political dilemmas created by the existence and spread of nuclear weapons, we have the opportunity to examine an intellectual crossroads moment.

⁸Kate Kirkpatrick has noted that in the summer and autumn of 1945, between them, Sartre and Beauvoir published over a half a dozen novels, plays, and lectures and launched a new periodical, *Les Temps modernes*. The editorial board of the latter included both Merleau-Ponty and Aron and according to Kirkpatrick, became a vehicle for Sartre and Beauvoir to ‘be “engaged intellectuals” who focused on the pressing issues of the day’. Kate Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir: A Life* (London, UK et al. : Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 204–05.

⁹Robert Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution: Statecraft and the Prospect of Armageddon* (Ithaca, NY and London, UK: Cornell University Press, 1989); Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, *The Myth of the Nuclear Revolution: Power Politics in the Atomic Age* (London, UK: Cornell University Press, 2020); Brendan Rittenhouse Green, *The Revolution that Failed: Nuclear Competition, Arms Control, and the Cold War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

¹⁰By this I mean that many of those now considered ‘key’ existentialist thinkers, including both Martin Heidegger and Albert Camus, disavowed the philosophy while those that openly embraced it often wrote so widely that pinning down a body of unambiguously existentialist work can be rather challenging. John Macquarrie was perhaps being overly polite when he wrote that, ‘When we try to say what existentialism is, we are confronted with a certain elusiveness.’ Sartre himself put it more plainly: ‘the word is now so loosely applied to so many things that it no longer means anything at all.’ See John Macquarrie, *Existentialism* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 13.

¹¹On Aron’s role in the early development of postwar existentialism, see Iain Stewart, ‘Existentialist manifesto or conservative political science? Problems in interpreting Raymond Aron’s *Introduction à La Philosophie De L’histoire*’, *European Review of History: Revue européenne d’histoire*, 16:2 (2009), pp. 217–33 and Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existentialist Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails* (New York, NY: Other Press, 2016).

¹²James D. Wilkinson, ‘Jean-Paul Sartre and Raymond Aron’, *Salmagundi*, 70/71 (spring–summer, 1986), pp. 285–315; Iain Stewart, ‘Sartre, Aron and the contested legacy of the anti-positivist turn in French thought, 1938–1960’, *Sartre Studies International*, 17:1 (2011), pp. 41–60.

On the one hand, we have Sartre, the leading proponent and defender of existentialism in postwar Europe who became one of the giants of twentieth-century literature and philosophy. On the other, we have Aron, claimed by sociologists, philosophers, and International Relations (IR) scholars alike as one of their own. While the comparison is not entirely a fair one in that Sartre wrote a small number of pieces and gave some speeches in which he directly discussed nuclear questions, Aron turned seriously to thinking about nuclear dangers soon after 1945 and it became one of his central preoccupations. However, both wrote at length about the choices, and societal norms that might constrain those choices, faced by all living in the modern (and post-1945, nuclear) age. Whereas the mid-twentieth-century state of humankind led Sartre to develop a philosophy centred firmly on realising human freedom, Aron focused instead on a 'sense of history and tragedy'¹³ in his brand of 'liberal pessimism' aimed at surviving rather than 'existing'.¹⁴

Today, as many lament the fraying of the global nuclear order, and others predict a shift to a new era in nuclear history driven by a multipolar distribution of power and new technologies, Sartre and Aron's competing visions for addressing nuclear threats have taken on a renewed relevance.¹⁵ The question of whether to reject the existing order that has naturalised the existence of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons or to try and salvage, even bolster this order as the only likely restraint on arms racing and instability in the immediate term, remains the central fault line of nuclear debates.¹⁶ Sartre and Aron's divergent positions are illustrative of contemporary debates between, for example, the proponents and critics of the 2017 Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW).¹⁷ At a time of growing polarisation between different camps in nuclear debates, exploring the possibilities of combining the most insightful aspects of each approach may offer a fruitful way forward.

In what follows, I briefly sketch the historical background to the engagement with nuclear questions of the mid-twentieth-century existentialist philosophers and the influence of their thinking on wider writings about the bomb in the decades since. I then turn to an examination of Sartre's writing on freedom, choice, and responsibility and how this might be applied to thinking about the ethics of nuclear decision-making. This is then contrasted with a discussion of Aron's writing on nuclear responsibilities and the specifically social and structural nature of his approach. The final section then provides a reflection on what looking at the work of these two figures tells us about the possibilities, but also the limits, of an engagement with existentialism for thinking about the future of the global nuclear order. Here I argue that Sartre's approach encourages us to ask the right questions about humanity's relationship to weapons technology and to challenge the conventional wisdoms on the place of nuclear weapons in international society. However, it is Aron's attempts at answering such questions that provide, at least a plausible, path to survival in what appears set to be a uniquely challenging chapter of the Nuclear Age.

Thinking the unthinkable about the existential weapon

While still coming to terms with the utter devastation of two world wars within a generation, the postwar writers that would go on to become known as 'the existentialists' were shocked into almost

¹³Raymond Aron, *Clausewitz: Philosopher of War* (London and Henley, UK and Melbourne: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 412.

¹⁴On Aron's 'liberal pessimism', see Dillon Stone Tatum, 'Liberal pessimism: An intellectual history of suspicion in the Cold War', in Tim Stevens and Nicholas Michelsen (eds), *Pessimism in International Relations: Provocations, Possibilities, Politics* (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 67–81.

¹⁵Andrew Futter and Benjamin Zala, 'Strategic non-nuclear weapons and the onset of a Third Nuclear Age', *European Journal of International Security*, 6:3 (2021), pp. 257–77; Caitlin Talmadge, 'Multipolar deterrence in the emerging nuclear era', in Vipin Narang and Scott D. Sagan (eds), *The Fragile Balance of Terror: Deterrence in the New Nuclear Age* (Ithaca, NY and London, UK: Cornell University Press, 2022), pp. 13–38.

¹⁶See, for example, Ramesh Thakur (ed.), *The Nuclear Ban Treaty: A Transformational Reframing of the Global Nuclear Order* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2022).

¹⁷Rebecca Davis Gibbons, 'Addressing the nuclear ban treaty', *The Washington Quarterly*, 42:1 (2019), pp. 27–40; Kjølv Egeland, 'Nuclear weapons and adversarial politics: Bursting the abolitionist "consensus"', *Journal for Peace and Nuclear Disarmament*, 4:1 (2021), pp. 107–15.

instant reflection on the destructive power of the atom bomb. Albert Camus wrote that ‘Before the terrifying prospects now available to humanity, we see even more clearly that peace is the only goal worth struggling for.’¹⁸ He spoke of the writers born at the beginning of the First World War, who had survived the Second World War, and now ‘must today rear their sons and create their works in a world threatened by nuclear destruction. Nobody, I think, can ask them to be optimists.’¹⁹ Other thinkers associated with the existentialist tradition reflected on the advent of nuclear weapons in similar terms. Karl Jaspers, for example, remarked that ‘The possible reality which we must henceforth reckon with – and reckon with, at the increasing pace of developments, in the near future – is no longer a fictitious end of the world. It is no world’s end at all, but the extinction of life on the surface of the planet.’²⁰ Continental existentialism was exported to other parts of the world, in part through the internationalism and activism of specific figures including Camus, Beauvoir, and Sartre. This included Japan and the generation of Japanese writers and philosophers making sense of the human and societal devastation left in the wake of the American nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. Sartre in particular was a prominent influence on those like Ōe Kenzaburō, who both championed the ‘atomic bomb literature’ of postwar Japan in literary outlets but also used the development of *hibakusha* (survivors of the atomic bombings) culture to reflect on questions of existence, authenticity, and shame.²¹

More broadly, in the decades that followed the zenith of its popularity, existentialism has influenced the writings of a range of commentators on the human condition in the nuclear age. Kelvin Mason, for example, writes that

Deterrence is immoral not (only) because it is defined by abominable revenge rather than justice, but because it shapes an oppressive politics and culture that preclude the attainment of freedom and the acceptance of a concomitant personal responsibility. Owning one’s radical freedom and responsibility is Sartre’s definition of ‘authenticity’, living the truth about ourselves.²²

Similarly, one of the most widely read authors on the issue of nuclear disarmament, Jonathan Schell, observed in his 1982 best seller, *The Fate of the Earth* that

If we want to find the meaning of extinction, accordingly, we should start by looking with new eyes at ourselves and the world we live in, and at the lives we live. The question to be asked then is no longer what the features and characteristics of extinction are but what it says about us and what it does to us that we are preparing our own extermination.²³

In this view, the Cold War nuclear arms race was allowed to take hold due to the complacency of populations who were able to dissociate themselves from the everyday and real experience of the

¹⁸ Albert Camus, *Between Hell and Reason: Essays from the Resistance Newspaper Combat, 1944–1947*, selected and translated by Alexandre de Gramont (Hanover and London, UK: University Press of New England, 1991), p. 11.

¹⁹ Albert Camus, ‘1957 Nobel Prize for Literature Acceptance Speech at the Nobel Banquet at the City Hall in Stockholm’, 10 December 1957, available at: {<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1957/camus/speech/>} accessed 13 May 2022. Here and in a number of quotes throughout this article, we see the explicitly gendered language of ‘sons’, ‘man’, and ‘men’ when referring to humans in general. This language is left unchanged here so as not to obscure this aspect of their work or to imply that their (by and large) progressive political ideals extended further than they actually did in practice in their writing. This is as true of Camus as it is of Sartre and also Aron. This of course should not be taken as an endorsement of such language today.

²⁰ Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind* (6th edn, Chicago, IL and London, UK: University of Chicago Press, 1973), p. 4.

²¹ John Whittier Treat, ‘Hiroshima Nōto and Ōe Kenzaburō’s existentialist other’, *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 47:1 (1987), pp. 97–136. On Sartre’s influence on others, such as Sakaguchi Ango, see Masahito Takayashiki, ‘Language and body: Betsuyaku Minoru and the “Small Theatre Movement” (*Shōgekijō undo*) in the 1960s’, in Roman Rosenbaum and Yasuko Claremont (eds), *Legacies of the Asia-Pacific War: The Yakeato Generation* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), pp. 182–97.

²² Kelvin Mason, ‘Ghosts of the future: A normative existentialist critique of nuclear weapons, Mutually Assured Destruction and deterrence’, *ACME: An International Journal for Critical Geographies*, 16:1 (2017), p. 149.

²³ Jonathan Schell, *The Fate of the Earth* (London, UK: Picador, 1982), p. 147.

threat of annihilation. To openly and regularly discuss nuclear dangers became an extraordinary act while living ‘on the edge of extinction’ became perfectly normal and barely worth mentioning. For Schell, ‘[I]t was not unless one lifted one’s gaze from all the allegedly normal events occurring before one’s eyes and looked at the executioner’s sword hanging over everyone’s head that the normality was revealed as a sort of mass insanity.’²⁴ Just as Sartre urged us to eschew ‘bad faith’ and the ‘suspension of judgement’ in our everyday existence,²⁵ Schell counselled engaging art and imagination in order to join even the likes of Herman Khan in ‘thinking about the unthinkable.’²⁶ A mid-1980s reflection on the ongoing relevance of existentialism even spoke of juxtaposing Schell and Sartre on university syllabi.²⁷ Lisl Marburg Goodman and Lee Ann Hoff’s exploration of the human condition under the threat of ‘thermonuclear omnicide’ channelled Sartre when they argued, ‘Alienation, then, is a response to overwhelming nuclear anxiety.’²⁸ In a similar vein, the novelist Martin Amis wrote that nuclear weapons, which he considered ‘biblical in their anger’ and whose invention was ‘clearly the worst thing that has ever happened to the planet,’²⁹ turn us into ‘Einstein’s monsters, not fully human, not for now.’³⁰ Attempts to shake humanity out of a complacency on nuclear dangers borne of more than 75 years since their use in war by the United States have regularly returned to the existentialist notion of approaching ‘the challenge of the bomb from every possible angle’³¹ in order that ‘the palpable jeopardy of man’s very existence might awaken slumbering human depths.’³²

Choice, responsibility, and Sartre’s Nuclear Age

As an engaged public figure, Sartre, like many others wrote publically on the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 and the implications for the future of warfare. While far from being his prime political concern, he did comprehend the unprecedented nature of nuclear weaponry early on. In the months following their use against Japan, Sartre observed that ‘the little bomb that can kill a hundred thousand at a stroke and which, tomorrow, will kill two million, brings us up suddenly against our responsibilities.’³³ From the outset, like fellow existentialists such as Jaspers, he approached the Nuclear Age through the prism of personal rather than collective responsibility. While, as is discussed further below, Aron (and later others such as Hedley Bull) would conceive of

²⁴Ibid., p. 151.

²⁵Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: And Essay on Phenomenological Ontology* (London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge, 2003), p. 504.

²⁶Schell, *The Fate of the Earth*, p. 140. See Herman Kahn, *Thinking About the Unthinkable* (New York, NY: Horizon Press, 1962). In his discussion of the role of the artist in the Nuclear Age in being able to ‘commune with the dead’ in order to reflect on the true meaning of human existence in the Nuclear Age, Schell invoked another existentialist philosopher, Albert Camus. See Schell, *The Fate of the Earth*, p. 163. Work on Schell’s perspectives on nuclear weapons, ecological collapse, and extinction have emphasised his ‘existentialist perspective that became central for Schell’s engagement with both nuclear weapons and ecology’. Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest, ‘Nuclear weapons, extinction, and the Anthropocene: Reappraising Jonathan Schell’, *Review of International Studies*, 47:3 (2021), p. 296.

²⁷Alfie Kohn, ‘Existentialism here and now’, *The Georgia Review*, 38:2 (summer 1984), pp. 381–97 (p. 397).

²⁸Lisl Marburg Goodman and Lee Ann Hoff, *Omnicide: The Nuclear Dilemma* (New York, NY et al.: Praeger, 1990), p. 31. They define omnicide as the destruction of humanity by humanity (p. 29). The phrase was coined by John Sommerville in 1979. See John Somerville, ‘Nuclear omnicide: It is now everyone’s responsibility to prevent the Holocaust’, *The Churchman*, 193: 6 (August/September 1979), pp. 12–13.

²⁹Martin Amis, *Einstein’s Monsters* (London, UK: Jonathan Cape, 1987), p. 6.

³⁰Ibid., p. 8.

³¹Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 6.

³²Ibid., p. 326. See, for example, Helen Caldicott, *Nuclear Madness: What You Can Do!* (Brookline, MA: Autumn Press, 1978); E. P. Thompson and Dan Smith (eds), *Protest and Survive* (New York, NY and London, UK: Monthly Review Press, 1981); Stephen J. Cimbala, *The Dead Volcano: The Background and Effects of Nuclear War Complacency* (Westport, CT and London, UK: Praeger, 2002).

³³Quoted in David Lethbridge, ‘Constructing peace by freedom: Jean-Paul Sartre, four short speeches on the peace movement, 1952–1955’, *Sartre Studies International*, 18:2 (2012), p. 10.

nuclear responsibilities in an explicitly intersubjective sense, the existentialist impulse was to seek peace through individuals taking on their own responsibility for self-criticism and self-education.³⁴

In the years that followed, he gave a number of speeches at meetings and seminars held by peace groups and wrote editorials and columns in which he outlined a highly pessimistic, if not fatalistic, view of the likelihood of war (including coining the phrase used in the title of this article). His views on the politics of nuclear weapons soon reflected his progressive political views and philosophical preferences, famously referring to the bomb as a 'weapon against history.'³⁵ He viewed Western nations in particular as wanting a monopoly over the ultimate weapon for purposes of control in the face of progress, writing that, 'In order to stop the world turning they are threatening to suppress history by liquidating those who make history.'³⁶ For Sartre, the bomb was therefore an inherently reactionary weapon, a position that of course would sit awkwardly with its acquisition by revolutionary governments in 1949 (the Soviet Union) and 1964 (the People's Republic of China).

This led Sartre to be, unlike Aron, an outspoken advocate of nuclear disarmament. At times this was borne of his progressive politics, at other times he joined philosophers and writers such as Bertrand Russell in making the case for nuclear abolition on purely rationalist grounds.³⁷ Echoing many of the arguments made by nuclear abolitionists and proponents of the TPNW today albeit in different geopolitical circumstances, Sartre's writing and speeches on Cold War geopolitics emphasised the oppressive and unjust outcomes felt outside of the two camps of East and West, particularly in the colonised world.³⁸ For him, the Cold War nuclear arms race deprived people everywhere of the peace of freedom: 'Our peace can only have one meaning: it is possible for all nations and all men to muster their own destiny; in a word it is freedom.'³⁹ Here we see an alignment of his political response to the Cold War with the emphasis on freedom and choice in his philosophical writings. Other existentialist writers such as Jaspers, and existentialist-adjacent intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt were far less enamoured with the conflation of freedom with peace.⁴⁰ Arendt, in particular, was scathing in her appraisal of such a position given the existential risks associated with nuclear use: 'To sound off with a cheerful "give me liberty or give me death" sort of argument in the face of the unprecedented and inconceivable potential of destruction in nuclear warfare is not even hollow; it is downright ridiculous.'⁴¹

Important in the existentialist tradition in general, and central to Sartre's contribution in particular, are notions of, and debates about, agency. For the IR scholar, agency is about actors and action. For the existentialist, agency is about choice. What the two approaches have in common is a focus on what Colin Wight has identified as 'the dual notions of meaning and intentionality.'⁴² IR scholars have generally conceded the existence of both important structural phenomena and the potential for either individual human or collective (often state) agency as two ever-present factors in world politics whose relative importance for causal explanations can be endlessly debated.

³⁴ Andrew Ryder, 'Sartre's Theater of Resistance: Les mouches and the deadlock of collective responsibility', *Sartre Studies International*, 15:2 (2009), pp. 78–95; Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. 312.

³⁵ Quoted in Lethbridge, 'Constructing peace by freedom', p. 11.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³⁷ Bertrand Russell, *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (London, UK: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1959).

³⁸ It is worth noting that this did not lead him to the advocacy of non-violence of many in the same intellectual circles during this period. See Michael Fleming, 'Sartre on violence: Not so ambivalent?', *Sartre Studies International*, 17:1 (2011), pp. 20–40.

³⁹ Quoted in Lethbridge, 'Constructing peace by freedom', p. 14.

⁴⁰ In 1963 (in a book dedicated to Gertrude and Karl Jaspers), Arendt wrote that 'The only discussion of the war question I know of which dares to face both the horrors of nuclear weapons and the threat of totalitarianism, and is therefore entirely free of mental reservation, is Karl Jaspers' *The Future of Mankind*'. Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York, NY: The Viking Press, 1963), p. 287, n. 1. Arendt and Jaspers, who were close friends and wrote regularly to each other on a variety of topics, had corresponded about nuclear weapons in general and Jaspers' book in the years prior to its publication. In one letter, Jaspers described his task in revising an earlier essay on the topic, which would go on to become the book manuscript, as 'an expression of political consciousness in the shadow of the bomb'. Lotte Kohler and Hans Saner (eds), *Hannah Arendt Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926–1969* (New York et al.: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers), p. 308.

⁴¹ Arendt, *On Revolution*, p. 3.

⁴² Colin Wight, 'State agency: Social action without human activity?', *Review of International Studies*, 30:2 (2004), p. 274.

The existentialist position by contrast, is *a priori* critical of structural accounts of human society. Instead it emphasises the agonisingly ever-present conditions of freedom and choice. While structural forces in the form of societal expectations may exist, they do so by virtue of human creation and the choice to conform to, and perpetuate, these constraints. There is no escaping the choice to free oneself of these structures or to choose instead to succumb to them. As Sartre puts it, ‘Choice always remains a choice in a situation.’⁴³

Such a relentless prioritisation of agency takes on a particular significance in the Nuclear Age. The ultimate choice for a nuclear-armed decision-maker is whether to make use of this destructive power in a moment of terror produced by the fear that an adversary might strike first. Given the chances, if not likelihood, of any nuclear use leading to retaliation and thereby instigating what strategists refer to (in deceptively neutral language) as a ‘nuclear exchange’, such a decision relates directly to the future of human existence.⁴⁴ The stakes could not be higher. This decision is never made under ideal circumstances but instead, under the worst, where time spent deliberating the ‘consequences of our freedom’ and the responsibilities it entails is, by definition, extremely limited. Based on modern ballistic missile flight times, the best estimates for how long a decision-maker would have to decide whether and how to respond to an incoming nuclear attack would be no more than 12 minutes.⁴⁵ But for Sartre, no matter how dreadful the decision and no matter the circumstances in which it is made, the freedom to choose is inescapable by virtue of the decision-maker’s human existence. US President Ronald Reagan may have uttered ‘no prayer more fervently than the ancient prayer for peace on Earth’⁴⁶ when navigating the threats to human existence posed by the more than sixty thousand nuclear warheads possessed between the United States and Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, but for Sartre, the choices of an individual – whether a nuclear-armed president or otherwise – are theirs and theirs alone:

Everything that happens to me is mine ... The most terrible situations of war, the worst tortures do not create a non-human state of things; there is no non-human situation. It is only through fear, flight, and recourse to magical types of conduct that I shall decide on the non-human, but this decision is human, and I shall carry the entire responsibility for it.⁴⁷

It is in Sartre’s discussion of freedom and responsibility that some of the distance between he and Aron on questions of peace and war is narrowed. Sartre’s approach to the freedom to choose during war was to emphasise the responsibilities inherent in the human condition. For Sartre, war is not a force external to us for which we must reckon. It is not a structural force that, as Hedley Bull once described it, acts as ‘a basic determinant of the shape the [international] system assumes at any one time’, nor is it ‘a manifestation of disorder in international society.’⁴⁸ Instead, the existence of the agent and the war itself are intimately bound together because ‘I *am* this war which restricts and limits and makes comprehensible the period which preceded it.’⁴⁹ Responsibility for the war and our experience of it, for Sartre, lies in what we do and do not choose to do. The first principle of existentialism, as Sartre claimed, is that ‘Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself.’⁵⁰ As

⁴³ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (New York, NY: Citadel Press, 1957), p. 44.

⁴⁴ On the issues of escalation and control in the use of nuclear weapons, see Desmond Ball, ‘Can Nuclear War Be Controlled?’, Adelphi Paper No. 169 (London, UK: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1981).

⁴⁵ David Wright, Eryn MacDonald, and Lisbeth Gronlund, ‘Reducing the Risk of Nuclear War Taking Nuclear Weapons Off High Alert’, Union of Concerned Scientists (January 2016), available at: <https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2016/02/Reducing-Risk-Nuclear-War-full-report.pdf> accessed 13 May 2022.

⁴⁶ Ronald Reagan, ‘Inaugural Address 1985’, Washington, DC, 21 January 1985, available at: <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/inaugural-address-1985> accessed 13 May 2022. For a full discussion of Reagan’s reliance on his religious faith under these circumstances, see F. H. Knelman, *Reagan, God and the Bomb* (Toronto: McLelland and Stuart, 1985).

⁴⁷ Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 53.

⁴⁸ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (Basingstoke and London, UK: Macmillan, 1977), p. 187.

⁴⁹ Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 56, emphasis in original.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

the famous existentialist phrase goes: existence precedes essence. If there is no God to conceive of human nature, then humans are what they conceive of themselves to be and this is done through the choices they make even, perhaps especially, in war.

The freedom to choose, even under conditions of war, highlights the inescapable responsibilities of human existence and therefore, as we will see in the following section, this brings Sartre and Aron's thinking on ethical responses to war and violence closer together. Yet it also highlights the limits of Sartre's reflections on the human condition and war for the Nuclear Age. Following the indiscriminate killing and utter devastation produced by the strategic bombardments of cities such as Dresden, Coventry, and Tokyo in the Second World War, let alone in the aftermath of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Sartre's writings about freedom, responsibility and war were remarkably unsuited to the new era of aerial bombardment. They would go on to become even less suited to what would soon be dubbed 'the missile age'.⁵¹ In the early 1950s, when Sartre's popularity was at its height, officials were making public statements about the consequences of a nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union. In 1956, when asked about the estimated casualties of an American nuclear attack against Russia in which the prevailing winds would spread radiation in a southeasterly direction, General James M. Gavin told the US Senate Armed Services Committee that, 'Current planning estimates run on the order of several hundred million deaths.'⁵² Yet Sartre's position on the responsibilities arising from an individual's freedom to choose how to live in any and all situations led him to claim 'there are no innocent victims' because 'we have the war we deserve.'⁵³ Still thinking in terms of soldiers on a battlefield in a traditional theatre of war, he argued of the human agent finding themselves at war that, 'I deserve it first because I could always get out of it by suicide or by desertion; these ultimate [possibilities] are those which must always be present for us when there is a question of envisaging a situation.'⁵⁴ This agent-centric understanding of the world simply bears no resemblance to a world in which quite literally a handful of individuals hold the authority to authorise nuclear strikes. Writers such as Elaine Scarry and Daniel Deudney have described this as forms of 'nuclear monarchy'⁵⁵ and even 'nuclear despotism'⁵⁶ in which 'temporally compressed decisionmaking must be concentrated by necessity into the hands of one individual.'⁵⁷ In such a world, the freedom of individuals or even polities to choose under conditions of war is radically different from the pre-nuclear era. The contingency of Sartre's work in relation to the nature of warfare, and the limits that this produces in terms of his ability to truly reckon with the ethical questions posed by the nuclear revolution, has been captured by a number of critics. As Craig Vasey has identified, when Sartre was attempting to write the final volume in his planned *The Roads to Freedom* tetralogy in the early 1950s, the Nuclear Age had overtaken him. His characters no longer inhabited the same world that he or his audience did: 'the world Mathieu inhabits is a prison camp in 1941; the world Sartre now inhabits is the post-Hiroshima world where Korea might well become a nuclear Third World War.'⁵⁸

It is not just that having 'the war we deserve' leaves individuals living under the nuclear 'sword of Damocles' with little room for 'authentic' existence without embracing their choice not to escape

⁵¹ Bernard Brodie, *Strategy in the Missile Age* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1959).

⁵² Evidence to the Subcommittee on the Air Force of the US Senate Committee on Armed Services, Washington, DC, 25 May 1956, quoted in Bertrand Russell, *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (London, UK: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 23.

⁵³ Sartre, *Existentialism and Human Emotions*, p. 56.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Elaine Scarry, *Thermonuclear Monarchy: Choosing Between Democracy and Doom* (New York, NY and London, UK: W. Norton & Company, 2014).

⁵⁶ Daniel H. Deudney, *Bounding Power: Republican Security Theory from the Polis to the Global Village* (Princeton, NJ and Oxford, UK: Princeton University Press, 2007).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁵⁸ Craig Vasey, 'The day after "existentialism is a humanism", and "the last chance"', *Sartre Studies International*, 16:1 (2010), p. 63.

the dangers of nuclear crises by suicide. It also leaves little guidance for the nuclear-armed decision-maker by way of reckoning with the responsibilities of being able to destroy millions of lives with a single launch order. Once US and Soviet decision-makers had adopted 'counter-value' targeting strategies in which civilian population centres are targeted over military sites, decision-makers had to consider the intergenerational effects of possibly killing entire generations of families living in the same city in a single attack. Sartre's thinking is insightful on the anguish produced by that decision-maker's consciousness of the consequences of their future decisions alongside their inability to control such decisions at present. His dogged insistence on the fact that our choices define our existence and that those choices are always real can be a remedy for the groupthink and 'conventional wisdoms' that lead to complacency about nuclear weapons. This remedy could hardly be more necessary. As one account puts the contemporary approach to the tens of thousands of nuclear warheads sitting in arsenals today:

Everyone knows what a nuclear war would be like: it would be an apocalypse. We hardly give that concept a second thought. It is a notion that powerfully frames our thinking about nuclear weapons policy, and it is so common that we notice it about as much as the furniture in our living rooms.⁵⁹

Such complacency about an everyday existential threat to humanity is both grotesque and profound. Sartre's exhortation is to resist the strictures of societal expectations and to confront the anguish of being a free agent choosing how to live in the nuclear age – being, as Sartre put it, a 'little God'.⁶⁰

Yet he is more interested in the anguish itself than he is with its real-world consequences and the ethical dilemmas it produces. For example, should the nuclear-armed leader who trusts her own judgement today but does not necessarily trust her successor's judgement with the same weapons in the future therefore opt to unilaterally disarm? Would it be to act in bad faith to choose not to imagine a future when her own nation might engage in a pre-emptive nuclear attack resulting in the indiscriminate killing of an adversary's population (not to mention undermining the 'nuclear taboo' thereby making further strikes by others more likely)? By perpetuating the status quo of her nation's privileged position in the global nuclear order rather than engaging in unilateral disarmament, is that leader living an inauthentic life by claiming that she has no choice? Yet by that logic, it would equally be an act of bad faith not to imagine a future in which that adversary may itself choose to pre-emptively strike her own nation having lost the deterrent effect of a retaliatory capability following her choice to unilaterally disarm. This is the dreadful and paralysing state that the leader finds herself in. It would appear that the tragic nature of an anarchic international system has deprived her of any real choice. Yet Sartre tells us that choice is inescapable, that the 'first act of bad faith is to flee what it can not flee, to flee what it is'.⁶¹ The ethical implication is clear: we must actively deliberate on these questions and explore alternative options. But on the criteria that might guide such deliberation, Sartre is far less clear.

Living with nuclear weapons means that a handful of individuals at any one time quite literally have the freedom to make choices that affect the fate of the rest of humanity. They do this every day. And while the 'bad faith' acceptance of this may result in the perpetuation of an unnecessary threat to human existence, we should not assume that it is only consciousness and being that will break us out of such madness. At times when leaders have been forced into an understanding of their freedom of action and the severe anguish it induces, their responsibilities have not been lost on them. The then US Attorney General Robert Kennedy wrote of his brother's fateful decision-making during the thirteen days of the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962:

⁵⁹Ward Wilson, *Five Myths about Nuclear Weapons* (Boston, MA and New York, NY: Mariner Books, 2013), p. 10.

⁶⁰Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 66.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 93.

I think that these few minutes were the time of gravest concern for the President. Was the world on the brink of a holocaust? Was it our error? A mistake? Was there something further that should have been done? Or not done? His hand went up to his face and covered his mouth. He opened and closed his fist. His face seemed drawn, his eyes pained, almost gray.⁶²

Rather than hiding behind the enormity of the situation, the sheer destructiveness of the arsenals of both sides, or some reading of the inevitability of conflict due to the essence of human nature, if his brother's account is correct, John Kennedy was instead reckoning with his freedom to choose in the Nuclear Age with the upmost dedication and authenticity. Yet Kennedy came dangerously close to ordering a military strike, which would very likely have resulted in a massive nuclear exchange between the Soviet Union and the United States. Such authenticity is no barrier to a nuclear-armed decision-maker choosing to 'protect' their own population by using nuclear weapons. Nor did the recognition of his own freedom to choose nuclear annihilation lead Kennedy, nor his successors, towards Sartre's own preference for nuclear disarmament. It took another five years before the US nuclear stockpile would peak at over 31,255 warheads and until 1986 for the Soviet Stockpile to hit its peak of over 40,159 warheads.⁶³ Despite the Cuban Missile Crisis resulting in a much greater awareness of the dangers of nuclear crises among both practitioners and the general public, it was far from the last nuclear 'close call' of the Cold War.⁶⁴

Nor should we assume that individuals accepting their responsibility to seriously grapple with the ethical decisions that they delegate to elites (political decision-makers and defence officials), rather than hiding behind the inauthentic denial of their own freedom to choose, would necessarily lower the risks of nuclear holocaust. Recent research into public opinion and willingness to sanction the use of nuclear weapons, even when civilian populations would be targeted, shows that significant proportions of the public in a number of nuclear-armed states are not dissuaded by norms against nuclear use and the deliberate targeting of civilians.⁶⁵ The freedom to choose can also entail the choice of nuclear strikes. Without going beyond the need to ask questions about how we have come to live so easily with nuclear weapons, Sartre's existentialism only offers limited pathways for surviving the existential threats of the Nuclear Age.

Structure, international society, and Aron's conception of nuclear responsibility

Unlike his (one-time) friend and interlocutor Sartre, Raymond Aron devoted much of his thinking and writing to the specific ethical and strategic choices faced by states and individuals living with the bomb. Along with others such as Bernard Brodie, John Herz, Thomas Schelling, Albert Wohlstetter, Herman Kahn, and Hedley Bull, Aron is widely considered one of the key thinkers of early Cold War nuclear scholarship.⁶⁶ In large part, his early, but also sustained, focus on nuclear

⁶²Robert F. Kennedy, *Thirteen Days: A Memoir of the Cuban Missile Crisis* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1969), pp. 69–70.

⁶³Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 'Nuclear Notebook: Nuclear Arsenals of the World', available at: {<https://thebulletin.org/nuclear-notebook/>} accessed 13 May 2022.

⁶⁴See Patricia Lewis, Heather Williams, Benoît Pelopidas, and Sasan Aghlani, *Too Close for Comfort: Cases of Near Nuclear Use and Options for Policy*, Chatham House Report (London, UK: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 2014), available at: {<https://www.chathamhouse.org/2014/04/too-close-comfort-cases-near-nuclear-use-and-options-policy>} accessed 13 May 2022; Union of Concerned Scientists, 'Fact Sheet: Close Calls with Nuclear Weapons', 15 January 2015, available at: {<https://www.ucsusa.org/sites/default/files/attach/2015/04/Close%2520Calls%2520with%2520Nuclear%2520Weapons.pdf>} accessed 13 May 2022.

⁶⁵See Scott D. Sagan and Benjamin A. Valentino, 'Revisiting Hiroshima in Iran: What Americans really think about using nuclear weapons and killing noncombatants', *International Security*, 42:1 (2017), pp. 41–79; Janina Dill, Scott D. Sagan, and Benjamin A. Valentino, 'Kettles of hawks: Public opinion on the nuclear taboo and noncombatant immunity in the United States, United Kingdom, France, and Israel', *Security Studies*, 31:1 (2022), pp. 1–31.

⁶⁶This list of male nuclear scholars from the Cold War should not be thought of as an exhaustive list of the most important scholars from this time but instead as a list of those who became the most prominent in their day. It therefore excludes the important, but largely marginalised, work of women such as Roberta Wohlstetter, Merze Tate, Annette Baker Fox, Vera

weapons was a product of his wartime experience and how quickly he comprehended the radical nature of the nuclear revolution. In his memoirs, Aron would recount that ‘the epistemological questions that had excited me before 1939 barely interested me in 1945.’⁶⁷

However, more than simply an IR or strategic studies figure, Aron also wrote widely on history, philosophy, and sociology. All three of these areas informed his outlook on the world in general and on nuclear weapons in particular. He rejected a teleological view of history in all forms – including Marxism, which would lead to a good deal of his differences with Sartre. His general pessimism about the nature of world politics has often led him to be associated with the realist tradition. Rather than joining Sartre in calling for the ambitious goal of nuclear abolition, he was an early advocate of settling for the more modest goal of deterrent rather than warfighting postures. He also advocated policies that might create the degree of stability found in mutual vulnerability – what would become known as the concept of mutual assured destruction (MAD).

While often not discussed as such, the doctrine of MAD relies on an intersubjective understanding between two or more parties about deterrence in general, and the requirements of a deterrence-centred nuclear posture in particular. Without at least a minimum level of agreement as to what constitutes vulnerability in the Nuclear Age, and what kinds of deployments and postures either increase or decrease that vulnerability, there can be no stability based on the ability to destroy the other being mutual. If one side interprets the other’s moves as signalling a confidence in their own invulnerability, they are likely to fear that an attack is imminent. Thomas Schelling, while operating in the rationalist mode of bargaining theory, referred to this as ‘the dialogue of competitive armament’ – a process of intersubjectively arriving at common ideas and practices that reduced the risk of war via what he thought of as ‘feedback in the arms competition.’⁶⁸ Echoing Aron’s appreciation for the relational nature of arriving at a nuclear order based on deterrence rather than warfighting, Schelling wrote that it is not enough for one side to adopt a posture of restraint but that ‘the other side must know it, must be equipped to perceive restraint if it occurs, and must have equipped itself to be discriminating in its own fashion, too.’⁶⁹ MAD was not some kind of automatic condition that naturally followed from the realisation of the immense destructiveness of first atomic, and later thermonuclear, weapons. It was a way of surviving in this new age that could only be reached through common, even if tacit and even reluctant, understanding between the superpowers in their unique historical and social setting.⁷⁰ Therefore, developing norms of nuclear restraint became integral to surviving the tensions and crises that had already become hallmarks of this new era of threatened mass destruction. The development of norms was grist to the mill for the sociologically minded Aron.

Instead of focusing on freedom and choice like his former schoolmate, Aron approached the question of responsibility in the Nuclear Age through the lens of societal norms. Today we might think of this as being a broadly constructivist, or perhaps even more accurately, English School approach to IR. Just as Bull wrote about the social institution of the ‘managerial’ role of the great powers – what he and others termed the ‘great responsables’ – Aron envisaged social norms as being the greatest restraint on the nuclear-armed superpowers.⁷¹ For Aron, ‘Inter-state relations

Micheles Dean, and Claudia Jones who all wrote on, and influenced the thinking of their colleagues, on debates central to the nuclear politics of the Cold War including on pre-emption, nuclear testing, alliance management, and disarmament.

⁶⁷ Raymond Aron, *Memoirs: Fifty Years of Political Thought* (New York, NY: Holmes & Meier, 1990), p. 141.

⁶⁸ Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven, CT and London, UK: Yale University Press, 1966), pp. 260–6.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁷⁰ On why even a rationalist account of MAD must take into account different ways of perceiving and interpreting an adversary’s nuclear signals, see Charles Glaser, ‘Why do strategists disagree about the requirements of deterrence?’, in Lynn Eden and Steven E. Miller (eds), *Nuclear Arguments: Understanding the Strategic Nuclear Arms Control Debates* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 109–71.

⁷¹ Hedley Bull, ‘The great irresponsibles? The United States, the Soviet Union and world order’, *International Journal*, 35:3 (1980), pp. 437–47. See also Bull, *The Anarchical Society*, pp. 194–222; Shunji Cui and Barry Buzan, ‘Great Power management in international society’, *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 9:2 (2016), pp. 181–210.

consist of social behaviour ... Diplomatic-strategic behaviour ... reckons on the reaction of the very person in relation to which it orients itself ...⁷² In some ways this is reminiscent of the work of existentialist writers, particularly Sartre and Beauvoir, who focused on the relational nature of self and other in defining existence. Yet Aron's pessimism is never far from his analysis and it is the relational element that drives the need for societal norms to dampen Cold War rivalry, 'The authority exercised by each of the major powers on its bloc is directly related to the fear aroused by the other.'⁷³ But importantly, the social nature of the international system – or what should therefore be rightly termed *international society* – is also evident in the recourse by practitioners to claims of legitimacy. Diplomatic behaviour also 'always attempts to justify itself, thereby admitting the authority of values or rules.'⁷⁴ Contemporary calls for a return to notions of 'nuclear responsibility', not least in the context of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, draw directly on this line of argument originally developed by Aron and others.⁷⁵

In Aron's view, not only had the invention of nuclear weapons forced humanity to consider the future of its own existence like never before, it had altered the social fabric of interstate relations. As he put it, 'What are called weapons of mass destruction have changed something in the course of relations between what are called sovereign states. They have changed neither the nature of men nor that of political units.'⁷⁶ His approach to trying to understand the impact of nuclear weapons was a specifically 'third image' one.⁷⁷

In particular, it was a social understanding of structural change in world politics. This sits in direct contrast with Sartre's agent-centred approach in which the only way to exist authentically in the Nuclear Age is to continue to insist on the individual's freedom to choose their own path, regardless of societal norms. Most importantly, since 1945 this has meant choosing to reject – and even resist – the frameworks and norms that have led us to living with the threat of omnicide as a normal condition in world politics to be 'managed' like other challenges.

For Aron, the first change that nuclear weapons had made to the social fabric of interstate relations was to convince the possessors of the ultimate weapon that this power must be deployed towards defensive, rather than offensive, purposes. This would mean that, rather than seeking gains in warfighting from nuclear weapons, both sides of the intense superpower rivalry would instead posture their forces to deter attack from the other side only. Aron, a keen student of the history of warfare, identified the revolutionary nature of this shift in thinking about the weapons of war. While others, like both Sartre and Jaspers looked to a fundamental change in consciousness in order meet the challenges of what they thought of as a completely new world, Aron thought of the nuclear revolution as a change in the nature of warfare, but not in the basic drivers of international conflict.⁷⁸ Therefore, it made sense to look to familiar ways of restraining relations between powerful states, such as the balance of power, diplomacy, and even international law, and consider how these practices and ideas might be adapted for a new age.

⁷² Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (London, UK: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), p. 725.

⁷³ Raymond Aron, 'The anarchical order of power', in Stanley Hoffman (ed.), *Conditions of World Order* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), p. 47.

⁷⁴ Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 725.

⁷⁵ Laura Considine and James Souter, 'State responsibilities and international nuclear politics', in Hannes Hansen-Magnusson and Antje Vetterlein (eds), *The Routledge Handbook on Responsibility in International Relations* (London, UK: Routledge, 2021), pp. 164–76; Sebastian Brixey-Williams and Nicholas J. Wheeler, *Nuclear Responsibilities: A New Approach for Thinking and Talking about Nuclear Weapons* (London and Birmingham, UK: The British American Security Information Council and The Institute for Conflict, Cooperation and Security, 2020); Benjamin Zala, 'Washington rediscovers "nuclear responsibility" in the Ukraine crisis', *The Interpreter* (17 March 2022), available at: <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/washington-rediscovers-nuclear-responsibility-ukraine-crisis> accessed 13 May 2022.

⁷⁶ Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 371.

⁷⁷ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Man, the State and War* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1959).

⁷⁸ Christian Malis, 'Raymond Aron, war and nuclear weapons: The primacy of politics paradox', in Olivier Schmitt (ed.), *Raymond Aron and International Relations* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2021), p. 105.

Rather than ‘suppressing history’ as Sartre put it, for Aron, the radical departure posed by nuclear weapons from the weapons of the past amounted to ‘the acceleration of history.’⁷⁹ The effect was to severely limit the freedom of action of the superpowers for the sake of ensuring their own, and humankind’s, continued existence. This new way of thinking about military technology and the effect of the agreed upon understanding on it by both sides of the Cold War divide – in spite of its regular testing and challenging in nuclear crises and ‘near misses’ that Aron was very much aware of – might almost lead to what he termed an ‘optimistic theory of peace by fear’. In 1962 – the year of the Cuban Missile Crisis – he wrote

Doubtless the most evident effect of the thermonuclear armament has been to deter the two super powers from total war, to incite both of them to moderation, to dissuade each of them from aiming a blow at the vital interests of the other. The optimistic theory of peace by fear (or at least, of the limitation of wars by fear of the thermonuclear apocalypse) may be based on the experience of the last fifteen years.⁸⁰

In contrast to Sartre, Aron emphasised the pacifying effects of social structure – mutual restraint due to the sheer destructiveness of these weapons and a shared understanding that deterrence was the best path to stability – over the choices and freedoms of agents. This was not the material structure of the nuclear balance favoured in the analysis of his fellow travelling realist strategists. Instead, for Aron the destructive force of the bomb had led to a revolution in thinking. It was not the material threat itself but how the decision-makers chose to respond that resulted in the absence of nuclear war: ‘when some states possess means of destruction against which all the others cannot protect themselves, and which they cannot respond to either, the essential focus lies predominantly in the minds of the group of men responsible for the diplomacy or strategy of the nuclear powers.’⁸¹ So while agency mattered to Aron too, for him it was the intersubjective agreement on legitimate nuclear practices built between agents over time – the creation of a social structure – that would reduce the threat of nuclear war.

In addition to the self-restraint borne of a mutually agreed upon (however rationally-based) approach to deterrence and mutual vulnerability, Aron also pointed to a wider societal norm that constrained the nuclear-armed actors – not just the superpowers. As early as 1958, he was articulating a notion of a norm against nuclear use – that which would become known in time as the ‘nuclear taboo.’⁸² He characterised this as a situation where nuclear weapons, ‘like gold reserves used to back currency’, were ‘buried in the ground, and accumulated in stockpiles.’⁸³ This led to the positive outcome in his view that nuclear-armed decision-makers were ‘paralysed’ by a taboo against actually using these weapons. The taboo and the agreed upon understandings of the workings of MAD were two sides of the same coin, both lowering the chances of nuclear Armageddon. Aron wrote that ‘it does not seem to me either intellectually right or politically opportune to assert that nothing could stop a total war the moment the atomic taboo was violated.’⁸⁴ In other words, the taboo bolstered deterrence, but the latter could be restored even in the event of a so-called ‘limited’ nuclear war.⁸⁵

⁷⁹ Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 406.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

⁸¹ Aron, ‘The anarchical order of power’, p. 43.

⁸² Raymond Aron, *On War: Atomic Weapons and Global Diplomacy*, trans. Terence Kilmartin (London, UK: Secker and Warburg, 1958), p. 69. For the later literature on the nuclear taboo, see T. V. Paul, ‘Nuclear taboo and war initiation in regional conflicts’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 39:4 (1995), pp. 696–717; Nina Tannenwald, ‘The nuclear taboo: The United States and the normative basis of nuclear non-use’, *International Organization*, 53:3 (1999), pp. 433–68; Nina Tannenwald, ‘Stigmatizing the bomb: Origins of the nuclear taboo’, *International Security*, 29:4 (2005), pp. 5–49; Rebecca Davis Gibbons and Keir Lieber, ‘How durable is the nuclear weapons taboo?’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 42:1 (2019), pp. 29–54.

⁸³ Aron, ‘The anarchical order of power’, pp. 43–4.

⁸⁴ Aron, *On War*, p. 303.

⁸⁵ On Aron’s position in this regard, see Ian Clark, *Limited Nuclear War: Political Theory and War Conventions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982.), pp. 149, 148.

As a key figure in French sociology circles – even if adopting the position that Peter Baehr has described as an ‘honoured outsider’⁸⁶ – it is not surprising that Aron’s position on human freedom and societal regulation echoes that of one of the sociologists he most admired, Emile Durkheim. When describing Durkheim’s work, Aron could almost have been describing himself: ‘In a certain sense, Durkheim’s thought is conservative; it seeks to restore social consensus and thus reinforce the authority of collective imperatives and prohibitions.’⁸⁷ Whereas existentialism rejects societal authority in favour of an ethic of personal responsibility (to live authentically is to recognise the freedom to defy social norms), Aron embraced Durkheim’s small ‘c’ conservatism. But in Durkheim, Aron also recognised a liberalism that was evident in his own work, ‘A sociology justifying rationalist individualism but also preaching respect for collective norms – such, it seems to me, is Durkheim’s ideal.’⁸⁸ Durkheim was not simply interested in the societal regulation of human freedom but instead in the interaction between the *conscience collective* and individual emancipation. As one account puts it, ‘the very prerequisite for this emancipation is the transfiguration in human existence produced by society. Thus there is no inherent opposition between “regulation” and “freedom”: the first is the condition of the second.’⁸⁹

Aron’s pessimism does not necessarily require an outright rejection of existentialism. Instead it rests upon an assumption that the temptation to slide back into what the existentialist would think of as an ‘inauthentic’ life is ever present. This is not a theoretical proposition but an empirical observation. As Sartre’s fellow existentialist interlocutor Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it, ‘It would seem that the communion between a man and his power to choose cannot long be endured’ before many succumb to ‘the rule of a fairly conservative reason’ whether this be the strictures of political ideology, the escape of religious faith and doctrine, or the socialising pressures of norms.⁹⁰ For Aron, therefore, when it comes to living with weapons that threaten humanity’s very existence, those norms can either make nuclear use more or less permissible and therefore more or less likely. His pessimism leads him to opting for those rules and norms that, at the very least, lower the risk of a nuclear exchange – even at the expense of Sartre’s preferred goal of nuclear abolition.⁹¹

Whereas Sartre worried about humans being so ‘immersed in the historical situation’ that they fail to ‘even imagine that things can be otherwise,’⁹² Aron saw that some humans were quite capable of imagining alternative futures where the norms of international society at that moment in history did not inhibit the actions of nuclear-armed states. That is what concerned him most. He put it rather pointedly, ‘Heaven forbid that a statesman might exist who would dream that nuclear weapons could not only be deterrent weapons – that is instruments to be used in human dialogue – but also arms of extermination.’⁹³ It is perfectly possible for individuals to reject international norms, like the nuclear taboo, and opt to instead use the weapons at their disposal.

It was to norms such as the nuclear taboo and agreed upon understandings about MAD and responsible nuclear great power management that seemed to him to offer a path to continued

⁸⁶Peter Baehr, ‘The honored outsider: Raymond Aron as sociologist’, *Sociological Theory*, 31:2 (2013), pp. 93–115.

⁸⁷Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought 2: Durkheim, Pareto, Weber*, trans. Richard Howard and Helen Weaver (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 106.

⁸⁸Ibid. Aron was, however, quick to point out in one of their many publicly traded barbs, that ‘The liberalism in which I seek and find my spiritual home has nothing in common with a philosophy for tender souls, a formula dear to Jean-Paul Sartre.’ Raymond Aron, *Power, Modernity and Sociology: Selected Sociological Writings*, ed. Dominique Schnapper (Aldershot, UK: Edward Elgar, 1988), p. 230.

⁸⁹Anthony Giddens, ‘Introduction: Durkheim’s writings in sociology and social philosophy’, in Anthony Giddens (ed.), *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1972), p. 28.

⁹⁰Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (3rd edn, Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 3.

⁹¹Aron is best characterised as sceptical about the prospects for nuclear abolition rather than being opposed to this outcome. He devoted relatively little of his voluminous writing on nuclear issues to the topic largely because he thought that the problem of verification of a multilateral disarmament treaty was unlikely to be solved in the immediate future. See Aron, *Peace and War*, p. 672.

⁹²Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 456–7.

⁹³Aron, ‘The anarchical order of power’, p. 45.

human existence. Rather than championing the freedom to choose how to live one's life as the only path to authenticity, Aron championed the regulative effects of societal norms instead. This led him to what he described as 'the true question concerning the future' in relation to his dual-track reading of norms of deterrence and the nuclear taboo as the pillars of a fragile social order at the international level:

The true question concerning the future thus involves the continuation of this fragile order, founded at once on a strategic doctrine expounded gradually and spontaneously by the actors in history, and on prohibitions arising out of the depths of human conscience – or perhaps one might say, out of the collective unconsciousness.⁹⁴

The fragility of the global nuclear order that Aron wrote of decades ago persists and, if anything, international society may be approaching an even more precarious moment in history. Nuclear threats have returned to the lexicon of world politics with a regularity not seen since the height of the Cold War.⁹⁵ New technologies are being developed and deployed – often outside of the traditional realm of nuclear weapons and their delivery systems – that challenge old ways of thinking about MAD and the nuclear revolution.⁹⁶ For the first time since their invention, the challenge of avoiding nuclear war will be set against a multipolar distribution of power. Even otherwise robust and widely adhered to norms of non-proliferation may now be under challenge.⁹⁷ It would appear that the challenges faced by Sartre, Aron, and their contemporaries have not so much faded as morphed into new dilemmas of an existential nature.

Conclusion: The rights and wrongs of Sartre and Aron in the Nuclear Age

It was once common to hear French intellectuals remark that they would prefer to be 'wrong with Sartre than right with Aron'. What the discussion above may point us towards is a slightly different version of this. It would seem that Sartre encourages us to ask the right questions, while Aron gives us some answers that might actually reduce the likelihood of nuclear war.

Sartre reminds us of what ought to be the daily anguish of choosing to live in a nuclear-armed world and reminds us that the decision to do so is real. A state that is not disarming its arsenal is not just existing within the bounds of an anarchical international system and, accordingly, being deprived of choice. More than this, even the international norms that Aron pointed to in producing some degree of global order, still tolerate the daily possibility of thermonuclear omnicide. 'International society', the 'global liberal order', or the much-discussed 'international rules-based order' all allow for a small minority of states to hold the fate of the rest of humanity in their hands due to their possession of the world's most destructive weapon. There is nothing natural or inescapable about this condition. Sartre's position forces us to ask difficult questions about nuclear futures and mitigates the sense of familiarity that has crept into the way we live with the ability to

⁹⁴Ibid., p. 44.

⁹⁵Peter Baker and Choe Sang-Hun, 'Trump threatens "fire and fury" against North Korea if it endangers US', *New York Times* (8 August 2017), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/08/world/asia/north-korea-un-sanctions-nuclear-missile-united-nations.html>} accessed 13 May 2022; Min Joo Kim, 'North Korean leader threatens nuclear strikes if provoked', *Washington Post* (26 April 2022), available at: {<https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/26/north-korea-parade-nuclear-weapons-icbm/>} accessed 13 May 2022; David E. Sanger and William J. Broad, 'Putin's threats highlight the dangers of a new, riskier nuclear era', *New York Times* (1 June 2022), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/06/01/us/politics/nuclear-arms-treaties.html>} accessed 13 November 2022.

⁹⁶Kier A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, 'The new era of counterforce: Technological change and the future of nuclear deterrence', *International Security*, 41:4 (2017), pp. 9–49; James M. Acton, 'Escalation through entanglement: How the vulnerability of command-and-control systems raises the risks of an inadvertent nuclear war', *International Security*, 43:1 (2018), pp. 56–99; Futter and Zala, 'Strategic non-nuclear weapons and the onset of a Third Nuclear Age'.

⁹⁷William Alberque and Ben Schreer, 'AUKUS, US Allies and the Age of Conditional Proliferation', *International Institute for Strategic Studies* (29 October 2021), available at: {<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2021/10/aukus-us-allies-and-the-age-of-conditional-proliferation>} accessed 13 May 2022.

destroy ourselves at a moment's notice every day. As Robert Jervis put it, 'The idea that not only could we die at any moment – this has been true for any given individual throughout history – but that everyone and everything we care about could be destroyed in a twinkling, must remain always frightening, however familiar it is.'⁹⁸ Just as freedom is fundamental to existence for Sartre and is therefore inescapable, so too is the ethical minefield of living with nuclear weapons inescapable for Jervis: 'None of us can, nor should we, put the nightmare of nuclear holocaust out of our minds.'⁹⁹

More than simply questioning the conventional wisdoms that guard the global nuclear order, Sartre pushes us to remember that structures of insecurity and fear are created by agents and can be undone, even transcended by agents too. He reminds us, as Hugh McDonnell puts it, of 'the mutual unfreedom linking oppressor and oppressed, but also that subjugation was never a closed situation and could be transcended.'¹⁰⁰ Decisions about how to reduce – even eliminate – the existential threat posed by nuclear arsenals, made up of tens of thousands of warheads even today, are within our grasp and to argue otherwise is to completely misunderstand the role of nuclear weapons in world politics.

Yet Sartre's existentialism also gives us little basis for making decisions about *how* to survive a world of persistent nuclear dangers today – even in terms of judging the relative merits of one or other paths to a world without nuclear weapons. Other existentialist (or existentialist-adjacent) thinkers like Jaspers may have more to offer, albeit in ways that depart from pure existentialism and are therefore more Aron than Sartre-like. Jaspers foresaw the need to reflect on the concrete ethical and political questions that the existential threat posed by atomic power posed, writing in 1958 that 'Either all mankind will physically perish or there will be a change in the moral-political condition of man.'¹⁰¹ In a similar vein, Camus' remarkably solidarist English School-like response in 1945 to the news of the bombing of Hiroshima was to broaden this out to thinking about the rights and responsibilities of states in international society: '... we refuse to see anything in such grave news other than the need to argue more energetically in favour of a true international society, in which the great powers will not have superior rights over small and middle-sized nations ...'¹⁰²

Perhaps worse than Sartre's silence on the ethical criteria that we might use to evaluate decisions about, for example, nuclear use, he also leads us towards a wholesale rejection of societal norms aimed at maintaining the status quo. The status quo for Sartre can only ever be the problem. Sartre's position pits agency against structure rather than Aron's more conservative approach, which sees agents as purposely, rather than unthinkingly, creating those structures. For Aron, the societal norms that underpin both MAD and the nuclear taboo are what have kept states from annihilating each other in an all-out nuclear exchange and these norms should therefore not be cast aside lightly. Given the decline of formal strategic arms control over the last twenty years, in which mutual and regular accusations of non-compliance and a new norm of unilateral treaty withdrawal has almost entirely replaced the negotiation of new agreements, it is hard to escape Aron's emphasis on the precariousness of social norms that limit nuclear dangers.¹⁰³

If we are to be right with both Sartre and Aron and survive the Nuclear Age long enough to see its end, then bridging the distance between Sartre's questions and Aron's answers seems to be the deeply problematic but agonisingly unavoidable way forward. Reminding complacent publics

⁹⁸Jervis, *The Meaning of the Nuclear Revolution*, p. ix.

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Hugh McDonnell, 'Jean-Paul Sartre the European', *Modern Intellectual History*, 17:1 (2020), p. 176.

¹⁰¹Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p. vii.

¹⁰²Camus, *Between Hell and Reason*, p. 11. On the distinction between solidarist and pluralist thinking in English School work, see William Bain, 'The pluralist-solidarist debate in the English School', in Cornelia Navari and Daniel M. Green (eds), *Guide to the English School in International Studies* (Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), pp. 159–69. On the pluralist approach to what Camus refers to here as 'superior' rights, see Benjamin Zala, 'Interpreting great power rights in international society: Debating China's right to a sphere of influence', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 16:2 (2020), pp. 210–30.

¹⁰³On the decline of formal arms control and the alternatives that might be explored, see Nina Tannenwald, 'Life beyond arms control: Moving toward a global regime of nuclear restraint and responsibility', *Dædalus*, 149:2 (2020), pp. 205–21.

and decision-makers of the moral disgrace that is the continued existence of tens of thousands of inherently indiscriminate and staggeringly destructive weapons must be central to galvanising political will for navigating what is already looking to be a more dangerous era. But the task is more complex than a simple awakening of humanity to its freedom to choose alternative nuclear futures. The shock of Russia placing its nuclear forces on what President Putin described as ‘higher combat alert’ in early 2022 during its invasion of Ukraine was a crucial reminder that not all alternative nuclear futures are safer than today’s nuclear present.¹⁰⁴ Building the common ground necessary between states to ensure that social understandings about appropriate behaviour in such a dangerous era is not undermined along the path to a disarmed world will be equally as important and as difficult. Sartre’s questions and Aron’s answers are likely to remain our best hope for some time.

Acknowledgements. An earlier version of this article was presented to the 2021 Annual Conference of the British International Studies Association, and I thank the panel organisers and participants for their feedback. Thanks also to the editors of, and fellow contributors to, this special issue who provided extremely helpful feedback and warm encouragement at earlier workshops. In particular, Rens van Munster and Cian O’Driscoll provided detailed feedback and suggestions on the article and I also thank Cian (I think!) for gently nudging me on to the existentialist path to begin with. My thanks also to the three anonymous reviewers for their excellent feedback.

Benjamin Zala is a Fellow in the Department of International Relations in the Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University. His work on nuclear weapons and great power politics has appeared in journals including *Review of International Studies*; *Journal of Global Security Studies*; *Third World Quarterly*; and the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. He is author of *Power in International Society: A Perceptual Approach to Great Power Politics* (forthcoming with Oxford University Press) and editor of *National Perspectives on a Multipolar Order* (Manchester University Press, 2021). He is also an Honorary Fellow at the University of Leicester where he contributes to the European Research Council-funded project, *Towards a Third Nuclear Age* {<https://thethirdnuclearage.com/>}.

¹⁰⁴Yuras Karmanau, Jim Heintz, Vladimir Isachenkov, and Dasha Litvinova, ‘Putin puts nuclear forces on high alert, escalating tensions’, *Associated Press* (28 February 2022), available at: {<https://apnews.com/article/russia-ukraine-kyiv-business-europe-moscow-2e4e1cf784f22b6afbe5a2f936725550>} accessed 13 May 2022.