

# Response and Responsibility: Rethinking Accountability in Education

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*Current conceptions of accountability imply that, in order for teachers to be able to hold themselves to account, they need first to have cultivated certain ‘professional dispositions’. But these conceptions fail to acknowledge the extent to which teachers are first and foremost accountable ‘as such’. For the early existentialist thought of the philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre, this relates to a kind of responsibility premised on the ways in which we are always and inevitably responding to the world in which we find ourselves (with others). In this paper, I offer a reconceptualisation of teacher accountability in light of this, one that recognises implicit responses in classroom situations as underpinned by the subjectivity of those who bring these situations to light—often in subtle and immeasurable ways.*

## INTRODUCTION

When we think about ‘responsibility’, particularly in an educational sense, we often refer to instances of what or whom we are responsible *for*. We might argue, for example, that teachers are responsible for their students, for the cultivation of their autonomy and criticality. Or perhaps we discuss the ways in which teachers are responsible for their subject matter, for passing on something that ‘matters’ to the next generation. We may even say that teachers are responsible for wider society, for ensuring social mobility, for modelling and developing democratic values in the classroom. Whilst such discussions are important, they can only be understood by first attending to a more ontological sense of responsibility, one that relates to what it is that we experience in particular situations (such as the classroom), how it is that we make judgements within these, and how, in turn, those situations are ‘brought to light’ in subtle and implicit ways. In this sense, responsibility refers to the ways in which such individuals inevitably respond to the situations in which they find themselves, a responsibility as prior to and as underpinning the kind of responsibility we may seek to cultivate in educational practitioners. In the educational context, this latter sense of responsibility is tied to the concept of ‘accountability’. In order to explore

this connection, let us first consider the more general sense in which accountability is referred to in educational literature.

### CURRENT CONCEPTIONS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

The term ‘accountability’ is ‘chameleon-like’, but on a basic level, it may be thought of in terms of being ‘called to give an account’ to some external authority, a form of social interaction ‘in which people are required to explain and take responsibility for their actions’ (Sinclair, 1995, pp. 220–221). This therefore implies a relationship between those who seek answers and those who are answerable, those who may impose sanctions and those who anticipate them. There is, of course, a distinction between simply *giving* an account and being *called* to give one (Mulgan, 2000), the latter of which implies an authority who enforces responsibility on another.

In the public sector, accountability often takes a ‘managerialist’ stance, where the focus is on the (in)effective performance of public institutions. The issues around this feature frequently in educational research—it is often characterised as coercive and overly intrusive, stemming from the so-called audit culture that public institutions are increasingly subjected to, exemplified in the growth of surveillance mechanisms that induce institutional and individual performativity as well as the prevalence of the language and logic of financial accounting systems (e.g. ‘effectiveness’, inputs/outputs binaries). Ironically, these managerial forms of accountability create what some researchers have called the ‘responsibility paradox’ (Harmon, 1995), succinctly defined by Jos and Tompkins (2004, p. 256) as follows:

Responsible interpretation and application of legitimate external accountability demands depends on the cultivation of virtues that support good administrative judgement, but the institution and mechanisms that are used to communicate these external standards, and that monitor compliance with them, often threaten the very qualities that support responsible judgement.

In response to this, a new form of accountability has arisen, one that implies a compromise between management and their institutions through the relinquishment of some level of managerial control in exchange for ‘professional autonomy’. In the educational context, this has been labelled in various ways—‘intelligent accountability’ (Miliband, 2004), ‘smart regulation’ (MacBeath, 1999, 2006), ‘responsive regulation’ (Hislop, 2012 in reference to Braithwaite *et al.*, 2007, 2008), ‘robust evaluation’ (McNamara and O’Hara, 2008), to name a few. Ultimately, it is a form of professional accountability that involves not simply holding individuals responsible for their performance through coercive measures, but instead ‘teaches’ individuals to hold *themselves* to account, thereby signalling a shift ‘away from the central importance of external scrutiny’ (Mulgan, 2000, p. 557).

Before this is possible, however, those being held to account need first to be recognised as ‘professionals’, as having acquired the techniques and values necessary for making professional judgements in unsupervised contexts, and as having demonstrated the requisite professional dispositions.

These include a ‘sense of (personal) duty’ (Sinclair, 1995, p. 230) in relation to their respective professions and to the individuals they are responsible for; a form of ‘practical wisdom’<sup>1</sup> that requires a firm and unchangeable character; a stable set of cherished values that are steadfastly and consistently applied to relevant situations; an ability to tolerate uncertainty and to conduct oneself with openness and flexibility (e.g. Jos and Tompkins, 2004). Professionals also have reflexive self-understanding such that they can examine and decide on the applicability of professional rules and standards in each situation, ‘tacking’ between both internal and external viewpoints in order to do so (e.g. McNamara and O’Hara, 2008; Nevo, 2002). In the educational context, there is often an argument that by ‘professionalising’ teachers in this way, these intrusive forms of managerial accountability will no longer be required. But such dispositions do not come ‘naturally’ to teachers. Rather, professional accountability requires fostering both the capacity and the willingness of teachers to develop their so-called evaluation literacy (McNamara and O’Hara, 2007, 2008) such that they can hold themselves to account in evidence-based and reflexive ways. In the professional understanding of teaching, capacity building is often seen as a form of ‘empowerment’, where studies (e.g. McNamara and O’Hara, 2008; O’Brien *et al.*, 2019) have shown that this ability to ‘act professionally’ leads to greater levels of commitment to the profession of teaching and to the standards that it involves.

According to this theory of professionalisation (e.g. Goepal, 2012; McNamara and O’Hara, 2008), it is through such capacity building that ‘trust’ in teachers is warranted. Professionalisation thus also involves an appeasement function—in developing these professional dispositions in teachers, the wider public can be more assured that they will make the right decisions in all (or most) situations, as well as the right judgements about the (in)effectiveness of their own practices (e.g. Brady, 2019). Ultimately, it is hoped that through cultivating such dispositions, teachers will not only be disposed towards making sound professional judgements both now and in the future, but also towards holding themselves to account for their actions in reasonable ways. But how convincing is this, and what, exactly, do we mean by ‘dispositions’?

## DISPOSITIONS AND THE PRODUCED SELF

Conventionally speaking, dispositions might be thought of as character traits. They often serve as rationalisations that explain how a person has acted, or might act, in certain situations. In this sense, dispositions not only function as explanations for behaviour, but also allow us to predict (and direct) future action. The basic idea behind the cultivation of (professional) dispositions is premised on this—that if a person is equipped with a ‘reflective’ disposition, then they are more likely to reflect on, recognise, and act on (in)effective practices accordingly (e.g. Kramer, 2018).

For Sartre, dispositions *do* relate to the ways that people act, but they are constructed *on the basis of* actions rather than existing as an essential component of ‘who they are’. They are intimately connected to what he (2011)

refers to as the ‘produced self’, something that is first explored in his 1934 essay *Transcendence of the Ego*, and which would later become a central component of his entire philosophy (Sartre, 2018). In the *Transcendence*, Sartre (2011) attempts to show that what we conventionally refer to as our ‘self’ is not ‘in us’, but ‘is outside, in the world... a being in the world, like the Ego of another’. As he (1973a) would also later state, for conscious (human) beings, ‘existence precedes essence’. According to Sartre (1973a, 2018), human beings are thrown into the world (existence) by birth, and through navigating our existence, we continually strive to formulate an essence that defines and determines ‘who we are’ as individuals. I thus *produce* my ‘essence’ on the basis of my existence, where who I am is defined purely in relation to the sum of my actions in the world (with others).

In order to demonstrate this, Sartre (2011, 2018) argues that consciousness exists across two ontologically distinct ‘planes’—namely, the ‘pre-reflective’ and the ‘reflected’ plane. Pre-reflective consciousness is what is most fundamental, but it is ultimately uncapturable in language, given that our attempts to do so put us immediately on the reflected plane. However, some sense of this can be imagined, perhaps, when we think about those moments in which we are fully absorbed in an activity. When I am absorbed in a book, for example, I am fully ‘at one’ with the activity itself, remaining unaware (in the explicit sense) of myself as a person in those moments. It is not as though I am *unconscious*, however, since if this were the case, I would not be able to understand what it is I am reading. Rather, I am at the level of ‘pre-reflective awareness’—a pure form of consciousness as directed outwards towards the book I am immersed in. If, for example, I suddenly become aware of myself as a body present in front of the book, or if I become hypervigilant of the lines and dots on the pages that make up the words, a radical modification in consciousness occurs. At this moment, there is a movement from the pre-reflective to the reflected plane, and my self immediately ‘erupts’ (Sartre, 2003, 2018) at the scene. From this, Sartre (2011) reinforces the phenomenological idea that consciousness, in its most fundamental sense, is pure intentionality—it is purely consciousness *of* something, without being the thing towards which it is directed (in this case, the book). As a pure, spontaneous activity, consciousness is therefore devoid of content *in and of itself*. Perhaps bizarrely, this further suggests that what exists at our ‘core’ as conscious human beings is not something substantial like a self. Rather, it is a fundamental *nothingness*—or, in somewhat simpler terms, a *lack* (of self) continually projecting onto the situation in which it finds itself.

This, in turn, has implications for our understanding of character traits or dispositions. A person may be (justifiably) led to believe that they have certain dispositions by reflecting on how they have behaved—perhaps I am more disposed towards thinking of myself in terms of others, hence the reason why I seem to feel so exposed as a teacher in a classroom. Perhaps this disposition explains other areas of my lived experience—I am terribly performative on first dates, I am over-sensitive to what others think, I am afraid of public speaking. But the ‘assignment’ of a disposition functions as an explanation of why I behave the way that I do *after the fact*—i.e.

on the reflected rather than pre-reflective plane of consciousness. It is not constituted on the basis of some objective structure of meaning that defines and determines ‘who I am’ *a priori*, nor because of some unchangeable essence that I can somehow extract and manipulate.

These explanations are belated, and thus always fail to capture fully the initial moment that moved me to act. But oftentimes, our responses are immediate in the sense that they are pre-reflective in nature. When Sartre (2018) talks about shame, for instance, it is something that we experience *without* reflection—it arises in pure consciousness, and when I make ‘a clumsy or awkward gesture... [it] sticks to me; I neither judge it nor blame it; I simply live it’ (Sartre, 2018, p. 308). When the Other is present in a shameful situation, I am forced to think of myself as an object, since before them I ‘erupt’ as a self that can be studied and judged. This self is not some ‘bad portrait of myself’ (Sartre, 2018, p. 308), something I can dismiss as distorted or false. Rather, I recognise that *I am as the Other sees me*—even if I do not like what I see, and even if the way in which the Other views me is unjustifiable in some respects. But all of this happens pre-reflectively. Indeed, when we are caught in a shameful act, we *immediately* feel ashamed, an ‘immediate shudder that runs through me from head to toe, without any discursive preparation’. Of course, my experience of shame is framed by particular ideas of what I *should* be shameful about in the first place. In this sense, shame arises immediately on the basis of a framework of fundamental values, values that are not articulated *before* my experience of shame itself, but nevertheless, where ‘who I am’ comes about via my interpretation of the entire situation, an interpretation which in turn produces ‘me’ as disposed or as characterisable in particular ways.

Importantly, Sartre is not denying that we have a *sense* of self, even if this ‘self’ is produced on the basis of our actions (with others). Moreover, he does not want to imply that our ‘self’ is merely arbitrary—that we can easily will ourselves to act against our apparent dispositions, or that behaving ‘out of character’ is some kind of effortless endeavour. However, rather than thinking of dispositions as essentialist character traits that determine how we act, they instead represent patterns (*choices*) of behaviour that, once unified upon reflection, define ‘who we are’. Equally, we should not understand ‘choice’ flippantly—indeed, our way of understanding choice depends upon norms and values that decide whether or not they are desirable or appropriate in the first place (like instances of shame), and whilst these norms and values are contingent, it is not that we can simply think outside of them in an inconsequential sense. This is best understood in relation to Sartre’s (2018) account of freedom and facticity in *Being and Nothingness* to which we will first turn before turning to the implications of this for the ideas of responsibility and accountability in the educational domain.

## **FREEDOM AND FACTICITY: THE FUNDAMENTAL PROJECT**

Thus, conscious human beings are underpinned by pre-reflective consciousness understood as pure intentionality, where consciousness is purely consciousness *of* something whilst remaining ‘nothing’ in itself. But this lack

of self is often much more than we can bear, and as such, we are persistent in our attempts to pinpoint ‘who we are’, often by aligning our understanding of ourselves with the ways in which we are produced in the world. This constant striving merely reinforces the perpetual instability underpinning our existence, but it is also in it that our persistent sense of self is produced.

This is not to suggest that this striving is some kind of blind instinct, however. Although consciousness is not reducible to the thing that it is conscious of (e.g. the book), it nevertheless cannot be understood outside of its intimate relation with the world. Indeed, consciousness is always a projection towards *the situation in which it exists*, relating to what Sartre calls ‘facticity’. Facticity refers on one level to our unchangeable circumstances—to those ‘brute facts’ of our existence that are not subject to manipulation, such as our bodies and how they are seen by others, our situatedness within a particular time in history, our physical limitations and constraints. Although facticity is accidental and without inherent justification, it is nevertheless the context in which our consciousness arises. Facticity is not something that we can merely ‘will away’, but it *is* something we (inevitably) respond to on some level, and this very relation we have with the situation in which we find ourselves is where Sartre’s understanding of freedom is best understood.

Sartre bases his discussion on the connection between consciousness and freedom throughout *Being and Nothingness* by positing an ontological distinction between ‘being-in-itself’ (brute existence) and ‘being-for-itself’ (consciousness).<sup>2</sup> Brute existence is that which consciousness directs itself towards, but it is not reducible to our conscious perception of it. When I encounter a table, for example, there is an infinite number of ways that it can appear to me—by virtue of the background that frames it, by virtue of its different angles, by virtue of how it might be (re)used, or of how it might look in the future or in the past etc. Although I can perceive what tables are in an immediate way, my perception is not the same as everything that that brute existence (might possible) be(come). In this sense, the table is a part of the ‘facticity’ that I encounter in my situation. But the capacity of consciousness to synthesise all of this information—about what a table is, what it might become, how it is used—is a *response* in the world that makes things appear ‘as they are’. Whilst this distinction may seem unimportant at first, it nevertheless reveals the extent to which our entire evaluation of the situation in which we find ourselves depends on our conscious perception of it, and as such, humankind ‘being condemned to be free, carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders: he is responsible for the world and for himself, as a way of being. We are using the word ‘responsibility’ in its ordinary sense as ‘consciousness (of) being the incontestable author of an event or an object’ (Sartre, 2018, p. 718).

There is, however, some confusion over what Sartre meant by freedom and responsibility. One misconception is that this relates to the capacity for individuals to achieve set ends *in spite* of their circumstances (e.g. Catalano, 1985, 2010). But Sartre, in fact, *does* accept that there are limitations to our freedom within particular contexts, most notably in his later works.<sup>3</sup> And yet, such limitations only make sense by virtue of our freedom



conceptualised in terms of what he calls our ‘fundamental project’. The fundamental project is upheld by the means of free choice, as sustained through our continually renewed commitment. It is not explicitly chosen in advance of action (e.g. ‘I want to be this person in 10 years time’). Rather, it manifests itself *through* action itself—in what we have committed ourselves to, what options we subsequently see as available to us, what it is that we value. Because it is only (somewhat) evident in our actions, and because our explanations for these are always belated, it is therefore difficult to articulate or grasp this project in any definitive sense, but it nevertheless relates to what it is that we do with our lives in a fundamental sense—i.e. in terms of the intentionality of consciousness understood as specific ‘end-points’ that we continually strive towards and that orient our action in subtle ways.

It is only when something becomes ‘amiss’ that we become aware of our fundamental project in some way, where we subsequently realise that it is held in existence by our free consciousness. Indeed, there is nothing that necessarily forces me to have these *particular* intentions—I ‘choose’ things knowing they might not be completed, that I might fail or give up on my decision to follow through. For instance, I might have made a resolution in the past to give up smoking, but since this resolution is of the ‘past self’, I experience a rupture between the self that resolved to stop smoking and the self in the present moment with the cigarette in her hand. Since nothing prevents me from breaking this resolution, I must decide and commit anew in each moment, and I am thus always in a position of questioning and deciding in this sense (albeit not always explicitly). This is also true of present situations. For instance, a worker does not realise he is being exploited until he conceives of the possibility of *not* being exploited (Sartre, 1973a), even if the intentions to live otherwise are never actually fulfilled. But when one is faced with the real possibility of change, our consciousness surpasses our particular situation towards the concrete nothingness of the future, where a new horizon of possibilities opens up to us as a result. It is only then that we can adopt a different attitude to our lives, and it is only then that we are aware of our freedom to do so. Rarely is it actually called into question, however—not because we are unable to, but because we usually have very little reason to do so. Moreover, we may be unwilling to accept the potential crisis that doing so would entail, where everything that we once felt we understood or that gave meaning to our life—including ‘who we are’—must be radically re-evaluated as a result (Sartre, 2000a).

As indicated, Sartre’s conception of freedom does not deny that there are limitations to what we can do, but that these limitations nevertheless only make sense *because* of my (freely chosen and freely abandonable) fundamental project. Let’s say, for example, that I wish to live in Paris, but I do not have the material means to afford the trip. I don’t speak French so I won’t be able to get a job there, and so on. Indeed, all of these are obstacles that prevent me from fulfilling my intentions, including also the (contingent) ‘situation’ of my birth (i.e. the fact that I was born in Dublin and not Paris). These obstacles represent the facticity or ‘brute given’ of the situation, and are thus unavoidable in a practical sense. But they only make sense

in terms of a more fundamental understanding of freedom—i.e. my freely chosen project to live in Paris (for whatever more fundamental reason), and my very conception of this possibility in the first place. Let's say I finally *do* find the material means to travel to Paris, but some kind of pandemic is preventing me from taking the trip. Again, these unpredictable obstacles certainly curtail my ability to achieve what I want, but the meaning I apply to them depends entirely on my intentions. If I really want to go to Paris, then I would be bitterly disappointed with this situation. But if I changed my mind, or 'deep down' I preferred the thought of living in Paris rather than the actuality of moving there, perhaps then these unpredictable events might be seen more favourably. Although the 'brute given' is the same in both situations, their meaningfulness only makes sense in the context of my freedom.<sup>4</sup>

Although these brute givens are related purely to the contingency of my place of birth, they are by no means arbitrary. Rather, freedom (in terms of the fundamental project) and facticity (in terms of the brute existence of the obstacles we perceive) are reciprocal. Thus, although we do not freely choose the facticity of our world, our freedom lies in the ways in which we choose our relation to these. This is where our responsibility lies—in the extent to which we *inevitably* respond to the situations in which we find ourselves, and *not necessarily* in the extent to which we can overcome them.

Of course, responsibility can be understood in both formal and substantive terms. Formal responsibility relates to *particular* things or persons to whom we are accountable (e.g. students, the lesson, the wider public). Substantive responsibility, however, relates to the ontological condition of *being able* to respond, and thus being responsible *as such*. Where we only focus on responsibility in formal terms, we deny the extent to which responsibility *as such* cannot be defined or decided in any *a priori* sense (in terms of the content of desirable actions)—rather, it is a form of a response that is 'invented in each situation' (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019, p. 93). This therefore points to responsibility as a form of 'orientation' rather than something enacted with a pre-defined direction. But in order to understand this responsibility in the *formal* sense, we must also recognise that it exists first and foremost *substantively*—and this, in turn, has implications for the context of education, particularly in relation to classroom situations in which teachers find themselves, and in which they are accountable *as such*.

## RESPONSE AND RESPONSIBILITY

Much of the literature that attempts to connect Sartre to the context of education focuses on the more practical implications of his thought. A discussion on Sartre's position in relation to humanism, for instance, might allow for a more empowering and emancipatory vision of what education might entail (e.g. Kakkori and Huttunen, 2012). Sartre's conceptions of freedom and responsibility serve as important remedies to the false consciousness that educational institutions are sometimes guilty of (e.g. Detmer, 2005). Moreover, in considering his notion of 'bad faith', educators may be able to consider ways in which to engage students in deep and important forms



of questioning such that they can ‘unmask’ the furtive ways in which it functions in our daily lives (e.g. Gordon and Gordon, 1996). Sartre’s later and more nuanced discussions on the political implications of his thought are also essential reading for those concerned not only with individual but institutional responsibility (and indeed, bad faith).<sup>5</sup> These discussions are vital, but they are not explored in depth here. Arguably, in order to think about how we might apply Sartre’s ideas to the educational context, we must first consider how—and to what extent—such ideas ‘make sense’ in our lived experiences in such moments. Doing so will not necessarily provide a solution to the inauthentic ways educational institutions sometimes expect us to behave, but rather, to draw our attention to these often unnoticed aspects of our lives, and to make a case for the idea that we nevertheless respond to such aspects in spite of how it may seem.

Indeed, the later post-structuralist movement, particularly that which is influential in sociological research in education, would probably voice certain disagreements over Sartre’s account of freedom. If we consider Foucauldian thought (e.g. Ball, 2003; 2016a, 2016b; Perryman *et al.* 2017, 2018), for instance, to what extent can freedom even be conceptualised in a context where so many of our gestures are facile, where so much of what we think and do is on the basis of unconscious, internalised norms of behaviour? Indeed, Sartre’s conception of freedom is, as Merleau-Ponty (Stewart, 1998; Whitford, 1979) once remarked, so uncompromising at times that it is untenable. It does not adequately account for the weight of circumstances, nor the ways in which, at times, it really is impossible to respond to situations in a *meaningful* way. Although, to some extent, it may be true that one does not always recognise their fundamental project unless presented with another way of responding to their situation (like the worker who does not realise he is being exploited until he conceives of the possibility of *not* being exploited), Sartre is dismissive of the stakes involved in responses, in terms of the extent to which they may change the course of a person’s situation, or the consequences of acting otherwise that may prevent us from making a meaningful choice in the first place. Indeed, what *meaningful* response can we expect when someone’s foot is on our neck—both literally and figuratively?

Even though freedom, as we have seen, is not necessarily about the ability to achieve desired ends, but merely the capacity to conceive of those ends in the first place, such ends are always circumscribed by what we *can* see, and by what we feel that we *can* do within a particular situation. Sartre also does not always account for the means by which we are presented with another possibility—does this come from another person, or from some event or crisis? Is it always there in the back of our minds? It certainly does not, as *Nausea* might suggest, come from mere reflection on our situation. And if one refuses to see things in another way, is it because they are unable to,<sup>6</sup> because they choose not to, or because they are in bad faith? In this sense, Sartre seems to deny the entire apparatus in which our thinking is situated, and the limitations this then places on our capacities to think otherwise, or, indeed, to ‘grasp’ our fundamental project at all. This, too, is true for teachers within the current educational regimes.

And yet, even when we appear to be completely *unfree* in our situation, at no point can we conceptualise a moment in which we are *not* responding in some way, whether or not those responses are desirable or, indeed, ‘useful’. Importantly, Sartrean freedom is also not necessarily something to be celebrated. Writing at a time when the very definition of freedom was being usurped by far-right nationalist agendas, he undoubtedly recognised the danger that this freedom could result in (Sartre, 1973b). But he also recognised the more subtle ways in which it is made manifest—resisting populist or consumerist conceptions of freedom (even in small ways), refusing to see oneself in the insipid ways that those with more power do (Barrett, 1962).

The question of desirability in terms of the *kinds* of responses we wish to cultivate depends first on a level of consent from the individual involved—i.e. their freedom to respond. In the context of education, then, we may ask to what extent schools, teachers and their students are ‘free’ given the demands that are placed on them by institutional forms of bad faith. When we think about accountability, we may also ask to what extent teachers *should* be autonomous in their decision-making, given that this may, in fact, be undesirable for those they are supposed to be accountable to. These discussions are important, but they can only make sense once we first establish the ways in which we evaluate situations in the first place, and for this, to understand *how* these values manifest themselves in the first place. Values are not simply related to what I think are important aims or purposes, or what desirable sorts of behaviour I wish to cultivate in teachers or in students. They are the very things that give meaning to my situation and to the ‘facts’ that appear within it—it is through them that I make sense of the world, and in which the world itself is ‘brought to light’.

Let’s imagine that, as part of an accountability agenda, a teacher is asked to evaluate and improve student behaviour in her class. She uses her professional judgement in appealing to what is ‘there’ before her (i.e. the ‘objective fact’ of disruptive students). As a professional, she consults guidance on what the best course of action will be, implementing an intervention on the basis of this and continually monitoring its effectiveness. If the teacher decides to focus on improving student behaviour, we may be tempted to say that the misbehaviour of students is an ‘objective fact’ of the situation. But, of course, misbehaviour can only be understood and identified in terms of norms and expectations of how students *should* behave, and this very identification of misbehaviour cannot be separated from the subject that interprets the situation in the first place. Not only this, but both the area the teacher focuses on and the intervention itself are decisions made by the teacher, over and against other things that she could focus on instead. This is also true of *who* in her class she decides to focus on. If her interventions are premised on the idea that the responsibility for behaviour is ultimately down to the students, she might come up with interventions that make manifest this belief whilst ignoring her own approaches and demeanour in the classroom, for example. Both are apprehending the same ‘data’, and yet both explanations may, in fact, be justified on some level. What makes them distinct is in relation to the values of the person involved, and their understanding and response to the situation that differs because of this. Not only this, but the

situation itself is brought to light in different ways *because* of such interpretations. Indeed, in order to discuss the desirable actions she should take, or what dispositions might be cultivated in order to ensure that she *does* take the best course of actions, we need first to come to terms with her implicit responses in the classroom. Her professional judgement is not simply in her capacity to consult with others or with her own teaching expertise, but is also premised on identifying what needs to be addressed in the first place, judgements that are already framed by particular values that do not appear in any explicit sense but are *already there* in our very understanding of the obstacles that appear before us.

This in turn raises a number of questions about the possibility of cultivating professional dispositions. The first relates to the question of how we might measure the extent to which they have been cultivated in the first place. Measurement demands *explicitness*, not only as explanations for what has happened, but also in order to direct improvement in the future. In turn, this requires a belief in the direct and essential connection between actions, dispositions and who that person 'is'. But our interpretation of the situations that leads us to posit dispositions in the first place does not capture a 'self' that is the *cause* of these interpretations, but rather, a self that is the *product* of them. Importantly, for Sartre, such interpretations are not to be dismissed as all 'made up'—they are, in fact, all that our 'self' amounts to. But we should nevertheless be careful in considering them as fixed and unchangeable characteristics that determine future behaviour, desirable or otherwise. And even if we *could* cultivate desirable dispositions that would make someone inclined to act in a certain way, our interpretations of whether or not this actually 'worked' also involves belated explanations that fail to deduce with any level of certainty the moment in which one is moved to act. For instance, one may behave *as if* they are acting in good judgement, when in reality they are focused solely on ingratiating themselves with superiors. Perhaps, in reality, they care little about the students or their subject matter. Would we still say that they demonstrated the requisite professional dispositions? And whilst the discussion here is not concerned with what good judgements consist in, this nevertheless demonstrates that unpredictable (and perhaps, undesirable) responses to situations may yield the same (explicit) results, making it therefore impossible to test whether or not a sense of 'genuine' professional accountability has really been developed.

Ultimately, professional accountability as a cultivated disposition denies the extent to which teachers are *already* responsible, insofar as one inevitably responds to the situation in which one finds oneself. In this sense, responsibility is embedded in the very situation that one acts, not as enforced or cultivated, but a 'fundamental relation of each human being with the world' (Vlieghe and Zamojski, p. 88). In this sense, '[r]esponsibility exists as such, and hence it conditions the very possibility of situations in which someone is rendered accountable' (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019, p. 88). All of this implies that, like responsibility, accountability is not simply a skill or a technique that is cultivated. It fundamentally (and primarily) exists *as such*.

### ACCOUNTABILITY AS SUCH

When we think of a teacher as being held to account, we might think of inspection regimes, and the way that these regimes turn the teacher into an object of study and analysis. Because of the pervasiveness of audit culture in schools, the teacher is embedded in ‘panoptic performativity’ (Perryman, 2006)—they conduct themselves in accordance with norms and behaviours imposed by inspection regimes, adopting a particular language or mannerisms in order to appear ‘effective’. This performativity terrorises the soul (Ball, 2003; Lyotard, 1984), not only dictating how one should behave, but actively contributing to the internalisation of norms such that teachers need not be policed in any explicit sense. Performativity is connected to an anxiety around appearing ‘effective’, an anxiety that often arises when one is focused on the technical aspects of their role—what ‘techniques’ can I employ in the classroom in order to make sure that I am seen as effective by students, by inspectors, and also, perhaps, by a dissociated ‘me’ reflecting on my own practices (Brady, 2019). But does the tyranny of performativity always account for the nuances in practices, that even if there is an imposition on teachers from external bodies in an explicit sense, they are nevertheless always *implicitly* responding to this?

In being asked to account for situations, individuals offer an account of themselves ‘in the world’. In the classroom context, account-giving in a more implicit sense is inevitable, just as responding to particular situations is, whether or not those responses are desirable. Indeed, teachers inescapably offer an account of something—their meaning-making in situations with others (upon which they base their judgements), the subject matter that they love (or not!), the world as they understand it (Vlieghe and Zamojski, 2019). These accounts signal a particular response to the world. Thus, accountability is not simply a cultivated skill that ensures a sense of (formal) responsibility. It is also a way of being (with others) in the classroom.

It is important to acknowledge that, in offering a response to the world, the Other is present in some way since, as Butler (2005, p. 131) remarks:

Giving an account of oneself is thus also a kind of showing of oneself, a showing for the purpose of testing whether the account seems right, whether it is understandable by the other, who “receives” the account through one set of norms or another.

Indeed, in accounting for oneself, the account is situated within the particular social normativity, one that must be incorporated if the account itself is to be intelligible. Such norms are impersonal in nature—they are not created by us as individuals, but rather, our accounts are always told and interpreted by others in a belated sense, through a facticity that we have been thrown into, and within which we are produced as certain ‘kinds’ of people. Importantly, this is not something to be overcome, nor is it arbitrary—it is simply how it is that we are in the world with others.

In his autobiography, *Words*, Sartre (2000b) admits that he had not quite thought about the fact that books are read by others. As he grew older, he

remarks how he began to feel the ‘presence’ of the author in the words he was reading, their ‘souls haunting the work’ as their words are carried forth by another, responded to, reinterpreted and reborn. Perhaps this serves as an analogy for the ways in which we account for ourselves in the situations, where the ‘structure of address’ (Butler, 2005) is an inescapable component. Indeed, like authors who leave behind legacies of words, words that are then read, reread and inevitably reinterpreted by audiences, individuals are similarly (re)defined by others through how it is they account for themselves. This demonstrates a vulnerability towards the other who may (re)define us in ways over which we have no control, carrying with it the danger of being misrecognised in the ways in which we are ‘re-produced’. But Sartre (2018) might argue that an overemphasis on this is a form of bad faith, where we deny the extent to which we are free to respond to these conventions as well as the ways in which we are ‘seen’ by others in the accounts we offer. Indeed, these are always negotiated with—and *responded to*—through our lived experiences. We situate ourselves in relation them, and in doing so, we situate ourselves in relation to the ‘selves’ that we are as subject to these. Accounting for ourselves also indicates the possible inauguration of renewal, where our account challenges the limits of what is recognisable, where the situation itself is potentially overturned as a result, or where we are, in fact, exposed to the different means of responding to the situations in which we find (and define) ourselves.<sup>7</sup> This, in turn, helps us to distinguish between the two kinds of accountability thus far outlined—between accountability as a cultivated skill involving the capacity to be ‘intelligible’ towards others, and accountability *as such* that relates to our implicit responses—and, indeed, responsibility—within the situations that we find ourselves. And in order to offer an (intelligible) account in the first place, we must first and foremost acknowledge the ways in which individuals are accountable *as such*.

Importantly, all of this calls into question our current understandings of ‘trust’ and of ‘sincerity’ in accountability. In the current climate, there is an implication that we can cultivate ‘trustworthiness’ in teachers through training them in specific ways of offering an account (e.g. evidence-based) that in turn allows us to measure the extent to which professional accountability has been developed. By doing so, there is also an assumption that such training might allow us to cultivate a ‘trustworthy person’, one whose accounts will *always* be trusted, since they will be trained to identify and measure their own practices in the most efficient and ‘robust’ ways. But isn’t there something a little too easy about this—and, perhaps, even insincere? Perhaps, instead, we should think about trustworthiness in a different sense, as something we must continually put into practice, test out, examine, reflect upon, where the measure of the ongoing practices of sincerity in our accounts would, in fact, be *uncertainty*. Indeed, if we wish to *trust* that individuals are able to hold themselves to account, would we appeal to those that are certain? Or would we rather appeal to those that are more sincere—a sincerity in their acceptance of the uncertainty that is part and parcel of what we do as teachers? This risk is one that any account of oneself might entail—being misunderstood, being unintelligible, being contradictory or

paradoxical—a risk that nevertheless signals a very different understanding of response and responsibility in teaching, one that does not deny the freedom by which individuals act upon the world with others in the Sartrean sense.

Like the nature of responding in situations, account-giving is thus also a process that is inevitably underscored by irresolvable complexities, given that the pre-reflective judgements it attempts to account for are ultimately uncapturable, and our explanations for such events (and ourselves ‘within’ them) are always belated. Thus, in order to understand accountability *as such*, a shift in our understanding is necessary. Unlike formal accountability, accountability as such might not be centrally concerned with an accurate portraying of events (ones that can be proven or disproven through selective use of evidence), but rather, with the way of *relating oneself* to such events. Accountability is thus not simply a cultivated disposition that is necessary in order to accurately evaluate one’s performances in the classroom, for instance, but is also the means by which one lays oneself bare before the Other, by which one’s commitments are made manifest in one’s accounts, and by which our responses to the world may be interpreted, albeit with cautious uncertainty. Ultimately, accountability in this sense involves a continual reinterpretation of our responses, one that does not necessarily see the value of accounts in terms of their (technical) accuracy, but their (existential) sensitivity to the context in which we find ourselves.

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## NOTES

1. This is often linked to the Aristotelian concept of ‘*phronesis*’. In the literature on professional accountability, however, *phronesis* is often narrowly defined as a ‘skill’ or a ‘technique’ (e.g. Jos and Tompkins, 2004).
2. This is most certainly a reduction of the distinction that Sartre makes between these two forms of being, where the in-itself is not, strictly speaking, reducible to brute existence, nor is the for-itself reducible to consciousness. For the sake of simplicity, however, the terms will be used interchangeably. For a more in-depth discussion on this, consider the text by Whitford (1979).
3. For instance, in an interview entitled ‘Itinerary of a Thought’, Sartre admits that his earlier work on freedom did not give enough weight to the circumstances in which it is enacted. For instance, he remarks how ‘[t]he individual interiorises his social determinations...the relation of production, the family of his childhood, the historical past, the contemporary institutions’. Yet, he still never quite let go of the idea that we can respond to these situations, where, in the same interview, he also states that ‘a man can always make something out of what is made of him’ (Sartre, 2008a, p. 35).
4. Sartre places a special emphasis on the Other as the only possible limitation to my freedom, however. Because we are born into the world with others, it is not that we solely decide its meaningfulness as individuals. Moreover, in order to be understood by the Other, we must limit ourselves to a particular context in relation to the facticity of our birth, the (albeit contingent) historical factors etc. They also act as an objectifying force, where we are forced to recognise in some sense the ways in which we are ‘seen’, even if we have no control over this. Nevertheless, this is premised on the intention to be intelligible to Others in the first place, and there are also subtle ways that we can respond to the recognition that is conferred on us by others.



5. In his later years, Sartre attempted to reconcile his overly individualistic focus on freedom and responsibility with a more nuanced understanding garnered from his adoption of Marxist thought. This can be most widely seen in his work, the *Critique of Dialectical Reasoning* (see Sartre, 2004; 2006). Some have remarked that Sartre's attempts to combine both theories marked the end of existentialism. Others see this later period as a continuation and enrichment of his previous writings. Due to space limitations, I have opted to focus primarily on Sartre's earlier (and arguably more individualistic) ideas. For a collection of short essays and interviews on this topic, see Sartre (2008a).
6. It may be the case that the individuals do not consider—or, indeed, are unable to contemplate—the political implications of their actions, something Sartre seems to be more keenly aware of in his more nuanced interpretation of freedom and responsibility in his later texts (e.g. see Sartre, 2008b).
7. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre (2018) conceptualises our relation with the Other in mainly conflictual terms, but towards the end of the text, as well as the work he released after this, he starts to consider the possibility of solidarity with the Other, whilst also recognising the limitations they place on us. This was in part related to his attempts to combine existentialism with Marxism.

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