

Maxine and Simone: (Dis)Orientation, Ambiguity, and Imagination in Existentialist

Pedagogy

Since the 1950s, many scholars have considered the differentiation between teaching existentialism and teaching *existentially*. Some of the more prominent book-length works include George F. Kneller's *Existentialism and Education* (1958), Van Cleve Morris' *Existentialism in Education: What it Means* (1966/1990), and Herner Saeverot's *Indirect Pedagogy: Some Lessons in Existentialist Education* (2013). These texts draw heavily from intellectual genealogies of Derrida, Hegel, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Levinas, Marcel, Nietzsche, Rorty, Sartre... Of course, these theoretical framings inherently shape the pedagogical vision the authors forward, primarily focusing on the individual, guiding them to overcome the supposed absurdity or meaninglessness of their lives and to find a way to exist in the world with integrity and purpose. For example, Morris argues that "Existential education assumes the responsibility of awakening each individual to the full intensity of [their]¹ own selfhood" (134). This sentiment is largely representative of existing scholarship on approaches to existential pedagogy².

None of these texts engage Simone de Beauvoir or her contributions to existentialist thought; my outrage about this is perhaps what warranted my inclusion on this panel. As I've considered the needs for a renewed existentialist pedagogy, I've wondered how an outline of that pedagogy might seek to place the individual *in context* of the whole, as but one (crucial) part of a larger assemblage. What does existentialist pedagogy look like when it starts with Beauvoir's insistence that "the individual is defined only by [their] relationship to the world and other individuals; [the individual] exists only by transcending [oneself] and [their] freedom can be

¹ I have altered gendered language to gender inclusive language throughout this paper.

² Two pieces point toward an approach to existentialist pedagogy I build here, one founded in Beauvoirian ambiguity and the other in Greene's articulation of imagination for social change. The first is the 1999 article from Slattery and Morris "Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics and Postmodern Ambiguity: The Assertion of Freedom in the Face of the Absurd; the second is Shaireen Rasheed's 2007 book *An Existentialist Curriculum of Action: Creating a Language of Freedom and Possibility*.

achieved only through the freedom of others” (*The Ethics of Ambiguity* 169)? This would be a pedagogy focused on radical social justice, on forging new potentials and possibilities, one that would guide the individual to not only assume the responsibility of their own freedom but, as a condition of that freedom, to seek the freedom of entangled others. Beauvoir was not alone in this approach to anti-oppressive existentialism.

I became interested in Maxine Greene (1917-2014)³ because of the social justice orientation of her existentialism and her lifelong commitment to the philosophy of education. Her accounting of existentialist thought in *Existential Encounters for Teachers* (1967) and *Teacher as Stranger* (1973) is comprehensive yet approachable; it is clear that even in her writing her goal is to *teach*. In another project, I am theorizing a “pedagogy of plasticity” and for that I draw on her conceptualization of imagination as a pedagogical tool. I was surprised, then, to see that in all of her historical accounting of existentialism and its applications to pedagogical encounters, Greene did not reference or draw from Beauvoir. But as I drew from both to build something new, they began to hold conversation in my mind. Both were concerned with human freedom, grinding against oppression, and both refused to subsume their philosophies in the hollow gratification of conclusion or consensus. They both valued the individual’s ability, if guided, to assume their ambiguous position in the world -- neither fully subject nor object, neither past, present or future, neither entirely self-made nor solely subject to the whims of “fate.”

Putting the individual works of Greene and Beauvoir in conversation, I see three main contributions to a new framework for an existentialist pedagogy: (dis)orientation, ambiguity, and imagination. While these might be most logically presented in this order pedagogically, as a scaffold for an existential encounter with self and other, they are by their nature recursive

³ After the Works Cited page, you’ll find a brief timeline of important events and publications in the lives of Maxine Greene and Simone de Beauvoir to provide context.

processes. In disorienting oneself to one's position, one can begin to grasp the ambiguous nature of their existence. Boundaries that were once rigid become malleable and porous, the distinctions between self and other, now and then, self-determination and fate fade as the self realizes that it is not pure transcendence nor pure immanence, but a complex and ambiguous interdependence. It is from here that imagination can reach a new potential, as the limits of that imagination expand beyond fixed habits, rigid assumptions, and the pessimism of critique. Borrowing an image from Virginia Woolf, Greene explains that "Breaking with the 'cotton wool' of habit is to find new ways and possibilities" (*Releasing the Imagination* 2). "When habit swathes everything, one day follows another identical day and predictability swallows any hint of an opening possibility...Once we can see our givens as contingencies, then we may have an opportunity to posit alternative ways of living and valuing" (*Releasing the Imagination* 23). The movements between these states -- (dis)orientation, ambiguity, imagination -- are not linear but cyclical, recursive as they break and build, sometimes in the same breath. The pedagogical encounter orients itself to assuming ambiguity, of resisting the urge to false clarity or closure, of remaining open to that which is not yet but still could be.

(Dis)orientation

In *Teacher as Stranger: Educational Philosophy for the Modern Age*, Greene writes: "To take a stranger's vantage point on everyday reality is to look inquiringly and wonderingly on the world in which one lives. It is like returning home from a long stay in some other place" (*Teacher as Stranger* 267). For Greene, an existentialist teacher would never lose sight of this orientation to their work, that the disorientation felt in assuming strangeness is the prerequisite for refining the view from a limited subject position. This "strange" (dis)orientation connects to the teachers' ontology and epistemology:

“The point is that reality does not exist for anyone as a given, as independently *there*. It is encountered by means of the matters of thinking, feeling, imagining, which distinguish particular languages and cultures....the teacher who wishes to be fully conscious must confront this contingency of the real” (*Teacher as Stranger* 10).

The teacher too should make space for the student to encounter disorientations. It is impossible to think and write of (dis)orientation and not call on Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. She writes, “Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground. Disorientation...can shatter one’s sense of confidence in the ground or one’s belief that the ground on which we reside can support the actions that make a life feel livable” (156). This unmooring is “vital” as Ahmed contends, since it makes space for new understandings, interpretations, orientations. Greene writes that the purpose of an education, particularly an existentialist one, is to “make the [person] visible to themselves” (*Teacher as Stranger* 270). This brings to mind the phenomenon of staring at oneself in the mirror for a prolonged period, opening a moment of disorientation about who one even is, what it means to be of a body, what is the relation between this body and the “immaterial” within. An existential educator would construct pedagogical encounters akin to a long, disorienting gaze in a mirror.

Beauvoir theorizes in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* on the condition of the child trying to make sense of themselves in the world: “The child’s situation is characterized by [being] cast into a universe which [they have] not helped to establish, which has been fashioned without [them], and which appears to [them] as an absolute to which [they] can only submit” (37). The child assumes that the values of this world are “ready-made things” which protect “against the risk of existence by the ceiling which human generations have built over [the child’s] head” (39). Of course, as the child moves through life and through their education, sparring with authority and

defining a path for themselves, there are as many ways for a child to break through this predetermination as there are ways to assume the comfort of an existence that needs no self-construction, requires no risk, resists all failure. Beauvoir, too, considers the future of the child who refuses to question the orientations given -- the fanatic, the beurocrat, the serious person. At best they miss the opportunity to forge their own vision or to become "visible to themselves" (*Teacher as Stranger* 270), at worst they become productive cogs in the machinery of oppression.

Ahmed reminds that, while critical, disorientation is not always radical (*Queer Phenomenology* 158). Disorientation, if not experienced in a way that reorients toward new understandings can cause crisis. Experiencing disorientation in a planned, scaffolded pedagogical encounter has the potential to make space for something new. Ahmed pushes, "the point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do--whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope" (*Queer Phenomenology* 158). In theory, these new directions toward hope follow in this approach to existentialist pedagogy as the individual comes to see the fundamental ambiguity of their existence, a space from which imagination can begin to form radical new possibilities.

Ambiguity

In moments of disorientation and reorientation, in making the self stranger to itself and its context, we can see ourselves from a perspective less likely to accept the taken-for-grantedness of our subjectivity. Our taken-for-granted subject positions arise from a resistance to experience ourselves as "thrown" into existence, acceptance of which causes anxiety, angst, existential crisis (Heidegger *Being and Time*). Heidegger suggests a resolve for this anxiety of our

condition as placing oneself in a context of individual past, present, and future. However, a Beauvoirian approach to overcoming existential anxiety comes not from resolving our ambiguous situation in some grand life narrative, but rather assuming that ambiguity as *fundamental* to existence. Assuming this “fundamental ambiguity” is crucial because “it is in the knowledge of the genuine condition of our life that we must draw strength to live and our reason for acting” (*Ethics of Ambiguity* 8).

Beauvoir posits three ambiguities that shape the “genuine condition of our life.” First, is that of transcendence and immanence. I am both the center of the world in which I live and the projects I undertake (transcendence) and but a thing in the lives of others (immanence) who also see themselves as the center of the world in which they live and the projects they undertake. Second is temporal ambiguity. We are aware of past, present, future but in a moment in which the past is no longer, the future isn’t yet, and the present is nothing. Greene sees this temporal ambiguity as well, observing, “There is always a gap between what we are living through in our present and what survives from our past” (*Releasing the Imagination* 21). From the present moment, I see a future in which I exist and a past that once existed, but the actual movement of time unfolds in a series of moments that “die one by one” (Beauvoir “An Existentialist Looks”). Finally, we see the aggregate of our lived experiences as belonging to ourselves alone, but also as unfolding as experience shared with others; we are both historically unique and part of the general collective of our milieu.

Seeking to assume as starting point these fundamental ambiguities is part of Beauvoir’s attempt provide an *ethics*⁴ for existentialism. How do we recognize the truth of our existence in

⁴ In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, this was one of Beauvoir’s main concerns. She writes, “There is only an ethics if there is a problem to solve. And it can be said that...the ethics which have given solutions by effacing the fact of the separation of men are not valid precisely because there *is* this separation. An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny *a priori* that separate existants can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedoms can forge laws valid for all” (17).

the world and not respond with despair, anguish, absurdity? Greene, in conversation with Beauvoir, provides some answers:

“We who are teachers have to strive against limits, *consciously* strive. The alternatives are not to be found in a rediscovery of untrammelled subjectivity or in acceptance of total determinism. A dialectical relation marks every human situation: it may be the relation between the individual and the environment, self and society, or living consciousness and object-world. Each such relation presupposes a mediation and a tension between the reflective and material dimensions of lived situations. Because both dimensions are equally significant, the tensions cannot be overcome by a triumph of subjectivity or objectivity; the dialectic cannot be finally resolved” (*Releasing the Imagination* 52).

Living, and teaching, from ambiguity recognizes the complexity of the individual in context and seeks to explore that complexity *without aiming for resolution*. While Greene’s vision here builds from binaries that may not push far enough toward the realization of ambiguity, it is valuable that even in this engagement with the dialectic, we seek no resolution.

Alexis Shotwell, in *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times* (2016), engages Beauvoir’s notion of ambiguity for its theoretical strengths; that it begins from a situated perspective, one that “wills itself toward its own projects,” and that it does not rely on the existence of an ideal world (*Against Purity* 131). Shotwell argues that an ethics formed from Beauvoirian ambiguity *holds in view* “how one’s actions open or close down the possibilities for others to unfurl their possibilities” (*Against Purity* 131). Of course this *holding in view* also knows no resolution since “we will never know all the features present in the moment and we will never have a clear-enough understanding of the outcomes of our willing. Still we make choices, nonideal choices” (*Against Purity* 131). The choices that appear available to us are dependent on our ability to imagine those choices and possibilities.

Imagination

After experiencing (dis)orientation and, in that opening, beginning to consider what it means, what it feels like to assume our ambiguity, Greene's focus on the imagination in learning encounters provides a space for freedom and hope in the uncertainty of existential rupture:

"Imagining things being otherwise may be a first step toward acting on the belief that they can be changed. A space of freedom opens before the person is moved to choose in the light of possibility; [they] feel what it signifies to be an initiator and an agent, existing among others but with the power to choose for [oneself]" (*Releasing the Imagination* 22).

Imagination is also finding traction in cognitive psychology, as neuroscientists realize that new experiences and ways of thinking can enhance the plasticity of our brains, or the ability for neurons to continue to build new networks⁵. Routine, habit, repetition all limit the potential of neural flourishing and restrict a person's ability to see things anew. Experiences of (dis)orientation and ambiguity can literally chart new pathways in the brain and engaging imagination in this newness pushes what a person might see as possible. This results in "a consciousness of the normative as well as the possible: of what ought to be, form a moral and ethical point of view, and what is in the making, what *might* be in an always open world" (Greene *Dialectic of Freedom* xi).

This space of imagination, while open and free and experimental and friendly to failure, should also maintain the insights of having been disoriented and assuming ambiguity. Beauvoir writes, "To be free is not to have the power to do anything you like; it is to be able to surpass the

⁵ Catherine Malabou's *What Should We Do With Our Brain* (2008) is an excellent introduction to the philosophical applications of modern neuroscience.

given toward an open future; the existence of others as a freedom defines my own situation and is even the condition of my own freedom” (97). Greene concurs,

“Freedom cannot be conceived apart from a matrix of social, economic, cultural, and psychological conditions. It is within the matrix that selves take shape or are created through choice of action in the changing situations of life. The degree and quality of whatever freedom is achieved are functions of the perspectives available, and of the reflectiveness of the choices made” (*Dialectic of Freedom* 80).

Thus, the practice of imagination supported by Greene and Beauvoir’s existentialists pedagogy and ethics is one that *holds in view* (Shotwell) the current situation while reaching out for what might still be possible. It is that vision of *what could be* in light of *what is* that forms the foundation for a hopeful agency in an ambiguous existence.

Conclusion*

“It is the assertion of our finiteness which doubtless gives the doctrine which we have just evoked its austerity and, in some eyes its sadness. As soon as one considers a system abstractly and theoretically, one puts [oneself], in effect, on the plane of the universal, thus, of the infinite....Existentialism does not offer the reader the consolations of an abstract evasion: existentialism proposes no evasion” (*Ethics of Ambiguity* 172).

“There will be no closure for us; there cannot be...There is always a tendency to drive toward completion, to finish the design, to stand back and look at an articulated whole. Each reader must strive toward such completion for [themselves]” (*Teacher as Stranger* 270).

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Appendix A: Maxine and Simone -- A Brief Timeline

1908 Beauvoir Born

1917 Greene Born

1947 *Ethics of Ambiguity*

1953 *The Second Sex*

1967 *Existential Encounters for Teachers*

1973 *Teacher as Stranger*

1981 *Dialectic of Freedom*

1986 Beauvoir Dies

2004 *Releasing the Imagination*

2014 Greene Dies