The Existential Concept of Freedom for Maxine Greene: The Influence of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty on Greene's Educational Pedagogy

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When freedom is the question, it is always time to begin.[1]

Maxine Greene and Jean-Paul Sartre both believe that it is through the dialectical principle of negativity and freedom that meaning and intelligibility are conferred upon the world in their manifest form. This notion is important throughout Greene's work, and is particularly important in *Dialectic of Freedom*, where Greene says about the student that "We must foster the freedom that he/she can attain as she moves dialectically between necessity and fulfillment, between the ineradicable qualities of her particular situation and the thus far unrealized capacities which are hers" (*DF*, 163).

Sartre's existentialist concept of freedom suggests that morality as a whole is the province of individual self-determination, and the social dimension of morality and relationships with others comes in simply as one element in the design of an individual life. Sartre's focus on individuality is particularly acute in *Being and Nothingness*. To use one's freedom of action, according to Sartre, means that one wills a world that bends to his or her desires. Rule-governed situations can be included within this world only to the extent that they can be shown to involve individual choice.

Greene, in emphasizing the social dimension of freedom, represents an advance on Sartre's individualistic philosophy. She is so faithful to the idea of an involved consciousness that the idea of a detached consciousness is largely negative in her cosmology of freedom. Greene believes that people are never alone but always stand in relation to others. In a recent interview, Greene drew attention to the importance of community: "I want young people to identify themselves by means of significant projects. It seems important as I have said too often that the projects are most meaningful when they involve others."[3] Moral education, according to Greene, must be specifically concerned with self-identification in a community.

In this essay, I will examine how Greene develops Sartre's concept of freedom by contextualizing it within an intersubjective realm. In emphasizing her development of Sartre's concept of freedom, this essay will further elucidate the influence of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on Greene's work. I will begin my discussion with an examination of Sartre's concept of ethics as it relates to freedom, as a critical evaluation of Sartre's thought may serve as the key to understanding both Greene's attempt to build upon Sartrean concepts and her redefinition of moral ethics. Human freedom for Greene, as for Sartre, manifests itself positively as grounded in possibility. But above and beyond her use of Sartre, I will go on to show how Greene interprets the concept of possibility within the intersubjective context of education. I will explore how the concept of freedom for Greene, as opposed to Sartre, is

concretely rooted in a notion of multicultural literacy in which social equality and cultural differences coexist with the principles that inform substantive participatory democracy. To this effect, I will show how Greene, by adopting Merleau-Ponty's concept of "social imagination," has created a successful educational pedagogy that recognizes the role of possibility, at the same time exploring the historical and social contexts of intersubjective relationships.

As Thomas Anderson, a renowned scholar of Sartre claims, throughout *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre seems to consider the choice of freedom to be primarily an individual one. He appears most interested in saying why free human beings do not choose their freedom but flee from it in pursuing a type of existence incompatible with it—namely by adopting the spirit of seriousness and living in bad faith. By "bad faith" Sartre designates the attempt by an individual to escape from what he or she is, to what he or she can never become.[4] The alternative he proposes is for an individual to undergo a "radical conversion" and to accept his or her freedom as his or her goal, as he believes that these considerations do not exclude the possibility of an ethics of deliverance and salvation. The description of the nature of this radical conversion was apparently left for his work on ethics, a work Sartre never completed (*SE*, 67-68).

As Anderson points out later, in works such as *Saint Genet* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre did examine the situated character of human freedom, particularly with respect to the social dimension of many freedoms.[5] Here he emphasizes the alienated state of human freedom in the world, its limitations, and the need for human cooperation to attain the goal of true freedom. But despite this emphasis on the social aspect of freedom, Sartre nowhere attempts to demonstrate systematically that the individual has a moral obligation to any freedom other than his own. In his discussions with de Beauvoir, Sartre noted the tension he felt between the requirements of freedom and the need for community, between his desire to safeguard his personal liberty and his need for others (*SE*, 68).[6] This is clear in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, where Sartre tries to set forth the structures of society and the various collectivities within it in their dialectical interrelations and in their relations to matter, an understanding of which would enable individuals more fully to control them instead of being controlled by them. But it is important to point out that the concept of group introduced by Sartre in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* does not provide any room for a unity of consciousness. Instead, the praxis of group projects depends upon external forces, including threats and danger. Praxis involves all the individuals who make up the group; yet the individual project remains the core of the praxis, and the individual retains his or her central position as a free consciousness that can break away from the group even if punishment is inevitable. Thus, the shift from the individual-centered world of *Being and Nothingness* to the group-centered sociality of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* is incomplete: it fails to resolve the conflict that marks the individual's relationship with the group as a whole.[7]

According to Anderson most commentators agree that in *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre does refer to what he considers to be an individual's moral responsibility to others. Here he says, "I am obliged to will the freedom of others at

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the same time as mine. I cannot make freedom my aim unless I make that of others equally my aim."[8] However, Sartre's reasons for holding this view remain unclear. Why is one obliged to will not just one's personal freedom but also that of others? The suggestions Sartre makes in *Existentialism and Humanism* are inadequate. Sartre argues that all moral principles rest upon the individual's choice; therefore, there are no objective grounds for morality. If one accepts the relevance of a particular consideration, it is because one chooses to do so. There are no objective criteria to govern such choices. Nor does Sartre discuss in this regard the nature of the relation between authentic individuals. Rather, according to Sartre, each individual must simply choose his or her freedom, the continual expansion of his or her own existence (*SE*, 68).

Sartre's paradigm is thus one in which the individual, as moral agent, must choose and must act in isolation from or in the absence of a collectively accepted, mutual body of moral rules. As a result, critics have argued that Sartre's ethics legitimizes radical individualism, leading to chaos and anarchy. The "normal" situation, in which such guidance and support are available, receives relatively little attention from Sartre. Since action outside of reciprocal moral strictures is always threatened with "inauthenticity," it offers at best a marginal example of the "moral." Under this view, morality could in fact be equated with the whole province of human action, with no distinction made between the broader questions of individual self-determination and the questions that are usually seen as answered by reference not to an individual ideal but to a rule held as common by at least some subgroup.[9]

The other striking thing about Sartre's treatment of human relations in *Being and Nothingness* is the manner in which the author reasons out his position. According to Anderson, human relationships for Sartre are founded at an abstract level. Sartre not only refers to such relations as existing either between consciousnesses, or in and of themselves, rather than between human beings, he sees these relationships as occurring almost exclusively on the psychological level.[10] When Sartre writes, for example, of a subject being alienated, degraded, or enslaved by another, this slavery is only psychological. Similarly, rather than addressing human beings, Sartre refers to consciousness coming to self-awareness by negating, even wrenching away from, the other. Through this process, consciousness recognizes that it is not the reified object the other makes of it but a free subject.[11] Again, the recognition of one's freedom does not necessarily involve any concrete social and political liberation from the other.[12]

Likewise, for Sartre, deliverance from conflict comes, when possible at all, not from real physical actions or from reforming oppressive political and socioeconomic structures, but from changing consciousness. Thus, the radical conversion Sartre briefly alluded to consists of a fundamental change in an individual's choices that arises out of an individual mental response to the concrete social problems of human relations. Though this remedy may be ethical, it is fundamentally apolitical and ahistorical.[13]

It is important to point out that given there is a difference between metaphysical or transcendental freedom on the one hand (free will) and empirical or social

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freedom on the other (emancipation). Sartre, following Kant believes that the former has normative implications for the latter, that is, that the very fact that we are free beings implies that some ways of treating people are wrong, some are right. But Sartre never works this out, not least of all because he rejects Kant's own moral theory: that freedom means autonomy, that autonomy means rational self-legislation, which in turn demands adherence to the moral law in the form of the categorical imperative. Thus individuals for Sartre are ultimately are morally responsible only for themselves.

Elaborating on Sartre's concept of choice, Greene believes that individuals always define their freedom in relation with others. Although it is equally important for her to affirm that the decision is always the act of an individual acting voluntarily in a particular situation at a particular moment, she does not believe that individuals are isolated, answerable only to themselves. As Greene explicitly states: "I do mean that individuals, viewed as participants, as inextricably involved with other people, must be enabled to take responsibility for their own choosing."[14] The aim for her is to find an authentic public space, one in which diverse human beings can appear before one another. Such a space requires the provision of opportunities for the articulation of multiple perspectives in multiple idioms, out of which something common can be brought into being. With this in mind, Greene wants to explore other ways of seeing, alternate modes of being in the world.

In *Dialectic of Freedom*, Greene maintains that it is "through and by means of education…that individuals can be provoked to reach beyond themselves in their intersubjective space. It is through and by means of education that they may become empowered to think about what they are doing" (*DF*, 12). And fundamental to this whole process of learning, Greene states:

> is the sense of moral directedness, of oughtness. An imaginativeness, an awareness and a sense of possibility are required, along with the sense of autonomy and agency, of being present to the self.…As wide awake teachers work, making principles available and eliciting moral judgments, they must orient themselves to the concrete, the relevant, and the questionable (LL, 51).

Education, according to Greene, is conceived as "a process of futuring, of releasing persons to become different and to take actions to create themselves" (*DF*, 22). The challenge for Greene is to engage as many young people as possible, thus motivating them toward what she calls "collective action" (*DF*, 125). Emphasizing the connection between education and freedom, Greene reinforces the themes of decision and choosing, as she stated in her inaugural lecture as William F. Russell Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University in 1975: "My concern is [with] what can be done by means of education to enable people to transcend their private terrors and act together to give freedom a concrete existence in their lives."[15] And, further separating herself from Sartre, she goes on to say, "My interest is not so much freedom from or negative freedom as it is the deliberate creation of the kinds of conditions in which people can be themselves."[16]

Moral sensitivity for Greene, in contrast to Sartre, is a crucial aspect of a student's learning. As she states in *The Landscapes of Learning*,

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> If teachers today are to initiate young people into an ethical existence, they themselves must attend more fully than they normally have to their own live,…they have to break with the mechanical life, to overcome their own submergence in the habitual, even in what they conceive to be virtuous, and ask the "why" in which learning and moral reasoning begin (*LL*, 46).

Greene in turn believes that the young "are most likely to be stirred to learn when they are challenged by teachers who themselves are learning, who are breaking with what they have too easily taken for granted, who are creating their own moral lives" (*LL*, 51). And further:

> if educators, whoever we are, can become challengers to impersonality,…challengers to suffering and [to] lack of care, if we take initiatives, we can begin to recreate an educational space in which meanings can emerge for persons as they take the risk of risking and begin choosing the moral life and in the process define their freedom" (*LL*, 157).

The underlying assumption of Greene's pedagogy is that human beings are beings in the world and are always in the process of constructing themselves by turning from their actualities to their potentialities; these potentialities are in turn discovered in relationship with others. As she says in *Dialectic of Freedom*,

> the world should be filled with meaning of students' existential experience and not of their teachers. Our role as teachers and teacher educators is to encourage and provoke students to speak in their own voice in a world where other voices define the mainstream (*DF*, 190).

For Greene, the growth of a new critical awareness is a rediscovery of the familiar, from which emerges a fresh use of old words. If the senses are set free, and begin to see what *is* rather than what the world of domination compelled them to see, the liberated person needs a new idiom in which to name what is seen for the first time. The goal, for her, is to recognize that in this world of multiple viewpoints no reckoning, whether that of the pedagogue or of another, can ever be finished or complete. There is always a possibility for different views, experiences, and ways of being in the world. As she says, "it is within this possibility that space opens for the pursuit of freedom within a public space," where persons appear before one another as who they really are and what they really can do (*DF*, 128).

Greene believes that the space in question ought to be one infused with an imaginative awareness, to allow those involved to imagine alternative possibilities for their own becoming.[17] It has to be a space in which individuals mutually discover, recognize and appreciate alternate ways of conceiving realities, consequently finding ways to make sense of their intersubjective world.

Greene, by invoking the phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty's concept of social imagination (which she defines as the capacity to invent visions of what should be and what ought to be), shows that the world we inhabit is the intersubjective and interpersonal world of human coexistence (*RI*, 5). Phenomenology which examines the structures of human experience is a philosophy which considers the comprehension of human beings and the world impossible from any other basis than the facticity of existence. According to Merleau-Ponty, human beings are essentially historical beings whose identity, unity, and autonomy as individual selves are always in a dialectical process of developing. Their identities are thus part of an ongoing history of human imaginative responses to situations whose inherent ambiguity and mystifying power involve us in a continual struggle to always be more than we are already:

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"The world," Merleau-Ponty therefore writes, "is not what I think but what I live through."[18] And it is in the very inexhaustibility of the world, Greene suggests, "that the search for ways of articulation or sense making will be ongoing"(*RI*, 107).

Imagination, for Greene, gives rise to glimpses of possibility, to what is not yet, to what ought to be. Any encounter, she says,

> with the actual human beings who are trying to learn how to learn requires imagination on the part of teachers and on the part of those they teach.…[I]t takes imagination to become aware that a search is possible.…[I]t takes imagination on the part of the young people to perceive openings through which they can move (*RI*, 14).

Greene believes that imagination is as important in the lives of teachers as it is in the lives of their students, in part, she says,

> because teachers incapable of thinking imaginatively or of releasing students to encounter works of literature and other forms of art are probably also unable to communicate to the young what the use of imagination signifies. If it is the case that imagination feeds one's capacity to feel one's way into another's vantage point, then teachers may also be lacking in empathy (*RI*, 36).

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's concept of embodied consciousness, in which perception undergirds cognition, Greene identifies consciousness as something experienced through the movements and gestures that embody us in space, time, and history, our differentiation from and integration with our past, with other human beings and with the world in which we move about and live.[19] For Merleau-Ponty the dialectical concept of experience is contextualized within the lived perception of the individual subject, at the same time immediately opening to a world beyond the subject; because he believes that a fundamental element of a subject's perception is its perspectival character. It is partial and incomplete and presented in a way that possibility of other perspectives are always open. So instead of starting with a specific individual's experience and connecting his or her projects with the projects of other individuals, as Sartre does, Merleau-Ponty argues that as soon as I perceive the world, I am immediately in a world with others.[20] He argues that the very first things perceived in the nascent perception are other human beings, a belief that arises out of a dialectical relationship between consciousness and the body and between an individual and its relationship to other individuals, a view contrary to what Sartre has put forth. The meaning of the human world he says is: "the recognition beyond the present milieu of a world of things visible for each "I" under a plurality of aspects, the taking of indefinite time and space."[21]

Like Merleau-Ponty, Greene stresses that perception is embodied, and that: "we are first cast into the world as embodied beings" (*RI*, 73). Through the language we speak, we are, Greene says, embodied in social roles, in cultures and subcultures, in forms of thinking, of understanding and of imagining. By attending, listening, and gazing, Greene maintains, a perceiver structures what presents itself. She continues:

> As Merleau-Ponty puts it, perceiving entails a return to the "there is" underlying an abstract conception, to the "object-in-general" or to the site, the soil of the sensible and the opened world such as it is in our life and body.…The way things are allows us only a partial view of things, not the kind of total view we might gain if we were godlike, looking down from the sky. But we can only know as situated beings. We see aspects of objects and people around us; we all live in the kind of incompleteness that Freire identified, and there is always more for us to see (*RI*, 26).

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Consequently, the situations in which choices concerning one's freedom take place are always embodied and socialized. The way in which the individual addresses himself or herself to the process of attending, judging, and choosing will be affected to the degree he or she is with others, the degree to which they have experienced the "we relation" in the world. Such relations are then, by virtue of their intersubjectivity, moral decisions. In a related quote Greene says a human being:

> lives as it were in two orders—one created by his or her relations with the perceptual fields that are given in experience, the other created by his or her relations with a human and social environment. It is important to remember that each of us achieves contact with the world from a particular vantage point, in terms of a partial biography. All this underlies our present perspectives and affects the way we look at things and structure our realities. To be in touch with our landscape is to be conscious of our evolving experiences, to be aware of the ways in which we encounter the world (*LL*, 2).

For both Merleau-Ponty and Greene, freedom and morality are commensurable and rooted in the world of which the other, another human being, is the predominant reality. Existence in this context is not "condemned to freedom" as it is for Sartre, but judged and invested as freedom. An important implication of this is that one is not an agent "over against" society. Rather than others being a threat to one's agency, as was the case for Sartre, others are the occasion for possibility. Humans as agents, then, are intimately connected with others.

According to Greene, moral choice, in the context of Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodied perception, requires choosing between two alternatives, typically between two goods. The task of the educator is to empower students to internalize principles that will enable them to make such choices. These, says Greene, "are choices of consequence for the self and others, and they are made and can only be made in social situations where custom, tradition, official codes, and laws condition and play upon what people think and do"(*LL*, 48).

In conclusion, this essay has tried to show how Greene, by further developing Sartre's concept of freedom to include the educational and the intersubjective realm, creates an educational pedagogy where human beings perceive the world as always situated. And the situated person as Greene says: "inevitably engaged with others, reaches out and grasps the phenomena surrounding him/her from a particular vantage point and against a particular background of consciousness" (*DF*, 51). Freedom then becomes not only a matter of being, it becomes our experience in an embodied way. But embodied freedom within such a context for Greene must be critical and self-reflective, a demand that people ponder what they imagine, that they articulate the principles that govern the choices they make as they live. What, after all, Greene asks, "is the relationship between imagination and moral life?"[22]

To appeal to the freedom of the individual, to enable students to confront their own reality, imaginative art should, according to Greene, always be offered as present possibilities—as beginnings rather than culminations, as origins, rather than means or ends.[23] And when such an imaginative dialogue is activated in classrooms, even the young are stirred to reach out on their own initiatives.[24]

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1. Maxine Greene, *Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988) 155. This text will be cited as *DF* for all subsequent references.

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2. W. Ayers, "Interview with Maxine Greene," *Qualitative Studies in Education* 8, no. 4 (1995): 319.

3.Thomas Anderson, *The Structure and Foundation of Sartrean Ethics* (Kansas: Regents Press, 1979), 67-68. This text will be cited as *SE* for all subsequent references. See also Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library 1956), part 1, chap. 2. For a related discussion see Richard J. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), 149; see also 148-52.

4. Bernstein, *Praxis and Action.* See also *Being and Nothingness*, 312, also n. 14.

5.Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. B. Frechtman (New York: New American Library, Mentor Books, 1963) and Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: NLB, 1976).

6. See also Simone de Beauvoir, *Force of Circumstance*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), 243, 261.

7. See Khemais Benhamida, "Sartre's Existentialism and Education: The Missing Foundation of Human Relations." *Educational Theory* 23, no. 3 (Summer 1973), 235.

8. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*, trans. P. Mairet (London: Methuen, 1973), 52.

9. See Frederick A. Olafson, "Authenticity and Obligation," in *Sartre: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Mary Warnock (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1971), 123.

10. Thomas C. Anderson, *Sartre's Two Ethics: From Authenticity to Integral Humanity* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 1993), 27.

11. Ibid., 30.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 35.

14. Maxine Greene, *Landscapes of Learning* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1978), 2. This text will be cited as *LL* for all subsequent references.

15. Maxine Greene, *Education, Freedom, and Possibility*; Inaugural Lecture as William F. Russell Professor, Teachers College, Columbia University, 1975.

16. Ibid.

17. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995), 39. This text will be cited as *RI* for all subsequent references.

18. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1967), xvi-xvii. According to Merleau-Ponty the logic of the world is a "living cohesion" in which I belong to myself while belonging to the world. Merleau-Ponty's conception of phenomenology is rooted in a philosophy of the embodied world and nature, an aspect he was still working on when he died. See *The Visible and the Invisible, followed by Working Notes*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

19. *The Phenomenology of Perception* explicitly deals with this process in its examination of perception and the world. In an overcoming of this duality of mind/consciousness over world, perception for Merleau-Ponty is the primary function of the human organism and of the human body, constituting the only adequate foundation for a theory of perception. See M.C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998), 105.

20. The phenomenal body as he claims then, "is the vantage point from which I perceive all possible objects. It is my body which is the vehicle of my perception and movement in the world." Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 111

21. The underlying aim for him being one of teaching individual to see and to learn what perceptions mean against our falsification that our mental constructs impose. It requires that we must learn what we have already taken the trouble to learn, called radical reflection, "reflection on the unreflected, it appeals to a conception of the a priori synthetic which no longer sets the a priori off against the factual but integrates the a priori with the factual, shows that the incompleteness of actual precepts is a necessary feature of the perceptual praxis." Christopher Macann, *Four Phenomenological Philosophers: Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty* (London: Routledge 1993), 182, 171

22. Ayers, "Interview with Maxine Greene," 319-28.

23. See Ibid., 80-83.

24. Ibid.

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