

The Dialectic of Expulsion: An Existentialist Account of Positive Freedom

Response to Frattura

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Addyson Frattura sets out to make “a significant mess” of school expulsion.¹ She does this by utilizing a common strategy in the existentialist literature. To truly see what is closest to you, one must defamiliarize the familiar and view one’s surroundings in a new light. Against the standard way of looking at school expulsions, as a disciplinary norm, there is an existential one, which she presents as a double isolation. The expelled student must not only cope with the isolation of being an individual thrown into an uncaring world, she is also isolated from the solidarity of community and prevented from access to the means by which she might exercise her subjectivity and act in the common realm. In highlighting the existential qualities of school expulsion, Frattura also displays her faith in school’s potential to actualize freedom through literature, guiding students to turn away, turn against, and turn towards a world that can be negated, rebelled against, and renewed in unforeseeable ways. In short, expulsion denies children love by “striking from their hands the chance to start something new.”² While it might bestow negative freedom by leaving the expelled to their own devices to do as they please (except of course, to go back to school), expulsion also denies positive freedom by withholding the very conditions that make action possible. Words and deeds only make sense in the context of community.

I suspect she knows that her optimistic conclusion doesn’t necessarily follow from the standard existentialist premises. The paradox of existence lies in the absurdity of a human life. Men and women desire a rational universe and a life of meaning but find themselves instead thrown into a world that is silent, cold, and irrational. The writer Annie Dillard illuminates an aspect of this paradox, when she writes:

On April 30, 1991—on that one day—138,000 peo-

PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION 2020 | Heather Greenhalgh-Spencer, editor

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ple drowned in Bangladesh. At dinner I mentioned to our daughter, who was then seven years old, that it was hard to imagine 138,000 people drowning. “No, it’s easy,” she said. “Lots and lots of dots, in blue water.”³

And again, in her description of the goings-on of a hospital.

On wards above and below me, men and women are dying. Their hearts seize, give out, or clatter, their kidneys fail, their lungs harden or drown, their brains clog or jam and die for blood. Their awarenesses lower like lamp wicks. Off they go, these many great and beloved people, as death subtracts them one by one from the living—about 164,300 of them a day worldwide, and 6,000 a day in the United States—and the hospitals shunt their bodies away. Simultaneously, here they come, these many new people, for now absurdly alike—about 10,000 of them a day in this country—as apparently shabby replacements.⁴

Frattura suggests that a utilitarian logic devoid of human freedom reduces our lives to probabilities, where we can only recognize others as lots and lots of dots in blue water. But the human search for meaning expects more from the world. This is what Camus characterizes as the absurd, the “confrontation between this human need and the unreasonable silence of the world.”⁵ “From this perspective of the system of the cosmos,” writes Maxine Greene, “things seem to happen automatically, irresistibly. We think in terms of trends, probabilities, statistical certainties.”⁶ Our lives are rendered cosmically insignificant.

As an educational account, the standard existentialist stance doesn’t offer much consolation against this problem of insignificance. It might be

argued that schools serve as the ideal breeding ground for bad faith, where complacency and conformity are cultivated like nowhere else. We are sorted and categorized, we bend to traditions and norms, we take on predetermined roles and functions in society, and if we are really good at doing these things, we become excellent sheep. The standard existentialist interpretation sees more liberatory potential in being expelled than remaining within the hallowed halls of the academy. Why not drive them out and wake them from their slumbers? Why not expose their myths, the “nakedness to the everyday” in the quickest and most emphatic fashion?⁷

But where many see hopelessness, Frattura sees creative potential. Rejecting the utilitarian account of schooling, she imagines school as a fertile place for risk, freedom, and solidarity. “From a human perspective,” writes Greene, “that of a teacher beginning a school year, a writer beginning a book, a child beginning the first grade, nothing is fully predictable or determined. All kinds of things are possible, although none can be guaranteed. When risks are taken, when people do indeed act in their freedom, a kind of miracle has taken place.”⁸ School expulsion denies the expelled from this important realm of experience.

Smoothing out its nihilist edges, then, Frattura recasts existentialism around the distinction between negative freedom (freedom from outside intervention) and positive freedom (the power to renew the world with others.) She turns to Hannah Arendt and Maxine Greene to give her account its existential teeth.

Of course, Arendt’s school is not the ideal place for the exercise of positive freedom. Schools serve as proving grounds where teachers prepare children for their second birth, their eventual entrance into the public realm of adults. Our potential for positive freedom lies in the human capacity to renew our common world in creative, unpredictable ways. The Arendtian form of positive freedom is the speech and action exercised among equals in the public realm of radical plurality. In keeping with an existentialist spirit, the effects of speech and action are unforeseeable and irreversible. They outlast us all. But without the initiation into the adult world provided by

schools, children are fated to flit across the social surface of things, blindly following fads and bullies or burning out in the glare of the public spotlight. Expulsion, then, denies a person's opportunity to one day participate in the renewal of the common world. This denial diminishes both the freedom of the individual and the plurality of the community. It is in this sense that we might understand Jean-Paul Sartre's claim that "nothing can be good for any of us unless it is good for all."⁹

But Frattura is interested in promoting positive freedom in the schools. Drawing from the work of Maxine Greene, Frattura espouses a form of freedom that can be cultivated and exercised in the classroom through literature. Literature is a side entrance to reality; it decenters our narcissist outlook, nudging students from their complaisant ways of being to rebel against an intolerable status quo. *Negation, Rebellion, and Freedom* is the Hegelian dialectic of this freedom. For Frattura, "imaginative and existential literature offer what expulsion denies—the leading forth of the educational."¹⁰

It is an open question whether this form of freedom is what is needed. What I most appreciate in this paper is the resistance against utilitarian thinking, the reduction of students to numbers and probabilities. While it might be asking too much to eradicate utilitarian thinking from education entirely—after all, this account of education, as Frattura states, is the cream swirling in all our morning coffees—there is certainly room for other accounts. As Danielle Allen points out, while macrolevel utilitarian concerns dominate administrative and policy circles, teachers who love the world and love their students will always find a way to cultivate the flourishing of individuals.¹¹ In the end, education will have to offer something more than a utilitarian account of itself if it is to successfully challenge the practice of school expulsion. Drawing from Greene, Frattura believes that we can face the paradoxes of existence and society by surpassing the given and looking "at things as if they could be otherwise."¹²

Of course, there are many ways to face our existential paradox. Albert Camus would tell us to face facts and live within the tension. We cannot

console ourselves with societal myths without also succumbing to bad faith. The paradox of existence is without resolution. Others who face the facts of our existence might marvel at the miracle of human life anyway. This seems to be Dillard's strategy back at the hospital.

At the sink in the maternity ward, nurse Pat Eisberg is unwrapping another package. This infant emerged into the world three weeks early; she is lavender, and goopy with yellow vernix, like a Channel swimmer. As the washcloth rubs her, she pinks up. I cannot read her name. She is alert and silent. She looks about with apparent concentration: she pays great attention, and seems to have a raw drive to think.

She fixes on my eyes and, through them, studies me. I am not sure I can withstand such scrutiny, but I can, because she is just looking, purely looking, as if she were inspecting this world from a new angle. She is, perhaps for the first time, looking into eyes, but serenely, as if she does not mind whose eyes she meets. What does it matter, after all? It is life that glistens in her eyes; it is a calm consciousness that connects with volts the ocular nerves and working brain. She has a self, and she knows it; the red baby knew it too.

This alert baby's intensity appears hieratic; it recalls the extraordinary nature of this Formica room. Repetition is powerless before ecstasy, Martin Buber said. Now the newborn is studying the nurse—conferring, it seems, her consciousness upon the busy nurse as a general blessing. I want to walk around this aware baby in circles, as if she were the silver star's hole on the cave floor, or the Kaaba stone in Mecca, the wellspring of mystery itself, the black mute stone that requires men to ask, Why is there here, instead of nothing? And why are we aware of this question—we people, particles going around and around this black stone? Why are we aware of it?¹³

Whatever response we give to these questions, each new generation should be afforded the chance to give it. Frattura's existentialist account reminds us not only that Being is an issue for us, but also that we are complicit in the making of our future. In an Arendtian democracy, all of us should be invited to take our place among equals to create something that "cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before."¹⁴ For many, that is just what our human freedom amounts to.

1 Addyson Frattura, "Existentially Expelled: School Expulsion and the Student," *Philosophy of Education* 76, no. 2 (2020).

2 Hannah Arendt, "The Crisis in Education," in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993).

3 Annie Dillard, *For the Time Being* (New York: Vintage Books, 1999), 48.

4 Dillard, *For the Time Being*, 91-92.

5 Albert Camus, trans. Justin O'Brien. *Myth of Sisyphus* (United States: Vintage Books, 1955), 28.

6 Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1988), 56.

7 Frattura, "Existentially Expelled."

8 Greene, *The Dialectic*, 56.

9 Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Carol Macomber, *Existentialism is a Humanism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 24.

10 Frattura, "Existentially Expelled."

11 Danielle Allen, *Education and Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2016).

12 Greene, 3.

13 Dillard, 92.

14 Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1998), 178.