

A Few Relevant Ambiguities

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How should we continue to move towards an existential ethic for teachers? The authors get the process started, or pick up where things left off — bidding us to return to the existential tradition with educational questions in mind, reminding us why philosophers of education have engaged these texts since the 1950s, and showing us why their relevance persists in today’s “accountability era.” Ultimately, I hope to offer a direction for the development of this project, but I will begin by laying out my understanding of the authors’ argument and raising a few points of concern.

Their argument springs from the accepted opinion that recent educational reforms (that is, those “influenced by neoliberal welfare policies”) are harmful to the practice of education. Focusing on the moral harm done to teachers, the authors remind us that teachers are human. An existentialist claim is then made, namely, that when humans exist authentically, they do so by defining themselves through free and responsible action. Threats to free and responsible action are existential threats. Therefore, problems arising in the “accountability era” should be understood as existential threats. Assuming this frame, the only way forward is through the individual teacher’s free and responsible action. Yet given their difficult working conditions, at present, many teachers opt to flee from freedom and responsibility and succumb to inauthentic states of mind (or “bad faith”). Acting in bad faith is morally problematic because it can lead to harm to self or others. So what should be done? The authors suggest that the best response is for existentialists to “move in,” and help teachers-as-humans avoid the temptations of bad faith. The authors are very careful not to offer any prescriptions for concrete action. Their existential ethic (thus far) only intends to help teachers avoid formal “archetypes” of bad faith.

Based on this understanding of the argument, I now offer a few points of concern. First, the authors leave an explanatory gap between their initial acknowledgement of problematic conditions and their conclusion, which appears to thrive on conditions that demoralize teachers. This explanatory gap leaves room for conditions to improve, but not on an existentialist’s terms. For instance, imagine teachers came to receive the same social respect and professional autonomy as heart surgeons. This would be an improvement of teaching conditions, some might say, but not necessarily an existentialist. The consistent existentialist would have to remind teachers that the “bad faith” archetypes remain. Now in a room full of teachers-bearing-the-social-respect-of-heart-surgeons — or even in a room full of teachers of today — the existentialist’s words might come off as a bit presumptuous. The teachers might respond: “We know we are humans; we are treated as such. Why are you talking about our souls? Why not say more about educational practice that draws us together?”

A second concern is that educational practice is described very abstractly. We learn that teachers bear some (unspecified) responsibility for children: teachers work in a “cognitive and dispositional environment” and, while teachers work in schools,

education should be a unified project that extends beyond educational institutions. Do any of these abstract descriptions apply to the educator's practice exclusively? Heart surgeons also bear some responsibility for their patients. Heart surgeons also operate in what could be called a "cognitive and dispositional environment." And heart surgeons work in hospitals, but most would agree that the concerns of health should extend beyond medical institutions.

This quick exchange might sound a little too quick, a little too eager. Indeed, substituting heart surgeons for teachers is facile. It loses some of the authors' intended meaning. Can the same charge be leveled against the authors' use of these texts? Is some meaning lost when Sartre and Beauvoir's diagnoses of the human condition (writ large) are facetiously applied to the woes of Anglo-American teachers? Perhaps, but I think the authors' very contribution is to encourage readers to follow their lead and return to these classical texts in order to discern — with fresh eyes — the ills and possibilities of the accountability era.

That said, a final concern arises for those who opt to follow the authors' lead. Readers and re-readers of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* may wonder if the authors' use of this text is problematically selective. To mention a smaller worry, the bulk of this essay fleshes out an analogy between Beauvoir's archetypes of bad faith and contemporary teachers. Yet the authors neglect to mention the "intellectual critic" and the "artist" — that is, the last two archetypes of bad faith she discusses. To mention a greater worry, the authors' intention to help teachers "avoid the archetypes of bad faith" is a purely formal claim. To see why this is a greater worry, consider the following remark from Thomas Flynn, a philosopher who has grown old studying existentialism. Flynn judges: "Of the many candidates for the distinguishing feature of existentialist philosophy, I would propose this [the] *pursuit of the concrete*."¹ Flynn's judgment resounds in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. In fact, Beauvoir concludes section II of the text, the section where the archetypes of bad faith are discussed, with the following remark: "To will oneself free is also to will others free. This will is not an abstract formula. It points out to each person *concrete* action to be achieved. But the others are separate, even opposed, and the man of good will sees *concrete* and difficult problems arising in his relations with them."² This remark segues to section III, entitled "The Positive Aspect of Ambiguity." This section reminds us that the positive project of an existential ethic is to engage in concrete work towards social and political *conditions* where each person is affirmed as an end. Accordingly, those who enslave or oppress others are unambiguously wrong; and those who choose profit over emancipation are also unambiguously wrong. The point being, wrongs can be readily observed in the world. An existentialist ethic affirms that concrete action should be taken against wrongs. This cannot be any action whatsoever, for that would be an affirmation of absurdity. So, whence the ambiguity?

Beauvoir explains that ambiguities (that is, relevant ones) persist when freedom is concretely pursued in political action. Two political parties, for instance, might adopt conflicting means for the same worthy end. The best means thus become relevantly ambiguous. Alternatively, pursuing freedom through political action might involve the so-called problem of "dirty hands," where violence is unavoidable but

not justified, and so it becomes morally obligatory for righteous political actors to acknowledge that their actions bear a “necessary element of failure” (EA, 146).

Were this positive political project to be facilely applied to today’s accountability era, an existentialist might advise a group of teachers to ambush educational administrators, in the parking lot until they stop being so demoralizing. (As a side note, based on the authors’ presentation, there is an interesting question that arises here about where Doris Santoro’s notion of demoralization falls on a spectrum of harms. I would say somewhere between outright oppression and a mere slight to one’s dignity, but where in between I’m not sure.) For now, it’s fair to say that these concrete political considerations do not mesh very well with the authors’ educational concerns.

And yet, in section III of the text, Beauvoir addresses education. She brilliantly distinguishes between “urgent” political action and the “slow labor” of education (EA, 98). And she speaks briefly but directly about the teacher-student relationship. Attending to her remarks on education, as I will suggest in concluding, provides direction for those moving towards an existentialist ethic for teachers.

First, Beauvoir understands children to be naturally irresponsible.³ Thus, the claim that “the existence of others as freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my freedom” (EA, 91) necessitates a qualification. Children bear the possibility of freedom, but, given their natural limitations, they do not exist as fully free and responsible agents. Thus, as Beauvoir explains, “To treat [a child] as a child is not to bar him from the future but to open it to him; [the child] needs to be taken in hand, he invites authority” (EA, 141). For those concerned with the teacher’s authenticity, it would seem critical to explain what occurs when children’s developing freedom conditions the teacher’s developed freedom. Expressed as a question, how does a teacher proceed in good faith when her responsibility to care for children, day in and day out, seems to involve being perceived by them as a “being” or a “statue” (EA, 35–36)? As I see it, this question evokes relevant ambiguities about educational practice.

Next, in reference to Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Emile*, Beauvoir makes the intriguing claim that, “in a sense, all education is failure” (EA, 142). Beauvoir claims that Rousseau proposes an education immune to failure. Some might describe this text as a stunning thought experiment, supplying regulative ideals for our messy educational practice. But I think it is worth considering that all education — as it proceeds in nonideal circumstances — involves an element of failure. What would it mean to take seriously the problem of “dirty hands” in an educational context, or, to amend Beauvoir’s quotation of Saint-Just, that “No one [teaches] innocently” (EA, 108)? Responding to this question also seems to evoke relevant ambiguities about educational practice.

Finally, in the context of a blues-themed philosophy of education conference where the accepted opinions that education is in jeopardy prevail and that teachers are in need of philosophical first-responders, it seems important to recall that one of Beauvoir’s bad faith archetypes is the intellectual critic. As she describes him, “he does not have to choose between the highway and the native, between America and

Russia, between production and freedom. He understands, dominates, and rejects, in the name of total truth, the necessarily partial truths which every human engagement discloses.” Beauvoir’s conclusion is severe: “Instead of the independent mind he claims to be, he is only the shameful servant of a cause to which he has not chosen to rally” (*EA*, 68–69).

Taken to heart, these severe words haunt me. What causes am I inexplicitly advocating here? I don’t know. Amidst the uncertainty, the bad faith archetypes beckon and seduce with falsities. Avoid them, I must. Yet Beauvoir’s severity offers more than an admonition to avoid bad faith; it urges us to mind the concrete. “Love,” she writes, “authorizes severities which are not granted to indifference” (*EA*, 137). I wonder how this line, written with teachers in mind, might apply to a field involving intellectual criticism. More specifically, I wonder how those moving towards an existential ethic for teachers can proceed in “good faith” — or even just “good enough faith.” My hunch is that love plays some role here, particularly love for the “necessarily partial truths” disclosed by the slow labor of education. Perhaps this sort of love authorizes theoretical work that proceeds by *severely* (but not indifferently) abridging educational realities. Again, I’m not sure. Posed as a question, how might an existential ethic for the intellectual critic relate to the existential ethic the authors prescribe for teachers?

1. Thomas R. Flynn, “Toward the Concrete,” *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 2: 247–255, 248.

2. Simone de Beauvoir. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 2000), 73. This work will be cited as *EA* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. See, by way of comparison, *ibid.*, 141.