SIMONE DE BEAUVIOR'S ETHICS AND POSTMODERN AMBIGUITY: 
THE ASSERTION OF FREEDOM IN THE FACE OF THE ABSURD

Patrick Slattery
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Texas A&M University

Marla Morris
Department of Curriculum Theory
Louisiana State University

[We must not] allow the liberating movement to harden into a moment which is acceptable only
if it passes into its opposite; tyranny and crime must be kept from triumphantly establishing
themselves in the world; the conquest of freedom is their only justification, and the assertion of
freedom against them must therefore be kept alive.¹

INTRODUCTION

In her 1948 book The Ethics of Ambiguity, Simone de Beauvoir critiques
metanarratives about the nature of the social condition and deconstructs totalitarian
doctrines that raise up before the individual "a mirage" of the universal. De Beauvoir
challenges utopian and utilitarian visions of ethics. She contends that the individual
must assume freedom in the creative and constructive moment in the face of the
absurd so as to counteract the attempt by tyranny and crime to subvert freedom. She
writes,

Is this kind of ethics individualistic or not? Yes, if one means by that that it accords to the
individual an absolute value and...the power of laying the foundations of his [or her] own
existence....But it is not solipsistic, since the individual is defined only by his [or her] relationship
to the world and to other individuals. [The individual] exists only by transcending himself [or
herself], and freedom can be achieved only through the freedom of others (EA, 156).²

De Beauvoir's ethics springs from the heart and leads to a relational experience in a
constructive moment. Modern utilitarian ethics and universal morality are thus
undermined; a context for the emergence of a postmodern ethics of freedom is
established. Like Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and
Richard Rorty, de Beauvoir enables societies to see themselves as historical contingencies
rather than as expressions of underlying, ahistorical human nature or as
realizations of suprahistorical ends. By exposing the ambiguity of the human
context, de Beauvoir successfully unites individual freedom and human solidarity.
Despite de Beauvoir's language of bifurcations, we argue that she actually initiates
a process of deconstructing the Cartesian distinctions between the individual and
society, past and present, present and future, means and ends, and ethics and
freedom: Thus, she provides insights useful for contemporary educational discourses
and postmodern ethics.

Library, 1948), 156. This book will be cited as EA in the text for all subsequent references.

2. In this citation we insert the female pronoun. In future citations we use de Beauvoir's original language,
assuming inclusivity based on the social and linguistic customs.
Just as de Beauvoir’s existential philosophy and her distinction between feminine, female body, and woman in The Second Sex supports the expansion of later feminist work on sex and gender, so, also, we contend that her existential examinations of past, present, and future in The Ethics of Ambiguity presage theological work on individual freedom and community solidarity in liberation movements. Some critics contend that de Beauvoir’s philosophy of male and female sexuality does little but reinforce masculine views of sexual difference. However, it is clear that de Beauvoir does not hold that “woman,” in any essential sense, is limited (as it is in Jean-Paul Sartre’s view of femininity in Being and Nothingness) as a threat to transcendence and a degradation of existence, nor does she hold the view that women are doomed to the dictates of female biology.

Similarly, despite criticism that her ethics perpetuates Cartesian distinctions and a moral relativism that leads to paralysis in the face of tyranny, crime, and absurdity, de Beauvoir vigorously insists that embracing ambiguity leads to an authentic individual freedom that is the foundation of any possible social solidarity, and for any possible postmodern ethics for a democratic and liberating education. In commenting on the most underappreciated concepts in the 1990s, philosopher Alexander Nehamas echoes de Beauvoir’s sentiments from the 1940s when he writes,

*We think that it is impossible to act without certainty, but certainty about yourself is also the quickest road to fanaticism. Uncertainty—the sense that not only you don’t know the truth but that many complex issues are irresolvably ambiguous—is sometimes the most productive way of allowing you to act while at the same time respecting that others are not going to accept your view, approve your action, or follow your example. [Ambiguity] produces a tentativeness that permits you to see many things from many points of view.*

Nehamas’s account of the underappreciation of uncertainty and ambiguity parallels the ways in which de Beauvoir’s contribution to contemporary ethics has been underestimated and misunderstood. She provides a context for ethics beyond deontological, dualistic, and utilitarian paradigms and other rigid systems that are inadequate for grappling with the complexity, contingency, chaos, irony, and ambiguity of the contemporary social and political milieu. We review and reconceptualize de Beauvoir’s The Ethics of Ambiguity in order to propose a

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PATRICK SLATTERY is Associate Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Texas A & M University, College Station, TX 77843-4232. His primary areas of scholarship are curriculum theory and philosophy of education.

MARLA MORRIS is a doctoral candidate in Curriculum Theory at Louisiana State University. Her preferred correspondence address is 4154 State Street Drive, New Orleans, LA 70125. Her primary areas of scholarship are curriculum theory and philosophy of education.
movement toward re-visioning freedom and ambiguity in discussions of ethics in contemporary education.7

TOWARD A POSTMODERN RE-VISION OF ETHICS

In The Ethics of Ambiguity de Beauvoir investigates oppression, freedom, and liberation in order to examine the complexity and ambiguity of ethical decision-making. Many of her concerns resonate with the uncertainty and ambivalence of our postmodern age. Unfortunately, as Margaret Simons points out, many philosophers tend to ignore The Ethics of Ambiguity and "leave Simone de Beauvoir out of the canon."8 Some argue that de Beauvoir shadows Sartre and is therefore unoriginal, a mere Sartre-clone. Others argue that de Beauvoir actually stole her ideas from Sartre. Recently, however, the de Beauvoir-Sartre debate has been turned on its head by Edward and Kate Fullbrook, who claim that like the thief Genet, Sartre in fact stole his ideas from de Beauvoir.9

Jacques Derrida reminds us that identity is nothing but a "vibrating or resonating system of relations," that "no identity can close on itself."10 Our identities, then, are co-produced by our complex interrelations with others. Thus, it becomes difficult to say just how others influence our thinking. Our writings, therefore, Derrida tells us, are made up of a "weave of different forces."11 When this weave of forces happens to include relations with an intimate other (such as de Beauvoir's relation with Sartre), the weave becomes ever so tangled. These tangles and complications led Michel Foucault to suggest that there is no such thing as an "author." William Pinar et al., explain:

Michel Foucault has argued that there is no "author." That is, any piece of writing, any author, is "filled" with the writings of others, and while a particular piece of writing, a particular author, achieves a singular identity, we must not mistake its singularity for absolute originality.12

7. De Beauvoir produced an existential ethics based on the recognition of human freedom as projected toward an open future. She argues for the rejection of inauthenticity and a rejection of the "spirit of seriousness" (similar to Nietzsche's criticism of the "spirit of gravity") whereby individuals define themselves within the context of certain absolute and rigid categories, values, standards, or sedimented perceptrons. Relying on both Husserl and existentialism, de Beauvoir distinguishes between "a life of immanence," whereby the individual passively accepts such socialized roles and standards, and a "life of transcendence," whereby the individual freely explores possibilities for transforming herself or himself in order to actively shape the future in the present moment. The concept of recognition in de Beauvoir's philosophy is significant; some would even contend that the reciprocal recognition of others in the process of transformation is even more important than ambiguity in de Beauvoir's project. While our interest in this article is to explore de Beauvoir's concept of ambiguity, we note the centrality of recognition in her work as well. For further discussion of these issues see Debra B. Bergoffen, The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997) and Margaret E. Simons, ed., Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).


In the case of de Beauvoir and Sartre, it is not just originality that is at stake, it is the singularity of authorship. In a shocking statement, Fullbrook and Fullbrook contend that Sartre simply could not have written *Being and Nothingness*. Did de Beauvoir write *Being and Nothingness*? If so, why did she allow Sartre to pen his name to that work? It does not seem that there are any clear answers here. Perhaps, in the light of Foucault’s claim, the whole issue of attributing unique and singular authorship has been exaggerated. If this is so, then it is all the more important to ask why de Beauvoir’s work has been seen as second-rate and derivative, and so has been excluded from the canon.

As with these questions of authorship, de Beauvoir’s work turns on the ethical implications of accepting or rejecting the fundamental, ontological ambiguity of the human person. For de Beauvoir, the willingness to accept this ontological ambiguity leads to an ethic of liberation. Conversely, a stubborn refusal to embrace our ambiguous condition leads to an ethic of oppression.

Ontologically, says de Beauvoir, we are ambiguous creatures. Distantly relying on Sartre’s (or her?) *Being and Nothingness*, she suggests that our task most fundamentally is to “make [in ourselves] a lack of being so that there might be being” (*EA*, 11). We “make” in ourselves this “lack” by being cognizant of the fact that we are never what we are at present because the future is pulling us into the horizon of our becoming. Change implies a movement to become what we are not. In order to become something other than what we are, we must not remain static. De Beauvoir suggests that because of this negativity, this lack, this nothingness that presses upon us, our existence is always in flux. We are what we are not, and that is the ambiguity of existence. By becoming what we are not, we are transcending ourselves; human existence is, in essence, a series of transcendences. However, “human transcendence...is prohibited from ever fulfilling itself” (*EA*, 130). There remains a tension, then, between one transcendence and the next. The horizon of our surpassing is infinite, yet our finite existence also pulls us back.

The ambiguity of our human condition is felt psychologically by intuiting that we are part of the world, yet we simultaneously feel estranged from the world. We may, at times feel that we are “unique subjects” living important lives, but at other times, we may also feel alienated because our “pure internality” is juxtaposed over against an overwhelming universe of objects (*EA*, 7). Perhaps de Beauvoir drives a wedge too deeply between subjects and objects, self and world, but still psychologically the world can feel like a strange place for more mysterious reasons than she is willing to admit. De Beauvoir argues that this strange feeling surfaces especially when we feel “more insignificant than an insect” (*EA*, 9). Even though we may feel this insignificance, it is our task, our responsibility, to inject meaning into a seemingly meaningless existence. To say that life is absurd, she claims, is also to say that it is meaningless. Unlike Sartre and Albert Camus, de Beauvoir declares that life is not *absurd*, but *ambiguous*. Ambiguity, unlike absurdity, implies that life has no

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13. Kate Fullbrook and Edward Fullbrook, “Sartre’s Secret Key” in Simona, *Feminist Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir*, 97-111. The reasons they contend that Sartre could not have written this text are many: Sartre was not really a very good philosopher, he did not have the time, and his positions changed too much in a short period of time.
“fixed” meaning: Life is perpetually in flux, chaotic, uncertain, but still meaningful \( \text{(EA, 129)} \).

The difficulty of life is that it is both joyous and tragic. Our ambiguous condition is tragic because “every moment is a sliding toward death”\( \text{(EA, 129)} \). The horizon of death should be integrated into our lives, not ignored or denied. de Beauvoir makes no attempt to take the bite out of death. To face death squarely is to face the nothingness death brings: Death is the end. For de Beauvoir there is no resurrection, no afterlife, no reincarnation, no Kingdom of God, no ultimate salvation. Our task, therefore, must be to embrace our “tragic ambivalence” as it is \( \text{(EA, 7)} \).

**ELIMINATING OR EMBRACING AMBIGUITY?**

For the most part, the history of ethics, de Beauvoir claims, has been “a matter of eliminating ambiguity” \( \text{(EA, 8)} \). It is not difficult to trace this attitude back to Plato through Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill, as well as Immanuel Kant. Plato’s *Republic*, for instance, is a utopian model of a just society. Generally, utopias, as models for perfect societies, do not tolerate ambivalence, uncertainty, or ambiguity. Models for perfect societies can, in fact, be dangerous. Utopias soon turn to dystopias because the quest after perfection can also result in the quest after conformity and foolish consistency. Perfect models do not celebrate difference: They celebrate the elimination of difference as in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* or the film *Metropolis*. Jean-François Lyotard contends that “the question of justice cannot be resolved in terms of models” because utopian models make little sense in the postmodern age. 14

Like Plato’s *Republic*, Bentham and Mill’s brand of utilitarianism stamps out ambiguity because ethical decisions are solved by calculating the greatest good for the greatest number. This simplistic, hedonistic calculus is quite insidious, for it can justify all sorts of horrors. If, for instance the greatest number or majority is composed of Nazis, then the Nazis decide the greatest good for all. Second, the formula of the greatest good for the greatest number does not tolerate ambiguity. De Beauvoir contends that utilitarianism masks our ambiguous place in the world and swallows up our individuality and places us on the side of generality. Individuals become blurred with humankind generally. De Beauvoir writes, “It is true that each is bound to all, but that is precisely the ambiguity of our condition....each one exists absolutely as for himself; each one is interested in the liberation of all, but as a separate existence” \( \text{(EA, 112-13)} \). Utilitarianism encourages the passive “I” to march without question or doubt into the history of oppressive regimes. Formulas for the greatest good do not solve complex moral problems.

Kant’s brand of deontology, with its categorical imperatives for ethical decision-making, also masks ambiguity. Following rules or imperatives does not always lead to good decision-making. Sometimes, in fact, it is better to break rules like truth telling or promise keeping. It is not always clear if rules will help us in difficult situations. Moreover, rules or categorical imperatives do not tolerate the “sometimes” of ambiguous situations. Deontology, like utilitarianism, also masks our

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ambiguous place in the world. Again our particularity gets swallowed up by a sea of
generality. We see this, more specifically, in Kant's first categorical imperative
concerning universalizability. An action is only ethical if everyone can and should
do it. What goes for one goes for all. However, this simplistic rule does not take into
account individual, ambiguous situations. This first categorical imperative, despite
Kant's call for ethical obligation, negates our individuality and the particularity of
situations. Further, de Beauvoir argues that Kant has made a grave error by suggesting
we can universalize principles. The complexity of our lives does not allow for
universalizing principles. To say that, in essence, human beings are all the same and
desire the same things in all circumstances ignores our ambiguity. De Beauvoir
writes, "Universal, absolute Man exists nowhere," and therefore, we cannot univer-
salize any principle (EA, 112). How can an individual know what is good for
humankind generally? De Beauvoir insists that ethical questions must be dealt with
on a "case by case basis" (EA, 134).

Although de Beauvoir emphasizes individuality, she also warns that we must not
slip into solipsism. When dealing with ethical decision-making, we must ultimately
involve the other: "The precept will be to treat the other...as a freedom so that his end
may be freedom" (EA, 142). On this point, de Beauvoir echoes Kant's second
categorical imperative to treat others as ends and not means only. Some critics, as
Hazel Barnes suggests, unfairly "label" The Ethics of Ambiguity a "Neo-Kantian
commentary."15 Not only is this label unfair, but it is fundamentally flawed. Kant
lusted after certainty; de Beauvoir did not. Kant was an absolutist, de Beauvoir a
relativist. Kant believed that a human nature exists, de Beauvoir rejected the concept
of "human nature." Although de Beauvoir and Kant both argued that ethics involves
"the other," de Beauvoir radically departed from Kant, most notably in her discussion
of freedom and recognition.

**FREEDOM AND RECOGNITION**

De Beauvoir writes that freedom begins in "spontaneity" and this spontaneity
"always projects itself toward something" (EA, 25). That is, freedom, as spontaneity,
intends its object. Thus, intentionality drives freedom. However, this freedom, in its
spontaneous manifestation, is nothing more than "flight" (EA, 26). Freedom in this
sense is merely spontaneous because one has not deliberated over one's freedom, one
has not reflected upon freedom in a conscious way. Therefore, one might "convert
[one's] flight into will" (EA, 26). To will freedom, to become fully conscious that we
are free beings, brings us back from our flight from freedom. To will freedom grounds
us not in the abstract idea of freedom, but in the "concrete and particular" (EA, 26).
Freedom, then, is something that is acted out in the world, not just an ideal about
which we contemplate. Unlike Sartre, de Beauvoir suggests that we are not con-
demned to be free; rather, as Debra Bergoffen points out, for de Beauvoir we take joy
in our freedom.16

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Interpretations of Simone de Beauvoir, 179-92.
Freedom is not radical for de Beauvoir. Our freedom is limited by our facticity. Although freedom "wishes to pass beyond everything which limits its power...this power is always limited" [EA, 32]. Hence, the paradox of freedom: It is always a struggle to become free because we tend to want to fly away from it in anxiety; we tend to avoid wanting to make free choices since they may entail complexity and uncertainty. This is exemplified in the contradiction of students who desire freedom of expression in classroom assignments while insisting that teachers provide detailed and unambiguous criteria for assessment. It is clear that the flight toward freedom is always in tension with the flight away from freedom.

The consequences of free actions, however, are uncertain. It becomes difficult to know just how one's actions, born out of freedom, may affect another. No matter whether the action seems good, it may have deleterious consequences. De Beauvoir says that "in order to serve some...we will do disservice to others" [EA, 112-13]. Therefore, acting in freedom cannot mean liberation for all, for that can only happen in an ideal world. De Beauvoir's ethic is not situated in an ideal world, but rather in the human condition where much gets in the way of attaining liberation and freedom. Still, she offers us hope, not despair, even though obstacles may prevent our freedom from becoming actualized.

One of the difficulties of freedom is that one is not alone in the world. We must, therefore, recognize that the other is also free. De Beauvoir says that one might "treat the other...as freedom so that his end may be free" [EA, 142]. If the other is recognized as a free human agent, and if the other recognizes the subject of her gaze as being free also, then it seems that both persons recognize that freedom can exist in reciprocity. Unlike Sartre, de Beauvoir avoids turning the subject into an object for the other's gaze. Hazel Barnes points out that for Sartre, "I exist as an object for the Other...I am vulnerable to the Other, who may anticipate and block my possibilities for action." Sartre calls this "The Look." With the gaze of "the Other," "I" turn into an object. Turning a human subject into an object is of course dangerous, for it justifies treating the person like a thing, it justifies all sorts of abuses. De Beauvoir, however, is not advocating this. She suggests that when I recognize the freedom of the other and when, conversely, the other recognizes my freedom, then we will treat one another as subjects, as human beings, not as objects to be used and abused. When one person does not recognize another's freedom, problems arise. As Charles Taylor points out, "our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person...can suffer real damage." When one misrecognizes another person as being an object rather than a subject — as often happens to students in authoritarian classrooms and teachers in bureaucratic school structures — one may cause real harm to that person.

THE PROBLEMS OF (MIS)RECOGNITION

Like Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics*, de Beauvoir suggests that the whole enterprise of ethics is a risky business where dogmatic judgments and misrecognition must be avoided. This is accomplished by accepting the limitations of our judgments and the ambiguous nature of our lives. Our conclusions, if anything, are inconclusive. The most we can do, says de Beauvoir, is "suggest a method," since "ethics does not furnish recipes" (EA, 123, 134). De Beauvoir's "method" is in fact no method, really. Ethics is not about following rules or models. De Beauvoir might mean that we understand who we are by first realizing whom we are not — then perhaps we can begin to explore ethical decision-making. In other words, we must realize that our self-understanding is difficult and ambiguous, and especially we must understand this before we can make decisions that concern others. A refusal to grasp our fundamental ambiguity leads, we believe, to failed lives and an ethic of oppression. Those who do grasp the fundamental ambiguity of life have, in de Beauvoir's terms, a genuine moral attitude and the capability of ethical decision-making.

A postmodern ethics for liberation or an educational ethics of freedom could build on de Beauvoir's work by recognizing the ambiguous nature of the self, or selves, and the ambiguous nature of the world and ethical decision-making. Ethics can no longer remain rule-based or rely on simple models. Situations, as de Beauvoir suggests, must be dealt with on a case-by-case basis. We suggest that postmodern ethics might be more historical, more existential, and less abstract, while still critiquing the darker side of liberation and post-liberation movements that have led to tyranny by both the oppressors and the oppressed. The cycle of oppression must be addressed in a more concrete way, a more contextual and historical way. Postmodern ethics might ask how liberation could be applied concretely to specific forms of oppression, such as racial, religious, ethnic, and sexual discrimination, authoritarianism in the classroom, or ahistorical and null curriculum practices. Let us explore the possibilities.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS FOR FREEDOM AND LIBERATION

Simone de Beauvoir contends that there is an element of failure in all success, and, thus, individuals have a right to freedom and must be respected as human persons:

What gives *Emile* its value is the brilliance with which Rousseau asserts the principle [of the freedom of the child]. There is a very annoying naturalistic optimism in *Emile*, in the rearing of the child, as in any relationship with others, the ambiguity of freedom implies the outrage of violence; in a sense, all education is failure. But Rousseau is right in refusing to allow childhood to be oppressed.... The good of an individual or a group of individuals requires that it be taken as an absolute end of our action, but we are not authorized to decide upon this end a priori. The fact is that no behavior is ever authorized to begin with, and one of the concrete consequences of existentialist ethics is the rejection of all previous justifications which might be drawn from the civilization, the age, and the culture; it is the rejection of every principle of authority. To put it positively, the precept will be to treat the other...as a freedom so his end may be freedom. (EA, 141-42).

De Beauvoir's contention that freedom is an absolute end, that all education is failure, and that there must be no authority to decide upon the end a priori leads to her thesis that we must first acknowledge ambiguity in order to understand ethics. She asks if there is an irresistible dialectic of power wherein morality has no place. Is the ethical concern, even in its realistic and concrete form, detrimental to the interests of action? Do hesitation and misgiving impede democratic visions and social justice? Since there is an element of failure in all success, and since the ambiguity generated must ultimately be surmounted to achieve justice, community, and sustainability, we must begin by acknowledging the ambiguity.

It is here that de Beauvoir cuts to the heart of contemporary educational discourses. We must acknowledge the ambiguity of the teaching and learning process and the reciprocal nature of the relation between students and teachers. Like de Beauvoir in her ethics, we must not remain paralyzed in uncertainty and unwillingness to act, even as we acknowledge this ambiguity. The distinction here is similar to Paulo Freire's and Donaldo Macedo's clarification of the difference between authority and authoritarianism. Democratic teachers must not, they insist, concede their liberating authority to simply become facilitators. Neither may they lapse into the rigid authoritarianism so characteristic of modern teaching rooted in the Enlightenment project. David Harvey amplifies:

The project of modernity came into focus during the eighteenth century. That project amounted to an extraordinary effort on the part of Enlightenment thinkers "to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic". The development of rational forms of social organization and rational modes of thought promised liberation from the irrationalities of myth, religion, [and] superstition...Only through such a project could the universal, eternal, and the immutable qualities of all of humanity be revealed...Writers like Condorcet were possessed of the extravagant expectation that the arts and sciences would promote not only understanding of the world and of the self, moral progress, and justice of institutions but even the happiness of human beings.

The twentieth century has certainly shattered this Enlightenment optimism. However, the quest for rational modes of thought, objective science, universal morality, and natural laws continues in earnest. Disconnected memorization, inert information, and universalizing discourses in schooling practices reflect such a mentality. Alfred North Whitehead writes, "Students are alive, and the purpose of education is to stimulate and guide their self-development...Teachers should also be alive with living thoughts. This whole book is a protest against dead knowledge, against inert ideas." The quest for freedom, solidarity, and community as a living process must be the focus of postmodern ethics.

Solidarity in the classroom springs from the freedom of ambiguity and the reformulation of authoritarian structures to modes of authorship. The imposition of metanarratives and totalizing discourses is curricular terrorism, a tyranny of oppressive conformity, an imposition of inert ideas, or, in de Beauvoir's terms, a drudgery


of useless repetition. Democratic educators must reinvigorate their opposition to such modern metanarratives and oppressive tyranny. De Beauvoir supports a liberating resistance which, for us, represents a prophetic voice in the midst of the absurdity of modern certainty.

The imposition of conformity is the failure of the success of modern education and curricular standardization, where there is no "end in view" but only a "view of the end."

We conclude, as did Martin Heidegger, that there can be no understanding of ontology — and thus no ethics — outside of the horizon of time. Heidegger writes, "Our...aim is the interpretation of time as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of Being." It is here that de Beauvoir provides an ontological and existential understanding of time that foreshadows contemporary eschatology: "I would distrust a humanism which was too indifferent to former times....To assert the reign of the human is to acknowledge [the human] in the past as well as in the future" [EA, 92]. De Beauvoir indicates a sense of proleptic time throughout her work. She is passionately concerned about the interrelation between past and present, with a view of the future as a horizon of the present, in the Heideggerian sense of presence.

The distinction made by de Beauvoir, as well as Ernst Bloch and John Dewey, is that freedom must inspire action and lead to social consequences or value. Ambiguity is not apathy, nor absurdity, nor anarchy. Rather, the quest for certainty, unambiguous goals, precise outcomes, and immutable ends is the real absurdity. Unambiguous goals actually eliminate the possibility of freedom when they infuse schooling with the lifeless drudgery of repetition. De Beauvoir contends that there must be a "non-separation" of means and ends in order to overcome the debilitating effects of modern ethics [EA, 131]. She explains that there is liberation from the tyranny of metanarratives only if, in aiming at itself, freedom is achieved absolutely in the very act of aiming at itself. She argues that "this requires that each action be considered as a finished form whose different moments, instead of fleeing toward the future in order to find there their justification, reflect and confirm one another so well that there is no longer a sharp separation between present and future, between means and ends" [EA, 131]. This will require a pedagogy whereby educators explicitly connect student experience to the subject of study in the present moment in such a way that the past and the future are open, emerging, and in process. Meaning cannot be deferred to a distant, benevolent future nor enshrined in the traditions of golden ages past.

Dewey argued that the idea of using the present simply to prepare for the


future is self-contradictory. We agree with his conclusion that the central problem of an education based on experience is to create present experiences that will live creatively and fruitfully in subsequent experiences.27 This is why a pedagogy for freedom and justice must first and foremost insist on a "non-separation" of means and ends.

Traditional curriculum development models have given us an ends-means continuum. Along with classical physics, Aristotelian philosophy, and Thomistic theology, modern curriculum models are committed to the linear segmentation of time and the separation of the present from the future. Thus, future ends are achieved by implementing present objectives. This separation of ends-means and past-present-future has, more than any other factor, led to the tyranny of the metanarrative, the disenfranchisement of students in classrooms, and the oppressive regimes of truth that deny freedom to teachers and students. By removing teachers and students from their historical, autobiographical, and social context — by separating human persons from time and space — the experience of freedom and democracy is exhausted. De Beauvoir is correct: Freedom is rooted in a philosophy of non-separation that begins by recognizing the ambiguity of the human condition.

Education for justice, solidarity, compassion, and sustainability must also reject the constraints that arrest the drive toward freedom. The tyranny of historical and scientific metanarratives is being challenged by postmodern scholars in classrooms in many disciplines. Postmodern pedagogy overcomes the debilitating drudgery of inert ideas and reinvigorates the teaching and learning process by including multiple interpretations, alternative representations, and silenced voices in the curriculum, while at the same time challenging the quest for absolute certainty. A postmodern understanding of pedagogy challenges administrator-teacher-student hierarchies in favor of subject-subject reciprocity as explored by de Beauvoir. Freedom emerges when sedimented perceptors — a term used in postmodern theory to describe entrenched prejudices — are challenged and the complexity and ambiguity of the human condition is foregrounded in the classroom.28

This is the sense of ethics that we see emerging in contemporary educational environments: a contested and complex struggle for freedom and understanding.


28. Recent texts that explore a postmodern pedagogy committed to ethics, reciprocity, and freedom include Elizabeth Ellsworth, Teaching Positions: Difference, Pedagogy, and the Power of Address (New York: Teachers College Press, 1997); James W. Lowen, Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything your American History Textbook got Wrong (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Sue Books, ed., Invisible Children in the Society and Its Schools (Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998); and Peter McLaren, Revolutionary Multiculturalism: Pedagogy of Dissent for the New Millennium (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1997). These texts are representative of recent works that attend to silenced voices and alternative interpretations for the purpose of promoting freedom, a freedom that arises from a posture of unknowing, resistance, and ambiguity. Sue Books, for example, describes her work as "at once disturbing and reassuring" (p. ix); James Lowen even cautions, "Despite my sincere efforts, this book undoubtedly contains important errors and should not simply be presumed true" (p. 313). Elizabeth Ellsworth best summarizes our "position" on postmodern pedagogy when she writes, "I don't intend for these analyses and contentions to be final words in an argument. I am much more interested in using them to open up questions that make productive difference in two places: (1) in my own practice as a teacher and (2) in ways that students put their graduate courses to use...in the field of education" (p. 12).
marked more by ambiguity than by certainty. The postmodern ethic that informs our teaching and learning must embrace the marginalized spaces, the ironic juxtapositions, the complex interrelations, the multiplicity of images, and the certainty of ambiguity. We must engage the world, as de Beauvoir writes, “for freedom realizes itself only by engaging itself in the world; to such an extent that [our] project toward freedom is embodied...in definite acts of behavior [will there be ethics]” (EA, 78). Our teaching, curriculum materials, and textual artifacts must all be active projects of freedom. This is the legacy of de Beauvoir. She concludes,

Since, in any case, there is an element of failure in all success, since the ambiguity, at any rate, must be surmounted, why not refuse to take notice of it?...Ambiguity cannot fail to appear on the scene; it is felt by the victim, and his revolt or his complaints also make it exist for his tyrant (EA, 152-53).

It is here that de Beauvoir reminds us that we have forgotten the child, the student, the teacher, and the learning community, as well as ongoing historical analysis, on the way to achieving our fixed goals and outcomes. Ambiguity teaches us that the goal is not fixed once and for all, historical interpretation is not finished. Rather, it is best described by Bloch as “the already but not yet.” However, modern schooling persists in its blind obedience to efficiency, while educators are too often silent in the face of dehumanizing schooling conditions and, as Jonathan Kozol has aptly documented, “savage inequalities.” Further evidence for educational silence is provided by Jonathan Silin who dramatizes “our passion for ignorance in the age of AIDS.” We are reminded of too many schools, classrooms, and laboratories when we read de Beauvoir’s warning:

[T]here is no more obnubilating way to punish a [student] than to force him to perform acts which make no sense to him, as when one empties and fills the same ditch indefinitely, when one makes soldiers who are being punished march up and down, or when one forces a schoolboy to copy lines. Revolts broke out in Italy in September 1946 because the unemployed were set to breaking pebbles which served no purpose whatever....This mystification of useless effort is more intolerable than fatigue. Life imprisonment is the most horrible of punishments because it preserves existence in its pure facticity but forbids it all legitimation (EA, 30-31).

De Beauvoir’s explanation of useless effort and intolerable repetition parallels the drudgery, wastefulness, and shame of lifeless educational structures and inert ideas. Lacking experiences that lead to what Dewey called “social consequences of value,” such lifeless curriculum is not only useless but morally reprehensible, for freedom is subverted whenever legitimization is denied. We think here of Madeleine Grumet’s plea in Bitter Milk for more ruminating in classrooms where there is currently no thinking, no grazing, and no reading with the whole body. In effect, there is no freedom. Too many students have been condemned to the horrible punishment of a life sentence that preserves existence but forbids it all legitimation.

How might de Beauvoir offer an alternative to the debilitating condition of modern society and classrooms? Her answer lies in ambiguity, first by accepting that ambiguity is the natural state of the human condition that allows freedom and ethics to emerge:

Whether the taste for adventure appears to be based on nihilistic despair or whether it is born directly from the experience of the happy days of childhood, it always implies that freedom is realized as an independence in regard to the serious world and that, on the other hand, the ambiguity of existence is felt not as a lack but in its positive aspect. This attitude dialectically envelops nihilism’s opposition to the serious and the opposition to nihilism by existence as such [EA, 58].

Thus, de Beauvoir concludes that for an individual to attain his or her freedom and truth, there must be no attempt to dispel the ambiguity of being, but, on the contrary, to accept the task of realizing it. In our educational practices we must become comfortable with uncertainty and an open systems cosmology rather than assuming that there must always be concrete, objective answers in a closed system universe. Contextual answers must arise from the freedom of the questioners.

This perspective is emerging in contemporary educational philosophy. Maxine Greene, for example, offers this cogent analysis:

My concern is to find out what we can do to open...spaces [for story, personal perspective, and expansion] where persons speaking together and being together can discover what it signifies to incarnate and act upon values far too often taken for granted....We must intensify attentiveness to the concrete world around in all its ambiguity, with its dead ends and open possibilities, and attending, as Dewey and Freire have helped us see, is not merely contemplating. It is to come to know in ways that might bring about change.44

We are reminded by Greene that education is a process open to possibilities, horizons, and change: "There is nothing objectively certain....All we can say is that from the vantage point of a situated consciousness, perspectives are opening, vistas are appearing, shapes — yes, and shadows too — are making themselves visible."35

The whole of education is enfolded in the particularity of the freedom of the individual to enter this process and contribute to justice, compassion, and sustainability in the global community.

William Doll also contributes to the discussion of ambiguity and pedagogy by investigating an open systems cosmology, and he proposes an educational matrix intended to rival the closed system of seventeenth century notions of a stable universe.46 Doll contends that the stable universe became the philosophical foundation of modernity as well as the scientific principle on which the American curriculum was developed, epitomized in Tyler's Rationale and Taylor's Scientific Management. Doll's educational matrix describes a process of education as experience based on "richness, recursion, relations, and rigor" whose order is dependent upon disequilibrium, indeterminancy, ambiguity, chaos, and lived experience rather

35. Ibid., 76.
than a rigid structuralism. Just as in chaos theory where it is not possible to predict with complete accuracy the next point in the trajectory of a phase space diagram of a nonlinear system, Doll points out that classrooms are also unpredictable for any given moment. In fact, he argues that teachable moments result only when we are attuned to such chaos, complexity, and ambiguity. We agree with Doll and further contend that a recognition of ambiguity not only supports an ethic of freedom, but also a pedagogy of freedom. Meaningful learning that leads to social consequences of value can occur in such a context.

Elizabeth Ellsworth reminds us that a part of the task of engaging—"inhabiting"—a pedagogy of ambiguity and "the text of teaching differently" means that educators must "think differently and perceive differently from how we have been seeing...if we are to go on looking and thinking at all." And what will this entail? We agree with Ellsworth that it will mean supporting interdisciplinary and cross-cultural endeavors, examining alien yet familiar shadows cast by our own domesticated knowledge about teaching, engaging the paradox to teach the unknowable, the foreign, and the ambiguous, and finally, turning and facing the shadows of our practices. Ellsworth describes this paradox:

Those subsurface dramas are not waiting to happen—they are happening all along. It is just that they have been rendered just out of sight, just out of memory, just beyond language, in forgettings, enfolds histories, mispearnings, fears, systematic as well as surprising silences, denials, guilty desires....Teaching is not normalizing. Where, when, and how teaching happens is an undecidable. This is what saves it from being a skill or technology.

Embedded in Ellsworth’s paradox of teaching the unknowable is ambiguity, “the unexplained, inexplicable, sliding signifiers.” A pedagogy of ambiguity will necessarily be unsettling—and this is exactly what is necessary, we believe, to move toward de Beauvoir’s ethics of freedom. Greene, Doll, and Ellsworth provide examples of the movement toward embracing the paradox, chaos, indeterminancy, and possibilities of pedagogy in the postmodern era. Following from de Beauvoir, we learn to embrace the ambiguity and complexity of pedagogy as essential for freedom, empowerment, and reciprocity, despite being caught in the interminable paradox that such a posture entails.

POSTMODERN ETHICS AND AMBIGUITY

Zygmunt Bauman writes in Postmodern Ethics that the postmodern perspective offers more wisdom, but that the postmodern setting makes acting on that wisdom more difficult—contributing to the sense of living in crisis. The postmodern mind realizes that there are problems in social life, schooling, and human relations with no clear solutions. We see “twisted trajectories that cannot be straightened up,

37. Ibid., 174.
39. Ibid., 195.
40. Ibid., 192-193.
41. Ibid., 192.
ambivalences that are more than linguistic blunders yelling to be corrected, doubts that cannot be legislated out of existence, moral agonies which no reason-dictated recipes can soothe, let alone cure." Thus, moral and ethical judgments are not safe in the hands of reason. Along with de Beauvoir, postmodern ethics considers the recognition of ambiguity as the starting point for understanding morality and freedom. Bauman concludes,

The postmodern mind does not expect any more to find the all-embracing, total, and ultimate formula of life without ambiguity, risk, danger, and error, and is deeply suspicious of any voice that promises otherwise.... The postmodern mind is reconciled to the idea that the messiness of the human predicament is here to stay. This is, in the broadest of outlines, what can be called postmodern wisdom. 44

In this article we have contended that de Beauvoir's *The Ethics of Ambiguity* provides important theoretical support for Bauman and others who propose a postmodern ethics, as well as for those of us committed to a postmodern pedagogy.

Charles Jencks further defines the postmodern condition as a reflection of kaleidoscopic sensibilities and multiplicity of subcultures. 45 Without an anchor of reason and certainty, some believe that society will decay into the morass of relativism, nihilism, hedonism, and anarchy. In contrast, with de Beauvoir, we see the ambiguity embedded in diversity and multiplicity as the guiding vision for a postmodern ethics and postmodern pedagogy. Complexity, creation, contingency, and chaos best describe the social realities of the postmodern era. In our pedagogy we must acknowledge many genders and anti-identity and not simply assume male and female bifurcation. We must provide support for multiracial self-understandings. We must encourage multiple forms of representation within a framework of multiple styles of teaching, research, and learning. Informed eclecticism and alternative learning experiences must be validated. In short, multiplicity and ambiguity open the possibility of freedom. Thus, we value the social construction of knowledge and the emergence of contextual understandings. As we situate ourselves within this new paradigm, the solidarity of the global community is more likely to emerge to address ethical issues related to ecology, economics, ethnicity, health, and social problems that defy simple, short-term solutions. Our vision of postmodern ethics celebrates kaleidoscopic sensibilities and the freedom of the individual within such a global context.

In de Beauvoir's language, educators will be cognizant of their responsibility to teach for freedom and solidarity while recognizing the reciprocal nature of teacher-student relationships. In such a community, time is experienced as a simultaneity of past, present, and future — a prolepsis. We neither enshrine a glorified past nor await a predetermined future. We live in the "essential tension" of the process of becoming. No longer authoritarian, bureaucratic, objectively rational, and respectably docile, educators create reciprocal relations and undertake hermeneutic inquiry without becoming paralyzed by uncertainty or immobilized by absurdity. We

43. Ibid., 243.
44. Ibid., 245.
become committed to activism for a just, democratic, and ecologically sustainable community, aware that ambiguity and complexity are at the heart of ethical decision-making. This is our re-vision of ethics for education. Simone de Beauvoir instructs us well in this process; *The Ethics of Ambiguity* belongs at the forefront of our discussions of ethics and education in the postmodern era.

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