Imagining Ourselves in the Future: Toward an Existential Ethics for Teachers in the Accountability Era

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> "I think education is about people and it's kind of messy and not, maybe, quite as standardizable as someone might think. I am fundamentally not interested in enacting other people's plans. There's no creativity in that, there is no opportunity to use what I know in that situation, and also I think it's a slap in the face to me as a professional." Stephanie found that it was impossible to exercise her moral agency and teach "right" within policy mandates that dismissed her pedagogical knowledge, constrained her pedagogical judgment, and so tightly circumscribed her pedagogical authority.[1]

Stephanie is one of a number of teachers interviewed in Doris Santoro's powerful study of those she calls "principled leavers"[2] of the profession. Scores of teachers find something that resonates with the frustration and disillusionment expressed by Stephanie in the era of accountability. This era has introduced educational policies emphasizing standardized content knowledge as well as (allegedly) quantifiable evaluations of student progress shaping teacher evaluations. In its wake, the opportunities for teachers to be active agents, enacting embodied, relational, and reasoning pedagogies, are dwindling. Accountability curriculum and testing policies have increased the rate at which teaching has become a deskilled profession, a concept over three decades old but which has been recently revived, intensified, and amplified.[3] Canned curricula, the overemphasis of standardized test scores, and the general technicization and mechanization of the teaching profession has left many teachers facing what Stephen Ball calls the "terrors of performativity."[4] These terrors pressure teachers to perform various routinized and prescribed subject positions, none of which seem to involve any sense of their own powers as actors who use critical intelligence to evaluate, judge, and shape their own practice. There is certainly "no creativity in that," as Stephanie well knows. It is fair to say that the net result of the current policy trajectory in schools is the disappearance of the teacher as a certain kind of subject position.[5]

Constitutive of the disappearance of teachers are the ways in which the ethical subjectivities of individual teachers are marginalized and often completely usurped by the accountability environment. The encroachment on the messy ambiguities connoting human elements of teaching involves not simply the denial of teacher professionalism and agency, but the political consequences of what John Dewey called "the quest for certainty."[6] This quest, in our current era of education, squelches any sense of the ambiguity that Simone de Beauvoir claimed was fundamental to being human. She writes, "Let us try to assume our fundamental ambiguity. It is in the knowledge of the genuine conditions of our life that we must draw our strength to live and our reason for acting."[7] Schools operate now (and perhaps always did) in ways

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that are explicitly designed to dispel and ignore ambiguity by making knowledge/learning instrumental, simplistic, determined. Our project here is to understand the (pending) disappearance of the teacher, but through an explicitly existential lens.

In this essay, we argue that existential crises in education call for existential responses. We draw from Beauvoir to argue for an existential ethics for teachers that avoids "bad faith — the false certainties that mask our human conditions. We argue for a teaching profession, and a viable teacher subject position, that underscores the fundamental ambiguity of human beings as teachers and that offers alternatives to the familiar teacher subject positions that are predictable responses to the current accountability era policies. We use writings of Jean-Paul Sartre to sketch how an existentialist response for teachers in this era draws upon a fundamental meaning of existence — that "man [*sic*] is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so."[8] In today's climate for teachers, the conscious process of hurling oneself towards a future is both contingently hopeful and a consciously grounding act of being.

Before we begin, a caveat. We evoke two problematic traditions in this argument: existentialism and humanism. Both traditions have been deservedly critiqued in light of poststructural, feminist, psychoanalytic, and critical appraisals of their faulty assumptions and conclusions.[9] Gert Biesta sums up the quandaries of humanism and, by extension, existentialism in questioning both the possibility and the desirability of humanist traditions like existentialism. Humanism (among other errors) "posits a norm of what it means to be human."[10] Existentialism, even its concern with freedom, is also vulnerable to such charges. As authors, we are both conscious of and yet mired in the ghosts of these traditions. We aim to interpret classic existentialist texts in full critical consciousness of their liberal Enlightenment assumptions, seeking conceptual tools rather than essential truth. We will make some generalizations about what it means to be simultaneously "human" and "teacher" that we hope avoid universalizing gestures.

Contemporary Existential Threats to Teachers

While others have articulated a political analysis of the condition of teachers today, we draw upon classical existentialism for texts uniquely suited to offer a fresh interpretation.[11] Our analysis focuses primarily on the condition of educators working in public schools in democracies like the United States and the United Kingdom, countries strongly influenced by neoliberal welfare policies, characterized by high-stakes standardized testing, competitive school choice models, and increasingly intrusive state-mandated curriculum and assessment processes. Such policies shape the lives of teachers in schools, rendering more narrow forms of professionalism and fewer "moral rewards" of the work.[12]

Sartre's well-known idea, "existence before essence," lays the groundwork for an existential response by providing a particular understanding of the plight of the teacher.[13] We have no preordained essence as human beings. We first exist. Then we define ourselves as humans by our actions. This kind of existential freedom is the cause of the literal and figurative nausea experienced by the protagonist in Sartre's novel of the same name.[14] Yet we would be naïve to say that there is no "essence"

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to "teacher." A teacher is a social concept that humans have made with a purpose in mind prior to any individual taking up the role. The existential challenge begins for teachers with the essence of "teacher" or "teaching" being inhabited and performed by human beings who exist prior to themselves. Humans-as-teachers face the task of defining themselves by their own work and actions within the histories and practices of teaching. For those enacting "teacher" through their daily actions, even without the challenges of the accountability era, this is difficult identity work. The weight of teacher subjectivity is heavily normed from the start. To the extent that the current era provides even less room for choices and decision-making among those occupying the role of teacher, teachers today face a particularly acute kind of abandonment, anguish, and despair. They are navigating an increasingly narrowed and constrained space within which to perform their own lives and futures.

Ball argues that today's "reform" efforts subject educators to the "terrors of performativity," where performativity is a "technology, a culture and a model of regulation and employs judgments, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change — based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic)."[15] He talked to teachers who, like Stephanie of Santoro's study, characterized the frustration and anger they were experiencing. "It's as though children were mere nuts and bolts on some distant production line, and its angers me to see them treated so clinically in their most sensitive and formative years," said one teacher. Another asked, "What happened to my creativity? What happened to my professional integrity? What happened to the fun in teaching and learning?"[16] The "terrors of performativity," which focus the teacher on the high-stakes judgments rendered upon test scores and similar outputs, contrast sharply with the holistic sense of teaching characterized by a teacher with purpose, agency, and adequate professional authority to practice the art and craft of teaching. Today's terrors of performativity leave many teachers "ontologically insecure."[17]

It is into this space of ambiguity, anguish, and despair that an existentialist can move, in service of the teacher as a subject seeking greater freedom and meaning in her own work. In "Existentialism is a Humanism," Sartre reminds us that humans are nothing but what we make of ourselves. Our anguish and nausea derive from the terrible responsibility of that fact. Beyond this, teachers are responsible not just for their own choices but, to some degree, for those of the young people moving in their classroom and school orbits day in, and day out. And add, finally, the ambiguity of the postmodern moment. Sartre describes the "abandonment"[18] confronted by existentialists realizing that neither a god nor a great secular universal moral code can dictate the truth or right path for teachers facing the terrors of performativity today. Having lost hope for certainty and plagued by the terrible responsibility of choices, teachers in our postmodern world can never be assured that they have "done the right thing," according to Zygmunt Bauman.[19] Nevertheless, existentially speaking, the teacher is free and responsible for creating spaces and action that move her and her students into a future. But absent a consciousness of the history of one's practice and conditions, teachers often seek to dispel this ambiguity and responsibility

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through a variety of subjectivities that falsely promise more security and stability in an uncertain world.

We explore these subjectivities through the work of Simone de Beauvoir. In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, she analyzes five character types of humans who fail to accept one another as genuinely free subjects. Each of these types represents a different kind of response that educators make in the face of the terrors of performativity today. These are "the sub-man [*sic*]," "the serious man," "the nihilist," "adventurer," and "the passionate man." In exploring these archetypes we seek to understand the forms of existential escape available to teachers today.

The sub-human exists, but without consciousness: "they have eyes and ears, but from their childhood on they make themselves blind and deaf, without love and without desire" (*EA*, 42). This is a fearful human living in an insignificant and dull world: "By the incoherence of his plans, by his haphazard whims, or by his indifference, he reduces to nothingness the meaning of his surpassing" (*EA*, 43). The professional norms and policies of teaching can make sub-humans out of the best teachers, as their authority as well as the meaning-making of their professional work is increasingly dictated in the most technical of terms. Sub-human teachers are acting out an archetype that follows the logic of their present circumstance; they are largely unconscious actors following orders.[20]

The next step in the archetypal scale is the serious human. Beauvoir states that "the serious man gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to the values which would be unconditioned. He imagines that the accession to these values likewise permanently confers value upon himself" (*EA*, 46). This is the most widespread human attitude, "that certain values are eternal and immutable," which only serves to shield serious humans from "the full consequences of their ontological freedom."[21] The serious teacher loses herself in the values of professional codes of ethics, or the legal contract, spelling out the duties of her work, or even in the child-centered ethic to which she might still stubbornly cling. The nature of the ends she seeks does not matter; what matters is that her freedom is subsumed by values that are seen to be universal, immutable, and good for the profession. She lives by the codes seen as appropriate for teachers, constructed by others. This escape from existentialist responsibility looks praiseworthy to many but represents a false consciousness in the attempt to dispel ambiguity through supposedly immutable values or practices.

The nihilist is the next archetype of bad faith. As Kristina Arp explains,

> Beauvoir sees this attitude arising when the serious man gives up his attempt to endow the human world of values with the status of being. The sudden deflation of values that have been heretofore unquestioned leads to a terrible crisis. Since there is nothing stable external to him to anchor meaning the nihilist concludes that there is no meaning and a void opens at his feet.[22]

This type is even more dangerous than the sub-human and serious human. Whereas the sub-human will blindly follow the dictates of totalitarian dictators and the serious human will sacrifice the needs of others for their own noble values and cause, the nihilist no longer believes in anything or anyone. The will to suicide and the will to power are both options in the face of such a void. The nihilist teacher could well conclude that if the work of teaching has no meaning, and contains nothing in which

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one's identity could be anchored, then the implicit destruction of self or others is all that is left. This takes the form of a range of destructive practices, from the mindless numbing of empty classroom worksheets to the crueler forms of tyranny that teachers might practice upon themselves, one another, parents, or youth in their charge.

The adventurer and the passionate man are the next and last archetypes. The adventurer "throws himself into undertakings with zest, into exploration, conquest, war, speculation, love, politics, but he does not attach himself to the end at which he aims; only to his conquest. He likes action for its own sake" (*EA*, 58). Despite the action and movement towards a future entailed in the adventurer's motif, there is bad faith at work. The pursuit of fortune, glory, conquest, and career advancement, without regard for the existence or the being of others, makes the adventurer one who plays a game with an instrumental aim in mind. The adventurer sees humankind as "indifferent matter destined to support the game of his existence" (*EA*, 62). We can see in the adventurer the seductions of critical responses to today's terrors of performativity for teachers. The call to arms of war against the neoliberal educational regime, the political engagement designed to overthrow the Common Core, vouchers, or high-stakes testing can pull teachers towards laudatory forms of work, but can also allow teachers to simply play a political game which must be won, sacrificing freedom as a person and a teacher to following the rules of the engagement with the goal of success.

The passionate human takes the adventurer one step further; rather than identify the pursuit as an external aim to be pursued, the passionate teacher undertakes exploration, conquest, or love "as a thing disclosed by his subjectivity" (*EA*, 64). The passionate teacher is attached to the object of her passion, whether that be the children she teaches, the passions for her discipline or subject area, or a belief about teaching's ultimate purposes. Yet Beauvoir is cautionary:

> That is why though the passionate man inspires a certain admiration, he also inspires a kind of horror at the same time. One admires the pride of a subjectivity which chooses its end without bending itself to any foreign law and the precious brilliance of the object revealed by the force of this assertion. But one also considers the solitude in which this subjectivity encloses itself as injurious. Having withdrawn into the unusual region of the world, seeking not to communicate with other men, this freedom is realized only as a separation…. The passionate man … is on the way to tyranny. (*EA*, 65)

Teachers sometimes resort to the archetypal forms for false securities and the comforts of values, adventures, nihilistic meaninglessness, or passions. Whichever form of bad faith is expressed, teachers perform identities that largely relieve them of the ambiguities of responsibility, interacting with peers, parents, children, and adolescents as if they were *un*ambiguous moral beings, as if the practices of teaching were bound up in absolute certainties.

The human condition is fundamentally ambiguous, as we are reminded by existentialists and postmodernists alike. Yet it could be said that contemporary schools are institutions that cling with white knuckles to modernity while they constantly intersect with the postmodern lived experience. In this context, there is no recognition of the fundamental moral uncertainty of humanity in the policies and practices of

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schools. This is evident in the myriad ways that school policies and practices seek to codify and operationalize deeply complex human behaviors and processes associated with education and schooling. It is evident as well in the mapping of Beauvoir's archetypes onto teachers.

Like all professional subjectivities, the "teacher" is a thing that already exists before the individual teacher can create herself. "Teacher" has purpose before existence. In the minds of a teacher's students, parents, and the community, and in the myriad texts of popular culture, a kind of "teacher essence," however false, is already established. As Sartre says of all "tradesmen" in *Being and Nothingness*, "The public demands of them that they realize it as a ceremony; there is the dance of the grocer, of the tailor, of the auctioneer."[23] Public policies mandating the terrors of performativity, then, are only the latest iteration of the ways in which "teacher" is made "thing." This existentialist point might help us see neoliberal education policies not as a radically new imposition on teachers, but yet one more allurement to seek the certainties and seductions of bad faith archetypes.

The Existential Ethical Responses Available to Teachers

In this current landscape of schooling, how can teachers imagine themselves into the future? How might teachers respond to existential threats in good faith? In the remainder of this essay, we sketch out an answer to these questions, keeping in mind that, for Beauvoir and Sartre, there are no precise solutions to moral dilemmas to be discovered, only ways of avoiding acting in bad faith. We begin by returning to themes of anguish in Sartre's "Existentialism Is a Humanism."

Abandonment, anguish, and despair, for Sartre, result from our radical freedom to choose and the fact that we have no universal template to adjudicate our moral dilemmas. We are ultimately on our own. Sartre illustrates this with his story of the student who must choose between joining the Free French in England or stay in France to care for his ill mother who lives only for him. Neither God nor the Categorical Imperative can determine the "right" choice. He is abandoned to choose for himself. Yet, in contemporary schools that are increasingly under the threat of scientism and rampant technicization and automation, human beings charged with the task of teaching often experience abandonment that leads to anguish and despair in a particular way. That is, although some teachers inhabit their freedom to choose, the structures and environment of the school treat them *as if* their choices can and should be set up for them in advance, like a script (sometimes literally). Absent the creative, relational, and reasoning work of teaching, both Ball and Santoro demonstrate that teachers often find themselves in despair as a result. For other teachers who deny their freedom, these scripts end up serving as tools for acting in bad faith.

So, how can teachers respond in good faith to the distinct forms of abandonment, anguish, and despair they face? It should be clear that a response inspired by Sartre and Beauvoir cannot be prescribed. We are also unable to determine whether or not a person has acted in good faith based on an observation of his or her choices. However, we can articulate the kind of cognitive and dispositional environment in which good faith responses to the particular threats teachers face could be made.

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First, teachers can find ways to commit to what Beauvoir calls the "unity of the project." Beauvoir's existentialist ethics suggest that "no existence can be validly fulfilled if it is limited to itself. It appeals to the existence of others" (*EA*, 67). She suggests that human beings are connected through the "unity of the project," or the historically-rooted project of lived engagement in projects that move us towards moral freedom with other human beings. Our freedom is found in our concrete projects to realize freedom, carried out with others, in which

> the value of the chosen end is confined and, reciprocally, the genuineness of choice is manifested concretely through patience, courage, and fidelity. If I leave behind an act which I have accomplished, it becomes a thing by falling into the past. It is no longer anything but a stupid and opaque fact. In order to prevent this metamorphosis, I must ceaselessly return to it and justify it in the unity of the project in which I am engaged. Setting up the movement of my transcendence requires that I never let it uselessly fall back upon itself, that I prolong it indefinitely. (*EA*, 27)

The unity of the project for teachers, we believe, can be found in education. As opposed to schooling, signifies an array of moral, relational, and human practices of reasoning, creative pedagogies on behalf of the pursuit of intelligences and wisdom, both among individuals and for their larger communities of the future. The unity of the project does not signify a substantive unity of purposes or callings; it does not signify commonality of approaches, content, or measurements of learning. It signifies a larger terrain of loose agreement that education is far more than schooling; that it is a creative act of encounter, and that teachers are key agents in its creation. Acting for themselves but not solipsistically, such teachers understand that "the existence of others as a freedom defines my situation and is even the condition of my own freedom" (*EA*, 91). The others involved in the unity of the educational project — students, fellow teachers, parents, administrators, even hostile media, politicians, and bloggers — define our situations but do not define us in the existential sense of anguished freedom and responsibility.

Teachers also move toward good faith by actively engaging the fault line between their facticity and their transcendence. Sartre makes clear that human existence is co-constituted in this way. We are both limited by our historicity and radically free to choose to make ourselves into ourselves. The contemporary landscape of schooling in which teachers operate clearly contributes to those limitations that inform a teacher's facticity. Teachers can, in good faith, understand and accept their situatedness and at the same time understand themselves as self-making beings. At a very basic level, as Maxine Greene suggests, this self-recognition can begin when teachers "struggle against unthinking submergence in the social reality that prevails."[24] Sartre claimed, "The coefficient of adversity in things can not be an argument against our freedom."[25] School policies and practices may truncate the agency of teachers, but human beings who teach are not an assemblage of *a priori* attributes. They are a series of historical phases and individual life projects.

Sartre said that human beings hurl themselves toward a future. For teachers to respond to their situations in good faith, they might also take full responsibility for imagining themselves in the future. This could take many forms. But for a teacher to imagine herself in the future is to avoid becoming the sub-human or serious

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teacher who unreflectively follows the policies of the school and ends up denying her moral subjectivity. It is also to avoid becoming the nihilist teacher who abandons any meaning of the profession and takes up destructive pedagogical practices. It is not difficult to perceive the undesirability of the actions with which these particular archetypes might operate. It is in the identification of the archetypes of the adventurer and passionate teacher that an existential ethics becomes uniquely valuable. Adventurous or passionate teachers often act in ways that are ostensibly desirable. They might carry the mantra of always "doing what's best for the students." Or, they could be critical pedagogues fighting the neoliberal educational policy environment. Engaging in these kinds of practices is not in itself an indication of bad faith. But a teacher who falls into Beauvoir's archetypes of the adventurer or passionate human might be like Sartre's waiter in a café in *Being and Nothingness*: "His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express and interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer."[26]

As Bauman reminds us, we cannot assess the quality of our courses of action by measuring the totality of their effects.[27] And for Sartre and Beauvoir, acts of good faith cannot be determined ahead of time. Teachers are abandoned to make their own decisions and are fully responsible for projecting themselves into a future that they imagine. But they make these decisions in the midst of anguish and within the limitations of their situations. They also do not have perfect knowledge of the consequences of their decisions before *or after* they act. For these reasons, Santoro's "principled leavers" of the teaching profession may or may not be acting in good faith. The teacher who stays in the institution to "fight the good fight" may be acting in good faith or could be doing "the dance of the teacher." Whatever the course of action, when a teacher imagines herself in the future, when she commits herself to the unity of the project and to understanding her co-constitution of facticity and transcendence, she can then avoid the archetypes of bad faith.

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7. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity,* trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Philosophical Library, 1948), 9. This work will be cited as *EA* in the text for all subsequent references.

8. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism," in *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, ed. Walter Kaufman, trans. Philip Mairet (Meridian Publishing Company, 1989), published on Marxists Internet Archive, last modified February 2005, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/sartre/works/exist/sartre.htm, access date 9/23/14.

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9. For example, we might want to admit that Sigmund Freud had a better ontology of consciousness than Sartre. Yet such an admission would not preclude us from subscribing to Sartre's notion of "bad faith." Additionally, Thomas Flynn claims that structuralism and poststructuralism are actually continuous with existentialism in important ways. *Existentialism: A Brief Insight* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

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11. See Dana Goldstein, *The Teacher Wars: A History of America's Most Embattled Profession* (New York: Doubleday, 2014); Henry A. Giroux, *Education and the Crisis of Public Values: Challenging the Assault on Teachers, Students, and Public Schools* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011).

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13. Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism."

14. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea* (1938; repr., New York: New Directions, 2007).

15. Ball, "The Teacher's Soul and the Terrors of Performativity," 216.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid, 220.

18. Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism."

19. Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1993).

20. Kristana Arp, *The Bonds of Freedom: Simone de Beauvoir's Existentialist Ethics* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2001), 57.

21. Ibid., 58.

22. Ibid, 59.

23. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness,* trans. Hazel E. Barnes (1956; repr. New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 59, http://www.dhspriory.org/kenny/PhilTexts/Sartre/BeingAndNothingness.pdf, accessed September 23, 2014.

24. Maxine Greene, *Teacher as Stranger: Educational Philosophy for the Modern Age* (New York: Wadsworth Publishing, 1973), 269.

25. Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 482.

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27. Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics*.

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