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# Exploring the Concept of Ambiguity out from Simone de Beauvoir and Paulo Freire - a Lens to Contemporary Education

von

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## Abstract

*Dieser Aufsatz untersucht eine spezifische Linie der Auffassung von Ambiguität, die sich aus dem französischen Existentialismus speist. Im Vordergrund steht das Verständnis des Konzepts der Ambiguität durch die Philosophin Simone de Beauvoir, einer der führenden Vertreterinnen des Existenzialismus, wobei besonders auf ihr Werk Ethik der Ambiguität (2018[1947]) Bezug genommen wird. Eng damit verwoben ist die pädagogische Sicht des brasilianischen Pädagogen Paulo Freire, der vom französischen existenzialistischen Denken beeinflusst wurde. Im Anschluss an diese beiden werden einige aktuelle Bildungsthemen aufgenommen und mit dem Verständnis der beiden ins Gespräch gebracht.*

*This essay explores the concept of ambiguity out from an understanding developed by the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir. She was one of existentialism's leading exponents, and her work entitled Ethics of Ambiguity (2018[1947]) works as a starting point. The concept of ambiguity is further explored from an educational view, with the help of the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire who was influenced by the French existentialist thinking. The essay ends discussing some current themes in education, with the insights brought out by the explorations of the concept of ambiguity by de Beauvoir and Freire.*

*Schlagwörter: Ambiguität, Bildung, Simone de Beauvoir, Paulo Freire, Existentialismus*

*Keywords: Ambiguität, Bildung, Simone de Beauvoir, Paulo Freire, Existentialismus*

## 1 Simone de Beauvoir and French Existentialism

Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986) is a key figure of French existentialism. Her best-known work, entitled *The Second Sex*, was first published in 1949 and is recognized as a foundational work in feminist philosophy. However, even before the publication of that book, her work on ambiguity had been published with the title *Pour une morale de l'ambiguité* (1947). This work can be seen as the culmination of de Beauvoir's interest in moral and ethical topics, an area of interest she had had since she was a student. At the time, such issues were widely articulated in society because of World War II, and accordingly, de Beauvoir argued for ethical considerations here and now and in the politics that shape society at present (Gothlin, 2018, 12–15). De Beauvoir's work includes

ethical philosophical discussions of human finitude, the self-other relation, and the relation between individuals and universals (Wehrle, 2020). She worked in a broad way, like the Enlightenment philosophers or philosophers in the Humanist tradition (Green & Green, 2011; Daigle & Renée, 2015, 7).

In *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (1947), de Beauvoir developed ethics from existentialism and a basic thinking about the ambiguity of the human condition. Beauvoir claimed that the individual ought to establish an authentic relation to herself, acknowledging the ambiguity of her own experiences as well as the ambiguity in her relations to the "Other" (Daigle, 2014, 197).

In the work of the existentialists, such as Kirkegaard and Sartre, the view of the human freedom is central. They asked questions such as "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" and "What is the meaning of life?" Kirkegaard answered these questions as a Christian, while Sartre and de Beauvoir offered a critique of religions.

*The Ethics of Ambiguity* begins with the central existentialist premise that "existence precedes essence" and de Beauvoir wrote: "Man is free in her/his choices and therefore always responsible for decisions and course of life. With freedom of choice comes anxiety" (1947/2018). This means that we, as humans, create our own essence or "nature" through our choices and actions, and that the existence of humankind is inherently ambiguous.

De Beauvoir stated that:

Ambiguity is not a quality of the human as substance, but a characterisation of human existence. We are ambiguous beings destined to throw ourselves into the future while simultaneously it is our very own existence that throws us back into facticity. (1947/2018)

When de Beauvoir discussed human essence, she referred not only to a general notion, but to Heidegger's assertion in "Being and Time", that our creation of ourselves in the present is based both on our past actions and on the choices that we make while projecting ourselves into the future. Beauvoir argued that we, as humans, are stuck between what she called "facticity and transcendence" (de Beauvoir, 1947/2018).

Facticity is what we are at a given moment and transcendence of what we can be in the future, ultimately our potential. These questions of "who I am" and "what I could become" in the future give humans existential anxiety rooted in the ambiguity. The fear typically manifests itself at adolescence, the point at which we leave the protected universe and the child's world. Adults are forced to make choices and decisions and assume responsibility - a life paired with fear and the risk of failure (Wehrle, 2020).

## 2 The Concept of Ambiguity

Ambiguity stands in the foreground of de Beauvoir's work and this dilemma, or dichotomy, can be extended to questions like "Am I an individual or a group member?",

“Am I Christian?”, “Am I Muslim?”, or “Am I Swedish?” The concept of ambiguity refers to the fact that we, as humans, are both objects and subjects, and that we are part of this world of which we are conscious (Wehrle, 2020).

According to de Beauvoir, we are free to choose, which can be scary, as mentioned. Religious leaders and institutions, theologians, and other intellectuals have sought to answer this question on ambiguity, while others have avoided the question. De Beauvoir wrote: “As long as there have been humans, humans that have lived, they have all experienced the tragic ambiguity in their human lives” (1947/2018). Accordingly, humans find themselves situated within paradoxical poles of being and have the existential task of dealing with their existential ambiguity. This is not something we think or reflect on, but something we primarily feel and are anxious about.

According to de Beauvoir, religions and philosophies, as well as politics in the world, use “bad tactics” to escape ambiguity and do not answer the question as a whole. De Beauvoir argued through her questions: Maybe you are not a singular thing? Maybe that situation is more complex than you think? It might not have a singular answer? However, de Beauvoir argued, in recognizing this you are doing something. You are ultimately confirming the very ambiguity in your life. Because when I ask “Who am I?” or “Am I a member in a group/nation/religion?” you are simply both, de Beauvoir would argue. The decision to choose is a false binary opposition and also, according to the philosophies of the past, the traditional belief systems of the past, they exist as comforting convenience. How convenient it is, de Beauvoir argued, that one thing can be explained by one simple answer or one simple factor. She argued that much of the politics, religions, and ethics of the past do not contend the reality of the world. The phenomenon of perceiving duality is as “primordial as consciousness itself” (de Beauvoir, 1949, xix); yet part of the ambiguity of human existence is that we possess a combination of these polarities, including a reciprocity between self and other.

Moral freedom is a response to one’s condition of ontological freedom. De Beauvoir wrote, “to will oneself moral and to will oneself free are one and the same decision” (de Beauvoir, 1947/2018). Values are revealed through human beings. De Beauvoir wrote, “one can reveal the world only on a basis revealed by other men” (de Beauvoir, 1947/2018, 71). Therefore, human subjectivity is relational since both meaning, and freedom are disclosed through relationships with others. De Beauvoir further established the relationship between intersubjectively disclosing worlds and human freedom when she wrote, “to wish for the disclosure of the world and to assert oneself as a freedom are one and the same movement” (de Beauvoir, 1947/2018, 24).

For Simone de Beauvoir, then, moral freedom is the choice to develop both one’s own ontological freedom and the ontological freedom of others, to engage with others as if they too are for-itself, or transcendent, which they are, as all humans are free. De Beauvoir’s ethics are based on relations and reciprocity, which are an aspect of the

ambiguity of the human condition. There is no such thing as the opinion of an isolated individual, de Beauvoir claimed, because there is no such thing as an isolated individual (1947/2018).

In sum, the concept of ambiguity runs as a thread through Simone de Beauvoir's ethics. She returned repeatedly to the ambiguity of human existence and the paradoxes and necessary failures of actions to which these leads. Her ethics build on the understanding that we are separate, individual existences, yet our actions may acquire their meaning only through the presence of others. Consequently, as we are separate, free existences, our plans will naturally often conflict. Therefore, we must create the meaning of our lives and, as de Beauvoir insisted, we are the prerequisite for what we make of our lives.

### **3 Paulo Freire and “Liberatory Learning”**

The concept of ambiguity is also important to the Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire (1921–2007), who was also influenced by existentialist thinking (Roberts, 2005, 2020). Freire is often described as one of the world's best known educationalists, and as one of the theorists within the field of critical pedagogy. However, Freire never positioned himself within this field; rather, he talked about his educational thinking as “dialogical pedagogy” or “liberatory learning” (Freire, 1985, 15; Barros, 2020, 160). This educational strategy builds on questioning the status quo in society in the name of social justice and with the aim of social transformation. Freirean thinking is based in Marxist humanism and radical Christianity (Holst, 2006) and, as Cemiloglu claimed, influenced by “Hegel, Marx and Jesus” (2019, 189). Marxist ideas were important to many decolonial movements at the time and widely debated in Freirean circles (Barros, 2020, 165). Also, the Christian Catholic Liberation Theology movement was spreading throughout South America during the 1970s and 1980s and these contacts were formative experiences for Freire (Barros, 2020, 165–166; Cemiloglu, 2019; Waisbord, 2020, 443). Barros emphasized the Christian Catholic influences for Freire and pleaded us to take these influences seriously into account in Freire's thinking. Barros stated: “Still, if we dismiss the relevance of the religious culture from which Freire's work emerges – namely the formative years of liberation theology within Latin American Catholicism – we risk disavowing what orients his texts intellectually and emotionally” (Barros, 2020, 166).

Other influences for Freire were the Frankfurt School thinkers, such as Erich Fromm, Herbert Marcuse, and Ernst Bloch (Cemiloglu, 2019; cf. Gerhardt, 1993, 452).

Freire's 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which was written in Portuguese and published in Spanish and English in 1970, is widely considered one of the most important books on education in the twentieth century and is still influential in many parts of the world (Kirylo, 2020, 1). However, Freire was also notable influenced by existentialist philosophy, which will be discussed later in this section.

Paulo Freire was born in Brazil in 1921. His initial studies and work were in law, but he did not remain in this occupation for long, as he became aware of and experienced Brazil's huge class differences. These experiences were sharpened through the involvement in a radical Christian movement claiming for social justice (Roberts, 2017).

Freire became involved in adult education, and his and his colleagues work in the field of adult literacy work became significant and successful. This was partly because Freire assumed that learners must understand their own reality as part of their learning activity and he insisted on and established a close link between the written word and the world of the student's environment (Gerhardt, 1993, 439; Roberts, 2017).

The literacy work that Freire developed challenged the military power that took over in Brazil in 1964, as literacy was a requirement for voting in presidential elections at the time (Gerhardt, 1993, 445-446). Freire was accused of spreading dangerous foreign ideas throughout the country. He was arrested, jailed and forced to flee Brazil (Mlekwa, 2020, 61). He then spent five years in exile in Chile, where he continued to work with adult education. He was invited to Harvard University and became later a consultant to the newly installed Sub-unit on Education of the World Council of Churches where, among other tasks, he served as educational adviser to Third World governments. After 15 years of exile, Freire returned to Brazil permanently in 1980, at that time under political amnesty (Araújo Freire & Macedo, 2001, 19-26; Gerhardt, 1993, 447; Kirylo, 2020, 1-12). The former ban against him was lifted and he went back to a Catholic University in Sao Paulo, where he headed the Public System of Education. In 1987, he was awarded a UNESCO Peace Prize (Mlekwa, 2020, 61).

Paulo Freire wrote continuously and published a vast number of books, but the most famous and influential, as mentioned above, was *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In this book, Freire impugned the "banking" method that characterized education at that time. The "banking method" worked as a narration, where the teacher narrates the textbook, and the students learn and repeat this narration. This form of conventional education, the "narration sickness" (Roberts, 2021, 113), passivizes the students as the teacher "deposits" education into the student, who serves as a passive receptacle for knowledge. Freire claimed that this method served to support the dominance of the elite within society and thereby maintain the powerful its social, political, and economic dominance (Freire, 2000; cf. Araújo Freire & Macedo, 2001, 67-74).

Instead, Freire insisted on an education that encouraged cooperation, decision making, participation, and social and political responsibility. Freire argued that by denying creativity and agency to the student, the traditional "banking method" of education served to disempower and adapting the students to the oppressive social order (Araújo Freire & Macedo, 2001, 18-19). Freire claimed that education instead was deeply political and states in an interview:

Because education *is* politics, it is never neutral. When we try to be neutral, like Pilate,

we support the dominant ideology. Not being neutral, education must be either liberating or domesticating. (Freire, 1985, 17)

However, Freire acknowledged that this kind of education is demanding, and stated further:

Many issues and questions arise from this understanding of the act of education. For example, it suggests that we as teachers constantly asking questions of ourselves and of our students, to create a spirit in which we are certain by not being certain of our certainties. To the extent that we are not quite sure about our certainties, we begin to “walk toward” certainties. (Freire, 1985, 17)

In the quote above we can see how Freire addressed issues of certainty and argued that we should be a little less certain than we appear to be. He also suggested that our certainties should be *provisional*, stating:

... to be absolutely certain, as if the certainty of today were the same as that of yesterday and will continue to be the same as that of tomorrow (Freire, 1997, 30-31).

## 4 Paulo Freire and the Concept of Ambiguity

As mentioned above, Freire was inspired by existentialist philosophy and there are references in Freire’s thinking to several of the existentialists, such as Sartre, Jaspers, and Buber (Roberts, 2020, 136), which is notable in the citations given above. As also claimed by Roberts (2005, 2020, 138), the concept of ambiguity is important in Freire’s work and the influences of de Beauvoir’s philosophy and ethics are salient. The point of departure for Freire here is the notion of *humanization* (cf. Roberts, 2020, 138). As humans, we exist both *in* and *with* the world “as a creative and re-creative being, who, through work, constantly alters reality” as expressed in Freire’s work (Araújo Freire & Macedo, 2001, 95). To be human is also to exist as an ethical being, with consequences on deciding how to act in the world. Thus, as the world is constantly changing, we can never be certain of what will happen as we act in the world, “as if the certainty of today were the same as that of yesterday” (Freire, 1997, 30-31). Thus, Freire argued that reality is “not motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable,” but “a process undergoing constant transformation” (Freire, 2000, 71). Also, Freire insisted that we, as human beings, are *social beings* and our formation is dependent on relationships with others, which echoes de Beauvoir. As our relationship with others is a key question, education becomes key, and for Freire this is to educate for a better world (cf. Roberts, 2020, 141). Here, Freire argued for a dialogical model as part of a humanizing education. Through this way of educating, where knowledge emerges through inquiry and critical investigators in dialogue with the teacher, students will develop as humans with relations *in* and *with* the world (Araújo Freire & Macedo, 2001, 9-10, 67-79).

As suggested by Roberts (2020, 141), Freire tried to qualify the concept of ambiguity, through comparisons with other models of education. We have seen this above in references to the conventional way of teaching, the “banking model”, which Freire sharply criticized and perceived as mechanistic, static, naturalistic, and transformed students into receiving objects (Araújo Freire & Macedo, 2001, 72).

In Freire’s view, education should bring about social transformation, and in order to make this happen, teachers need to “remain open, humble, and ever ready to learn as we make our way in the world” and form real relations in dialogue with the students (Araújo Freire & Macedo, 2001, 67-79; Mlekwa, 2020, 63; Roberts, 2020, 14). Freire expressed his view as follows:

[...] a teacher is professional, one who must constantly seek to improve and to develop certain qualities or virtues, which are not received but must be created. The capacity to renew ourselves everyday is very important. It prevents us from falling into what I call “bureaucratization of mind”. I am a teacher. (Freire, 1985, 15)

Here we can also see the influences of existentialist thinking in expressions of teachers “recreating” themselves with virtues not “received but must be created”.

During Freire’s later years, he became critical of neoliberal trends in education that started to emerge during the 1980s and 1990s (Roberts, 2020, 141). Freire described neoliberalism as knowledge for industrial productivity and stated that “A critical reading of the world implies the exercise of curiosity and the ability to challenge in order to know how to defend oneself from the traps ideologies will place along the way” (Freire, cit. in Jackson, 2007, 204). Freire argued that education had come to pure training and to adopt students to global competitiveness, leaving little space for creativity (Jackson, 2007; cf. Giroux, 2021, 296). Freire stated:

I see as dangerous the possibility of education collapsing into technique, of being transformed into mere technique, into a practice that loses sight of the question of dreaming, the question of beauty, the question of being, the question of ethics. (Freire, 2014, 25)

Here Freire emphasized the question of ethics, something that de Beauvoir had worked on in her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, and the convergence between de Beauvoir and Freire is striking.

Paulo Freire died suddenly of a heart attack in 1997. His work, which contains themes of oppression and liberation in education, and his educational work was – and as many have argued, still is – visionary in its attempt to bring about social transformation in unequal societies all over the world (see, e.g., work in Kirylo, 2020). Henry Giroux,<sup>1)</sup> one of the leading theorists in the field of critical education wrote:

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1) <https://www.henryagiroux.com/> [2021-12-09].



Freire's pedagogy and politics of hope are, given his remarkable prescience, a model for articulating education and politics to actions that speak to the struggles and promises of these times. (2021, 286)

The relevance of Freire's work is also discussed in recent published books and articles, since it was 100 years since he was born (in 1921). Freire's ideas are also currently hotly debated in Brazil. Soon after taking over the presidency in January 2019, the Bolsonaro Administration continued its battle against the status of Paulo Freire. One member of Bolsonaro's party introduced a bill in Congress to strip Freire of the honorary title he received in 2012: "the patron of Brazilian education". Attacks on Freire are common in Brazil and form part of the cultural wars driven by Bolsonaro's right-wing regime (Waisbord, 2020). Thus, Freire's thinking is still influential and debated, and also inspiring to many. This will be the motif for the concluding part of this essay.

## 5 Education "in our times" and Ambiguity

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir declared the human condition to be ambiguous. This is emphasized by Freire in most of his work as well, not least in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Both de Beauvoir and Freire argued that humans are separate, but deeply connected to each other. Every human is a unique subject and object for others, both free and unfree and creative, not as things or objects to own. As an educationalist, Freire saw how a "banking teaching" makes people unfree, oppressed, and uncreative. Moreover, both de Beauvoir and Freire argued that the conditions of humans in the world are ambiguous.

However, the question must be asked again: Are de Beauvoir's ethics and the educational ideas of Freire relevant for today's world and education "in our times"?

Here I want to draw on research and, in accordance with the researchers mentioned above, claim that it is relevant to rethink both de Beauvoir's and Freire's work in today's world, a world that the sociologists Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens described as a "risk society". Beck and Giddens claimed that the scale and potential for catastrophe in such a "risk society" is increasing, there is a loss of faith in experts and science, and there are increasingly competing knowledge claims (erosion of expert consensus) (cf. Baxter, 2020). We can actually see all of this happening. The world is characterized by hypercapitalism, digitalization (sometimes digital oppression), secularization, commercialization, migration, and climate change, which some researchers claim is changing mindsets, ethics, morals, and lifestyles, and contributing to fragmented knowledge of the world (Pring, 2018).

Education is also challenged by large transformations in educational governance (Ball, 2017, 2018).

As a larger background to current changes in education, neoliberalism stands as a policy

model that seeks to transfer control of economic factors to the private sector from the public sector. It tends towards free-market capitalism and away from government spending, regulation, and public ownership and prescribes a minimal amount of government interference in the economic issues of individuals and society. The neoliberal theory is characterized by the belief that continued economic growth will lead to human progress, confidence in free markets, and an emphasis on limited state interference (Thorsen, 2010).

The neo-liberal theory and its world view are affecting lifestyles all over the world, creating larger economic gaps between poor and rich, breeding vulnerability, and creating a precariat of people on the move in search for jobs and better living conditions (Palumbo & Scott, 2019). The discourses and practices of neoliberalism have been at work on and in schools at least since the 1980s to appropriate the new moral order of schooling and education, and to produce the new student who is appropriate to, and appropriated by, the neoliberal economy (Biesta, 2007; Davies & Bansel, 2007). In his critique of the neo-liberal way of education, Peters argued, “We are told, in no uncertain terms, what makes us happy, and products and services are marked aggressively by those seeking to sell their version of the good life to us” (2020, 135). As Roberts further argued, the kind of education embodied within the new-liberal regime is characterized by “exaggerated certainties” (2020, 134), which is opposite to that reflected in the thinking by de Beauvoir and Freire. The certainties in education in the neo-liberal regime and referred to by Peters are initiatives such as evidence-based education, “brain-based” education, and the discourse on the absolute importance of new technologies for children in classrooms (Peters, 2020, 135).

I argue that it is precisely in these times that educationalists must ask, “What does it mean to be human?”, “What does it mean to live a good life?”, “How can education contribute to living well?”, “Who should be educated and how?”, “What forms of education and curriculum do I as a teacher want to teach?”, and if the answer to the previous question is “justice”, “What is justice and how can I teach it?” As we have seen, Simone de Beauvoir and Paulo Freire critically engaged in these issues and provided interesting insights for further thinking on ethics, social justice, and the ambiguity in our lives not only as themes for Ethics or Religious Education but as task for the whole school.

## 6 Conclusion

The concept of *ambiguity* belongs to an existentialist tradition, outlined above with a starting point in the publication *The Ethics of Ambiguity* by Simone de Beauvoir (1947/2018). In de Beauvoir’s understanding, the concept of ambiguity is central, as it describes the human condition. Thus, de Beauvoir outlined an ontology and an ethics with an approach that humans are part of this world as situated subjects, both free and

unfree to choose (de Beauvoir, 1947/2018). Moreover, the ethics of ambiguity builds on relations and a focus on the Other; the Other is you and you are the Other. De Beauvoir's ethical claim is to start with the people next to you and so is Freire's way of reflecting on education in his work, not the least in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Thus, both de Beauvoir and Freire are deeply concerned with our attitudes towards life and our engagement with other people and how to live our lives.

The concept of ambiguity and the ethics developed by Simone de Beauvoir and influencing Paulo Freire's educational strategies provides an example of outlooks of life that might be useful for students and student teachers, not least in an understanding of human lives, when discussing moral issues, ethics and values, and also useful when working with critique of religions and different truth claims.

I end this essay with a comment about and from a young student, from the book *Sophie's World*:<sup>2)</sup>

At school she had trouble concentrating on what the teacher said. "They seem to talk about unimportant things. Why couldn't they talk about what a human being is - or about what the world is and how it came into being?"

Young students like Sophie remind us that teachers need to join in a dialogue with students on their life experiences, as Paulo Freire insisted, and on ethics and the ambiguity of life, as claimed by de Beauvoir. Uncertainties and indeterminacy are not supposed to be the outcomes of reasoning and teaching. However, as noted by de Beauvoir as well as Freire, human existence cannot be devoid of ambiguities. This requires constructive educational approaches.

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2) *Sofies värld (Sofie's World)* was written by the Norwegian author Jostein Gaarder and published originally in 1991. It was the world's best-selling book in 1995. The novel is subtitled "Novel on the History of Philosophy". Thanks to Rosemary Laoulach (2021, p. 265) for reminding me of this book.

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