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TROUBLING NEUTRALITY:  
TOWARD A PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHER AMBIGUITY

Jessica A. Heybach  
Aurora University

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*Kristallnacht*. This year marks the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the “night of broken glass”—often cited as the event that begins the Holocaust. *Kristallnacht*, the word, signifies the shards of glass that littered the streets the morning after November 10, 1938; remnants of the synagogues and Jewish businesses destroyed through an extensive looting campaign that resulted in the death of 91 Jewish people and the arrest of 30,000 more.<sup>1</sup> Countless bystanders, some innocent and some not, frozen in time, bore witness to the beginning of the end for their neighbors and fellow citizens.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, I sat in a crowded auditorium on my campus to commemorate the anniversary of Kristallnacht. This event brought together a Holocaust survivor, a genocide educator from a local Holocaust museum, and an American witness to the Rwandan genocide. The goal of the evening was not to detail the historical events of the Holocaust, the Rwandan genocide, or Kristallnacht per se, but instead to discuss how such events have and continue to occur in history, and begin to trace the creeping commonalities, or similar zeitgeists, that lie at the foundations of all gross human rights violations—genocide-producing or otherwise.

The Holocaust survivor, Magda Brown, described her adolescent experience of suddenly being ostracized and segregated within her previously harmonious heterogeneous childhood community, the death of her entire family at the hands of the Nazi regime, and how she ultimately survived Auschwitz. She chronicled a list of descriptors to help explain her experience to the

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<sup>1</sup> “In two days, over 250 synagogues were burned, over 7,000 Jewish businesses were trashed and looted, dozens of Jewish people were killed, and Jewish cemeteries, hospitals, schools, and homes were looted while police and fire brigades stood by. . . . The morning after . . . 30,000 German Jewish men were arrested for the “crime” of being Jewish and sent to concentration camps, where hundreds of them perished. Some Jewish women were also arrested and sent to local jails. Businesses owned by Jews were not allowed to reopen unless they were managed by non-Jews. Curfews were placed on Jews, limiting the hours of the day they could leave their homes.” *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, s.v. “The ‘Night of Broken Glass,’” accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.ushmm.org/outreach/en/article.php?ModuleId=10007697>.

<sup>2</sup> A photograph in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum’s *Holocaust Encyclopedia* shows “local residents watch[ing] the burning of the ceremonial hall at the Jewish cemetery in Graz [Austria] during Kristallnacht,” s.v. “Kristallnacht: A Nationwide Pogrom, November 9–10, 1938,” accessed November 15, 2013, [http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media\\_ph.php?ModuleId=10005201&MediaId=1403](http://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/media_ph.php?ModuleId=10005201&MediaId=1403).

uninitiated in the audience: a “conspiracy of silence,” “fear,” “restrictions,” “hunger,” “thirst,” “emotional pain,” “dehumanization,” “revenge,” “the construction of an enemy,” and a mentality of “scorched earth policy.” Her words and the ensuing conversation around how to thwart frighteningly similar contemporary social realities led the audience to see connections between her experiences and the issues of immigration reform and same-sex marriage matters of today. And, they reminded me of the final words in the film *Night and Fog* (1955):

From this strange observatory, who watches to warn of new executioners? Do they really look so different from us? Somewhere among us remains undetected *Kapos*,<sup>3</sup> officers, informers. There are all those who didn't believe, or only sometimes. And those of us who see the monster as being buried under these [concentration camp] ruins . . . finding hope in being finally rid of this totalitarian disease . . . pretending to believe it happened but once, in one country . . . not seeing what goes on around us, not heeding the unending cry.<sup>4</sup>

Who *is* keeping watch to warn when policies and practices become essentially the same as those used in previous eras to justify the destruction of human beings, en masse, I wondered almost aloud? Near the end of the evening's discussion, Magda raised her voice a bit and said, “If the young people here today remember nothing else about my talk, I want you to remember to protect your freedoms first and foremost. *Protect your freedoms*”—not just a lesson for the young undergraduates in attendance, but a jarring reminder to me as I attempt to articulate why teacher neutrality is a dangerous, often ignored, creeping practice in perpetual vogue.

In her recent book, *Education and Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Nel Noddings makes a brief comment regarding neutrality: “Pedagogical neutrality is an ethically and strategically effective way to introduce students to controversial issues.”<sup>5</sup> Of course, some clarification might be needed regarding her intended meaning, her stance seems clear: neutrality is possible and is the desired position for teachers to adopt “pedagogically” in regard to

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<sup>3</sup> A description of *Kapos* is as follows: “The German concentration camps depended on the cooperation of trustee inmates who supervised the prisoners. Known as *Kapos*, these trustees carried out the will of the Nazi camp commandants and guards, and were often as brutal as their SS counterparts. Some of these *Kapos* were Jewish, and even they inflicted harsh treatment on their fellow prisoners.” *Jewish Virtual Library*, s.v. “*Kapos*,” accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/kapos.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Jean Cayrol, *Night and Fog*, directed by Alain Resnais (France: Argos Film, 1955).

<sup>5</sup> Nel Noddings, *Education and Democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013), 63.

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“controversial issues.” She goes so far as to suggest that controversial issues *require* neutrality on the part of a classroom teacher: “to present such material in schools requires pedagogical neutrality—a willingness to consider all reasonable points of view without endorsing one as the absolute truth.”<sup>6</sup> However, I am left to wonder, does Noddings in fact mean *neutrality*, or might she be suggesting the adoption of *ambiguity* in the classroom? The second part of her definition seems, with the inclusion of *absolute truth* to actually be an argument for an *ambiguous* stance in the classroom—a conscious stance that allows positive inquiry rather than an authoritarian neutrality that breeds repression of ideas.<sup>7</sup> Given her prior commitment to critical lessons in the classroom, including such topics as war, parenting, religion, and propaganda, her return to a stance of neutrality, and her shift away from the phrase “teacher neutrality” to “pedagogical neutrality” leaves much to sort out in the perennial discussion of neutrality in education.<sup>8</sup>

In the coming pages, I describe the etymological roots of the word neutrality, the social function of teacher as neutral and its relationship to what I believe is the self-censorship, or the knowing adoption of neutrality as a guiding philosophy that has become common practice and common sense among teachers.<sup>9</sup> To better understand the impetus for self-censorship, I utilize Simone de Beauvoir’s notion of “sub-man” and “serious man” which highlights the ins and outs of one’s conscious flight from freedom that originates as a crisis of subjectivity and ends with an intense willing adherence to that which submerges the autonomous subject in an external object. Finally, I suggest that instead of perpetuating a naturalized view of teacher neutrality, by inoculating educators into the bifurcation of either teacher-as-neutral or teacher-as-indoctrinator, educators might realize their subjectivity and “protect their freedoms” by adopting a position of ambiguity sourced in the existential philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 63

<sup>7</sup> Previous work by Nel Noddings suggests that she is not as attached to neutrality as her latest book suggests. See Noddings, *Critical Lessons: What Our Schools Should Teach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> At the outset of this argument, I want to avoid the discussion of “age-appropriateness” or “developmentally appropriate practices” when it comes to controversy in the classroom. I do so by reminding the reader of the false dualism of child and adult worlds argued by George S. Counts: “There is the fallacy that the child lives in a separate world of his own. The advocates of freedom often speak of the adult as an alien influence in the life of the child. For an adult to intrude himself or his values into the domain of boys and girls is made to take on the appearance of an invasion by a foreign power... Place the child in a world of his own and you take from him the most powerful incentives to growth and achievement. Perhaps one of the greatest tragedies of contemporary society lies in the fact that the child is becoming increasingly isolated from the serious activities of adults.” Counts, *Dare the School Build a New Social Order?* (1932; repr., Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 16–17.

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## NEUTRAL (N.); NEUTRAL (ADJ.); NEUTRALIZE (V.)

To begin, I want to remind readers, and in particular, teacher practitioners, of the etymology of the word *neutral* to bring into sharp focus what is meant by “neutrality.” By examining variations of *neutral* as a noun, adjective, and verb, educators can come to understand the complicated and problematic nature of neutrality—a concept in education that has become a powerful common sense matter or an a priori, unquestionable belief. *Neutral* originates from the Latin *neutralis* which means “of neuter gender”; however, the 15<sup>th</sup> century writings of Catholic bishop Reginald Pecock employ this word in something like its contemporary sense.

In the *Repressor*, Pecock challenged the infallibility of the church by arguing that natural law supersedes church doctrine, and he used the vernacular to do so.<sup>10</sup> In this text, *neutralis* (neutral) is used to describe someone who is without opinion;<sup>11</sup> or, more importantly for this discussion, as someone whose opinion is not sanctioned by those in power. Specifically, he argues that the opinions of individual clergy who question church doctrine should be accounted for if these opinions are based on reasonable interpretations. Consequently, he was convicted for heresy but later renounced his “political” position regarding clergy “opinions” to avoid his own death.<sup>12</sup> A curious similarity between clergy and contemporary teachers arises here. Both, clergy and teachers, are responsible for the dissemination of knowledge and the “indoctrination” of the young into the social order of the day. Similarly, the church and the school, both vested keepers of ideological common sense, clearly require the mandate of neutral, non-opinionated, clergy and teachers to maintain the infallibility of their respective power structures.

Beyond its etymology, the word neutral has been adopted in a variety of disciplines, and these riddled connotations have pedagogical significance. *Neutral*, the noun, “A person or state remaining neutral in a controversy, dispute, war, etc., or a ship belonging to a neutral state, etc.”<sup>13</sup> appears as the most obvious understanding of the word to have been adopted by educators—one who is ethically impartial (think Switzerland). However, with the rise of industrialism (1912), the term neutral was adopted to describe a disengaged clutch: “A position of the driving and driven parts in a gear mechanism in which no power is transmitted.”<sup>14</sup> *Neutral*, the adjective, arrives on the scene from science: “A particle, esp. an atom or molecule, that has no electric

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<sup>10</sup> Reginald Pecock, *The Repressor of Over Much Blaming of the Clergy*, edited by Churchill Babington (London: Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860).

<sup>11</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., s.v. “neutral.”

<sup>12</sup> Catholic Encyclopedia, s.v. “Reginald Pecock,” accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11600a.htm>.

<sup>13</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

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charge.”<sup>15</sup> In particular, the field of chemistry utilizes the following definition of *neutral*: “composed of contrasting elements which, in proper proportion, neutralize each other.”<sup>16</sup> And lastly, *to neutralize*, the verb: “To counterbalance; to render ineffective or void; to destroy by an opposite force or effect” is from Edmund Burke’s writings in 1795.<sup>17</sup>

Disengaged—something about that meaning of neutrality (adj.) should nag at the ethical soul of any educator. Given the demands to “engage” students, and create “critical thinkers,” why would teachers adhere to the metaphor of a disengaged gear—one sitting there with the potential to move, but instead resting in place? A disengaged gear is not moving, not involved in the environment, and most importantly not involved with the other moving parts; rather, movement is deferred to another time and space. Although this might appear desirable because “no power is transmitted,” can educators truly adopt such a position? If we apply this metaphor to the community of students in a classroom, we see quickly that disengagement should not be a desired mode of being for students or teachers. Further, is it even possible for an educator to appear, let alone *be*, disengaged, disinterested, or lacking an electrical spark—a mere observer, or worse yet, a bystander, rather than a vested participant?

Neutral, or neutrality, can be understood both a teacher’s mode of being as well as the defining quality of classroom curriculum and discussions. Returning to Noddings’s suggestion of pedagogical neutrality, it appears that she is adopting neutral as an adjective rather than a noun—can the curriculum be balanced in equal parts—should this be a desirable pedagogical aim? Most teachers are familiar with the possible pedagogical implications of a balanced debate in “proper proportion” which can, even if done well, lead to a felt futility in classrooms where all opinions are equal and consequently useless—leaving many to simply shrug their shoulders, or utter the sentiment, “I don’t know.” For those already dogmatically committed to an idea, these “neutral” experiences can further entrench their ideological stance; for example, those on the pro-life or pro-choice sides of the abortion debate find themselves in this predicament quite often. Furthermore, can educators even ever bring in *all* sides to every controversial debate in authentic and meaningful ways?

To borrow from an easy target, would educators ever consider integrating those who deny the Holocaust in equal proportion to the narrative of human rights violations and genocide during World War II? I’ve yet to meet any educator who feels this would be appropriate. Yet, possibly, as Noddings suggests, a neutral environment is warranted in certain, hypothetical, reasoned debates, discussions where the absolute truth is not known, or could never be known. Yet, in terms of an overall pedagogical quality, again, *neutral* appears

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> *Etymology Online*, s.v. “neutral,” accessed November 15, 2013, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=neutral>.

<sup>17</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*.

impossible. Curriculum is always for something—moving in some direction, towards some end that has been deemed necessary or desired; consider even the countless mandated ends established by modern politics and institutions.<sup>18</sup> Curriculum and educators are, in so many ways, as Sartre reminds us, “condemned to be free”—forced to choose, and to make choices for ourselves and others on a consistent basis.<sup>19</sup>

If we consider teacher neutrality as a verb, as an activity that is achieved in our actions and pedagogy, which then gets transmitted to youth, we might wonder again, why adopt such a disposition? To neutralize suggests that power is dispersed by rendering the subject powerless or even so far as killed according to the etymological roots. Thus, to neutralize is rather reminiscent of the violent actions taken during Kristallnacht to render an entire population of human beings neutral through human actions taken by another. Through the images of a disinterested bystander, a disengaged gear, chemical neutrality, and Kristallnacht, I argue that neutrality might *denote* a worthy or safer position, but it *connotes* something far more dangerous and sinister.

#### RENEGOTIATING THE IMAGE OF NEUTRALITY

Beyond the etymology of the word neutral, the image of a teacher as neutral is far more complicated than it may first appear. To better understand what the image of teacher as neutral “does,” I turn to Roland Barthes for some necessary distinctions. Barthes, French philosopher and semiotician, provides the needed framework, or linguistic structure, to discuss what images are in fact “doing.”<sup>20</sup> Barthes moves beyond the initial understanding that images are simply a tool to demarcate or denote. Of course, images denote—they mark, indicate, serve as a symbol, and signify; however, images often come to connote so much more than they denote. Connotation opens up the array of meanings that are encapsulated in the image. Barthes originally explains this phenomenon as it relates to the “pose” of photographs:

The photograph clearly only signifies because of existence of a store of stereotyped attitudes which form ready-made elements of signification . . . a “historical grammar” of iconographic connotation ought thus to look for its materials

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<sup>18</sup> See Michael Apple, *Ideology and Curriculum* (New York: Routledge, 1979); and George S. Counts, *Dare the Schools Build a New Social Order*. (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> Jean Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 29.

<sup>20</sup> Thus, a bit of a conundrum is created, as Barthes noted, “How can the photograph be at once “objective” and “invested,” natural and cultural?” Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 20.

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in painting, theatre, associations of ideas, stock metaphors, etc., that is to say, precisely in “culture.”<sup>21</sup>

The obvious connection, or “historical grammar,” at play in the image of teacher as neutral align with the common narrative, an often gendered narrative, that has always surrounded the teaching profession: educators are not (or should not be) politically motivated or engaged, but rather loving keepers of children, disseminators of objective lessons, and ever hopeful builders of our youth’s self-esteem and confidence. A few minutes on Google Images will help to underscore this analysis of what society imagines as a teacher—doting, smiling woman, near a chalkboard, red apple in the foreground, hands raised, a learner at the board practicing inane math problems.<sup>22</sup>

Another aspect of Barthes’s thought relevant to this inquiry are the many processes through which the “cultural” becomes the “natural” in images. This aspect is of particular interest because again and again many educators believe that neutrality is in fact a natural state, or just “the way it is,” rather than socially constructed over centuries of reinforced mythologies. Barthes states, “The connotation is now experienced only as a natural resonance of the fundamental denotation constituted by the photographic analogy and we are thus confronted with a typical process of naturalization of the cultural.”<sup>23</sup> For example, images of the neutral teacher elicit a strong connoted-turned-denoted “fact” that neutrality is natural and there is nothing that could change this reality. Thus, these sophisticated, often unconscious, cultural mechanisms do much to perpetuate neutrality as desirable practice.

In this way, neutrality as a matter of naturalized “fact” should be seen as a deeply unconscious cultural myth that has ethical considerations often ignored by those who cry fear of indoctrination. Myths, Barthes argues, are often maintained through a series of practices that work through the raw material of cultural assumptions. Although many of them apply to this conversation, I’d like to utilize one in detail: inoculation. Barthes argues that in inoculation, “One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion.”<sup>24</sup> Discussions of teacher neutrality as they relate to isolated, often egregious instances of indoctrination (Nazi youth camps), inoculate educators from the larger, more relevant, conversation that reveals how *all* education is a type of imposition upon the young that mediates and regulates their experience and understanding of the world. Thus, the myth

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>22</sup> Most of these teachers in the images appear to reinforce the cultural understanding of who a teacher is and what they do, and often that is white, middle class, English speaking, able-bodied, and female.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>24</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Jonathan Cape (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 150.

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of teacher neutrality which seeks to prevent indoctrination simply reinforces an uncritical, somewhat disingenuous, discussion that seeks to de-politicize and de-skill teachers into automatons—perpetual supporters of the always supposed “non-neutral” institutional apparatus.

#### THE CRISIS OF SUBJECTIVITY: LESSONS FROM SIMONE

But human beings are not machines, and however powerful the pressure to conform, they sometimes are so moved by what they see as injustice that they dare to declare their independence. In that historical possibility lies hope.<sup>25</sup>

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Simone de Beauvoir takes readers on a deep exploration of freedom and ambiguity.<sup>26</sup> Beauvoir offers a nuanced discussion to aid the understanding that teacher neutrality is not merely a safe position to occupy, but rather neutrality is a flight from freedom as one experiences one’s own subjectivity. Also, Beauvoir provides the means for teachers to envision their subjective position in the classroom and society more generally, and begin to unlearn the naturalized image of teacher as neutral. Beauvoir begins by briefly describing a coming of age story of man, and the discovery of his subjectivity and of those around him: “He will have to choose and decide. It is comprehensible that it is hard for him to live this moment of his history, and this is doubtless the deepest reason for the crisis of adolescence; the individual must at least assume his subjectivity.”<sup>27</sup> Others have marked adolescence as a time of significant strife regarding the discovery of one’s identity; however Beauvoir’s discussion offers less a moment of discovery and instead a moment of choice—the choosing of one’s subjectivity that may have previously been felt but was left submerged.

Thus, adolescence is the moment when one becomes painfully aware of his or her own freedom. Beauvoir writes:

Freedom is then revealed and he must decide upon his attitude in the face of it. Doubtless, this decision can always be reconsidered, but the fact is that conversions are difficult because the world reflects back upon us a choice which is confirmed through this world which it has fashioned. Thus, a more and more rigorous circle is formed from which one is more and more unlikely to escape. Therefore, the misfortune which comes to man as a result of the fact that he was a child is that his freedom was first concealed from him and that all

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<sup>25</sup> Howard Zinn, *You Can’t Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times* (Boston: Beacon, 2002), 162.

<sup>26</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1948; repr., New York: Citadel, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

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his life he will be nostalgic for the time when he did not know its exigencies.

That is, human adolescence is fraught with frightening choices and realizations; and, once these choices are made and realizations known, there can be no real denying of one's freedom. However, deferred action or freedom denied (the case of the previously discussed disengaged gear) becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that is more and more difficult to escape as one's action or inaction solidifies the world one inhabits and co-creates with others.

Beauvoir moves beyond the initial "choice" that arises in adolescence and utilizes two understandings of man, "sub-man" and "serious man," to help sketch her philosophical concerns regarding the fundamental issue of freedom at play in the achievement of one's identity. She writes that sub-men:

Have eyes and ears, but from their childhood on they make themselves blind and deaf, without love and without desire. This apathy manifests a fundamental fear in the face of existence, in the face of the risks and tensions which it implies. The sub-man rejects this passion which is his human condition, the laceration and the failure of that drive toward being which always misses its goal, but which thereby is a very existence which he rejects . . . he is afraid of engaging himself in a project as he is afraid of being disengaged and thereby of being in a state of danger before the future, in the midst of its possibilities. He is thereby led to take refuge in a ready-made values of the serious world . . . He would like to forget himself, to be ignorant of himself, but the nothingness which is at the heart of man is also the consciousness that he has of himself. His negativity is revealed positively as anguish, desire, appeal, laceration, but as for the genuine return to the positive, sub-man eludes it.<sup>28</sup>

Here we see clearly that sub-man never really achieves a sense of being, but rather lives in a "state of danger before the future." Rather than a sense of "being" rooted in the subject and experienced as subjectivity, it is diverted to an external object which allows sub-man to "take refuge in [the] ready-made values of the serious world." Thus, one chooses, consciously or unconsciously to deny the difficulties associated with self-articulation and self-determination. I relate many of these sub-man characteristics to the countless teachers I have encountered who articulate, in varying forms, their desire not to think, and not wade into the depths of their own subjectivity. Instead, by deferring to the "standards" or simply carrying out the mandated "district policies" sub-man follows a thoughtless, and therefore, safer route which escapes the potentially painful experience of individual agency, and evades having to choose which

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

knowledge is of most worth in the classroom.<sup>29</sup> Returning to the original images of neutrality above, sub-man is an expression of the disengaged gear, the bystander, the charge-less molecule or atom in science.

Beauvoir's serious man, on the other hand, is an extension of sub-man, but far more dangerous in her estimation. Serious man goes beyond the simple apathy and potential nihilism of sub-man, and makes something productive of this escape from freedom. Serious man

gets rid of his freedom by claiming to subordinate it to values which would be unconditioned. He imagines that the accession to these values likewise permanently confers value upon himself. Shielded with "rights" he fulfills himself as a being who is escaping from the stress of existence. . . . *There is the serious from the moment that freedom denies itself to the advantage of ends which one claims are absolute.* The thing that matters to the serious man is not so much the nature of the object which he prefers to himself, but rather the fact of being able to lose himself in it. So much so, that the movement toward the object is, in fact, through his arbitrary act the most radical assertion of subjectivity: To believe for belief's sake, to will for will's sake is, detaching transcendence from its end, to realize one's freedom in its empty and absurd form of freedom of indifference.<sup>30</sup>

This description helps us to see that serious man is able to find freedom in his indifference, thus, the sense that one is free in choosing that which others have deemed of value is as ironic as the iron-gate over Auschwitz proclaiming "*Arbeit macht frei*," or "work makes [you] free." Of particular interest is the denial of one's humanity that must occur for there to be freedom in indifference—an anesthetization of one's consciousness that must accompany such a choice.

Beauvoir continues her discussion of serious man by describing how he makes useful the conscious and perpetual renewal of other's constructs, and the treacherous implications that can give way as a result of his pseudo-freedom:

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<sup>29</sup> I say this knowing that many readers may be thinking that teachers follow district policy and curriculum because their jobs and livelihood are at stake, and not because they have a "choice" in the matter. Of course this is, practically speaking, true of the times we occupy. But, this is a view of policy and curriculum that has become naturalized through our cultural practices, and is in fact not inherent in the practices of teachers. In other words, this reality has been man-made, and thus, can be unmade through different practices that pierce the naturalized view of policy and curriculum.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 46–47 (my emphasis).

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The serious man's dishonesty issues from his being obliged ceaselessly to renew the denial of this freedom . . . The man who has the necessary instruments to escape this lie and who does not want to use them consumes his freedom in denying them. He makes himself serious. He dissimulates his subjectivity under the shield of rights which emanate from the ethical universe recognized by him . . . The serious man puts nothing into question. For the military man, the army is useful; for the colonial administrator, the highway; for the serious revolutionary, the revolution—army, highway, revolutions, productions becoming inhuman idols to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice man himself. Therefore, the serious man is dangerous. It is natural that he makes himself a tyrant. Dishonestly ignoring the subjectivity of his choice, he pretends that the unconditioned value of the object is being asserted through him; and by the same token he also ignores the value of the subjectivity and the freedom of others, to such an extent that, sacrificing them to the things, he persuades himself that what he sacrifices is nothing.<sup>31</sup>

One “makes himself serious,” reveals that a choice is made in the life of a serious man, but the choice is to affirm the object rather than one's subjectivity. If Beauvoir is accurate in her assertion that “for the military man, the army is useful; for the colonial administrator, the highway; for the serious revolutionary, the revolution—army, highway, revolutions, productions becoming inhuman idols to which one will not hesitate to sacrifice man himself,” then for the teacher, schooling is useful, and thus schooling becomes an “unconditioned value” that is asserted through the teacher and involves the sacrificing of self and potentially students to the production of schools as an inhuman idol.

#### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS ON AMBIGUITY

For Beauvoir, freedom is found through ambiguity and in the choosing associated with subjective crises. Ambiguity opens up possibilities that are not otherwise accessible—a reality open to interpretation and the creation of subjective meaning could never be sourced in absolute truths. In Beauvoir's ambiguity freedom is a continual choice, it must be won—each new set of circumstances always demands engagement and inquiry rather than the application of already predetermined outcomes. However, one might argue that neutrality allows for freedom in the adoption of the already prescribed fixed truths, external objects, cultural idols, and in the submersion of one's subjectivity. Thus, one can be indifferent to the particularities of time and space because the eternal truths will protect us from the anxieties of subjectivity. In

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

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this calculus, ambiguity has been miscast as that which leads to a slack ethical disposition or a stop along the way to absurdity, or worse yet nihilism. Beauvoir writes: “The notion of ambiguity must not be confused with that of absurdity. To declare that existence is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning; to say that it is ambiguous is to assert that its meaning is never fixed, that it must be constantly won.”

Ironically, neutrality can be understood as that which becomes dogmatic because serious man need only adopt the positions of others and then work tirelessly to maintain that which he did not create, rather than endure the angst associated with freedom. Those who participated in the events of Kristallnacht, as active participants in the evil ideas of others (serious man) or as bystanders (sub-man), can be understood as dangerously neutral, and participants in the neutralizing of others. Returning to the issue of teacher neutrality proper, Beauvoir prompts teachers to consider the unethical dimension of sacrificing one’s freedom, and adopting the suspicious aims of those who claim that neutral is in fact ethical. Moreover, that neutrality can somehow escape the uncertainty of freedom, and allow teachers to avoid their actions and decisions in a classroom before these actions have even begun, assumes that neutrality itself has no consequences. Beauvoir reminds educators that

regardless of the staggering dimensions of the world about us, the density of our ignorance, the risks of catastrophes to come, and our individual weakness within the immense collectivity, the fact remains that we are absolutely free today if we choose to will our existence in its finiteness, a finiteness which is open on the infinite. And in fact, any man who has known real loves, real revolts, real desires, and real will knows quite well that he has no need of any outside guarantee to be sure of his goals.<sup>32</sup>

Might educators be mindful of their perpetual evasion of freedom, their own and the freedom of their students, and begin to imagine a classroom or school where every moment offers a choice to be made—where today is won rather than merely inevitable?

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

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