BECOMING STUDENT: REFLECTIONS ON THE POST-SECULAR CLASSROOM

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When I teach existentialism, one concept that I emphasize in lesson plans is a distinction between "being" and "becoming." Simone de Beauvoir explains that "being at rest" is the degradation of existence,[1] and Sartre advises, "Existence precedes essence,"[2] a phrase that I tell my students can be read as a rallying cry to passionate existential becoming. *Being* a self does not involve anxiety, risk, or real choice, since it essentializes the self as a given "thing" in obedience to dictates like human nature, genetic destiny, or society; *becoming* a self, in contrast, is essentially risky, staking hope on subjective rather than objective values. Where *being* invokes predetermined goals for selfhood, *becoming* accepts responsibility for the freedom of establishing meaningful and open-ended projects of selfhood. After I introduce this material to the class, I pose a question to my students that I hope will clarify the concepts but also demonstrate the relevance of the material to their own situations: "What is the difference between *being* student and *becoming* student?"

What we run up against, almost immediately, in our in-class collaborative exploration of this question is a rather over-determined understanding of *how* students should be relating to the *what* of the material. Oriented towards the always-impending verdicts of evaluation, students tend to study concepts in order to replicate them on exams and assignments. When I was teaching in California a few years ago, for example, a student explained to the class, bluntly and rather proudly, "I do the least amount of work for the highest grade." This finely tuned formula of efficiency and success seems exactly in line with certain prevailing assumptions of the contemporary university classroom.

What actually gets to count as "knowledge" in the classroom? Many universities, including my own, approach this question by looking beyond the activities and interactions of the classroom itself to identifiable objectives to which undergraduate education is presumed to be oriented. According to the list of my own university, for example, students should gain knowledge of human cultures, civic knowledge, and intercultural knowledge, among other learning outcomes. "Knowledge" on these terms refers less to the content of courses and more to particular skills that students will be able to employ upon completing their studies, skills that include personal and social responsibility, self understanding, and critical and creative thinking.[3]

One expectation of this prevalent understanding of knowledge is that students become certain kinds of persons because of the learning undertaken at university. Since "knowledge" is equated directly with skills and capacities, what counts as knowledge here is what can be observed through demonstrable aptitudes that our students will evince. Implicit in outcomes-based approaches to education, then, the *what* of learning in the classroom leads directly to a certain anticipated *how* of selfhood: undergraduate students become particular selves through the course of their studies, selves with the capacities of engaged citizens, efficient workers, and effective consumers.

Another implicit assumption is that knowledge as an outcome can, actually, be *counted*. By equipping professors with prescribed "learning outcomes," universities hope to secure methods of assessing the successful acquisition of such skills so that governmental and accrediting bodies, as well as the broader marketplace, will respond approvingly. Based on such assessments, universities can make promises to prospective new students through their branding messages about how they can and do guarantee the effectiveness of the education that they deliver. Such branding reflects the increasingly privatized, standardized, and commodified nature of higher education, in which corporate management and for-profit dictates determine what constitutes valuable investments.[4]

The evaluative monitoring of professors implies that the *how* of knowledge-granting itself is also objectifiable and countable. For example, at my institution, students appraise their professors, on a course by course basis, of the effectiveness of their teaching through quantifiable scores, and senior faculty and department

chairs evaluate sessional and tenure-track professors every semester for how closely the methods employed in the classroom secure the results of those learning outcomes promised by course syllabi. In addition, the department distributes, every semester, a statistical overview of the scores that every professor received from their students, and so each teacher knows whether their teaching practices are marked as below or above average.[5]

Since critical thinking is a learning outcome at my university, the capacity for critique is, by definition, a measurable goal, and while its accounting extends in various directions, responsibility for its acquisition ultimately inheres in the scripted roles performed by the professor. The *how* of a high-scoring professor, someone who reassures students, faculty, and administration that doctoral expertise produces and effectively measures critical thinking, secures hope that knowledge will be acquired and assessed and will yield economic mobility for students beyond the university.

In this way, the reification of knowledge reflects the neo-liberal promises of higher education. According to anthropologist Susan D. Blum, whereas faculty members themselves often point to their own undergraduate studies as a time of existential self-discovery, today's students speak quite differently about the purpose of the classroom: "In interviews, students scarcely ever volunteered anything as old-fashioned as 'finding themselves' or 'figuring out who they are' as a reason for being in college, though they might have agreed if asked. Their goals had to do with action, with finding a place, not with finding a self."[6] The anticipated self, achieved through undergraduate studies, is a self that looks forward to employability, especially. In the face of economic recession and social policies of austerity, in order to retain such hope, this forward-looking self must internalize a resilient narrative about the *telos* or goal of undergraduate education.

So far, these descriptions have been fairly *normative* in terms of prevalent institutional self-understanding. They point to the ideals that govern university teaching practices, and, as such, lead to pedagogical spaces that are saturated with the anticipation of evaluation. We could say that the intersubjectivity of the classroom, the "we" expressed and achieved in each class meeting, is quite over-determined because of such anticipation. The "we" in the classroom is made up of evaluator and evaluated, peers competing against a grade scale, all involved, oriented in some way or another towards a "view from nowhere" that grants credence to the terms of evaluation. The grade scale itself invokes confidence in the norms that stabilize the range of A through to F. Evaluation is, in this way, *transcendent*: the terms exceed the specificities of the persons involved, since a professor's whimsy about what actually constitutes an "A" is at odds with the robust presumptions, upheld by the "we" of students, faculty, and administrators, that a grade point average, accumulated over semesters by students through the assignment of grades by professors, is and must be impartial and objectively comparable across institutions.

While I often attempt to subvert these assumptions, and I will reflect on several examples below, the most common response that I receive from students upon receiving a more experimental and open-ended assignment is, "But what do *you* want to see?" With this question, students do not imply that the professor, with subjective and contingent desires about "what to see," is inviting explorative, non-scripted responses by students; rather, students invoke the transcendent "view from nowhere" that authorizes the professor's prescriptions about "what to see" on an assignment. Similarly, last semester in a unit on existentialism, several students explained that they chose to write a multiple choice version of the exam, instead of the optional essay version that I thought would suit their approach far better, for fear that they would not express their arguments "in the right way." In both cases, there is a robust assumption that the professor has one determined expectation of a "right way" to write an answer and therefore a grade at hand with which to mark the work.

Students' responses to classroom exercises, then, often mirror the very relationship to freedom that "*being* student" demonstrates: namely, freedom as the proper response to a set of seemingly objective and external criteria. By supplying the professor with what he or she "wants to see," students anticipate rewards for successfully achieving knowledge on the neo-liberal institutional model. Such success accords with specific promises of freedom, the freedom to express one's individuality as a consumer, to compete for economic mobility, and to find the kind of outward happiness in property and ownership that others will recognize and admire.

These terms of how to acquire knowledge do not translate into the existential terms of "*becoming* student." When I pose the question—how is *being* different from *becoming* student?—the first response is invariably something like, "*Becoming* student is when a student works hard and gets high grades," an answer that makes sense within the prevailing terms of the university but is far away from an existential sense of a non-scripted, impassioned approach to student-hood. Another common response is, "*Becoming* student is becoming open-minded and tolerant," similarly in line with the

teleology of neo-liberal higher education: in the terms of my own institution, for example, students study "intercultural knowledge" and "civic knowledge," through involvement with "diverse communities," and thereby, the university hopes, become more responsible, engaged, and ethical citizens. The learning outcomes of undergraduate study are not morally neutral, in other words, but rather inscribe into the trajectory of knowledge acquisition the highly prescribed liberal virtues of tolerant individualism.

In what follows, I ponder the question: Can I teach existentialism *existentially*? Is it possible to echo the concepts of existentialism in the very assignments, conversations, and dynamics that we as professors establish with our students in the classroom? By asking my students to contemplate the meaning of "*becoming* student," I am implying that the very meaning of student selfhood might hold a different relationship to freedom, knowledge, and responsibility than that prescribed by the classroom itself. If the *how* of becoming-student is open-ended, rather than determinant, then the assumptions that an authentic student is a hardworking and tolerant individual become fraught, laid bare as moralizing and neither necessarily inevitable nor desirable. Likewise, if modes of teaching themselves can be qualified as "existential," responsibilities intensify for professors. At odds with acting like bureaucratic cogs in the institutional machine, we can practice *becoming*-professor. Anne O'Byrne has described a similar approach to teaching as "a project without a project," a phrase that signals the existential nature of a *project* that resists the determining pressures of learning outcomes.[7]

I raise this question about teaching *existentially* in part because I am convinced that the content of existentialism itself prompts hope for more passionate meaning-making than liberal and neo-liberal prescriptions offer. I also raise it as a response to what some have called the "post-secular turn,"[8] a wide-ranging set of interventions by scholars of different disciplines that calls for resistance to the evaluative "view from nowhere." By assessing various approaches to the classroom below, my own hope for existential meaning in the classroom becomes itself subject to scrutiny, most especially in light of pressing post-secular challenges. Is an existential classroom a post-secular classroom? This question is the heart of my reflection and, increasingly, is itself the motivation for many of my pedagogical projects.

Individuals who occupy the role of "student" are also *not* students, just as Sartre's waiter in *Being and Nothingness* both is and is not a waiter.[9] A waiter who only performs the script that is expected by those in the café is in bad faith, evading the task of existing by manifesting solely the essence of waiter-ness. Sartre's description of the context in which the waiter enacts this role does not include a clear model by which the waiter might find ways to become authentic, rather than rest in bad faith. However, to confront one's bad faith is to encounter the occasion for choosing to choose differently. In Søren Kierkegaard's words, to confront one's despair or sin is to awaken the possibility of faith and passion.[10] Teaching *existentially* would involve, likely in a variety of different experimental ways, prompting such hope for awakening the freedom of becoming.

However, given that existential freedom is at odds with the naïve freedom of neo-liberal individuality, how free *are* students in the contemporary classroom to explore becoming? Sartre's waiter cannot simply, as a voluntary expression of his own will, decide to change his existential possibilities by exerting his choices as an individual. His *facticity*, the embodied facts of his own existence, constitutes the situation in which he can choose to choose, and these facts include the ways in which others recognize him and relate to him as he navigates the café in which he works: facts inflected with the gendered, racialized, sexed, class-based and other embodied markings that might be involuntary but nonetheless require some kind of existential choosing.

Students likewise enter into a university that structures in part the *facticity* of student-hood in which they are implicated, the material, epistemological, and relational aspects of their embodiment. In her recent ethnography of the contemporary university classroom, for example, Blum emphasizes the significance of widespread grade inflation, combined with intensified competition for entering increasingly selective universities. Harvard University increasingly rejects more than a thousand applications of students with perfect GPAs per year.[11] Blum concludes, "This habit of perfection brings us students who are unaccustomed to taking risks. What they want is to be handed the formula for success. When we give assignments, we can no longer issue an open-ended invitation to write about a work. The students find that 'confusing.' (Or it yields self-indulgent ruminations about their own experience)."[12] While Blum's ethnography dramatizes the predicaments of today's university student, her comments indicate anxiety on the part of professors: does open-endedness in teaching risk sentimental self-indulgence, as Blum suggests? Or are there ways to acknowledge the situations of our students while also attending to subjective lived experiences in critical, non-sentimental ways?

Simply crafting an assignment that elicits existential reflection, as Blum points out, is not a sufficient approach to teaching existen-

tially, given the pervasive ways in which students and teachers alike have internalized habits and expectations of competitive evaluation. In his careful analysis of resistance within the university, Jeff Schmidt points out that professors were often themselves the "best" students, those who excelled by playing by the rules; conforming to institutional norms reflects "long-rewarded behavior that got them into graduate school in the first place."[13] We need to find ways, in the classroom itself, that subvert tendencies to conform on the part of professors, as well as students.

Moreover, the presumption of freedom that tends to subtend classroom practices lines up closely with the consumer-based ideologies that lull us into existential apathy. Consumers express their identities by enjoying the choice of this brand over that one, but as existentialists point out, such choice is better understood as an evasion of the arduous task of *choosing* to choose. Kierkegaard's texts demonstrate in various ways, for example, that individuals who follow the crowd and drift along with the pressures of mass media are amoral selves, lacking the very selfhood to exert morally significant choices. There is a qualitative difference, in other words, between asserting one's preferences as a consumer and asserting one's choices as an existential self. Given that many branding messages in the marketplace invite consumers to "assert your own opinion," in-class practices need to deviate somehow from the conflation of individualist consumer opinion with subjectively impassioned expressions.

While I would like to understand teaching existentially as a pedagogy that liberates students from the question, "What do *you* want, professor?" the intersubjective conditions of the classroom constitute in part the facticity of students and professors alike. We generally do not get to choose our students, and our students do not get to choose the learning outcomes of the institution or the modes by which they will be assessed. Existential thought proffers the hope that our situations need not define us or determine our goals, however, and so the corrective edge of existential teaching focuses on the mutable, indeterminate, and spontaneous potentialities of the classroom.

A word that appears fairly often within post-secular discussions is "parochialize," and while this term might strike the reader as slightly pejorative, its use seems to invoke the corrective force of existential teaching. Michael Warner suggests, for example, that we might parochialize standards of critique "as an ethical discipline of subjectivity rather than as the transparent medium of knowledge."[14] Similarly, Saba Mahmood cautions us that critique be cultivated as an ability "to recognize and parochialize its own affective commitments that contribute to the problem in various ways."[15] In both of these cases, practices that cultivate a sense of contingency are affirmed in the name of the post-secular turn, most especially practices that identify the contingency of the very modes of critique that we tend to take for granted.

When we expose practices and ideas as contingent, rather than necessary, Mahmood points out, we "cleave apart" the normative from the descriptive,[16] thereby opening up the possibility that *how* we become critical subjects is itself partial and not necessarily prescriptive for others or even for ourselves. Our practices of reading, contemplation, and engagement can all be "parochialized": confronted, in some way, as embodied and morphological modes of becoming; as products of particular conditions of facticity that, in turn, shape agency and facticity; as potentially at odds with other differing embodied practices.

In this way, parochializing as an approach to the classroom brings with it the hope of destabilizing the "view from nowhere." As I describe above, this "view" simulates the coherence of ideas and material in light of expert PhDs who allocate grades and, while under scrutiny themselves, adjudicate the successful knowledge-acquisition of the classroom. If we render such practices contingent, we make possible a much more incoherent or disorienting space within the classroom.[17]

As thinkers, we often either invalidate contradictory notions in light of our own claims or simply fold them into our own arguments. However, if our own theoretical commitments are rendered contingent, then we can resist the prescriptive urge to make sense of dissonances in the terms of our own particular frameworks.[18] This is one reason why, in post-secular analyses by Mahmood, Warner, and others, tolerance is exposed as a secularizing mechanism at odds with critical dissonance.[19] Tolerance, as a goal of liberal selfhood, all too often resists the call to render itself contingent, reaching out instead to smooth out incoherence in the name of liberal ideals like equality, impartiality, and rationality. The post-secular challenge of parochializing, then, extends to neo-liberal as well as liberal methods.

If modes of inquiry are "parochialized," then we can consider how specific classroom practices are oriented towards cultivating particular subjects and relationships. As Warner points out, in a humanities classroom, we tend to strike a clear opposition between the reading subject and text object. A critical reader, in this prevalent mode of inquiry, is a distant and impartial reader: "Critical

reading could be thought of as an ideal for maximizing that polarity, defining the reader's freedom and agency as an expression of distance from a text that must be objectified as a benchmark of distanciation."[20] Warner concludes that such a practice is normatively rich, effortful, and subjectively intense. And Mahmood points out, "This insistence on a particularly singular relationship between subject and text is essential to what might be called *secularity*."[21]

To "parochialize" our own practices, as Warner and Mahmood advise, is to render our own learning capacities contingent, for example, by suspending them before others' differing modes of learning. In her influential ethnography *Politics of Piety*, Mahmood discovers that the body itself is teachable in significantly variable ways.[22] While we can learn through the mechanisms of words and arguments, we can also learn through corporeal practices that retrain sensibilities, affects, desires, and sentiments. In Mahmood's study of several Islamic communities in Cairo, for example, women pray in habitual and ritualized ways in order to cultivate particular pious desires.[23]

Following the call to parochialize our own learning, I employ one fairly commonplace strategy in which the professor constructs lessons and units that cultivate epistemological dissonance for students. One step along these lines is to set aside, explicitly, the objective or purportedly transcendent measure by which the professor assesses the successful acquisition of knowledge by students and so by which students orient themselves to the material. For example, within a unit in a course on Social and Political Philosophy, I teach arguments by Immanuel Kant, Georg W. F. Hegel, and Karl Marx that each set up for the students compelling and yet incommensurate positions about the nature of reason, philosophy, and education itself. Since there is no easily accessible way to adjudicate between these arguments from within the lessons themselves, students face several options: to focus on each separate argument, as discrete positions, while eluding the grander task of grappling with the dissonance between them; to accept the task of choosing one argument over the others, aligning their own epistemological commitments or intuitions with a philosopher; to identify a grander dissonance at work within the classroom, in which the professor's own commitments are clearly at work but are somewhat suspended in light of the open-ended tensions between the philosophical frameworks.

Another strategy involves crafting a syllabus in which methods of critique are themselves dissonant. For example, together with Dr. Thaine Stearns, a colleague in the English Department, in a collaboratively taught Critical Thinking and Composition course, I built a syllabus in which three units collide with each other, methodologically and epistemologically. We called these units "Objective Truth," "Subjective Truth," and "Moral Judgment," teaching thinkers including Kant, Sartre and Beauvoir, and Hannah Arendt; the methods of "critical thinking" did not cohere with each other in important ways. While there was a certain appeal to evaluation in the course, since students were accountable for demonstrating careful understanding of the texts, this more "objective" component of the course intersected with writing assignments in which the students put into practice the differing modes of critical thinking. They grappled, in other words, with the challenge of emulating *subjective* truth in their writing about "Subjective Truth" and with asserting moral judgments in their writing about "Moral Judgment."

In each of these cases, the *what* of the material is somewhat parochialized in and through the conceit of a course: topics are confined by scale, significance, and methodology, in part because of the dissonance that arises immanently within the material itself. We can study the topic of existentialism "objectively," for example, examining its historical influences and closely assessing its texts, but we can also study it "subjectively," applying its methods to our own reading, writing, and discussions, looking to intensify the subjective meaning of the concepts or arguments. While the impending objective judgment of a grade lines up easily with an "objective" assignment, it is much less in line with an assignment that elicits "subjective thinking," in which the very capacities that are to be adjudicated by the professor involve uncertainty, maybe even anxiety or despair.

When students are presented with Kant, Hegel, and Marx as incommensurate thinkers who proffer differing implications about who we are and ought to be as individuals, students can also consider their encounters with the material subjectively. In this exercise, for example, if I look in a mirror as I read a text or engage with an argument, here are my choices: do I see an autonomous individual whose rationality enables moral action (a Kantian self), an ethical member of community who becomes more actualized through social involvement (a Hegelian self), or an alienated worker who longs for solidarity with others (a Marxist self)?

It seems that an exercise of seeking oneself in a text might evade or at least bracket for a time the secularizing mode of reading identified by Mahmood and Warner. To encounter oneself in a text, as if a text is a mirror, opens up the possibility for affective

and diagnostic kinds of reading. Am I encountering myself as student, as a citizen, or as an alienated consumer/worker? And, given that as a student I am not alone but share this institutional space with others, is this classroom best described as rational, ethical, or suffused with false consciousness? Once I take my pick, I can practice, as well as contemplate, the kind of critique that follows: the practical reason of Enlightenment that, according to Kant, enables the morality of autonomous individuals; the historically and socially reflective consciousness, only possible, as Hegel explains, through involvement in an ethical institution like the university;[24] the consciousness-raising critical theory that, according to Marx, includes changing the alienating material conditions of the university.

Students can choose between thinkers, on these terms, not simply as an intellectual exercise but as a way to experiment with modes of critique. In his post-secular reflections, William Connolly explains that as we engage in intellectual endeavors, we have to begin, and begin again, and we always begin somewhere. He points out, "The problem is that the existential faith with which you start plays a role in sorting out and weighing disparate considerations. Welcome to the real world of politics and politico-economic inquiry."[25] And also to the real world of classroom practice. We begin again by considering carefully the places in which we find ourselves: who am I in this text, right now? How does this implicate me in particular ways of becoming, as well as specific ways of interacting with others and shaping this shared space of the classroom?

Along similar lines, in his influential reading of Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment," Michel Foucault explains, "It is true that we have to give up hope of ever acceding to a point of view that could give us access to any complete and definitive knowledge of what may constitute our historical limits. And, from this point of view, the theoretical and practical experience we have of our limits, and of the possibility of moving beyond them, is always limited and determined; thus, we are always in the position of beginning again."[26] Since we cannot rise above the limits of own situatedness, we are always in the position of beginning again. One such limit has to do with the saturated market-driven priorities of the contemporary classroom. So what kind of critique can and should we practice when we can acknowledge that our limits include the alienating pressures of the marketplace?

Another thinker that I aspire to teach *existentially* is Jürgen Habermas, a thinker who incorporates Hegelian and Marxist arguments within his avowedly Kantian approach to philosophy. The democratic aspirations of the enlightenment, the "ongoing project," as Habermas puts it,[27] depends in part upon the very practices that we undertake in the university classroom. On his terms, we educate students so that they can warrant their own claims and interrogate the claims of others, so that we are better able together to achieve "the better argument."

In a lecture that he gave several decades ago, Habermas describes another kind of epistemological contingency by employing the metaphor of an earthquake: "Only an earthquake makes us aware of what we all the time took for granted about the safety of the ground."[28] Habermas is referring to the background knowledge that suffuses so essentially our sense of the world that we are not able to identify or question it *as* "knowledge." An earthquake, a dramatic shaking-up, exposes truths, values, or assumptions to be, in fact, knowledge claims that can be examined; they become less certain because they can now be challenged by self and others, and, in important ways, understood to be contingent and problematic. I have always seen things this way, but now I understand that others might very well see them differently, and so, too, might I. Once I experience this kind of epistemological shake-up, I can no longer continue to take for granted those pieces of background knowledge that used to supply such stability and security. They become open to criticism. Just like how we cannot find stability on the ground during an earthquake, we need to find ways to accommodate our understanding to the new post-earthquake world in which we find ourselves.

As modern individuals, Habermas explains, we cannot take up the objective point of view of an ideal observer—there is no "context of all contexts" from which to adjudicate differing positions or resolve epistemological dissonance.[29] Moreover, since we do not "parochialize" arguments or material in a vacuum, we need to invoke normative ideals from our very own context, one that, in Habermas's words, is "post-metaphysical." The transcendence of authoritative traditional frameworks no longer holds up, and so the resolution of epistemological crises does not occur by simply re-subscribing to our original background knowledge. We cannot look to parents, community leaders, or teachers to remind us that ideas and arguments *do* have rational coherence after all because "I said so."

So, in a more dissonant or parochializing classroom, we echo the modern conditions of post-metaphysical thinking, at least to the extent that we each as individuals intensify our sense of responsibility for interrogating the limits of our knowledge claims. This hope can be traced to Kant, who explains that liberation from

unquestionable ideas, prejudices, or superstitions is called enlightenment:[30] namely, the courage and the capacity to think for oneself. Moreover, the kind of legitimation that we achieve, as we raise claims and counter-claims together, results in an existential affirmation of our social belonging: we become "authors of the law," Habermas promises, with personal stakes in the policies and pragmatics of our institutions.[31] On these terms, students can become authors of the law in the classroom, too, occupying more existentially edifying relations to adjudication and evaluation than that of compliant passivity.

After pointing to an earthquake as a metaphor for an epistemological crisis, Habermas explains that the normative perspective to which he himself is appealing is "an unimpaired intersubjectivity," which he finds in the work of Hannah Arendt.[32] Critique is possible, he explains, given the very conditions of "intersubjectivity" that we ourselves achieve together, as a plurality of perspectives, coordinated in part through language. Normatively, we must recognize one another as equals in our capacity to say "yes" and "no," freely and spontaneously. Habermas warns, however, that such "liberty can be maintained only as long as political institutions in turn protect that source of unimpaired intersubjectivity from which a communicatively generated power springs."[33] Along similar lines, Arendt writes, "But the world and the people who inhabit it are not the same."[34]

We share a common world through immanent practices of discussion and collaborative inquiry, and yet this world, which is the very resource by which we can launch critiques of commercializing pressures, is itself contingent. A communicative space at odds with such freedom and spontaneity jeopardizes the very project of critique, not only pragmatically but also existentially.[35] What we *practice* in the classroom is what is in between grand structures and individual agencies, and, as such, it is one contingency that we can contemplate and perhaps correct. In the classroom, then, we can explore different contingencies: what we can see *as* knowledge in the first place; whether we relate to each other as equal dialogue partners, as citizens or as consumers; whether we even desire to participate at all in intersubjective communication.[36]

Along these lines, we parochialize classroom practices through questions that prompt diagnosis of the state of our classroom itself. For example, we can ask students, "In this classroom, at this university, *do* you feel like the 'author of the law'?" Since Habermas predicts that such a feeling results from effective communicative action, we can tune inwards, assess the extent to which we ourselves validate the legitimacy of classroom practices, and then, when students say "No," as they usually do, we can begin discussing specific policies or assumptions that generally remain implicit and not nameable as such. Often students explain that, whereas overarching principles like fairness and equality ought to govern the intersubjective relations of the classroom, they do not necessarily feel like they can contest a grade or counter a claim made by a professor.

One implication of diagnostic questions is that it—the classroom dynamics—can and maybe should be otherwise. Another is that we actually can shape these dynamics, as mutable shared relationships, together. Habermas's affirmation of intersubjectivity as *the* normative resource for critique is significant. Given that the institutional context is a highly over-determined space, a discussion about the very conditions of possibility for sincere participation is itself, at least ideally, critical. However, one of the most heated lines of debate within post-secular conversations has to do with this very hope that Habermas continues to place in collaborative discussion itself. If Habermas is correct, then in the post-metaphysical conditions of our society, there is no "view from nowhere," which means that we are each, as rational actors, equals. Even in hierarchical spaces like the university, we can seek and achieve the legitimation necessary for equal participation in debates by raising claims and counterclaims, by pursuing grievances in line with formal procedures, and changing procedures when they are unjust.

Habermas might not be correct, though. As I suggest above, we are often at odds with post-metaphysical thinking, looking for a transcendent "view from nowhere" to subtend university operations: we await adjudication of our teaching and learning in terms that instrumentalize knowledge, and we acquiesce to approved methods of knowledge acquisition which often seem more in line with entertainment and consumption than Kantian rationality. Moreover, the liberal sensibilities that accompany "being the author of the law" are, ultimately, prescriptive, as Habermas himself acknowledges and accepts. Given that inclusive dialogue on his terms is secular, Habermas invites religious participants to translate their beliefs into terms that are accessible, in principle, to all.[37] He is not, in his own self-understanding, thereby seeking to regulate what counts as religious but rather to achieve inclusive public debates in which religious and non-religious citizens learn from each other.[38]

Perhaps we are not actually free to exercise our rationalities as equals, especially if the university is built for consumers or, as Foucault seems to suggest, for inmates. Exploring this possibility, in a lesson on Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, I ask students,

"Since according to Foucault, the university, like the army and the factory, is one of the modern institutions structured like the Panopticon, how have we internalized the self-policing gaze? *Do* we discipline each other with sanctions when we disobey the institutional rules?" On any given day, there will almost always have been a student who wandered late into class, and so we can turn to this individual and ask if he or she had felt "gazed upon" in a disciplining way. The response to this question usually elicits a fairly enthusiastic conversation about the many ways in which students do not feel free to exercise their own agency, not only because of time prescriptions but also because of the many social proprieties they feel compelled to obey.

At a certain point in the conversation, I point out that the Panopticon does not let anyone step outside of the disciplining gaze; even the guards in the prison watchtower are, at any moment, subject to scrutiny. "How, then, are your professors also obedient to the gaze?" I ask the class. This question often yields a long pause. Usually, I end up offering several examples, describing the many modes of evaluation to which each professor at the institution answers. Students generally raise eyebrows or laugh at the idea that they might, inadvertently, be disciplining their professors, simply by occupying the role of student. But my own sense of these kinds of discussions is that the unexpected and immediate gaze *on* the professor, as an embodied and vulnerable subject, provides a bit of relief from the near-constant obedience to the pressures within the classroom.

In fact, something invariably shifts in the classroom dynamics in this kind of lesson. The materiality of the room becomes more visible: the clock on the wall; the door which lets late students sneak in; the desks positioned towards the front of the room; the various "gazes" at work in the classroom, student to student, professor to student, student to professor. Perhaps it seems odd that reflection on imprisonment might resonate as existential teaching. This is where the tone of the lesson becomes especially vital. A classroom is, in part, a scene of drama. We inhabit roles and play out scripts that are generally not called out as such. In the example of a tardy student, if we employ tones that accentuate the comedic drama of the situation, we not only identify pressures that students often experience as oppressive and alienating but we alter them momentarily through laughter and embarrassed self-deprecation. Laughter, as Henri Bergson tells us, can serve as a corrective force to automated or mechanized behavior.[39] We laugh when someone's repetitive actions resemble a rigid machine. And so even though we are examining the imprisoning dynamics o our institutional roles, we render them absurd when we recogniz ourselves as highly generalizable types: "professor" and "student."

Through the alchemy of comedy, the late person turns into hero, the exemplar of the very idea that the class is grappling t understand: namely, how conformity makes us less free, and hov resistance to disciplining pressures requires our bodies, as well a our minds, to perform in more dissident ways. The professor turn into a guard, but also into a self-policing subject who has beer shaped by the presence of the students themselves. Since we tend t ignore our own bodies in the classroom, we can feel vulnerable o strange when we become unexpectedly aware of the affective an corporeal shapes of our selves and others. Turning myself into gazed-upon prison guard can be quite productive in undermining my own "expert" authority as the professor. The students become perhaps momentarily, empowered by the sense of their own disci plining force, as the professor's own facticity is exposed somewha as particular and notable. The existential crux of a situation like thi is that the very potential for imprisonment constitutes the hope fo spontaneous meaning. My own body, objectified through the gaze of others into *being-for-others*, as Sartre explains, is also what secures the passionate *being-for-self* of authenticity. And so there is some risk to this kind of lesson. The corrective force of laughter, Bergson points out, can lead to the humiliation of the person targeted as comedic.[40]

As well, as de Beauvoir dramatizes so vividly in *The Second Sex*, the existential drama of becoming is different for different bodies. The privileged body is unmarked in crucial ways, whereas the "peculiar" body is marked as a matter of course and yet not in ways that often get called out or noticed. My own white, normatively-gendered, female body is of course always present when I am teaching, but drawing attention explicitly to myself *as* an embodied individual intensifies the existential possibilities and risks of the gaze of others. What I find important to notice, in such classroom-interactions, is that the capacity that we build together for more discussions is in itself an intangible yet transformative dynamic. We are not only reflecting on the pressures of our classroom, but we are also building and shaping the intersubjective "we." A great deal depends on the quality of this "we" in such exercises. Whereas laughter can risk humiliation, it also can forge a shared sense of vulnerability.

One final exercise dramatizes the risks and existential possibilities of such forged sharing. While teaching in California, I participated in the local Friends Meeting, in which individuals gather to

sit in silence for an unprogrammed hour as they cultivate what Quakers call "expectant listening." Each person contributes, in some way, to the shared silence, which may or may not be broken when someone rises to speak. Silence, in this setting, is a form of spiritual practice, oriented towards gaining specific capacities, like, for example, "peace" or "peace-making." On very rare occasions, the quality of the silence intensifies and deepens, and someone might describe it as "a Gathered Meeting." It is this quality that I, every now and then, experience in the classroom: a sense that something is happening in the room, that every person there is vital for the dynamic, and that subjectivities are somehow being shaped by the shared "we."

One spring, I attended a workshop put on by members of the Friends Meeting called "Alternatives to Violence," a two-day program for communities as well as for inmates in county jails and state prisons.[11] Since one exercise reminded me keenly of existentialist thought, I asked for and received permission to translate it for the classroom. As adapted from a form of spiritual practice, this exercise comes the closest to what I might want to call a post-secular teaching practice.

In this exercise, we sit in a big circle, an immediately unfamiliar dynamic in the classroom. I ask the students to write ten answers on the ten pieces of paper I have given them, in response to the question, "Who am I?" I explain that they might write nouns, adjectives, or particular roles, and that no one will need to see what they write down; it is an entirely personal reflection and will not be adjudicated by anyone. After a quiet period in which students fill each paper with a response, I tell them to look over their answers and place them in a careful order of importance: to rank them as most to least meaningful for their sense of self.

As the next step in the exercise, I ask the students to flip the pieces of paper over, with the least-important answer on top. Then, slowly, one by one, I ask them to turn over the papers and study the responses as I pose questions to guide reflection: "Does this quality enable you to experience meaningful things? Can you imagine how your life would change without this element or role? Do others see you in this light, and how would their impressions of you change if you were missing this attribute? Does this element or role close off any possibilities? Would people react differently if you no longer held this quality? Do you feel a place where this quality resides in your body?"

After the meditative reflections on "Who am I?" I ask the students to reconsider their answers silently: if they were to repeat the exercise, would they reorder any answers or substitute new words? I ask "Did you notice any differences between who you *are* and the roles that you play or the traits that you exhibit?" And finally, I state, "This exercise is part of a non-violent workshop that inmates take in prison, only on a volunteer basis and with no guards in the room. Can you anticipate how such an experience might contribute to becoming more committed to non-violence? How might meditating on your own facticity intensify your sense of responsibility for how you interact with others?"

Given the personal nature of the exercise, in the discussion afterwards, students often share specific details about their own identities. A student might explain, "I chose to go back to school for this particular reason" or assert, "I'm hoping to find this kind of meaning for myself." As we begin to grapple with the distinction of *being* and *becoming* in this context, students tend to name the ways in which their educational experiences are fraught with anxiety: "If I am here because I am paying a lot for it, and working my part-time jobs or asking my parents for help, then how can it be anything but a monotonous following of rules?" In the course of such a conversation, the existential question, "How free are we, as individuals, to become authentic?" opens up discussion about real limits on the meaning found within the university.

In my experience, this in-class practice has the potential to yield unexpected encounters with humility: we can come into contact with our own finitude, since there is, of course, no full or accurate answer to the question "Who am I?" and glimpse others' frailties as they reflect on their own partial and fallible responses. Every student moves through the steps of ordering or reordering their sense of self, as illuminated by that particular moment's insights of self-understanding. There are invariably surprises in such a first-person examination of the self, surprises that can prompt doubts or solidify certainties about one's identity commitments and convictions.

There are two main risks to this exercise, I think. Since the question "Who am I?" is essentially indeterminate, the discussion that arises afterwards is perhaps less predictable than normal classroom conversations. Students can and will begin to name what is existentially unfulfilling about the classroom, perhaps about this very course, stating, for example, "No offense, but I'm only in this course for General Education credit." There is a risk that uncomfortable truths will be named. As in the earlier example in which describing our classroom as a prison opens up the possibility for relief and laughter, however, the very naming of the limits of existential meaning is itself potentially transformative. Through this collaborative

exercise, the "we" cultivated in this lesson, in my experience, has the potential to resemble a "Gathered Meeting," in which meditative quiet yields a rich shared space. De Beauvoir writes so beautifully, "Only the freedom of others keeps each one of us from hardening in the absurdity of facticity,"[12] and one way in which we break through such "hardening" is by listening to and elaborating our own struggles with becoming.

The second risk relates to the limits posed by the institutional context to the very possibility of teaching existentially. One fall, a few years ago, when the entire California State University was on system-wide furlough, I decided to integrate this exercise into a course, and I found that the alienating and impoverished dynamics of the campus as a whole simply could not be suspended, even momentarily, through this meditative practice. The neo-liberal policies of the university administration seemed too harsh to be bracketed, as tuition hikes and salary slashes yielded somewhat extreme apathy on the part of students and professors.

Of course, the animating hope of this essay is that an existential classroom is a critical classroom, at odds in corrective ways with the individualist, consumer-based pressures of the contemporary university. Interestingly, something I have noticed is that when classroom dynamics *do* shift through these teaching practices, students seem to begin to enjoy themselves in qualitatively marked ways, including body postures, voice inflections, and other sparks of interest. And so, when I prompt students to approach material in unexpected or self-reflective ways, invariably I myself receive quantitatively high scores on teaching evaluations.

Even if I do "parochialize" the material in such a way as to empower students to think otherwise than "What does the teacher want to see?" if I receive high evaluation scores at the end of the term, am I not ultimately still oriented towards the commercial classroom?[13] One worry here is that to subvert professorial authority by saying, "Actually, to adjudicate this material, it's up to you!" is an echo of almost every advertising message. In each of the examples above, am I ultimately inviting students to enjoy the comfort of consumption that is so familiar? My own sense here is that I walk the line of in-class dissonance fairly carefully. I wonder if, at times, I sacrifice the impassioned possibilities of incoherence—moments like Habermas's earthquake in which suddenly a taken-for-granted assumption is exposed as a fallible knowledge claim—to the prescriptions of a comfortable space. I'm not sure that the existentialists themselves agree about the degree to which subjective and intersubjective transformations require discomfort. But I am sure that the *becoming* of our selves in the classroom holds tremendous potentiality for invoking new capacities and achieving new meanings. Perhaps the interrogation of the limits of such a project is itself a crucial and existentially edifying task.

Notes

[1]Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 16.

[2]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, trans. Carol Macomber (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 20.

[3]The learning outcomes of my Canadian institution, Mount Royal University, are adapted from the Association of American Colleges and Universities' "Essential Learning Outcomes," which can be found at http://www.aacu.org/leap/documents/EssentialOutcomes_Chart.pdf (accessed May 20, 2011).

[4]As a recent example, the United Kingdom's drastic policy shifts in public funding for universities explicitly invoke the measurable learning outcomes of specific disciplines; subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) deserve funding because they demonstrate an "identifiable impact on our economy and society," in purported contrast to subjects like the Humanities. See Keith Thomas, "What are Universities For?" in *Times Literary Supplement* May (2010): 13-15. For a thoughtful overview of several recent publications that critically examine the state of higher education, see Jeffrey R. Di Leo, "To Save Academe," in *symploke* 18 nos. 1-2 (2010): 281-292.

[5]Louis Menand argues in his historical survey of the Humanities in the United States that "the key to professional transformation is not at the level of knowledge production. It is at the level of professional reproduction. Until professors are produced in a different way, the structure of academic knowledge production and dissemination is unlikely to change significantly." See Louis Menand's, *The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance in the American University* (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 2010), 121. Menand describes the stringent structures that discipline graduate students into potential faculty members, pointing out that ultimately professors constitute a fairly homogenous group (ibid., 140). Whereas individuals can become lawyers in three years or an MD in four years, the median time to a doctoral degree in the humanities disciplines is nine years (ibid., 106), and so the socialization of professors contributes hugely to classroom dynamics.

[6]Susan D. Blum, *My World! Plagiarism and College Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 112.

[7]Anne O'Byrne, "Pedagogy Without a Project: Arendt and Derrida on Teaching, Responsibility, and Revolution," in *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 24 (2005): 389-409.

[8]See Rosi Braidotti, "In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism," in *Theory Culture & Society* 5 no. 6 (2008): 1-24. For an analysis of how the post-secular turn animates current feminist debates about the secular/religious divide, see Ada S. Jaarsma, "Rethinking the Secular in Feminist Marriage Debates," in *Studies in Social Justice* 4 no. 1 (2010): 47-66.

[9]Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1992), 101-103.

[10]Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 82.
[11]Blum, *My World!*, 98.
[12]Ibid., 139.
[13]Jeff Schmidt, *Disciplined Minds: A Critical Look at Salaried Professionals and the Soul-Battering System that Shapes Their Lives* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), 250.
[14]Michael Warner, "Uncritical Reading," in *Polemic: Critical or Uncritical*, ed. Jane Gallop (New York: Routledge, 2004), 18.
[15]Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2009), 91.
[16]Saba Mahmood, "Can Secularism be Other-Wise?" in *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age*, ed. Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 293.
[17]Mahmood herself acknowledges the likelihood that "cognitive dissonance" will arise when differing ethical projects encounter each other, for example, when contemporary feminist liberalism seeks to understand the women's piety movement occurring within Egyptian Islamic mosques. See Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (New Haven: Princeton University Press, 2005), 37.
[18]Janet Halley makes this point in relation to feminist commitments and explicitly identifies it as existentialist: "Instead of working to defend, protect, and maximize theory as an account of the world and program for the world, I am trying to see it as theory fragments lying about that we can use quite instrumentally, pragmatically, and disloyally to deal with problems we perceive and want to do something about. . . my desire is for a pragmatic posture, a sense of being *in relation to* problem seeing and problem solving. . . My desire is a posture, an attitude, a practice, of being in the problem, not being in the theory." See Janet Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 7.
[19]Mahmood calls for the urgent rethinking of what is assumed to be the moral superiority of the secular vision of "tolerance": "Apart from the fact that this secular vision does not command broad allegiance in the world today, I fear that it is premised on a propensity to violence that is seldom questioned." See Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," in *Public Culture* 18 no. 2 (2006): 347. She explains that "culturally repugnant" groups continue to be understood in oppositional terms—as antimodern, fundamentalist, backward, irrational, and so on—without any regard for how conditions of secular modernity have been crucial both to their production and their reception." See Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 37). On Mahmood's account, then, the liberal project of secularism is a *reshaping* of religion through reforms, state injunctions, and more significantly the authorization of a "kind of subjectivity" that complies with the normative demands of secularism (see Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire," 328).
[20]Warner, "Uncritical Reading," 20.
[21]Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," in *Public Culture* 18 no. 2 (2006): 344.
[22]Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 166.
[23]Mahmood explains, "The repeated practice of orientating all acts toward securing God's pleasure is a cumulative process, the net result of which is, on one level, the ability to pray regularly and, on another level, the creation of a pious self" (see Mahmood, *Politics of Piety*, 126). Rather than assuming that a pious disposition is somehow natural (see ibid., 123), in this example desire is the product of specific disciplining actions (see ibid., 126).
[24]Hegel's declarations about the seemingly impossible scenario of women studying philosophy can prompt fascinating conversation about whether our classroom with a female professor, reflects ongoing dialectical progress. See Georg W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 264.
[25]William E. Connolly, *Capitalism and Christianity, American Style* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 77.
[26]Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Ethics Subjectivity and Truth*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 316-317.
[27]Jürgen Habermas, "Religious Tolerance: The Pacemaker for Cultural Rights," in *Philosophy* 79 no. 207 (2004): 9.
[28]Jürgen Habermas, "On the German-Jewish Heritage," in *Telos* 44 (1980): 130.
[29]Jürgen Habermas, "From Kant to Hegel and Back Again: The Move toward Detranscendentalization," in *Truth and Justification*, trans. Barbara Fultner (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2005), 202.
[30]Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 161.
[31]Jürgen Habermas, "Religion in the Public Sphere," in *European Journal of Philosophy* 14 no. 1 (2006): 5.
[32]Habermas, "On the German-Jewish Heritage," 130.
[33]Ibid., 128.
[34]Hannah Arendt, "On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts about Lessing," in *Men in Dark Times*, trans. Clara and Richard Winston (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 4.
[35]Habermas explains that economic imperatives dissolve the willingness of individuals to engage in collective action to improve those very democratic conditions that make rational capacities possible. See Jürgen Habermas, "'The Political': The Rational Meaning of a Questionable Inheritance of Political Theology," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 16.
[36]As Thomas Hove points out, the commercial mass media cultivate a *civic privatism* (see Thomas Hove, "Understanding and Efficiency: Habermas's Concept of Communication Relief," in *Communication Theory* 18, 2008: 251), which removes the desire to participate in the legitimizing process of political will formation. If students are willing to begin contemplating themselves in the classroom, one likely self-discovery is the very lack of will to engage sincerely at all in dialogue. My own sense is that a classroom that is open to such discoveries about the self as a consumer offers some possibility of existential relief.
[37]See, for example, Jürgen Habermas, "An Awareness of What is Missing," in *An Awareness of What is Missing: Faith and Reason in a Post-Secular Age*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Malden: Polity Press, 2010), 15-23.
[38]Connolly identifies a "secular conceit" in the attempt "to provide a single, authoritative basis of public reason and/or public ethics that governs all reasonable citizens regardless of 'personal' or 'private' faith." See William E. Conley, *Why I am Not a Secularist* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1999), 5. Similarly, according to Mahmood, inclusion itself requires that a group recognize itself and be able to articulate its self-recognition "within the terms of liberal national dis-

course" (see Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire," 328 and note 10).

[39]Henri Bergson, *Laughter* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 74.

[40]Ibid., 187.

[41]For information on the *Alternatives to Violence Project*, see http://avpinternational.org/ (accessed May 20, 2011).

[42]Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), 71.

[43]For a thoughtful and insightful look at the importance of altering students' relations to evaluation itself, see Natalie Helberg, Cressida Heyes, and Jaclyn Rohel, "Thinking through the Body: Yoga, Philosophy, and Physical Education," in *Teaching Philosophy* 32 no. 3 (2009): 271. This article, co-written by a philosophy professor, graduate student, and undergraduate student, reflects on an experimental class in which students read phenomenology and philosophies of somatic practices, while also practicing yoga. How the students are able to shift their orientations towards impending evaluation is an especially rich contribution of this essay, which points to the importance of exploring differing ways to embody thought in practice in the classroom.

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