PHENOMENOLOGY AND FUNDAMENTAL EDUCATIONAL THEORY

Phenomenological research is needed in the study of education to ground education in the being of children and youth by describing the essential characteristics of educational phenomena. Because it thereby formulates a substantive, normative theory using philosophical methods to describe substantive, normative phenomena of education, it is a branch of philosophy of education. However to distinguish it from other modes of philosophy of education and educational theorizing, it has been called fundamental educational theory in its European origins, which will be considered first.

GERMAN ORIGINS

The best place to begin may be Romano Guardini’s Die Lebensalter: Ihre Ethische und Pädagogik Bedeutung, into its fifth edition by 1959 (See Vandenberg, 1968; Vandenberg, 1971). Guardini noted that because remembering and foresight are different in different phases of life, the mode of temporalizing and being authentically there in the world is relative to one’s life-phase (Guardini, pp. 12–13). He distinguished seven life-phases (pre-natal, childhood, youth, young adulthood, mature adulthood, old age, and senility) separated by critical turning points (birth, puberty, practical experience, experiencing the limits, retirement, and helplessness) and described each, acknowledging there were sub-phases such as the small and large child, male and female, etc. (p. 11).

Because the child lives in a strange world and has little foresight, it needs security and love, lives wholly in the present, and becomes alienated from the world if too much of its time is taken up preparing for the future (pp. 16–17, 26). “The child needs to play” (p. 11), for in play it “experiences, continually, with its whole being, and with a never to be regained intensity” (p. 71), but this is prevented by removing the child from its living presence to the world by untoward education as preparation. Adolescents become increasingly aware of their independent existence, and their greatest danger is “das Man”, i.e., falling into the anonymity of the peer group (p. 31). Youth have great energy, enthusiastically face adulthood, and can dare to make life-decisions that affect their whole future, although they are not yet in touch with the realities of death.
of adult life and form idealistic expectations of their adult existence that will be upset when they gain practical experience (pp. 22–24, 34). To survive this crisis without fanatically repeating their youthful ideals or cynically abandoning them (pp. 35–38), childhood and youth have to be lived fully, authentically, without having the ideals of adulthood imposed upon them, for this grounds their being firmly in the world. Guardini said that most important is who the teacher is, then what the teacher does, and least important is what the teacher says, and the more so the younger the child (p. 36). In describing each life-phase, Guardini showed their dialectical interrelation, for in a sense they all exist at once and the adult can see no more of the world than was seen as a child (p. 26). He warned against projecting aspects of authentic adult existence on to children or youth, for it would prevent them from living this life-phase fully, the sine qua non of existing authentically in adulthood.

Two things of permanent value to the phenomenology of education result from Guardini’s work. Within its perspective, the descriptions of authentic existence by major existentialists seem to reflect the (male?) midlife identity crisis, for their major works were all written in their thirties (Kierkegaard, at 33 years of age; Nietzsche, 39; Jaspers, 36; Marcel, 38; Heidegger, 38; Sartre, 38; and Merleau-Ponty, 37). This contextualizes them existentially, e.g., perhaps Heidegger’s being-towards-death (i.e., foresight and projection into the rest of one’s life) characterizes authentic existence only during the transition from young adulthood to mature adulthood as one assumes full responsibility for one’s whole being. More important is the phenomenology of childhood and youth to educational theory. Is being educated an essential characteristic of childhood and youth? Is being educable the meaning, the significance, of being a child or youth?

A response to these questions appears in Otto Friedrich Bollnow’s 1959 Existenzphilosophie und Pädagogik: Versuch über unstetige Formen der Erziehung, which furnishes a theory of discontinuous education to overcome the phenomenon Heidegger called falling into inauthentic, everyday existence through intermittent awakenings. Bollnow recommended that to motivate students the teacher should use the admonition instead of praise and blame, for its combination of reminding students of a failure to complete something they had pledged to do with an appeal to complete it helps them reorient themselves toward fulfilling their own possibilities of being. It is forward looking, involving the whole temporal structure (p. 63). It respects the pupil’s freedom because it is only a call to conscience (p. 66). In his terminology, the admonition can waken the pupil from a state of Nicht-so-sein-sollens to Sein-sollens, and from In-der-Welt-seins to In-der-Wahrheit-seins, i.e., from being-obligated-to-be-nothing to being-obligated-to-be (oneself), and from being-in-the-world to being-in-the-truth (pp. 47–48).

This awakening can also occur in the educative encounter with the content of the curriculum, for which Bollnow gave a phenomenological description greatly improved from the 1955 version published as “Encounter and Education” (1972). One can have an intellectual encounter with an author or great figure of the past or present (Bollnow, 1959, p. 110), with groups of people, previous times and cultures, works of poetry, and intellectual truths (p. 93). To distinguish it from a theoretical interest, Bollnow cited Heidegger’s claim that deficient moods underlie abstract theorizing, but an educative encounter involves one’s whole being: “One must first of all value and only then can one understand” (p. 108), and, “I understand only insofar as I place myself in question” (p. 110). This leads to Bollnow’s definition of education as “the intellectual encounter between the generations, or of the educational encounter between the rising generation and the intellectual-historical world” (p. 93). Although teachers cannot contrive encounters, they can promote their occurrence through a serious, respectful, engaged treatment of curriculum content that will also enable an encounter with the teacher (pp. 125, 130), which requires an atmosphere of trust.

Before proceeding to the educative atmosphere, however, three things should be noted. The encounter in education was already considered in Gustav Würtzberg’s 1949 Existenz und Erziehung: Aufsätze und Abhandlungen zur Pädagogik, although Würtzberg claimed, “Everything said about the Existenz of man is also applicable to the adolescent” (p. 54), indicating a lack of awareness of life-phases. Secondly, Bollnow raised quite a controversy, e.g., Das Problem der Begegnung (1969), edited by Werner Faber and including essays by Werner Loch, Josef Derbolav, Fritz Bohnsack, and Bollnow, as well as by Faber. Finally, Bollnow had already written Das Wesen der Stimmungen (1956) as early as 1941 and Neue Gehör­genheit: Das Problem einer Überwindung des Existen­tialismus by 1955. In the former he accepted Heidegger’s philosophical anthropology regarding basic moods (Grundbefindlichkeiten) that have no intentional object because they are states of being, then in the latter he claimed that hope is more primordial than Heidegger’s Care because it is its necessary presupposition (see also Bollnow, 1961, p. 271). Because hope underlies caring about one’s existence, it transcends the negativism of some “existentialism” without denying the reality of the negative aspects of personal existence. Bollnow also