THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD AS AN APPROACH TO STUDYING THE REALITY OF EDUCATING A CHILD*

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1. INTRODUCTION

By asking penetrating, disclosing and revealing questions about **educating/bringing up a child**, a phenomenologist allows that reality to "describe and explain itself". That is, a phenomenologist allows the phenomenon "accompanying/guiding a child to adulthood" to describe itself **through** his/her questioning of it. How educating can be investigated so that it reveals its essences (structures, categories) is described and provisionally verified in the steps below. When one asserts that the reality of educating a child reveals itself as it **essentially** is, this means that one has

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penetrated through everyday superficialities to the very root of the matter. The phenomenological method is required to disclose these essences that are present in but concealed by the appearances that are superficially perceptible. However, this does not mean that there is a reality hidden behind these appearances. The reality of educating itself, its essences (structures, categories, the phenomenon) **is** in the appearances but in confused, unclear ways. The steps of the method are designed to allow one to reduce or "purify" the appearances to their essentials.

Essences **refer to** those structures, categories that make **educating** possible and understandable. These essences are grasped when one has a clear understanding of their contents (what constitutes trust?), their meaningfulness (why is trust necessary?) and their interrelatedness (how are trust, understanding and authority necessarily interrelated?).

This method is a way of **disclosing** essences (also called structures, categories) through reflecting on and questioning reality. A

phenomenologist, as phenomenologist, doesn't speculate about **educating** or form hypotheses about it. He/she is not interested in speculation and incidental facts but rather in **vital essentials.** (Essence is from Latin <u>esse</u> = to be). A phenomenologist does not start with definitions or theories but with the reality of educating, with the phenomenon "educating" itself, and he/she is open (minded) to what that reality has to say regarding its essences and its meaningfulness.

2. POSSIBLE STEPS IN THINKING PHENOMENOLOGICALLY

The steps discussed below are not the only ones possible and they are not ordered in the only possible sequence.

* Step one (**Bracket**, neutralize, control assumptions, beliefs, etc.)

Thus step is operative throughout the entire investigation. A phenomenologist does not want anything to come between him/her and the reality of educating a child. Therefore, this first step is an attempt to neutralize or

control for certain obscurities that conceal or obscure the reality of interest. Naturalism, existentialism, pragmatism, etc. conceal the essences of educating as well as the necessary constituents of the essences. These concealing perspectives prevent one from penetrating to or disclosing the real essentials (fundamental structures and their contents). The attitude, purpose of this step is to neutralize or control these hindrances to disclosing the phenomenon itself.

A phenomenologist who is a Christian (or of any religious persuasion) knows that his/her own philosophy of life can prevent the reality of educating from becoming clear and translucent. Also, he/she is aware that his/her own philosophy of life necessarily is operative in all that he/she does--including a phenomenological study of educating a child. He/she also is aware that he/she might unintentionally only seek confirmation of his/her philosophy of life and thus distort or conceal the essences of educating. Thus, the investigator decides to study the reality of educating separately from his/her philosophy of life that is a second valuable source of knowledge about educating. At a

later stage, when his/her investigation is completed, he/she can unite the knowledge of educating emanating from these two sources (the reality of educating and a philosophy of life). That is, after disclosing the essences of educating, he/she must introduce his/her own philosophy of life that particularizes, enlivens and nuances these essences and his/her understanding of educating.

* **Step two** (Turn to a wide variety of situations and name the seeming essences)

This is an empirical aspect in that one turns to as wide a variety of educative situations as one's experiences offer. The purpose is to isolate, select and describe the seeming **essentials** of each situation (the purpose is not a list of empirical characteristics of the order "90% of kindergarten teachers are women," "87% of classrooms at institution X have chalkboards," etc. Empirical characteristics may or may not be essentials). Everything that seems essential needs to be named. The investigator devises names that he/she considers to be the best linguistic expression of an aspect of the reality of

educating. For example, one aspect may be called the relationship of trust (instead of, say, "rapport"). He/she also searches for the contents (essential constituents of an essence) of the relationship of trust (e.g., acceptance, commitment, etc.).

* **Step three** (Think* a seeming essence away; view it as absent)

This step provides a first test of whether a seeming essence really is necessary. By a thought experiment, the investigator tries to "think away" the supposed essence to ascertain whether educating would still be possible (conceivable) without it. If educating still is possible then the thought away "essential" in fact is not an essence.

For example, the investigator could try to think away the educator's philosophy of life. What would happen if this were done? (One's philosophy of life is the total of the demands (norms) of what is proper that the educator must obey). If his/her philosophy of life were "thought away" educating would

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* One can also act a seeming essential away by, e.g., purposely withholding a relationship of trust. However, there are ethical problems to such an action.

be without any demands of propriety and it would be destroyed. This means that **a particular** philosophy of life is essential for educating to occur, but this step *cannot prescribe* **the** philosophy of life for an educator.

As part of this step, we also can turn to a range of empirical situations where a presumed essence or essences are missing to see whether, in fact, educating has been destroyed. We also can study how a distorted actualization of a presumed essence distorts (or doesn't) the occurrence of educating a child.

* Step four (**Separate essentials** from non-essentials or from mere characteristics)

In his/her search for true essences (fundamental structures) the investigator noted aspects of educating that could be "thought away" and others that could not be. In this step he/she deliberately separates the essential from the non-essential features so that the essences will appear even more clearly. (For example, an educator's physique is a non-essential aspect in contrast

to his/her acceptance of a child, which is an essence, a condition for educating to be actualized).

* Step five (talk with others, including those with different philosophies of life)

At this stage, the investigator needs to converse with others studying the phenomenon "educating a child" with the aim of verifying the validity and meaningfulness of the essences. For example, a fundamental pedagogician requests his/her fellow fundamental pedagogicians and the practitioners of the other part-perspectives of pedagogics (e.g., psychopedagogics, didactic pedagogics, sociopedagogics) to ascertain from their **perspectives** on the reality of educating whether the disclosed essence can be thought away. If there is disagreement, then a joint investigation will have to be carried out. If there is agreement, there will be greater certainty about the validity of that essential of educating.

* Step six (further elucidation of essentials: what is their purpose, their meaning?)

The guiding question here is what purpose does the essence serve? That is, it is not enough to have disclosed an essence or essences; one needs to elucidate their function, contribution, meaning for educating a child. This can be determined only from the reality of educating itself; the meaningfulness of the essences for the occurrence of educating must be determined. The disclosure of the essences and their elaboration also is a disclosure and elaboration of the phenomenon "educating a child". For example, how do the disclosed essences promote the aim of educating a child (adulthood)? The actualization of every essence must foster the aim of educating and they should be elucidated in relation to this aim. If this cannot be done, such an essence then is void of any meaningfulness regarding educating a child.

* Step seven (Contradictory [opposite] thinking)

This step complements step three (think away the essential, view it as absent). In fact, step three is more general and vague than thinking of the opposite of an essential as

present. However, **both** steps are necessary to map the essential limits of a phenomenon. Consider the relationship between steps three and seven (this one) in terms of trust. The **absence** of trust (step 3) does not necessarily imply that mistrust is present. Indifference could be what prevails. **Both** possibilities need to be covered and that is why this step (seven) also is necessary.

However, a problem here is what constitutes the "opposite" of a presumed essential? Is love the opposite of hate or is indifference? Is trust the opposite of mistrust, no trust, distrust? The solution to this "problem" is to cover all possibilities that one can think of.

* Step eight (examine the names of the essences and **look for the most appropriate name for each**)

Is the term ascribed to the essence the most appropriate one? The investigator tries to make sure the terms are not derived from the plant or animal worlds or from physiology or the world of physics otherwise a human being will tend to be reduced to the animal or physical world, etc. Since educating a

child is a human occurrence involving human beings, its essences should be described by terms that reflect or express the nature of human beings.

Is the designated name the most descriptive, most accurate **grammatical expression** because it renders the true meaning of the essence as no other name can?

Examples:

1. The educative occurrence shows a dynamic nature. Should this be called an "educative process" since "process" indicates a dynamic aspect? The problem is that the word "process" has many different connotations that are not a true representation of the activities in educative situations. A connotation of "process" is that once educating is started, the activities will develop and run their course mechanically leaving the educator powerless. What really happens, however, is that an educator **initiates an occurrence** that he/she can freely manipulate. Thus, the term "educative process" is less adequate than "educative

event or occurrence." In addition, "process" connotes a high degree of predictability but, in fact, the event of educating carries no guarantees. It can abort or fail at any time for a variety of reasons. The terms "event" and "occurrence" do not conceal the reality that the course of educating is neither mechanical nor predictable; "process" does tend to conceal this.

2. The investigator notices that the difference between a child and an adult entails much more than differences in age and size. How can the difference(s) between an adult and a child best be expressed? In contrast to an adult, a child may be described as "immature" or even as a "non-adult." Certainly, on the surface, there is nothing "inaccurate or false" about these descriptions. On second thought, however, the "im-" in immature, in fact, is an **evaluation** of a child's unworthiness as a human being. in contrast to the maturity or worthiness of an adult. The implication is that being a child is a lesser mode of being human than being an adult, and this simply is not accurate. Childhood and adulthood, though different, are equally modes of fully

and completely being human. Also, the term "non-adult" clearly indicates that adulthood is the criterion being used to describe a child. But phenomenologically, one cannot validly describe or disclose an essence through or in terms of another mode or way of being. These terms fail the test of describing a child as a child.

In this light, rather than "describing" a child as "immature" or as a "non-adult," we need a term more accurately expressive of the reality that a child-in-education is being guided and assisted in becoming an adult; that is, from the reality of educating, a child is on-the-way to adulthood and should be described as such. Nobody can deny that being a child is a positive phenomenon, but this does not justify the child remaining a child. A child is not immature but rather has **not yet reached maturity.** The **not-yet** of his/her being mature (adult) is what should be emphasized. Therefore, to describe a child as an adult-in-the-making or as **not yet adult** agrees more with reality than does "immature."

To view the above examples as playing with words, hair splitting, or merely a matter of semantics is to not respect the close connection between language and thinking as well as between language and our grasp of reality.

* Step nine (interrelations among essences)

Now greater clarity regarding the disclosed essences must be gained by examining the interconnections among the different essences. One way of doing this is to ascertain whether one essence is a condition for the actualization of others. If an essence has gained the status of "condition for," its essentiality and meaningfulness are confirmed.

* Step ten (Unbracket; actually this is post phenomenological in the sense that the phenomenological investigation ends with step nine)

The essences need to be particularized and implemented in terms of the educator's philosophy of life (which was bracketed by step one and not allowed to influence the

results of the other steps). Now the educator should reconsider the education doctrine or theory to which he'she subscribes since it is based on his/her philosophy of life and *not* the essences or structures of the reality of educating a child. As a practicing educator, he/she must give particularized contents to the disclosed pedagogic essences or structures. (In a parallel manner, a nutritionist knows the "essentials" of bodily needs for nutrients. However, these essences do not dictate or prescribe what one should eat. The particularized contents will be determined by the dieter's philosophy of life, e.g., his/her ethnic, cultural context).