

[April 2024]
THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD AS AN APPROACH
TO STUDYING THE REALITY OF EDUCATING A CHILD*

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*[A PHENOMENOLOGICAL METHOD IS AN EYE- AND MIND-OPENING
METHOD FOR REVEALING AND DESCRIBING THE ESSENTIAL
STRUCTURES/CATEGORIES OF ANYTHING EXPERIENCEABLE. --
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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, he/she allows the phenomenon "accompanying/guiding a child to adulthood" to describe itself **through** his/her questioning it. How educating can be investigated so its essences (structures, categories) are revealed, described, and provisionally verified via the following steps is indicated. When one asserts that the reality of educating a child reveals itself as it **essentially** is, this means one has penetrated through everyday superficialities to the very root of the matter. The phenomenological method is required to disclose these essences which are present in the appearance but are concealed by superficially perceiving them. However, this does not mean that there is a reality hidden behind these appearances. The reality of

* This is an edited and slightly modified version of pages 80-89 in Landman, W. A., Kilian, C. J. G., Swanepoel, E. M and Bodenstein, H. C. A. (1982). **Fundamental pedagogics**. Johannesburg: Juta.

educating itself, its essences (structures, categories, the phenomenon) **is** in the appearances but in confused, unclear ways. The steps of this method are designed to reduce or "purify" the appearances to their essentials.

Essences **refer to** those structures, categories which 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 educating. A phenomenologist, as phenomenologist, does not speculate about **educating** or form hypotheses about it. He/she is not interested in speculation and incidental facts, but in **essentials**. (Essence is from Latin *esse* = to be). A phenomenologist does not start with definitions or theories, but with educating, i.e., with the phenomenon "educating" itself, and he/she is open (minded) to what it has to say regarding its essences and its meaningfulness.

2. POSSIBLE STEPS IN THINKING PHENOMENOLOGICALLY

The steps discussed are not the only ones possible, and they are not ordered in the only possible sequence, **after** the first step is initiated and remains functioning throughout a phenomenological analysis.

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

This step is operative throughout the entire investigation. A phenomenologist does not want anything to come between him/her and the reality of educating, as accompanying/bringing up a child to adulthood. Thus, this first step is an attempt to temporarily hold in abeyance, bracket, set aside beliefs, opinions, theories, etc. which might conceal or obscure the reality of interest. Philosophies such as Naturalism, Existentialism, Pragmatism, etc. conceal the essences of educating, as well as the necessary constituents of these essences. These concealing perspectives prevent one from penetrating to or disclosing the real essentials (fundamental structures and their essences). The attitude, purpose of this step is to neutralize or control these and other potential hindrances to disclosing the phenomenon "accompanying a child to adulthood" itself.

When his/her investigation is completed, he/she must unbracket or reintroduce everything which was bracketed to be able to particularize, enliven, and nuance these universal essences and his/her understanding of educating and its post-phenomenological concrete, specific practice within a socio-cultural context.

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

This is an empirical moment 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 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 which seems essential is named. The investigator devises names which he/she considers to be the best linguistic expression of a moment of the event of educating. For example, one moment 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, respect 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, i.e., essential. 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 without it, 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 which the educator must obey). If his/her philosophy of life were "thought away", educating would be without any demands of

* 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.

propriety, and it would be destroyed. This means a **particular** philosophy of life is essential for educating to occur, but this step *cannot prescribe the specific* philosophy of life for an educator.

As part of this step, we can also 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 can also study, e.g., case studies of educatively neglected children to see how a distorted actualization of a presumed essence distorts (or doesn't) the occurrence of accompanying a child to adulthood.

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

In his/her search for true essences (fundamental structures), the investigator noted moments of educating which could be "thought away" and others which 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 gender is a non-essential moment, in contrast to his/her acceptance of a child, which is an essence of trust, a condition for educating to be actualized).

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

At this stage, the investigator must 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 **part-perspectives** on the reality of educating whether a disclosed essence can be thought away. If there is disagreement, then a joint investigation must 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 via hermeneutic thinking: 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 must elucidate their function, contribution, meaning for educating a child. This can be determined 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 or contradictory 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 must 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 which 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 our understanding of 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 which reflect or express the human 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 moment? The problem is that the word "process" has many different connotations which 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** which 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 entail 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-educating 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 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 via dialectical thinking)**

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; in fact, this is post-phenomenological, in the sense that the phenomenological investigation ends with step nine)**

The universal essences must 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 [e.g., a parent or teacher], he/she must give particularized contents to the disclosed pedagogical essences or structures. (In a parallel manner, a nutritionist knows the "essentials" of bodily needs for nutrients. However, these essences do not precisely dictate or prescribe what one should eat. The particularized dietary contents (e.g/. fried beans, potatoes, rice, etc.) will be determined by the dieter's cultural context.

A thorough discussion of the essences and structures of an adult-child educative relationship (i.e., its relationship, sequence, activity, and aim structures), and how these essences occur during educating, constitute an educative perspective, and an example of its use use to evaluate the educative possibilities and limitations of a widely accepted, valid psychological technique. Although absent from our (U.S.A.) literature on education, these essences/structures are the outcome of several decades of research using the above phenomenological method by the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria in South Africa, they are accessible at:
georgeyonge.net/node/148
