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PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY:  
An ontological-anthropological view  
of being human and its relevance for educational theory  
and practice

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## 1. Introduction

As used here, the term anthropology (anthropological) does not refer to the social science but to the philosophical perspective which pursues the question of what it is to be human. There are as many philosophical anthropologies as there are philosophical schools addressing this question. So, which one should be one's point of departure in studying educating (pedagogics) or any human science? In this regard, I give precedence to a 20th century philosophical anthropology reflective of existential phenomenological thought, because this mode of thinking begins with the reality of being human itself by bracketing or temporarily holding in abeyance any philosophically, religiously, politically, scientifically and other derived assumptions about this reality, and strives to disclose and describe essences [the ontological] of being human [the anthropological], and to express them in the form of categories which are rooted in being human itself. Phenomenologically, an essence is a precondition without which a phenomenon could not be, would not be possible. In this sense, phenomenology is an open-ended inquiry of the range of possibilities (as preconditions) which "allow" something to be what it is.

But why should one be interested in the issue of what it is to be human, especially if one is primarily oriented to practical, non-philosophical interests? Whether one is aware of it, everything one does is an expression (reflection) of implicit and explicit philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality, knowing, persons, educating, etc. In this regard, Dreyfus (1991) says about our understanding of people (of course, including children), "...one cannot understand something unless one has an accurate account of what it is that one is trying to understand. Thus, for example, if one thinks of man as a rational animal, solving problems and acting on the basis of beliefs and desires, as the tradition has done since Aristotle, one will develop a theory of mind, decision-making, rule-following, etc., to account for this way of being. If this description of human reality turns out to be superficial, all the hard work will have been in vain" (p. 1). In fact, these are prevailing views, e.g., in psychology and education and, thus, we find information processing and even neuroscience models influencing the psychology and educational psychology of learning which, according to the views to be presented, seem to lead to confusing theorizing. However, there is a possible alternative.

To clarify one possible alternative, I focus on a natural science oriented philosophical anthropology and contrast it with a phenomenologically oriented (i.e., ontologically based) one.

## 2. A natural science grounded anthropology

A notion basic to this approach is that a human being is a psychophysical organism interacting with his/her environment within the limits set by the physical and biological laws of nature. An evolutionary perspective is

central to this approach. Also important is the assumption of substantialism (see Van Rensburg & Landman, 1988) which means that a human being is viewed as made up of substances or properties which can be identified, isolated, and studied by various experiments and measurement techniques or tests. These physical and psychic properties or functions are studied as elements separable from the whole; also, in this approach a person, as a psychophysical organism, is often studied in isolation and in separation from his/her world, even though he/she somehow interacts with it.

According to Van Zyl (1980), a natural science grounded anthropology assumes the following:

- (a) a human being is governed by mechanistically operating physical and biological laws of nature.
- (b) the spiritual aspect of a person is an epiphenomenon, i.e., merely a byproduct of these laws of nature and can be reduced to or explained by them;
- (c) in addition to the assumption that a human being has psychic functions (e.g., thinking) which presumably can be isolated from the total person and then measured or quantified by means of research methods which are often patterned (at least analogously) after those of the natural sciences, a person is seen to be the sum of separate quantified and quantifiable properties or functions. A person's power of self-determination, in its spiritual sense, does not fit this perspective, and is reduced to a psychophysical phenomenon determined by external stimuli in accordance with the laws of nature.

### 3. A phenomenologically oriented (ontological) philosophical anthropology

This also is called a humanistic or human science approach because its point of departure is the phenomenon of being human as a *person* rather than a specific (often implicit) metaphysical argument such as substantialism. In addition, the attempt is to describe the phenomenon "being human" in terms of *categories intrinsic to it* rather than in terms of categories borrowed from other realms of being (e.g., "organism", a core category of a natural science anthropology, is borrowed from biology). Also, the attempt here is to allow the methods employed (or at least the way they are used and interpreted) to reflect the nature of the phenomenon being studied rather than imitating the methods of the natural sciences, which are designed to study phenomena other than *persons*, and merely applying them to the study of human beings.

In contrast to a natural science grounded anthropology, a phenomenological-humanistic oriented one views a human being as a psychological, physical, spiritual, self-determining, indivisible person-world unity (For the meaning of this person-world unity, note the concept of intentionality presented below). One implication of this view is that, although different human abilities can be identified and distinguished, they cannot be "accurately" grasped and "measured" as independent, separate characteristics detached from the person who is always involved as a totality in some situation. In other words, as Dasein or being-in-the-world, a *person* is actualized as a totality; thus, e.g., the actualization of his/her intelligence in some situation is not merely a cognitive, intellectual matter but rather the whole person is implicated emotionally, volitionally, normatively, etc.

#### 4. The three-dimensional anthropology of Viktor Frankl

Frankl (1969) proposes a three-dimensional anthropology according to which a human being is viewed as a psycho-physical-spiritual (noological) unity. And even though the spiritual is at the core of being a person, and the psychic is more peripheral, and the physical is most peripheral of all, still these dimensions or moments of being a person cannot be separated; as three moments of one totality (person), they mutually qualify and define each other.

In considering what these three dimensions mean, I move from the physical, via the psychic, to the spiritual. I do this because the spiritual is the most problematic and needs the greatest explication. I believe this is because the more familiar and generally accepted natural science grounded anthropology presents the physical (physiological/biological) as more basic, "real", or fundamental than the psychic, and it reduces the spiritual to the psychic as may be seen, e.g., in many of Kohlberg's writings on moral development (e.g., Kohlberg & Mayer, 1972).

Very briefly, the physical dimension of a person, also called corporeality, refers to our body as we live or experience it and not as it is defined and described by anatomy. It is the most basic dimension of our being alive (but certainly not most basic in the same sense as espoused by a natural science anthropology). Indeed, it is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for being a person. According to Kraft (1986), our being a person, viewed in its physical aspect, is prerational, preconscious, emotional, limited (I can't jump over a house), perspectival (I can only see something from where I am), situated in space (here) and time (now). It is the seat of the immediate, the impulsive, the private (mine), and of desires. As Kraft says, the body, as a mode of existence, "underlies such prerational processes

as physical needs, desires, emotions, drives, attachments, and the bodily expression of knowledge."(p. 29)

With respect to the psychic dimension, one speaks of the ego, or I, and of being conscious. As for the ego, Kraft (1986) says that it "underlies such functions as thinking reflectively, deciding rationally, adapting, managing, synthesizing, and executing. The ego is related to the motivation of relatively rational, cognitive, task-oriented behavior."(p. 29)

The spiritual dimension, as noted, is usually neglected or, at best, reduced to the psychic in a natural science anthropology. But without this spiritual dimension, there would not be persons and, further, educating would be neither necessary nor possible (unless one defines educating as essentially learning and/or teaching, a definition consistent with a two-dimensional natural science anthropology). Where for the psychic there is no ego without consciousness, for the spiritual there is no self without self-consciousness. With respect to this self, Kraft (1986) says that it "underlies such experiences as compassion, faith, hope, and love, as well as being the paramount (but not exclusive) dynamic of moral development."(p. 29) From the physical to the psychic, there is a distancing from the object of experience, and from the psychic to the spiritual, there is a distancing (detaching) from oneself as one who experiences. For example, viewed from the physical aspect or moment of being a person, I feel something; from the psychic aspect or moment, I am aware that I feel something; and from the spiritual, I am aware that I am aware that I feel something. Although in extreme circumstances each may be approximated, it is not likely that there is a purely physical, psychic, or spiritual

experience because a person is a totality in which all three are always involved.

In describing what he means by the spiritual, Frankl (1969) says, "to detach oneself from even the worst conditions is a uniquely human capacity..." (p. 16-17), and with respect to self-detachment, he says "... man is capable of detaching himself not only from a situation but also from himself. He is capable of choosing his attitude toward himself"(p. 17). Then he adds, "what matters is not the features of our character or the drives and instincts *per se*, but rather the stand we take toward them, and the capacity to take such a stand is what makes us human beings"(p. 17). According to Frankl (1969), a person enters the spiritual dimension "whenever he is reflecting upon himself - or, if need be, rejecting himself; whenever he is making himself an object - or making objections to himself; whenever he displays his being conscious of himself - or whenever he exhibits his being conscientious. In fact, being conscientious presupposes the uniquely human capacity to rise above oneself, to judge and evaluate one's own deeds in moral and ethical terms" (p. 18).

Indeed, when Nel (1974) says, "upbringing, as viewed from the pedagogical situation, is thus essentially the *forming of conscience*" (Nel's emphasis), he is acknowledging that educating is necessarily an awakening and cultivating of a child's spiritual dimension. If a child is left to his/her own resources regarding his/her spiritual potential, that potential almost certainly will not be cultivated as it could be or flourish as it should. For this reason, the spiritual dimension makes educating necessary and possible. Animals, as psycho-physical organisms, can be trained; only persons, as psycho-physical-spiritual beings, can be and need to be educated (see, e.g., Gunter, 1974). Of

course, we too are animals, but our spirituality (in the above sense) makes us qualitatively different (See Scheler, 1962; Van Zyl, 1967).

The spiritual core of a person involves responsibility, the ability to objectify oneself and to comprehend a world. The spiritual is what enables a person to *not* be determined by needs and drives, but to be able to sublimate and even say "no" to them (as the protesting faster says "no" to the need for food, e.g., in making a political statement). This spiritual core allows a person to exercise freedom, to recognize values, and to decide in terms of them.

### Spirituality as intentionality

The spiritual dimension considered above in some detail is another nuance of what existential phenomenologists refer to as intentionality or existence (hereafter spelled as ex-sistence after Kockelmans (1966) to emphasize its technical meaning of "to stand outside", from the Latin word: *exsistere*). Indeed, spirituality and ex-sistence are virtually synonymous. As Nel (1974) expresses it, "man exists in view of the fact that he is a spiritual being, in other words, he is able to 'step out of himself,' can 'detach himself' and can thereby look upon and evaluate himself; he is thus a self-conscious being." And further, he says, "The activation and potentialization [sic] of the spirituality of being-a-person, as the aim of education, is nothing other than the forming of a person"(p. 36).

To better understand the connection between intentionality and spirituality, the distinction between act intentionality and functioning (fundamental) intentionality is helpful. Act intentionality is a mode of functioning intentionality, and, as such, they cannot be separated. For example, a psychic act, such as



perceiving, as act intentionality, is a particular actualization of the fundamental directedness and openness of one's consciousness as functioning intentionality, ex-sistence, spirituality, being-in-the-world.

Following Kockelmans (1966), on the level of specific acts, intentionality is the way a person directs him/herself to and *gives* meaning to [while simultaneously receiving meaning from] that of which he/she is conscious. But the possibility and implicit sense of any such act rests on functioning intentionality as being-in-the-world, ex-sistence; the essence of being human lies in ex-sistence, in a human being's openness for (as receptive to meaning from) and directedness to (as freedom of initiative to) the world. This openness and freedom are always limited by one's situation and by one's physical, historical, and social conditions (which are known as facticities in existential phenomenological thought). Being human is a possibility of situations, or, as Frankl (1969) says in discussing a person's spiritual dimension, "Man's freedom is no freedom from conditions but rather freedom to take a stand on whatever conditions might confront him"(p. 16).

Kockelmans (1966) sums up these two senses of intentionality by saying, "Consciousness is essentially directed to the other, it is intentional. In addition to 'act intentionality', 'functioning intentionality' recognizes a more fundamental form of intentionality. This form of intentionality does not merely express that man in his acts of knowing is of necessity directed to something else, but primarily indicates that being-man implies an essential relationship to the world and that this intentional relationship of being is the proper and ultimate root of all meaning"(p. 61).

Lived experience, as intentionality  
(directedness/openness)

As just noted, intentionality as directedness means that one is conscious of something by entering a dialogue [of giving *and* receiving meaning] with the world. This dialogue is motivated by an appeal which the world directs to a person who, in answering that appeal, goes out to the world, encounters it, and invests it with meaning.

But, inseparably linked with intentionality as directedness is intentionality as openness. This involves an openness or receptiveness to that very appeal of the world as well as an open-endedness regarding how specifically that appeal will be answered (what it will mean, how one will act). This implies that a person lives in a world to which he/she can give *and* receive meanings in terms of his/her own initiative and perspective. It also indicates that a child is open to the educator and his/her world. To stress the point once more, this openness makes educating possible and necessary.

Even though he is in general agreement with what has been stated to this point, Pretorius (1972) argues that the category lived experience is of greater value for a phenomenological psychology (and psychopedagogics) than is the concept consciousness, especially because of its unacceptable natural science connotations. He describes lived experience as "...the personal..., intentional..., continuous activity of being-aware of reality" (my translation). As our way of being open for and directed to the world, lived experience has affective, cognitive, and normative moments which are related respectively to the physical, the psychic and the

spiritual dimensions of Frankl's anthropology. These three moments imply that a child must be accompanied in educatively affective, cognitive, and normative ways.

#### 5. A child as directedness and openness (intentionality)

To this point, the discourse is abstract. Now the question is: what are some of the ways in which a child (a person) shows him/herself as directedness to and openness for? Although not exhaustive (see Reilly, 1983, and DeVries, 1986), the following should be taken into consideration by an educator in accompanying a child:

##### (a) A child is possibility

As an expression of openness, no child is not precisely predictable; he/she is possibility/potentiality and his/her ex-sistence is an open question. To say that a child (person) is possibility means he/she is born with potentialities which are actualized and cultivated in individual ways but under the accompaniment/guidance of his/her educators; what a child makes of these possibilities/potentialities is an open question, not precisely predictable. Also, because of intentionality, as directedness to, these potentialities are actualized only in relation to a situation or situations. In addition, a child invests his/her world (situation) with his/her own meanings (intentionality as directedness) and makes his/her own choices and decisions (openness) in such meaningful situations.

Inasmuch as a child is "directed to and open for", he/she should not be viewed merely as a reactive being who can be conditioned and predictable in terms of causes and effects, or as a responder to stimuli (e.g., see Sonnekus, 1985). A child is continually and actively accepting and rejecting meanings and possibilities and , in these ways,

he/she is contributing to shaping his/her own world, own person, and own further possibilities. Because a child is directedness, openness, and possibility, he/she remains an "open question" in that he/she is never finalized (until death) and continually is actualizing his/her potentialities-in-a-situation.

(b) A child is initiator of relationships

Because of his/her directedness and openness (and the freedom stemming from them), a child gives meaning to his/her world by initiating relationships with people, things, events, etc. and by giving meaning to and receiving meaning from them.

(c) A child is a subject

As initiator of relationships, a child is a subject and not an object. As a person, he/she can only be understood in reference to the meanings he/she ascribes to reality. To know a person as subject (as a person) requires a perspective of understanding, and not just one of measurement. If knowing a person is limited to measurable and "objectively" observable characteristics, that person is reduced to and is known in the way an object (e.g., a table) is known.

(d) A child is always in a situation

As noted, a child is always in a personal, concrete, here-and-now situation. To understand him/her as a person, one must understand his/her situation, not in an objective sense from the "outside" but through an involved encounter with a child within his/her world of meanings. It is in terms of these meanings, possibilities, and limitations they offer that a child lives his/her life and can be educated.

(e) A child is lived body-ness or corporeality

A child's (a person's) body is the center of and the medium through which he/she has access to and ex-sists in the world. As noted , as it is lived, the body is not an object possessed such as a purse or a wallet; it is not the body as known by anatomists. As discussed under Frankl's anthropology, body and self are inseparably intertwined and this inseparability has led Merleau-Ponty (1962) to formulate the idea of a body-subject. One has a body but also one is one's body. It is through one's body that one actualizes his/her intentionality as directedness and openness. Body-ness, as a lived situation (Buytendijk, 1968), can facilitate or impede a child's actualization of his/her potentialities and must always be considered by an educator.

6. A child-in-education

Having looked at some of the more specific ways in which directedness and openness are manifested, the focus now moves from these philosophical anthropological categories descriptive of being human, to how these very same categories are seen with respect to a child-in-education. This is brief, and the interested reader is referred to DeVries (1986).

A child has a will of his/her own (with respect to which he/she must be stabilized emotionally, encouraged, and directed by an educator); each child is unique and must be respected as such; a child has (really is) potentialities and he/she must be shown what they are and how to cultivate them; a child needs activity; a child has a desire to know and a need for authority (this means he/she is born with the possibility and desire to know and to actualize his/her potentialities but, as openness,

he/she requires guidance and direction, i.e., authority); a child can become independent, but for this to occur, he/she must venture and explore under the guidance of an adult until that assistance becomes unnecessary.

A final point is the connection between the philosophical anthropological categories of directedness and openness, on the one hand, and the following two child-pedagogical-anthropological categories proposed by Langeveld (1968), on the other hand: (1) a child is someone who wants to be a person in his/her own right (directedness); and (2) a child is a being who must be educated (openness). Briefly, according to Sonnekus (1985), the connection is this: by means of intentionality, a child directs him/herself to the lifeworld of the adult to which h/she gives/receives meaning, and gradually makes his/her own by learning what he/she must know to eventually live as a morally independent, responsible person (i.e., an adult) in such a world. A child, as a being who must be educated, is a manifestation of openness, in the sense that he/she is born into an open world and, therefore, needs direction, but he/she also is open to the interventions and guidance of an adult and, as openness, his/her possibilities include learning to live as a human being should (i.e., in terms of the norms and values prescribed by a particular life philosophy exemplified and also followed by his/her educators). Educating, as upbringing, is required for a child to be able to fulfill his/her promise or potential to live as a fully human person should (i.e., humanizing is a central moment of educating as upbringing).

Just as directedness and openness only occur together as intentionality, so too are a child's wanting to be independent and his/her need for education inseparable. From a pedagogical perspective, a child's

wanting to be someone must be balanced with the necessity that he/she be educated. If his/her wanting to be someone is over-emphasized, this can lead to a child-centered approach to educating, and if his/her need for education is over-stressed, this can result in an adult-centered approach. In the first case, the adult-child relationship of authority becomes almost non-existent; in the second case, the adult-child relationship of authority becomes too pronounced (even authoritarian). Neither of these extremes is pedagogically accountable because educative authority resides neither in a child nor an adult but rather *in the norms and values* the educator strives to instill in the child. Or, as the forming of conscience, educating essentially is norm-centered (Gunter, 1974).

## 7. Categories and criteria

The phenomenological disclosure of some of the essential characteristics of being a person presented serve as categories which capture the nature of being a person and which allow one to think further about the phenomenon at issue. By assuming an evaluative attitude toward any practice involving persons, these categories can then serve as criteria to evaluate whether that practice is true to or does violence to the nature of being a person (child). If the latter is the case, these criteria become guidelines for modifying the practice so that it is made congruent with the nature of being a person. Thus, in this way the issue of the nature of being a person(child) has direct relevance for educative practice.

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