

**C. K. OBERHOLZER AS PHILOSOPHER\***  
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Whoever wants to understand the philosophy of C. K. Oberholzer must view it against the background of him as an educationist. On the basis of his field of interest, training, professional activity and publications he is known primarily as an educationist. His particular field of interest within education is fundamental pedagogics. Naturally, this entails an involvement with philosophy. However, this is not everything. Teaching and educating were and still are a life calling for Oberholzer—not in a general, almost meaningless sense but really as a calling from God. For this reason they are matters of utmost seriousness and responsibility. This view is carried by his ardent interest in and love for the child and youth.

The primary result of this is its influence on Oberholzer's teaching. Each teacher has a degree of influence on his students but Oberholzer taught his students with so much surrender and dedication, and so much conviction regarding the matter presented and with so much personal involvement that one cannot understand his influence as a philosopher if these personal characteristics are not taken into account. This had the further consequence that he inspired a great number of students to pursue graduate study under his direction. Because he was so strongly convinced of his own views his students often complained of a lack of freedom. To what extent this complaint was justified and to what extent such freedom must be granted to his students are questions that we leave aside. The strong impression that Oberholzer undoubtedly made on his graduate students resulted in a great number of his own ideas and work finding their way into theses and dissertations.

Although in both his teaching and writing Oberholzer never really left philosophy out of consideration he never subordinated it to the pedagogical. Oberholzer has always clearly seen the relationship between philosophy and pedagogics: One of the main motives for

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his pedagogical work is to establish and build up the pedagogical as a human science in its own right, as an autonomous science (not just as an applied science, a sort of technique that flows from other sciences). Seen from this angle, philosophy is one of the foundational sciences for pedagogics, not subordinated to it, that provides insights on which the pedagogician must build. However, this does not mean an absolutizing of the pedagogic or a kind of “pedagog-izing” of philosophy. Philosophy is not only a science in its own right but it is the *mater scientiae* for which Oberholzer has a great love and interest. What an interest in philosophy brings about is a particular concentration. Although Oberholzer shows a broad knowledge and erudition in the entire area of philosophy, he concentrates on particular areas. These areas are a scientific view and ontology.

Before proceeding to this, attention is given to another aspect. As any academic who remains seriously involved in his subject, the insights and approach of Oberholzer did not remain static and unchanged over the years. The change noticed in Oberholzer’s philosophy is a maturing and deepening of insight along with a renovation in approach. This is of particular importance in the history of philosophy in South Africa. Before World War II it was only the Universities of Pretoria and Stellenbosch that had found a real linkage with European philosophy. However, both had become bogged down with philosophical trends of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the University of Pretoria the history of philosophy did not lead further than Kant. As far as the then contemporary philosophy is concerned, G. Heymans held the dominant position, especially through the works of Prof. T. Hugo who received his doctorate with Heymans. Besides Heymans, great value was attributed to students and related spirits of his such as Brugmans, Polak, Casimir and Poortman (especially his “Two kinds of subjectivity” that appeared in 1929). The very strong empirical orientation and psychological flavor of Heymans was the reason that additional figures such as Foerster, McDougall and Rombouts had enjoyed attention. If one looks at Oberholzer’s (D.Phil.) dissertation of 1936 (An epistemological theoretical reflection on natural science thought), the dominant position of Heymans is very conspicuous. Brentano, Husserl and Heidegger were mentioned once in a footnote. In Oberholzer’s (D.Ed.) dissertation of 1942 (The idea of freedom in

modern education) Max Scheler appeared once in a footnote and Karl Jaspers was mentioned in the bibliography.

The search for the founding of the phenomenon of education and with this a foundation for education as a science allowed Oberholzer to turn to philosophical anthropology, phenomenology and existential philosophy after World War II. In the space allotted to us we cannot consider this turn. We suffice by stating that Oberholzer clearly is the person who had introduced this contemporary stream of philosophy into South Africa, had made it fruitful for education and in doing so he also stimulated the interest of those outside of the circle of educationists. In this way, Oberholzer played a key role in the development of philosophical thinking in South Africa.

Above it was stated that the motivation from the pedagogical problem allowed Oberholzer to achieve depth especially in the scientific view and ontology. We can summarize this as follows:

The pedagogic is no longer merely an applied science where the findings of psychology, sociology, philosophy and other sciences are used to teach and educate a child. The pedagogic makes use of many sciences but it is a science in its own right. This implies that there is a particular onticity that must make the pedagogic understandable and understood, just as any other science has a particular onticity as its field of problems and work. Oberholzer states this himself as follows:

“The pedagogic is a human science; . . . The fundamental question is what are the primordial facts, the ontically given to which these sciences turn and are critically accountable? Each human science is a critically accountable system of knowledge that is acquired in a particular way and must point to its primordial facts. And he indicates his point of departure when he emphatically says what his *fait primitif is*”.<sup>(1:17)</sup> These primordial facts must be sought in experience but not in a haphazard experience that merely presents particular facts. If the pedagogician will claim to be scientific he must be able to make generally valid pronouncements. “Experience provides us with such a point of departure. And this point of departure is the undeniable reality of the educative event. There is such a thing as education; it is a universal experiential fact among

and between persons by which is meant that it always is and has been encountered. *All of the problems about which fundamental pedagogics reflects lie within the irrefutable universal experiential fact that a person is a being who educates, who has lent and is lending himself to it, and that he has committed himself to education and is still doing so*".<sup>(1: 18)</sup>

Educating is a pre-scientific "primordial event, i.e., it is an inseparable part of being human; it is given with being human; it is a mode or way of being human".<sup>(1: 19)</sup>

Because educating is a mode of being human, being human itself emerges as the central primordial given, the reality around which everything revolves. Human onticity in its primordial relatedness is the reality that is understood and made understandable by philosophy. This understanding is the task of philosophical anthropology that stands along side of other anthropologies such as ethnography, medicine, psychology and sociology, all of which are anthropologies in the sense that each is directed to the human being. However, all are perspectives from a particular angle on the human being and the human reality as a being-in-the-world. Philosophical anthropology is the conversation of human being about being human out of being human and this conversation must give expression to being human in its primordial structuredness and relatedness. Thus, a philosophical anthropology can be nothing other than an ontology and with reference to the other human sciences, philosophical anthropology is the fundamental ontology (Heidegger's term) while the other perspectives on being human are regional ontologies. Also, the pedagogical is "a perspective on the anthropological in its multi-dimensionality".<sup>(2: 120)</sup> None of these perspectives can be made absolute. Such an absolutizing means a perspectivism, dimensionalism, reductionism, scientism, naturalism and nihilism that follows the formula: A human being is nothing more than . . . It is a one-sidedness that testifies to a bias expressive of a particular philosophy of life or world view. It distorts and falsifies the vision of being human. It is the "most dangerous cancer in the scientific practice of any anthropological subject science. The only way to counteract this perspectivism, dimensionalism and nihilism grounded in the technique and methodology of reducing

and absolutizing is to penetrate to the essences of human reality in its anchoredness in being”.<sup>(2:20)</sup>

This penetration is only possible as phenomenology. “Human reality is multidimensional by which then a variety of human sciences are distinguishable. They are so many illuminations of or perspectives on human reality as this reality makes itself accessible for knowing out of its origins. Thus, this has to do with an ontology of being human as ontologically making knowable what is ontic. Now ontology, and also especially an ontology of being human, only is possible as phenomenology with the additional implication that a phenomenology only is meaningful as an ontology.

A phenomenological vision of being human thus means disclosing as the unconcealment of human reality in its primordial structuredness; it is essence thinking as bringing to expression the essentials of being human as the essence of being human”<sup>(3: 106-107)</sup>.

Because of the limited space available to us it is not possible to summarize the content of Oberholzer’s view of phenomenology and of philosophical anthropology. What was said is sufficient to indicate why Oberholzer made phenomenology, philosophical anthropology and existential philosophy (not existentialism) central to his own philosophy, why he became the foremost exponent of them in South Africa and why he had made them very important streams in South African philosophical thinking. In concluding this section and typifying Oberholzer’s views we can provide a quotation from Buytendijk who had greatly influenced his pursuit and that Oberholzer himself had quoted many times:

“We will understand a person from his ‘world’, i.e., from the meaningful fundamental structure of the whole of situations, histories, cultural values, to which he directs himself, of which he has become conscious, in which his behaviors, thoughts and feelings involve him—the world within which a person *exists*, that he meets and forms in the course of his personal history by the meanings he gives to everything. A person is not ‘something’ with characteristics but an initiative of relationships to a world that he chooses and by which he is chosen”.<sup>(3: 110)</sup>

It is to be expected that the work of Oberholzer would also receive criticism. This is an extremely important part of all scientific work and the growth of scientific knowledge and insight is greatly dependent on it. Especially in the Human Sciences, however, criticism sometimes takes a critical turn because fundamental standpoints so often can be as important or even more important than the factual data. The development that Oberholzer's work showed also was in the direction of greater clarity and sharper formulations of his own insights and standpoint that, at the same time, gradually drew criticism and disclaimers. Although he usually worked positively and paid very little attention to criticisms or polemics, it is just in this connection that he sometimes made his clearest pronouncements, especially regarding his view of science.

Oberholzer's view of science is a result of his phenomenological approach. "Phenomenology is something other than a purely philosophical system; it wants to be the champion and advocate for a particular way of practicing science". Essentially it had arisen as a "protest movement against a particular scientific practice and technique, namely, *reductionism*".<sup>(3: 103)</sup> Throughout his work Oberholzer never tired of criticizing reductionism because it made a human being into a thing with characteristics and allowed him to be placed in a "blind causal-mechanical chain".<sup>(3: 105)</sup> In contrast, Oberholzer strongly states his standpoint: "And now it must be asserted emphatically that our entire contemporary scientific thinking, on a human as well as non-human terrain, principally is anti-Cartesian, anti-scientistic, anti-objectivistic and anti-substantialistic. Phenomenology is at the foundation of this state of affairs".<sup>(3: 105)</sup>

This approach experienced no serious objections because Oberholzer stated the matter convincingly and because today there is a multitude of evidence to support him. However, one consequence of his standpoint elicited a strong polemic that sometimes was painful to Oberholzer and that questioned the level of worthiness of the scientific standard he maintained. This had to do with the problem of a value free science.

Oberholzer states his position very clearly: "Also he (Oberholzer) takes care to place himself and co-workers under the same norms

and demands (the Afrikaaner and Christian) just as his co-religionists also unconditionally advocate to him and each other the Protestant-Calvanist education that he has received.” But “the writer *practices* science as a Christian and claims to be a Christian man of science (scientist). When as a Christian he practices science this still is not a Christian science that arises”.<sup>1: 24)</sup> “Science is not valuing since there also are normative sciences as indeed are all human sciences but it is value free in the sense that science never says how phenomena ought to be or how and what way they are. . . . In his science as critically accountable thinking he does not take his point of departure in his philosophy of life with the contrasts included in it but in what is, also with its implied contrasts”.<sup>(1: 25)</sup>.

Because of this standpoint, Oberholzer is vehemently charged by Christian scientists as being guilty, among other things, of humanism (to use the most gentle term). Oberholzer responds: these persons, “in their ‘pedagogical thinking’, want to justify ideologically what pedagogics ought to be in practice.” Oberholzer cannot identify himself with this charge. “Ideological justification is not scientific practice simply because *no science and thus no Pedagogics* can say what ought to be . . . Science describes and *grounds and it also describes and grounds given prescriptions . . .* It is the ideological as philosophy of life in its calling to work, demand setting and human demanding, but always in an a-scientific respect, that says what ought to be or not to be”.<sup>(4: 3)</sup>

Finally, there still must be an indication of what must be viewed as *unique* in South African philosophy. It is Oberholzer’s work in medical anthropology. Although he has published only a few articles on this it held a prominent place in his teaching and in the work of his students. It is this author’s belief that this work deserves more attention than what is the case to date.

## SUMMARY

(Author’s English Summary)

The philosophy of Prof. C. K. Oberholzer must be seen in the light of his interest in pedagogics. As educationist he needs an unshakable foundation for pedagogics as an independent human science. This foundation is to be found only in a fundamental analysis of man.

His philosophy is therefore characterized by the fundamental importance of philosophical anthropology as the basic science of all human sciences. In his analysis of man he is strongly influenced by existential philosophy. He considers the phenomenological method as the only adequate scientific method for this particular problem. In this way Oberholzer became the major exponent of philosophical anthropology, existential philosophy and phenomenology in South Africa.

## REFERENCES

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