

C. K. OBERHOLZER AS RESEARCHER WITH SPECIAL  
REFERENCE TO HIS ESTABLISHMENT OF PHENOMENOLOGY  
IN SOUTH AFRICA\*

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If by way of introduction it can be said broadly that the aim of research is the *disclosure* and *expansion of knowledge* regarding what has stimulated the researcher's wondering or what announces itself as a problem for him, then one first must look at Oberholzer's research contributions to philosophical as well as to pedagogical thinking in South Africa. In this reflection, however, continual evidence of the particular courses of development in his research and thinking up to the present cannot be avoided. Although in a brief article of this nature the pre-anti-naturalistic tendency of Oberholzer's early research cannot be gone into in detail, by his own account, at the beginning of his academic work he moved in a strongly naturalistically oriented climate of thought as a consequence of an early Anglo-American influence. It was only during the middle 1940's that a shift in emphasis—a transition to an anti-naturalism and anti-scientism is noticed<sup>(5: 3)</sup> after which he became the great exponent of existential-phenomenological thinking in South Africa.

In addition, for the sake of trying to successfully organize his course of thinking, by considering Oberholzer as a researcher it certainly is appropriate to acquire a decisive answer to what research essentially is. In light of Landman's definition that research, as an activity, is a *formal, systematic* and *intensive execution of scientific analysis* with the aim of disclosing and broadening knowledge,<sup>(3: 3)</sup> it certainly is possible to look at Oberholzer as a researcher within this framework. In connection with what research is it also is of importance to indicate what *types* of research can be distinguished. In this case *basic, applied* and, according to J. W. Best, as cited by

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\* A.J. Smit (Ed.) 1979: **Die Agein Perenne: Studies in die Pedagogiek en die Wysbegeerte**. Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik, pp. 38-45.

Landman<sup>(3: 6)</sup>, *action research* are attended to. On the basis of these descriptions there is an attempt to gain insights into Oberholzer's research, especially its formal facets and to what kind or kinds of research his academic work is attuned.

Regarding the type of research that he justifies for the sake of meeting the demands of scientific practice is a particular method and his is an avowed follower of the phenomenological way of thinking. Although he is not the very first South African scholar to avail himself of the phenomenological method (see H. G. Stoker<sup>(15)</sup>), for good reason he is called the greatest exponent of this direction of thought in this country.

In so far as the *formal* has a relationship to the idea of *form*, which for him is a precondition for the authentic practice of science, it is in this connection that Oberholzer has made his particular contributions. Indeed, this is the central point around which his research revolves, especially in the sense that in this country he was the first scientist, thanks to his sharply critical thinking and creative disposition, to break through to the realization that for an accountable scientific practice he must search for the generally valid, the universal, the invariant, the necessary, i.e., what is visible as perennially repeatable or recurring<sup>(14: 111)</sup> as essential characteristics of what ontically is and, as such, makes the educative event possible and necessary.<sup>(11: 29)</sup> In this he was completely successful because he was relentlessly aware of the demands of a scientifically accountable practice of research in terms of a phenomenologically reflective attunement and a dedicated, radically consistent striving to remain unprejudiced, logical and true to reality. In other words, he continually remained the conscientious protector of the purely rational without engaging in general chatter and ambiguity in his explanations.

It is in light of the formal aspect of his research that in his pedagogical practice, and even in the titles of his two main works<sup>(6 & 10)</sup>, Oberholzer unambiguously qualifies the pedagogical as a *principle (fundamental)* pedagogics. With this he wants to indicate that for him—for the past more or less fifty years and to date—there is a consistent denial that his science is colored or obscured by particular prejudgments or principles or *matters of*

*principle*. The real fact of the matter is that by “principle” he is attuned to grounding pedagogics in the *principium*, the *beginning*, the *origin*, i.e., in the ontic facts. With reference to the idea of principle by Oberholzer, it remains meaningful to note that regarding the *type* of research, he never went further than basic research because for him scientific research revolves around increasing knowledge for the sake of knowledge<sup>(10: 101 et seq.)</sup> or science for the sake of science. With an extreme degree of expertise he even talks of the ideological against the principle in which case he expresses himself about a diversity of ideologies but still without prescribing or promoting any of them or falling into an apologetics, as he himself says.

What especially characterized his research from the late 1940’s and early 1950’s is the fact that gradually he detached himself from all ism thinking and proceeded to the phenomena of being human and of educating to allow them to speak for themselves and to listen to them.<sup>(8: 86)</sup> However, it must be clearly understood that for him this does not involve a reconnoitering and thinking of the phenomenon in appearance but of the “phenomenalness”<sup>(10: 264)</sup> of the phenomenon or the *phenomenal* of the phenomenon. For purposes of intensive analytical consideration he became an avowed student of phenomenological philosophy and turned himself to the phenomenological method on the basis of which he then also broke from all system-thinking and, for understandable reasons, exposed the pedagogic as a system and completely adopted a standpoint in opposition to the idea of a system-pedagogics.<sup>(7: 193)</sup> Being a philosopher, in the first instance, it is remarkable that in certain related articles, and some of his larger works, he only advocates the phenomenological method to the critical reader, dedicated student and curious researcher and leaves it to them to master and categorically apply it according to its various steps of reduction as steps of thinking. Naturally, this also is understandable because in the first instance Oberholzer did not feel it necessary to propagate or ground phenomenology. Edmund Husserl had already done this groundwork. Rather, for him it is a matter of using phenomenology to ground something else, namely, anthropology, education and now, in recent years, andragogy.

With the application of this particular method he moves into and takes his point of departure in these ontic events for the purpose of authentically grounding them. In this connection, it is meaningful to indicate what he personally has wondered about with respect to the phenomenon of educating. He gave expression to this wondering when he noticed that, for him, it was possible to walk the path of scientific practice with the Dutch scholar, M. J. Langeveld, when in the 1940's he put forth the idea with his ontological postulate about educating as a universal phenomenon among and between persons and stated that being human is a being who educates, is educated and is committed to education<sup>(4: 158)</sup>.

Oberholzer supplemented this by arriving at his premise that all human beings lend themselves to being educated. This interested him the most because from this premise his well-known question flowed, namely, what sort of being is a human being who lends himself to educating or who has a need for education? As such he arrived totally and completely at the philosophical anthropology and ontology of being human. Naturally, this could not be otherwise because the reality of the pedagogic event in its universal regard simply compelled him to a questioning of the *antropos*. On the other hand, there also is mention of a self-imposed compulsion to questioning, especially when he was particularly impressed by the meditations of Immanuel Kant about what a person must be in order to be regarded as a human being. This contributed to the fact that, as a mystery, a person never again can rest in peace<sup>(14: 111)</sup> and he recognizes himself that this *anthropos* is what he is himself, but he always carries his own anthropologist with him. He then provides phenomenological elucidations with respect to anthropological reality that he continually addresses but without ever laying claim to a final explication.

With reference to the third facet of research, namely that it is a matter of intensive analysis, which implies disclosing the essential characteristics the perennial, and their verbalization (something that Landman qualifies as a matter of essence disclosing, verification and realization) in this country it became commonplace to speak of Oberholzer as the forerunner and initiator of designing categories and criteria for the purpose of accountable scientific research.

It is readily recognized that he came to these insights, undertook penetrating research and was influenced by equally original thinkers such as Langeveld, Perquin, Hoogeveld, Luijpen, Kohnstamm, Buytendijk. Immanuel Kant, Hessen, Strasser, Wilhem Flitner and many others, but it deserves special mention that in South Africa he was the first human scientist whose research was attuned to disclosing essences and their verbalization. What is more, Oberholzer's great merit is that the decided influence of other thinkers of stature had not forced him to summarily repeat them, and also he cannot be accused of standing on their shoulders. Rather it must be said that he traveled the same path alongside of and, thus, with them and continually reflected on the problematic with which they were and still are confronted. Once again, remarkable is the fact of his consistent distinguishing between the formal design of his research that for him has to do with science for the sake of science, and scientific results that always have application possibilities. Understandably, Oberholzer did not worry too much about realizing essences in educative practice. In his search for scientific truth this realization really is a secondary matter. He gives form to this attitude by refusing in any sense to work prescriptively with the results of his research and thinking—as is clearly the case with his practice of a science of education. He claims that he discloses and verifies the essences of the educative reality that he then makes available to those who will use them.<sup>(11: 29)</sup>

He proceeds phenomenologically to the ontic facts in order to verbalize and design the invariants of the phenomenon of being human and of educating. Consequently, in his various contributions we learn about anthropological categories<sup>(14: 113-117)</sup> as well as pedagogical categories<sup>(9: 60-71)</sup> and criteria<sup>(10: 317-325)</sup> and in recent years also the design of andragogical categories.<sup>(13: 179)</sup>

In reflecting on the anthropic phenomenon in the late 1960's Oberholzer arrived at an essential typification of being human as a *complete form concerned with an incomplete and incompletable function and involvement in an incomplete and incompletable time because of his being confronted with an obscure futurity.*<sup>(12: 13)</sup> Especially he was the first person to have conceived of the idea of a human being as a being confronted with an obscure futurity. Also,

in this case, his sharp critical-analytical look made it possible to see the meaningfulness of Buytendijk's well-known statement that 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>(1: 303)</sup> This idea of "... by which he is chosen" increasingly caught hold of Oberholzer in his later years such that he had noticed that a person necessarily is an encountering and becoming being, also through a future that he is going to encounter. Thus a person not only is on the way to a future but the future, in its obscureness, is approaching him, and it is a future that he can never evade.

As a thinker of his time confronted with the problematic of his time, in his more mature years, Oberholzer was very impressed by the role of the flow of time in human existence from which a person can never distance himself. Connected with this, he was strongly influenced by J. H. van den Berg's metabletic perspective on the world and life. Human awareness of continual *change* in and around one is a becoming aware of *time*. A person's concern with the experience of existential time in the form of its uninterrupted flow is for Oberholzer the content of the obscure foundation of a person's pathic involvement in reality where he not only stands in a withdrawing and entering manner but by which he also goes to meet it.<sup>(12: 5)</sup> Here one finds Oberholzer as a philosophical anthropologist at his best where he wrestles phenomenologically with the temporal awareness of persons on the basis of which the *anthropos* manifests its historicity and futurity, a futurity characterized by an experiencing of insecurity. This insecurity allows a person to continually yearn for security and making futurity secure. A person is a consistent seeker of a place to stand, a foothold, but the more he searches the further the place to stand withdraws and the more extensive the unrest becomes so he is completely needy for a fellow person who is sympathetic to him.

Where Oberholzer had progressed the furthest in South Africa regarding research into the andragogic, in the literature it is conspicuous to which degree he, in his intensive analysis of the andragogic phenomenon with his particular power of thinking, branched off in his reflecting and explicating to crowning concepts in human existence such as an obscure futurity, the yearning and

need for a sympathetic fellow person, the person in boundary situations, human unchangeability within changeableness, the person as historicity and even as religiosity. This put him in a position to put forward with particular acumen fundamental forms of being human<sup>(13: 18)</sup> in which case he is particularly sensitive to the fundamental form of religiosity: He views a person in existential need of a fellow person who can help alleviate this need. On the other hand, for a person this also is a matter of faith that this fellow traveler can never save him from his need because deliverance is not human work. In this way he makes his last leap to a final place to stand and foothold and this is to grasp at SOMEONE who is more than himself.

However, now there is a fine distinction that Oberholzer, as a scientific researcher, does not propagate or hold a particular religious conviction because it is still on a phenomenological basis that he is concerned with disclosing essences where the idea of a philosophy of life is essentially characteristic of being human as are any of the many other characteristics that are perennial. But it also must be clear that not for one moment does he hesitate, as an avowed Christian, to recognize that phenomenology is but a pale form when, by virtue of his philosophy of life, he must answer to his being accosted. As a scientist, without a doubt, phenomenology gave him great satisfaction, but in the end it doesn't and never can answer the personal questions with which he is confronted as a person. For these answers he makes his last leap into the Lap of Eternal Life where he can live in hope, trust and love.

Just as Oberholzer was the first South African scholar to design pedagogical categories, it also is the case with his founding of pedagogical criteria<sup>(10: 317-325)</sup> in the original experience. What is important here is that he views pedagogical criteria as *evaluative yardsticks* and not as discriminating ones. For Oberholzer, by nature, they are primitive contrasts, i.e., good or bad, permissible, not permissible, [while the categories are universal]. One uses criteria in association with fellow persons while being involved either in recognizing their value or undervaluing them. Therefore, there is mention of pedagogical evaluation.

Finally, there is reference to Oberholzer's productivity as a researcher: from 1942 to 1978 he wrote 8 larger works and 68 articles of lesser or greater scope. What is remarkable is that, in spite of the particularly wide recognition he enjoyed from overseas as a researcher<sup>(2)</sup> and also in spite of the depth, radicalness and formidable scope of his knowledge in a diversity of fields of research, he has always remained a modest man and an avowed Christian. It can very rightly be said of Oberholzer as a scientific researcher that the truth of all times is the truth that also had addressed him and for which he was a modest seeker.

### AUTHOR'S ENGLISH SUMMARY

In the initial years Oberholzer's research as an academic was characterized by a naturalistically oriented approach but there was a gradual shift in emphasis, with the result that, particularly after the middle forties, a transition to anti-naturalism and anti-scientism became perceptible. This occurred as a result of his violent opposition to the depersonalization and obscuration of man by all kinds of -isms in philosophical thought. He consequently turned to the phenomenological method for purposes of formal and radical cogitation on ontic principles concerning the phenomenon man and the phenomenon education in order to arrive at the revelation of essences and to classify them in appropriate categories and criteria. Herein lies Oberholzer's most important contribution, viz. that he is the first person in South Africa who, in his methodology, initiated such an impartial approach in the sphere of research that it became possible for academics to communicate with one another and be thoroughly conversant with the philosophy of education and of man. He can rightly be regarded as the foremost exponent and founder of phenomenology in this country.

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