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The phenomenological method applied in pedagogy Some critical reflection for practice

The text deals with the connections and possibilities of applying the phenomenological research method in pedagogy. Phenomenology is the study of the way in which things appear or are present in consciousness. It is not just a simple recording of the content of consciousness – it examines its structures. The phenomenological research attitude implies the suspension of all theories when undertaking scientific research. However, it is not assumption-free knowledge, there always remains some attitude towards the area of reality being explored. Phenomenology is a method of spiritual looking and describing what is seen. It contains many rules that apply in a completely general way to all thinking, regardless of the philosophical position or scientific attitude in a given field, e.g. pedagogy. The article shows the potential and limits of using these rules in educational practice.

Keywords: phenomenology, *Phänomenologie*, phenomena, education, pedagogy, Edward Husserl, Wilfried Lippitz, Martin Heidegger, *Lebensphilosophie*, *Lebenswelt*, hermeneutic, mind, consciousness, awareness, senses, perception, notion, *epoché*

Metoda fenomenologiczna stosowana w pedagogice Kilka krytycznych refleksji dla praktyki

Tekst traktuje o związkach i możliwościach aplikacji fenomenologicznej metody badawczej w pedagogice. Fenomenologia jest badaniem sposobu, w jaki rzeczy pojawiają się lub są obecne w świadomości. Nie jest ona tylko prostym rejestrowaniem treści świadomości – bada jej struktury. Fenomenologiczna postawa badawcza implikuje zawieszenie wszelkich teorii przy podejmowaniu badań naukowych. Nie jest ona jednak wiedzą bezałożeniową, zawsze pozostaje jakieś nastawienie wobec poznawanego obszaru rzeczywistości. Fenomenologia jest metodą duchowego patrzenia i opisywania tego, co zobaczone. Zawiera wiele reguł, które obowiązują całkowicie ogólnie, dla każdego myślenia, niezależnie od stanowiska filozoficz-

nego czy postawy naukowej w danej dziedzinie, np. pedagogice. Artykuł pokazuje potencjał i ograniczenia stosowania tych reguł w praktyce edukacyjnej.

Słowa kluczowe: fenomenologia, fenomeny, edukacja, pedologia, Edward Husserl, Wilfried Lip-pitz, Martin Heidegger, *Lebensphilosophie*, *Lebenswelt*, hermeneutyka, umysł, świadomość, zmysły, percepcja, pojęcie, *epoché*

“Bad witnesses are people’s eyes and ears having the souls of barbarians” (Diogenes Laertios, 1988, p. 519) claimed Heraclitus of Ephesus. Heraclitus considered sense perception to be only the first stage of knowledge. For him “philosophy begins with the awareness of the invisible harmonious order of the world, which manifests itself in visible things, as if they were transparent”. For Heraclitus, “invisible harmony” is better than what is visible. Physis – nature, which is the total-ity of all things that were not created by gods or men, hides behind phenomena. People who are alien to logos, the gift of rational argumentation, are deaf and blind to

the surprise at the invisible, which manifests itself in the phenomenon [and] is taken over by speech, which has enough power to dispel the errors and illusions to which our organs of hearing and seeing are subject, directed towards what is visible, unless they find help in thinking (Arendt, 1991, p. 201).

Was Heraclitus a phenomenologist?

The semantic deconstruction of the notion phenomenology is quite simple: it is the study of phenomena. The word phenomenon comes from the Greek *phainómenon* – “what appears, what is clearly in front of us” (Bocheński, 1992, p. 29) and means what appears, what can be clearly perceived. The word *phainómenon* also includes the Greek word *phos* – light (ibidem). Phenomenology is therefore about what appears, about reaching “the thing itself” (*zu den Sachen selbst*), but these things should be perceived spiritually, intuitively. Therefore, we should put aside everything we already know, e.g. about upbringing, and look carefully at how this phenomenon is presented to us, how it can be described and captured its essence. Therefore, what should come into play is not knowledge about a given phenomenon, but the phenomenon itself (Danner, 1989, p. 117).

The phenomenological research attitude implies the suspension of all theories when undertaking scientific research. However, it is not an illusion of assumption-free knowledge, because – despite the rational rejection of a priori theory as a potential constitutive scientific structure – there remains some attitude towards the explored area of reality. However, it is not constituted by ready-

made categories, schemes or scientific models, but by the expectation typical for every learning entity to find scientifically relevant phenomena for their description and interpretation in a given area of epistemological reflection. In this sense, striving to create a phenomenological reduction procedure that would allow the generation of assumption-free knowledge is pointless.

The phenomenologist does not perceive reality as something given and unchangeable, but strives to capture the processuality and variability of “ordered chaos” in it. Social reality is perceived not as objective, “external”, independent of the cognizing entity, but as a socially constructed tissue, related to the ways in which people themselves (Krasnodębski, 1989, p. 41) become aware of it. Man himself is perceived as a creative and free being who is not determined solely by environmental conditions.

The phenomenologist asks questions about the very foundations of the conceptual apparatus, constantly defining and explaining it anew. The methodology, its rules and assumptions are the subject of constant doubt, not a rigid construction of the axiom of the research procedure. The basic problem is always how to reach the “thing itself”, so as to capture it and analyze it. A phenomenon, as something given, existing in the world, cannot bear the characteristics of an appearance (*Schein*), different from reality itself: a phenomenon is also not a “symptom”, a manifestation of something else, as, for example, a fever is a symptom of a disease; it is also not simply a process that is observable in the sense of natural sciences – according to phenomenology it is not necessary, that (phenomenologically) a given phenomenon can be observed through the senses (Danner, 1989, p. 118): it can be given not only in sense perception, but also in an imagination, a memory, a wish, a logical judgment, etc.

“For the phenomenologist it makes no difference whether what is given is ‘real’ or is it just ‘appearance’. The only important thing is that it is simply given” (Bocheński, 1992, p. 31). Phenomenology, strictly speaking, does not deal with specific, tangible things and processes, but with intentionally given objects of transcendental consciousness.

The phenomenological research approach distinguishes two levels of analysis: formal and material analysis. In formal analysis, the constructed constructs are independent of subjective actors (e.g. in the concept of formal and material theory of social systems by Richard Grathoff) (1990, 1992). Analysis methods become independent of data and become “entities” for the researcher. Their adequacy is no longer a problem because they exist objectively outside the researcher and are only “perceived” by him. This makes it independent from the subjectivity of the actor’s approach and allows us to investigate the very mechanisms of phenomena that actually determine human behavior.

Material analysis should precede formal analysis. By capturing the relationships of data with their context, the goals of phenomenological orientation research are set. The phenomenologist does not perform a preliminary theoretical structuring of the subject of research, nor does he formulate research hypotheses. Reaching the essence of the subject of research takes place during its examination itself – this is the so-called principle of openness. Refraining from such interference in the examined object that would deform its own communication rules is, in turn, a principle of communication. They refer to the level of material analysis, e.g. in pedagogy to the first stage of the biographical method.

It is only at the level of formal analysis that system structures are created. Quantitative analyzes to interpret the collected data can also find place here.

The most important thing in the phenomenological method is to rely on what is actually given and to reject the contexts offered by tradition, ideology or stereotypes of thinking. This release allows for a new beginning, for considering the original foundations of the phenomenon, leaving blind alleys and astrays onto new paths of knowledge (Diemer, 1967, p. 241).

The above leads to various consequences for pedagogy, e.g. in the field of semantics (semiology – the study of the meaning and changes in the meanings of words). The basis of the discursivity of a scientific argument is the clarity of the conceptual scope of the words used, especially when we are dealing with concepts that are also in use in everyday language, ambiguous concepts (e.g. covered with pejorative historical associations, such as authority, discipline, obedience) (Danner, 1989, p. 118) or calques from a foreign language. In such a case, a precise DESCRIPTION of the semantic content of a given word is necessary to make sure that we are after the same thing, to reach the THING ITSELF. Only then can one proceed to hermeneutical analysis, i.e. the interpretation of the meaning of concepts. And this was the original task of phenomenology: to prepare an interpretive field for hermeneutics. Hence, these two methods are intertwined and complementary, and their descriptive identification in practice can be quite difficult.

Wilfried Lippitz distinguishes the following research steps of the phenomenological method:

1. Study of individual phenomena using a) intuition, b) phenomenological analysis of what is intuitively given, c) description of the phenomenon;
2. Exploration of Being (*Wesensforschung*);
3. Capturing important relationships;
4. An overview of the modality of phenomena (the relationship of judgments about them to cognitive faculties);
5. Observation of the subjective constitution (structure) of phenomena in consciousness;

6. *Epoché*, i.e. bracketing the problem of the existential context of phenomena;

7. Interpretation of the meaning of phenomena (Lippitz, 1987, p. 109).

Phenomenology is about examining the semantic content of facts, as they actually are, and not as they may seem on the basis of some established theory. This also means the need to give up some preliminary interpretation in the context of quantitative research in the natural sciences. Phenomenology (especially phenomenology in the strict sense) is therefore understood as a science that lies BEFORE any other science – depending on the position, it only wants to be a METHOD, ATTITUDE (approach) or a preliminary research phase for other sciences. In this understanding, phenomenology cannot be included among the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), especially since they are burdened with existential-philosophical axioms. On the other hand, it is possible to take a position on this issue assuming that everything that does not belong to the natural sciences can be assigned to the social and humanities (Danner, 1989, p. 118).

The affinity of phenomenology with the humanities also lies in its use as a method for capturing concepts that cannot be captured using the one-sided research procedure of the natural sciences, e.g. complex relationships of the psyche (soul, spirit) and the body cannot always be captured using empirical-inductive methods (phenomena such as: uniqueness (*Einmaligkeit*), individuality, wholeness, structure, spirituality, interpersonal relationships and ways of behaving, etc.). This is what can only be described by the phenomenological method and that is why applied phenomenology entered the methodology of psychology and pedagogy (Lippitz, 1987, p. 107).

From the above, it can be seen that phenomenology can be broadly divided into phenomenology in the strict sense of the word and applied phenomenology. The former is understood (or was understood) as a strict philosophical method, or even as a philosophy giving rise to every philosophy that gives rise to every other way of doing philosophy and science (Honderich, 1998, p. 242). This “proper” phenomenology was created by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) and was developed by him throughout his life. The latter was created by adopting certain elements of this method through certain trends in the humanities, e.g. philosophical anthropology or the so-called existential philosophy (*Lebensphilosophie*), which use the concepts of phenomenological method, phenomenological view, phenomenology of significance or simply talk about phenomenology as such. The most important difference here is that Husserl’s phenomenology has as its object what is given to our consciousness (*Bewußtseins-Gegebenheiten*) (Danner, 1989, p. 120), while other directions have shifted the focus to what is given – without ultimately dealing with the problem of HOW it is given to us, and thus neglecting Husserl’s actual intention to show through the so-called

transcendental reduction of the constitutive structure of the world, relating it to the human Self, which lies “before” all perception (including psychological experience) (Danner, 1989, p. 120).

Husserl’s phenomenology was developed over many decades: in his *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900–1901) it is different from that in his *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie* (part 1: 1913) or in *Cartesischen Meditationen* (1931). For this reason, it is presented and interpreted in very different ways in the literature on the subject. His students (later also other philosophers) went in other directions, sometimes very different from the Master: Max Scheler, Martin Heidegger, also the French Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Paul Sartre: descriptive phenomenology or essence phenomenology was created (*Wesens-Phänomenologie*) (Diemer, 1967; Wuchert, 1977). Various forms of application of phenomenology have also been developed – there are also different positions in phenomenological pedagogy.

A newer understanding of phenomenology in pedagogy approaches it not based on Husserl’s original model nor as applied phenomenology in the sense of method, but rather referring to the findings of M. Merleau-Ponty. His phenomenology is neither transcendental nor applied, but a kind of analytical philosophy of perception, placing “particular emphasis [...] on what makes experience not a closed, private sphere, but a way of being-in-world; our life is a life in the perceptual environment of the human world, that is, in *Lebenswelt*, in something irreducible to pure or private consciousness” (Blackburn, 1997, p. 233).

It was the concept of *Lebenswelt* popularized in the 1940s and 1950s by M. Heidegger, A. Schütz, H. Plessner, M. Merleau-Ponty, J.-P. Sartre and P. Ricoeur achieved the “Copernican revolution” in phenomenology (Lippitz, 1993, p. 49). The framework of philosophical awareness of Husserl’s traditional phenomenology became too narrow and complicated. His concept of one integrated mind seems to be only a metaphysical dream detached from history, and “the separation of philosophy from specific sciences, such as psychology, physiology, biology, sociology and aesthetics, was too hermetic for a creative dialogue to be established with them.” (Lippitz, 1993, p. 49).

If philosophy (phenomenology), as Husserl wanted it, was a science ultimately providing explanations of all phenomena and providing the ultimate reason, then the specific disciplines would provide it the only contributions “to the local fulfilments of this universal reason” (Lippitz, 1992, p. 107), and could not themselves vouch for its categories and principles. After modifying Husserl’s original position, these sciences can no longer be perceived as a kind of applied, auxiliary philosophy, and emancipate themselves from “full dependence to partial autonomy” (Lippitz, 1992, p. 107).

This is also what happened with the relationship between phenomenology and pedagogy.

Nowadays, the pedagogical and phenomenological image of this scientific discipline is not uniform, there are many positions within it, often quite distant from each other.

The common features of its various varieties can be summarized as follows. Pedagogical phenomenology is mainly concerned with (Lippitz, 1992, p. 126):

1. recovery of the multi-layered concept of learning, experience and thinking, emphasizing the sensory-corporeal basis;
2. rehabilitation of specific pedagogical action strategies in their possibilities and limits of translating reflection;
3. critical and constructive integration of anthropological and humanistic research in the field of creating a theory of knowledge about education;
4. systematic and specific research on the child's image of the world and his or her self-image as a basis for child-oriented pedagogy and as a correction of the perspective of adults in anthropological and pedagogical research;
5. explaining the dependence and conditions of being-in-the-world on normative problems and pedagogical action and pedagogical research.

Phenomenology is – to put it briefly – “a method of spiritually looking at and describing what is seen. It also contains many rules that apply completely generally, i.e. to all thinking” (Bocheński, 1992, p. 24), regardless of the philosophical position or scientific attitude in a given field, e.g. pedagogy. Among others in its generality lies its unifying value in a situation where nowadays the methodological concept itself often determines the nature of research and its results, when researchers commit themselves “a priori to one of many methods” (Bocheński, 1992, p. 138), replacing scientific dialogue with an exchange of monologues. “However, in the light of what contemporary methodology has to say, different methods are not mutually exclusive alternatives, but complementary aspects of thinking” (Bocheński, 1992, p. 138). Józef M. Bocheński encouraged in this context that scientists, “joining the tradition of great thinkers, would like to consider *nihil humani a se alienum*” and look for an integrating method that

would be based on the **phenomenological** method. However, it would not stop there, but, on the one hand, it would apply the analysis to what exists and existence itself, on the other hand, aware of human weakness, it would make extensive use of linguistic analysis, and finally it would not give up any of the results of the reductive sciences (1992, p. 138).

Increasing specialization in science today leads to the multiplication of detailed disciplines “and similar simplifying systems which, as they are related to

one method, are unable to encompass the whole” (Bocheński, 1992, p. 138). Although we know enough today to abandon hope for the construction of one, stable, certain image of reality based on a “universal theory of everything”, we should not lose sight of the phenomenological landscape that spreads around our pedagogical path. Unless our ears and eyes are bad witnesses to us, as Heraclitus wrote.

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