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EXISTENTIALISM AND EDUCATION

An Introduction to
Otto Friedrich
Bollnow

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An Introduction to Otto Friedrich Bollnow

Edited, with a foreword by co-translator Norm Friesen

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EDITOR & CO-TRANSLATOR'S FOREWORD

As this book's editor and co-translator, this foreword provides me with two valuable opportunities: to contextualize my own interest in and appreciation of the work of Otto Friedrich Bollnow, and also to locate his thought in what I hope will be a familiar conceptual context. I thus begin by discussing Bollnow's work in terms of my own academic research and experience. I then point out some of the more academic, conceptual aspects that connect Bollnow to important but perhaps less familiar intellectual traditions in the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*)—including the tradition of philosophical “anthropology” central to this book's discussion. I conclude with a brief overview of the book's chapters and its principle themes.

Otto Friedrich Bollnow and his approach to “educational realities” first became familiar to me through the work of my doctoral supervisor, Max van Manen, who translated one of Bollnow's key texts, *The Pedagogical Atmosphere* (1968/1989). In this text, Bollnow describes the pedagogical atmosphere as a kind of shared mood or sense of attunement: “A disposition of acceptance, [encouraging students'] making of far-reaching plans, and... [the] hope-filled working toward their fulfillment” (1989, 23). Such a positive and supportive climate is understood by Bollnow in close connection with another key notion from the tradition of the human sciences, the pedagogical relation.

In my 2003 dissertation (later revised and published by Peter Lang in 2011 as *The Place of the Classroom and the Space of the Screen: Relational Pedagogy and Internet Technology*), Bollnow's understanding of both atmosphere and the pedagogical relation proved to be immensely helpful

in exploring common experiential elements of contemporary online education. In this study, I worked to tease out the differences between pedagogical lived experience in online and face-to-face settings. The idea of sharing an “atmosphere” or a general “climate” is one that raises many questions and uncertainties in online pedagogical contexts, particularly when the online “classroom” is constituted primarily through the non-synchronous exchange of textual posts and replies. We all know that “tone” is especially hard to assess when it comes to email and online posting. In face-to-face settings, as Bollnow makes clear, such “tone” may be communicated not only in terms of non-verbal cues, but also, for example, by teachers’ and students’ passive receptivity, even their silence. A kind of pervasive “mood” can arise that is more than simply the sum of its parts. The fact that a shared mood or climate is not nearly as palpable online is something that distance educators and advocates of online education must keep in mind. Today, concerns with school and classroom “climate” are commonplace, and this can be seen as an unintended echo of Bollnow’s original and powerful account of this intangible but indispensable pedagogical phenomenon.

Later, I turned in my own work to experiences of “atmospheres” in the contexts of relational, “tactful” action through which they can be carefully cultivated. I explored “spaces” of tact and relation in an examination of online videoconferencing (2014), and more recently, in the context of the pedagogical relation itself (Friesen, in press). In both of these cases, Bollnow provides fresh and inventive insight into pedagogical atmospheres and relations—insight that appears surprisingly contemporary in sensibility and significance. Bollnow conceives of the pedagogical relation, for example, not as something that is absolutely removed from the discontinuities, even the crises of contemporary existence. Instead, it is for him a relation that must be cultivated and fortified to endure and retain its characteristic hope and trust precisely because of the unavoidability of such discontinuities and interruptions. Indeed at times, Bollnow shows, the pedagogical relation may even enable moments of difficult discontinuity to become moments of character development.

However, in presenting these and other aspects of Bollnow’s thought in context, this book does something very different from my own work. Perhaps most important for English-language readers, through its reconstruction of Bollnow’s pedagogical theory—and its coverage of the origins, influences and reception of Bollnow’s thought—this book illustrates the profoundly philosophical nature of “general” German educational and

pedagogical scholarship. General educational and pedagogical studies (*Allgemeine Erziehungswissenschaft* and *Allgemeine Pädagogik*) are traditionally conceived as disciplines autonomous from others, rather than as having their foundations in (and thus being dependent on) fields like psychology or sociology (Biesta 2011). Indeed, institutionally, “general” educational and pedagogical studies have also not been closely tied to teacher training or related policy-making. Instead—and particularly in the case of “general educational studies”—they have as had their focus areas of philosophy associated with the aforementioned human sciences. These include *Lebensphilosophie* (literally the “philosophy of life”), philosophical anthropology (the study of human nature), phenomenology (the study of lived experience or the *lifeworld*) and hermeneutics (the study, art and practice of interpretation). The intricate interworking of these and other influences and differences are richly illustrated in this book—starting with Bollnow’s biography, which tells of his complex engagement with philosophical developments in phenomenology and existentialism.

My discussion of these traditions and developments represents the second part of this foreword, in which I now briefly locate Bollnow’s work in a broader historical and *conceptual* context. Perhaps the most important element, or rather, event in this context is the publication of Martin Heidegger’s ground-breaking *Being and Time* in 1927. The profound originality of Heidegger’s philosophy drew Bollnow to Heidegger, and he subsequently worked in a postdoctoral capacity with Heidegger in Marburg and then in Freiburg. This fact positions Bollnow’s work as an educational interpretation (if not the educational interpretation) of Heidegger’s existential phenomenology. But Bollnow’s pedagogical take is not what readers of Heidegger might expect: It is not an “onto-theology,” a plumbing the mysteries of “being” and “nothingness” as they might relate conditions or experiences of teaching and learning (e.g., Thomson 2005); nor is a quasi-pragmatist reconstruction of Heidegger’s ontology, one that might seek to understand teaching and learning in terms of our “concernful coping” in the world (e.g., Dreyfus & Dreyfus 1986). Instead, it can be characterized as more of a *response* to the early Heidegger, one that embraces as much from *Being and Time* as it resists and critiques it. It is in this resistance and critique that aforementioned ideas and elements from the human sciences become particularly important.

As indicated, the most important of these is the human science of (philosophical) *anthropology*, defined in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* as a “discipline within philosophy that seeks to unify...investigations of human

nature in an effort to understand individuals as both creatures of their environment and creators of their own values" (2016, n.p.). Of course, this anthropology, particularly in modern and contemporary incarnations, is *not* an effort to "fix" human nature as something stable, or even biological and immutable, as existing outside of history and culture—something that contemporary sciences of the mind, brain and evolution seem to tacitly but powerfully accomplish. Instead, as Heidegger, Bollnow and many more recent thinkers understand this philosophical brand of anthropology, it reveals human beings to be defined above all by the very fact that their "being" *cannot* be narrowly defined at all.

Lebensphilosophie, discussed extensively in this book's third chapter, can be understood as an early articulation of what is today known as the philosophies of phenomenology and hermeneutics. *Lebensphilosophie*, sometimes also referred to as vitalism, has as its

central claim . . . that life can only be understood from within. [It] denotes a philosophy which asks after the meaning, value and purpose of life, turning away from purely theoretical knowledge towards the undistorted fullness of lived experience. (Routledge 1998, n.p.; emphasis added)

This same source notes that a number of the "principle insights" of *Lebensphilosophie* "were taken up in a methodologically more rigorous and productive way in Husserlian phenomenology and Heidegger's 'philosophy of existence.'" The overview of Bollnow's work offered in this text can be seen as a part of this reworking of *Lebensphilosophie* by means of phenomenology and Heideggerian existentialism. At the same time, the coverage of *Lebensphilosophie* provided here can be regarded as a valuable introduction to some of the foundational assumptions underlying the human sciences. For both *Lebensphilosophie* and the human sciences have a common origin in the influential thought and prolific work of Wilhelm Dilthey, who established these human sciences as a disciplinary possibilities, and also developed *Lebensphilosophie* as a way of understanding the relation of lived meanings of the present with those still dwelling among us from the past.

The term *lifeworld*—as well as the associated notion of lifeworld "realities"—reflects the concern of *Lebensphilosophie* with life "itself." The lifeworld brings *lived experience* (the focus of phenomenology) together with the *meanings* that arise and have arisen through life and experience (the

focus of hermeneutics). The lifeworld, a term originally defined by Edmund Husserl, refers to our shared “awareness of the world as universal horizon, as [a] coherent universe.” It identifies our “belonging to the world as living with one another in the world [as] pre-given... valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this ‘living together’” (Husserl 1970, 108-109).

The lifeworld, in short, is the shared “reality” or “realities” of everyday experience—however much they might vary. As the study of such experience, phenomenology represents an attempt to understand life on the immanent terms of the experiences and meanings it presents to us every day. Of course, the classroom presents realities that are rather complex and ambivalent, but they remain experienced realities of direct and also often ethical relevance as teachers. In phenomenological terms, such realities are labelled “facticity”—a reality or way of being that is simply “given” in experience.

As the science and art of interpretation, hermeneutics is not simply a philosophical engagement with meaning in some abstract sense. It is also and always “a procedure that we in fact exercise whenever we understand *anything*” (Gadamer, 2013, 280; emphasis added). In other words, hermeneutics is not just something that is used to puzzle through a text, it is something we exercise when we try to understand where someone “is coming from,” how they might be feeling, and why they might be feeling that way. When we call someone a good person or a hypocrite, for example, we are similarly working hermeneutically, interpreting their actions, statements and the (often ethically-charged) meanings to which they give rise.

In the context of these terms—terms which together form the basis for the contemporary human sciences—education and pedagogy themselves take on rather particular connotations. They do not simply refer to “the knowledge, skill and understanding that you get from attending a school, college, or university” nor to the “science or profession of teaching,” as dictionary definitions suggest. Instead, their broadly human every day, experiential, lifeworld dimensions are decisive: Education becomes a matter of biographical and relational experience, whether routine or out of the ordinary, for both teacher and student(s). Pedagogy, meanwhile, becomes a matter of ethical concern for the teacher, the adult, in relation with the child or student. Its central focus is on continuity and change, the mundane and the extraordinary, particularly in relation to the experience and sense of self of the child, student or *educand*.

Such views of pedagogy and education are evident throughout this book, which is divided into five chapters. The first introduces Bollnow in

terms of the basics of his biography and the wide and varied influence of his work, both in Germany and internationally. In Germany, Bollnow is said to have founded his own school of thought, which developed phenomenological approaches to teaching and learning—focusing on the quality of the lived experience of students and teachers, rather than on outcomes or efficiencies. Internationally, Bollnow's thought had its greatest impact in East Asia, particularly in Japan, and his works have translated into numerous languages.

The second chapter offers a second point of entry to Bollnow's thought by discussing the interpretive and thematic foundations for the book as a whole. These are derived through the epistemological "lenses" and the themes offered by Bollnow's own work—which is itself challenging in its wide-ranging complexity. The key "lens" involves an epistemology that is accepting of uncertainty, even of a lack of clarity. The key themes are those of attuned, broken and guided educational "realities."

The third chapter lays the groundwork for the book's exposition of these three educational realities by explaining how Bollnow's philosophy of education brings together Heidegger's existentialism with two other philosophical influences introduced above: (philosophical) anthropology and *Lebensphilosophie*. While reminding the reader of the basics of and sources for Heideggerian existentialism, the third chapter focuses on the latter two influences, explaining how they bring to light everyday human, relational realities like attunement and dissonance, continuity and change.

The fourth chapter, consisting of three substantial parts, represents the book's core contribution to Bollnow scholarship in education and it presents a way of understanding Bollnow's own key contributions to this field. Forming the keystone of the book's exposition, this chapter outlines three general but practical educational implications of Bollnow's work: 1) Its structured understanding of the aforementioned pedagogical "atmospheres," particularly ones conducive to harmony and focused attention. 2) Its description of the breaks and fractures that inevitably open up in such atmospheres and in one's life course, known in existentialism as "crises." The educational significance of these breaks and crises is discussed, as well as possible pedagogical responses to them. 3) The implications for ethically or morally informed guidance in and of educational reality, whether such reality is characterized more by breakage and discord or by attunement and harmony. This chapter concludes by attempting to answer the existential questions: "What can we depend upon in our everyday life, and what does this mean for education?"

The fifth and final chapter of this book's exposition covers critiques of Bollnow's philosophy, particularly those found in critical theorist Theodore Adorno's *Jargon of Authenticity: On the German Ideology*. This chapter also concludes by arguing that despite any criticisms, key aspects of Bollnow's thought are arguably more, rather than less relevant in our contemporary situation. Bollnow's unflinching pedagogical engagement with existentialist themes of radical uncertainty and alienation have particular value in times that are again wracked by economic and political—and now also environmental—uncertainties and insecurities.

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PREFACE

Every day, as parents, teachers, or pedagogues, we engage with what is new and unexpected. We constantly make decisions and adjust our actions within and in response to concrete situations. Ideally, before every action, in an attempt to ground our actions, we try to gain some knowledge of the situation itself—even if only very partially. We must have at least some minimal understanding of the challenges presented to respond sensibly. Knowledge and action cannot be separated from one another. It is *understanding* that forms the basis not only for action but also for knowledge itself. By “understanding,” I mean nothing more (or less) than that a particular *situation* has a particular *meaning* for us. Such a meaning arises for me not only through my own biography, but also in terms of the broader social field in which I live. It is a matter of bringing my action and analyses into relation with myself and my social world. However, in everyday life—when decisions must be made from one moment to the next—the work of understanding in this sense generally remains in the background. Nevertheless, it is important from time to time to be consciously aware of the process and about broader questions concerning meaning and understanding.

The tradition of hermeneutic pedagogy directs its attention to such questions, for example: Why are pedagogical decisions made as they are? What the larger purpose is served through such decisions? Hermeneutic pedagogy is always a matter of working to understand pedagogical situations in a deeper sense, in terms of both the basis for and the results of our action and reflection. In this sense, understanding is a capability that is particular to human beings. We become “human” through understanding.

Because we must always critically evaluate the motivations for and the results of our actions and those of others, “understanding” forms the basis for asking pragmatic and empirical questions about education.

By bringing existentialism into relationship with education, Otto Friedrich Bollnow was able to develop a hermeneutic pedagogy of his own. He offers to us as parents, teachers, and pedagogues a kind of lens which allows us to read what he calls “educational reality.” Bollnow’s pedagogy views practical pedagogical action through the lens of modern hermeneutics.

In a time when empirical inventories, evaluation, and optimization have taken over, hermeneutic pedagogy has its own urgent message; it reminds us that as parents, teachers, and pedagogues, we are often confronted by contingencies and chance events. For example, a normally active child retreats into a sullen silence. Is this a sign of discontented exhaustion, of vague noncompliance, or of problems at home that the child senses but does not or cannot comprehend? A response to such an occurrence is hardly something that can be known or mastered in any definitive sense. Instead, it has to do with the freedom and independence proper to human life, and its gradual emergence in the lives of our sons, daughters, or students. The only way that these lives can be addressed as ones that are free and independent—or that are becoming so—is by recognizing the interweaving of the rationality and irrationality of human thought and purpose. Only in this way can we engage in the challenges of pedagogical situations in a manner that involves *understanding*.

“Hermeneutic pedagogy” is of course not in the mainstream of today’s studies of education and schooling—indeed, the phrase itself is all but unused in English. However, it offers a way and means for thinking of pedagogy. It is a building block that is needed in order to avoid falling into the absolutism of measurement and optimization.

It has been my great pleasure and honor that my colleague, Professor Norm Friesen, has accompanied me on the journey of translating my original German study of the hermeneutic pedagogy of Bollnow into English. Of course, real translation is never a matter of replacing one word with another. Through intensive discussion and collaboration, Norm Friesen, my assistant Sebastian Engelmann, and I have endeavored to make some of the basic ideas of this pedagogical tradition comprehensible in English. In particular, Norm Friesen’s work as a Visiting Professor at Friedrich-Schiller-Universität in Jena in 2016 was instrumental in this process. I am also grateful to Diana and James MacDonald, who, years