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Providing orientation by philosophizing at school. Phenomenological and postmodern validity claims

Summary

In liberal societies it seems to be important to provide orientation by philosophizing at school. We are used to doing this by discussing classic ethics with our students. Here, skills like rational argumentation can be trained. It is the universal rationality that can be applied to different ethical issues and, thus, provide orientation. When it comes to this learning objective phenomenology and postmodernism are mostly not expected to provide assistance. Phenomenology might be seen as just dealing with perception whereas postmodernism is under suspicion for contributing to indecision, arbitrariness and relativism. In this article I will try to outline the potentials of phenomenology and postmodernism in the field of orientation. In the tradition of Husserl's 'epoché' we can let students discover the perspective of a first person and what it means to be a 'self'. Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty have not only described a certain closeness to the world which can be described as 'dwelling' of a lived body. They have also delineated elements of a new 'postmetaphysical' and at the same time 'prehermeneutical' metaphysics. All this can help to open the depth of self, life, and world. Postmodern thinkers claim a plurality of truths. By this means, these theories can encourage self-empowerment. At the same time, authors like Lévinas (responsibility for the other), Lyotard (the sublime), and Rorty (solidarity) describe new ways of openness towards the world which are not founded by any primal truth and thus provide orientation.

Key words: orientation, phenomenology, postmodernism, philosophy at school, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Lévinas, Lyotard, Rorty

red. Paulina Marchlik

In this article, I will make the case for phenomenology and postmodernism as part of the school subject of philosophy. Both strands are able to provide

orientation in their specific ways. It is not my intention to weaken classic ethical approaches used at school such as rational validity claims in Aristotle, utilitarianism, Kant or Habermas. But I will try to demonstrate that phenomenology and postmodernism are much more than perception and deconstruction, and that they can be an important complement in our usual syllabus when it comes to the questions of philosophical orientation. I will begin with two queries: Should we provide orientation at all? And what does orientation mean? Then, I will investigate why classic ethics is so dominant at school when compared to contemporary continental approaches. Finally, I will outline three ways of philosophical orientation, namely: classic ethics and rational validity claims, phenomenology, and postmodernism. Pros and cons of each tradition will be discussed, too.

Should we provide orientation at all?

Imagine that as philosophers and teachers, we would not pose this question to ourselves but we would pose it to the government and to the parents of our students. They might probably answer: yes, of course you are expected to provide orientation to the young. Do teach moral standards, convey the moral values of our culture to students, and show them how to deal with ethical questions properly. A quick glance at our governmental educational plans shows us these learning objectives. Now, why do we as philosophers and critical thinkers presumably hesitate when it comes to providing orientation? Because we do not want to present a 'big picture' to our students – no religious, political or national ideology, no overwhelming truth. For us, the notion of orientation seems to denote such meaning or concept. But we can also use the notion of orientation in a more philosophical way. Werner Stegmaier (2008) carried out an extensive examination of the term of orientation in philosophy, describing fifteen different meanings. For example, we can empower our students to think independently. And, by doing so, we can give them a means for further orientation – an orientation which they learn to give to themselves. This is Kantian way of self-orientation: have courage to make use of your own reason. Should we provide orientation, then? There is no need to downplay orientation, if we use it as a philosophical term. This text should help us to see such a possibility. I endorse Kantian critical way and I strongly advocate universal

approaches like Habermas' theory of communicative rationality. Nevertheless, I should like to prove that postmodernism and phenomenology can contribute to the philosophical education which would attempt to reflect the questions of orientation. This is what this work aims at.

Why is classic ethics so dominant in a teaching process?

In order to answer this question, it might be helpful to consider the role and the self-conception of the school subject of philosophy. According to this self-conception, at least as it can be observed in Germany, the rational discourse seems to be the very essence of ethics. The school subject of philosophy needs to be differentiated from religious education, social studies, and the specific kind of education in art, literature, and poetry. Whenever we face the need to justify philosophical education we might tend to concentrate on abilities such as arguing conclusively, or basing decisions on rational reconsiderations. Classic ethics and rational argumentation are strong and held in high regard.

There is more to it than that. In order to explain, conversely, why phenomenology and postmodernism play only a marginal role at school, some negative preconceptions of these strands need to be considered. Regarding the preconception of phenomenology, this philosophical tradition might be viewed as sometimes banal or even old-fashioned. Are Husserl's descriptions of perception related to the pieces of paper on writing desks really crucial for education? Moreover, phenomenology can be regarded to be of only individual, but not of public interest. Does not the first person perspective in phenomenology mean the same as the usual individualism of our young students: everyone has to decide for themselves? As for postmodernism, there might be the fear of indecision, arbitrariness and relativism. All of those factors are not a stable basis for education. Obviously, this preconception lacks a concept of the specific orientation which postmodernism can provide. It is against this backdrop that the dominance of the rational discourse and of rational validity claims can be understood better. In the following section I try to distinguish several meanings of philosophical orientation. To that effect, I will outline three ways of providing philosophical orientation, and each of them would display its specific potential.

Classic and applied ethics: rational validity claims as orientation

Here I have in mind strong rational arguments of classical ethics (and authors like Aristotle, Kant, Bentham, and Mill²), or of applied ethics. These arguments lead to moral decisions out of rational reasons. Lutz Koch has carried out a profound investigation into Kant's ethical didactics (2003). The depth of Kant's analyses of rational and therefore universal ethics and the positive impact on the processes of philosophical education can hardly be overvalued. For it is an essential characteristic of ancient as well as modern rational validity claims to believe in the rational discourse, and, what is more, to strive for progress by means of rationality. Whenever we convey this hope of human progress by rationality to our students we provide this form of orientation. The fundamental advantage of the rational discourse is that it can be used as a common and even worldwide language. For this reason, the rational discourse or the language of rational validity claims is capable to deal with public problems and to pursue human progress. As an example we might think of problems in medical ethics such as euthanasia (Schöne-Seifert 2015). Here, conceptual distinctions prove helpful (ibid.: 265 f.), and concise argumentation is possible (ibid.: 269 f.).

Why do we need more than that? From the perspective of rational reasons everything should be translated into a language of rational discourse in order to help human beings to come to proper decisions which are also correct in terms of ethics. Rationality should improve life. That being said, it seems obvious that the totalization of rationality is in danger of getting blind for otherness. From the perspective of other realms like ethical emotions, philosophical wisdom, intercultural questions, or simply questions concerning what I call the depth of life, things look different. Translating these validity claims of otherness into the language of rational discourse sometimes appears to be both the colonization and totalization of rationality which fall short of better possibilities.

² Regarding contemporary philosophy, Jürgen Habermas could be cited as an advocate of rational validity claims.

Phenomenology: opening the depth of life and the world as orientation

Here I have in mind the phenomenological movement, for example, thinkers like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.³ What do I mean by the depth of life and the world and how is phenomenology able to provide orientation? Orientation by phenomenological philosophy comprises two steps or two sides of the coin.

First, in the tradition of Husserl's *epoché* (1976) phenomenology questions validity claims of explanatory models and abandons explanation for the sake of experience. Perception, experience and the question of: how, outweighs explanation and the questions of: what, or why? For Husserl and Heidegger (1984) this change of perspective allowed to investigate how things, we ourselves, time and space, the world become something meaningful for us, how they gain meaning. These phenomenological investigations disclosed new insights as part of transcendental anthropology. Taken as the theory of philosophical education, this new perspective means to leave explanatory models behind and concentrate on experience (Werner 2001). It means to bracket expert knowledge and to assume responsibility not only for what we perceive and experience, but also for our decisions (Thomas 2001, 2002; Albus/Thomas 2018).

As for the other side of the coin, phenomenological thinkers have described new forms of knowledge and an openness towards the world which can be brought to light once explanatory models have been abandoned. We can call this type of knowledge un-representational (Kutschera 2012). These new forms of knowledge can be made fruitful for orientation by philosophizing in a school environment. Here we can distinguish at least three different aspects.

One is what I would call the discovery of the first person perspective: we are not able to replace this perspective to full extent by an explanation which we find in the third person perspective. Once we have changed the direction of viewing, by following Husserl and Heidegger, we begin to sense what it means to be a 'self'. Here we find a momentum of self-empowerment in philosophy: the 'self' is like a space of freedom and depth, untouched by expert knowledge and explanatory models, the space which we can be curious to enter and which comes into being only when we enter it. This experience of a 'self' is an important objective of philosophical education (Thomas 2001, 2002). In the

³ Regarding contemporary philosophy, Bernhard Waldenfels could be cited as an advocate of orientation by phenomenology.

tradition of Kant's imperative of enlightenment, we can now formulate the statement: 'have courage to make use of your own sense and intuition.' Going even one step further, we can deal with Heidegger's ethics of authenticity in *Being and Time*. Our students might be well familiar with the fear of a "life not lived." Heidegger's notions of authenticity and guilt (1984, §§ 58–60) can provide proper philosophical concepts for this kind of feeling. Whenever we make the case for this strand of phenomenology, we invite our students to discover themselves as "selves." We invite them to be curious about their individual way to live, their individual way to experience the world.

Moreover, we can distinguish yet a different aspect of the other side of the coin – another new way of an openness towards the world. Phenomenologists like Heidegger (1954, 1959, 1984) and Merleau-Ponty (1945) have described a specific closeness to the world. In order to understand this concept of closeness properly it is helpful to read it as an alternative to a technical attitude.⁴ Closeness in a phenomenological perspective means a pre-conceptual intimacy and familiarity to things and to the world, like in Heidegger (1984), "being-as-equipment," "equipmental whole," and "being-in-the-world," or like in Merleau-Ponty (1945) – analyses and studies on the lived body. It is the close-up range of our lifeworld which we are used to skip in philosophy. Starting with the phenomenological analyses we begin to focus on this realm. In his later philosophy Heidegger made up new concepts of the closeness to things and worlds like "dwelling" (*Wohnen*) (1954) and "equanimity" (*Gelassenheit*) (1959).⁵ It is against this backdrop that I speak of phenomenology as opening up the depth of life and the world. This seems to be an important aspect of the theory of philosophical education. Whenever we provide orientation to our students in the phenomenological way, we try to make them sensitive to their own being-in-the-world and to make them capable to root themselves in life and the world. Again, these approaches are not too sophisticated for our students as long as the unusual language is introduced as a helpful reconstruction of our own elementary experiences for which we are unable to find appropriate words.

⁴ Habermas (1968) too, but in a completely differing way, has elaborated an alternative to technical knowledge. For Habermas, this alternative is emancipatory knowledge, which reflects, unlike technical knowledge, its social, political, and material preconditions.

⁵ Modern thinkers have refined these early concepts. For instance, the central notion for Bernhard Waldenfels is responsivity (Waldenfels 2006; Busch 2007). For Hartmut Rosa (2017), coming from the field of sociology, it is the notion of resonance, which has been transferred to pedagogy (Rosa, Endres 2016).

Finally, looking at Heidegger's (1989), Merleau-Ponty's (1964a, 1964b) and Lévinas' (1974, 1992) later philosophy, the last aspect of the other side of the coin – the last new way of openness towards the world can be described. Here, we can read phenomenology as 'post-metaphysical metaphysics'. What do I mean by this? Heidegger (1989) thinks of being as of an event (*Ereignis*),⁶ Merleau-Ponty (1964b) uses the notion of "flesh" (chair) as an unavailable ground of the world that brings forth both, perception and being. He describes intersubjectivity not as two distinct subject-entities which influence each other, but as a common ground out of which two subjects develop. Lévinas describes the responsibility for the other as having started long ago not from the subject, but from the other, he describes being as something that occurs (1974). Against the background of these phenomenological concepts, we may experience our 'selves', our lives and the world in a way that reminds of a spiritual experience. But, in contrast to classical metaphysics, in phenomenology there is no "hermeneutic as," no "something as something." We experience the self, life and the world as an event, happening, process. But, we experience it *not* as part of an explanatory model: neither, as religion puts it, as divine, nor, as science puts it, as biological evolution. This strand of phenomenology reconstructs our experience without forcing it to draw itself into a 'big picture'. With this in mind, phenomenological metaphysics can be called *epoché*-metaphysics, for it brackets the hermeneutical "something as something." With regard to educational goals, phenomenology makes the necessary means available for our students to re-experience the world in a new way. A new ontology can help them discover deeper layers of life and the world. These layers are not just subjective. To me this seems to be an important complement to the usual way of experiencing the world.

To sum up, phenomenology can provide orientation in the sense of opening the depth of life and the world: first, discovering ourselves as selves, about which we can be curious. Abandoning third person knowledge, orientation means to have courage to make use of our own intuition and sense. Second, orientation means to root ourselves in existence as human beings in a new closeness to our life-worlds. Third, orientation means developing a sense for the "unfolding" of life and the world in a post-metaphysical way.

⁶ "Beyng essentially occurs as the event. [...] The essential occurrence is secured and sheltered in the truth. Truth happens as clearing-concealing. [...] Da-sein happens in the modes in which truth is sheltered out of the securing of the cleared-concealed event. The sheltering of truth allows what is true to come into the open, and into the distorted, as a being. Only in that way do beings stand in beyng. Beings are. Beyng essentially occurs" (Heidegger 2012: 25 f.).

When phenomenology is criticized for being “only subjective,” I assert the following. The phenomenological strand of closeness to the world – Merleau-Ponty’s “lived body,” or Heidegger’s “being-in-the-world,” as well as “dwelling” – transcendental anthropology – claims more than a subjective validity. Likewise, the phenomenological strand of ‘post-metaphysical metaphysics’ and of the new ontology claim to describe and reconstruct a dimension of being which is more than subjective.

Despite all the aforementioned advantages, providing orientation in the phenomenological way is not able to deal with all ethical matters and challenges. Wherever there is a need for regulations, rules and law, phenomenology is important and helpful in terms of describing ethical problems. But ethical argumentation and decision must follow. And in this field, rational validity claims and exchanging rational arguments is in fact what is required. At the same time, however, it is obvious that many questions of young students on their way into a life worth living are not ethical questions in a narrow sense. And, clearly, in order to provide orientation at school for philosophy teachers, it is not enough to be experts in ethical argumentation in the narrow sense.

Postmodernism: plurality of truths as orientation

Here I have in mind the postmodern positions of Lyotard (1983, 1988a), Lévinas (1974) or Rorty (1989). These philosophies abandon, each in their own way, the classic epistemology, ethics and ontology, the notion of a uniform reality and of true representation. They make the case for the postmodern claim that there is no single truth. Postmodernism claims the impossibility of any self-reasoning by philosophy, and of any bird’s eye view.⁷ What is the impact of postmodernism on the theory of philosophical education? Two different aspects can be distinguished. Deconstruction as the first step (or one side of the coin). As the second step (or the other side of the coin) – new ways of openness

⁷ “As distinguished from a litigation, a differend [*différend*] would be a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both arguments. One side’s legitimacy does not imply the other’s lack of legitimacy. However, applying a single rule of judgment to both in order to settle their differend as though it were merely a litigation would wrong (at least) one of them (and both of them if neither side admits this rule)” (Lyotard 1988b: xi).

towards the world have been described, new forms of knowledge which are only possible once any 'big picture' has been abandoned.

As for the first point, deconstruction is not about questioning validity claims of others. Above all, it refers to our own truth or standpoint. In post-modernism, there is a strong feeling for otherness. Reading an author like Habermas (1981), who defends rational validity claims against postmodernism we might trust in communicative rationality in a comprehensive manner: if we only discuss long enough, everyone, whether a member of one culture or another, will share the views since rationality is universal. Yet, postmodern thinkers trace otherness back to the lack of such a universal structure. At the same time, otherness is seen as an advantage.⁸ Taking postmodern approaches into account, the one side of the postmodern theory of education is the claim that social groups are allowed to air their views without being forced to first draw themselves into a 'big picture.' Thus, postmodern authors convey a message of empowerment: a certain normality might be useful for many people who will not question or reflect it. For others, the same normality feels restrictive. They have the right to restate and reformulate normality. Reflecting the post-modern claims, students will find themselves belonging to both groups. This is a fruitful learning goal.

Regarding the other side of the coin, or the second step in the postmodern theory of philosophical education, thinkers like Rorty, Lévinas or Lyotard have described new types of philosophical knowledge. Abandoning the world model of uniform reality and true representation is a precondition for these new ways of openness. Rorty (1989) speaks of a political practice of solidarity without final justification.⁹ Lévinas elaborates an a priori power of the other,¹⁰ and, therefore, a post-universal and post-rational way of ethical orientation.

⁸ In the field of culture and interculturalism, thinkers like Achille Mbembe (2009) articulate other valuable perspectives. Similarly, Judith Butler (1990) writes about identity and gender, showing an important perspective of minority.

⁹ "Such reflection will not produce anything except a heightened awareness of the possibility of suffering. It will not produce a *reason to care* about suffering. [...] For the liberal ironist, skill at imaginative identification does the work which the liberal metaphysician would like to have done by a specifically moral motivation – rationality, or the love of God, or the love of truth" (Rorty 1989: 93).

¹⁰ "Before, but in what past? Not in the time preceding the present, in which I might have contracted any commitments. Responsibility for my neighbor dates from before my freedom in an immemorial past, an unrepresentable past that was never present and is more ancient than consciousness of ..." (Lévinas 1989: 84).

Lyotard (1989) outlines a kind of new ontology of experience by reformulating the sublime.¹¹ These new forms of philosophical knowledge are possible on the basis of deconstruction. They, too, result in fruitful learning goals. These types of knowledge are not too sophisticated because they refer to elementary experiences that our students are familiar with. The unusual and new language can help to reconstruct experiences that could not have been expressed in words as yet. Looking at pros and cons of an orientation provided by post-modernism, we can say that this kind of orientation is strong when it comes to transcending the norm or to assert oneself in a restrictive normality, also to face otherness and things that are completely unknown to us. Likewise, reconstructing experiences for which we lack proper words, like Lévinas or Lyotard do in their philosophies, is a strong point. However, the questioning of validity claims or the possibility of a bird's eye view must not turn into relativism, since relativism can be regarded as a 'big picture' in itself and another world model among others. Relativism loses the inventive step and the level of reflection that has been reached by abandoning the idea of a possible 'big picture' and by discovering otherness.

All three ways of providing orientation, which I discussed in this article, are strong in some fields and weak in others. My objective was to make the case for postmodernism and phenomenology at school. I wanted to elaborate the potential contributions of these two strands of contemporary philosophy to the theory of philosophical education. Above all, the undeniable potential can be found in new ways of an openness towards the world, the un-representational knowledge, which postmodern and phenomenological thinkers describe and which can help reconstruct our experiences. Preconditional for un-representational knowledge is the abandoning of explanatory models, big pictures, and the idea of true representation. Postmodernism and phenomenology can provide philosophical orientation in a specific way. Here, orientation means to trust in one's own intuition, sense, and experience and to reconstruct philosophically its specific validity claim.

¹¹ "Before asking questions about what it is and about its significance, before the *quid*, it must 'first' so to speak 'happen', *quod*. That it happens 'precedes', so to speak, the question pertaining to what happens. Or rather, the question precedes itself, because 'that it happens' is the question relevant as event, and it 'then' pertains to the event that has just happened. The event happens as a question mark 'before' happening as a question" (Lyotard 1989: 97).

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