



Altering identities

Possibilities of understanding identity in phenomenological pedagogy

Patrizia BREIL*

ABSTRACT

In one way or another, the other plays an important role in educational settings. Over the last few decades, the recourse to philosophical phenomenology has proved to be helpful for the discussion of this topic. Coming from this thematic direction, this article focuses on the other in its constitutive function for the construction of identity. Both within the phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels' theory of responsivity as well as in the pedagogue Wilfried Lippitz' theory of alterity, the other is a structural part of the self. It will be shown that within these theories the possible dangers of an encounter with the *other* cannot be addressed in an adequate way. However, this is especially important in educational contexts. Therefore, with regard to the philosophies of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, I would like to present two additional phenomenological approaches from which the pedagogical discussion can benefit. Both Sartre and Beauvoir put great focus on possible obstacles regarding the encounter with the other. Whereas Sartre identifies negativity as an essential part of human existence, Beauvoir enriches these thoughts with an ethical component. Against the background of these philosophies, the other comes into view as a possible source of both objectification and empowerment. Lastly, the article shows that an implementation of these considerations in teacher training can lead to a deeper understanding of the constitution of identity and the inherent possibilities of any interaction with the other.

KEYWORDS

phenomenological pedagogy; phenomenology; Jean Paul Sartre; Simone de Beauvoir; Bernhard Waldenfels; Wilfried Lippitz; responsivity; alterity; education; identity

* Ph.D. student, research assistant, Tübingen School of Education, University of Tübingen. E-mail: patrizia.breil@uni-tuebingen.de.

The discussion about what school must be like is almost as old as school itself. Over the centuries, an immense quantity of different school systems have been developed. Individual schools differ just as equally. Thus, modern educational science is still concerned with questions about school architecture (e.g., Daniels *et al.*, 2019), what good teaching looks like (e.g., Stolz, 2018), what sort of content should be taught (e.g., Pinar, 2013) and to whom (e.g., Lindmeier, 2018). Of course, these discussions also vary greatly between different countries. The understanding of education is also changed significantly by ever-growing digitalization (e.g., McElvany *et al.*, 2018). Yet there are some components in educational processes that seem to stay the same throughout all changes. In one way or another, there is always more than one person involved in the educational process. Besides the learner there is also the teacher and, possibly, classmates. However, the confrontation with the other in this context does not necessarily have to take place directly, i.e., face to face. Instead, it can also be mediated. Regardless of that, the experience of the other plays a crucial role; one which should not be neglected. This is underlined by the fact that the other is frequently discussed in educational science.¹ In this article the other is to be viewed from a particular perspective. Based on phenomenological research, the experience of the other comes into view in its constitutive function for the construction of identity.

Bernhard Waldenfels especially is concerned with the meaning of the other in everyday experience and the self in general. Therefore, a recapitulation of his responsive phenomenology marks the starting point of this article. Within Waldenfels' theory of the alien, the possibility of an experience of the other, the alien, lies in one's own self. Due to an underlying bodily responsivity, human existence is generally open to its environment and to others. Against this background every human action can be understood as a response to a claim made by others. This means that the other is always already a part of the self. Within this theory it quickly becomes clear that the other does have a constitutive function regarding the identity of the self.

The same holds true for the considerations of Wilfried Lippitz. He is one of the main representatives of the sub-discipline phenomenological pedagogy. Waldenfels' works are an essential source of reference in his theory of alterity. In Lippitz' view, the experience of the other is a constitutive part of education and of the formation of one's identity. Pedagogical understanding is therefore always also an understanding of the other, the alien. Both in Waldenfels' and in Lippitz' theoretical construct the other is not a complete stranger, but an innermost part of the self.

¹ This not only includes considerations about a successful teacher-student interaction (e.g., Joldersma, 2001), but also the discussion of negative possibilities that come with an educational setting (e.g., Papa, 2019).

Based on this underlying interconnectedness of self and other, the experience of the alien seems to lose its dangers. Although both Waldenfels and Lippitz address, for example, violence as a possible type of interaction, the other — as foreign as they might be — always remains connected to the self in a way that makes a complete alienation rather unimaginable. Therefore, in this article I would like to examine whether there is a better way to display the possible dangers of an interaction with the other. In the course of this, Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of the other is drawn upon. Although the usefulness of Sartre's philosophy regarding an interpretation of human interaction is highly doubted (e.g., Honneth, 1995; Honneth, 2018), I want to argue in favour of it. This conviction is based mainly on two assumptions. First, in his late works, Sartre himself shows that a positive and successful human interaction is possible. And, second, Simone de Beauvoir demonstrates how an existential ethics can be developed based on Sartre's considerations. Herein, a dialectical interplay of seemingly contradictory aspects is crucial for human existence in general.

In a final step, these considerations are to be made fruitful for teacher training. The works of Waldenfels, Lippitz, Sartre and Beauvoir form a theoretical foundation on which experiences of the other and the alien can be addressed in a way that offers insights into the construction of the self and its identity.

RESPONSIVE IDENTITIES

The starting point of Waldenfels' reflections is the body in its multidimensionality. In contrast to the Cartesian notion that the body is a passive and machine-like object, the lived body, as in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of perception* has mental components as well and is actively involved in all human interactions. The possibility to take part in any interactions is founded in the openness of the lived body. In addition to its self-reference, the lived body also embodies a relation to the world and to the foreign. Due to this relational form of existence, one always stands a certain distance away from oneself (Waldenfels, 2016: 11f.), because the lived body is always already out there, with the world and with others.

This human constitution leads to significant changes in the understanding of identity. Instead of having a purely intellectual self as its foundation, the subject exists in and through an interconnection between itself and its surroundings. If the identity of the self is constituted in an intersubjective interconnectedness, then the role that the other plays in self-constitution is more fundamental than any operation of the self on the self. Contrary to the tradition of subject-philosophy, the subject is no longer the starting point for philosophical enquiry (Waldenfels, 2013: 17). There is no "inner man"

(Merleau-Ponty, 1945: V; transl. by the author). Thus, identity is interspersed with moments of foreignness (Waldenfels, 2013: 68).

As these initial observations show, the other plays a twofold role regarding the constitution of the identity of the self. This dual role is rooted in the structures of the lived body that is the self. First, the lived body is always already out there, with the other. In this way the other transcends itself towards the self. Thus, not only is the other something outside the self, it is also something that can be found within that same self. Only through this pre-given connection does the self emerge, as well as the possibility to interact with one another. While this basic constitution of the body lies the foundation for all communication, it also leads to the fact that the self is never truly and solely with itself.

The interconnectedness of alien and self, which Waldenfels determines for the being of the lived body, is also reflected on the level of action. Within the structures of the lived body, described in detail by Merleau-Ponty, Waldenfels discovers one characteristic alongside which he develops his phenomenology. Namely, its “responsivity”. This means that the self consists in its responsivity to the other. Due to the irreducible connection with the other, the own self is always responding to a certain foreign claim. Thus, what we do and what we say does not primarily aim at the alien, but starts from it (Waldenfels, 2013: 15). The initial starting point of this relation of claim and response is no longer discernible. Due to its corporeal situatedness, every human being is constantly claiming and responding. Thus, even if we think of a person’s identity as being constituted by his or her actions, the other still plays the primary constitutive role.

The question of autonomy is closely linked to these considerations. If the self is permeated by the other as described, it is questionable to what extent autonomous behaviour is still possible at all. In the course of the phenomenology of the lived body, the subject loses its central status. Instead, an interplay of subject, world and the other forms the starting point of philosophical reflections. A concept such as autonomy might no longer be appropriate under these conditions.² In accordance with this, Waldenfels writes:

Alienness is not limited to the fact that there is something that exceeds our ability to place things at our disposal; rather the experience of the foreign proceeds from a claim of the foreign, a claim which precedes our own initiative (Waldenfels, 2013: 14; transl. by the author).

Before we take initiative, the claim of the other is already valid. It is not possible to not respond to this claim. This is especially because even the refusal

² This, of course, goes hand in hand with disillusionment, which should not be neglected. Käte Meyer-Drawe shows what this means for different fields of study (Meyer-Drawe, 1990).

of a proper response is itself an acknowledgement of the fact that there is a claim being made upon one which calls for a reaction of some kind. In everything it says and does, the self is under the influence of others.

With regard to educational science, this leads to important questions about the general goal of education. This is because, traditionally, according to Immanuel Kant (Kant, 1784), students should be educated to grow autonomous. However, based on Waldenfels' considerations, one can now question what autonomy can still mean if the alien can be located at every level of the self. A corresponding goal for education could be to develop a certain reflected way of dealing with the foreign in oneself.

As shown here, one of the most crucial insights within Waldenfels' theory of responsivity is that there is first an interconnectedness of different influences. Only in a further step do self and other differentiate themselves as seemingly self-contained entities. Based on this underlying unity, the identity of the self cannot be understood without the other. The alien plays a constitutive role in the formation of identity. Without the other human existence is not possible at all.

ALTERITY IN EDUCATION

Based on phenomenology, a corresponding pedagogical sub-discipline has recently developed (e.g., Brinkmann, 2019). Initially, mainly Edmund Husserl's phenomenology was influential. With regard to the phenomenological *epoché*, the concept of a descriptive pedagogy (Fischer, 1914) marks the starting point of phenomenological pedagogy. The main objective of this current is to elaborate the benefits of phenomenological concepts for pedagogical settings (e.g., Lippitz, 1993). Waldenfels' theory of responsivity is also well received in this context. Wilfried Lippitz in particular is concerned with the significance of alterity in educational processes.

In Lippitz' view, alterity and the experience of the foreign play an important role in today's understanding of education and *Bildung*. An illustration of this conviction can be seen in modern resumes. According to Lippitz, it is becoming increasingly important to gain experience abroad. Be it as part of an internship, as a business trip or simply as a longer stay abroad to get to know a different language and culture. Becoming a stranger (*Fremdwerden*) is an essential part of a successful resume (Lippitz, 2003: 91). Therefore, the experience of and the confrontation with the foreign and the other mark an important aspect of education. The encounter with the foreign and the other is constitutive for the formation of an educated self (Lippitz, 2003: 71).

This proves to be the case from early childhood on. Lippitz demonstrates his theory of the foreign with the example of a newborn child (Lippitz, 2003: 92).

From the parents' perspective, foreignness plays a crucial role in this new situation. First of all, the child itself is a stranger. The parents cannot understand the screams and needs of the child yet. Only in the course of familiarisation or de-alienation will barriers of understanding gradually be removed. The child is introduced into the already familiar world and is educated according to known and familiar structures. With every step of development, the child becomes less foreign.

However, this situation is also marked by foreignness in a different way. The second dimension of foreignness works retrospectively and means that things and particular ways of life that once were familiar suddenly become strange and alien. In the confrontation with the other it becomes clear that one's own behaviour is not natural, but rather conditioned. In view of the given example and this second dimension of foreignness, the parents are forced to justify their ways of life, which seemed so natural to them before (Lippitz, 2003: 92).

Human existence is marked by change. One stage of development in which changes are especially crucial is puberty. The various physical changes are accompanied by a general development of the self (e.g., Flaake, 2012). At this age, the school context plays an important role as well. As shown above, the constitution of the self is influenced by experiences of the foreign and the other. Identity develops in interaction with others (Lippitz, 2003: 215). These considerations lead Lippitz to the assumption that education or rather *Bildung* and alterity form a systematic relationship. This also means that pedagogical understanding must always be an understanding of the foreign and of the other at the same time (Lippitz, 2008: 273, 286). Each person involved in the educational process is under the influence of the other. Through ongoing interaction, both the identities of the students as well as the teacher's identity are shaped by others. A better understanding of the human being in his corporeal intersubjectivity constitutes for teachers the ability to grasp the interactions in school on a more reflected level.

THE OTHER'S GAZE

In addition to Waldenfels, whose theories are broadly received by Lippitz, there are other philosophers who address the importance of the other for an understanding of the self, for example, Sartre. Whereas Waldenfels' description paints a rather harmonious picture, Sartre's theory of the other in his main work *L'être et la néant* (Sartre, 1943) — in contrast to his later work *Critique de la raison dialectique* (Sartre, 1985) — focuses on rather negative aspects of an encounter with the other. The unavoidable experience of the other suddenly turns into something painful.

In *L'être et la néant* the encounter with the other is usually exemplified by the gaze (Sartre, 1943: 310–364). Within this gaze, a conflict is carried out. To put it in simple words, Sartre describes the experience as follows: a subject who is unaware of the presence of someone else very likely behaves in an unreflected manner. Which means the subject just is, without thinking about the fact that or how it is. Suddenly, the presence of the other becomes noticeable. He or she is looking at the subject. Before, the situation and all things in it stood in relation to the subject. All things have gained their meaning from their distance or relation to the subject. Now, things slip away from the subject and rearrange themselves around the other. The situation changes. There is a new reference centre. Thus, the first encounter with the other is always a conflict: he or she is stealing the world of the subject. At the same time, the other also determines the subject as an object of its world. For the affected subject, this is experienced as an objectification. Because, of course, the subject as a person is more than a first impression could capture.³

Nevertheless, the other sees the subject — or rather object — in a certain way. This picture must be accepted by the subject as an essential component of its being-for-others. Thus, the subject no longer has sole control over its own identity and how it appears to others. Instead, there are certain aspects of the self that are determined by others. Every human reality, as a being-for-itself, has a dimension of being-for-others, which is also constituted by others (Sartre, 1943: 275–503). To experience one's own body as an object means — according to Sartre — to experience oneself in one's being-for-others. Objectification, then, is a necessary by-product of any encounter with the other and is founded in the corporeal structures of human-reality.

In educational science, the works of Jean-Paul Sartre are not often well received. Considering the previous reflections, it quickly becomes clear why this may be the case. After all, teaching processes should be characterized by mutual understanding at eye level, i.e., a successful dialogue between the self and the other. However, based on Sartre's theory of the other in *L'être et la néant*, the interaction between student and teacher would be imbued with reciprocal acts of objectification, especially in the face of the omnipresent teacher's gaze.

And yet, this struggle for subject and object status has another side to it. To be able to objectify someone through the gaze, one has to be a subject who transcends oneself towards the other.⁴ An encounter between two human

³ The subject is more than a waiter for example (Sartre, 1943: 98ff.). In the attitude of bad faith, the subject objectifies itself in so far as it acts as if its whole identity would lie in one single role. Thus, the intersubjective conflict between the self and the other can very well be carried out intrasubjectively.

⁴ This paradox has been widely discussed with regard to Hegel's notions of master and slave (Hegel, 2011; Kojève, 1947). The recognition that the master seeks from the slave can only be appreciated if the slave him- or herself is someone who can be respected and who — in the

realities does not consist solely in objectifying one another. Rather, in an objectifying gaze the other proves that he or she must be a subject. In feeling objectified the subject recognizes the other as subject. An encounter between different human realities does not only lead to mutual objectification, but also leads to a deep understanding of the other's subjectivity.

The aforementioned mutual objectification is accompanied by a similar and also mutual subjectification. In feeling objectified one is confronted with the status of the subject in two different ways. First, one recognizes the other as the subject. In order to objectify someone, it is necessary to form an intentional relation with someone outside the objectifying self. This ability is one of the main characteristics of human reality. Human reality transcends itself towards what one sees or experiences. With this in mind, a new dimension of the encounter becomes apparent. The objectified human reality not only experiences itself as an object, but also experiences the other as a subject. Thus, the other can be grasped and recognized in his or her being as human reality.

Additionally, subjectivity plays an important role in human interactions in a second way. Namely, because the oppressed human reality is challenged by the situation to regain its subject status (Sartre, 1943: 349f.), i.e., for its own part to transcend itself towards the *other* in order to practice its subjectivity. The other, then, is not only someone who might see or treat the self as an object but also someone who challenges the self to realize its subjectivity, to realize what it means to be a human reality.

AUTHENTIC AMBIGUITIES

Although an interpretation like this is unusual, none other than Simone de Beauvoir tried to develop Sartre's theories in the direction indicated. Due to a different perspective on interpersonal encounters, Beauvoir addresses the possibility of mutual objectification as well as the possibility of mutual subjectification and liberating empowerment. In her essay *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté* (Beauvoir, 1947), Beauvoir shows how seemingly contradictory aspirations form the core of any authentic human reality.⁵

With the example of authentic love, it can be shown to what extent an antagonism of this sort can be involved in the formation of identity. Superficially speaking, the ambiguity of love is its power to both oppress and empower (Gregoratto, 2017: 18). Because in any loving relationship, the partner always

eyes of the master — is 'worthy' of recognition. In order to solve this paradox, Axel Honneth develops a theory of recognition in which an underlying and reciprocal recognition forms the basis of every interaction (Honneth, 1992).

⁵ Herein, Beauvoir's agenda is similar to Merleau-Ponty's considerations on ambiguity. However, the ethical component distinguishes Beauvoir's writings from those of Merleau-Ponty.

has the ability to hurt the other in any way. In order to speak about what Beauvoir calls “authentic love”, the partners in the relationship should of course not make use of this ability. Instead, mutual recognition must form the basis of this relationship. This recognition is again marked by ambiguity. On the one hand, the needs of the other must be recognized. On the other hand, one must also acknowledge one’s own ambiguity, which lies in being trapped in immanence and yet striving for transcendence (Gregoratto, 2017: 20f.). These ambiguities constitute the agonistic nature of authentic love. A partner has the opportunity to slow his or her partner down or to help him or her to achieve his or her goals.

Beauvoir draws attention to two ways in which the other is involved in the constitution of one’s own identity. On the one hand, the other has an objectifying gaze. On the other hand, the other constitutes the identity of his or her self by enabling and challenging him or her to fully develop his or her subjectivity and, thus, to be the self he or she wants to be. In this sense, the objectifying gaze of the other is a necessary by-product of a relationship to the other who helps to realize one’s own freedom.

ALTERING AND ANTAGONISTIC IDENTITIES

In contrast to a theory of the other where the other solely objectifies his or her opposite, this extended theory of the other seems to be more useful for educational science. Understanding every relation as somewhat antagonistic in nature allows a differentiated view on teaching processes. From the student’s point of view both teacher and fellow students appear in an ambiguous role. On the one hand, they can be a danger in the broadest sense. In addition to a purely physical dimension, this also concerns, for example, a certain fixed expectation that the student cannot meet. In this case, the teacher influences the student’s identity by seeing him or her in a certain light, which does not match the student’s self-perception. Somehow the student must take a stand on this; he or she has to accept this new role as part of his or her self for others. On the other hand, the student can benefit from the others. They can help him or her to develop according to his or her own ideas. Either way, identity seems to be something that is developed under the influence of others. At all times, the other is both a help and an obstacle. Identity is relational.

Educational settings are characterised by interpersonal interactions. As shown above, this foreign influence also has a constitutive function in the formation of identity. Due to these circumstances, identity cannot be understood as a static notion. Instead, one’s identity is always changing according to changes in one’s situational setting. But, even the influence from others differs in its appearance. An encounter with the other can be both objectifying and

empowering. This also applies to one's own relationship to one's self. Therefore, to incorporate antagonistic aspects is part of an authentic identity.

These considerations can be made useful for school contexts. The notion of an altering and antagonistic identity allows for a differentiated perspective on educational processes. Teaching, then, comes into view as multidimensional and highly relevant to the constitution of identity, both the student's and the teacher's.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beauvoir, S. de (1947). *Pour une morale de l'ambiguïté*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Brinkmann, M. (2019). Phenomenological theory of *Bildung* and education (pp. 1–7). In: M. Peters (Ed.). *Encyclopedia of educational philosophy and theory*. Singapore: Springer.
- Daniels, H., Tse, H.M., Stables, A., & Cox, S. (2019). *School design matters. How school design relate to the practice and experience of teaching and learning*. Abington–Oxon–New York: Routledge.
- Fischer, A. (1914). Deskriptive Pädagogik. *Zeitschrift für pädagogische Psychologie und Jugendkunde*, 15(2), 82–95.
- Flaake, K. (2012). Pubertät, Biologie und Kultur. Erfahrungen leiblicher Veränderungen (pp. 135–152). In: K. Liebsch (Ed.). *Jugendsoziologie*. München: Oldenburg.
- Gregoratto, F. (2017). The ambiguity of love. Beauvoir, Honneth and Arendt on the relation between recognition, power and violence. *Critical Horizons*, 19(1), 18–34.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (2011). *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Hamburg: Meiner.
- Honneth, A. (2016). *Kampf um Anerkennung. Zur moralischen Grammatik sozialer Konflikte; mit einem Nachwort*. (9th ed.). Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Honneth, A. (2018). *Anerkennung. Eine europäische Ideengeschichte*. Berlin: Suhrkamp.
- Joldersma, C.W. (2001). Pedagogy of the other. A Levinasian approach to the teacher-student relationship (pp. 181–188). In: S. Rice (Ed.). *Philosophy of Education Yearbook*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press..
- Kant, I. (1784). Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?. *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 12, 481–494.
- Kojève, A. (1975). *Hegel, eine Vergegenwärtigung seines Denkens. Kommentar zur Phänomenologie des Geistes; mit einem Anhang: Hegel, Marx und das Christentum*. (I. Fetscher & G. Lehmbruch, Trans.). Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Lindmeier, C. (2018). *Differenz, Inklusion, Nicht/Behinderung. Grundlinien einer diversitätsbewussten Pädagogik*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
- Lippitz, W. (2003). *Differenz und Fremdheit. Phänomenologische Studien in der Erziehungswissenschaft*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Lippitz, W. (2008). Bildung und Alterität (pp. 273–288). In: U. Frost, G. Mertens, W. Böhm, & V. Ladenthin (Eds.). *Handbuch der Erziehungswissenschaft*. Vol. 1: *Grundlagen Allgemeine Erziehungswissenschaft*. Paderborn: Schöningh.
- Lippitz, W. (Ed.). (1993). *Phänomenologische Studien in der Pädagogik*. Weinheim: Dt. Studien-Verlag.
- McElvany, N., Schwabe, F., Bos, W., & Holtappels, H.-G. (Ed.). (2018). *Digitalisierung in der schulischen Bildung. Chancen und Herausforderungen*. Münster–New York: Waxmann.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1945). *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard.

- Meyer-Drawe, K. (1990). *Illusionen von Autonomie. Diesseits von Ohnmacht und Allmacht des Ich*. München: Kirchheim.
- Papa, R. (2019). *School violence in international contexts*. Cham: Springer.
- Pinar, W.F. (2013). *Handbook of curriculum development*. (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1943). *L'être et la néant*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1985). *Critique de la raison dialectique*. Vol. 2: *L'intelligibilité de l'histoire*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Stolz, S.A. (2018). A genealogical analysis of the concept of 'good' teaching. A polemic. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 52(1), 144–162.
- Waldenfels, B. (2013). *Topographie des Fremden. Studien zur Phänomenologie des Fremden 1*. (6th ed.). Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Waldenfels, B. (2016). *Das leibliche Selbst. Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des Leibes*. (6th ed.). Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.

