

**REFLECTIVE BOOK REVIEW OF
*EDUCATION, DIALOGUE AND HERMENEUTICS,***

ed. by Paul Fairfield, Continuum International Pub Inc, 2011. Pages 152.

Daniel J. Shuster

Paul Fairfield selected seven guest essays (by Jean Grondin, Shaun Gallagher, Nicholas Davey, Graeme Nicholson, Ramsey Eric Ramsey, Andrzej Wiercinski, and Babette Babich) and one of his own for this 152 page volume. These chapters take a Continental view of education through a hermeneutic lens, and together form a balanced argument for education renewal with Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Bildung*. A common theme is concern for the underlying postmodern aversion to *paideia* and resistance to hermeneutic dialogue in schools. This book is strongly recommended as a foundational footing for deep study of the contemporary condition of education and its critical relation to dialogue and hermeneutics as it relates to any field. Each author is broadly published and thereby accessible.

Jean Grondin's essay "Gadamer's Experience and Theory of Education: Learning that the Other May Be Right" provides a solid anchor for this collection. After discussing the social and historical traditions that formed Gadamer's life, Grondin shares his essential views on the constructivist nature of learning and education as revealed through *Truth and Method*. We are reminded of the importance of receptivity to other's points of view, and of Socrates' *elenchus* in the cultivation of *Bildung* – "to elevate oneself above one's own particularity and learn to view it with some perspective." Conversely, we are dissuaded from clinging to the certainties of positivism and the need to be right and conclusive in our ever-changing, white-water circumstances.

Grondin invites the reader to Gadamer's perspective of reality as continuous acquisition of an ever-expanding horizon. Our *sensus communis* within our culture draws and binds us to a humanist education that allows scientificity and empirical reasoning their proper place and proportion of influence, while also allowing us to create our own place and identity in the world. Through never-ending dialogue and suspension of finality we can continuously re-interpret our horizons across time, through language, and to apply that learning to emergent social situations for a more humane culture.

Shaun Gallagher's essay "Narrative Competence and the Massive Hermeneutical Background" draws on childhood development stages to locate the roots of intersubjective understanding. After discussing the theories that constitute a *massive hermeneutical background* accumulated through interactions since childhood, Gallagher describes a development toward narrative framing which together with primary and secondary intersubjective processes leads to contextual understanding of other's actions. Narratives accumulate into a *folk psychology* within particular cultures and communities, and it is only new narratives that can change the folk psychology, and the culture itself, as they increase the stock of massive hermeneutical background from which new narratives emerge. This is strikingly similar to Alfred Korzybski's *time binding*. The two stages of early childhood interaction that lead to intersubjective understanding may draw to mind the work with mirror neurons and empathy since the link was discovered in the 1980s and 1990s by Giuseppe Di Pellegrino, Luciano Fadiga, Leonardo Fogassi, and Vittorio Gallese at the University of Parma.

Nicholas Davey's essay "Philosophical Hermeneutics: An Education for all Seasons?" builds on three "mutually interwoven concepts:" education, the formative process of *Bildung*, and philosophical hermeneutics. Davey speaks to Gianni Vattimo's dialogical utopianism and "defense of every individual's entitlement to a meaningful existence" through *Bildung* as an intensification of process not outcomes – means not ends, quality not quantity, solidarity not competition, reduction of violence not scientific models. From this perspective, "unending individual qualitative transformation" comes about as a "consequence of continuous adaptation and negotiation" through "exchange with others, [and] challenging and extending horizons of individual and collective possibility." Davey draws on Martin Heidegger, Francisco Varela, John Shotter, and Mikhail Bakhtin to show how living systems are autonomous, complex systems of potentiality – dialogical, hermeneutical, and self-organizing through their own recursive history.

Davey articulates Gadamer's synthesis of Herder and Hegel's understanding of *Bildung* into six theses: *Bildung* as ontologically congruent with non-essentialism; *Bildung* as associated with culture; *Bildung* as effect; *Bildung* as thoughtful disposition towards experience; *Bildung* as capacity to act; and *Bildung* as tactfulness. From these perspectives Davey summarizes *Bildung* as "a philosophical attempt to articulate a process of self-formation which neither depends on the self alone nor culminates in a final self-image." Again drawing from Gadamer, Davey offers a phenomenological conception of *movement* with respect to *Bildung* that involves three separate but overlapping levels of meaning: the historical, the linguistic, and the tribal. Holding one's self in mindfulness "to the movement in things" is an essential part of *Bildung*. The author goes into detail into the idea of formative movement. Davey also includes more recent perspectives on *Bildung* from Michael Oakshott, Lars Løvlie and Paul Standish, Sven Nordenbo, Klaus Mortensen, Gert Biesta, Ilan Gur-ze'ev, Helmut Peukert, and Ronald Reichenback (*Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 2002) to build a strong case for *Bildung* and its transformative, non-instrumental approach to education. The essay concludes with a strong critical argument against instrumental methods of education and the neglect of the whole student.

Graeme Nicholson's essay "The Education of the Teacher" speaks to the notion of *Bildung* as life-long, self-reflexive, mutual education of students and teachers alike. Nicholson makes it clear that the formative nature of *Bildung* falls in opposition to professional education or development of any particular technical expertise; however the *thinking teacher* of any such instrumental coursework may also bring the student along on their own research journey into more humanistic topics or unanswered questions in the teacher's own life narrative. Nicholson offers a picture of the thinking teacher – one who shares her internal thought processes of the formative experience in her own life leading up to the curriculum at hand. Such a teacher may also invite the students to reflect on their own lives and circumstances that bring them to that moment. One outcome is a continuously evolving approach to any given curriculum and its historical and situational relevance to the multitude of lives passing through a school. "The student is invited to think because the teacher does not merely think but fosters thinking through *acting out* thinking in the course of a class." The thinking teacher is described as one who fearlessly works along the edges of what they themselves don't know; and is not one to hide in the safety of certainty and a fixed canon

of knowledge to be doled out in one direction. Acknowledging one's errors and their corrections by one's students, and asking students for insight and answers are hallmarks of a thinking teacher. In his reflection on *Bildung* Nicholson cites the ambition held for its purpose by Herder, Fichte, Humboldt, Schleiermacher and Hegel, and its displacement by pedantry in 19th century German universities by way of bourgeois deviation and nationalism. The author leaves the revival of *Bildung* squarely on the shoulders of thinking teachers.

Paul Fairfield's essay "Dialogue in the Classroom" begins with recognition of a form of dialogue used in the pedagogy of Paulo Freire for critical consciousness. Fairfield finds elements of objectivist epistemology embedded in Freirean dialogue associated with Marxism. He suggests that Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics provides a form of dialogue for the classroom that is less ideologically, and more hermeneutically driven. This preference toward an emergent and generative style conversation reminds this reviewer of David Bohm's conception of dialogue through mutuality; which albeit powerful and intriguing, may risk dulling the critical edge of the pedagogy and detracting from Freire's *conscientization*. Stepping completely away from the *political* aspects of hermeneutics in this case may have unforeseen consequences and need deeper reflection given the present circumstances of education that have become ideologically skewed by neoliberalism, whether we like it or not. Exclusive use of Gadamerian or Bohmian dialogue, it seems to this reviewer, is a pivotal, strategic choice to be further considered and cautiously made; and if chosen as such, may just the same lead to expressions of a critical and political nature that will challenge the teacher for political solutions.

Fairfield cogently reviews Gadamer's contributions to the art of dialogical conversation: the receptivity and passivity of quality dialogue, "falling into conversation," "that a conversation has a spirit of its own...that it allows something to 'emerge' which henceforth exists," that it "is like an event that happens to us," that "goodwill...is a disposition that applies equally to the text and to the participants in the conversation," that "it requires a good deal of background knowledge," and that "dialogue presupposes both informed participants and a common orientation toward a productive line of questioning." The author is firm in his opposition to Freirean dialogue stating, "educators are not revolutionists in the cause of emancipation," and invoking Dewey in the idea that students ought to be exposed to a form of inquiry that leads them to "habits of mind that

incline them toward further inquiry and to a love of ideas for their own sake.” This idea has long been a hallmark of good education and now challenges critical pedagogy to find its place within the teacher-student relationship. Fairfield is clear on the value of Socratic questioning and its value in motivating the student to research answers through reflection and reading sources they might not otherwise look for. He furthermore details the difficulties of engaging dialogue in uncondusive spaces, or with dogmatic or highly structured teachers who may be uncomfortable with the informality of good dialogue. Some teachers may feel insecure being confronted with new information presented by students doing their research to examine or validate their ideas. Notwithstanding Dewey’s “ethos of experimental inquiry” being threatened on many fronts in the contemporary university, the author concludes with Gadamer, “The path of all knowledge leads through the question.”

Ramsey Eric Ramsey’s essay “On the Dire Necessity of the Useless: Philosophical and Rhetorical Thoughts on Hermeneutics and Education in the Humanities” stems from his work in the philosophy of communication and rhetoric. He draws on Pierre Hadot, “Not the memorization of doctrines, philosophy...understands [that] ‘real wisdom does not cause us to know: it makes us *be* in a different way.” Ramsey points to philosophy as both “diagnostic and therapeutic for troubled times.” On the diagnostic side he points to problems arising from Platonism, Cartesianism, Christianity, scientism, capitalism, and instrumentalization as revealed by modern western philosophers. On the therapeutic side he points to eclecticism, transdisciplinary dialogue, “transformative power of our own pleasures,” socialism, and art. The author sees hermeneutics and rhetoric as the fabric of social interconnectedness—“interpretation and communication as part of the inescapable structure of the human condition and not merely techniques.”

Ramsey quotes Calvin Schrag, richly describing the epistemological space beyond subjects and objects as a “vibrant hermeneutical space of affect-imbued and praxis-oriented engagements.” His idea of the hermeneutic circle consisting of *phronesis*, *ethos*, and *pathos* as “constitutive of our being-together” follows from that understanding of the entwinement of hermeneutics and rhetoric. It is against this backdrop that Ramsey generously illuminates two moments within Plato’s cave allegory that illustrate “what the task and challenge of our education shall entail.” From his rendition of the cave allegory, he extracts that “we share and confirm our place in the world” and are thereby returned to a grounding of

phronesis, ethos, and pathos. Thus we now stand “in dire need of inventing ways of thinking, talking, and being-together to confront rhetorical situations” to try “from as many disciplinary perspectives as possible to disclose the structures that make up our shared being-in-the-world.” In closing, Ramsey tells us his reading of the allegory can allow us to welcome Socratic dialogue, “welcome our inexactitude and remain answerable to it by thinking about it with care, spontaneity, and rigor,...[and] welcome the idea of and be thankful for an education that makes us...Useless.” This reviewer invites the reader to study this interdisciplinary interpretation of the cave allegory.

Andrzej Wiercinski’s essay “Hermeneutic Education to Understanding: Self-Education and the Willingness to Risk Failure” is a lucid testimony on the understanding of what education is and is not. A powerful statement sets the stage: “To educate a human being is not to teach someone a trade or an art, but to cultivate a sensitivity toward exercising one’s freedom... Primarily it is about the will to learn about oneself.” The role of hermeneutics in education is described as to help us “realize what is happening to us in the process learning” and to help us “to identify serious misconceptions and to address unspoken premises that we often take for granted.” In hermeneutic education the teacher’s role is to sensitize the student, not necessarily to inform them. “The teacher has a profound responsibility of creating a learning relationship with students and encouraging them to build such relationships with others.” Encouraging “openness to risk, misunderstanding, and the unexpected...situates the relationship in the horizon between familiarity and strangeness.” In such a relationship we have a mutual commitment to each other’s freedom. Withholding one’s prejudices and personal interests protects the visibility of the other in such a dialogical relationship. Without resorting to totalizing power, the teacher encourages ethical decisions. In this way, “education can be understood as a kind of assistance in the transformation of the self in the better living of life.”

Wiercinski draws heavily from Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Gadamer to find *Bildung* to be not just formation, but self-cultivation with an emphasis on the student self as the active agent. One can say that the self learns and transforms through conversation with others. The quality of the conversation and the sensitivity of the ‘others’ surely have effect on the self-cultivation. To each participant in a dialogue there is likely some proportional measure of mutual transformation; thus to the teacher even the student is an ‘other’ through whom she is also

transformed. This line of thinking leads this reviewer to suspect that if there was to be a “measure” to this true form of education, it might be a teacher’s written narrative of how *trans*-formed they themselves are through the dialogical mutuality with each particular student—whereas the student’s autobiographical writing might describe their mutuality among all those with whom they converse and learn with and through. The final pages of this memorable essay are so rich with description of the vital importance of education and the hermeneutic life they must speak for themselves.

Babette Babich’s essay “Education and Exemplars: On Learning to Doubt” details how Ivan Illich and Friedrich Nietzsche each in their own way challenged educational institutions. Drawing on Illich’s 1971 *Deschooling Society* and Nietzsche’s 1910 *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* the author appears to recognize the valid need to de-school society and replace mass education with self-education.

On balance, this volume is an important and timely addition to the philosophical canon on education. Each contribution is a different facet to a crystal clear image of the vital importance of hermeneutics and dialogue to everyone’s formation through mutuality. I recommend this book to anyone who cares deeply about a hopeful future for the coming generations of humanity.

Correspondence:

Daniel J. Shuster

e-mail: shuster@scc.net

REFERENCES

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