

natural world and the more ‘artificial’ cultural world, and whether the idea of the natural world may itself be, especially after the work of Bruno Latour and others, a cultural construct. This investigation, as a few others present in the two volumes, is work in progress. Varela’s legacy, Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, affect theory...they could all provide further articulations for an approach and a method outside the self-boundedness of the subject.

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Young Children’s Existential Encounters

Zoi Simopoulou. 2019. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Neither the title of this book nor this review can do justice to its scope and importance. Instead, I will draw out some of its main points.

The book is in three parts. Part 1 is an introduction to infant observation and a review of the literature. Part 2 is a detailed phenomenological analysis of the author’s encounters with five different children, and Part 3 is an examination of how an integration of psychoanalytic and existential sensibilities can provide a fertile ground for a way forward.

Overall, the book is a review of the way young children have been viewed by both existentialism and by psychoanalysis. When I say viewed, I mean

the way they have been regarded both theoretically and philosophically but also how they have been studied. It is about infant observation, or maybe we ought to say, 'infant observation'. I will say more about this in due course. The specific age group the author is referring to in this book is pre-school, age four to five, and the book is something of an integration of existentialism and psychoanalysis with each being used to enhance the other. Not surprisingly, phenomenology is the glue that holds them together. This is demonstrated in the first paragraph when the author says:

This writing speaks to the times that I stood by a child gazing silently and taken by the poignancy of what they had just said or done whilst also unable to grasp a meaning of it. This moment moves me and immobilises me. I am moved by the child's meaningfulness in a manner that feels almost concrete, physical, and enlivening. Awakened to something fresh and new, how do I begin to make sense of it? How do I stay true to its newness? How do I stay true to it, capture it without deadening it?

(p3)

This applies to all moments, not just those with children, although it is easy to forget this.

In our contact with children, often our own children, how many times have we been struck by how what they say and do is as mundane as it is profound? And how aware we are that our responses are likely to be woefully inadequate? Often, being quiet and giving full attention is literally the best – not the least worst – we can offer. As she says, how can we stay true to it without deadening it?

That it is possible to take a phenomenological approach to child development rests upon the simple fact that to be human means that one is or was, a child. The experience of having been a child is therefore known to everyone as an essential part of their existence. The use of the present tense here is deliberate because constructed meanings about the value of chronology allow adults to forget this.

As we know, psychoanalysis has written a lot about early experience, and the fact that early experience is so underrepresented in the existential therapy literature shows that many existential therapists do not share existential philosophy's interest in early experience. This would explain why only some existential training courses have a human development module and none have an infant observation module.

The author goes on in that first chapter to give a history of infant observation in psychoanalysis, noting that psychoanalysis has long been aware of the shortcomings of developing theory from such a research method. For example, how is one to ascertain the veracity of one's perceptions, given

the existential difference between the adult and the child? And what can be taken as consent? Also, as we know, most therapeutic theory is derived from a small, skewed sample of people who have come because of self-identified problems in living. Insights derived from infant observation, on the other hand, are derived from a sample of people who have not done this; they have no ‘problems’ as such. While this allows us to sidestep the danger of pathologising, we must remember that the main difference between ‘adults’ and ‘children’ is only chronology.

Moreover, as psychoanalysis also knows, the term infant observation itself is misleading because it implies spurious neutrality and objectivity. In fact, what is being ‘observed’ is not, and has never been, the so-called child but the relationship between the adult and child. And that while this is being reported on by both in different ways, it is only recorded by one – the adult. This means that what results is a hybrid of extraordinary complexity.

In our work with children even more than with adults we need to be alert to the danger that what we take as evidence will often resemble our unexamined assumptions. This leads to a self-reinforcing cycle of delusion in which we unwittingly plant the evidence, and then discover it as if for the first time and maintain that it ‘proves’ a (favourite) theory. Most case studies are like this, especially those done for a course. As the author says, “[How does the existential] reveal itself in the child’s relationships with others including myself as someone who arrived in search of it?” (p6).

At all times Heidegger’s notion of being as being-in-relation underlies the author’s thinking about her being with the children, and this is where rigorous phenomenological practice comes in. She says,

...the space to explore the existential [is] fluidly located between the child and myself[...]. In the course of our time together, we met each other encountering the existential, playing out these encounters in imaginative ways and symbolic languages. The existential did not emerge as a question per se but was embodied in[...]. the way they were present and in the relationship that we formed together. It emerged elusive as a quality, a shade or a nuance embedded in a movement, a voice, or a gaze. Along with the body, time and space emerged implicated in children’s relationship with the existential.

(p6)

This emphasis on the being-with echoes Laing (1967: 15) when he says: “Even facts become fictions without adequate ways of seeing ‘the facts’. We do not need theories so much as the experience that is the source of the theory.”

The literature review continues her examination of what ‘existential’ refers to in the context of the book. Rather than defining it, she echoes both the title of the book and the example given above, in that both the existential and children are similar in that they are encountered as they currently are, rather than defined. They are perhaps both, in Gendlin’s (1996) sense, beyond words. Existential for her, then, is more of an approach than a discrete body of knowledge and is therefore closely allied to phenomenology. This is also the way she uses psychoanalysis.

The literature review is wide but also impressively perceptive and nuanced. She includes many writers familiar to readers of this Journal but also many that are not. She covers existential philosophy as well as the educational, health and psychotherapy literature. An existential approach to education is one that allows the space for all participants to engage with the existential process of meaning-making but also allows both the child and the teacher an active presence in this reciprocal relationship. The role of the existential therapist is analogous. Existential therapists could do well to familiarise themselves with the educational literature.

The review of relational psychoanalysis is particularly useful for existential readers because it draws out the long-standing phenomenological current within psychoanalysis that is manifested by the theory being regarded as something that can be used to think with rather than something that is applied like a set of rules or a template. This is the way the author uses the theory; she holds it firmly but lightly and the either/or is replaced with the both/and. In its incorporation of phenomenology and hermeneutics, relational psychoanalysis then becomes an intersubjective process in which the analyst imagines rather than knows, and the analyst’s interpretation is seen as an inevitable communication of her current understanding. It has an authority, but not an objective natural scientific authority. It is a phenomenological authority and as such is open for discussion. Winnicott (1991) has written extensively about the value of play throughout life, and the way he uses his ideas like transitional object and potential space are an example of the way he uses theory. A more explicit dialectic of psychoanalytic and existential thinking is found in both Laing’s work and later in Stolorow’s (2007, 2011) work on trauma.

The final part of the review puts existentialism, phenomenology and psychoanalysis together and adds a feminist perspective, with its attention to being and meaning as fluid and ongoing, to infant observation.

She returns to the theme of the first paragraph, that child observation must be closely attentive to the child’s emotional responses, which are not translated into formal language but are embodied in play and communicated intersubjectively. In infant observation, the adult’s own struggle to articulate experiences (which are perhaps beyond words anyway) is attuned to the

child's struggle with preverbal affective states. This struggle with language is just as present in adults as it is in children. It is just that adults think they know what words represent whereas children know they do not. Like everything, it is a mystery to be grappled with. Although it is so that adults inevitably introduce children to language, children also continually remind us as adults what it is like not to have language. But this is not automatic, it can only happen if we are open enough to stay tuned in to our own embodied (childlike) inarticulacy. The author notes that the fact that English is her second language makes her attuned to her own inarticulacy, and therefore to the children's.

While Part 1 is a more traditional literature review, Part 2 is a truly original piece of reflexive phenomenological research. It takes the form of a writing inquiry about the author's encounters with five children as these emerged during a six-month 'observation' at a nursery.

In terms of the methodology, the ideas of the unfairly neglected French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard on reverie (1971) and space (1969) form the foundation, although these are echoed, enhanced and reinforced psychoanalytically by the extensive and insightful work of both Bion (1970) and Ogden (1999), also on reverie. Winnicott's ideas on play (1991) are also invoked and his observation about the importance of the child's capacity to be alone in the presence of an other in play and the role of the other in this.

Each of the sections in this chapter is devoted to the author's encounters with one child and takes the form of a kind of meditative conversation between the child and the author, but written by the author. As such, the writing takes the form of a kaleidoscopic enquiry as different ideas, memories and associations blend to produce constantly moving and never complete images of meaning in a sometimes linear, sometimes non-linear, sometimes materially descriptive, often poetic, set of impressions of what it is like for the author to be with this child at this time, playing together in this way. Perhaps the last line or two should be hyphenated.

The children are personalised with names, but the names the author gives the children is a good illustration of this. It goes without saying that they are pseudonyms but for this account the author kept the first letter of the child's real name and then gave them other names, but not just any other name. She says:

The names of the children are pseudonyms but are more real to me than their real names which I cannot easily recall anymore. Their names are born out of my first impressions of them – impressions, imaginings, imprints, implicated in my unconscious.

(p87)

It is worth reflecting here why it is, as parents, we gave our children the names we did. What were we trying to say? Also interesting is what we, others and the children did with them subsequently.

Bachelard himself writes in a poetic way that makes him hard to quote out of context – like the children he must be encountered – but for him reverie is the product of the kind of solitude which is in the space between memory and imagination. For him, space is not just physical and imaginary, it is also relational and co-constructed, and to use a Winnicottian term, potential. Again, a bit like Gendlin's Focusing.

In this, it is not unlike free association and it is worth remembering that free association applies equally to analyst and analysand and in its purist form is just phenomenology in action. Like reverie, free association does not just come out of a space between memory and imagination: it generates memory and imagination. Moreover, play is the way the child free associates. Play is about wonder. I wonder if... What about if... How about if I put this with that... Play is how we discover the world and our relationship with it, it is about the relationship between the 'present-at-hand' and the 'ready-to-hand'. Heidegger (1962) says there are two ways of encountering objects. One way is to consider them as nearby, as 'present-at-hand' and the other as use-able, as 'ready-to-hand' (Adams, 2019:84), and as such they introduce us to ownership, to life skills and to temporality. Play is about how we learn; it is not just something we do between important things. As Einstein is alleged to have said, "It is child's play to understand theoretical physics compared to understanding child's play".

For Bachelard, childhood is a state of mind and reverie does not attempt to recount it in a linear fashion. Instead, it opens up images and associations without the demand of telling a coherent story. Moreover, a phenomenology of childhood is only possible by means of our reveries towards our own childhood, and it is through our own reveries of the child's reveries in her moments of solitude that we can get closer to the child's worlds. It is this that the author has tried to do in her writing research.

For Bachelard it is the phenomenological gaze which allows this uniqueness to breathe. Another way of saying this is that there is something paradoxical about the existential. If you go looking for it you won't find it, or if you do it will be a rather depleted, captured version, a bit like a wild animal in a zoo or, even worse, a stuffed animal in a case. But by being phenomenological and attending reflexively we allow the existential to surface in the everyday. The poetic has to emerge out of the concrete, it cannot be forced out. It is this that the author is aware of when she talks, at the beginning of this review, about the child's meaningfulness.

Ideas derived from, and evoked by, Bachelard as well as Camus, Laing, Fernando Pessoa and others weave in and out of her writing.

The third part revisits and reinforces some of the points made earlier.

One of these is that it asks that psychoanalytic child observation gives more space for children's existential questions to emerge and she provides a research method for this. It needs to be added here that existentialism could do well to give some space to these questions as well.

Another point is made by Bachelard, that the relationship between phenomenology, existentialism and psychoanalysis is a dialectic between exaggeration and reduction. Whereas phenomenology can help us to generate options, psychoanalysis can help us to make sense of them, to put them into an order. Humans are patternmakers, we make narrative; we must do something with the relentless flow of experiences, otherwise we drown. Perhaps this does not have to be a specifically psychoanalysis; a rigorous existential analysis could also do this, except that what psychoanalysis can bring is many years of wondering about the details of an individual's life and imaginings. Another way this dialectic can be posed is that whereas phenomenology and existentialism take a broader, macro, almost anthropological view of human life, psychoanalysis takes a micro, private and psychological view. Moreover, that these two are not mutually exclusive. They have much to offer each other.

While some of the content may be unfamiliar and therefore challenging, this book also has much to offer readers of this Journal and is to be recommended.

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