Young Children's Thinking: An Interpretation from Phenomenology by David K. Kennedy, Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Kentucky, 1986.

Reviewed by

David G. Smith

University of Lethbridge

As David Kennedy says, "each image of the human has its 'child'" (p. 53). Pedagogically speaking, the question of children must be taken up self-reflectively by adults. Such a project may be all the more urgent given

> the ever-increasing hegemony of the public school ... and its academic instrumentalism [which] are, rather than a manifestation of real concern for children, a sign of their expendability in an increasingly adultomorphic culture, and their increasing relegation, like the elderly and the insane, to collective institutional settings. (p. 235)

> Educational thought must, in order to know its object, seek the onto-epistemological grounds of childhood—that is, take up the educational relation with the child hermeneutically before it does so instrumentally. (p. 226)

> A setting [the school] which is a reconstituted, separated, specialized, instrumental world apart will embody in all its dimensions just that form of consciousness which so sets it apart. (p. 238)

We need instead "to understand the child apart from our designs upon him" (p. 254), which means learning to recover the child in us, thereby restoring the essential, deep conversation between old and young, a conversation analogous to aesthetic and religious understanding.

To summarize the thesis this way does the work a certain violence, because the question of the pedagogic relation and formal educational practice only comes at the end of a long journey through historical and literary studies, philosophical argumentation, phenomenological description (along Schutzian lines), and psychological theory. Basically, I take Kennedy's questions to be these: Because conceptions of childhood are always culturally and historically conditioned,

what are the antecedent auspices of current modes of thinking about children? Second, how would an inquiry into the nature and significance of the *lived experience* of the young child bear on an inquiry into adult epistemology? A claim is made (p. 273) that the study uncovers *the* (?) onto-epistemological basis for a philosophy of childhood which is a necessary precursor for any philosophy of education, as well as for a psychological and philosophical understanding of the human. The central conclusion is that "the perceptual and noetic modes of the young child have an ontological and epistemological significance beyond their status as forms preliminary to adult epistemology" (p. 274). That is, the child does not just prefigure some end-state of adult maturity. While there *is* a qualitative difference in *epistemological style* between adult and child exemplified most clearly in children's play where there is a fundamental unity of knower and known, and even though children move developmentally away from this early essential unity, it always remains as a *nucleus of childhood* in the adult in the form of spiritual and aesthetic aspiration. Hermeneutically, what makes understanding between children and adults possible is a recovery or reappropriation "on a higher level" by adults of that form of early childhood experience. Hermeneutical understanding of the adult-child relation works to restore the dialectical unity in that relation. It is a unity lost in modern Western thought because of the "dualistic split within our idea of reason or more explicitly, of reason in relation to nature" (p. 53).

Again, such a summary in no way does justice to the full density and complexity of Kennedy's work. I found the first chapter, "The Young Child in History and Method," to be particularly helpful. A history of the *image* (an interesting choice of word) of the young child in Western thought is offered followed by an historically oriented discussion of the philosophical assumptions underlying the methodology of the Western sciences. It is argued that such a methodology is inappropriate for the study of the child because the child is not "an object in itself" but is ontologically linked to the world of the adult. Kennedy works this out as making the case for a phenomenological study of childhood, an approach which affords an understanding of the way the adult as interrogator is in turn interrogated by the child as subject.

To be honest, I found the phenomenological aspect of the study disappointing. The use of Schutz's analysis of *provinces of meaning* and *tensions of consciousness* to compare the life worlds of young children and adults results in a highly abstract

discussion which left me wondering about the value of this kind of phenomenological theorizing. Here is an example of the kind of thing Kennedy is moved to say: "child's play both expresses and represents the chiasmic structure of consciousness and contributes to the articulation, functional separation and hierarchization of the intentional field" (p. 272). The problem here is not just one of linguistic style; more fundamentally it is a question of what one understands to be carried in language. On this point I would say the thesis suffers from one noticeable absence, which is an acquaintance with the literature of deconstructionism. This has pedagogical implications as well. Deconstruction turns attention away from the formal declarations embodied in writing to the question of what is at work in the writing itself.

The deconstructive refusal to allow written declarations to make a claim to final meaning is in the service of the freedom of the word which in a post-Wittgensteinian world means in the service of life itself. Otherwise, writing is instrumental in what Ulmer (1985) calls the *imperial dispensation* of the Western logocentric tradition: It reflects the desire to say everything that could be said. In religious terms, we might call this the *idolatry of concepts*. Erny's (1973) excellent phenomenology of the Black African child is quite different in tone, substance, and direction from Kennedy's phenomenology presented here, which again only shows the deconstructive point, namely that how we understand our life with children is a matter open to discussion. Children are the ones who suffer most when, because of our rationalistic abstractive tendencies (even in the name of phenomenology!), we violate what children already understand to be true about the world, namely that there is a discursive unity at the heart of it which cannot be understood by reason alone. Of course, this is exactly what Kennedy would want to affirm, but the challenge is in how to say it in a way that shows it, which is the challenge of all good phenomenological writing. There's a vast and important difference between "using a phenomenological approach" to study a topic, and speaking and writing about a topic phenomenologically. But that is another story, and I in no way want to detract from the kind of insights that are positively and powerfully afforded through Kennedy's historical and philosophical work. For example,

> as Western literature since the Romantic revolt demonstrates, the high subject-world separation of modern Western consciousness is haunted by a sense of a lost unity, which, for the overdeveloped or separated ego, manifests demonically as a "heart of

darkness" as well as in a nostalgia for childhood; all of which suggests that the modern ideal of "objectivity" is not an end-state, a form of cultural-individual maturity, but is in dialectical tension, containing, as it were, the seeds of its own undoing and overcoming. (p. 179)

There is implicit here a critique of all of those *adultomorphic* end-state epistemologies (Piagetian, Kohlbergian) which dominate the field of education today. I have often wondered about the stubbornness of that domination, particularly in teacher education, and Kennedy helps me to understand it as an historically constructed response arising not only from a fear of the child within the adult, but also from a certain hubris coming from an appropriated Cartesian world view. What has transpired practically in teacher education, for example, has two aspects: on the one hand an insipid, sentimental *love of children* which is in fact a bansishment of children from authentic participation in the living stream of things, and on the other hand, in a paradoxical way, a lingering infantilism on the part of many adults working in the child care professions. Whether such a condition contains "the seeds of its own undoing and overcoming," as Kennedy suggests, is an interesting question: Philosophically, it is quite understandable; practically, the implications are deep, and there are strong political and social forces which will always resist it.

In chapter IV, Kennedy works out a kind of *archeology of adult consciousness* and in this way helps us with the task of educating ourselves as adults by moving us away from the *knowledge-ideal* implicit in the modern Western scientific view to a *recovery* of a different form of knowledge. In this new case, there is an appreciation of the coincidence of the sensible and the nonsensible, and a recognition of the self as being "grounded in an origin beyond itself, in a personal otherness out of the relation with which the self comes to understand itself" (p. 273). Here there is a heavy reliance on Merleau-Ponty as well as the more mystical writings of Marcel, Bachelard, and Schemman. Personally, I welcome this kind of recovery of the spiritual; it links up with the work of other important voices of the contemporary soul such as Matthew Fox, Thomas Berry, and Sean McDonaugh.

There is not much hope for the modern school in Kennedy's analysis because it is a place where children learn early to fragment their world, live separately from the life-stream of adult life, and reorder experience according to abstracted, superordinate modes of thinking. However, I think he is right in understanding the task ahead as a *hermeneutical* one. Simply

deschooling society is not the answer; we must struggle to reorient the work of the school along lines more faithful to a phenomenological understanding, not just of the child but of what is at stake in the adult-child relation. So, for example, the emphasis must be on the intersubjective nature of all understanding, with an acceptance of the profound pedagogic responsibility any adult bears when children are truly borne. Similarly, the *world* of the school must be understood as sharing a unity with the world as a whole. It is not some isolated place separated from the real world, a place of preparation for reality. (In Norway, under the leadership of Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, a woman, children have their own official ombudsman who assists them in making meaningful contact with adult life through job creation projects, telephone hotlines for children being abused, and so forth. These are good signs.) Curricularly, we can teach children to understand formal knowledge as a kind of language game which is forever in play, and as such always open for children's full participation as discussants and enquirers. For this to happen, I suspect teachers will need more basic training in the development of interpretive ability. Hermeneutics for everyone?

This is a dense, rich, complex thesis. If (when?) published as a book it could mark an important and well-grounded point in the emergence of a new paradigm for understanding the place of the young in our midst. As an educator I know such understanding is badly needed.

References

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