Book Review:
Fiachra Long, *Essays in the Phenomenology of Learning The Challenge of Proximity* (Routledge, 2022; copyright 2023)
202 pp, ISBN: 9781032245744 (HB), 9781003279327 (e-book)
£104.00 (HB), £31.19 (e-book)

Review by Pádraig Hogan*

This elegantly-written and probing book pursues an important task of retrieval. It restores to the notion of human learning the richness that it has lost incrementally in recent decades, both through the huge expansion of on-line learning and an international educational policymaking that becomes increasingly led by competitive rankings. Long draws attention in his opening pages to newly routinised form of learning where expertise 'floats by on a thousand platforms' but where the 'nearness' of teaching and learning is bypassed; where students become more distant from what they learn, even while learning performances, as measured by conventional means, might continue to improve.

Against this background the nine essays in the book are a series of enquiries into the kind of learning that really matters, that yields a rich sense of selfhood, which in turn advances a capacity to contribute fruitfully to society. The essays can be read as stand-alone pieces or as contributory perspectives to a larger argument. Each essay draws on the work of a major thinker whose writings have shed light on essential, but often overlooked, aspects of human knowing. These include, Socrates, Husserl, Heidegger (2

essays), Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, Donald W. Winnicott and Axel Honneth. Not all of these thinkers could be called phenomenologists, but the writings of each are concerned to uncover an original awareness of self and of self's relations to an encountered world. It is this concern, the author points out, that Husserl formally identified as phenomenology (p.4). "The aim of a phenomenology of learning," Long explains, "is not to generalise from a particular experience but to reveal its essential character" (p.39). This thought-provoking remark suggests that recognition by practitioners and resonance with practitioners, rather than empirical evidence in a scientific sense, would be the hallmark of phenomenological forms of research in education.

Each of the essays explores one or more aspects of "proximity" – i.e. of what brings learning closest to the fullness of experience. The argument here goes roughly along the following lines. Where learning is linked to the immediacy of the learner's own experience the learner can get beyond the unattached character of most routine learning and be awakened to a "proximate contact with the frontiers of his own world, with a view to his ultimate engagement in society" (p.19).

A review such as this cannot do justice to all of the essays in the book, but by selecting a few characteristic examples and commenting on these, the reader will hopefully gather a flavour of the book's content and style. The examples I've selected are: "Socrates and the Proximity of Address" (Ch.1); " Husserl and the Proximity of Encounter" (Ch.3); "Heidegger and the Proximity of Care" (Ch.4).

Beginning with Socrates, it may seem strange to include this ancient figure in any bringing-together of phenomenological perspectives. Yet the Socratic

dialogues illuminate for investigation, and in fresh and unforced ways, the underlying inner landscape that gives human experience its everyday bearings and orientations. Husserl's successive investigations struggle recurrently with intractable methodological questions in attempting to accomplish a comparable task of drawing into close proximity what is regularly overlooked or bypassed. Long selects the *Lysis* dialogue as the starting point for his investigation of the distinctively Socratic. In the engagement of Socrates and Lysis (*Lysis*, 208d ff), the teenage Lysis is eager to tell Socrates of the restrictions his parents impose on his freedom. As the dialogue proceeds Lysis quickly becomes absorbed by the fetching questions of Socrates. The younger man's views on love, friendship and freedom are deftly elicited and made explicit. When Socrates turns his attention to Lysis's friend Menexenus for a while, Lysis continues to follow with keen interest, but he also begins to realise during this interval that the views he had eagerly contributed himself might be half-baked, or ill-founded. This unsettling of Lysis's preconceptions is educationally decisive, as its consequences place Lysis himself on a more fertile path. As Long writes: "He [Lysis] has begun to evaluate his life and he uses Socrates as a teacher and guide to help him to do this. He has decided to grapple with large questions and to set conventional answers aside. He has discovered that the truth lies much closer to him than he had thought before" (p.9). This does not mean that the normal subjects on a curriculum should yield pride of place to a preoccupation with the learner's self-knowledge. Rather, as Long points out, learning becomes understood as an active encounter or interplay in which participants' sense of selfhood is involved, as distinct from any transmission of ready-made knowledge. "The teaching of English, History, Chemistry or Biology becomes a platform that reveals the limitations of

learners to themselves" (p.11). What is said of the limitations of different learners here could equally be said of the particular promise, or strengths, of each. Long describes such pedagogical encounters not as something rare, but as "epiphanies" that are induced by good teaching "in classrooms up and down the country." And he concludes by stressing what makes such learning significant and enduring: "Old items of knowledge now suddenly achieve new depth in the life of the child, their profiles altered, their meaning radically transformed, even though, all things considered, nothing has factually changed. In such cases, a moment of address has become a moment of encounter where the insight that this 'close' teaching has inspired is grasped and treasured" (p.20). The uncovering of vital aspects of an ever-emergent sense of identity is enabled to proceed fruitfully.

Turning to the second example, encounter becomes a central theme in Chapter 3, which deals mainly with the contributions of Husserl. Long rightly credits Husserl, and his mentor Brentano, with highlighting the *relational* nature of human consciousness. This historic shift to a new and different focus helped philosophical researches to break free of a long and restricting preoccupation with the solitary Cartesian ego as the primary source of secure knowledge. As Long puts it, "this focus began to show that the ego does not operate at a distance from objects but is already embedded in a subject-object relation" (p.46). Pursuing this key point further he writes: "Against Kant, Husserl will point to the way consciousness in its operation is already connected to the things in themselves. Perception is already marked by this connection and so to perceive is not simply to observe from a distance" (p.49). So being embedded in a web of relations – with people, things, ideas etc – means that we are already drawn toward some things and not others, albeit in ways that are unreflective, or pre-reflective, as

distinct from being critically self-reflective. The "natural attitude" of from a distance would be thus a refined, or secondary way, rather than a primary way, of experiencing, as all forms of experience, scientific and otherwise, arise in the first placed from consciousness as a form of relation.

Yet it was observation from a distance – methodical and detached, critical and objective – that made possible the rise of the natural sciences, and of empirical research more widely. Long identifies here a lingering tension in Husserl's own philosophical efforts. On the one hand he was keen that phenomenology would succeed in allowing the fullness of the lived world of human experience (*Lebenswelt*), including refined forms such as scientific experience, to disclose itself. On the other hand, Husserl was continually attracted by the notions of scientific mastery and precision. His aspiration here was that phenomenology would itself be a systematic, transcendental pursuit; i.e. that it would show a similar rigour as Kant's investigations of conditions of possibility. Long deftly identifies the difficulties these tensons present if Husserl's phenomenology is to be helpful in advancing an understanding of educational experience (pp.36-37, 57-58). He also stresses however that teachers have much that is valuable to gather from Husserl's investigations. This includes the insights that self-reflection does not necessarily yield self-transparency, that living knowledge provides the basis for all sciences, and that "learning without existential encounter risks failure" (p.55). Arguably the most important conclusion Long draws from his review of Husserl's work however is that "the enemy to education is not puzzlement, confusion, or obscurity" on the part of students. Rather, "the enemy is indifference to the lifeworld, becoming bogged down in forms of learning that have lost all reference to living experience" (p.61).

Proceeding now to the third example, Long remarks that Heidegger's writings on education are sparse, and that this is a pity (p.67) as these writings are replete with challenging ideas for educational thought and action. Among such ideas are: that human being (*Dasein*) is the kind of being for whom that very being is an issue, so that care, or concern (*Sorge*) of one kind or another is a basic feature of being human; that human being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*) is from the start a being-with (*Mitsein*) as distinct from being a solitary consciousness; that entities can show themselves differently depending on the kind of access we have to them; that understanding anything – however well or poorly – always already involves interpretation; that being concernfully absorbed in our dealings is more primary than relating in more objective ways to things that are present as entities in the world; (Heidegger calls the former readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) and the latter presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*)).

This sample could be considerably lengthened, but it provides enough to show something of the continuity and the differences between Heidegger and Husserl. In reviewing Heidegger's criticisms of Husserl, Long highlights the points that Husserl's phenomenology left the being of the self largely unexamined, that it remained too uncritical about human tendencies to self-deception, and that it retained the "rational animal" conception of being human, with its unity of mind, body and soul, that was characteristic of traditional metaphysics. These tendencies would incline or confine philosophy to Cartesian conceptions of selfhood and to the prevalence of notions like that of a stable, or fixed self. In particular, they would provide few ways of recognising the Heideggerian insight that everyday-being-in-the-world is, "proximally and for the most part", an acquiescence, a falling

into conformity with others, in uncritical ways of thinking, doing and acting (*das Verfallen*).

Such uncritical ways of being would hide from persons their ownmost possibilities, those that belong to the "mineness" (*Jemeinigkeit*) of each and that cannot be taken over by someone else. Where the dominant kind of learning in school and college becomes a partner, albeit unwittingly, in furthering such acquiescence, education loses its way. A concern for authenticity is an important educational matter and Heidegger has much to say, in a formal sense, about authentic selfhood. As Long summarises the point: "Teachers must initially support the learner's attempt to manage the ready-to-hand features of their world. Nevertheless teachers also need to promote the child's futural being and the *potentiality-for-being* that belongs to the child's ownmost self" (p.78).

Despite the many pages Heidegger devotes to "authentic potentiality-for-being", Long calls attention to the point that his investigations lack a vision of the good – a lack, it might be said, that became gravely evident in Heidegger's own political conduct in the early 1930's. While this omission is unfortunate, Long adds, the merits of Heidegger's contributions still stand: "While Heidegger unfortunately does not provide us with any such vision, he at once highlights the importance to us of conventional thoughts and behaviours together with our need to find an authentic way through these" (p.79). Seeking such an authentic way remains a perennial and defining challenge for all educational practitioners, including educational researchers.

The essays in the book provide the essential ingredients for pedagogy, for educational leadership and for educational policy-making, to rise to this

challenge. The incisiveness they offer stands in sharpest contrast to the superficiality of an international educational thought and action that has self-forgetfully allowed itself to become harnessed to a busy drive to “gain the whole world.”

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