

A REVIEW OF *FOLK PHENOMENOLOGY*

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Folk Phenomenology: Education, Study, and the Human Person

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Samuel Rocha, author of *Folk Phenomenology: Education, Study, and the Human Person*, spent many of his intellectual development years honing his oratorical skills on debate teams. It is not surprising, therefore, to find this book to be an act of rhetoric, not in the narrow sense of the arts of persuasion, but in the broader sense of rhetoric found in the works of Kenneth Burke (1970), Giambattista Vico (1990) and twentieth century Vico scholar Ernesto Grassi (2001).

Burke's theory of *dramatistic* language offers a way into understanding Rocha's sometimes esoteric language as ontological rather than epistemological, or as action proceeding from mind and brain rather than from the brain only (Burke 1970). Burke and Rocha have this in common: their work is not directly responsive to questions like "What do I see when I see this object?" but rather to questions like "From what, through what, to what, does this particular form proceed?" or "What goes with what in this structure of terms?" (Burke 1970, p. 39).

Regarding those questions, this book comes from Rocha's deep Catholic faith, through his ontological commitment to the *real* and his adherence to phenomenology and its methods. The work aims at an explication of the *being* of education, study and the human person. Although some of Rocha's language appears as theology, it is not directly theological. Yet in clarifying where his words come from and how he is using them, we can better see how they serve in representing Rocca's version of an ontological turn in the field of curriculum studies.

Giambattista Vico was an Italian anti-Cartesian philosopher who wrote in the generation after Descartes, decrying the mathematization of all knowledge and the narrow individualism of Cartesian thought. Descartes, he said, ignored tradition, i.e. the conversation of the community of learned persons over centuries in the West, back to the time of Homer. These myriad conversations are the stuff of what Vico called “topical philosophy” which, he held, fundamentally differs from Cartesian, or “rational philosophy” (Grassi, 1969).

Vico’s argument against Cartesianism was based on his notion of *ingenium*, his term for the human capacity for invention or construction. He argued one cannot formulate scientific conclusions as deductions from some “first truth” as any first truth is a product of *ingenium* or human ingenuity, that is, from history, literature, law, medicine, the arts, religion, i.e., the humanities. For Vico, human constructions, and the *ingenium* that makes them, constitute the ground of all knowledge. In a sense, Vico was an effective critic of Comte and positivism in the social sciences a century before the emergence of Comte and positivism (Rickman, 1969). It is from this orientation, that is, Rocha’s Catholicism, and the rhetorical theories of Burke, Vico and Grassi that I interpret *Folk Phenomenology: Education, Study and the Human Person*. What Vico called “topical philosophy” he also named “rhetoric.” Grassi clarified this in his book *Rhetoric as Philosophy* (Grassi 2001). When Rocha says “Art precedes metaphysics,” he is echoing Vico’s notion of *ingenium* preceding philosophy and science.

Rocha is a professor in philosophy of education, a teacher, a musician, a researcher, a writer, and a Catholic living out the tradition of St. Francis of Assisi¹ and St. Bonaventure². In short, he is a Franciscan, a specific kind of Catholic who grounds his being in desire, love, beauty, action, truth, journey, the whole, and engagement in the life of the three persons of the Trinity. These elements are always just below the surface of *Folk Phenomenology*, and can be detected in much of the richest thinking that surfaces in the text. For example, Rocha’s notion of person finds its origins in the narrative of the Trinity—the three persons of God who Catholics believe are essentially related to each other in love. This teaching was found by the 13th century Franciscan theologian Bonaventure to be the basis of Christian life, and the model for the belief that persons in relation are the core of the common good Rocha seeks (Delio 2001). This is a very different and more straightforward view of the common good than that taken by John Dewey, for example, in the *Public and its Problems* (Dewey, 1940).³ His understanding of the common good is far closer to that of the Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain as reflected in his book, *The Person and*

the Common Good (Maritain, 1973). Understanding these features of the book may help one grasp the élan of Rocha's thought. Kenneth Burke developed a similar line of thought when he found the Trinity to be a design that underlies the linguistic situation (Burke 1970, p. 29).

Vico's and Grassi's notion of rhetoric can help clarify three features that appear early in Rocha's book: first, the claim that art precedes metaphysics; second, the phrase "the folkloric reversal"; and third, the book's title "Folk Phenomenology." First, when Rocha says art precedes metaphysics he is making almost the same claim that Vico did against Descartes when he said that the human ingenuity that makes something precedes all science and all philosophy. Second, Descartes, by beginning his philosophy with a first undeniable truth started at the wrong end of the spectrum of being, and had nothing to offer ethics, politics, art, religion or anything that engages the passions, the loves, fears, and hatreds of human persons. Rocha postulates and describes what he calls the folkloric reversal early in the book as one instance of phenomenology's setting aside the abstract metaphysics of the Western tradition and going back to the things themselves. The move is very much like Vico's reversal of Descartes (Grassi, 2001). Third, when Rocha calls *Folk Phenomenology* a meditation on the real he is describing persons in a tradition of speaking and listening, reading and writing in their own time and place as well as across generations. He is referring to conversations about living and real things grasped through memory, imagination and ingenuity (*ingenium*). In this way, Rocha is enacting and participating in what Vico and Grassi call *topics*. In other words, Rocha is performing rhetoric in its broadest sense. The reason for this rather lengthy digression is that rhetoric, in this broad sense, does not aim at certainty, but at probability; not statistical probability, but at the verisimilitude embedded in the art of popular discourse, that is, in art, in what is made by the ingenuity of human action and thought (Grassi, 2001). Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's work *The Roots of Thinking* (2010) serves as a powerful endorsement of Vico's position that making precedes knowing. Sheets-Johnstone, a philosophical anthropologist, shows how the study of tool-making among early hominids evolved into language and thinking, eventually leading to the evolution of Homo Sapiens. Her argument is a highly persuasive endorsement of both Vico and Rocha.

In terms of Vico's rhetoric, *Folk Phenomenology: Education, Study and the Human Person* is an invitation offered by Samuel Rocha to participate in a conversation with him about education as he enacts his phenomenological skills to determine the *being* of education, the *subsistence* of study, and the *existence* of the human person. In the

end, the book becomes an ontology of education. He searches not for the meaning of education, but for the *being* of education. He writes, "Even before metaphysics begins, and long after it ends, there is the naked presence of what is around, what is there."

Rocha imaginatively constructs a *trinitarian lens*, a heuristic device that provides structure to his thought. When we seek being, he says, we involve ourselves with things that exist, with energy that persists, and with being, the largest category within which existence and subsistence are situated. In Rocha's dynamic trinity, as one seeks being one sees existence and senses subsistence, all three in constant interactions as one whole. As the reader absorbs this structure, the book is revealed more and more clearly as an engagement with the *being* of education.

It is useful to consider how Rocha uses these three terms. Being, he says is the widest category of things. He says, "In order to be something instead of nothing, a thing must be within something." That something in which everything is contained is what Rocha calls *being*. Subsistence, he says cannot be seen, as it is the energy that is the very heart of being, which holds being together; it is the place of Eros, desire, the search, the imagination, insight, *ingenium*, judgment, deliberation, decision. Existence, he says, refers to things in the world, things we see and hear, touch, taste and smell. He considers existence, subsistence, and being as distinct yet necessary to the whole of being through their interaction.

The ontological task then is to seek being, to sense subsistence, and to see existence. In the actual sequence of beginning this task these three are reversed; the seeker attends to what is present to her, and then realizes in her body the erotic desire to be immersed in being. Thus the search begins with Rocha's claim, "Art precedes metaphysics," a claim that is fundamental to the *folkloric reversal*. Again, he writes, "Even before metaphysics begins, and long after it ends, there is the naked presence of what is around, what is there." This appears to be Rocha's way of working with Husserl's return to the things themselves, or in Rocha's language, "the real." It may also be seen as a reiteration of Vico's claim that we can only understand what we make (Vico 2000). Seeing, sensing, and seeking being, however, are not mere chronological steps; they are constantly interacting with each other in the task of achieving understanding of the real. As I read Rocha, being is the reality in which we all participate, and attention to ourselves individually and communally enriches our experience of this participation. He makes this point explicitly on page 26, "Being is the sea, and we are within it, pulled by the subsistent tides and forces,

existing as an embodied sponge, always gushing with excess—saturated with and within Being, alive with energy and spirit.”

Rocha offers several corollaries to his notion of being. One of these corollaries comes out of the difference in Spanish between two words that translate into English as to know: *saber*, and *conocer*. *Saber* means to know about something as in knowing the rules of baseball; *conocer* means to understand someone or something. This difference may be further informed by the biblical sense of *know* as in Genesis Chapter 4 verse 1: “Adam knew his wife Eve, and she conceived and bore Cain.” The Spanish formulation reverses the dictum that to love someone you must first know them. This reversal says to know someone you must first love them. Love constitutes the very subsistence of being and existence. The primacy of desire and love is ever-present in this text.

As he moves into his direct discussion of education, Rocha asks us to enter into the process of being astonished by what appears to be obvious. He asks, “What is education?” Rather than stock answers, which often enough devolve into talk about schooling, Rocha follows William James’ *Some Problems in Philosophy* (James, 1996), challenging us to think of essence, of contexts within which the word education appears, its existence, its subsistence, its being. Using the trinitarian lens, he focuses on the *Being* of education. He complains, somewhat cavalierly, that education theorists never account for the *being* of education, a situation that he works to change by considering the *being* of education as the context for study and the human person (p. 89).

Rocha overstates his critique of other educators when he says they *never* account for the *being* of education. Robert Maynard Hutchins in *The Great Conversation* (Hutchins, 1991) and *The Higher Learning in America* (Hutchins, 1952) treated this issue from a classical humanist perspective; Joseph Schwab, a biologist, did the same in his structure of the disciplines work in *Science, Curriculum, and Liberal Education* (Schwab, 1978); Paul Goodman’s *Compulsory Mis-education and the Community of Scholars* attempted to persuade college age students to drop out of college and find education elsewhere (Goodman 1966); Philip Jackson’s text on John Dewey, *What is Education?* does a similar thing from the perspective of progressivism (Jackson, 2011); and then there is the work of Ivan Illich, which Rocha draws from, *Deschooling Society* and *Tools for Conviviality*, which is written from a Marxist/Humanist perspective (Illich, 2013 & 1973). In fact, many scholars in the field of curriculum studies began their work with the maxim, “Don’t let schooling get in the way of

your education.” Rocha is correct, however, in that his approach differs from most, if not all, those others who have addressed the issue of the essence of education, just as each of these others has also addressed this question from his own distinct perspective.

The distinguishing difference of Rocha’s approach is that much of his work derives from the philosophy of religion of the Catholic phenomenologist Jean-luc Marion (1991, 2002, 2007). When curriculum studies scholars pay attention to religion, they tend to do so from the Religious Studies perspective, focusing on knowing *about* religion (*saber*). Rocha, as a scholar who is fully engaged with the Catholic tradition, has focused on knowing (*conocer*) religion from a theological perspective (Rocha, 2017). This orientation also underlies his ontological approach to education.

Rocha’s manner in this book is, however, not doctrinal, but rather apophatic. The term *apophatic* is the adjectival form of *apophasis*, an ancient practice of some individual Christians and some churches of approaching God through a process of saying or even singing what God is not. Apophasis is sometimes called the negative way. When the list of things that God is not becomes overwhelming, the practitioner acknowledges she is in complete darkness when it comes to God. From that darkness one can experience God who is beyond words, who can be known only in silence. Rocha, then, is attempting to get to the essence of education by saying what it is not (Smith 2004). Theologically, Rocha appears to have achieved that in that he self-consciously says nothing directly about God or theology. The closest he gets to doing so with regard to education is his recognition that the essence of education is, in the end, a mystery. The resemblance of this approach to the phenomenological reductions is striking.

In no way is Rocha naïve about the possible fruitlessness of the process in which he wants us to involve ourselves. He recognizes that possibility, and asks us to acknowledge the presence of mystery in the inquiry to the point that we may find there is no point—that we might find ourselves inquiring into the known-unknown. At this point, Rocha invokes awe and reverence in the presence of this mystery we call education. This point calls to mind the vastly underrated, yet ever more timely, book of Paul Woodruff, *Reverence* (Woodruff 2001). Woodruff thinks of reverence this way:

Reverence begins in a deep understanding of human limitations;
from this grows the capacity to be in awe of whatever we believe

lies outside our control—God, truth, justice, nature, even death. The capacity for awe, as it grows, brings with it the capacity for respecting fellow human beings, flaws and all. This in turn fosters the ability to be ashamed when we show moral flaws exceeding the normal human allotment. (2001 p. 3)⁴

As this core description of reverence makes clear, Woodruff finds nothing essentially religious in reverence. There are religious people who are quite irreverent, for example, suicide bombers and televangelists who advocate assassinations. Woodruff is talking about reverence as a political virtue, a virtue necessary for people to live together in community. Grassi, however, would insist that reverence is both political and religious, as he considers the two inseparable since both are constituted by symbols and language that support communities in their need to make a home for themselves in an otherwise chaotic cosmos (Grassi 2001). Rocha would agree with Grassi on this as his book has both a political and a theological dimension.

Modern philosophy with a Cartesian orientation offers no response to the fact that we humans do not rationally know who we are, where we are from, and where we are heading. These things are utterly beyond rationality. Paying deep and meditative attention to this reality induces the capacity for *wonder, awe, respect*, and ironically, the *shame* that Woodruff alludes to. This, then, becomes the point of reverence in education: to induce a sense of wonder, awe, respect, and shame in relationship to the cosmos, individual persons, the community, and the ultimate *beyond* of our existence. This is significant for a sound reading of Rocha's text. There are theological convictions underlying this work, but it is helpful to follow Rocha's line of thought ontologically. He argues that a rational or ideological claim on the nature of education merely tames education, which, as mystery, is wild and wide open, demanding reverence and love. Thus he calls for the re-enchantment of education. He calls on philosophers of education to dwell in the known-unknown and through study to resist the temptation to achieve quick and simple certainties.

Rocha's call for an apophatic ontology would downplay but not eliminate the contrary approach to ontology, which would state clear claims about the nature of education. When he addresses education, study, and the human person, Rocha becomes strongly apophatic, i.e. often searching for education, study, and the human person by saying what these three phenomena are not. At this point he develops more fully the place of Eros as subsistent within the trinity of being,

subsistence and existence. Eros holds the trinitarian image together. This image facilitates the understanding of existence, subsistence and being in the large context within which one sees education. “We resist”, he says on page 22, “Whatever seems to trivialize who we are.” Rocha is referring here to the attempt to make scientific claims about education, study and the person in psychology and the social sciences.

So, education is not psychology, it is not what social science tells us, it is not what school administrators advertise it to be, it is not what many educational researchers claim it to be, it is not preparation for life or for a job, it is not teaching. In the end, Rocha says, education is serious, mysterious, sacred, divine, ever not yet present, yet desired, sought for, and as such, education is tragic, requiring that we face the tragic for what it is. Facing tragedy, he says, brings out the love for what education is: undefinable, yet dynamic, always with us, challenging us not to mistake the part for the whole. The influence of Unamuno’s *Tragic Sense of Life* (2007)⁵ is palpable, particularly in Rocha’s sense of the inseparability of tragedy and love.

When he turns his trinitarian lens to the topic of study, Rocha shifts his emphasis from the overarching category of *being* to the energy of *subsistence*. Etymologically, to subsist means *to stand under* and there is a range of interpretations of the term among philosophers. As we have seen, Rocha interprets subsistence as the energy that unites and sustains being and existence. In the case of study, he understands subsistence as love, for love drives study to unflinchingly seek *being* that embraces the student as a growing reality here, there, within, and beyond. Study done right, in his way of thinking, is always erotic. It is not tied to school or the fulfilling of assignments; it is driven by what the body experiences as loving and persistent pursuit. That does not mean there are no rules or discipline in study. For example, one cannot play the piano well if one’s fingers have not memorized the keyboard, nor can one master chemistry if one has not a working memory of the Periodic Table. Some ways of achieving such memorization are more effective than others, but the Eros of study has the power to enable the student to discern the way that is best for her on the way to mastery. That Erotic force that is love enables the student to keep at it, to persist.

Clearly, Rocha’s point of departure for the Eros of study is the body. His line of thought is consistent with the paleoanthropology of Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (2010) and that of Richard Sennett who writes of his callused fingers directing the flow of music as he plays the cello (Sennett 2009). Matthew Crawford makes a similar point in *Shop Class as Soul Craft* (2009) in which he argues that repairing motorcycles is an

activity that integrates intellectual study and manual labor in a way that satisfies the whole person of the repairman. Sam Rocha's experience of mastering the guitar also makes this point: the body is central to art, and it makes music through *ingenium* and inspiration.

If my claim that *Folk Phenomenology* is a work of rhetoric as understood by Vico and Grassi makes sense at all, it can be shown that Rocha's ontology of the human person is readily mapped with Vico's (2000). Vico would have disagreed with an interpretation of Descartes' *Cogito* as including any notion of love. Rocha quotes the Thomist theologian Norris Clarke who states that the core reality of a person is in its relationship with other persons. This view is deeply indebted to the Catholic theology of the Holy Trinity (Clarke 1993). Vico lamented that Descartes, in his mathematizing of science and philosophy, had failed to address the contributions of history, politics, and moral philosophy. Those philosophical studies, Vico said, belong to the humanities and rhetoric. Rocha's book is not about the differences between rational and rhetorical philosophy, but his work is an act of the ground upon which rhetoric stands, *ingenium*. The distinctive contribution to the ontology of the person in *Folk Phenomenology* is the notion that in relation to other persons we do not give, we can only offer. The person to whom we make an offer is free to do what she wants; the person who offers has no control over the offering once it has been made. The way Rocha applies that insight to teaching is recognizable to every experienced teacher.

Folk Phenomenology: Education, Study, and the Human Person is a short but dense book. At times it can be challenging to follow Rocha's reasoning. But I think his book is something new in the field of education, as well as in the field of curriculum studies. In his foreword to the book, William Pinar is skeptical about Rocha's claim that the book is not for dreamers but for teachers. I agree that the book would be tough going for many teachers, but curriculum theorists have a lot to gain from reading it. I have never read a book in education quite like this one.

Here are some reasons I consider the book new to the field. First, Rocha unabashedly uses a Catholic orientation towards education that does not preach the religion, but uses the language and spirit of that tradition to argue for reverence in the presence of education's mystery. The tendency of curriculum theorists when they approach religion in curriculum is to take a Religious Studies stance and talk about religion (e.g., Pinar, Taubman, Reynolds, & Slattery, 2006). Rocha's work is a fresh attempt to move from the *saber* of that approach to an attempt at *conocer*.

Second, Rocha has engaged his readers in a deep experience of the ontological turn in himself and in curriculum studies, which is not so much an identifiable movement in philosophy as it is a committed effort to reexamine how we go about thinking about the things around us (Pedersen, 2012). With Rocha's trinitarian lens, an offering is made of an innovative and effective way to proceed in thinking about what education, study, and the human person are.

Third, while the uses of Rocha's approach in curriculum studies do not leap immediately to mind, the approach offers lines of inquiry that ought to be taken seriously in our field. Among these are the opening of a space for religious language and religious insights to receive a respectable hearing in curriculum conversations, and the acceptance of an apophatic and non-dogmatic ontology as a method to move our curriculum conversations more towards the actual being of curriculum. Both of these lines of thought have the potential to clarify what the field of curriculum studies actually is.

Fourth, the approach might assist in moving the mainstream university coursework in curriculum away from the deadening approach of selecting standards, naming benchmarks, documenting lesson plans, and manufacturing materials aligned with standardized tests, toward thinking about the essence of education and discerning how to answer the essential and ever burning curriculum question, "What is Worthwhile?" (Schubert 2012).

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Notes

- ¹ Francis of Assisi founded the Franciscan order on the basis of the desire for God expressed in voluntary poverty and love for all creation.
- ² Bonaventure was an Italian Franciscan monk who translated Francis' simple practice of voluntary poverty and love for all creation into masterful theological texts during the 13th century. A contemporary of another Italian, Thomas Aquinas, his central teaching was the holy trinity as a community of persons in love. See: *Simply Bonaventure* by Ilia Delio 2001 Hyde Park NY: New City Press.
- ³ In his book, *The Public and its problems*. 1954. New York. Swallow Press John Dewey argued against Walter Lippmann's contention that the public was too ill-informed to make sound judgments about the state of society. Dewey's notion of the public was that it emerged out of conflicts of interest between groups that need a third voice to resolve or at least deal with these conflicts. This emergent group Dewey called the public. Rocha's notion of the common good is simpler and more direct: we are all persons, integral to being a person is a relationship of responsibility for the other persons in society, and out of that responsibility emerges the common good. This version of the common good seems grounded in Rocha's trinitarian thought.
- ⁴ The term *shame* may be a bit off-putting. I recommend recalling, or reading Ernest Becker's 1997 remarkable text *The Denial of Death*. Becker says the sense of shame is built into our being conscious of our mortality – our awareness that we cannot achieve all our goals. Woodruff is using the word *shame* in that way. This phenomenon is well expressed in the novels of Walker Percy.
- ⁵ Unamuno's Catholic sensibilities were influential in Rocha's way of being Catholic. Unamuno thought that the finality of death was ultimate tragedy and that some sort of belief in immortality was necessary to live life fully. His commitment to seeking truth was life-long, and admirably tolerant of contradictions and ambiguities. He admired Cervantes' idealism because Don Quixote was always seeking truth even though he knew he would never achieve truth fully. Rocha appears to have imbibed this spirit.