

Author's Response

RESPONSE TO TIMOTHY LEONARD

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*A Review of Folk Phenomenology*

Timothy Leonard / JAAACS / Vol. 12(2)

I wrote the bulk of *Folk Phenomenology* when I was unable to understand it. It began as my doctoral dissertation at Ohio State University and I edited it for five years after graduation, oscillating between enthusiasm and despair. If I am being honest, I still feel this way about the book. More and more, selective concepts seem more fruitful than the work as a whole. It is not as systematic as I once thought it was. It lacks the development that might have better revealed that phenomenology is not a wholly static or dynamic affair—there is more to reality than well-regulated descriptions. I underestimated the moral significance of ontology because of my allergic reaction to overdetermined normative accounts of ethics and thinly veiled prescriptive politics. I still do not feel bad about rejecting logic-chopping epistemology and popular psychological mumbo jumbo, but I can see that there are other senses of meaning and thought that must be accounted for.

What I am confessing is particular to me and my book, but it is also common to all. No one understands. We do not know who we are, where we come from, what love is, or when we will die. The desires of our heart wander, travel, get lost, find their way, seek a home and feel homeless there at times. I suspect that a great deal of what I was unable to understand when I wrote *Folk Phenomenology* is what I am still unable to understand. The difference is that I can now better admit to not understanding. This is, obviously, not only a question of what this book might be; it is a question of who its author might be. I do not celebrate not understanding nor should anyone idealize it. There is a difference, I think, between not understanding something and *misunderstanding* the nature of understanding.

What I mean by the word ‘understanding’ is perhaps the most proper aim of belief: faith seeking understanding. This sense of the term applies, too, to my relationship with Timothy Leonard. He believed in and sought to understand me from his faith in me. This happened long before his review was posted or my book was published, but it is important that the reader of this exchange keep Leonard’s practice of faith seeking understanding—i.e., the simple act of a teacher who believes in their student—fully in mind. Leonard writes as a scholar, but, for me, he is firstly my mentor, teacher, and friend. (Those who find such intimacies compromising to scholarship are invited to examine themselves more deeply.)

Leonard’s careful exposition and interpretation of my book as a theological work of rhetoric has shown me many new things about it, but, above all, it has reminded me of two core aspects of the book—theology and rhetoric—that are also core aspects of who I am and how I think. In other words, while the technical points on theology and rhetoric are substantial and true, the real impact of Leonard’s review of my book for me is that he truly reviewed *my* book. He took me seriously as a person and helped me understand myself better as a result. I can only offer my thanks to him for that. His contribution is not only to the field; it is also a personal reminder to me and my work. I think he also gently reminded me of the things that the book was, in many ways, unconscious of. Some of that, especially the role of theology in my thought, has been brought more intentionally into consciousness since then. Other parts, like the role of rhetoric, are things I still need to become more deeply awakened to.

There are some points to clarify. The first is the particular role of hyperbole within rhetoric, kin to the role of dynamics in music. At my gig last night, I chose to set my guitar at a relatively low setting that would allow me to reach the apex volume of the amplifier. The reason I did this was to create a dynamic spectrum that would begin in an inaudible hum and go end into a peak of volume that was nonetheless not too loud for the room I was playing in. This need for regulated loudness is how I understand the rhetorical use of hyperbole. One must not only show nuance and subtlety; one must also allow for absolutism and overgeneralization. Arguments, after all, begin as assertions. Of course, neither a tedious nor a pompous result should be the end goal; rhetorical composition is about the attunement of a dynamic range of expression, its proper usage and effect.

I mention hyperbole to make better sense of what I intended to do when I made the claim that educational theories have never accounted for the being of education. This

statement is, of course, something of an allusion to Heidegger's opening statement in *Being and Time* that philosophy has forgotten the meaning of being. Now, no one who has studied even the history of the philosophy of the 1920s in Germany can take Heidegger at face value in this claim. It is preposterous. But it serves as a clearing for his more constructive work to follow. Given my consideration of William James' posthumously published ontological research in *Some Problems in Philosophy* alongside Heidegger's, it was my hope that the impact of my hyperbolic claim would be somewhat blunted, but one could easily argue against it through moderation by way of counter-example, as Leonard did. I would agree with Leonard that Phillip Jackson's book *What is Education?* seems to be an ideal candidate, although it was released as my own book was already in press. Jackson sets out to respond to John Dewey's exhortation in *Experience and Education* that we inquire into "education pure and simple." The result is interesting, to be sure, but neither Dewey's initial salvo nor Jackson's lovely meditation account for the being of education in the sense I meant to convey.

What this sense of education—the sense of education that might emerge from trying to account for the being of education—might be is hard to say since it is precisely here where we step onto the sacred ground of mystery. I suppose here I should add a bit of clarity about the difference between being clear about what is actually unclear and being unclear about what is clear. When I take a photograph of a foggy day at dusk, it is the shadow and obscurity and smokiness of the image that conveys the scene clearly. That shadow, obscurity, and smokiness are not "clear" in the abstract sense of clarity means absolutely nothing for my exposition. In the same way, I realize that education as mystery may seem evasive or absurd but here the religious sense of the rhetorical use of hyperbole begins to operate more fully. Again, I see nothing of this sort in Dewey or Jackson or, hyperbolically, the entire history of educational theory.

It is beyond the bounds of this reply to outline the theological and religious terms of my book, but Leonard's review is right to directly describe it as emerging from my own confessional Catholicism. I realize this may seem scandalous to certain secular impressions of the work of curriculum. I would gently ask anyone provoked by this aspect of my work to consider the rather obvious Protestantism of the project of educational and curriculum theory produced in the United States in the 20th and 21st centuries. This impression was much clearer in the 19th century's Whiggish appeal for the institution of compulsory common schools, but it is perhaps not something we should forget entirely today. I realize that this entails a broader

interreligious and ecumenical conversation and I welcome it. For my part, however, I would also moderate the Catholic sense of the work against the tense relationship that the Catholic intellectual tradition has between philosophy and theology and the added present anxiety within contemporary phenomenology on whether it can or should do the work of philosophical theology.

As for the work of teachers, I feel that I have yet to properly express myself on the subject. What I have benefited most from reading Leonard's review of my book is a deeper realization of this. In future work, I hope to provide better and more robust reasons for why Leonard's dual emphasis of rhetoric and religion might be negated to result in a dialectical synthesis of teaching as a uniquely religious form of rhetoric unto itself.

I hope the readers of JAAACS will permit me to close by expressing my delight at the specific issue that Leonard's review was included in. It was an issue devoted to essay reviews of books in our discipline. Each review and each book is very fine in its own way. If I may frame them in a thematic way, I saw the sense of understanding I opened with each of them: faith seeking understanding. Above all, it was heartening to me to see an issue of a journal in our field that is literary and humanistic in the fullest sense. If this is the direction of our collective future within curriculum studies, then it is my belief that we have much to hope for. I will pray that it is so, and I will work to try to understand it with as much effort as Leonard has taken to understand me. This is the only work there is to do: to love and be loved. This work is the erotic root of faith seeking understanding and, perhaps, the only adequate response to the questions that emerge from the effort to understand curriculum through study.