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Entry

Philosophy of Education

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Definition

The Philosophy of Education investigates the epistemological, anthropological, and ethical–normative foundations of education. It examines the meaning, purposes, and conditions of possibility of educational processes, bringing to light the implicit assumptions that underlie pedagogical theories and practices. Historically developed in close dialogue with both philosophy and pedagogy, the Philosophy of Education performs a critical–metatheoretical function and, more fundamentally, a constitutive one: it seeks to clarify the formal object of education and to restore its unity and intelligibility. From this perspective, it helps to establish Pedagogy as an autonomous field of knowledge—primarily descriptive–interpretative and only thereafter practical–normative—capable of understanding education as a human phenomenon that is historically and culturally situated.

Keywords: philosophy of education; foundations of pedagogy; educational epistemology; phenomenology of education; educational theory

1. Introduction

Any attempt to formulate an epistemological definition of the Philosophy of Education requires a preliminary theoretical investigation reconstructing the historical and conceptual evolution of this field. Such an inquiry intersects with the broader development of Philosophy and Pedagogy—the latter emerging through a progressive process of autonomisation between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, marked by a significant "paradigm shift" towards the "educational sciences." These two distinct paradigms—philosophy-based pedagogy and "educational sciences"—currently coexist within pedagogical knowledge: they often intermingle, yet they also generate misunderstandings and internal contradictions.

This entry proposes that the Philosophy of Education should not be understood merely as an "applied" branch of general philosophy—deriving educational consequences from particular metaphysical, ethical, or anthropological perspectives—but rather as possessing its own foundational status in relation to the pedagogical discipline. The fundamental question is thus: under what conditions can it fulfil such a role, and how might it maintain critical openness while providing substantive foundations?

Contemporary approaches to the Philosophy of Education diverge considerably. While phenomenological realism offers valuable insights [1–3] (as explored here), other important traditions include analytic philosophy of education—emphasising conceptual clarity and logical analysis of educational discourse—and post-structuralist perspectives, which interrogate power relations and deconstruct normative assumptions in educational theory [4–7]. Each approach contributes distinctive methodological tools and critical perspectives to educational inquiry.

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2. Education as a Fundamental Philosophical Problem: From Ancient *Paideia* to Modern *Bildung*

2.1. Classical Foundations

Reflection on education has accompanied Western philosophy since its inception. In early Greek thought, education (παιδεία, *paideia*) emerges as structurally intertwined with ontological, anthropological, ethical, and political questions. However, it does not yet constitute a Philosophy of Education with autonomous epistemological status. Educational theories in ancient thought, despite their complexity and depth, present themselves primarily as applications of broader philosophical visions concerning humanity, the world, and the πόλις (*polis*). Education is thus conceived as an essential function within the overall philosophical project, yet it does not constitute an independent object of inquiry grounded in its own distinctive categories.

Education occupies a crucial position in sophistic and Socratic teaching and forms a pivotal element of Plato's philosophical system, as demonstrated in the *Republic* and the *Laws*. The educational phenomenon is investigated—and potentially designed and "regulated"—as a privileged means for shaping the political class and preparing citizens. For Plato, it represents a condition of possibility for realizing a just order, both within the individual soul and the city, according to a precise ontology from which an ethical conception and a rationalistic definition of the good are derived.

Similarly, for Aristotle, education is conceived as constitutive of ethical and political life, aimed at achieving εὐδαιμονία (*eudaimonia*). The pedagogical reflections in the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics* derive from a teleological understanding of human nature and the *polis*: education is the process that directs natural human dispositions towards their proper end, in accordance with rational and moral virtues.

Werner Jaeger's studies, brought together in *Paideia* [8], show that classical philosophy can be understood only as the expression of a comprehensive educational ideal aimed at the formation (*Formung*) of the Greek person in accordance with a normative model of humanity. For Jaeger, Plato makes explicit the inherently educational character of philosophy: *paideia* forms the very nucleus of the philosophical enterprise. In his later dialogues, most notably the Republic, education is conceived as a process of the soul's conversion περιαγωγή (*periagogé*) towards the Idea of the Good. The hierarchical structure of being is mirrored in the corresponding educational trajectory. Yet this centrality of education does not give rise to an autonomous discipline: Platonic educational theory remains fully embedded within the wider philosophical and political framework. *Paideia* represents philosophy in practice, rather than a distinct, self-contained domain of reflection.

According to Jaeger, Aristotle represents the realistic and systematic consolidation of philosophical *paideia*. The Stagirite situates education within a teleological framework in which the human τέλος (*télos*) is attaining the good life within the *polis*. For Aristotle, *paideia* is closely connected to ethics and politics as practical sciences oriented towards character formation. Education is presented as an essential task of the state, forming virtuous citizens through habituation, law, and the cultivation of rational life. Aristotle's emphasis on ἦθος (*ethos*) and moral dispositions demonstrates an intrinsically educational conception of practical philosophy. Compared with Plato, Aristotle abandons a single ideal-typical model of *paideia* but gains attention to the plurality of life forms and the gradual nature of formative processes. Even here, education does not emerge as the object of an epistemologically autonomous inquiry: it remains a "secondary" outcome of a philosophy already articulated in its ontological, anthropological, and ethical foundations.

2.2. Medieval and Modern Transformations

This derivative relationship persists, albeit in transformed form, beyond classical antiquity. With the advent of Christianity, philosophical reflection on education was reformulated within the framework of theological anthropology. In Augustine, education is intertwined with inner conversion and orientation towards God, the sole proper object of desire: "Tu excitas, ut laudare te delectet, quia fecisti nos ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum, donec requiescat in te" [9] (I, 1); (note: "You stir us to take delight in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it comes to rest in you", *Author's translation*) [10]. Augustine's work, however, also contains refined psychological analyses and at least an implicit "theory of the educational fact" [11].

In Scholastic thought, and particularly in the work of Thomas Aquinas, education is conceived within a teleological framework as a cooperative engagement with both the natural and divine order. Following Aristotle, it is understood as the actualisation of the rational and moral capacities inherent in human beings, whereby education enables the fulfilment of human potential in accordance with the ultimate ends of life [10,12]. Thomas, like Augustine, discusses education not only in *De Magistro* [13] but throughout his *corpus*, especially in the *Summa Theologiae*, as when he compares the family to a "spiritual womb": "Filius enim naturaliter est aliquid patris. Et primo quidem a parentibus non distinguitur secundum corpus, quandiu in matris utero continetur. Postmodum vero, postquam ab utero egreditur, antequam usum liberi arbitrii habeat, continetur sub parentum cura sicut sub quodam spirituali utero" [14]. (note: "A son is naturally something of the father. And at first he is not distinguished from his parents according to the body, while he is contained in the mother's womb. Later, however, after he leaves the womb, and before he has the use of free will, he is kept under the care of his parents as if in a kind of spiritual womb", *Author's translation*).

2.3. The Emergence of Bildung

In modernity, philosophical reflection on education, while rejecting grand metaphysical and theological systems, continues to depend upon broader philosophical frameworks. A central concept emerging within German Idealism is *Bildung*, understood as the formation and cultivation of the whole person. Developed particularly by Humboldt, Herder, and subsequently Hegel, this concept presents education not merely as the acquisition of skills, but as the comprehensive personal and cultural formation of the individual [15–18].

The notion of Bildung integrates individual self-cultivation with participation in cultural and historical life, emphasising the dialectical relationship between autonomy and tradition. It has profoundly influenced European educational thought and remains crucial for understanding education as a process of personal transformation rooted in specific historical and cultural contexts [19,20].

For Enlightenment thinkers, as well as for Locke [21,22], Rousseau [23,24], and Kant [25], education acquires a utopian character, envisaged as a project of human and rational liberation from superstition, dogma, and authority. This sensibility, embraced—albeit in differing forms—by both the Enlightenment and Romanticism, is exemplified in the works of Kant [26] and Lessing [19,27]. Kant's conception of education as oriented toward the cultivation of moral autonomy, and Lessing's vision of the "education of humankind," demonstrate how the notion of *Bildung* connects individual development to the universal advancement of humanity. Yet even in these formulations, education remains a "secondary" moment in relation to broader philosophical and anthropological premises.

2.4. An Initial Synthesis

Rather than encountering a Philosophy of Education in a proper sense, we are faced with a long history of reflection on education within philosophy: a vast tradition of applying major philosophical paradigms to the educational sphere.

This trajectory allows two crucial aspects to be recognised. First, the "long history" of "education within philosophy" serves as a reminder that every pedagogical theory, however "scientific" or "autonomous," necessarily implies a broader *Weltanschauung* concerning reality, humanity, knowledge, and ethics.

Second, elements of an independently conceived Philosophy of Education may be implicitly present within pedagogical discourse. Pedagogical knowledge does not necessarily coincide with systematic, intentional, and explicit theoretical reflections on education. The Greek literary tradition already offers sophisticated conceptions of education, childhood, and the cultural significance of educational care. The religious origins of pedagogical reflection remain insufficiently acknowledged: the major religions have historically developed doctrinal systems containing educational reflections that have been absorbed into the Western pedagogical tradition [28,29].

Only with the gradual autonomisation of pedagogy does the question of the epistemological status of a Philosophy of Education emerge, understood as an autonomous body of knowledge rather than a mere derivation from pre-existing philosophical systems. Recognising that reflection on education exceeds systematic theorisation constitutes the first step in this direction.

3. Autonomy of Pedagogy and Philosophy of Education

The emergence of modern pedagogy must be understood within the broader differentiation of knowledge that characterises the cultural project of modernity. From the seventeenth century onwards, education begins to be thematised as a domain with its own specific problems. This tendency is associated with the progressive consolidation of the worldview introduced by the "scientific revolution," particularly through the application of the mechanistic paradigm to human affairs. Yet, these developments do not initially confer full epistemological autonomy: modern pedagogy oscillates between dependence on philosophy and attempts to establish itself as a systematic and independent field of knowledge.

A decisive moment is represented by Johann Amos Komenski—better known as Comenius—and his *Didactica Magna* (1657), which affirms the principle of universal education founded on rational criteria and organised according to rigorous methodological standards [30]. Operating within a theological and metaphysical horizon, Comenius nonetheless marks a step forward towards conceiving education as an explicitly organised, regulable, and in part generalisable process.

In the eighteenth century, with the Enlightenment, education assumes a central role in the project of human and social reform. For Jean-Jacques Rousseau, it becomes the privileged sphere in which the relations between nature, culture, and society are negotiated [23]. Yet even here, educational theory remains bound to a philosophical anthropology, an ethical–political utopia, or a critique of civilisation that constitutes its foundation [24].

The work of Johann Friedrich Herbart represents a further crucial step towards modern pedagogy as a systematic discipline, constituting an explicit attempt to establish pedagogy as a science with its own principles and coherent theoretical structure [31,32]. Nevertheless, Herbartian pedagogy exemplifies the intrinsic ambiguity of modern pedagogy: it aspires to autonomy while remaining anchored in philosophical presuppositions, particularly ethical and psychological. It is defined as a normative science grounded in ethics (which determines the ends of education) and psychology (which provides the means).

Pedagogy—and the philosophy associated with it—is conceived as derived knowledge, dependent upon other foundational disciplines. This model exerts a profound influence on nineteenth-century pedagogy, contributing both to its academic institutionalisation and to theoretical fragmentation.

Throughout the nineteenth century, pedagogy experiences significant expansion accompanied by increasing internal diversification. Alongside approaches inspired by Idealism (for instance Hegel, for whom education constitutes an essential moment in the formation of Spirit [15,16]), pedagogical theories of positivist, naturalistic, and social origin also develop. A particularly influential figure is the Swiss Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, in whom religious matrices and Romantic sensibilities orient educational reflection towards concrete experience, the observation of the child, attention to natural developmental processes, and the theory of a universal and popular school [33]. Yet even these approaches remain situated within broader theoretical frameworks—anthropological, moral, and political—meaning that they presuppose philosophical assumptions to varying degrees without constituting a fully developed Philosophy of Education.

4. The Paradigm of Educational Sciences

Between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this framework undergoes a further transformation with the emergence of the "educational sciences" paradigm. In a context marked by the consolidation of the social and human sciences, education becomes the object of empirical and descriptive investigation, employing methodologies drawn from psychology, sociology, and biology. Pedagogical contributions in this context increasingly distance themselves from foundational reflection, adopting psychology and sociology as points of reference—not only for normative elaboration but also for investigative procedures—with the aim of constructing pedagogical knowledge founded on criteria of observability and empirical verifiability.

As Michele Caputo observes, this entails a shift from dependence on philosophy towards new forms of dependence, inherited from the neopositivist approach: "Man is no longer defined, in ideal terms, by ethical reflection; rather, a 'scientific' description is sought, one that shares in the 'cultural credit' acquired in the field by the human sciences and their 'technical' and 'methodological' applications. In reality, the anthropological question, considered misleading within the context of dominant scientific paradigms, remains implicit in the prescriptivity derived from human sciences accredited as normative sources for contemporary education" [34] (pp. 27–28, author's translation).

The growing attention to "scientific" orientations entails the adoption of experimental methodologies and the progressive delimitation of pedagogical research to phenomena susceptible to measurement and quantification. This arises from the need to free the discipline from ideological and philosophical presuppositions deemed restrictive, yet it often relegates anthropological and ethical dimensions to the background, privileging the "direct" analysis of formative processes and the operational definition of verifiable objectives. With the establishment of mass education systems, this approach manifests in the gradual narrowing of pedagogy towards school didactics, particularly in the design and evaluation of teaching [34].

A key reference for the educational sciences is Émile Durkheim, who defines education as a social fact, emphasising the necessity of studying it "scientifically," beyond normative speculation [35,36]. Similarly, in psychology, Édouard Claparède promotes an experimental pedagogy founded on observation and measurement, following a scientistic approach [37]. In the United States, John Dewey proposes a reformulation of education in pragmatist terms, intertwining philosophical reflection with attentive observation of concrete learning processes [38–40].

Didactics: European and American Traditions

The divergence between European and American approaches to didactics warrants particular attention. European traditions, especially in German-speaking contexts, develop *Didaktik* as a comprehensive theory of teaching and learning, integrating content, method, and aims. Wolfgang Klafki's critical–constructive didactics exemplifies this approach, proposing education oriented towards general *Bildung* through categorical formation, emphasising key problems of humanity's present and future [41–43]. Klafki's framework connects didactic planning with broader questions of democratic participation, critical thinking, and social responsibility.

In contrast, Anglo-American traditions often emphasise curriculum theory and instructional design, with a more technical–operational focus. This difference reflects broader epistemological divergences: European Didaktik maintains a stronger connection to philosophical anthropology and educational theory, whereas American approaches frequently prioritise empirical research on learning outcomes and instructional effectiveness [44,45].

These differences are not absolute—significant cross-fertilisation occurs—but recognising them helps to understand how Philosophy of Education engages differently with practical pedagogy across cultural contexts.

As Moscato observes [2,3,46], the educational sciences paradigm, while incorporating empirical elements into research, results in a further fragmentation of educational knowledge. Education becomes decomposed into partial objects, each studied by different disciplines without unifying principles of theoretical integration. Moreover, adopting this paradigm entails the effective eclipse of the philosophical dimension, questioning the necessity of a Philosophy of Education. The latter continues to be conceived as an "applied" and "derived" moment of philosophical systems, regarded as increasingly obsolete alongside philosophy more generally. Models, materials, worldviews, and methodologies are borrowed from other fields without establishing pedagogical categories or a specific pedagogical perspective. Simultaneously, philosophical presuppositions persist implicitly, operating "upstream" of concrete, "objective" pedagogical study without being questioned.

Pedagogical knowledge, while apparently freeing itself from subordination to philosophy, falls into a mirrored subordination, uncritically adopting theoretical and epistemological paradigms from psycho-sociological knowledge. Pedagogy becomes a "transit zone" for models formulated in other disciplinary fields, each with distinct formal objects and entirely different epistemological logics. Moscato further notes that this results in the fragmentation and weakening of the pedagogical lexicon, coupled with the impossibility of establishing shared conceptual categories. The adoption of standardised, measurement-oriented terminologies ("competences," "performance," "output," "levels") entails a theoretical reorientation: education is transformed into a technical, governable, and plannable object, ideologically neutralised. Pedagogy, reduced to operational support for decision-making formulated elsewhere, risks becoming a tool for managing the status quo: the technicalisation of pedagogical knowledge effectively coincides with its political and value neutralisation.

Above all, the fundamental weakness lies in the failure to make explicit pedagogy's formal object—education—which often remains implicit in favour of the immediate identification of operative intervention lines. The consequent lack of definition of education through pedagogical categories undermines not only the discipline's claim to scientificity but also exposes it to ideological capture [2,3,35].

Pedagogy is thus reduced to practical, technical, normative guidance on "how to educate," frequently disconnected from reflection on "what it is to educate." It risks becoming increasingly assimilated to a "technology" of behaviour and relationships, or to ethical–political visions and utopias, losing the interpretative, critical, and theoretical char-

acter that is structurally intrinsic to it [28,29]. The recovery of its descriptive–interpretative function could constitute the core of a Philosophy of Education.

The emergence of modern pedagogy and educational sciences leads to an epistemologically more problematic situation than the previous one. While philosophical pedagogy tends to multiply into particular pedagogies dependent on originating worldviews, educational sciences risk dissolving education's unity into sectoral approaches [47].

5. What Autonomy for the Philosophy of Education?

Within this tension, the need for philosophical reflection on education develops during the twentieth century. Such reflection must critically examine the foundations, assumptions, and limits of different paradigms. The derived paradigm—which treats education merely as the application of pre-existing philosophical, ideological, or scientific systems—proves untenable. This model produces a proliferation of particular pedagogies, each coherent with its own premises, yet incapable of engaging critically with others. At the same time, the fragmentation introduced by the educational sciences is recognised: despite the claims of empirical and descriptive approaches, they dissolve the unity of education into partial objects, obscuring the possibility of a theoretical space capable of interrogating education as a whole, in terms of its aims, assumptions, and meaning.

This gives rise to the need for a Philosophy of Education conceived, initially, not as a "foundational" discipline, but as a second-order reflective domain aimed at clarifying the conditions of possibility of the educational discourse itself. Its task is not to generate pedagogy founded on specific premises, but to render explicit, analysable, and discussable the implicit assumptions that underlie educational theories and practices. This version assumes a meta-theoretical role, designed to prevent educational reflection from becoming self-referential. Its "foundational" function is expressed as a critical, reflective, and heuristic activity, providing criteria of intelligibility and mediation among heterogeneous educational knowledges.

More than constituting a discipline in itself, it serves as the site of fundamental inquiry, determining whether pedagogical knowledge can aspire to shared rationality amidst a plurality of historical and theoretical expressions.

5.1. Key Development in Critical–Metatheoretical Approaches

A first key development is the overcoming of Positivism and the revaluation of the historical, interpretative, and normative character of educational phenomena. Wilhelm Dilthey's decisive contribution in *Einleitung in die Geisteswissenschaften* (1883) and in his foundational pedagogical works challenged the notion that education could be understood according to the explanatory models of the natural sciences [48–50]. He demonstrated that education fully belongs to the historical–spiritual world (*geistige Welt*), requiring a comprehensive approach (*Verstehen*) capable of apprehending meaning in relation to values, goals, and historically determined life forms. This opened space for philosophical reflection not merely deducing norms from abstract principles but critically examining the historical and cultural conditions of human formation.

American pragmatism, particularly John Dewey's thought, provided a further decisive contribution [38,51]. Dewey rejected both the speculative orientation of traditional philosophical pedagogy and the reductionism of empirical educational sciences. According to Dewey, education is intrinsically philosophical, since it always implies a conception of experience, knowledge, and democracy. Yet Philosophy of Education must emerge from analysis of concrete educational practices and return to them critically. Dewey helped redefine Philosophy of Education as critical reflection immanent to practice, mediating between theory and action without reducing itself to the mere application of external premises.

The post-war hermeneutic tradition provided additional tools to consolidate the epistemological autonomy of Philosophy of Education. Hans-Georg Gadamer [52], though not directly concerned with pedagogy, highlighted the dialogical, historical, and linguistic character of every understanding process. Education, as a process of transmitting and reworking meaning, emerges as an eminently hermeneutic phenomenon. Philosophy of Education can thus be conceived as a space for the critical interpretation of educational traditions, formative practices, and pedagogical discourses. It relinquishes the claim to ultimate universal foundations, yet without abandoning rationality: its rationality is dialogical, historically situated, and open to engagement with differing perspectives.

A similar role is played by Paul Ricoeur, particularly in his reflections on the self, narrative identity, and interpretation [53]. Though not explicitly pedagogical, these works provide fundamental conceptual categories for a Philosophy of Education attentive to identity formation processes and to the relationship between education, language, and recognition. As Caputo notes, the philosophical re-evaluation of authors such as Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche highlights the positive value of critiquing consciousness and the classical rationality model [34,54].

Another contribution to the critical–epistemological definition of Philosophy of Education comes from the Frankfurt School. Max Horkheimer [55] introduced a distinction between traditional theory (oriented towards neutral description) and critical theory (aimed at uncovering the ideological presuppositions of knowledge and social practices). Jürgen Habermas developed a conception of communicative rationality with far-reaching educational implications. Philosophy of Education assumes the task of clarifying the communicative, normative, and emancipatory conditions of formative processes, positioning itself as a critical instance with respect to both the technicalisation of education and its ideological reductions [56,57].

Analytic philosophy of education represents another significant tradition, developed particularly in Anglo-American contexts. This approach emphasises conceptual analysis and logical clarity in educational discourse. Philosophers such as R.S. Peters and Israel Scheffler applied tools of analytic philosophy to clarify concepts such as "education," "teaching," "learning," and "indoctrination" [58–61]. This tradition contributes rigour in examining educational aims, the nature of knowledge, and criteria for educational quality.

Post-structuralist and postmodern approaches offer yet another critical perspective. Drawing on Foucault, Derrida, and others, these perspectives interrogate power relations embedded in educational institutions and discourses [62–64]. They problematise claims to universal educational aims and reveal how educational practices normalise certain subjectivities while marginalising others. While sometimes criticised for relativism, these approaches contribute valuable tools for the critical analysis of educational power dynamics [65,66].

Noteworthy is the work undertaken by the Bologna school of pedagogy in Italy. Authors such as Giovanni Maria Bertin and Piero Bertolini implemented a philosophical foundation of pedagogy revolving around an explicitly anti-metaphysical Philosophy of Education. Bertin inaugurated Problematicism: a phenomenological–transcendental approach assigning Philosophy of Education the theoretical task of understanding and problematising human educational experience, to establish educational ends and means. The law governing the educational process is not universal, deductively imposed from above, but arises in relation to the problems of each socio-cultural and historical situation. Philosophy of Education becomes primarily an anti-dogmatic instance, exposing the partiality of historically established pedagogical models and continually highlighting the intrinsic problematics of educational experience. Pedagogy, in turn, assumes the task of selecting a concrete normative dimension [67,68].

Piero Bertolini envisages a phenomenological–eidetic role for Philosophy of Education. He resolves the problem of pedagogy's theoretical foundation in terms of its threefold nature: "eidetic" with respect to its phenomenological foundation, "practical" in relation to its normative–applicative and ethical dimension, and "empirical" with regard to its content and research instruments. Bertolini explicitly rejects any metaphysical reference: the foundation must proceed through a phenomenologically characterised Philosophy of Education, understood as a tool for the rational and intentioned foundation of action-guiding norms (not for the theoretical foundation of the object of education) [69–71]. However, such an attempt at foundation is problematic insofar as Philosophy of Education does not address the status of reality or of the person: Bertolini's writings already reveal, in the language employed, reference to a residual metaphysical field [72]. His student Letizia Caronia speaks of a "personalistic residue" in the early phenomenological pedagogy, noting as an aporia the oscillation between subjectivist and socio-historical visions of education, between recognition of the subject/object dialectic and the constant emphasis on the primacy of the person [73]. Maria Teresa Moscato, also from Bologna, reaches a similar conclusion [74], showing that attributing priority to the person constitutes an ontological residue favouring the subject, which, despite Bertolini's stated premises [75], does not entirely dissolve in intersubjectivity.

5.2. The Limits of a Meta-Theoretical Philosophy of Education

The critical core of Philosophy of Education as it emerged in the twentieth century can be described as the transition from an applicative to a meta-theoretical conception of educational reflection and of Philosophy of Education itself. This approach seeks to analyse, compare, and critique the various conceptions of education, making explicit their epistemological, anthropological, and normative presuppositions.

It occupies a boundary position: engaging in dialogue with general philosophy, pedagogy, and the educational sciences, without fully identifying with any. Its autonomy lies not primarily in disciplinary isolation, but in the critical function it exercises with respect to the different bodies of educational knowledge.

At the same time, the understandable anti-dogmatic and anti-metaphysical stance proves insufficient to provide a solid foundation for pedagogical knowledge. On what basis, for instance, can one determine the normative direction of pedagogy after the critical moment? How can one assert the greater appropriateness of one pedagogical approach over another without acknowledging the persistence of an ontological, metaphysical, or anthropological "residue"?

The identification of one of the fundamental epistemological tasks of Philosophy of Education—maintaining an open inquiry into its meaning, aims, and conditions—is commendable, underscoring the necessity of a critical and reflective space in which to consider education as an original philosophical problem. Yet the critical moment alone appears insufficient to provide a stable foundation for autonomous scientific knowledge.

Is it possible to envisage an alternative direction for Philosophy of Education, one that is complementary rather than competitive with the critical–epistemological approach?

6. What Constitutes a Philosophy of Education for Pedagogical Foundations?

As previously noted, the question of the possibility of a Philosophy of Education seeks to overcome the view according to which pedagogical knowledge depends entirely on philosophical knowledge, deriving from it directives to be "converted" into practical and applicative terms. The historically ancillary status of pedagogy partly stems from an epistemological weakness inherent in pedagogical knowledge, particularly its emphasis on

the normative–practical dimension. Pedagogy has therefore often relied upon metaphysical premises or scientific models external to its own field, assumed as theoretical a priori.

It is proposed here that phenomenology can provide crucial conceptual tools to furnish pedagogy with a solid and non-incidental theoretical foundation, protecting it both from empirical dispersion and from reductive normativism. Such phenomenology draws upon its intrinsic descriptive orientation and its primordial engagement with reality [76–80].

Within philosophy, contributions in this direction can be traced to authors such as Guardini [81,82], Zambrano [83–85], and, more recently, Marion [86,87]. At the pedagogical level, a particularly original and profound proposal is offered by the Salesian educator Gino Corallo (1910–2003), whose work has arguably not yet received the attention it deserves.

6.1. Gino Corallo's Phenomenological Realism

Corallo's central thesis, articulated in his major 1961 work [88], is that pedagogy's capacity to establish itself as a scientifically founded discipline depends essentially on a rigorous clarification of its formal object: education. Education cannot be understood merely as the result of an intentional plan or a fully controllable rational calculation; it must be recognised as an event traversing the history of civilizations and human experience, always exceeding, at least in part, any planning attempt. For this reason, education must first be described, interpreted, and understood in its concreteness before being regulated or normativised.

At the core lies a conception of reality marked by a constitutively dual structure: every aspect of the real not only exists but simultaneously demands to be understood and imbued with meaning; everything exists and at the same time refers to value and truth. This structure becomes particularly evident in thought experience, which Corallo takes as an explanatory paradigm: thought does not merely mirror reality passively but, precisely as a determined form of being, renders explicit the laws structuring reality itself, communicating and revealing them. Thought shares a common condition with all realities: they are present and simultaneously carriers of meaning, so that fact and sense cannot be separated or reduced to one another.

Corallo emphasises this point to avoid two opposite extremes: the reduction of reality to a mere happening devoid of intelligibility, and the dissolution of reality into a purely constructive process of thought. The unity binding existence and meaning is not a simple undifferentiated identity but the result of a rational act of unification, which does not erase distinction but renders it fruitful. Being is never a mere "there-being" devoid of content, but always the being of something possessing meaning and value. There is no neutral zone between being and nothingness, nor a realm of meanings detached from things' concrete existence.

Corallo's approach, elaborated in subsequent writings [89], stresses that knowledge always implies interpretative work. Data, as such, do not constitute knowledge: they become knowable only insofar as an intelligence collects, processes, and understands them as carriers of meaning. This does not reduce truth to arbitrary subjective production, but recognises that access to truth always occurs through the active participation of the knowing subject. Truth retains its objective character while becoming genuinely appropriated and internalised by the knower.

He carefully distinguishes between the being of things, which is given and independent of cognitive activity, and the existence of truth, which is realised only through human knowing. Knowledge does not confer meaning upon things but allows that meaning to manifest and be recognised. Every rational reflection begins from a reality not produced by the subject but offered to it, intelligible without ever being exhausted by the categories through which it is interpreted.

From this standpoint, Philosophy of Education must approach education itself as a real event-fact, which must first be recognised and understood in its own structure. Education, as a specific portion of human reality, does not evade the conditions rendering every phenomenon knowable: it presents itself as a problem for thought precisely because it requires a rational unification of the various planes constituting it. Without a form rendering its unity intelligible, education would dissolve into a mere collection of facts or coincide indiscriminately with life itself, losing all specificity.

Thus, Philosophy of Education constitutes the first moment of pedagogical knowledge; starting from a clear awareness of its epistemic premises, it is tasked with identifying and thematising education as such. It assumes a foundational role, not an accessory or derivative one: it represents pedagogy's initial moment, clarifying pedagogical knowledge's formal object and rendering its unity and scientific character possible. Describing education always implies interpreting it, bringing to light the structures of meaning that traverse it and the constants that render it recognisable across different historical and cultural forms.

6.2. Maria Teresa Moscato's "Educational Constants"

This line of thought is developed by Maria Teresa Moscato [28,29], a pupil of Corallo during his time in Catania and a careful reader and interpreter of his work. Although Corallo himself never employed the term, Moscato defines her position as "phenomenological realism" [90,91].

Starting from the recognition of the epistemological weakness of pedagogy and its fragmentation into multiple approaches, she critiques the persistent opposition between Philosophy of Education and the educational sciences. According to Moscato, the central issue is not the lack of critical perspectives, but the absence of a shared theorisation of education as a formal object, which forces pedagogy to depend on categories developed elsewhere. A genuine reconsideration of the discipline requires the recovery of its descriptive–interpretative vocation and the capacity to phenomenologically redefine its object.

Moscato [28,29,92] begins by assuming the existence of a widely attested and socially recognised phenomenon commonly referred to as "education" (also designated by related notions: "formation," "instruction," "enculturation," etc.). Although it manifests in highly diverse forms across historical and cultural contexts, this phenomenon exhibits an internal coherence that allows for its immediate recognition by common consciousness. Within the Western tradition, it is possible to trace a relatively stable and shared representation of what is understood by education, permitting its identification and naming even in the absence of a rigorous or systematically elaborated theoretical definition.

The recurrence of symbolic images, narratives, and metaphors associated with educational experience across different historical periods and cultural settings suggests the existence of deep structural elements that permeate the educational phenomenon. While taking on different configurations according to historical and social conditions, these elements appear with a certain regularity, indicating the presence of recognisable constants in experience. In this sense, it is possible to speak of phenomenological invariants or constants: fundamental aspects that human consciousness identifies as belonging to education, transcending contingent differences and contributing to delineating the essential core of the educational experience.

A pedagogical reflection that aspires to be well-founded, and a Philosophy of Education that intends to be genuinely "foundational," must start from the concrete experience of education as it manifests in its multiple historical and cultural forms. Understanding the educational phenomenon entails identifying units of meaning that persist beyond the variety of historical forms, rendering education recognisable as such. In this regard,

Gino Corallo—whose line of thought Moscato continues—affirms that the observation of educational facts allows the identification of a specific class of actions which, despite differing in content and method, are consistently designated as "educative" across diverse linguistic and cultural traditions.

6.3. The Educational Process

Moscato identifies four phenomenological constants of education:

Cultural transmission: Education is the process through which experiences accumulated by previous generations are transmitted to subsequent ones, taking forms that are communicable and shareable. This occurs through multiple concrete mediations—from language and writing to artistic and technological practices—constituting the core of every educational experience.

Intersubjective communication: Closely linked to cultural transmission, every educational act involves a relationship between subjects in which interaction is never unilateral. Educators and learners are engaged in a dynamic process of exchange, in which both are transformed. Educational communication produces effects on the recipient, but also prompts the educator to critically reconsider their own experiences and representations.

State of immaturity: A third constant resides in the state of immaturity that characterises the early phases of human life. Childhood and adolescence are marked by a prolonged developmental period, potentially extending into early adulthood, introducing a structural asymmetry into the educational relationship. This condition is accompanied by considerable neurobiological and psychological plasticity, making the educational experience the privileged context for the progressive construction of personal identity.

Promotion of autonomy: Finally, a fourth constant concerns the outcome towards which every genuine educational process tends: the promotion of the learner's autonomy. Such autonomy is not reducible to operational skills alone, but encompasses the internalisation of habits, values, and shared social practices, enabling active and responsible participation in collective life.

6.4. Autonomy, Subjectivity, Freedom

The concept of autonomy requires deeper examination as it intersects with fundamental questions of subjectivity, affectivity, consciousness, and politics. Autonomy in educational philosophy cannot be understood merely as independence or self-sufficiency, but rather as a capacity for self-determination within intersubjective and cultural contexts.

This autonomy involves developing critical consciousness—the ability to examine one's beliefs, values, and choices reflectively. Such critical consciousness is not an abstract rational capacity divorced from affective life. Rather, as contemporary philosophy recognises, human consciousness is always affectively situated: we experience the world through emotions, desires, and felt meanings that shape our understanding and motivations [93–96]. Educational processes must therefore attend to affective development alongside cognitive growth.

The relationship between autonomy and freedom is dialectical rather than linear. Education aims not at unconstrained freedom, but at freedom-within-responsibility, which might be called "openness to freedom." This openness involves the capacity to recognise multiple possibilities, to deliberate among them, and to commit to chosen courses of action while remaining responsive to changing circumstances and new insights. Such openness requires both cognitive flexibility and affective maturity: the ability to tolerate ambiguity, to revise commitments without losing coherence, and to engage with difference without defensiveness.

The political dimension of educational autonomy is equally crucial. Autonomy is never a purely individual achievement but is constituted through and for participation in collective life. As critical pedagogical traditions emphasise, education either reproduces existing power relations or cultivates capacities for democratic participation and social transformation [97,98]. Promoting genuine autonomy therefore entails developing not only individual critical thinking, but also capacities for collective deliberation, solidarity, and political agency.

Contemporary challenges to autonomy—from the algorithmic curation of information to political polarisation—make this dimension increasingly urgent. Philosophy of Education must address how educational practices can cultivate autonomous subjects capable of resisting manipulation while remaining open to persuasion, committed to their convictions while remaining capable of revising them, and grounded in particular communities while extending moral concern beyond them [99,100].

The affective dimension deserves particular attention: an autonomous person is not an affect-less rational agent, but a whole person whose thinking, feeling, and acting are integrated.

6.5. Education and Human Development

The infant's prolonged dependence on adults and the environment allows for the assimilation of increasingly complex symbolic and cultural experiences, constituting a decisive resource for human development. This dependence requires social structures capable of protecting and supporting immature subjects, as well as processes of cultural transmission that ensure the continuity of social life. Culture plays an essential role not only in collective cohesion but also in the construction of individual identity. Without insertion into a cultural–symbolic horizon, humans are incapable of comprehending or realising themselves.

If human specificity resides in the capacity to produce symbolic systems and cultural tools to organise and interpret experience, then these symbolic devices are indispensable for constructing meaning and personal identity. Consequently, every educational initiative necessarily occurs within a specific historical and cultural horizon, enabling intergenerational interaction and facilitating the transition from initial dependence to maturity. The social and cultural environment, as highlighted by neo-Freudian developments in psychoanalysis [93,94], plays a decisive role by providing a framework of meanings within which the young subject enters the world and orients their experience.

Once adult autonomy is reached, the process of personal transformation does not cease: depending on the quality of educational trajectories, individuals are more or less capable of navigating subsequent existential, professional, and relational changes in a formative and self-realising manner, or risk experiencing them passively and regressively. Each of these elements requires ongoing work of understanding and reinterpretation, confirming the dynamic and never fully completed nature of the educational process itself.

7. Conclusions

To secure a solid and coherent epistemological foundation for pedagogy, it is necessary to re-establish its explicit and conscious engagement with a fundamental theoretical horizon capable of supporting its claims to scientific legitimacy. Such engagement cannot take the form of passive subordination to conceptual frameworks developed elsewhere, reducing pedagogical knowledge to a mere field of application for premises external to its disciplinary specificity. A genuine theoretical foundation should strengthen both the autonomy and the epistemological stability of pedagogy. It is within this perspective that the role of a phenomenologically oriented Philosophy of Education can be envisaged.

A clear reference point in this regard is provided by certain Husserlian texts of extraordinary contemporary relevance [76], which highlight the incapacity of modern science, understood in a rigidly positivist sense, to account for the so-called *Lebenswelt*—the totality of pre-theoretical experiences, meanings, and interests that constitute the original horizon of human existence. Natural sciences, by virtue of their objectivist orientation, progressively exclude from investigation the decisive questions for human life, limiting themselves to the analysis of facts and systematically removing subjectivity and all that gives meaning for the subject. This critique also extends to the so-called human sciences, which, according to Husserl, are similarly guilty of having lost the original connection with lived experience. In both cases, the *Lebenswelt* is reduced to a construction derived from cognitive categories, until a conceptual image of the world—a veritable "habit of ideas"—is mistaken for reality itself.

Recovering the relationship with the *Lebenswelt* implies abandoning the illusion of fully objective knowledge and recognising the artificiality of rigid separations between subject and object, body and mind, typical of modern rationality. The researcher's subjectivity, which cannot be reduced either to the psychophysical dimension or to an abstract, disembodied entity, is always implicated in every act of knowing, even when the highest degree of objectivity is claimed. As Husserl emphasises, all sciences are the result of spiritual operations performed by concrete subjects acting in cooperation. As such, they fully fall within the domain of phenomena that must be understood and explained by the human sciences.

The limits and crises of scientific knowledge ultimately derive from the naivety of a conception that equates the objectified world of science with the totality of what is, neglecting that the subjectivity producing such knowledge cannot be captured by the instruments of objective science. The natural scientist, trained exclusively in the methods of the natural sciences, tends to consider the exclusion of the subjective dimension self-evident and to regard their method as objectively grounded, even when operating through subjective representations. In doing so, they inadvertently presuppose the *Lebenswelt* as the constant background of their work, without thematising it as such, ignoring that it is only against this backdrop that their concepts, problems, and methods acquire meaning.

The theoretical perspective initiated by Corallo and originally developed by Maria Teresa Moscato—here adopted in a propositional form—is particularly compelling precisely because it aligns with a "phenomenological realism" orientation, capable of avoiding the aporias generated by certain contemporary readings of Husserlian thought in the human sciences. In many cases, criticism of the idea of neutral objectivity in knowledge has been accompanied, especially in the pedagogical field, by an implicit abandonment of the very possibility of accessing truth. The recognition of the active role of the knowing subject has been taken to an extreme, giving rise to markedly subjectivist or relativist outcomes, further accentuating the already evident fragmentation of pedagogical knowledge.

However, subjectivism does not constitute a necessary outcome of the phenomenological approach. Its core lies rather in the possibility of reinterpreting the relationship with empirical data and measurement, not as the ultimate guarantee of certainty, but as one of the possible criteria for attaining understanding. The awareness that the subject inevitably intervenes in every cognitive process, and that their structures make the very manifestation of reality possible, does not imply that the subject becomes the ultimate foundation of the world or the absolute principle of its meaning; it constitutes, instead, the condition through which the world can appear and become intelligible.

The adoption of a phenomenologically oriented Philosophy of Education, as identified here, requires a return to concrete experience, to the world as it presents itself in the "here and now," to the structures of everyday experience, and to the world of things, which

constitutes the shared ground of all knowledge and theoretical orientation. It is from this original level that, through progressive clarification and deepening, one can ascend to the ultimate foundations of pedagogical discourse.

The Philosophy of Education, thus conceived in this contribution, represents a fruitful synthesis between the phenomenological approach and foundational reflection. Moving from the manifestation of the educational fact to the human gaze, it seeks to interrogate education in its *ipseity*, in its "what it is," prior to addressing the "what it ought to be," a subsequent and derived moment of pedagogical inquiry.

It is on this terrain that pedagogy can establish itself as an autonomous and unified body of knowledge: a discipline capable first and foremost of understanding the human condition through the lens of educational dynamics and, only subsequently, of reflectively guiding processes of personal and social transformation. In this perspective, the Philosophy of Education does not serve merely a critical or negative function, but assumes a positive and constitutive role, allowing the recognition of implicit educational theories and their deep roots, traceable even in extra-scholastic contexts such as religious, familial, and symbolic experience, thereby protecting the educational fact from reduction to a purely intellectualistic or institutional domain [92,101].

This foundational approach acknowledges the plurality of legitimate philosophical perspectives on education [102–109] while simultaneously insisting on the need to clarify the formal object of education through rigorous phenomenological description [110,111]. It maintains the critical openness characteristic of meta-theoretical approaches, while providing a substantial basis for pedagogical knowledge. The result is a Philosophy of Education capable both of interrogating its own assumptions and of offering a stable foundation for understanding education as an irreducible human phenomenon.

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