

## Chapter 1

# Reflective practice research and kaleidoscopic epistemology

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### Abstract

The first part of this essay represents an example of Reflective Practice Research, while the second part examines the epistemological nature of this research approach. We begin the essay by sharing a concrete experience of discrepancy from one of our Dialogos workshops. Through critical (phenomenological-hermeneutical) reflection upon the experience, we draw out two core themes, namely *self-understanding* and *good practice*, both essential to the education of good practitioners in any human-oriented profession. In further theoretical reflection, we point out that the currently dominant epistemological way to approach such themes is through so-called evidence-based research and practice. We challenge and criticize this approach for lacking personal involvement – an aspect that is vital for developing practitioners’ self-understanding and practical wisdom or good practice. As an alternative we suggest a relational and dialogical *methodos* in terms of Reflective Practice Research. We root this research approach in classical philosophical practices as well as in modern forms of phenomenological research. We argue that epistemologically speaking, Reflective Practice Research opens up for a kaleidoscopic multi-perspectivism without falling prey to relativism, while simultaneously fostering practical wisdom in terms of phronesis.

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## Keywords:

Reflective Practice Research, kaleidoscopic epistemology, phronesis, teacher education, higher education, pedagogy

## Introduction

We have a double intent with this essay. Our first intent is to provide an example of how so-called Reflective Practice Research might be brought about, using a three-stage framework as suggested by Anders Lindseth (2017a). Our second intent is to explore what we have called the epistemological nature of Reflective Practice Research.

Regarding the first intent, we take our point of departure in describing a concrete experience from our own practice as teachers in higher education. Describing such a practice experience also represents the first stage in the Reflective Practice Research process, called *concrete reflection*. It is an *experience of discrepancy*, that is, an experience of failure, unsatisfied expectations, and wonderment. In the second stage – *critical reflection* – we explore the experience critically, that is, phenomenologically and hermeneutically, drawing out core themes from the experience by asking what is at stake in the example. In our example, we discovered that what was at stake was different expectations on *what it is to be a good teacher*, and *what it implies to become one*. In the third step of the Reflective Practice Research process – *theoretical reflection* – we reflect theoretically upon these themes in more general terms, drawing on philosophical as well as theoretical perspectives and research literature. By working through our experience in these three stages, we touch upon some fundamental problems in current pedagogical practice as well as in pedagogical research. This leads us to our second intent, which is to explore the epistemological nature of Reflective Practice Research. In this regard, we argue that the phenomenon of “good teaching” can be fruitfully understood through the metaphor of the kaleidoscope and the notion of *kaleidoscopic epistemology* (Helskog, 2015) as an approach of multi-perspectivism.

Overall, our essay can be read as a meta-philosophical reflection that also has implications for research dissemination. In the format of an *essay*, the text is rooted in the tradition of the humanities rather than in the tradition of the natural and social sciences, where the research report is the most common format. Though our example is drawn from teacher education, our line of reflection and argumentation makes the essay relevant to everyone interested in the development of practical knowledge and wise

action as such, whether in teaching, nursing, therapy, law, police or military practice, or other fields.

## Part 1 – Our Reflective Practice Research example

In order to fulfill our first intent, we begin by sharing one of several experiences of ours that has left us with a feeling of unease concerning some developments in the culture of pedagogical practice and research (see for instance Helskog 2003; Helskog and Weiss 2021). The experience will be used as a peephole into some key challenges in the education of practitioners who in their future professional lives will be responsible for other human beings.

### 1.1. Original and concrete reflection

A few years ago, the two of us facilitated a two-day Dialogos workshop with second-year students in teacher education at our university. A Dialogos workshop is designed as a process where philosophical, ethical and/or existential questions about what it means to be human in relation to other people and phenomena in the world is pondered and investigated from different perspectives in order to gain a deeper and more fundamental understanding of what we in everyday life tend to take for granted (see Helskog, 2019a, 2009, 2008). This particular Dialogos workshop had the overarching topic: *Developing life skills* (in Norwegian, “*livsmestring*”) *through philosophical dialogue*.

Life skills is one of three interdisciplinary themes in the new national curriculum, with the second theme being *democracy and citizenship* and the third being *sustainable development* (UDIR, 2017). Teachers in all subjects are required to integrate these themes into their pedagogical practices across all school levels and subjects. This is why the themes are also central to teacher education. In our practice, we have chosen to treat these interdisciplinary subjects as interconnected. Ideally, as we see it, developing into a person who is good at practicing the art of living for the best of herself and others will also imply developing a democratic orientation and an urge to be a participating citizen who lives sustainably and strives for sustainable development overall.

We thus organized the workshop in line with this preunderstanding. For instance, one question we explored during the two days was “What does it imply to respect nature?” and another was “How can I educate for sustainable development?” We also explored, respectively, a) the art of questioning (inspired by the practice of Socrates), b) values behind negative emotions (inspired by Stoic philosophy), c) “The Art of Living” (inspired by the

classical Greek notion and purpose of philosophizing), and d) wise action: I act wisely when... (inspired by the philosophy of Aristotle). Hence, there are deep connections between the phenomena explored with the students and the classical philosophical and pedagogical tradition.

On the first day, after we reflected upon a poem written by a 13-year-old who had experienced her parents' divorce through an approach inspired by Matthew Lipman's *Philosophy for Children*, we moved on to a comparative Dialogos dialogue based on the question, "What might it imply to live well?" While the first dialogue was purposely kept "shallower" and abstract, in the second philosophical exercise of the workshop, we wanted the students to dig deeper. They were invited to find, formulate and share a concrete personal example where they once experienced living well, i.e., applying the right life skills in a given situation. The example was supposed to be self-experienced, but now emotionally closed. Moreover, the students were instructed to anonymize the experience in order to protect other people in their examples, while at the same time agreeing that what was said in the room would remain in the room. For this reason, we will not go into detail as to the content of the philosophical dialogues we had those two days<sup>3</sup>.

Despite our enthusiasm and positive expectations, it was quite difficult to get the group into the flow of collaborative inquiry, dialogue and wonder, both in the rather critical-analytical first dialogue and in the more existential-ethical second dialogue. Only a few students seemed to dare to reflect openly in the group in the first dialogue. The same few were able to find personal examples in the second dialogue, and even fewer were willing to share their examples.

This did, of course, change a bit during the two days of the workshop, but our overall impression was that the students seemed unable to let go and engage openly and honestly in the philosophical dialogue process. Of course, we did not force anyone to do anything, but several students struggled throughout the workshop to endorse our approach. They remained rather distant and reluctant to fully participate.

During breaks, we discussed our difficulties and dissatisfaction with how the workshop developed. Why was it so difficult for the students to engage freely and openly in the dialogues? Was it something about our way of facilitating the workshop with this particular group of students? Why were so many of the students hesitant or even resistant to enter into the flow of dialogue? Were they unable to, were they afraid to, or were they

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<sup>3</sup> Our work is reported to and approved by NSD (Norsk samfunnsvitenskapelig datatjeneste), in accordance with standards of research ethics.

simply unwilling to? They did, however, seem to listen carefully and be fully absorbed in the examples and reflections of those few who did engage freely and openly, so it was obviously not that they were disinterested or unengaged. What was it, then, that was in play and at stake here? What was holding so many of the students back?

## 1.2. Critical (phenomenological-hermeneutical) reflection based on our experience

In the previous section, we narrated our experience, and in this section, we will move on to the next stage in the Reflective Practice Research process, the critical reflection. Here, we will reflect upon the question, “What is at stake in our narrated experience?”

The meta-reflection round at the end of the workshop gave an indication. Many of the students had expected to be lectured on the overarching theme of the workshop (developing life skills and the art of living through philosophical dialogue) and learn different dialogue tools and dialogical skills that they could then apply directly with kids in the classroom. They did not expect to engage personally with the phenomena. Rather, they had expected to sit back and be lectured and taught skills in a more traditional and technical way. Our expectation was the contrary; we expected the students to willingly and thoughtfully engage with the phenomena and each other in open-ended phenomenological and hermeneutical dialogue that would eventually lead them to *wonderment*, as outlined by Guttesen & Kristjánsson:

There is a fine and delicate distinction between *awe* and the type of wonder that is referred to as *contemplative wonder*. *Awe* is the emotion of being momentarily captivated by the experiencing of something inspiring, as if being struck by a lightning, and through that experience one feels one’s smallness in the face of the vastness of existence (Schinkel, 2021, p. 44-45; Kristjánsson, 2018, p. 144-151), while *contemplative wonder* refers to a philosophical attitude of a kind that is not confined to philosophers. It is aptly described as being ‘on the other side’ of *awe*, as it is all about experiencing the grandeur of existence and the position of Man in it – in such a way that one wants to experience more. Another kind of wonder is what is called *inquisitive wonder* (Schinkel, 2021: 45), which is another term for curiosity [...] In an educational context, *wonderment* combines *awe* and *contemplative wonder*. (Guttesen & Kristjánsson, 2023)

Our expectations – not to speak of our hopes about *wonderment* – seemed to have come like an unpleasant surprise to *them*, just as their reactions came as a challenging surprise to *us*. We struggled to create the contemplative atmosphere, the dialogical flow and awe-inducing wonderment that, at their best, emerge quite immediately in Dialogos workshops.

While our stance as pedagogues in teacher education is that it is essential to reflect on one's life practices both as a human *being* and as a teacher *becoming* in order to become a good teacher, many of the students seemed to assume that acquiring the right skill set would do the job. And here we arrived at a fundamental discrepancy between our perspective and the students' perspective at this particular point in their lives. With Husserl (1970, p. 108f), we could say that our lifeworlds were different, or with Gadamer (2004, p. 270f), that our fore-meanings or pre-understanding were different. How can these differences be interpreted?

The students in our example were second-year students. Most of them were young enough to have had their entire primary, secondary and upper secondary education in a school increasingly governed by curricula oriented towards predefined learning outcomes regarding skills and competences, with results measured through national and international test regimes (see Helskog, 2003; Karseth, Møller and Aasen, 2013; Engelsen 2015). Moreover, they had their first two years of teacher education training in a higher education culture pressured by the expectation that practice in the field of education should be evidence-based (see Kvernbekk, 2018).

What already came to the fore were the different perspectives and pre-understandings on what it means to *become* and *be* a teacher. This brings us closer to what could be called *the ontology of a good teacher*, centrally dealing with the question, "What *is* a good teacher, really?" Directly linked with this ontological question are the *normative* questions "What should I do in order to *become* a good teacher?", asking for the right education, and "What *should* I do in order to *be* a good teacher?", asking for the right practice.

When we now go back to our experience of discrepancy, it is obvious that the students had a different understanding of what it means to be and become a teacher, and thus about what good teaching is, than we had. And here we can ask, What is it that brought them there? What path were they on that made them arrive at their conclusions, and what was ours? What experiences in their lives convinced these students of their perspective about what it means to become and be a good teacher? Was it first and foremost a question of the right knowledge, skills and techniques rather than of one's attitudes and practices? And what made us, as pedagogues and facilitators of this workshop, convinced that the latter is essential to good teaching in teacher education?

Already here, we can see the significance of posing, reflecting on and investigating ontological questions in higher education, like teacher education, nurse education, etc. If these questions are not taken seriously, we literally do not know what we are talking about when we are talking about our own profession as pedagogues, engineers, psychologists, nurses,

etc. This does not only jeopardize our professional (and personal) self-understanding and identity, but it also opens the gates for ideologies, which are then either tacitly accepted or simply not realized as such. Whether professional studies at the university level can afford such professional self-ignorance appears to be a mere rhetorical question.

While ontological questions deal with understandings (*What is...?*), questions that ask for the way that led you to the respective understanding are not so much ontological but *epistemological* (*How do you know? How did you arrive at this understanding and this conclusion?*) in nature. And here, when it comes to epistemological questions, we do not think so much of conventional research methodologies as of *method* in its original sense: The term was introduced by Plato (Lindseth, 2015, p. 47). Consisting of the two words *meta* (over) and *hodos* (way), Plato used the term *methodos* in order to illuminate that even though we cannot *re-walk* the way of life (*what happened, happened*), we can *re-reflect* on what happened, and learn from it (ibid.). This way of reflecting was what Plato had in mind when introducing the term *method*. Lindseth admits that we often use this term differently today, but in order to preserve Plato's conception of it, Lindseth suggests that there are generally two types of methods (ibid.): *Monological* methods, which resemble standardized procedures leading to a predictable outcome, and *dialogical* methods, where both the procedures and the outcomes are open. The latter already indicates what kind of method Plato preferred when it came to his philosophical investigations, namely, dialogue. With that, dialogue can be seen as one of the oldest research methods, and this epistemological way of reflection still appears to have relevance in today's science when it comes to ontological questions like *What is a good teacher, nurse, soldier, etc.?* and normative questions like *What should we do to educate good teachers, nurses, soldiers, etc.?* With that, we arrive at two general themes or phenomena that seem to be at stake in our narrated experience, namely *self-understanding* (ontological) and *good practice* (normative). This leads us to the theoretical reflection part.

### 1.3. Theoretical reflection

In the following third stage of the Reflective Practice Research process – the *theoretical reflection* – we will further explore the ontological theme of “self-understanding” and the normative theme of “good practice” through relevant theoretical perspectives related to teaching for practical knowledge in higher education.

In this section, we will point to an aspect of the dominant culture of education (lower and higher) that most of these young students are raised in

that we ourselves see not only as a possible hindrance for the development of their self-understanding and understanding of what it implies to become and be a good teacher, but also as a possible hindrance to the development of the self-understanding of higher education teachers and researchers in other fields dealing with human relations. The aspect we choose to focus on is the demand that teaching practice in education at all levels, in lower as well as higher education, should be research- and evidence-based (which is then assumed to be *good practice*). What does this imply?

Kvernbekk (2018) identifies three elements in the culture of evidence orientation. First, the political domain demands that researchers create more and better research-based knowledge, and second, that practitioners should use research to create desirable results and improve existing ones. Within this picture, we also find the idea of evidence-based practice – an idea first established in medicine in the mid-1990s. The core of evidence-based practice is the pragmatic quest for desirable results and the prevention of undesirable results, with the aim of finding out “what works”.

Those in favor of evidence-based practice in the field of pedagogy argue that rigorous educational research over time will create the same kind of progress within education as we have seen within medicine because interventions are tested and evaluated thoroughly before being put into practice. Advocates for this stance are, e.g. Slavin (2004; 2002), Hattie (2012; 2009), and Nordahl (2010; Nordahl & Overland, 2021).

Those opposing evidence-based practice argue that evidence-based practice is a threat to the development of virtuosity, ethical deliberation, practical wisdom, professional judgment, context sensitivity, moral practice and so forth. Advocates for this stance are, e.g. Biesta (2015; 2010; 2007), Hammersly (1997), and Hansen (2007; 2008).

Kvernbekk’s (2018) own stance is that causality has a legitimate place in most practical pedagogy: if we have aims we want to reach, we must be able to plan how we are to do it; if we want good results, and if we wish that these good results should be replicable, then this requires a foundational causality. The task of pedagogical research, hence, is amongst others to convey these causal elements. Kvernbekk (2018) does, however, criticize evidence-based practice for tending to emphasize research at the expense of practice. She argues that because the demands of rigorous research evidence are so high, the demands for structured implementation are also high, yet she concludes:

If EBP is to be a success, the research story and the local-practice story must be brought together, and this is the practitioner’s job. The researcher does not know what is relevant in the concrete context faced by the practitioner; that is for the practitioner to decide. (Kvernbekk, 2017)



Hansen distinguishes between what he calls a) a pragmatic, problem-solving and critical line of teaching and research (2007, p. 18) and b) an existential, moral and wonder-based line of pedagogical teaching and research (ibid.). While practitioners of line a) ask questions like “What works?” and “What is to be done?”, practitioners of line b) ask questions like “What is experienced as meaningful and wise to do in this particular moment? What is or should be the ethical criteria for “what works?” “What is this really about, deeply speaking?” He further argues that the teacher needs to engage personally in questions like “Who am I, the person who is teaching these young people?” “Who are the young human beings for whom I am responsible? Where am I in my thinking, my speech and my actions in this organization? What do I indirectly convey about who and where I am? What is the deeper meaning of my work as a teacher? What is my good vision? Do I enhance “the good life” for my students with what I am doing at this moment?”

Research into the existential, ethical and normative lines of pedagogical practice is often not considered research at all by those arguing for evidence-based practice. Rather, there appears to be an evidence hierarchy in which research drawing on inspiration from the natural sciences is valued the most: The best “evidence” is conveyed through randomized controlled trials that give quantitative data. It is argued that such evidence has the highest reliability and validity, while research based on experience and professional deliberations is considered the least trustworthy (Kvernbekk, 2018).

As a consequence, the tendency both in higher and lower education pedagogies seems to be that the focus on evidence-based practice and evidently rather instrumental implementation of research results makes the space for open dialogue, reflection and personal growth both of students, teachers and the researcher obstructed and limited (see also Løvlie, 2013). This educational culture in which the students in our example are embedded and have been raised might have taught them to be obedient and do their best to fulfill predefined aims and objectives based on line a) of Hansen’s distinctions above, rather than being self-reflective, dialogical and wondering, in line with line b). Quite likely, elements of this culture were playing out through the students’ reluctance to participate in the Dialogos workshop, even though we do not have hard-core evidence for it (here it has to be mentioned that the group members were familiar with each other, they were in the same class and had a good time together, so trust or insecurity was not an issue). Whereas both the Dialogos approach (Helskog 2019a; 2009; 2008) and the Daimonic dialogue approach (Weiss 2021a; 2017a; 2014) were developed to foster wisdom, phronesis and thus *Bildung*

with students, the curricula that the students were brought up with focused on measurable competences. The idea has been that learning should be visible and measurable. Such a culture, however, does not only limit the development of the students' self-understanding. It also limits the development of the self-understanding of teachers and researchers in higher education, toning the dominant understanding of good pedagogical practice in an instrumental direction. Teaching in line with this ideology is more about applying the right methods and reaching predefined, measurable goals than about developing one's own and students' existential self-understanding and maturation, as well as ethically sound practice, which is always situational and unique to the context a practice is embedded in. Even though there are justifiable technical-instrumental aspects involved in good professional practice, this aspect is normally not sufficient for a practice to be *good*, morally speaking.

Following this evidence hierarchy also results in a hierarchy of how to disseminate research. On top of the hierarchy is the so-called IMRaD structured research report; IMRaD refers to "Introduction, Methods, Results and Discussion" (see NTNU, 2022). The reports should ideally have undergone a "double-blind review", meaning that traces that can reveal who the author is should be removed from the report prior to peer-review. During the review process, the reviewers are kept anonymous too. The idea is that the removal of the author will secure a neutral, unbiased and objective evaluation of the research carried out, corresponding to the idea that research should be generalizable and replicable in new contexts and that results should be transferrable to new situations. From such research, testifiable and falsifiable results and knowledge supposedly arise, which can then be implemented by practitioners. The least trustworthy are, from the perspective of advocates of evidence-based research, publications based on research where the experience and voice of the researcher are pivotal, such as an action research article or a reflective practice research essay.

At the same time, however, as our impression suggests, this is where reflective practice research can come in as a research approach that *opens up* this space. It does so by encouraging the practitioner-researcher to take his or her point of departure in experience and through promoting traditional methods of research and writing stemming from the humanities, taking an ontological-phenomenological starting point rather than a positivistic-epistemological one. Where the evidence-based practitioner and researcher would take his or her point of departure in abstract, general and presumably objective and universally replicable research findings, the reflective practitioner-researcher takes his or her point of departure in so-called particular,

concrete, subjective and unique experiences. We say “so-called”, because our stance is that as human beings, we experience life in contexts that are embedded in wider contexts, not only historically, culturally and ideologically, but also biologically. The strings of relational embeddedness can be followed from the individual to the local to the national to the global and cosmic. Thus, our stance is that there is something commonly human that can be drawn out of any particular experience (Helskog 2019a).

This is not “new”. On the contrary, it has been implicitly and explicitly dealt with by classical philosophers and scholars throughout history, both in western and eastern traditions, as we will soon show by pointing out a few examples from the long and well-elaborated culture and history of the humanities. The humanities, as one of the two main academic traditions, is concerned with the classical questions regarding what is right, good, true and beautiful (see also Kjølrup, 2007). They discuss fundamental questions regarding experience, existence, values, meaning and consciousness and study topics such as the edification of human beings, how we create meaning in life and the world, and the relationship between the individual and society. The humanities include disciplines such as history, philosophy, literature, linguistics and traditional pedagogy, which are all concerned with understanding unique texts, events and phenomena in their particular contexts, whereas the social sciences are more often concerned with models, typologies and sometimes generalizations. (Nordenstam, 2000).

Halås et al. (2015) argue that the humanities are particularly suited to understanding and developing knowledge about professional practices in terms of creative, meaning-making, judging and value-creating action. Already, the term *humanities* refers to an idea of research that sees the human being as a feeling, thinking, creative and active creature, they claim (ibid., p. 12).

Some of the greatest classical sources that are referred to across modern science disciplines today were based on personal experiences that are subjective, particular, concrete, contextual and unique. Yet the texts of these authors have inspired researchers and philosophers up to this day. Some of these classical sources are unique not only in content but also in their written forms and writing styles – revealing a certain stance regarding wisdom (see Helskog, 2016: “What do we lose with the stifling academic genre demands of our time?”<sup>4</sup>). In the following section, we will give examples of such texts. We chose to call these texts examples of reflective practice research simply because their authors were all concerned with how to live and act well, broadly speaking.

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<sup>4</sup> In Norwegian: “Hva mister vi med tidens kvelende akademiske sjangerkrav?”

### 1.3.1. Classical forms of reflective practice research

Through the genre of *written dialogues*, Plato's work is an early example of how concrete experiences formed the basis for philosophical investigations for the purpose of getting a deeper and more universal understanding of certain virtues and how they eventually can be practiced (see for instance Plato a, b, c and d). Even though Socrates often managed to lead his interlocutors into confusion (*aporia*), they could raise their existential and ethical awareness in these dialogues, implying a deeper understanding of the general human condition (e.g. by becoming aware of their own not-knowing, as one general aspect of this condition). Aristotle would call this existential and ethical awareness *practical knowledge* or *practical wisdom* (*phronesis*) and distinguishes it from theoretical knowledge (*epistémé*) and technical knowledge in terms of know-how (*techné*). One of the works of Aristotle frequently referred to by scholars today is the Nicomachean *Ethics* (Aristotle, a.), a series of *lecture notes* collected by his son Nicomachus. In his notes, Aristotle brings forward his deep insight into the general features of human virtues that are still relevant for researchers and laymen today (see e.g. Weiss, 2021b). The same can be said about the written work of Roman emperor and Stoic philosopher Marcus Aurelius, who included exercises, examples and diary notes of different kinds (1997), while in the period 1570-1592 Michel de Montaigne wrote and revised his influential *Essays*, stating that they were designed to explore some traits of his personal character and humors (1992). The *Essays* were published in 1580 and cover a wide range of topics ranging from drunkenness, anger and being sick to repentance, experience, sleep and cowardice as the mother of cruelty.

Even the scholar praised and accused of creating the final rupture and dichotomy between the opposing stances in research as outlined previously, initiating the Enlightenment period, wrote his research in a deeply personal manner: René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy, in which the existence of God and the immortality of the soul are demonstrated* (1641) comes in a form similar to diary notes. Descartes describes how he has cut himself off from the outer world in order to follow his thought to the end in solitude, exploring whether he can be sure that he is. His famous conclusion is *Cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). He did not need to doubt that he is anymore, yet the mystery of *who* he is is still there. Another important scholar, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, wrote *Emile, or On Education* (1762), the book that is claimed to have introduced childhood in European culture, and thus inspired the later field of pedagogy. This important classical contribution to the philosophy of education was distributed in the form

of a *novel*. Friedrich Schiller, on the other hand, had his *letters* to the Duke of Augustenburg published as a book: *Letters Upon the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1774).

In our own time, the famous scholar Simone de Beauvoir, who disseminated her philosophical investigations of topics such as freedom and responsibility, means and aims as well as gender questions through novels, plays and essays (see e.g. 2009), can be mentioned. Her German colleague Hannah Arendt, one of the major philosophers in the 20th century, wrote her famous report of the trial against Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem based on her observations and reflections (1963).

To sum up, the classical scholars mentioned above disseminated their research in a variety of genres, covering dialogues, lecture notes, essays, meditations, novels, letters, plays and observational reports. As humanistic researchers, they took their point of departure from personal experiences, practices and/or concerns, reflecting upon them in their own unique manners. Their texts have nevertheless inspired researchers throughout the centuries. Paradoxically, today these texts are often read, studied and analyzed without taking into consideration the living, experiencing, breathing and feeling human being who wrote them and who struggled to come to terms with his or her human condition and cultural situation (Helskog, 2016). However, these researchers were, as were also the classical Greco-Roman philosophers, primarily life philosophers. As Pierre Hadot showed in his ground-breaking book *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (1995), the classical philosophical schools were aimed at promoting morally and existentially good lives for those engaging in the philosophical practices promoted. Important to note: these life philosophies were not studied as texts. Their common springboard was lived experience. When brought into text, they turned into works of reflective practice research, so to speak. That is, a reflective examination of one's own life and practice. By taking their point of departure from their individual experiences, the authors were able to create something unique, while at the same time giving general reflections on the issue at stake that are relevant to human lives across global cultures to this day.

Following this line of thought, we would go so far as to argue that all good philosophy is reflective practice research. This form of research was not about gathering information and analyzing data but about trying to understand life while living it. This makes the reflective research work of these great minds relevant to this day, as the phenomena and general aspects of the human condition that they examined, like courage, responsibility, love, etc., are still relevant to all of us. Hence, it is in this sense that

the personal experiences that have informed classical research works in the humanities have proven both valid, reliable and generalizable throughout the centuries. People across generations have resonated personally with this form of practical knowledge and wisdom and found it useful in their own lives, both privately as well as professionally; however, in a broad phenomenological-hermeneutical way rather than in a narrow “scientific” manner. Yet some, like, for instance, the Yoga Institute in Mumbai, claim to teach “the science (and also technology) of yoga”, using the concept “science” in an experiential way. Their argument is that the practice of yoga has endured the test of between 5000 and 10000 years of experience, and that it has worked for the betterment of people’s lives to this day (see Patañjali, 2001; Yogendra 2007; 2009).

In this respect, Hans-Georg Gadamer, can be brought into the discussion. He asserts:

When Aristotle, in the sixth book of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, distinguishes the manner of ‘practical’ knowledge... from theoretical and technical knowledge, he expresses, in my opinion, one of the greatest truths, by which the Greeks throw light upon ‘scientific’ mystification of the modern society of specialization. In addition, the scientific character of practical philosophy is, as far as I can see, the only methodological model for self-understanding of human sciences if they are to be liberated from spurious narrowing imposed by the model of the natural sciences. (Gadamer, 1997, p. 107)

More than two decades later, the “spurious narrowing imposed by the model of the natural sciences” (*ibid.*) appears to be more present than ever in the human sciences, while practical knowledge (not to be mixed up with technical knowledge, as we will see) is rather residing in them like a ghost. And today, this is what the humanities, including pedagogy, sometimes look like to us – a haunted house deprived of its true spirit.

In a certain sense, the present essay can therefore be read like an invitation to the spirit of classical reflective practice research to return home again, to put it metaphorically.

In the following, we will turn our attention to modern forms of reflective practice research. The approach, by the way, does not only appear to offer valuable potential for the development of self-understanding and practical knowledge in the humanities, as Gadamer demands, but also for research in the natural sciences, as we shall argue.

### 1.3.2. *Modern forms of reflective practice research*

While the notion *reflective practice research* was first used by Anders Lindseth (2015), the approach as such is, as we have seen, embedded in

classical humanities as well as in modern phenomenological and hermeneutical research, with Husserl and Heidegger as foundational figures. This implies that, of course, phenomenology and hermeneutics have developed into many-faceted approaches to research over the years. For instance, Thorsted and Hansen (2022), in their book on existential practice phenomenology, distinguish between three forms of phenomenology and phenomenological research. These are, respectively, epistemological knowing-oriented phenomenology inspired by Husserl (1970), existential being-oriented phenomenology inspired by Heidegger (1972), and mystery-oriented phenomenology inspired by Levinas (1987) and Marion (2002)<sup>5</sup>.

In their book, Thorsted and Hansen (2022, p. 183-249) distinguish between the Danish words “oplevelse” and “erfaring”, which both normally translate to “experience” in English. “Oplevelse” is normally seen as an experience occurring as an event, that is, within a limited moment of time. “Erfaring”, on the other hand, is often used for experience that is processual and has become deep rooted (practical) knowledge, insight and wisdom. We choose here to call the two forms of experience respectively *event-experience* and *insight-experience*.

A researcher that applies a Husserl-inspired knowing-oriented phenomenology is, according to Thorsted and Hansen (2022), concerned with the so-called factual and with the surface or outside of language. Husserl-inspired phenomenology operates with “first order event-experience” oriented towards the affective or subjective feeling and first order insight-experience oriented towards generating knowledge through cognitive reflection upon the first order event-experience.

While a Husserl-inspired researcher is epistemologically oriented, a researcher that applies a Heidegger-inspired being-oriented phenomenology is concerned with what Thorsted and Hansen (2022) label the existential and the depth, or the inside of language. Experience is here seen as of second order. Second order event-experience implies, existentially speaking, being touched and moved as a basic mode, while second order insight-experience implies existential insight gained through existential reflection over the second order event-experience of being touched and moved.

While a Heidegger-inspired researcher is existentially oriented, a researcher who applies Levinas- and Marion-inspired phenomenology will, according to Thorsted and Hansen (2022), be concerned with metaphysical

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<sup>5</sup> There is no room to go more deeply into these distinctions within the frame of this article, but the interested reader can go to the sources referred.

experience beyond language. Experience is in their scheme classified as third order. The third order event-experience is here a revelation and a hunch of something that is emerging, while the third order insight-experience is the ethical and spiritual wordless insight and wisdom that is gained through an openness for the mystery and that which “calls” us in the third order event-experience.

Thorsted and Hansen (2022) use the word *epistemology* only about Husserl-inspired phenomenological research. However, since research, in one way or another, deals with generating new knowledge or insight, there is not really a way to escape epistemology even when it comes to writing phenomenological research texts, whether one chooses the first order factual approach, the second order existential being-approach, or the third order revelational mystery approach to experience, as suggested by Thorsted and Hansen. All three approaches are relevant to reflective practice research, as all three approaches will generate insight derived from a practitioner’s experience. However, practical knowledge in the sense of *phronesis*, also often translated as prudence, virtuosity or even mindfulness (Weiss, 2017c; Helskog 2019), in the sense that “the experienced professional is often capable of intuitively judging what a situation demands, and then act in accordance with this in a wise manner” (Halås et al., 2015, p. 9). And virtuosity – or better, the lack of it – might also have been a central aspect in the experience that constituted the starting point of our investigation. Thus, even though we acknowledge that the second and third order forms of phenomenological research and teaching practice reaches deeper and are more powerful than factual-oriented research and teaching, we also acknowledge that it might take many years of practice to be able to conduct good second- and third order phenomenological research and teaching, especially if one is embedded in a means-aims oriented culture where more or less instrumental research based knowledge reigns. Second- and third order phenomenological research and teaching will touch and move not only the researchers but also the readers of the research, and not only the students, but also the teachers themselves as exemplified for instance in the epilogue in Helskog (2019). At its best, it might lead to human flourishing.

Having claimed that there is not really any way to escape epistemology when teaching and doing research, it is now time to move into part 2 of this essay and to the question *What is Reflective Practice Research in epistemological terms about?* Hence, we are now moving one step further into a transcendental-philosophical reflection upon our earlier concrete, critical and theoretical reflections.



## Part 2 – On the epistemology of Reflective Practice Research

When one takes a closer look at the methodological sides of the approach of Reflective Practice Research, one finds several references and similarities to certain dialogue approaches in the discipline of philosophical practice, like Nelson and Heckmann's Socratic Method (Nelson, 1922; Heckman, 1981; and also the Dialogos approach (Helskog, 2019, Weiss & Helskog 2018).

Though today there exist many different approaches to philosophical practice, a common denominator among them appears to be that the vast majority of "philosophical practitioners are convinced that philosophy is not only a worthwhile academic task but should also be accessible for everyone as it is an activity useful for a good life as well", as Staude and Ruschmann state in the introduction of the anthology *Understanding the Other and Oneself* (2018, p. ii). In this anthology, they also point out that deep *reflection on one's own practice* as a philosopher is "the basis for research on philosophical practice", and such research "on the methods, experiences, ideas and reflections is needed to develop the field of philosophical practice further" (ibid: vii). Hence, the practice "needs philosophical reflection itself" (ibid.), they argue. This line of thought puts forward an idea central to Reflective Practice Research but also relevant to our previous experience of discrepancy with our students: the need to reflect on one's professional practices with the prospect of (self-)understanding and (self-)improvement.

While Staude and Ruschmann seem to suggest a possible form of research on philosophical practice, Lindseth is expanding this idea to all kinds of professional practices. Nevertheless, both Staude and Ruschmann, as well as Lindseth, are advocating a research stance that sees reflection as a means of research, as does Finn Thorbjørn Hansen. He argues that for a Socrat and a historian of ideas like him, references to "objective reality" can be difficult to take seriously, especially when it comes to topics of the more existential, ethical, aesthetical or philosophical kinds (see e.g. Hansen, 2007; 2008). These are topics belonging to the humanities and not to the social sciences, he argues (see ibid.). In the humanities, the foundational attitudes, values and worldviews of the researcher are constitutive of his or her work. The "objective" glance is determined by the lens – that is, the value perspective – one is looking through. For the Socrat, the psychological science becomes, broadly speaking, a rather stiffened and institutionalized philosophy (Hansen, 2008). Certain researchers within the educational research tradition that advocate quantitative measures

refuse to acknowledge that qualitative research in general, and philosophical reflection upon practice in particular, count as research, or at least as ‘proper research’ (see e.g. Hargreaves, 1997; 1999; Oakley, 2001). This research tradition possesses what is in some fields called ‘the gold standard of research’, namely the *randomized control trial (RCT)*. We could add that for many social science researchers, philosophical reflection as research approach is likely to be seen as ‘subjective’ and ‘lacking rigour’. A similar accusation comes from traditional philosophy towards reflective research (see e.g. Walderhaug, 2018). However, the craft of a philosopher is dialogical, and the similarities between academic philosophy and philosophical practice are many. Marianne Walderhaug, after doing interviews with academic philosophers, came to the conclusion that the work and methods of these philosophers were similar to her work as a philosophical practitioner, but the differences were that these academic philosophers engaged in dialogues with texts, while she engaged in dialogue with inmates in prison, where she was working (Walderhaug, 2018). So, here again, we arrive at what Lindseth called the dialogical method, which essentially represents a practice of reflection (Lindseth, 2015, p. 47f).

## 2.1. Ontology and responsibility

In section “2. Critical reflection”, identity and self-understanding were pointed out as general themes that were at stake in the initially described experience of discrepancy from our workshop. In our subsequent line of argumentation, we related this theme to the fundamental philosophical question “Who am I?” and stated that this question was ontological in nature. Now, the ontology that is currently dominating the natural and social sciences operates with notions of a nominal universe – a universe that is structured by laws that exist independently of the observer. The assumption that there would be a world “out there” (object) that we just needed to observe with the proper tools so we could arrive at true knowledge represents what is called a positivist stance. This stance, especially when it found its way into the humanities in general and into pedagogy specifically (see for instance Myhre, 1980), was criticized already at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1930s, the famous Vienna Circle dissolved, failing in its intention to develop an objective scientific language (see Putnam, 1985). In the 1970s and 1980s, the movement of Radical Constructivism then appeared to have put an end to positivism as a legitimate scientific stance by bringing up indisputable arguments against it (see Watzlawick, 1984). Nevertheless, the previously mentioned assumption appears to be still present in several disciplines, e.g. in pedagogy or psychology, like an underlying cold that you never really get rid of. To a certain degree, it

also seems to be present with the students from our previously described workshop. They thought if we taught them the right techniques and the right evidence-based knowledge, they could just apply them as if they would apply a hammer. With the right knowledge and techniques, they would hit the nail on the head. In ontological terms, this resembles an almost mechanical worldview.

As with many others, Lindseth sees such a stance as problematic not because of the thought that existence is structured by laws but because of the thought that the world is there as a structure independent of us as a subject (see e.g. Lindseth, 2017a, p. 255). This view implies that knowledge about the world becomes ethically neutral, he claims. Knowledge is reduced to theoretical knowledge (epistemé) and becomes a pure description and statement of facts, while practical knowledge (phronesis) in terms of reflecting the practice of norms and values, ethics and morals is given little room. Instead, this dimension of knowledge is reduced to something subjective or intersubjective that has nothing to do with the world and the ontological. However, as soon as we see reality as participation, in line, as we shall see, with the theories of Buber and Skjervheim (see Buber, 2010; Skjervheim, 2002), we can no longer see this knowledge as ethically neutral. Instead, our ways of researching the world require that we take on the role of responsible subjects that are co-creating the part of the world that we are researching, something that was, among others, convincingly shown by the representatives of Radical Constructivism (see Watzlawick, 1984). It was specifically Glaserfeld (1984) and Foerster (1984) who pointed out that the cognitive process of knowing is not so much a process of depicting the world but a creative process in which we also contribute to the phenomenon we are experiencing. Our interpretation of these authors does not mean that there is no world and that everything is constructed; rather, it means that there is no neutral place in this world. There is no neutral knowledge. And of course, there is no neutral practice of this knowledge.

In more general terms, when it is about what Lindseth called *dialogical method*, the researcher and practitioner is already *immersed* and participating in the reality which he or she describes and analyses, regardless of how phenomenologically or scientifically “objective” his or her approach is. While researchers who use phenomenological or hermeneutical approaches are most often aware of their own participation, researchers who use “objective” approaches are often not aware of it, or act as if their stance is a neutral observer stance. Thus, “scientific” approaches often become naïve. While the phenomenological and hermeneutical approach holds that the basic condition of human beings is *motion* and *change* in and through the relationship to oneself, to other people and to phenomena in the world,

the “scientific” approach often treats phenomena as static objects that can be fixated and taken out of their contexts. The psychological lab where “research objects” are taken in for tests is an example of this attitude. That this attitude is problematic was, e.g. shown by constructivist researchers who sneaked into a psychological clinic as “patients” without the psychologists knowing it. Even though these researchers behaved completely normal in the clinic, the psychological staff never realized that these “patients” were not mentally ill and treated them as if they were (see Rosenhan, 1984). That such an attitude is far from objective seems to be at hand with this example. Moreover, in such a positivistic approach, concepts are usually stripped of everything that cannot be explored and measured empirically, which in itself represents the starting point of a so-called *logical circle*, where nothing else is being confirmed in the end than what was assumed to be confirmed in the beginning (see e.g. Hugh, 1911, p. 389). Even in much of psychological wisdom research, there is an encapsulation of the researcher, the research informants or “objects”, and the phenomenon wisdom that are being investigated. In the eagerness to measure wisdom, the research is at risk of becoming a non-participative, objectifying and unreflected form of research that, in some respects, is directly opposed to the dynamic issue at stake, which is wisdom. In other words, some forms of human research as we find it today has little to do with the development of practical knowledge (*phronesis*) as Aristotle suggested in general terms, and Gadamer specifically for the humanities (Gadamer, 1997, p. 107). Rather, highly dynamic and many-facetted phenomena is often studied in static, fixated and mono-facetted ways. Instead of this static, one-dimensional, nomical approach, we will suggest a dynamic poly-dimensional approach.

Lindseth (2017b, p. 21f) states that the dominating ideology of our time is the notion of knowledge development as something that is gained as we direct our eyes towards the objects in the world and collect as detailed information as possible, whereby the subject analyses the information in such a way that general knowledge appears. Because it is easy to become a victim to prejudices and fallacies, it is claimed that we need scientific methods to make sure that the knowledge gained is valid and reliable. Thus, it is important to ensure that we do not commit mistakes in the research process (Lindseth, 2005a, p. 153f). The paradox is that in the attempt to secure methodical correctness, everything that cannot be investigated empirically and give reliable general knowledge is defined away. In a conception of the world and of knowledge where we are always already participating, such an understanding becomes naïve. Lindseth argues that it is a form of “superstition” to believe that it is possible to reach

objective knowledge independent of the researcher's subjective structuring consciousness and activity. Moreover, the result of such approaches is that we are left with a crippled, fragmented and reduced image of the human being and the world and a very narrow conception of knowledge. We might argue: These conceptions are crippling both research and education at all levels, as well as the human psyche and outlook. Our ability to engage in intimate relationships with others, with nature and with the world shrinks as we learn to objectify the world and others. We become increasingly separated and isolated in our own world of fragmented I-it relationships, as Martin Buber called it (see 2010).

Finn Thorbjørn Hansen takes a similar stance and claims that it is important to differentiate between methodical-scientific approaches and philosophical-hermeneutic approaches to research (2008, p. 241-244). While the first is based on "evidence-seeking" approaches that are inspired by the natural sciences, the latter is based on personal experience and *being*, demanding research approaches that are open for interpretation. This does not mean, as Hansen argues, that we should not use scientific approaches, for instance, in educational research. Rather, in our context, it means that the philosophical practitioner and researcher should know both of these very different but complementary approaches and use them when appropriate. Here, it is not enough to distinguish between quantitative and qualitative research methods, Hansen argues, since the scientific methodological outlook has a tendency to move into qualitative research that has "empirical knowledge" and "evidence" as an aim for the work. Instead, he suggests, when ethical and existential dimensions of teaching and supervision are at stake, *phronetic knowledge* should be the turning point.

As previously mentioned, phronesis is the Greek notion for practical knowledge or virtue, which Socrates, Plato and Aristotle were concerned with. The phronetic dimension is, according to Hansen, more fundamental than the epistemological and functional dimensions of teaching (or philosophical dialogue facilitation). It is generally not enough to use an epistemological approach to knowledge and wisdom.

If one wants to learn how to stand in the open, a phenomenological, sensual and listening attitude on the one side, and a hermeneutical, dialogical wondering attitude is needed, which is connected to phronesis and the Socratic eros. (ibid., p. 244)

Hansen's approach is similar to Lindseth's, who argues that a participative ontology opens one up to seeing knowledge development as a reflection of lived experience, which can open one up for new insights and give a better basis for orientation and meaning in life. Participative

researchers do not only study the world around them; they also study the understanding they bring to the world. They recognize that their knowledge and understanding have limits and that they will never get out of this condition of insecurity (see Socrates' notion, "I know that I don't know"). When they realize this, they no longer believe that their research methods will give them access to a world independent of their own consciousness and thus "unknown" to them. On the contrary, before methodical research is possible, people are already familiar with the world. If we take this seriously, we risk being wrong because it is impossible for us to reach full understanding and knowledge, but this does not matter because the phenomena of the world appear in our consciousness, and therefore it is always possible to reflect on our knowledge and improve and develop it (ibid.).

## 2.2. Kaleidoscopic epistemology

A dialogical and participatory ontology opts for an equally dialogical and participatory epistemology that is oriented toward making visible the different possible connections between fragments within a greater whole. Our suggestion is to call it a *kaleidoscopic epistemology* (Helskog, 2015). The noun *kaleidoscope* refers to an optical instrument in which bits of glass are shown in continually changing forms by reflection in two or more mirrors set at angles to each other. The bits of glass are held loosely at the end of a rotating tube. The corresponding adjective *kaleidoscopic* is defined as changing form and pattern – continually shifting from one set of relations to another. In the context of philosophical pedagogy and reflective practice research, the metaphor can be used to understand how perspectives and patterns might change as we view a topic from different angles and through a changing twist of the conceptual or experiential angle taken. In the course of a dialogue, the different examples, interpretations, and ideas that are brought up can metaphorically be compared with the pieces of glass in the kaleidoscope that create different patterns depending on the questions that are asked, the kind of nuances that are focused on or drawn out based on the criteria applied, and the elements that other elements are compared to. Therefore, even though a philosophical dialogue on the same topic – let us say the topic of care – is structured in a similar way several times, the content and results will differ every time because patterns emerge based on the preconceptions, examples and perspectives of the concrete participants. A concept dialectically explored in relation to concrete examples will bring about new kaleidoscopic patterns and thus eventually new content to the concept.

Hence, a kaleidoscopic participatory and dialogical approach makes it impossible to fixate on narrow self-conceptions, ideologies, theories or models. Rather, every self-conception, ideology or theory is opened up for dialogue with other models, ideologies and theories and with the lived experience of researchers or philosophical dialogue participants. A dialogical participatory perspective is thus a movable perspective in which opposite perspectives can contain elements of truth, or rather, meaning. Instead of or in addition to arguing for and against different positions and ideas in order to establish one's own, the dialogically oriented researcher can go into dialogue with the positions from different perspectives. Within a kaleidoscopic epistemology, opposite perspectives can shed light on different elements of a phenomenon and be meaningful in their own right.

A critique might be that this would lead to relativism, as there is no room for the notion of "truth" if such a metaphor is applied. We disagree that this is a possibility. It is not the case that "anything goes". Only perspectives, examples, concepts and theories that are related to the overarching topic or question explored are relevant. Thus, the options will be limited, and what kind of patterns – e.g. what lines of argument, what networks of ideas – emerge is not entirely accidental. Nor are their possible combinations unlimited. On the contrary. The possible patterns created by the kaleidoscope are limited by the character of the glass pieces that are in it at a given point in time (and also if new glass pieces are added). Similarly, the possible patterns that can emerge in a philosophical dialogue will be limited by the topic, that is, the phenomenon that is examined as well as the content brought into the dialogue and the way this content is formed with regards to the topic in the course of the dialogue. However, instead of fixating on one pattern, several patterns can dynamically enlighten each other, bringing out a bigger and truer picture of complex issues. For instance, by focusing on one aspect of a phenomenon and drawing it to the foreground, other aspects are pushed to the background. What comes to the foreground and what is pushed to the background can change if the perspective on a phenomenon changes. Likewise, by shedding light on some aspects, other aspects are left in the shadows. This is not something that can be done objectively or neutrally. It is done by the structuring mind of the researcher or by all the participating subjects.

### **2.3. Researchers and researched as *participants* in a shared world**

An ideal in a relational and participative ontology and an equally relational and participatory kaleidoscopic epistemology is thus – in research as well as in philosophical dialogues in general (which represent a form of

investigation too) – that the participants should look at the phenomenon or topic at stake from different perspectives without the ambition of reaching complete or absolute knowledge about the phenomenon. This can sometimes include opposing positions that both have meaning and hold aspects of “the truth” (the latter, a term that can be highly misleading, which is why we replace it with the term “the world” since it seems to fit better with what we try to point at, also with regards to the term “worldview”). They do not need to be seen or treated as competing positions. Rather, they can mutually inform each other and contribute to a fuller picture of “the world”. For instance, in the encounter with two opposing theoretical perspectives, an experiential phenomenon might appear in two different kaleidoscopic patterns that can mutually enlighten both the theoretical perspectives and the experiential phenomenon.

Even though the researcher, the dialogue facilitator and dialogue participants take different perspectives and positions in relation to phenomena, they still take part in a shared world. We are all thrown into this world, even though we see different aspects of it from our respective positions and perspectives. This appears to be a rather banal statement. Still, it seems that we all tend to forget about it from time to time. A story that depicts this banal insight is the Indian Jain parable of the blind men and the elephant. The parable has several Indian variations, but the main content can be summarized in the following way (see also Helskog, 2019):

A group of six blind men had heard that a strange animal had been brought to their village, but none of them were familiar with the shape and form of this animal, which they heard was called an elephant. They were curious and wanted to inspect it by touching it since they could not see. When they arrived, they all got to touch different parts of the animal. One of the men was touching the trunk and claimed that the elephant was like a thick snake. Another was touching its ear and claimed that the elephant was a kind of fan. The third blind man, who was touching the leg, argued that the elephant was like a pillar or a tree trunk, while the fourth, who placed his hand on the side of the elephant, claimed that it was like a wall. Another who held its tail described it as a rope, and the last felt its tusk, stating that the elephant is like a hard, smooth spear. They simply could not agree on how to describe the elephant.

The parable of the blind men and the elephant can be interpreted as a metaphor for people of different cultures, ideologies and worldviews relating to the same phenomenon in the world – here the elephant – from their differing limited perspectives. Or, transferred to the world of research, it can be interpreted as a metaphor for researchers from different research traditions claiming to have found the one right way to approach and interpret



a phenomenon. In the parable, each blind man, seen individually, is only partially right. If they, however, had spoken together in genuine dialogue, listening to each other's experiences and trying to understand and describe the elephant by combining their different interpretations and perspectives and trusting the experiences and descriptions of the others, they would possibly have gained a broader understanding of how the shape of an elephant i.e. "the world" or even "the universe" can be described. Yet they would never get a full understanding. It would still be partial.

The Jaina philosophers point out that every object has infinite aspects, by which it is judged from different points of view. Every judgment that we pass about a phenomenon is therefore true only in relation to a particular aspect of the phenomenon seen from a different point of view (Chatterjee & Dhirendramohan, 2007, p. 29). Thus, Jaina philosophy seems to imply a perspectivism that has a parallel in European phenomenology. In his book on the basics of phenomenology, Dan Zahavi (2019, p. 10-11) proposes the view that phenomenology is the philosophical analysis of different forms of givenness that appear *perspectival*, always from a certain *angle*, and that

It is possible for one and the same object to appear in a variety of different ways: from this or that perspective, in a strong or faint illumination, as perceived, imagined, wished for, feared, anticipated, or recollected (ibid., p. 10).

With the parable of the blind men in mind, it also becomes apparent why the idea behind a kaleidoscopic epistemology is not based on relativism. On the contrary, it *is* based on perception and empirical data, to put it bluntly. Each of the men can give reasons for his description of the elephant due to his *experience* with the elephant i.e. the world/universe. They did not simply fantasize about what an elephant might be like. No, they had direct contact with the phenomenon at stake. However, direct contact with the phenomenon is not enough to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. A better understanding can first begin to unfold when the different experiences, impressions, thoughts and perceptions are brought into dialogue with each other. Not the least: In a multi-cultural and multi-religious world, listening to each other in dialogue and taking in the perspective of each other, is crucial if we want to develop our understanding.

Two banal examples can illustrate this point further. The winners and the losers of a war are likely to tell very different stories about the same incidents of that war, depending on their perspectives and the aspects they focus on. Also, some would claim a certain point in history as a "beginning", for instance, for the formation of a state, giving this state a claim to an area that now belongs to another state, while the other state bases their claim on another "beginning" in history. At their worst, opposing views

can escalate into war. Likewise, in the private sphere, parents who are divorced will most likely explain the reason for their divorce in completely different ways, based on their often-opposing experiences. Only if the parties engage in open, honest dialogue with each other can there be a hope of reconciling the different perspectives and creating a shared, deepened and expanded understanding. Of course, this demands of the parties that they be willing to take in the perspective of the other. That is, to return to the parable of the blind men and the elephant, each experience of the elephant is assumed to represent a part of the phenomenon, and the parable, in terms of what we earlier called a poly-dimensional approach, shows how anyone who puts forward an unconditional view of reality, denying the possibility of other aspects and views of that reality, necessarily has an imperfect and far too limited view. Hence, dialogical research is also a call to epistemic humility.

In this respect, Gadamer's philosophical approach of hermeneutics can be brought into account again. In his famous work *Truth and Method* (2004), Gadamer not only strongly criticized the humanities for their epistemological orientedness towards the natural sciences but also extensively elaborated the significance of dialogue in order to develop understanding, as he, for example, did in his "Analysis of historically effected consciousness" (ibid., p. 335-382). As Malpas writes,

Gadamer views understanding as a matter of negotiation between oneself and one's partner in the hermeneutical dialogue such that the process of understanding can be seen as a matter of coming to an 'agreement' about the matter at issue. Coming to such an agreement means establishing a common framework or 'horizon' and Gadamer thus takes understanding to be a process of the 'fusion of horizons' (*Horizontverschmelzung*). (Malpas, 2018 - see "3.2. The Happening of Tradition")

The need for dialogue between horizons comes to the fore as a term that can summarize the essence of the blind men and the elephant. The researcher or dialogue facilitator in this picture is no different from the blind men. She or he too has a limited perspective, though ideally she or he has seen more of the part of reality that is to be studied than the participants. However, sometimes this is not the case. The researcher or dialogue facilitator does not necessarily have a deeper understanding or broader perspective than the other participants in the research- or dialogue process. The researcher or facilitator might even be "blinder" than the other participants in the respective investigation. This calls for a humble openness (see Weiss, 2017b; Helskog 2009, 2019; Hansen 2008). Also, the researcher and facilitator need to be open to the possibility of having his or her perspectives and beliefs altered when entering into a truly philosophical

research or dialogue process. This also shows the ethical responsibility of the researcher and dialogue facilitator. If the dialogue can impact him or her in profound ways, this can also be the case for other participants. Hence, the first and most important virtue of the researcher and facilitator is humility and ethical sensitivity, in order to keep the balance between intimacy (which at its worst takes the form of intrusion) and distance (which at its worst takes the form of cold observation without participation). The researcher and facilitator should serve the participants to the best of his or her abilities.

Ironically, we arrive at an important insight here concerning the second universal aspect we put forward in “3. Critical reflection”: *good practice*, which is neither *epistemological* nor *ontological* but *normative* in nature. Nevertheless, we can see here how a kaleidoscopic epistemology informs good practice. Namely, in the sense that *good practice* is not so much about the question of the right techniques. Rather, *good practice*, as a desired *norm* (we probably all wish to be good in what we practice), first and foremost asks for approaches that can highlight and reflect *diverse* practices. Only then can we get an idea and eventually a deeper understanding of what good practice is and how it might be realized. The present anthology is an attempt at such an approach based on Reflective Practice Research. And eventually, this publication might contribute to illuminating what good practice might be about in the context of higher education pedagogies.

## Final remarks

We started this philosophical investigation by presenting a case from our own teaching practice in higher education, which made us wonder. During a Dialogos workshop with our students in teacher education, it became obvious that some of them refused to go into existential self-reflection. Rather, they were expecting that we would “hand over” some dialogical skills that they could just apply and replicate without any personal involvement. They wanted a recipe, so to speak.

In the second stage of our investigation – the critical reflection – we examined the question of what it is that is at stake in this case. In this respect, we arrived at two key themes: a teacher’s *self-understanding* and *good practice*. While the former points at the importance of posing and investigating *ontological* questions in teacher education (e.g. *What is a good teacher?*), the latter requires asking *normative* questions (e.g. *What should I do in order to be a good teacher?*).

In order to examine such questions, we suggested in the third stage of our investigation, called *theoretical reflection*, a hermeneutical

epistemological way strongly related to the original meaning of the term *method*, namely *a way of reflection*. That reflecting on one's (professional) practice can also represent a form of research was then explicated in terms of Lindseth's understanding of the *dialogical method* as a research method. In this regard, we presented Lindseth's approach to Reflective Practice Research and by exemplifying it with a variety of contributions from classical philosophy, we argued that reflective research, starting in personal experience and concerns, has had a central place in academia for centuries. We then set out to examine the question, "What is Reflective Practice Research in epistemological terms?"

In this respect, we arrived at the conclusion that a positivistic stance, which is still widespread in the humanities, jeopardizes the development of a form of knowledge that appears to be essential, especially in professional studies: *phronesis* – that is, practical wisdom or prudence. In a further step, and based on the assumption that research, in general terms, represents an activity that produces knowledge, we pointed out that theoretical knowledge in terms of *epistémé* as well as know-how knowledge in terms of *techné* is not sufficient when it comes to study programs like teacher education and also teaching practices in higher education in general. It also needs *phronesis*, and the dialogical method seems to be a method to develop this form of knowledge further. This dialogical method – as a hermeneutical method – opens for different and even contradicting views. The epistemological question then is not which of them is true, but rather how can these different views contribute to expanded consciousness, a bigger picture and a deeper understanding of what we do and who we are as practitioners, researchers and finally as human beings. We called our perspective *kaleidoscopic* epistemology and explicated this perspective by means of the Indian Jain parable of the blind men and the elephant.

If we now close our line of argumentation like a circle and return to our starting point, namely our experience of discrepancy in our Dialogos Workshop with the students, then especially one thing seems to become apparent: Existential themes like *life skills* in teacher education require the participants to engage with questions aiming for *self-understanding* and *good practice* (and not mere good techniques or knowledge). For that, a *dialogical methodos* seems not only *a way of reflection*, but also *the way to go*.

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