

Existentialism and Education.
An Introduction to Otto Friedrich Bollnow

Ralf Korrenz (Author)

Norm Friesen (Editor)

Table of Contents

Editor's & Translator's Foreword	2
Author's Preface	8
1. "What can we say with any certainty about human beings?"	10
2. From "Uncertainty" to "Deeper Understanding"	17
3. Between <i>Lebensphilosophie</i> and Existential Philosophy	23
Lebensphilosophie: Philosophizing "Life" Itself	23
Existential Philosophy	29
Rationality of the Irrational	37
4. Educational Reality	48
Attuned Educational Reality	49
Broken Educational Reality	58
Guided Educational Reality	70
6. Conclusions: Criticisms and Connections	80
7. Biographical Timeline	86
8. Selected Bibliography	87
9. Secondary Works Cited	89

Editor's & Co-Translator's Foreword

As this book's editor and co-translator, this foreword provides me with a valuable opportunity to contextualize my own interest in and appreciation of the work of Otto Friedrich Bollnow, and also to locate his thought in a broader conceptual context. I thus begin by discussing Bollnow's work in terms of my own academic research and experience, and I then point out some of the more academic, conceptual aspects that connect Bollnow to important but perhaps less familiar intellectual traditions in the human sciences—including the tradition of philosophical “anthropology” prominent in this book's title. I conclude with a brief overview of the book's chapters and its principle themes.

Otto Friedrich Bollnow and his approach to “educational realities” first became familiar to me through the work of my doctoral supervisor, Max van Manen, who translated one of Bollnow's key texts, *The Pedagogical Atmosphere* (1968/1989). In this text, Bollnow describes the titular concept, the pedagogical atmosphere, as a kind of shared mood or sense of attunement: “A disposition of acceptance, [encouraging students'] making of far-reaching plans, and... hope-filled working toward their fulfillment” (1989, p. 23). Such a positive and supportive climate is understood by Bollnow in close connection with another key notion from the tradition of the human sciences (*Geisteswissenschaften*) from which Bollnow draws, and to which he contributes in significant ways. This second notion is the *pedagogical relation*.

In my 2003 dissertation (later revised and published Peter Lang as *The Place of the Classroom and the Space of the Screen: Relational Pedagogy and Internet Technology*, 2011), Bollnow's understanding of both atmosphere and the pedagogical relation proved to be immensely productive in analyzing common experiential elements of contemporary online education. In this study, I undertook to tease out the differences between pedagogical lived experience in online and face-to-face settings. The idea of sharing an “atmosphere” or a general “climate” is one that raises many questions and uncertainties in online pedagogical contexts, particularly when the online “classroom” is constituted primarily through the non-synchronous exchange of textual posts and replies. We all know that “tone” is especially hard to assess when it comes to expressions sent and received online. In face-to-face settings, as Bollnow makes clear, such “tone” may be communicated not only in terms of non-verbal cues, but also (for example) by teachers' and students' passive receptivity, even their silence. A kind of pervasive “mood” can arise that is more than simply the sum of its parts or of the individuals who might experience it. Today, concerns with school and classroom “climate” are commonplace, and this could be seen as an unintended echo of Bollnow's original and powerful account of this intangible but indispensable pedagogical phenomenon. The fact that a shared mood or climate is not nearly as palpable online is something that distance educators and advocates of online education must keep in mind.

Later, I turned in my own work to experiences of “atmospheres” specifically in terms of relational, “tactful” action through which they can be carefully cultivated. I discussed “spaces” of tact and relation in an examination of online videoconferencing (2014), and more recently, in the context of the pedagogical relation itself (forthcoming). In both of these cases, Bollnow provides fresh and inventive insight into

a manner that involves *understanding*. “Hermeneutic pedagogy” is of course not the mainstream in today’s studies of education and schooling—indeed, the phrase itself is all but unused in English. However, it offers a way and means for thinking of pedagogy. It is an indispensable building block that is needed in order to avoid falling into the absolutism of measurement and optimization.

It has been my great pleasure and honor that my colleague, Professor Norm Friesen, has accompanied me on the journey of translating my original German study of the hermeneutic pedagogy of Bollnow into English. Of course, real translation is never a matter of replacing one word with another. Through intensive discussion and collaboration, Norm Friesen, my assistant Sebastian Engelmann and I have endeavored to make some of the basic ideas of this pedagogical tradition comprehensible in English. In particular, Norm Friesen’s work as a Visiting Professor at Friedrich-Schiller-Universität in Jena in 2016 was instrumental in this process. I am also grateful to Diana and James MacDonald, who, years earlier, undertook a verbatim draft translation of the book. Through these experiences, I have learned that translation is a complex transfer of meaning involving omission, addition and reconstruction. Translation in this sense involves the identification of structures of meaning—of understanding—that are bound to languages in particular and multifaceted ways. It was Norm Friesen above all who undertook this difficult task. I thank him and Sebastian Engelmann for their collaboration in this regard.

This English introduction to the pedagogy of Otto Friedrich Bollnow is based on a German-language book titled “Otto Friedrich Bollnow. Ein pädagogisches Portrait” (Weinheim 2004). It was important then, and it remains important today that the combination of existentialism and education presented in this book is seen as a variant of hermeneutic pedagogy. I hope that this focus on understanding itself becomes understandable in this text.

- Ralf Koerrenz

1. “What can we say with any certainty about human beings?”

The question in the title of this chapter was one that motivated Otto Friedrich Bollnow—both as a philosopher and as an educator. His answer to this question is complex. There is a paradox at the root of Bollnow’s response: human beings are defined by the very fact that their “being” cannot be narrowly defined at all. The essence of an individual is not determined by the makeup of his or her brain or even by the influences of nature and nurture. Humans are instead primarily determined by their openness to what is new and changing—in other words, by learning. As a result, an individual cannot be reduced to a singular core being that is determined by specific content (e.g., beliefs, theories, moralities).

But even this conclusion would be an oversimplification, a reduction of Bollnow’s response. At this point, we should instead simply be aware of the challenge of describing humans in any single simple or definitive way. To begin any such description, one must consider the variability and variety to be found at various levels of human reality. In the context of an open inquiry into humans, these different levels need to be interpreted. Therefore, an appropriate perceptual framework is required. For our purposes here, a framework based on a notion Bollnow borrowed from one of his university professors, physicist Werner Heisenberg, will be used. This is Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle”—the idea that a fundamental limitation or “uncertainty” is necessarily a part of any knowledge or insight that one might gain from the reality around one’s self.

It is in this uncertainty that one finds the individual—dealing with change, engaging in learning, and also constantly undergoing “education” in the broadest sense. The individual is simultaneously a unique creature and a social one determined by overarching social and cultural systems. The individual’s life is characterized by both consistency and unpredictability in equal measure. According to Bollnow, this mixture of consistency and unpredictability means that human beings are able to experience a kind of spatial and situational “harmony.” Emotionally, the individual is embedded in and frequently dominated by contexts of consistency or unpredictability, as well as ones of harmony. This is even true when the individual consciously represses his or her emotions, and tries to rise above his situation and context.

We are speaking here on the level of human values and their subjective evaluation; a level far beyond day-to-day activities, but at the same time clearly relevant to them. These human values determine and guide the individual, but would remain nothing more than abstract intellectual forms if they were not put into practice. The central challenge and indeed the ultimate goal for human beings on a path of learning and education becomes the search for genuine balance.

The examination of this and other levels of human reality lies at the foundation of Bollnow’s pedagogical perspective and his philosophy. Philosophy and pedagogy support each other in Bollnow’s work; both draw deeply from his examination of basic human realities—from what is known as his “anthropology.” Anthropology in this

context does not refer to the study of foreign or “primitive” cultures or peoples; instead it names the science (logos) of concepts and notions of humankind (*Anthropos*), as studied from historical, philosophical linguistic and interpretive perspectives. This specific kind of “anthropology” is known in English specifically as “philosophical anthropology,” and it appears in the works of thinkers as varied as Immanuel Kant, Michel Foucault, Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor.

This study offers a thematic introduction to the specifically *pedagogical* anthropology of Otto Friedrich Bollnow. The historical and biographical contexts of Bollnow’s work will also be a part of this introduction, but will remain secondary to an examination of the logic of Bollnow’s argumentation and the development of his conceptual approaches. An introduction like this, of course, cannot dismiss specific historical and political aspects of Bollnow’s biography; this is especially true of his problematic political positioning during the *Third Reich*. Our main focus, however, will be on providing an outline of his work, not on the minutiae of his biography.

Any interpretation of Bollnow must begin with the question of his own primary intellectual or disciplinary focus. Bollnow’s efforts were directed as much to pedagogy as they were to philosophy. In many interpretations of his work, scholars have asked themselves whether Bollnow’s pedagogical theory was a product of his philosophical work or whether it arose independently, constituting a theory on its own. This question is particularly pertinent in the German context, where the word pedagogy, as the theory and practice of education, is understood somewhat differently than in English. In German, pedagogy does *not* primarily designate one or more effective methods, techniques or theories for teaching or instruction. Instead, the term covers both formal and informal education—just as the German word “education” (*Erziehung*) itself includes what happens at school, at home and in the playground. Pedagogy also refers to a 200-year tradition of philosophically rich thinking that has focused, for example, on personal experiences and relationships of education and personal growth—to name a few foci. In this tradition, stress has also been placed on the deeply ethical nature of the orientation and relationship of the adult to the student or child.

In this study, Bollnow’s simultaneous pedagogical and philosophical interests are brought together through a deliberate emphasis on the *hermeneutic* roots of his work. Simply put, hermeneutics refers to the theory and method of *interpretation* and to a tradition of thought, also about 200 years old, that is associated with it. Hermeneutics provides a framework for connecting Bollnow’s philosophical efforts with his pedagogical theory. His life story shows that his intellectual interests were wide ranging; they included not only pedagogy and philosophy, but as already indicated, physics and natural science as well. Indeed, the curious combination of disciplinary interests and passions that were combined in Bollnow’s thought can perhaps be most easily understood by looking towards his biography, particularly his years as a university student. It is to this biography that we now turn.

Otto Friedrich Bollnow was born in 1903 in Stettin, now Szczecin, Poland, into an extended family of teachers. At the age of 12, his family moved to nearby

Anklam, a small town where his father was the head of an elementary school. Bollnow's father, however, was not just a parochial schoolmaster; he was, as Bollnow recalls, "extremely active in the progressive educational reform movements of his time" (1975a, 96).¹ Although Bollnow himself did not speculate much on the influence of his family on his pedagogical interests, it is clear that he was born into a home saturated with pedagogy. His daily exposure to the practices and concerns of elementary school instruction contributed a great deal to his intellectual development, and the progressive educational reform of the day influenced his thinking more broadly.

These deep pedagogical roots also affected the choices he made when starting his university education. According to Bollnow, his early university days represented "a powerful experience" (Bollnow 1975a, 96). Familiar only with narrow, provincial life, Bollnow set off in 1921 to one of the biggest, most vibrant, and chaotic cities in Germany—Berlin. Bollnow enjoyed city life, but, like many others at the time, he experienced economic difficulties. Soon after his studies began, he was faced with two *further* challenges: to decide on a course of study, and to find friends in the vast and sprawling capital. Bollnow's response to the first (after an initial detour) was: "I wish to be a pedagogue." His response to the second was to join an academic association, the "Skuld Academic Society," an organization that—like Bollnow's own father—was active in seeking education reform. This was a time when many students and young people were attempting to change the culture and nature of education and also of youth and childhood themselves. They didn't want their early years to be defined simply as time spent in school, and they wanted to determine their own interests and goals outside of institutionalized education. Above all, they wanted to spend time outside of the city, in nature. Among the most well-known of these groups was the *Wandervogel*, literally the "hiking" or "wandering birds," who sought to shake off social restrictions, and to enjoy their freedom in nature. So sizeable was this movement that, as a whole, it was (and still is) known simply as "*the* youth movement" (*die Jugendbewegung*). Thus, in addition to becoming a pedagogue, Bollnow also decided at this early point in his life that "I will dedicate myself to the ideals of the youth movement."

This second key decision cultivated in the young Bollnow a keen awareness of ethical concerns, since the youth movement was based on strong ethical or normative claims regarding nature, freedom and youth themselves. The significance of this choice will be investigated further in the section on "Guided Educational Reality" in chapter 5, which explores an aspect of Bollnow's pedagogical thought that is most directly connected with ethics. This concern with ethics is also evident in Bollnow's later attraction to the philosophies of existentialism and *Lebensphilosophie* (literally the "philosophy of life"). Both dynamic philosophical movements (explained further in chapter 3) sought to strip away layers of metaphysics, "essences," and speculation from philosophy, and to focus on what confronts us, both ethically and otherwise, in terms of existence or "life" itself. Both brands of philosophy served as key steps on the way to Bollnow's development of an anthropological pedagogy.

¹ All text from German sources cited in this book have been translated by the author.

At first, Bollnow wanted to be an artist, a painter, but he later said that he was very fortunate that his father strictly forbade him from pursuing a career in art. He instead turned initially to a more practical field, first studying architecture in Berlin's Technical College (*Technische Hochschule*), and later turning to mathematics and physics. The choice of these two theoretical fields was a very pragmatic one. In fact, in his own autobiographical writings, Bollnow acknowledges the practical value of this decision: "studying the humanities in [an] environment in which those disciplines are already overfilled would be impractical. So I began to study mathematics and physics while the appeal of teaching continued to grow within me" (Bollnow 1975a, 96f). Yet, in the final analysis, it was not so much the search for scientific understanding as the opportunity to stand before a classroom of young students that determined Bollnow's choice of study.

However, Bollnow's studies in the natural sciences were significant. During his time in Berlin, Bollnow attended the physics lectures of Max Planck. As a testament to his interest in other scholarly fields, Bollnow also participated in courses offered by Eduard Spranger, a leading figure in a movement or area of educational theory and practice ("human science pedagogy" (*geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*)), which is central to this book. For Spranger, as for this movement as a whole, the connection between education on the one hand and culture on the other was paramount.

Bollnow's academic progress was interrupted by economic developments in the troubled Weimar Republic. For a time, he returned to live with his family, rather facing an abject life in Berlin. Following a few semesters of study at home, he decided to move to the small university town of Göttingen. "At that time [this place] was the intellectual capital of research in mathematics and physics," he recalls (Bollnow 1975a, 97). It was the professional home of Werner Heisenberg and Max Born, the second being Bollnow's future academic mentor. As in Berlin, in Göttingen, Bollnow also sought out courses in pedagogy, taking part in seminars offered by educationists Herman Nohl und Georg Misch, both of whom would play a significant role in Bollnow's later conversion to pedagogy and philosophy. In 1925 Bollnow was awarded a PhD, completing a dissertation entitled "Crystal Lattice Theory of Titanium Oxides." The study itself was a highly specialized scientific investigation carried out under the expert guidance of the physicist Max Born.

The combination of Bollnow's father's profession, Bollnow's sympathy towards the youth movement, and his encounters with Spranger, Nohl, and Misch all strongly predisposed Bollnow to pedagogy. This interest was greatly strengthened over the winter of 1925-26, when Bollnow was briefly trained at the progressive Oldenwald School near the small town of Heppenheim. There, he met Paul Geheeb and Martin Wagenschein, leaders in progressive pedagogical reform. Wagenschein, like Bollnow, was a physicist and was unwilling to abandon his work at this school to take a teaching position at a university. Bollnow also learned about a number of well-known and established alternative educational approaches. These generally involved the students in all decision-making processes and in questions related to the formation and content

of lessons—no principle was more important than the consensus of the school community. Later, Bollnow himself would consider questions regarding the pedagogical value of consensus as well as the dynamic form of learning inherent in gatherings large or small. Despite the brevity of his visit at the Odenwald School, Bollnow was later to say it was a “great turning point.” His most significant impressions were the “liberal atmosphere of the school, the honorable presence of Geheeb, the didactic genius of Wagenschein, the deep consideration for the pupils, and the possibility of reading long texts [together, which I found to be] simply enchanting” (Bollnow 1975a, 96).

The full effect of this brief stay at Oldenwald became clear when Bollnow returned to Göttingen. There Bollnow had an opportunity to work as an assistant to Max Born, but in his own words, he “was unable to find my way back to the work of physics.” Bollnow adds: “And furthermore when Born was generous enough to offer me the position I had hoped for, I still decided quite quickly to dedicate myself to pedagogy and philosophy” (Bollnow 1975a, 98). Then, at the request of his parents (according to Bollnow’s account), he took and passed the state teacher certification exam.

Bollnow’s academic instructor and advisor now became Herman Nohl, who, at the time, was the head of the Human Sciences Department in the School of Pedagogy in Göttingen. Nohl gave the successful physics and mathematics student a piece of pragmatic advice: Building on his existing PhD degree, he should complete a postdoctoral dissertation (the German *Habilitation*) as a qualification for university teaching and as a means to learning as much about the field of pedagogy in as short a time as possible. Nohl referred Bollnow to the philosophy of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who was associated with the early romantic, anti-rationalist *Sturm und Drang* movement.² Bollnow was able to complete his second dissertation in a new field in four short years, by 1931.

However, there was yet another dramatic intervention that indelibly marked Bollnow’s intellectual development. This time, it was eminently philosophical in nature. Up to this point, *Lebensphilosophie*, the philosophy of life as the vital, irrational, but ultimate reality for philosophy had been dominant in Germany. In fact, Bollnow’s supervisor in pedagogy study, Herman Nohl, had described the significance of this philosophy for education in a series of lectures, later edited and published by Bollnow, on the “German Movement in Pedagogy.” Yet, more importantly, in 1927, the Marburg professor Martin Heidegger had come out with the epochal *existential* text *Being and Time*. For Bollnow, as well as for German philosophy in general, *Being and Time* was momentous and monumental, an enormously challenging and productive work in philosophy. Bollnow was quick to recognize not only the intellectual potential of the work, but also the importance of connecting with Heidegger himself in nearby

² Sometimes translated as “storm and stress,” *Sturm und Drang* refers to a German movement in the arts in the late eighteenth century. It celebrated nature, emotion and the individual, and was deeply opposed to the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther* is one of the best-known literary works associated with this movement.

Marburg. Therefore, he packed his bags and moved to be closer to Heidegger, and when Heidegger left Marburg for Freiburg one semester later in 1928, Bollnow followed him. (For more on the publication of *Being and Time* and Bollnow's engagement with Heidegger, see the last section of this chapter). In 1929, armed with the latest Heideggerian insights, Bollnow returned to Göttingen to dedicate himself to the intensive study of *Lebensphilosophie*. As the representatives of *Lebensphilosophie* in its traditional incarnation, Georg Misch and Herman Nohl now came to think of Bollnow as their "instructor in actuality," rather than as their student (Nohl 1970, 99). In 1931, upon the completion of his *Habilitation*, Bollnow became Nohl's assistant. This represented a student-teacher relationship that was not without some personal friction, but that further established and shaped the course of Bollnow's future work. Besides being rooted in *Lebensphilosophie*—as supplemented by Heidegger's existentialism—Bollnow's work at this time was always building upon developments in his personal life within education.

The dominance of pedagogical matters in Bollnow's work and life can be illustrated in many ways. First of all, Bollnow was a founding member of and contributor to two significant pedagogical journals. The first was entitled *Die Sammlung* (The Collection) and was founded in October of 1945. Since 1961 it has been known as *Die Neue Sammlung* (The New Collection) and it is published to this day. Herman Nohl encouraged Bollnow to contribute to the "Collection," and Bollnow responded not just with a few pieces, but by writing several *series* of articles. The second was the *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik* (Journal of Pedagogy) for which Bollnow served as a contributing editor from 1954 until 1980. It was in this forum that he published some quite significant studies including one on the term "experience" in pedagogical contexts.

Remembering his own formative experiences in the "youth movement," Bollnow was inspired to establish a student organization of his own in his adulthood. Particularly in Tübingen—where he settled in 1953—Bollnow set up and actively encouraged a youth organization to engage in intensive and long term discussions of issues focusing on pedagogy. In retrospect, Bollnow writes "Here [in Tübingen] a circle of students from a variety of backgrounds arose from which a number of the professors at the newly-established Pedagogical College would be drawn" (Bollnow 1975a, 104). Bollnow named a few of these former students in his autobiographical writings: Gottfried Bräuer, Klaus Giel, Friedrich Kümmel, and Werner Loch (Bollnow 1975a, 104).

Finally, when examining his academic life and works, one must also remark on Bollnow's contact with East Asian pedagogues and philosophers, something he maintained throughout his career (see chapters 1 and 6 for more on this topic). Some of Bollnow's works appeared first in the Japanese language and even today in Korea his work on "pedagogical reality" is widely known and appreciated. Among his first publications in Korea was a lecture entitled "Aspects of the New Philosophy: German Philosophy, Pedagogy, and Literature" delivered in 1966 and published the next year.

In Japan, his first works were his lectures on the “Philosophy of Hope” from 1959 (published in 1960, with a second edition 1976). He also gave lectures there on the “New Pedagogy and Philosophy” in 1966, on “Introduction to Philosophical Pedagogy” from 1972 and 1973, and he published “Education to Conversation” there in the same year. Perhaps most significant in this connection, however, is his comprehensive work “Pedagogy from an Anthropological Perspective,” a work that first appeared in 1969 in Japanese and was published two years later in German in Tokyo. The connections between the work of Otto Friedrich Bollnow and discussions in the Far East regarding pedagogy that exist to this day are impressive.

Along with the publications intended for the Far East there were also volumes in other languages: French, Spanish, English,³ and Portuguese. Otto Friedrich Bollnow is without a doubt a powerful and prolific writer on pedagogy. And when it came to cross-cultural exchange, he not only encouraged international communication, he also exemplified it in his own life and work. This was certainly uncommon in Bollnow’s own time, and is changing only gradually in Germany today.

Otto Friedrich Bollnow’s biography is characterized by clear trajectories. One of these traces a path from his time as a trainee at the Oldenwald School to his appointment as a head in the pedagogical institute in Tübingen. Another begins his studies under Herman Nohl, and moves through his becoming an assistant and then a colleague of Nohl’s—working side-by-side with him as contributing editor at the “Collection” journal. This second trajectory would end with Bollnow’s role as the editor of Nohl’s lectures on the “German movement” in pedagogy.

Within the rather different Anglophone tradition of the philosophy of education, it may seem counterintuitive to choose an “anthropological” approach to pedagogy. However, anthropological pedagogy is not nearly as foreign or marginal as it might initially sound. Its primary concern, after all, is with the character of human nature that is to form the basis for all educational or pedagogical work that might shape and profit from it. In its existential and humanist emphases, it can speak directly to today’s practitioners’ (and others’) theoretical and practical concerns. Moreover, Otto Friedrich Bollnow’s *œuvre* is one of the most impressive examples of just such an approach.

³ Three of Bollnow’s books have been translated: His 1966 *Crisis and new Beginning: Contributions to a Pedagogical Anthropology* appeared from Duquesne University Press in 1986; *The Pedagogical Atmosphere* (1964) appeared in 1989 in the journal *Phenomenology + Practice* (Vol. 9; which is currently available online), and his *Human Space*, originally published in 1963, has recently appeared from Hyphen Press (2011). A slightly larger number of articles by Bollnow are available in English as well.