



**EUGEN FINK**  
**&**  
**EDUCATION**  
**BEYOND**  
**THE HUMAN**

**Norm Friesen**

## Eugen Fink and Education beyond the Human

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Eugen Fink (1905-1975) earned his doctorate under Husserl and Heidegger and remained Husserl's loyal assistant, even when the latter was abandoned by Heidegger and persecuted by the Nazis for being Jewish. Regardless, the influence of Heidegger is much more evident in Fink's work than that of Husserl. Like both Husserl and Heidegger, Fink held a chair at the Albert Ludwigs University of Freiburg—although Fink's was in philosophy and *education*. Fink saw the two disciplines as being inextricably intertwined. After the end of metaphysics, according to one commentator, Fink saw education not simply one of many possible topics for philosophizing; instead, he saw human becoming in its imminence as *the* concern par excellence for both philosophy and philosophical anthropology.<sup>1</sup> “The way in which human beings are seen” Fink emphasizes, “predetermines the nature of education.” In this presentation, I focus on one recently-translated 1959 piece from Fink, “The Questionableness of the modern Educator,” and work to connect it to important themes in the German tradition of *Bildung* and *Erziehung*.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, I deal with existential questions about the limits and possibilities of “the human,” and possibilities and dangers presented what could be regarded as “beyond” the human—new, even previously unimagined possibilities of definition and self-definition.

I begin, however, with “a central question for education” raised in 1826 by theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher: “What does the older generation actually want with the younger?” Education for Schleiermacher as for Fink—and for German thought in general—is not a matter just of formal schooling, but about bringing up and raising children more broadly. These meanings are all captured by the German term “*Erziehung*,” which gives to education the significance of a kind of *existential*, a fundamental condition of existence: “Education,” Fink explains, is to be found “wherever a difference between the generations exists, where those who are older feel responsible for the younger.” Education, upbringing and human life itself are all indelibly and unavoidably marked by the responsibility of older generation for the younger. The mutual, formative (*bildende*) influence of the one on the other is one of its inescapable realities. A similar position may be familiar to

One of the implications of these insights is that educating is neither primarily the specialized application of a knowledge base nor the use of a set of established scientific or pragmatic techniques to prepare the young for the world. Fink declares boldly:

One is not an educator like one is a weaver, streetcar conductor or bank director—but in the manner of being a worker, lover and fighter. 'Educating' [especially in the sense of upbringing]

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<sup>1</sup> Ferdinand Graf. Einführung in die Pädagogik Eugen Fink. In Anselm Böhmer (Ed. 2005) *Eugen Fink: Sozialphilosophie - Anthropologie - Kosmologie - Pädagogik – Methodik*. Pp. 72-84. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

<sup>2</sup> This translation has not yet been finalized. See: Eugen Fink. *Die Deutsche Schule: Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft und Gestaltung der Schulwirklichkeit* 51(4; April 1959), 149-162.

belongs to the central phenomena fundamental to human existence. This simple truth however is generally forgotten, obscured or distorted, because in the modern world, the 'educator' has increasingly taken the role of a specific functionary in the ... process of social production, one specialist among countless others.

The relation of the generations, the relation of *this* child or young person to *me*, is not an abstract one which I would observe as if from afar. It is instead a personal, often passionate relation where a great deal is at stake. It is one in which the teacher or adult generally engages with great conviction and a deep sense of individual investment. The intensive but socially sanctioned involvement of the teacher within this relationship between the generations makes his or her role special. As Fink explains, the teacher “exemplifies a point of awareness,” and “exist[s] in a representative way for fellow human beings.” It is not his or her specialization that distinguishes the teacher from others involved in upbringing. Instead, it is the depth of his or her passion and conviction, the direction of his or her interest, as well as the cultivation of her intelligence to this end. Fink emphasizes the terminology of the “vocation” and “calling” of the teacher, and speaks even of the “internal mandate” or “inner life-mission” of the teacher.

In her responsibility for the next generation, in exemplifying the relations between the generations, the educator is not just “a mere technician in the transfer of cultural power that dominates” at a given place and time. “Instead,” Fink continues, the teacher “takes an active part in this power, takes part in shaping it, takes part as a subject” or an active agent. He explains: It is the teacher who “contributes and helps to shape the historic formation and living perpetuation of... a comprehensive relation to world of a certain humanity.” It is the teacher, in other words, who helps to shape the ongoing relation of a culture or collective to the world--a relation characterized by a particular power and comprehensiveness. But what does Fink mean by “power” or in his description of this relation as “comprehensive”? And what might be some of the individual implications of these sweeping characterizations?

To begin to address these questions, it is first important to recognize that Fink is speaking at this point not just of the teacher but of anthropology and ontology in the broadest sense. Fink’s anthropology, understands human beings in terms of relation.<sup>3</sup> This relation is twofold, it is relation to the world, and also relation to oneself:

[The human being] lives in relation to himself through understanding [*Er lebt im verstehenden Selbstumgang*]: He places himself into practical relation to his own existence [Dasein] and to the Being of all beings. However, such self-relation is not a consequence of “consciousness,” it is not a conscious reflexivity, but rather a much more primordial and tension-laden existential structure. The human being is “his own task” [*ist sich “aufgegeben”*], he must become what he is, must look for and fulfil his essence or being.

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., see: Mario Ruggenini. Selbstbezug und Weltbezug Grundprobleme der Anthropologie Eugen Finks. In Anselm Böhmer (Ed. 2005) *Eugen Fink: Sozialphilosophie - Anthropologie - Kosmologie - Pädagogik – Methodik*. Pp. 141-153. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann.

The human for Fink is someone who lives in a relation to himself and to the world, not through a conscious and deliberate “positing” or “positioning,” but through practical habit, through familiar and customary ways of doing things, routine was of regarding oneself and the world around one. These customary relations of self to self and to world, their expression and reflection are what Fink means by “culture,” and he sees these at once as having a particular power to shape and perpetuate themselves, but also as entities subject to change, influence and individual agency.

At the same time, though, these relations are “tension-laden.” They compel the human being to regard him or herself, and his or her fulfilment, as a problem and a project. In this sense, human beings manifest a “strange incompleteness, [an] existential imperfection” that they are compelled to address. The “questionability” of the teacher is one that can be extended to “the questionability of humanity” as a whole. At the same time, Fink sees this fragmentary nature as the basis for human education and *Bildung*, and also for human freedom—all of which are similarly incomplete and fragmentary in nature. The indeterminate and incomplete nature of the “human being [*Dasein*]” for Fink is “the condition and precondition for the shaping of the educational imprimatur.”

Education, thus, has the formative task of working with this underdetermined and incomplete being. Its purpose, however, is hardly one of fulfilment and completion. Instead, it is to undertake the task of shaping the existential relations of self-to-world and self-to-self. Its formative task, in other words, is ultimately to foster a “free, thinking relation of everyone to themselves,” as Fink puts it. And this free thinking self-relation according to Fink, must in turn be “recognized as the basic life-shaping human-forming power.”

However, there is a conspicuous circularity in this remark: A “free thinking relation” of oneself to oneself is at once the aim of *Erziehung* and *Bildung*, and also the basic power that is presupposed in them. In concluding my presentation, I show how this circularity both opens up and forecloses on possibilities for Fink’s anthropology. These are possibilities, moreover, that have been the focus of this panel. For example, in some of his other work on education, Fink openly affirms the anthropology of the *homo faber* discussed by Fernando. Although Fink regards education as something that is intrinsically cultural and personal rather than rationally instrumental, the postwar era for Fink is one that is irremediably technological and scientific. Consequently, Fink advocates for the direct engagement of education with the contemporary, scientific and technological relation of human beings to their world. Fink speaks of a “technical *Bildung*” as necessary for his time. Sounding perhaps a bit like Marcuse, he explains that such an education must “teach people to empower and meaningfully shape the richness of machine-made products and the excess time that arises from technological automation.”<sup>4</sup>

But unlike Marcuse, Fink did not see sexuality or eros as something that would consequently be liberated or opened to experimentation or redefinition. Although Fink, writing in the *Questionableness of the Modern Educator*, acknowledges that “we live in relationship to our own sexuality,” he places

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<sup>4</sup> Eugen Fink. Technische Bildung als Selbsterkenntnis. *Die Deutsche Schule: Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft und Gestaltung der Schulwirklichkeit* 55(1963), 176-177.

unmistakeable limits on the freedom that might be exercised overall in one's relation to one's sexuality, oneself and the world. This is clear in his characterizations of the educator as "*taking part* in [the] power" of free reflection rather than as *controlling* or *redirecting* it; it is also evident in Fink's characterization of the ontological and broadly educational "self-relation" as being "not a consequence of *consciousness*... but rather a much more primordial and tension-laden existential structure." So although education is made possible in terms of our relation to the world and to ourselves, it hardly free to change these at will. The ability of the individual and of the educator for Fink is significantly limited by the fact that they exist in a history, culture and collectivity. This is registered in Fink's classical Greek vocabulary through the term *Polis*. Speaking specifically of the educator Fink emphasizes that the educator is one in whom "the general will, the interest of the Polis, is glowing." In this regard, too, the educator is representative. Going even further, Fink describes sexuality in this context in terms of quasi-mythological characteristics of tender femininity and tenacious masculinity. Unfortunately, aspects of Fink's anthropology, like those of Heidegger's, tend towards the provincial and parochial, rather than being particularly open to the cosmopolitan; the elements he tends to affirm are ultimately proper to the traditional *Gemeinschaft* rather than the contemporary international *Gesellschaft*.

To sum up my presentation and to speak to the other presentations in this panel, I want to emphasize that regardless of this and other significant moments, Fink did indeed attempt to stretch the normative boundaries of the human. He also perceptively brought the question of these boundaries into clear if not completely direct relation with education and the educator. Fink and philosophical anthropology generally can be said to offer valuable points of reference for thinking more radical possibilities for the technological, sexual and collective in terms of education and the relations between self and world. What Fink wrote of human beings in 1963 is certainly as true today as it was in his German post-war milieu, namely, that "We know *a priori* that human power is limited, but how it is limited, we do not know."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Fink, *Technische Bildung*, 175.