



7th World Conference on Educational Sciences, (WCES-2015), 05-07 February 2015, Novotel Athens Convention Center, Athens, Greece

Education as Synesis: A Hermeneutical Contribution to the Pedagogical Theory of Educational Practice

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Abstract

Synesis, a category mentioned by Aristotle in the sixth book of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, is, along with *phronesis*, a fundamental concept of ethics as a human reflection on moral action. Through a hermeneutical methodological approach, this paper will demonstrate how *synesis*, a concept scarcely studied by scholars in the context of pedagogy and philosophy of education, represents a basic category both of pedagogical epistemology and educational practice, upon which one needs to reflect in order to understand the function and meaning of education and learning in a human perspective.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: Philosophy, Education, Synesis, Practice, Hermeneutics

1. Introduction

In the sixth book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle introduces the concept of *synesis* without offering any explicit and deep analysis. Educationists know well this chapter, because it speaks about *phronesis*, which, understood as an intellectual virtue combined with moral virtue and referred to *sophia* as an intrinsic reference model, is a form of practical knowledge aimed at deliberating and prescribing actions that are good from an ethical point of view. However, the concept “synesis”, usually translated as “understanding”, “consciousness”, “care”, “intelligence”, or “judgment”, is overlooked and scarcely studied (or ignored) in both pedagogy and the philosophy of education.

Thus, on the one hand, *phronesis*, understood as a practical reason that guides educators’ actions and allows them to act and play their functions in the best possible way and with full and appropriate knowledge of the facts, has been largely analyzed and studied in the philosophy of education, and has become part of the conceptual lexicon of this discipline. On the other hand, *synesis* has never been linked to educational practice.

This being so, the purpose of this study is to demonstrate, through a hermeneutical methodology, not only that the

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concept of *synesis* is closely linked to *phronesis*, but also that it is fundamental to the philosophical theorizing of education and its epistemology. This study wants to highlight the relevance of *synesis* and its role in defining the theory of educational work, because this Greek concept helps us better grasp the meaning of key terms in education, understood as a human practice, such as “comprehension”, “care”, “interest in the other person”, and “love for the other”.

2. The concept of *synesis* in Aristotle

In the above-mentioned sixth book of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle says the following regarding *synesis* (1143a 1-18; Crisp, 2004):

“Judgement (*synesis*), that is good judgement (*eusynesia*), in virtue of which people are said to have judgement or good judgement, is not the same as knowledge in general, or the same as belief (since then everyone would have been a person of judgement); nor is it any one of the particular sciences, such as medicine, which has health as its concern, or geometry, which has spatial dimensions. Judgement is concerned not with what is eternal and unchanging, nor with what comes into being, but with what someone might puzzle and deliberate about. For this reason it is concerned with the same things as practical wisdom (*phronesis*).” (1-6).

The Stagirite goes on and says:

“But judgement (*synesis*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*) are not the same. Practical wisdom gives commands, since its end is what should or should not be done, while judgement only judges (*kritike*). Judgement and good judgement (*eusynesia*) are the same, as are those with judgement and those with good judgement. Judgement, then, is neither the possession nor the acquisition of practical wisdom (*phronesis*). But just as understanding (*manthanein*) is called judging (*synienai*), when one employs scientific knowledge (episteme), so we also call judging (*synienai*) what is involved in employing belief (*doxa*) to judge (*krinein*) what someone else says (*allou legontos*) about what concerns practical wisdom (*phronesis*) (and it must judge it nobly (*kalos*), since judging it well (*eu*) is the same as judging it nobly (*kalos*).” (7-15).

And, then, he concludes:

“From his use of the word “judgement” (*synesis*) in the case of understanding (*synienai*) is derived the sense in virtue of which people are described as having good judgement (*eusynetoi*), since we often say that understanding (*manthanein*) is judging (*synienai*).” (16-18).

For Liddell and Scott (1996: 1712), *synesis* is a Greek term derived from the verb *synienai*. This verb means “to send, to bring, or to set together,” “to perceive,” “to hear”, and “to come to an understanding about something.” From this definition, we can infer that the concept “*synesis*” always involves a communal and dialogical dimension (Long, 2002). One of the meanings of *synesis* established by Liddell and Scott is “conscience.” For them, there is a link between *synesis* and *syneidesis*, a word that means: “a joint knowledge or consciousness,” or “conscience”:

“However, [*synesis*] is derived from a different root, namely, *synidein. This verb is linked to verbs of knowledge related to the sense of sight: *synoran*, ‘to see together,’ and *syneidenai*, ‘to share in the knowledge’ of a thing, or ‘to be conscious’ to oneself, (when used with the dative). Taken together, the cluster of words in which *synesis* is embedded clearly suggests that it connotes a sort of intelligence directed towards and intimately related to others. Thus, the translation offered here is designed to bring out this dimension of the term that is otherwise eclipsed when merely translated into English as ‘intelligence’ or ‘understanding’.” (Long, 2002: 58).

3. Hermeneutical perspectives and educational interpretations of *synesis*

Reading Aristotle’s paragraph, one can conclude that *synesis* is different from *phronesis*. The former is a disposition, an intellectual *dynamis* (power), a capacity of *nous* (intellect). Which means that *synesis* is something referred to things that are subject to doubt and that make one be perplexed and reflective about them (Rowe & Broadie, 2002). To be clear, Aristotle states that *synesis* deals neither with metaphysical nor with physical things. As *nous*’ capacity, *synesis* is one of its functions in opposition to *dianoia* (discourse).

Synesis is also linked to *sophia*, because: “the power of insight of understanding into the things that are subject to doubt, operates with opinion and not with the truth contained directly as in the case of *sophia*. For this reason, what is subject to doubt needs deliberation. By the power of design which it involves, *synesis*, still lies within the intellectual sphere, the link with action being accomplished by *phronesis*. Practical wisdom holds the urgency of decision as far as action is concerned.” (Isai, 2013: 75).

From Aristotle's point of view, there exists a strict relationship between *phronesis* and *synesis*. *Synesis* is literally a "joining" or "meeting together", and it connotes a kind of being with others, and indicates the peculiar kind of intelligence exhibited by the *phronimos*, the wise man. The difference between *phronesis* and *synesis* is that whereas *synesis* is an intellectual capacity to judge, *phronesis* is a virtue able to bridge the gap between theoretical judgment and action (Zagal, 1999). For this reason:

"*Phronesis* is never a purely intellectual exercise, yet if the intellectual side of *phronesis* is permitted to be completely eclipsed, the misconception emerges that it is merely a matter of mechanical habituation. As will be seen in the discussion of *phronesis* and *arete* below, the disposition of *phronesis* is thoroughly saturated by deliberation. Here, however, he is concerned to establish precisely what sort of intellectual operation is at work in *phronesis*." (Long, 2002: 45).

When Aristotle says that *synesis* deals with things judged using *doxa* and *phronesis*, when someone else speaks (*alou legontos*) about them, it indicates that *synesis* is never pursued in isolation, but in dialogical encounters with others. In the line with this idea, Hans-Georg Gadamer has built a specific, very interesting and useful, from a pedagogical point of view, theory of *synesis*. *Synesis* is linked to *syneidesis* and conscience because:

"Once it is recognized as the sort of intelligence that is directed toward or exercised in conjunction with another, a more nuanced and indeed stronger translation of it may be suggested. The word itself has an etymological relation to 'syneidesis,' or 'conscience.' Thus, although 'syneidesis' never appears in Aristotle as such, and there remains in the term "conscience" dangerously misleading Christian theological and Heideggerian connotations, perhaps we can nonetheless risk the more bold translation of *synesis* as 'conscientious apprehension' so as to emphasize the ethical and dialogical connotations it clearly has in Aristotle." (Long, 2002: 46).

Synesis is "conscientious apprehension", and it has, as stated above, ethical and dialogical connotations. Long (2002), who studied the concept of *synesis* in Aristotle, says that:

"'Conscientious apprehension' names the ability to grasp the nature of a given situation in a mode of critical self-reflection that remains constantly conscious of the fact that the judge too is implicated in each act of judgment. The ability to imagine one's way into the position of the other and to listen as the other speaks (*alou legontos*) are important elements of conscientious apprehension because they disrupt the internal monologue of the *phronimos* and direct it towards that which is outside itself. Here *phronesis* is understood as dialogical not merely because it can listen as others speak, but also because it recognizes that the concrete situation itself is never exclusively determined by its subjective judgment. Indeed, the fact that *synesis* must operate with *doxa* and not, as *sophia*, with an immediate grasp of the truth, already suggests the extent to which *phronesis* is itself determined by the world in which it is embedded." (Long, 2002: 46).

Synesis is an important concept in Gadamer, because:

"Besides *phronesis*, which Gadamer calls 'the virtue of judicious judgement', is *synesis*, the ability to understand. This form of understanding is different from the intellectual capacity to understand abstract notions or mathematical demonstrations. In this case, it is a form of understanding that comes from experience of similar events. Only the one who has gone through similar experiences can truly understand all the human things." (Isai, 2013: 75).

To be clear, *synesis* is a *synienai*, that is to say, it is a comprehending in order to make a decision; a comprehending others, learning from this experience, and making the better decision, deliberating in the interest of and to the advantage of them. *Phronesis* means to recognize what is universal into the particular: but it has many limits because it is an ethical attitude based on a moral disposition (a wise, virtuous and moral act) which is self-referential (it is always and only for me).

Therefore one can affirm that *synesis* has the capacity of improving and perfecting *phronesis* as wisdom. *Phronesis* has an epistemological duality. Reasoning from the point of view that conceives of pedagogy as a hermeneutical theoretical and practical science of education (Gallagher, 1992), one can say that *phronesis* knows the principals of its model (pedagogy) and knows how to apply them to *praxis*, to the concrete and practical case (education). Education is both *synesis* (comprehension and judgment) and *phronesis* (wise reasoning).

Education is (and always it requires) *synesis*, because education is a rapid penetration into the ethicality of the action, and it is a not discursive operation which can be analyzed. *Synesis* is sensitiveness, a capacity to see the ethicality of an action (Levin, 1972; Desideri, 1998). The need for *synesis* from education, it demonstrates that education, as a human practice, is never something fully rational. Like *synesis*, education is something that is between animal functions (sensitiveness) and intellectual virtues (*techne* and *phronesis*). So one can conclude that Education is both *phronesis* and *synesis*. *Synesis* is a way, a path, to *phronesis*; and *synesis* is a reflective component of *phronesis*, an exercise aimed at comprehending and helping the other.

On the basis of Gadamer's and Heidegger's translation of *synesis*, the correct meaning of this term would be given by the two following German words: *Rücksicht* ("regard", "consideration", "respect") and *Verständnis* ("comprehension"), which are intrinsically related to (Greek) terms like *gnome* (*Einsicht* in German, "judgment", "discernment") and *sygnome* (*Nachsicht* in German, "indulgence", "compliance") (Conill, 2006).

Synesis is a hermeneutical tool that every educator must own. *Synesis* is an attitude between *techne* (dianoetic virtue of *poiesis* and practical reason) and *phronesis*. For this reason, the educator, if she or he wants to educate well, must use the following hermeneutical tools: *techne* (which can be bad or good, and it serves as a knowledge of means); *synesis* (which is a way and a bridge to the other); and *phronesis* (which is a tool to know the relation between means and goals).

Synesis also relates to *syneidesis*, a term that literally means consciousness or awareness. *Syneidesis* (distinguished from *synderesis*) comes from the Greek verb *syn-eidenai* ("to know from an act of seeing and watching"), that is "to have knowledge/to be aware of something", and "to have the capacity to apply general principles of moral judgment to particular cases." In this sense, *synesis* is a conscience that comes from an act of "hearing", "listening", "comprehending", "understanding", "taking care of the other, watching her/him carefully and in depth", and the like (Osborne, 1931; Snell, 1953).

One could say that *synesis* is the conscience that listens to itself, and to its human roots; *synesis* is our conscience that listens to, understands, and recognizes the other as a human being (Franco, 2000). Educator's knowledge thus can be regarded as *phronetic* and *synetic* at the same time.

1) Educators' knowledge is *phronetic* because it refers to a knowledge-for-itself, a wisdom that starts from the ethical perception of educational situation as a state-of-our-actions, and then as a state-to-us; situation in which we act, and in which we are called in person to make a decision about what is right or wrong to do for us. This knowledge constitutes a clear understanding of ourselves and of our capacity and potential in terms of actions and behaviours in different situations. It is a technical knowledge (a know-how), which is external and lacks an internal dimension, namely, that one of consciousness; it is a well doing that also needs an equitable and fair acting (which is given by *epieikeia*, that is "equity").

2) Educators' knowledge is *synetic* because it refers to a knowledge-for-the-other and implies a capacity to assess and to understand her/his situation. This is done not only in technical terms (through the knowledge of sciences, for example), but rather in terms of human comprehension (that is in terms of *sympatheia* and *empathia*). This human comprehension gives educators the possibility to judge fairly and to contribute with their actions (with a good advice, for example) to the development and improvement of the other as a person by assuming a human responsibility (developed through a specific and personal consciousness as educator) before him/her (Gadamer, 1996a).

These two types of knowledge are fundamental hermeneutic tools to empower both teachers and educators by providing them with the capacity to understand the different types of educational situations they face in their everyday professional life.

To sum up, being a teacher or an educator, understood as figures located between the ethical-normative dimension of education as theory and its methodological-didactical dimension as practice, always requires the deep development of skills related to the type of knowledge defined as "synetic" in this study. The two types of knowledge mentioned above highlight how education always requires decision-making processes related not only to judging and assigning values, but also to taking care of the other.

Teachers and educators, in fact, have the duty to not only judge (according to what is right or wrong in terms of rules, ethics, traditions, behaviours), her/his students; but also in terms of care, commitment, interest and attention to their growth as subjects of ethics and morality: that is to say, in terms of subject-persons. The knowledge of the teacher and educator, as a *synetic* understanding and awareness, appears in all respects as a knowledge of care in which the consciousness of the other as person, and the respect devoted to her/him is the only fundamental criterion for acting.

Every educational situation implies a wide range of emotions, feelings and passions related to an ethical and moral sphere. This type of situation requires both a *synetic* and *phronetic* attitude. From this standpoint, *synesis*, as an understanding and awareness of the other, represents the hearth of education. What gives sense to education and to the complex set of values and actions implied in it, is the will and willingness to participate through an aware action aimed at helping and improving the other as a human being, and at continuously taking care of her/him in the situations that she/he is experiencing. Education implies rational actions, but it is also refers to states linked to the sphere of emotions and feelings. One has not to forget that the assessment and evaluation by the teacher is always

deeply embedded in a dimension that links her/him to *synesis*.

4. Synesis as theory and practice of education

For the above mentioned reasons, *synesis* represents a fundamental concept to be analyzed in the fields of epistemology and philosophy of education. Therefore, one can affirm that *synesis* is what can be defined as the departure and arrival of education, because it implies the concept of responsibility conceived of as taking care and being interested in the other, and in her/his development as a human and social being.

In a nutshell, *synesis* sums up the actions of caring and acting with those of responsibility and awareness of the other that education as a human practice implies. One could say that *synesis* activates the circle of human care, a process in which education represents a fundamental aspect. In contemporary philosophy of education, *phronesis* is identified with practical reason, with a knowledge that directs and guides the teacher or educator's actions so that she/he can perform in the best possible way while teaching or educating. To sum up, both educators and teachers must always act and behave by using *synesis*; according to the Aristotelian principle of the *epieikeia* (equity and fairness) and to *synesis* interpreted as the faculty of "apprehension", "right judgement", "understanding, intelligence", and "conscience" (Gadamer, 1996). *Synesis* must be considered as a fundamental component in the theory and practice of education, and be thought of as strictly connected to *phronesis*.

Actually, *synesis* and *phronesis* show that education always implies the three following main dimensions:

- 1) an ontological dimension which deals with Being and its values, and gives sense to education as a human and transcendental practice;
- 2) a technical dimension which refers to the application of a system of rules to interpret and to judge the other, and to put into practice, in the best way, all the values that education implies;
- 3) a deontological dimension concerning *why* and *with what purpose* we educate or teach in order to help people acknowledge their responsibility and commitment as social agents to a better world.

To be clear, education not only implies, *phronesis* ("technical competence" and "wisdom" in interpreting and understanding other's situation by applying a pedagogical models), and *synesis* ("awareness" of others, "comprehension" of their situations in the human perspective of care, help, and "good advice" for their improvement as persons). Rather, it also implies *epieikeia*: that is, the principle of "equity" that enables teachers and educators to apply, in a practical way, the rules of education in accordance with a pedagogical consciousness (Isidori, 2005). In a nutshell, *synesis*, *phronesis*, and *epieikeia* are the three main principles of educational practice.

Equality and fairness, in fact, facilitate the practical application of rules when the teacher or educator must make a decision applying the principles of a pedagogical model. Teachers and educators, through *synesis* and *epieikeia*, act as impartial judges with moderation and flexibility when they do it according to that category of equity that, as pointed out by the philosopher Hans Gadamer (2004), allows the application of the rules to a practical case in a flexible and no rigid way.

5. Conclusion

Synesis, *phronesis*, and *epieikeia* make teachers and educators capable to reason and act in a coherent way, and out of fixed patterns. *Synesis* helps the educator and teacher, through fairness and common sense, to adapt the abstract world of the values and principles of education to the concrete situations of people. This happens because the teacher and educator are always communicators able to mediate, and they must show qualities and capabilities derived from practical wisdom, responsibility, and consciousness of the other as human being (this knowledge is the result of a fusion between *phronesis* and *synesis*).

These qualities can be summed up in the concept of "balance" that every educator or teacher should have. This balance, seen from the perspective of educational hermeneutics and pedagogy, implies moderation, and involves calm, patience, impartiality, tolerance, understanding and openness towards others.

Educational practice always requires a hermeneutic sensitiveness as well as specific *synetic* attitudes, skills, and qualities from the teacher/educator, who must be able to interpret and understand the other. All these skills can be gained and developed only by a continuous hermeneutical exercise of interpretation-understanding of other human beings. To conclude, it is only this willingness and openness to the *phronetic* and *synetic* wisdom based on equity-*epieikeia* which allows educational practice to develop as a democratic and a fair complex set of actions without falling into contradictions and paradoxes.

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