

# Aesthetics and Civilizing Education: A Perspective of Practical Phenomenology

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Within the horizon of the history of ideas, the relationship between aesthetics and civilizing education has always been a core issue in the evolution of human civilization. Traditional aesthetics regards the aesthetic as “pure sensory pleasure” or “the manifestation of abstract ideas”, while simplifying civilizing education to “the transmission of knowledge” or “moral discipline”, splitting them into a dual opposition between “sensory experience” and “rational cultivation”. Based on practical phenomenology as a methodological foundation, this paper attempts to reveal the ontological connection between aesthetics and civilizing education through etymological research and classical text analysis. It argues that properly understood and defined, the aesthetic is essentially the authentic psychosomatic integration of a real subject endowed with free will with the world in free and conscious objective activities. The core of civilizing education, on the other hand, is the historical generation of a holistic way of human life. The two are unified in the process of “the manifestation of meaning in bodily practice”. The core and purpose of the interpretive logic of practical phenomenology is to emphasize the principle of “returning to practice itself”, and in the three dimensions of “the corporeality of aesthetic experience”, “the situationality of the educational process”, and “the practicality of civilizational evolution”, to reactivate the authentic value of the aesthetic for civilizing education. Aesthetics is not the “ornament” of civilizing education, but its “ontological foundation”. The ultimate goal of civilizing education is “the realization of the free and comprehensive development of human beings through aesthetic practice”.

*Keywords:* aesthetics, civilizing education, practical phenomenology

## Introduction

Since Plato proposed that “beauty is the shadow of the idea”, aesthetics has long been placed in a secondary position “below truth” in Western philosophy. In contrast, the “music education” thought of the pre-Qin period in China, while emphasizing that “music and politics are interconnected”, essentially also treated the aesthetic as “a tool of moral education”. This double concealment has distorted the authentic relationship between aesthetics and civilizing education: Either the aesthetic is “elitized” as “the spiritual privilege of a few”, irrelevant to the civilizing education of the masses; or it is “utilitarianized” as “a means of moral indoctrination”, losing its own independent value.

Since the rise of modern industrial civilization dominated by Enlightenment modernity concepts, the expansion of instrumental rationality has further exacerbated this split—the aesthetic is reduced to “a sign of

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consumption” (such as the market price of works of art), and civilizing education is alienated into “skill training” (such as the utilitarianization of vocational education). Both together fall into the predicament of “value confusion” and “meaning loss”.

Practical phenomenology provides a new theoretical path for resolving this predicament. Husserl’s program of “returning to the things themselves” requires us to suspend the “abstract presuppositions” about aesthetics and education and return to the “existential experience of aesthetic experience”. Heidegger regards “the manifestation of being” as the common essence of aesthetics and education, revealing their isomorphism at the ontological level. Merleau-Ponty’s “body phenomenology” shifts the subject of aesthetics and education from “consciousness” to “body”, emphasizing that “corporeal practice” is the core link uniting the two.

Clearly, from the perspective of practical phenomenology, aesthetics is no longer “passive sensory reception” but “active meaning creation”; civilizing education is no longer “external norm imposition” but “internal existential generation”. The two form an indivisible organic whole through “human practical activity”.

### **Aesthetics and Civilizing Education in the History of Ideas**

#### **Aesthetics: From Sensory Perception to the Manifestation of Being**

The Greek root of “aesthetic” is αἰσθητικός (aisthetikos), derived from the verb αἰσθάνομαι (aisthanomai), originally meaning “to perceive, to be aware”, and initially referring generally to “all sensory experience”, without the limitation to “pure art” (Williams, 1976, p. 26).

Aristotle used “αἰσθητικός” in the *Metaphysics* to describe “the perceptual capacity of animals”, emphasizing its characteristic of “direct grasp of the world” (Aristotle, 1984, p. 980b). In the 18th century, Baumgarten first established “aesthetics” (*Aesthetica*) as an independent discipline, defining it as “the science of sensory cognition”, which, while still confined to the “epistemological category”, already implied that aesthetics is “a way of knowing that is below reason but indispensable” (Baumgarten, 1983, p. 11). Kant further treated the aesthetic as “purposiveness without purpose” in the *Critique of Judgment*, seeing it as “a bridge connecting understanding and reason”, but still confined it to “subjective emotional judgment” (Kant, 2000, p. 57).

Practical phenomenology completely subverts the traditional definition of the aesthetic, elevating it to the “ontological level”. Heidegger pointed out in “The Origin of the Work of Art” that “aesthetics is essentially ‘the manifestation of the being of beings’”—the “truth” of a work of art does not lie in “imitating reality” or “expressing emotion”, but in “letting being manifest itself” (Heidegger, 1971, p. 19). For example, Van Gogh’s “Peasant Shoes” is not an objective representation of “shoes”, but through the shoes “reveals the world of the peasant”—the moisture of the soil, the hardship of the fields, the heaviness of life—meanings that emerge on their own in the work.

Merleau-Ponty, proceeding from “bodily perception”, argued that aesthetics is “the experience of interfusion between body and world”: “The painter’s vision is not ‘detached gazing’ but ‘bodily participation’—the brush is an extension of the body, color is the interfusion of perception, and the canvas is the field where the world manifests itself” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 162).

#### **Civilizing Education: From Knowledge Transmission to Existential Generation**

The core term of “civilizing education” in both Chinese and Western contexts contains a “practical dimension”. The Chinese term “教化” (education/cultivation) is composed of “教” (teaching) and “化” (transformation). The oracle bone form of “教” depicts “holding a whip to guide a child”, emphasizing “external

guidance”; the oracle bone form of “化” shows “a person and an animal together”, meaning “gradual transformation”. Together, they originally meant “achieving human transformation through guidance” (Xu, 2013, p. 289).

The Western concept of “Bildung” (education/cultivation) derives from Old High German “bilden”, originally meaning “to shape, to generate”, and is cognate with “Bild” (image), emphasizing “shaping a person into a ‘complete image’ through practice” (Gadamer, 1975, p. 12). Herder defined Bildung as “the comprehensive development of human potential”, seeing it as “a generative process resulting from the joint action of nature and history” (Herder, 1968, p. 45).

The alienation of the traditional view of education began with the rise of “knowledge-centrism”. After the Industrial Revolution, education was reduced to “knowledge transmission” and “skill training”. Spencer argued in “What Knowledge Is of Most Worth” that “scientific knowledge is the most valuable knowledge”, equating the goal of education with “the ability to adapt to industrial society” (Spencer, 1902, p. 3).

Practical phenomenology restores civilizing education to “the process of human existential generation”. Heidegger believed that the essence of education is “the clarification of Dasein”—through education, humans “understand the meaning of their own existence” and move from “inauthenticity” to “authenticity” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 264).

### **Practice: The Unifying Link Between Aesthetics and Civilizing Education**

The Greek root of “practice” (Praxis) is *πρᾶξις*, originally meaning “authentic action in the community”. Aristotle distinguished it from “ποίησις” (making), emphasizing that practice “has itself as its end” (Aristotle, 2002, p. 1140b). In “Theses on Feuerbach”, Marx proposed that “practice is human sensuous activity”, seeing it as “the basic way humans relate to the world, others, and themselves” (Marx, 1975, p. 42).

Practice is the “ontological link” between aesthetics and civilizing education, manifested in three dimensions:

1. Subject dimension: The subject of practice is the “body” rather than “consciousness”.
2. Process dimension: Practice is “dynamically generative”.
3. Goal dimension: Practice has as its ultimate goal “the free and comprehensive development of human beings”.

## **The Internal Unity of Aesthetics and Civilizing Education**

### **The World-Constructing Nature of Aesthetic Experience**

The essence of aesthetic experience is “the construction of world meaning”—through aesthetics, humans not only “perceive the world” but also “endow the world with meaning”. This constructiveness provides an “indubitable foundation of meaning” for civilizing education.

Traditional aesthetics treats the aesthetic as “a reflection of the given world”, while practical phenomenology sees it as “the process of world generation”: Before the aesthetic, the world is “chaotic and meaningless”; through aesthetic practice, the world “appears as a meaningful whole”.

### **The Existential Generativity of Civilizing Education**

The essence of civilizing education is “the existential generation of human beings”—through education, humans become “civilized beings” from “natural beings”. This generativity provides aesthetics with a “historical dimension”, elevating the aesthetic from “individual momentary experience” to “the transmission of civilized meaning”.

Gadamer's hermeneutic view of education profoundly reveals this. In *Truth and Method*, he proposed that "education is 'the historical existence of the spirit'"—humans achieve self-understanding through "dialogue with tradition", which is not "reproducing tradition" but "reinterpreting tradition in current practice" (Gadamer, 1975, p. 18).

### **Practice: The Unifying Field of Aesthetics and Civilizing Education**

Practice is the "unifying field" of aesthetics and civilizing education—in concrete practical activities, the two are "inseparable". The traditional view that treats "artistic practice" as purely aesthetic and "educational practice" as purely educational ignores the "wholeness" of practice.

Practical phenomenology holds that all practice is a unity of "aesthetics-education", differing only in "the emphasis at the level of appearance".

## **Alienation and Antinomy in Modernity**

### **The Alienation of Aesthetics and the Activation of Bodily Practice**

The core of contemporary aesthetic alienation is "the absence of the body"—the aesthetic is alienated from "authentic bodily experience" into "visual consumption of signs", and from "meaning creation" into "utilitarian calculation".

The practical phenomenological response is "activating bodily aesthetic practice" and restoring the authentic connection between aesthetics and the body.

### **The Predicament of Education and the Aesthetic Reconstruction of the Lifeworld**

The predicament of contemporary civilizing education is "the loss of meaning"—education is alienated from "the existential generation of human beings" into "instrumental skill training", and from "the transmission of meaning in the lifeworld" into "the indoctrination of abstract knowledge".

The practical phenomenological response is "reconstructing the aestheticization of the lifeworld" and returning education to "authentic life practice".

### **The Authentic Unity of Aesthetics and Education**

The authentic unity of aesthetics and education ultimately points to "the aesthetic return of civilizing education"—taking aesthetics as the "ontological foundation" of education and making education into "an aesthetic process of meaning generation".

## **Conclusion**

The aesthetic return of civilizing education is essentially "a transformation in the way of human existence"—from "utilitarian survivors" to "aesthetic beings", from "passive recipients of civilization" to "active creators of civilization".

The introduction of the practical phenomenological interpretive paradigm aims to show that the relationship between aesthetics and civilizing education is "coexistence on the ontological level": Aesthetics provides the "original foundation" for civilizing education through "the construction of world meaning", preventing education from being alienated into "empty norms"; civilizing education infuses aesthetics with a "dimension of depth" through "the historical transmission of meaning", preventing the aesthetic from being reduced to "sensory stimulation."

The two are unified in "bodily practice", together pointing to "the free and comprehensive development of human beings".

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