

Volker Haase: Philosophie und Autobiografie – Untersuchung in fachdidaktischer Perspektive, Dresden: Thelem 2018

Reviewed by Bianca Schreiber, Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg,
bianca.schreiber@phil.uni-halle.de

As the title suggests Volker Haase analyses the connection between philosophy and autobiography from a didactic perspective. The book contributes to a subject-related approach of interpreting the self and the world and it complements previous articles by the author on autobiographical narrative competence and autobiographical interviews (“Betroffenen-Interviews”).

The monograph is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is an introduction, chapters two and three deal with theoretical aspects and the last chapter is more practical, focussing on methods and tasks for students.

The introductory chapter helps the reader to understand why the examined issue is of current interest and what the author aims at. Haase diagnoses an increasing interest in autobiographical publications. This seems to be connected with the need for support in crises of orientation and identity. The author derives goals for school education from this diagnosis. Students should be able to reflect critically on autobiographies. This includes skills such as detecting manipulative intentions and recognizing the triviality of self-help literature. Another goal is to make interpretative patterns of the stock of traditional autobiographical narrations available for students. Therefore, it is the aim of the author to investigate suitable sources in order to enrich the canon of texts for teaching philosophy at school and to integrate the techniques extracted from autobiographical narrations into the repertoire of students’ skills. Furthermore, the author wants to offer a complementary perspective on established text types used for philosophical writing in class.

In chapter two the author analyses different understandings of the term *autobiography*. The author outlines autobiography as lived life, description, interpretation, strategic self-presentation, and as a medium of philosophical thinking. The understanding of autobiography as description is subdivided into self-responsibility and self-determination. There are also subdivisions for autobiographical texts as interpretation, namely self-knowledge, self-finding, self-invention, and self-love. The author’s terms refer to Dieter Thomä’s subdivision made in *Erzähle dich selbst*. The strategic self-presentation is divided into self-defence, self-assertion, and self-distance. The author presents one example for every type of autobiography. For example, the *Confessiones* by Augustinus are suggested as an example for self-responsibility. (p. 30f.) This is convincing, but it is not really clear why other types should not apply. So one might wonder why the text is not an example of strategic self-presentation as well, because of the fact that Augustinus was advertising for Christianity and therefore events were selected by him on purpose. To sum up, characteristics of the different types are shown, but questions about the relation between the different types remain.

The last part of the chapter deals with autobiography as a medium of philosophical thinking. Again there are numerous subdivisions. On the one hand, there is the autobiography

as a medium of presentation with a didactic, exemplary, or critical self-reference. On the other hand, there is the autobiography as a medium of philosophical cognition with the following subdivisions: self-reduction, self-projection, self-transformation, self-transcendence, and self-attempt. The author illustrates every type. For instance, self-projection is exemplified by Hobbes' experience and philosophical thinking. Hobbes assumed fear as a feature of human beings and the mutual fear as reason for social alliances because of his own personal fear (p. 80f). So he generalized his own feelings. In that way, the other types are described in order to show a connection between autobiography and philosophical thinking. The examples of the first chapter (e.g. Augustinus) are not taken up again, so the reader does not know whether they are a medium of philosophical thinking or not. It can be misleading that for every "self-term" another autobiographical text is presented because one could assume that one particular text is a prototype.

Based on the assumption that autobiographical texts are narrative texts, the third chapter deals with narrative theory in order to focus on the process of producing autobiographical texts. Theoretical aspects like plot and text composition are taken into account when looking at established text types such as letters, literary essays, and philosophical diaries that play a role for philosophical writing in class. The author presents examples of philosophers who wrote one of these particular texts and shows how autobiographical texts can support the understanding or discussion of the respective philosophical theory. Furthermore, the author identifies the following functions of autobiographical narrations: identity formation and consolidation, social integration, reflection on moral issues, and coping with contingency. These functions are relevant for teaching philosophy because of being central issues themselves.

The last chapter deals with the use of autobiographical narrations and autobiographical philosophizing in class. First, preconditions from the perspective of developmental psychology are described with a special attention to narrative competence, the episodic memory and autobiographical consciousness. The author draws an analogy between the autobiographical consciousness and the historical consciousness that is an important concept in the didactics of history. There are four different types of the autobiographical consciousness: the traditional type, the exemplary type, the critical type and the genetic type. Depending on whether one considers the self as more or less static or dynamic or whether one has or has not doubts about the truthfulness of memories, one belongs to one or another type. According to Haase, there is a relation between these four types and the different concepts of self-reference (see chapter 2). For instance, the critical type matches to the concept of self-determination and self-invention.

Next, the author aims at putting the theoretical aspects into practice. Based on Rohbeck's model of *Transformationsdidaktik*, the author identifies techniques that are used in autobiographical-philosophical texts. These techniques are transformed into elementary writing exercises for students. The author suggests tasks for working on these written autobiographical texts. He refers to Rohbeck's article *Ten ways of reading a text*. In order to illustrate this process, one example by the author is given here. In the opinion of Haase, the method of objective hermeneutics can be transformed into the following task: Choose a

personally significant event in your recent past (photos have to be available). Put the photos in the order of the chronological sequence of events. Describe the sequence of events without using your memories from the perspective of a person who sees these photos for the first time. (p. 190) Haase explains that this way of writing an autobiographical text is characteristic for self-determination (see chapter 2) and for the critical type of the autobiographical consciousness. The students get a task for working on this written autobiographical text. This task is derived from one of Rohbeck's suggested ways of reading, namely the students analyse the text in order to find out the intentions of the author (strategy, intended effect). By reflecting critically on this autobiographical text, the students work on one ability that is part of Haase's model of autobiographical narrative competence. While the main focus of the first parts of this chapter is on autobiographical writing of students, the last part of the chapter deals with the treatment of oral narrations of affected people ("Betroffenen-Interviews") and the critical reflection on them.

All in all, the book offers a well-founded guideline for integrating autobiographical narrations into teaching of philosophy. For those teachers who look for material that enables students to philosophize from a first person perspective, the book provides excellent writing tasks for an autobiographical philosophizing. Moreover, the author gives an important contribution to a narrative approach that can inspire the reader to go on with the research of the significance of narrations as a medium of philosophizing.

How to cite this article

Schreiber, Bianca (2018), "Review of: Volker Haase: Philosophie und Autobiografie – Untersuchung in fachdidaktischer Perspektive. Dresden: Thelem, 2018", *Journal of Didactics of Philosophy* 2, Nr. 2, 66-68. DOI: 10.46586/JDPh.2018.9550.