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Recontextualization, Herbart vs Neo-Herbartianism, plurality and broadmindedness, aesthetic revelation, historical consciousness

1. Introduction

Italo Calvino’s beautiful essay, ‘Why Read the Classics?’ has been inspirational for this article. It is larded with references to literary authors: Dickens, Dostoyevski, Kafka, Proust, Zola, and many others, but what Calvino says about the appreciation and the lasting significance of the classics is as much applicable to the academic as to the literary domain. I would like to show here that it also holds for philosophy of education.

The appreciation of classics is, according to Calvino, pre-eminently a matter of ‘mature readers’. This is why, with classics, the term ‘rereading’ is often used, instead of ‘reading’. Of course, snobbery can easily come into play here. Notwithstanding that risk, I take it that the following quote expresses a real experience of ‘well-read people’: ‘Every rereading of a classic is as much a voyage of discovery as the first reading’ (Calvino, 1997, 127). There is an element of surprise: in rereading, the classic text gives us ‘a surprise or two vis-à-vis the notion that we had of it’ (ib., 128). One of the reasons behind this is, that the present context that we read the classic from, is different, and that, with the change of context, we ourselves have changed since we read the classic the previous time. The questions and problems of our present situation and our present preoccupations are addressed by the classic on rereading it. It speaks to readers in their
present situation: ‘The classics help us to understand who we are and where we stand’ (ib., 133).

Calvino’s view on the continuing significance of the classics agrees very much with my own experience in reading educational classics time and again during my approximately forty year career in the discipline (in Dutch) ‘algemene pedagogiek’ or (in German) ‘allgemeine Pädagogik’ – the traditional designation of the domain of history and theory (or philosophy) of education on the continent. In this article, I intend to retrace my own history of rereading the educational classic Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841), one of the great educational thinkers of the modern age. In reading a classic (1), the present context one reads and rereads it from, makes a difference and results in ever new readings of the same texts. Again, Calvino explicitly identifies this experience: ‘We can, of course, imagine some blessed soul who devotes his reading time exclusively to Lucretius, Lucian, Montaigne, Quevedo, Marlowe, the Discourse on Method, Wilhelm Meister, Coleridge, Ruskin, Proust, and Valéry’, he says. But ‘this blessed soul would have to abstain from reading the newspapers’ as well as ‘the latest novel or sociological investigation’ (Calvino, 1997, 131). Most readers, however, are not that ‘abstinent’ – and, what is more, the ones that follow ‘the latest news’ as well may actually gain more from reading the classics: ‘The latest news may well be banal or mortifying, but it nonetheless remains a point at which to stand and look both backward and forward. To be able to read the classics, you have to know “from where” you are reading them; otherwise both the book and the reader will be lost in a timeless cloud. This, then, is the reason why the greatest “yield” from reading the classics will be obtained by someone who knows how to alternate them with the proper dose of current affairs’ (Calvino, 1997, 131/132). My own reading of Herbart time and again indeed illustrates the importance of changing context in re-establishing the meaning and significance of the educational thought of this classic. Rereading is about recontextualization.

In this article, my own subsequent readings of Herbart will pass in review. It will demonstrate that the reading and interpretation of classics is an ongoing business and is never completed. ‘Herbart’ – in
quotation marks, because it refers to the work, not the person – is shown to address ever new questions in changing contexts, and to speak in a fresh voice to this reader, the present author, who turned to ‘Herbart’ subsequently with different questions on her mind, because a person’s mind is also historically changing. At the end of this contribution, I will turn to another classic in the educational discipline. Theodor Litt’s evergreen *Führen oder Wachsenlassen* of 1927 illuminates the importance of time, time in the human sense of tradition and historical change, in educational thought and practice. Rereading the classics from ever new contexts itself is a case in point here. In my recent rereading of Litt, it came as a surprise to me that he, in one of the appendices in my copy of 1967 to *Führen oder Wachsenlassen*, refers to Herbart. That will nicely close the circle of this article.

2. Herbart and the Neo-Herbertians

I started reading Herbart during my pre-graduate studies in theory and history of education. In 1978, I chose to do a study on this early 19th century educational thinker for a writing assignment in the domain of history of education. My teacher, N.F. Noordam, at the time professor in history of education at Groningen University, suggested that I would rather choose Eduard Spranger – ‘a far more interesting thinker’, he said. Maybe it was due to my teacher training that preceded my studies in theory and history of education at the University of Groningen, that I stuck to my choice of Herbart. He seemed somehow more close and more relevant to what I had acquired in teacher training, insights connected to my first and first-hand experiences in primary school practice. I was soon to discover that the idea that Herbart was somewhat boring – Noordam clearly suggested that much – was a prejudice originating from the identification of the thought of Herbart himself with that of his Neo-Herbertian followers. It was through the sound advice of the same Noordam, once he had accepted my choice, that I focused on the comparison of Herbart’s thought with the work of Dutch Neo-Herbertians such as Harm de Raaf (1866-1920) (2). This excursion of mine into the history of educational ideas fitted in nicely with the research of Jan Dirk Imelman, at the time
So it was the debate on the ‘New Education’ as opposed to ‘old school Neo-Herbartian education’ that supplied the context from which I started to read Herbart. The criticism of Neo-Herbartianism by proponents of the New Education Movement focused on the role and character of the instructional method. Its four stages (clearness, association, system and method) were indeed taken from Herbart, but their use as a rigid pedagogy, a didactical method to be applied by teachers in planning their lessons, was clearly a case of Neo-Herbartian scholasticism. The rule to design each and every lesson after the same model of four (sometimes reduced to three or expanded to five) stages is, according to the critics, a recipe for tedious lessons and boredom on the part of pupils. For decades, Herbart had been reviled and rejected, together with his Neo-Herbartian followers. It was, however, not difficult to find the antidote against scholastic Neo-Herbartianism in Herbart’s own writings. I followed in the footsteps of, e.g., Hermann Nohl, who had already retrieved Herbart from under the Neo-Herbartian dust in a lecture in 1948, entitled ‘Der lebendige Herbart’ (The Living Herbart), when I used various passages from the Umriss pädagogischer Vorlesungen (yet Herbart’s most methodical and systematic work) for this purpose (3). ‘To pave the path so completely that no jump is needed, is taking care of the teacher’s convenience, not the pupils. Young people love to climb and jump, they don’t like to follow a totally paved path’ (4), was one of them. Another was: ‘Whether education gets on the right track, depends on the teacher, the pupil, and the subject-matter at the same time’ (5), an interesting statement because of its total lack of mention of the universal method that Neo-Herbartians attributed to Herbart and identified as his main idea. So Herbart himself could be used to argue against the strict ‘methodism’ in education (Dutch: ‘vermethodieking’) that New Education proponents fiercely criticized in Neo-Herbartian education. Herbart explicitly wanted to safeguard the room for the individuality of pupils as well as teachers. Teachers absorbed in their
subject are, according to Herbart, a better recipe for good education than a universal method (Umriss, section 105; cf. Meijer 1994, 106ff.).

Along these lines I presented my first reading of Herbart, in the mentioned historical educational thesis as well as, a few years later, in my book on educational anthropology (Meijer, 1984). For its fourth reprint in 1994, I revised this book so that it would fit into a book series (‘Pedagogische inleidingen’) which would eventually consist of five introductory books in educational history and theory (Imelman, 1995; Meijer, 1994, 1996; Meijer et al, 1992; Van Essen & Imelman, 1999). The chapter on Herbart and Neo-Herbartianism was only slightly altered; the addition of a new final chapter in which Herbart was to appear once again, was one of the bigger changes. In this new chapter, I focused on Herbart’s concept of ‘erziehender Unterricht’. By identifying three defining characteristics, this concept was shown to coincide with the concept of general education or liberal education (Dutch: algemene vorming, German: allgemeine Bildung) as it is still in use today, with its three characteristics of breadth, coherence and commonality (6). In this connection, Herbart again proved to be truly classic, in 1994.

3. Rereading Herbart from the Context of Cultural and Religious Diversity

A couple of years later, a new context of reading Herbart was supplied by issues that the ‘multicultural society’, as it was then called, raised for education. One of general education’s characteristics, the commonality of education – i.e., the idea that it is an education for all, regardless of difference in class, gender, etc. – was clearly in need of reconsideration in that context. Herbart’s ideas on the task of school education, viz., the task to complement the experiences and conceptions with which pupils enter school, to broaden horizons, fight one-sidedness and cultivate many-sidedness (‘Vielseitigkeit des Interesses’), gained new relevance and power of expression in the late 20th century. What he said on the need to ‘equalize’ pupils (‘gleichartiger machen’) sounded rather provocative in the days that ‘multicultural education’ had quite a few advocates. He certainly will have had other kinds of difference in mind than the cultural and
religious differences identified with ‘multiculturalism’, but this doesn’t diminish the thought provoking significance of the following words of Herbart: ‘there are large differences between individuals, and a child’s one-sidedness starts with his own particular nature. The first thing to follow from this is that a school in which many are to be educated together, has the task to make them more similar’ (7). To broaden everyone’s perspective: this is what general education (‘allgemeine Bildung’, ‘erziehender Unterricht’) is about. More in particular, this thought also turned out to be relevant in discussions on religious education and possible developments required in religious education in the present context of religious diversity. The idea of many-sidedness (‘Vielseitigkeit’) is, indeed according to Herbart himself, also applicable to the domain of religion in education.

In the above mentioned revision of my educational-anthropological book of 1994, I had already referred to the passage in the Umriss on religious plurality in relation to general education which is quite significant in this connection. Here, Herbart once more explicitly advocates many-sidedness, and he particularly explains what one-sidedness as opposed to many-sidedness can be taken to mean in the various ‘domains of interest’. Religion is represented in his list of such domains: ‘The religious interest becomes one-sided when it celebrates a particular dogma or sect, while judging others to be inferior’ (8). Although Herbart was most likely thinking of differences within Christianity only, which of course makes perfectly sense for his age and context (9), it nonetheless is an argument in favour of many-sidedness, an argument in favour of openness towards difference, towards the other. And as such it is relevant for the contemporary educational debate on ‘religious education in a world of religious difference’. I have contributed regularly to this debate, and in that context I have indeed used various insights that I owe to Herbart (Meijer, 1998, 2012; cf. Meijer et al, 2009). Besides his concept of ‘erziehender Unterricht’ as aiming at widening horizons and ‘opening all doors’ (‘allen Pforten öffnen’, Umriss, section 36), his concept of the ‘stages of learning’ turned out to be very interesting in this connection also – albeit in a new, reinterpreted way, i.e., different from its reception by the neo-Herbartians as a universal didactical method in the hands of teachers.
A new, contemporary type of religious education, in which religious plurality is somehow represented, emerged in the last decades of the 20th century. Initially, in the seventies in Great Britain, it was labeled ‘multifaith approach’ or ‘world faith education’ (cf. Owen Cole 1978). The labels have been subject to change since then – of more recent origin is, for example, the term ‘inter-religious education’ – but the general idea and the new practice of religious education has become broadly accepted and widely implemented in Europe (cf. Jackson, 2010). The issue of religious commitment and religious identity and its not conflict free relation with other religions, was often on the agenda when this new religious education was investigated and debated. It was in that connection, that I started to reread what Herbart had said about the ‘Wechsel der Vertiefung und Besinnung’ (Umriß, section 66), which he had, already in his Allgemeine Pädagogik, so beautifully called the respiration of learning (‘die geistige Repiration’: the mental or intellectual respiration, Herbart, 1986, 172). This now appeared to be the fundamental thought at the heart of the idea of ‘learning stages’, which had later on been made into a universal instructional method by the neo-Herbartians. At this point I discovered its actual relevance to education and to religious education more in particular. In an article of 1998, I presented it alongside the hermeneutical idea of the dialectic of appropriation and distanciation, in other words: the dialectic of identication and reflection for which Ricoeur was my source of inspiration (Meijer 1998, 91/92). The relation to ‘the other’ and ‘otherness’ is at stake in this dialectic, and it can be taken as a central element, or rather a central movement, in education, religious education more in particular, but certainly not exclusive. A dialectic between ‘the familiar’ and ‘the strange’ is started in education: ‘die Annäherung an das Fremde’ that also leads ‘zu einem Befremden über das Vertraute’ (Meijer, 1998, 90). The respiration of deepening and reflection, Herbart’s pair of ‘Vertiefung und Besinnung’, can be taken to characterize this movement: concentrating, focusing on the other, the new, the unknown, the strange, trying to understand it, needs to be complemented by reflection, i.e., explicitly considering the new in relation to one’s existing circle of experience and ideas (‘Gedankenkreis’), reconsidering ‘the familiar’ as well as ‘the other’, and so trying to find a new balance.
4. Modern or Postmodern: Herbart vs. Kant

Since a few decades, post-modern educational philosophers have repeatedly been referring to the modern philosophy of Kant and its concept of the autonomous subject when they identify modern theory of education as an Enlightenment project (see, e.g., the introductions to Smeyers & Levering, 2001 and Biesta, 2006). Modern educational theory is, first, assumed to be inextricably tied to the Kantian concept of the subject. Then, this concept is rejected and alternative postmodern ideas, focusing on difference and otherness, are proposed as offering a new, contemporary, postmodern perspective on education. As a rule, subsequently more contemporary philosophers, such as Levinas and Foucault, are referred to as offering the new inspiration for educational thought.

By way of contrast to this postmodern movement, in 2004 Hans van Crombrugge and I tried to show that the rereading of the classics of educational thinkers from the modern age is yet a fruitful undertaking in our days (Van Crombrugge & Meijer, 2004). Instead of focusing on philosophers (modern or postmodern) and working out educational implications of philosophical ideas, we suggested the importance of rereading the classics of the educational tradition themselves. The challenge is to find out what they may still have to say to us in our context. For my own article in this book that I edited with Van Crombrugge, I once more reread the early work in which Herbart explicitly relates to Kant, who was already influential in Herbart’s lifetime (Meijer, 2004). An important early work of Herbart actually appeared in the year Kant died, 1804, viz., *Die ästhetische Darstellung der Welt als Hauptgeschäft der Erziehung* (10). That Kant was already very influential in Herbart’s days, is demonstrated by the self-evident way that Herbart again and again mentions and discusses Kantian ideas. He is quite critical – which in itself is already sufficient to show that one cannot identify modern educational thought with Kant only, which seems to be taken for granted by post-modernist educational philosophers.
4.1 Aesthetical and Ethical Judgment

According to Herbart, Kant’s conception of reason, especially practical reason, is not educationally fruitful. As an alternative, Herbart develops his ideas on aesthetical judgment, its development and its relation to ethical judgment. According to Herbart, general education, erziehender Unterricht, is essentially about contributing to the development of aesthetical judgment, and as such it indirectly contributes to the development of ethical judgment. It is evident from the early work that ethical and educational theory converge, and it is in the discussion of Kant’s theory of practical, ethical judgment that this unity is accounted for by Herbart. In the Aesthetische Darstellung (AD) of 1804, we find a fifteen page explanation of what is later, in the Allgemeine Pädagogik (AP) of 1806 and the Allgemeine Praktische Philosophie of 1808, spelled out in greater detail. It is Herbart’s concern to form an idea of morality and freedom as real possibilities, in other words, as potentialities realizable in historical time, in contrast with the transcendental and universal character of the Kantian conception of morality and freedom. Herbart’s concern is inherently educational: the concept of the ethical is presented in unity with the concept of its development over time in childhood and youth.

This essential difference should not, however, blind us to a crucial similarity with Kant’s theory of practical reason. Herbart agrees with Kant – and in this respect both thinkers are indeed typically modern – that morality should not be identified with prevailing, conventional, historically given, moralities. So, the ethical judgment of the free, autonomous human subject is indeed crucial: ‘Der Sittliche gebietet sich selbst’ (AD, Herbart, 1986, 61). But what is the content of this judgment? According to Herbart, Kant dismisses this essential question by turning immediately to the form of the judgment, i.e., the formal generality of the categorical imperative that distinguishes practical judgment from random arbitrariness. Herbart explicitly chooses a different route here.

According to Herbart, the object of the ethical judgment is the will, while, as a judgment, it is itself a matter of insight. Herbart’s ethical-cum-educational theory pivots on the relation between will and insight. Insight and judgment are characterized by reflective
distanciation; this also holds when, in ethical matters, they are concerned with the will and action and especially with one’s own will and action. Deliberating and judging about one’s own will and action implies a certain duplicity, an essential self-referentiality and reflexivity. This duplicity is a main theme in Herbart’s AP, where it returns in the distinction between ‘objective character’ and ‘subjective character’, but it can also be discerned in the AD: ‘See to it that the pupil finds itself as choosing the good and rejecting the bad: this, and nothing else, is character education! This development of a self-conscious personality should without a doubt happen in the mind of the pupil itself and it should be executed by the pupil’s own activity; it would be nonsense for the educator to want to produce this essential power and to put it into the soul of the other being’ (11).

From an educational perspective, this is a wonderful quotation, because it emphasizes the significance of the activity of the child as to its own development and education, in contrast to the educational activity of the educator. It puts autonomy over heteronomy. And, although I must admit to finding the rather objective designation of ‘the good’ and ‘the bad’ not really appealing from an ethical perspective, I do appreciate the phrase concerning the experience of ‘finding oneself as a choosing being’. The educational elaboration that Herbart provides of this idea of the duplicity of a more or less grown-up and reflective person that ‘finds itself as a judging and choosing being’ is very interesting. He says that the indirect route of the aesthetical to the ethical is the truly educational alternative to the ‘Unsinn’, the nonsense, of the educator directly trying to influence, or even build, the character and morality of the pupil, for example, by moralizing or preaching. The latter would count as ‘a sort of false economy’ (‘eine Art von falscher Ökonomie’, AP, Herbart, 1986, 179), that wants to attain immediately something that can only be the outcome of a gradual development over time. It is educationally unwise to demand of pupils an instantaneous acceptance of, and obedience to specific moral rules and values, instead of waiting for the development of, and the coming into existence of, the ethical judgment in the pupil – although it is a matter of common sense, when children participate in the everyday life of the community, to have them adapt to the custom and rule of that community. The latter is part of what
Herbart calls *Regierung* – which is preparatory for education and precedes it, rather than being itself a central part of education. To wait – and to educate the mind and thoughts to wait (‘die Gedanken warten lernen’, cf. Meijer, 2004) is an essential element in Herbart’s theory of education that centers on the emerging of a link between ‘scientia’ and ‘conscientia’, knowledge and conscience (Dutch: *weten en geweten*; German: *Wissen und Gewissen*). The aesthetic representation of the world is therefore the essence of education: first, there needs to be the time and the room for the aesthetical judgment to develop, and from this, ethical judgment will arise in due time.

Aesthetical judgment arises inevitably from a full, ‘completed’ perception and representation of an object or a situation (‘vollendeten Vorstellen ihren Gegenstandes’, AD, Herbart, 1986, 63). This can be illustrated by the example of hearing harmonic proportions in music. Suppose that the teacher is asked to furnish further evidence, he could only laugh and regret the obtuse ear that didn’t already perceive. In other words, one can sound the musical chord, and let it be heard, but then the musical chord has to ‘speak for itself’. It is impossible to produce further arguments to back up the aesthetical judgment. The aesthetical judgment springs from a completed perception and is not the outcome of an argument or a line of reasoning. Aesthetical judgments are about perceptible proportions, be it in music (which is not about one isolated tone, but the collective of various tones sounding simultaneously, chords, concords, discords), or in human affairs. It is about relations between human beings, comparative relations between what the one person does, or desires to do, and what the other does or desires to do, and also between the thinking and doing, insight and will, of each person individually. Here too, judgment arises from the completed, balanced perception of comparative relations in their full concreteness and detail.

Here we arrive at the point where the aesthetical touches the ethical judgment – and thus we reach the border of the area of practical philosophy or ethics where Herbart’s discussion with Kant can be situated. Kant, in his three Critiques, distinguishes practical, ethical reason (der praktische Vernunft) from aesthetical reason (*Urteilskraft*, power of judgment), while he had previously distinguished pure, theoretical reason (*der reine Vernunft*). Herbart, however, explicitly
intends to connect aesthetical and ethical judgment and emphasizes their shared comparative-deliberative character in which content and form are indissolubly connected.

4.2 The Role of Education according to Herbart: Aesthetical Revelation

What then, is, according to Herbart, the role of education? Basically its task is the aesthetical revelation of the world (‘die aesthetische Darstellung der Welt’) – that is, to contribute indirectly to the origination of aesthetical and ethical judgment, nourishing it by increasing the pupil’s knowledge and understanding of the world, in which aesthetical proportions occur in ever changing concrete configurations. For eventually, aesthetical judgment will arise from ‘completed perception’ (‘vollendetes Vorstellen’). Ethical judgment, and the guiding of one’s own will by such judgment, is a matter for later concern – it will take care of itself once aesthetical judgment has come into existence. This should not be misread for the unwarranted optimism that people would, in actual fact, always obey the moral implications of their thought and judgment. Herbart is well aware of the divide between ‘knowing’ and ‘doing’ and the problem of ‘weakness of the will’ in ethics (cf. Meijer, 2004). Educationally, the matter at hand is the cultivation of ‘full and balanced perception’, which is, in a sense, the ‘material condition’ for aesthetical and ethical judgment to originate. Education’s first concern is what the perceived world will be like: ‘This world should be a rich, wide-open sphere full of varieties of life! … Such a revelation of the world – the entire world and all known ages … – can rightly be called the main concern of education’ (12).

Education that is indirectly ethically relevant is thus, to put it briefly, characterized by breadth and many-sidedness: a general and liberal education. Its aim is the broadly interested and versatile mind that is eventually of ethical relevance. The person who is broad in mind, in knowledge and in thought, is also broad in desires and in interests (‘wer viel kennt und denkt, der verlangt viel’; AD, Herbart, 1986, 65), whereas a restricted outlook, by its very one-sidedness, comes close to egoism. ‘The one-sided person approximates the egoist,
even when he does not notice it himself, because he relates everything to the small circle of his own life and thought’ (13). Only full and balanced perception of complex situations can make the aesthetical judgment arise. The richer and fuller the world opened by education, the less one-sided and narrow-minded, and the more well-balanced, the judgment that originates from it will be. This is why school education should intentionally and methodically correct and complement the one-sidedness acquired by pupils in experience and human association (‘Erfahrung und Umgang’) in the outside world and at home. Breadth of knowledge and understanding are essential. It is therefore essential that education should give ample time for the aesthetical representation of the world and the origination of aesthetical judgment. This echoes the classical connotation of the word ‘school’ (scholè), viz., ‘leisure’. The school for general education should indeed be the place of, and offer the time for, perception and reflection and, to that end, have the character of a moratorium.

5. Theodor Litt’s Führen oder Wachsenlassen

In 2014, I was invited to contribute a piece on my favourite educational classic for the series ‘Het beslissende boek’ (The decisive book) in the Dutch educational journal Pedagogiek in Praktijk Magazine. My first idea had been to choose one of Herbart’s books. However, it turned out to be difficult for me to choose between his works the one for this occasion, either the Aesthetische Darstellung or the Allgemeine Pädagogik or the Umrisse pädagogischer Vorlesungen. Although Herbart’s educational thought has certainly been decisive among the classics that played (and do still play) a part in the ongoing development of my own educational thought, I found it hard, indeed rather impossible, to identify among his works just one book as ‘the decisive book’. The way out of this dilemma was to turn to another classic, Theodor Litt (1880-1962), whose famous book Führen oder Wachsenlassen has also been decisive in my educational thought – indeed also from the very first time that I read it in the days of my pre-graduate studies in theory and history of education.

In this book of 1927, which is based on a lecture at an educational conference in Weimar in 1926, Litt first discusses the ideas of the New Education, still topical in those days. Litt is critical.
Progressive education loses sight of an inevitable characteristic of education, viz., that it is about transmission of culture. However further to conceive of education, it is in any case a process of cultural transmission between generations. And as such, it is integral part of history, of the ever ongoing cultural-historical movement. It is therefore educationally crucial to judge cultural heritage, i.e., culture as handed down from the past, on its significance in and for the present. In so far as it is yet valid and vital in the present, therefore not dead or only ‘museological’ but lived by people of the present, and as such considered probably viable with an eye to the future, it is to be passed on to the new generation. The choice of what to pass on to the new generation is a matter of continuous reflection, deliberation and justification. But it is something else altogether to discard cultural heritage entirely in order to make room for the new. According to Litt, progressive and child-centered (‘Vom Kinde aus’) educators err in wanting to face only the future and in so doing turn away from the past. They argue that schools must make room for the free and spontaneous activity of children, because the new generation is the promise of a new era. New education to bring about that new era.

Subsequently, Litt is just as critical about the other extreme: the idea of education according to which the new generation is only the new bearer of an already given ideal, a ‘Bildungsideal’ derived from the past. Here, educators err because they exclusively orient themselves towards the past and ignore historical change. They impose an ideal from the past on the new generation and, in doing so, settle and fix their future – or at least they intend to do so. The movement of German humanism is Litt’s example here, more in particular the school subject of ‘Deutschkunde’ aiming at the formation of ‘true Germans’. The German person of today has to become, whom he was: ‘Der “deutsche Mensch” von heute soll werden, was er war’ (Litt 1967, 44). Litts vision was prophetic, his criticism soon to be no longer accepted. When Hitler rose to power in Germany, in 1933, the book was banned.

Litt’s criticism on both educational positions, however opposed they seem to be at first sight, essentially boils down to the same. Both educational positions have equally lost sight of their own historical relativity. Litt denounces in both the typical, idealistic enthusiasm of visionaries – ‘die Brust geschwelt vom Bewusstsein ihrer
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Sendung’ (1967, 28) – which, by the way, often makes such ideologies rather contagious and creates enthusiastic followers. Visionaries with a revolutionary mission forget their own historical relativity, they lose sight of how much their ideals are ideals of the present – with all the limitations this entails. It is a crucial educational error: to start from revolutionary, idealistic visions for the future and to deduce from those ideals what education has to be, regardless whether the ideals are derived from a cherished past or are (apparently) newly developed. The real future is confiscated this way. According to Litt, by contrast it is an essentially educational virtue to leave the future open.

Educators should leave the future open for the new generation – because the future is theirs and they will have to shape it as responsibly as they are able to when that time has come. This is ‘Wachsenlassen’ in the good sense: to leave the future open. Whereas ‘Führen’ in the good sense can only be ‘einführen’, initiation: to initiate the new generation into the existing culture, inherited from the past, but yet lived and appreciated in the present. The educator, then, is a mediator, bringing together the present culture and the new generation. What will, in the future, come of the interaction between this culture and these children, what the new generation will do with the culture handed down to them – maintain? adapt? renew? reject? – is not the responsibility of the adults of today, but of the future adults.

6. Litt and Herbart on temporality and historical consciousness

On rereading Litt in 2014, I found his analysis and especially his educationally sound understanding of time, history, and human historicity, which underlies his call for modesty of educators, truly compelling. I was, to be honest, rather surprised to recognize my own repeated call for educational modesty (‘pedagogische bescheidenheit’; see, e.g., Meijer, 1999) foreshadowed in this classic. I seemed to have forgotten how much I first must have learned this – from Litt. In that sense it was a reminder to practise modesty myself. The first words of the final section of Führen oder Wachsenlassen formulate exactly what I have repeatedly been doing myself, as an educational thinker, in the past couple of decades (ever since, I think, Meijer et al, 1992): ‘dem Erzieher wieder und wieder die Erkenntnis seiner Grenzen, die willige Selbstbescheidung ans Herz [legen]’ (1967, 80). It is in this very
connection that I find the rereading of educational classics of importance: they may help us to be modest, in recognizing that important ideas and insights are already there, to be rediscovered and once more appreciated – so that one doesn’t have to ‘reinvent the wheel’ (as a Dutch expression goes) time and time again, but rather can often learn from previous generations, and in doing so, ‘stand on their shoulders’ (to use another one of those expressions).

As a characteristic representative of the *geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*, Litt confronts us with our fundamental historicity and with the importance of being aware of our historical context as educators. Interestingly, in that connection Litt mentions Herbart (the fact that he mentions him was another surprise for me in this recent rereading of Litt). I have shown above that Herbart has an educational important sense of the historical, viz., in his concern to form an idea of morality and freedom as potentialities realizable in historical time, in contrast to the transcendental and universal character of Kant’s ideas of morality and freedom. Herbart emphasizes the importance of time in education and development, the importance of taking one’s time and of allowing for time in education: the time and the room for the aesthetical judgment to develop, and from this, again in due time, mature ethical judgment will develop. So, according to Herbart, a temporal dimension is inherent to education. Litt, however, wants to add another essential historical dimension.

In an appendix to my 1967 edition of *Führen oder Wachsenlassen*, ‘Die Bedeutung der pädagogischen Theorie für die Ausbildung des Lehrers’ (The significance of educational theory in teacher training, 1967, 110-126), Litt calls Herbart’s educational theory the methodically complete ‘Strukturanalyse des erzieherischen Vorgangs’ (116), that focuses on what characteristically is, and should be, going on between educator and pupil. However, according to Litt, something important is still lacking in this educational theory: ‘Sie hat die überpersönlichen Mächte aus den Augen verloren, die in jedem erzieherischen Verhältnis im Spiele sind’ (1967, 117). Litt wants to reckon with these powers in education and educational theory. He explains that one could call them, either, in Hegelian fashion, ‘die geistige Lage’, or ‘die geschichtliche Lage’ (1967, 117). Educators need, besides a thorough understanding of the specific structure of the
educational relationship and the educational process, historical consciousness, ‘geschichtliches Standortbewusstsein’ (1967, 119). The importance of historical consciousness for the educator is, according to Litt as I read him this time, that it enables them to cultivate an attitude of critical distance from the perplexity of one’s own time, instead of being at the mercy of whatever the contemporary trends and policies are: ‘he should be able to face the turmoil of his own time from a critical distance, to determine his own position and to judge the phenomena of his era in a critical way’ (14). Living in their own particular historical time, educators will personally take positions in all kinds of matters (politically, religiously, etc.), but they have to be aware that their personal choices and positions can neither be the framework nor the heart of their teaching. The educational importance of an open future is better served with true open-mindedness and ongoing reflection and deliberation.

Perhaps one could say that Litt adds the idea of historical context, especially the educational importance of an awareness on the side of educators of their own particular historical context, to Herbart’s theory of education. On the one hand, as Herbart emphasized, education is itself something that necessarily stretches out in time – there is temporality in education. On the other hand, and this is what Litt emphasizes in addition, education is itself enveloped by or situated in time, part of a particular historical context. The two connections between education and temporality, as identified by Herbart and by Litt respectively, go very well together, I think. And what’s more, Litt pleads the educational cause of openness, of open-mindedness and of the educational importance to keep the future open, in a way that straightforwardly reminds of Herbart. Herbart emphasizes that the cultivation of broadmindedness, of a broadly interested and versatile mind, demands that the ‘circle of thoughts’ should not be closed untimely, that it shouldn’t be foreclosed, as we would say today: ‘dass sich der Gedankenkreis nicht vorzeitig abschliesse’ (Herbart, 1964, 94). I cannot think of a better way to end this article than citing words to the same effect, the words with which Litt ended his piece on teacher education: ‘Let us aim at educating the teacher who will shun away from prematurely fixating his pupils’ opinions and desires after the opinions and desires that that he himself celebrates. The teacher should rather intend to keep his pupils’ minds open and flexible, so
that they will be capable of choosing their own way of life when they have reached maturity. To make teachers capable and willing to practise this truly educational attitude, this is the objective to which educational theory has to contribute its share’ (15).

Notes

(1) One’s own classic, because it is not even remotely possible to read all possibly relevant classic authors. Calvino recognizes this where he says ‘Your classic author is the one you cannot feel indifferent to’ (1997, 130).

(2) De Raaf translated and explained Herbart’s *Umriss pädagogischer Vorlesungen* in Dutch (De Raaf, 1903).

(3) For my pre-graduate thesis on Herbart, I used his 19 volume collected works edited by Karl Kehrbach and Otto Flügel (1887-1909), in the Groningen University library. I was able to purchase for myself at the time a more recent edition of the *Umriss Pädagogischer Vorlesungen* (1964), the late work that contains his entire educational thought in a very systematic, concise and aptly formulated manner. It has been on my book shelf, and indeed often close at hand on my desk, ever since, later accompanied by more recent text editions of his other works, viz., the very well-chosen collection edited by Dietrich Benner in 1986. The latter volume contains a *Vorlesung über Pädagogik* (i.e., one of the two Vorlesungen of 1802), *Über die ästhetische Darstellung der Welt als Hauptgeschäft der Erziehung* (1804), *Allgemeine Pädagogik* (1806), *Allgemeine Praktische Philosophie* (1808), *Über Erziehung unter öffentlicher Mitwirkung* (1810) and a few *Pädagogische Briefe* (1832).


As far as I can tell, Herbart himself used the expression ‘allgemeine Bildung’ only once, in his latest work, *Umriß pädagogischer Vorlesungen*, in section 16, where he contrasts it to *vocational education* (‘Fachbildung’), a contrast that is also still current.

‘[E]s gibt grosse Unterschiede der Individuen, und mit der Eigentümlichkeit eines Kindes beginnt schon seine Einseitigkeit. Das erste nun, was hieraus zugleich folgt, ist dies, dass für eine Schule, wo viele zusammen lernen sollen, die Aufgabe entsteht, sie gleichartiger zu machen’ (*Umriß*, sections 111 and 112).


In the third part of the *Umriß*, in which ‘special branches of education’ are discussed, among them religious education, this rather self-evident restriction to Christianity becomes explicit (section 233; cf. Meijer, 2012, 78).


‘Machen, dass der Zögling sich selbst finde, als während dat Gute, als verwerfend das Böse: dies oder nichts ist Charakterbildung! Dieser Erhebung zur selbstbewussten Persönlichkeit soll ohne Zweifel im Gemüt des Zöglings selbst vorgehen und durch dessen eigene Tätigkeit vollzogen werden; es wäre Unsinn, wenn der Erzieher das eigentliche Wesen der Kraft dazu erschaffen und in die Seele eines anderen hineinflössen wollte’ (AD, Herbart, 1986, 61).

(13) ‘Der Einseitige nähert sich dem Egoisten, auch wenn er es
selbst nicht merkt; denn er bezieht alles auf den engen Kreis, für
den er lebt und denkt’ (Umriß, section 63).

(14) ‘[E]r [muss] wenigstens durch das Wirrsal seiner Zeit
hindurchzublicken imstande sein, dass er auf den schwankenden
Boden der Epoche einen gewissen Stand zu gewinnen und ihre
Erscheinungen mit kritischem Urteil zu mustern vermag’ (1967,
120).

(15) ‘Trachten wir danach, den Lehrer zu erziehen, der es sich
unnachsichtig verbietet, die jugendlichen Seelen vor der Zeit auf
die Meinungen und Wollungen festzulegen, denen er sich als tätiger
Mensch gelobt, vielmehr darauf bedacht ist, diese Seelen so weit,
offen und beweglich zu erhalten, dass sie dereinst, zu voller Reife,
erstärkt, sich selbst ihren Lebensweg zu wählen imstande sind! Zu
dieser wahrhaft pädagogischen Haltung den Lehrer fähig und willig
t zu Machen – das ist die Aufgabe, der auch die pädagogische
Theorie an ihrem Teile zu dienen hat’ (Litt 1967, 126).

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Abstract

Reading the classics is essentially rereading them from new contexts to re-establish their meaning and continuing significance. This article rereads the educational classics Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) and Theodor Litt (1880-1962) in that sense. When Herbart is reread in the context of the debate between ‘New Education’ and Neo-Herbertarianism, he turns out to be opposed to the strict ‘methodism’ in education that New Education proponents criticized in Neo-Herbertarianism. Another context to read Herbart from, is the so-called multicultural (and multi-religious) society. Herbart’s ideas on the main task of education, i.e., to complement the experiences and conceptions with which pupils enter school, to fight one-sidedness and cultivate many-sidedness, gains new significance in this context. Next, the debate between postmodernists and modernists offers a context for rereading Herbart. Postmodern educational philosophers refer to Kant and his concept of the autonomous subject in identifying modern theory of education as an Enlightenment project. However, Herbart developed an idea of morality and freedom as potentialities realizable in historical time in explicit opposition to the transcendental and universal character of the Kantian conception of morality and freedom. Education is, according to Herbart, essentially taking place in time – it is an essentially temporal matter. Litt is still convincing today in his
idea that historical consciousness is important for educators because it enables them to keep a critical distance from the perplexity of their own time. One could say that Litt adds this historical aspect to the temporal aspect that Herbart identified in education. In closing, the article shows that Litt is however yet quite on Herbart’s page when it comes to the time of education itself, especially in emphasizing the importance of open-mindedness and of keeping the future open for the future adults to decide upon.

Résumé

Si on lit les classiques c’est surtout pour les relire à partir de nouveaux contextes pour réhabiliter leur signification et leur importance intemporelle. Le présent article relit dans ce sens les classiques sur la pédagogie Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) et Theodor Litt (1880-1962). Lorsque Herbart est relu dans le contexte du débat entre «éducation nouvelle» et néo-Herbartianisme, il s’avère être opposé au «méthodisme» strict dans l’éducation, ce que les défenseurs de l’Éducation Nouvelle critiquent précisément dans le néo-Herbartianisme. Un autre contexte à partir duquel on peut lire Herbart, est la soi-disant société multiculturelle (et multi-religieuse). Les idées de Herbart sur la mission principale de l’éducation, c’est à dire, compléter les expériences et conceptions avec lesquelles les élèves entrent à l’école, pour combattre la partialité et cultiver l’ouverture d’esprit, prend dans ce contexte une nouvelle signification. Ensuite, le débat entre les postmodernistes et les modernistes est une occasion appropriée pour relire Herbart. Les philosophes de l’éducation postmodernes se réfèrent à Kant et son concept du sujet autonome pour déterminer si une théorie moderne pourrait être considérée comme projet humaniste. Herbart a toutefois développé une idée de la morale et de la liberté étant des potentialités réalisables dans le temps historique en opposition explicite au caractère transcendantal et universel de la conception kantienne de la morale et de la liberté. L'éducation, selon Herbart, s'installe essentiellement dans le temps – c’est avant tout une affaire temporelle. De nos jours Litt est toujours convaincant dans l’idée que la conscience historique est importante pour les éducateurs et les enseignants, car elle leur permet d’avoir un recul critique par rapport à la confusion de leur propre temps. On
pourrait dire que Litt ajoute cet aspect historique à l'aspect temporel que Herbart a identifié dans l'éducation. Pour terminer, l'article montre que Litt est toutefois sur la même longueur d’ondes que Herbart lorsqu'il s’agit du temps même de l'éducation, en particulier en soulignant l'importance de l'ouverture d'esprit et de garder ouvert l'avenir de nos futurs adultes afin qu’ils puissent en décider eux-mêmes.

Samenvatting

Het lezen van klassieken is vooral ze te herlezen vanuit nieuwe contexten om hun betekenis en blijvende, tijdelijke relevantie te herstellen. Dit artikel herleest de pedagogische klassieken Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) en Theodor Litt (1880-1962) in die zin. Wanneer Herbart wordt herlezen in het kader van het debat tussen ‘Vernieuwend Onderwijs’ en Neo-Herbertianisme, blijkt hij tegen het strenge 'methodisme' in onderwijs gekant te zijn, net wat de voorstanders van het Vernieuwend Onderwijs bekritiseren in het Neo-Herbertianisme. Een andere context van waaruit Herbart kan gelezen worden, is de zogenaamde multiculturele (en multireligieuze) samenleving. Herbarts ideeën over de kernopdracht van het onderwijs, d.w.z. het aanvullen van de ervaringen en opvattingen waarmee leerlingen naar school komen, om eenzijdigheid te bestrijden en veelzijdigheid te bevorderen, krijgt een nieuwe betekenis in deze context. Vervolgens biedt het debat tussen postmodernisten en modernisten een goede reden om Herbart te herlezen. Kant en zijn concept van het autonome subject wordt in het kader van de Verlichting door de postmoderne educatieve filosofen beschouwd als de referentie om moderne theorieën in de pedagogiek te identificeren. Herbart echter ontwikkelde het idee dat moraal en vrijheid als potentiële mogelijkheden realiseerbaar zijn in de historische tijd, in expliciete tegenstelling tot het transcendentale en universele karakter van de Kantiaanse opvatting over moraal en vrijheid. Volgens Herbart installeert het onderwijs zich wezenlijk in de tijd - het is vooral een temporele aangelegenheid. Litt is er nog steeds van overtuigd dat het historisch geweten belangrijk is voor pedagogen en opvoeders omdat het hen in staat stelt een kritische afstand te houden van de eigentijdse twijfelmoedigheid. Men zou kunnen zeggen dat Litt dit historische
阅读经典著作本质上是在新的背景下阅读它们然后重新理解它们的含义及其深远的意义。这篇文章是从这个意义出发重读经典教育家赫尔巴特（1776年至1841年）和西奥多·利特（1880年至1962年）的著作。在“新教育”和新-赫尔巴特主义之间辩论的背景下重读赫尔巴特的著作，他转而成为反对严格的“循道宗”式的教育方式，而严格的“循道宗”式的教育方式正是新教育倡导者们用以对新-赫尔巴特主义的批判要点。在另一个所谓多元文化（和多宗教的）社会背景下读赫尔巴特著作。赫尔巴特认为学生进入学校是以补充经验和理念为教育的主要任务，反对培养片面性人才而要培养多方面才能的人才，并从中获得了新的启发。其次，在后现代主义和现代主义之间辩论的背景下重读赫尔巴特。在一个启蒙时期的项目中康德作为后现代教育哲学家，提倡主体自治的理念奠定了现代教育理论的基础。然而，赫尔巴特发展了在一定历史时期内可以实现的道德和自由理念并明确反对康德的道德和自由理念具有超然性和普遍性。赫尔巴特认为教育是以时间为基础的——它是一个时间问题。利特在他的思想理念中仍然确信今天的工作者的道德意识是很重要的，因为这种意识能够使他们保持一定程度的距离而不受自己所处时代的干扰。可以说，利特把这种历史意识加入到了认识赫尔巴特在教育方面的时空理念。文章最后显示了利特和赫尔巴特在教育的时间问题上，
尤其在强调解放思想以及对青少年的未来保持开放的重要性方面观点是一致的。

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