

EDUCATION AND AESTHETICS: CURRENT AND FUTURE LESSONS TO LEARN FROM PAST EDUCATIONAL CONCEPTS

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Abstract

*Referring to the cases of (sexual) abuse and violence in pedagogical institutions recently discussed in Germany and Austria, this article questions the interrelation between concepts of 'education' and abuse of power and authority – not only in pre-reform periods, but also “behind the back and in the clothes of reform” (DGfE, 2010). Contrary to renewed reform suggestions, I intend to show that revisiting historical concepts proposes alternative modes of education. Aesthetic education, in particular, is highly potential in the current debate. Using historical, qualitative/hermeneutical text-analysis, I study A. G. Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750), which uncovers the fundamental connection of pedagogy and aesthetics, and J. Fr. Herbart's paper *On the Aesthetic Revelation of the World as Education's Main Concern* (1804), which shows the practical value of aesthetic thinking in education: even in moral education, educator and pupil are not immediately or directly correlated but their relationship is mediated by subjects and matters. Furthermore, an aesthetic approach to education draws the main attention to spaces which provide opportunities for development, not to restricting discipline. Aesthetic experience moreover supports sensuality and therefore productively breaks with taboos in an intellectually orientated pedagogical system. All three points are crucial to current and future public and professional debates.*

Key words: *aesthetics, education, educational relationships.*

Introduction

Cases of (sexual) abuse and violence in pedagogical institutions have moved the public and educational discussion in Austria, Germany and several other countries in the course of the last year. As became public, the emphasis on authority and discipline but also their intended avoidance actually induced violence. An appalling amount of disrespect for human integrity and dignity resulted. The German Society of Educational Science (DGfE) pointed out that these “authoritarian and partial violent practices of dealing with children and adolescents” have been criticized since the 1960s, but “continued behind the back and in the clothes of reform” (DGfE, 2010)¹. They furthermore stated that it is “deplorable that critique on and changes of [authoritarian and violent] forms of education could not prevent the violations which now became public” (DGfE, 2010).

Connected to the quoted official statement, the main question is how do concepts of 'education' interrelate with abuse of power and authority in the current theoretical concepts and practical settings? In Germany and Austria after World War II, educational reflection and reform focused on the educational relationship between students and teachers, children and parents, and adolescents and adults. In order to differ from impersonal relationships, which seemingly culminated in punishment and harsh discipline, educational discourse turned to favor more emotional and personal forms of relationship. Concepts of antiauthoritarian education or antipedagogy (*Antipädagogik*) and publications on the topic of the educational relationship

¹ Translation of German sources by the author.

(Pädagogische Beziehung) can be contextualized in this way². Although there is a body of educational literature dealing critically with such ideas of reform, they lack scientific and professional resonance. This is for systematic reasons. From the middle of the 20th century onwards, the *problem* with education has been phrased in a binary way, constructing an opposition between concepts based on discipline, personal distance and intellectualism – often resulting in cruelties – and, on the other hand, concepts grounded in a loving educational atmosphere, sympathy and personal engagement. The latter were supposed to prevent the violation of the child's mental and bodily integrity. Since then, this opposition has framed 'new' approaches to education, which have been relevant until today although they have hardly allowed 'third ways' of educational thinking to emerge.

The thesis is that emotionalizing and idealizing the personal relationship in education, without focusing on *matters and subjects*, tends to favor uncontrollable personal interventions and therefore does not serve as a prevention of authoritarian tendencies but rather obscures them. Against this background, the recent appeals to increase respect for authorities and to place higher importance on discipline appear to be as pointless as trends towards even more emotional and personal devotion. The latter especially find high acceptance in parent training and practical advice for parents. The former enter these forms of knowledge-transfer more subtly, for example via provocative books like *Praise to Discipline* (Lob der Disziplin) (Bueb, 2009). Overstepping the outlined binary structure of discourse requires that the fundamental problem of education itself is re-phrased in a systematically different way. This paper thus shows how including historic sources and concentrating on *aesthetic education* opens up an alternative perspective on education, especially focusing on the issue of closeness and distance in education. This article aims to provide alternative solutions for problems in education in the 21st century with the abuse of educational power being just one of the problems.

Using hermeneutic and comparative methods of text analysis the study inquires into the potential of aesthetic concepts of education and the *interrelation* between education and aesthetics. The main sources are Johann Friedrich Herbart's paper *On the Aesthetic Revelation of the World as Education's Main Concern*, published in German in 1804, as an appendix to Herbart's *Pestalozzi's Idea of an ABC of Apprehension*, and selected parts of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's *Aesthetica*, which was first published in Latin in 1750. Both interpretations will be connected to contemporary productions on education. The main focus lies on the educational relationship resulting from an aesthetic understanding of education and the role of subjects and matters, *mediating* persons in educational interaction.

Aesthetic Approaches to Education

Conceptualizing education as an aesthetic practice has a prominent history in education. Besides Friedrich Schiller (1962), Johann Friedrich Herbart was one of the central theorists with far reaching educational influence all over Europe (Coriand 2003). From a philosophical perspective, an interrelation between aesthetics and education can be found when referring to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's path-breaking, but nevertheless underestimated, work *Aesthetica* (1750). However, in present educational discourse, aesthetic education is not at all predominant. Only recently the topic of aesthetics in education has been taken up again with historical interest (Fuchs & Koch, 2010; Fuchs & Koch, 2006), supporting this paper.

In order to find a scientific approach to education Johann Friedrich Herbart conceptualizes education as an aesthetic process. Not only did he describe the aims of education (morality) in terms of aesthetics, he also analyzed the educational interaction itself by means of aesthetics.

² See, for example, Giesecke, H. (Ed.) (1997). *Die pädagogische Beziehung* [The educational relationship]. Weinheim: Juventa; and Kluge, N. (Ed.) (1973). *Das pädagogische Verhältnis* [The educational relation]. Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft.

Education's main concern was, as he stated in 1804, the "aesthetic revelation of the world", indicating the representation of "the *whole* world and *all known* times" (Herbart, 1982a, p. 115). Through aesthetic works like poetry, literature, but also via visual arts, he aimed to challenge and invite the child to develop an aesthetic power of judgment, which he assumed most relevant for (moral) education³. Herbart focused and relied on the power of judgment to be *evoked* through education. He focused further on knowledge, reason and understanding of the world – as well as a profound observation of the child's intellectual and emotional capacities. This view leaves no space but also no need for disciplinary punishment. It seeks to meet *educational challenges* (Kunert 2001)⁴ by *educational means*, which Herbart differentiated from mere social, intellectual and physical manipulation. Education instead minds and enhances freedom of the will and freedom of action for all participants: educators and pupils alike.

What does this mean for the educational relationship? An aesthetic approach to education highlights the weight of subjects and matters on which it refers. These subjects are presented by aesthetic means and open aesthetic ways of perception. They include the freedom to accept or reject a presented view. The educator does not directly address a child's personality, engagements and attitudes. But she or he seeks to influence the child indirectly via *provoking* aesthetic judgments through aesthetic representations. Herbart termed this systematic structure of education 'educative lessons' (Erziehender Unterricht) (Herbart, 1982b, pp. 22ff. Anhalt, 2009). Herbart even conceded that he had no idea of education without subjects and at the same time had no idea of teaching subjects independently from education (Herbart, 1982b, pp. 22ff.). His main point was that only reference to a subject or matter allowed distance between educators and children. This, as Elmar Anhalt pointed out, is necessary for *both* to be *actors of education* (Anhalt, 2004, pp. 106 and 114). This is crucial for the sake of human dignity. Of course this concept of education leaves spaces for unpredictability and imponderability. In times when effectiveness and efficiency dominate the discourse on education, this view does not seem to be functional. But when compared to educational reality, and from a phenomenological viewpoint, it may be highly appropriate.

Concerning the question of whether or not this fundamental relationship between education and aesthetics not only appears useful from an *educational* point of view but also from an *aesthetic* perspective, we studied Alexander Baumgarten's *Aesthetica* (1750). This work proves relevant when considering our question as Herbart referred to Baumgarten's definition of aesthetics, among others.⁵ On the other hand, *Aesthetica* was the first monograph dealing with aesthetics as an independent philosophical discipline and it was therefore most influential on the discourse regarding aesthetics from 1750 onwards. Nonetheless, Baumgarten's work fell into near total oblivion and its influence has therefore been viewed as being indirect and implicit (Mirbach, 2007, p. XXIf.).

Baumgarten's view on aesthetics is broad, covering the theory of cognition, the theory of beauty, and the theory of arts as well as aspects of practical philosophy and morality. Considering all of these aspects, he defined aesthetics as the "science of sensual cognition" (Baumgarten, 2007, p. 11). Beauty therefore is "perfection of sensual cognition" (Baumgarten, 2007, p. 21). In this definition, Baumgarten makes reference to a previous work, *Metaphysica* (1735), which defines aesthetics as "perfection of sensual phaenomenon" (Baumgarten, 1735, in Mirbach, 2007, p. LIII). Therefore, beauty not only depended on the measured subject but also on the form of judgment and the judging mind (Gerdenitsch, 2010, pp. 31 and 35).

Most interestingly, Baumgarten explicitly attributed educational aims to aesthetics. This

3 In Herbart's view, morality is based on aesthetic sentences. He characterizes aesthetic sentences as evaluative judgments on relations (Herbart, 1964, p. 344) and as immediate feelings (Herbart, 1982a, p. 110f.).

4 Hubertus Kunert states: "Educational processes are per definition processes of conflict" (Kunert, 2001, p. 58). The conflict lies in the twofold intentionality, which has to meet if education is to be effective (Kunert, 2001, p. 58). Therefore education has plenty of challenges to accept.

5 Besides Baumgarten, Herbart also referred to Aristotle, Kant and Schiller (see, for example, Thimm, 2007).

not only concerned subjects of genuine aesthetic nature but also “subjects which transcend the aesthetic horizon” (Baumgarten, 2007, p. 101). The latter may be subjects of epistemology or practical philosophy, concerning questions like ‘are sensations true?’ or ‘what is good apart from the truth?’ (Baumgarten, 2007, p. 101). These questions may not be *scientifically solved* via aesthetic approaches, but aesthetics aims at *imparting* subjects of various scientific disciplines to a common mind via representations, illustrative examples and commenting notes:

The ability to think gracefully even occurs in the fields of the disciplines and sciences, which are 1) – concerning their matters – dealing with dogmatic, theological, physical, practical, historical etc. questions, if you want to think and represent them in a way, that you appear accessible to people, who are not highly educated. It occurs 2) in fields of the disciplines and sciences, which have to intersperse explanatory illustrations. (Baumgarten, 2007, p. 103).

Therefore, aesthetic thinking is suitable to make scientific knowledge accessible to a wider, but not necessarily educated, public. However, Baumgarten adds a condition to this educational and scientific function of aesthetic representations: an aesthete had to follow a *different reason* compared to somebody who would explain certain questions in terms of ethics, philosophy, natural science or mathematics (Baumgarten, 2007, p. 101).

These are some of the educational lessons we may learn from Baumgarten’s *Aesthetica*: the *logic of teaching* need not necessarily conform to the logic of subject as the logic of imparting must also follow the learning subject’s logic of acquiring. Aesthetic representations satisfy both conditions. Therefore, aesthetic representations, and aesthetic judgments in general, are fundamental to education. Education, vice-a-versa, is essentially an aesthetic discipline and practice. The systematic and structural relationship between education and aesthetics on both sides is grounded in the importance of appearance and performance. This, at the same time, illustrates the difference between aesthetics and education on the one hand, and philosophical reasoning on the other.

As a result, sensuality and feelings play central roles in education and aesthetics. Human beings can neither be reduced to rational beings nor to sensual beings only. Schiller (1962), for example, and thereafter the phaenomenological approaches to subjects and learning (see, for example, Meyer-Drawe, 2006, p. 36) emphasized that both aspects are intertwined and mutually dependent. This is of importance for education because both the neglect of sensuality and the promotion of sensuality and emotion in education are misleading if presented as strong alternatives. Aesthetic reflection in contrast shows more appropriate ways of educational thinking and practice.

Discussion

Revisiting historical texts and thoughts on education is enlightening in the context of this discussion as well as in the present situation of educational practice. This is not for the sake of mere history and tradition, but for *systematic* reasons. Historical analyses open up access to problems which appear uncommon or unfamiliar to the present educational debate, although the problems themselves are most familiar. They allow an outside perspective and call attention not only to possible solutions but also – and most importantly – to ways of phrasing and analyzing the considered *problems*.

The educational problems underlying the recent cases of abuse of authority and power in education do not revolve around whether a child, a pupil or a person cared for should be treated more rigorously or more warmheartedly. *Both* of these attitudes imply a *close* relationship between educators and students, leaving little space for subjective evading from personal

power on the side of students and for dealing with the burden of personal and emotional responsibility on the side of educators. We can show this *close* relationship in various contexts dealt with in education. For example Herman Nohl's most prominent, and still influential, term of the "Educational Relationship" (Pädagogischer Bezug) (Nohl, 1973). Nohl pointed out the importance of *personal* and *emotional* relationships in education, putting the *educational eros* against coldness and distance, but also against psychoanalytical interpretations of sexual tendencies in education:

The passionate relation of a mature person to a developing person is the foundation of education. [...] Long ago it has been known [...] that there is a sensual moment included in the educational relationship (Nohl, 1973, p. 39).

Nohl explicitly points out certain erotic dimensions of education (Nohl, 1973, pp. 39f.) which, however, must not be interpreted in a sexual way as psychoanalysis would. In exactly the same way, Friedrich Winnefeld argues against *objectification* (*Versachlichung*) in education, pleading for a deep personal contact between teacher and pupil (Winnefeld, 1973): "Objectification of the educational relationship implies the death of any real educational arrangement" (Winnefeld, 1973, p. 140). More popular sources propose more 'relation' instead of 'education', trying to avoid family problems via personal devotion and 'amicable' interaction (see, for example, Juul, 2010; Schoenebeck, 2004). They, however, tend to overlook that personal devotion leads to high *personal* and *individual* expectations, not at all taking into consideration that education is embedded in environmental, social and political circumstances which may not be accessible to individuals.

Aesthetics in education, by contrast, reminds us that educational relationships *are not constituted by two persons only*, but require a "third factor" (Sünkel, 2010; Sünkel, 1997, pp. 198f.). Wolfgang Sünkel indicates three types of objects, education is concerned with: knowledge, skills and motives (Kenntnisse, Fertigkeiten, Motive) (Sünkel, 2010, pp. 23 and 41), that is "everything one has to know, be able to do and be willing to do, so that one can act appropriately and successfully according to the social demands" (Sünkel, 2010, p. 41). In case this object or topic of education is missing, education is reduced to relation. This challenged education, because the thematic claims cannot be grounded anywhere else but in the will of the educator (Sünkel, 2010, p. 42). In a systematically similar way, Klaus Prange speaks of 'showing' (*Zeigen*) as the predominant operation in education (Prange, 2010, p. 20; Prange 2005). Showing combines three components: a personal, a social and a thematic component. *Someone shows somebody something in a specific way* (Prange, 2010, p. 21). Again the object of education is necessary to mediate the relationship of educator and child.

An aesthetic approach to education supports the foundation of the educational relationship in subjects and matters. Consequently, the personal relationship between teachers and pupils, parents/educators and children is *mediated* by a 'third factor' (Sünkel). Therefore, the aesthetic foundation of education proves to be the only accessible way to cope with authoritarian tendencies in education – which may accompany all of our social relationships. As aesthetic judgments are characterized as 'free', they allow pupils and teachers/educators a sense of freedom from authorities and cultural or sensual arbitrariness.

Although an aesthetic point of view in education does not explicitly tend towards emotionalizing the educational relationship, it does not de-emotionalize it either. It shows education in a more 'objective' way and is more concerned with the surrounding world. Aesthetic judgments integrate rational and emotional aspects and are expressed by feelings. They have strong emotional parts in themselves. However, the emotional reference between subjects of education is mediated by matters.

Based on his aesthetic approach to education and moral philosophy, Herbart designed

an educational concept which he called 'educational instruction' (Erziehender Unterricht). However, like his predecessors in aesthetic and educational thinking, his concept almost sank into oblivion although it systematically appears most instructive and a potential aid for dealing with the current problems of education. In Herbart's view, education becomes manipulative and cruel if it does not include a mediating matter. This is because education has to provide scopes for dissociation of the teacher's personal authority. Conversely, Herbart judged that instruction without being accompanied by education is narrow and lacks practical relevance for social as well as individual life (Herbart, 1982b, p. 22).

Conclusion

Highly emotionalized references as well as de-emotionalized approaches – focusing on discipline and the authority of educators/teachers – hold the danger of abusive tendencies in education, as a child is not allowed but also not able to refuse infringement on its personal integrity. Only a concept of education based on aesthetic judgments, allowing the world to be experienced simultaneously in an emotional and intellectual way, is able to cope with these current, but not at all recent, problems of education. Here an objective fundamental of education provides possibilities for dissociation. Neither the call for returning to more disciplinary ways of education, nor the call for even more emotionalized relations between teachers/educators and pupils, parents and children are appropriate to deal with the serious problems troubling the educational debate at present: sexual abuse, abuse of power, and violence. Both approaches overlook the importance of subjects and matters in education, if the autonomy, dignity and integrity of a person should be defended. An *aesthetic* understanding of education draws the attention to the subjects being taught and mediating educational interaction instead of to the emotional and moral states of pupils. It integrates feelings without explicitly and exclusively focusing on them. This seems to be the most important *systematic* lesson to learn from the history of education.

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