

Pedagogies in Dissonance: The Transformation of *Pedagogical Tact*

Karsten Kenklies

Abstract

When Herbart in 1802 introduced the concept of *Pedagogical Tact* in his first lecture on pedagogy, he answered to a systematic problem that had also troubled his predecessor: It was within his theory of judgement that Immanuel Kant attempted to solve the problem of the relation of theory and practice, of theoretical and practical *Vernunft*. **In reference to Kant's notion of *Logical Tact***, Herbart proposed the *Pedagogical Tact* as a way to describe how, in pedagogy, theory and practice could be bound together.

Despite their brevity, those short remarks of Herbart became, and continue to be, a Classic theorem of pedagogical thinking, especially within Continental Pedagogy, while in the Anglophone world, *Pedagogical Tact* has found only sparse interest until recently.

Both the larger absence of interest, as well as the recent interest are, in themselves, rather remarkable as they represent trends that seem characteristic for the adaptation of especially German pedagogical theories in Anglophone contexts. Concentrating on **Herbart's tact, this chapter will explore the distortions** that not only led to an obliviousness towards the fundamental concept of *Pedagogical Tact*, but also its distorted reception much later.

Keywords

History of Education, Philosophy of Education, Systematic Pedagogy, General Pedagogy, Intercultural Education, Herbart, *Pedagogical Tact*

Introduction

Introducing the concept of *Pedagogical Tact* (*Pädagogischer Takt*) in his first lecture on pedagogy in 1802, Herbart pedagogically reformulated a systematic problem that had troubled his predecessor for quite some time: It was within his theory of judgement that Immanuel Kant attempted to solve the problem of the relation of theory and practice, of theoretical and practical *Vernunft*. In reference **to Kant's notion of *Logical Tact***, Herbart proposed the *Pedagogical Tact* as a way to describe how, in pedagogy, theory and practice could be bound together.

Despite their brevity, those short remarks of Herbart became a Classic theorem of pedagogical thinking, especially within

Continental Pedagogy (Friesen & Kenklies, 2022), where it continues to illicit far-reaching reflections (Friesen 2022). However, in the Anglophone world, *Pedagogical Tact* has found only sparse interest, and it was only very recently that academics began to engage with it in a specific way.

Both the larger absence of interest, as well as the recent interest are, in themselves, rather remarkable as they represent trends that seem characteristic for the adaptation of especially German pedagogical theories in Anglophone contexts. Concentrating on **Herbart's tact, this chapter will explore the distortions** that not only led to an obliviousness towards the fundamental concept of *Pedagogical Tact*, but also its distorted reception much later.

1. The Rise of a Systematic Problem

When Johann Friedrich Herbart gave his famous *First Lecture* on Pedagogy in 1802 (Herbart 1896), he had to find a solution to a problem that had not really emerged in pedagogical reflections until then. It was just about the time in which Education Studies, i.e., the academic study of education, had begun to take shape. In 1778, the very first (short-lived) Chair for Pedagogy was established (at the University of Halle in Germany), with Ernst Christian Trapp taking up the role. Trapp used his Inaugural Lecture to make a strong case for the necessity to study education & instruction as a specific art (Trapp 1779). Together with the chair, Trapp was entrusted with the responsibility for a newly opened Pedagogical Seminar, which was focused on the education of teachers and was the first one to combine theoretical studies with practical exercises. From then on, this combination became the primary challenge for teacher-educators and teacher-education. At first, an educational theory had to be developed (Trapp 1780); and secondly, the question arose, how could this combination be conceptualized and enacted? Or, in other words, what is the relation between educational theory and educational practice? Here, the two sides of educational theory and educational practice take their conceptual shape. While an educational theory must consist of general and universally valid rules and principles to be an academic (in German: *wissenschaftlich*) theory at all, educational practice is always dealing with individual, unique, and almost

incommensurable cases, events, and peoples. It may be obvious that this question only arises because educational theory becomes an academic form of reflection, i.e., because this academic reflection takes on the form of an academic discipline that – as it is studied at universities – has to comply with the same general expectations of validity and thoroughness as all other theories in disciplines or subjects discussed in academia; thus forming the very notion of an academic theory of education opens the chasm between theory and practice. Consequently, the theorizing on education had to 1) reflect on its own form as an academic theory, 2) reflect on the very nature of its object of reflection, i.e., educational practice, and 3) reflect on the relation of an academic theory (of education) to the practice (called “education”).

Having arrived at such a prepared scene, Herbart had to respond to those questions. Beginning his career at the University in Göttingen and later occupying the chair formerly held by Immanuel Kant in Königsberg, Herbart **followed in Kant’s footsteps while attempting to** modify Kantian philosophy in light of modern psychological and pedagogical developments.¹ And right at the beginning, in his first lectures on education in 1802 (which have been handed down only as fragments), Herbart offered a response to the challenge posed by Trapp. What are, in short, the answers to the three questions?

a) *What are theory & practice?*

“Discriminate, in the first place, between pedagogy as a science and the art of education. What is the content of a science? An orderly combination of

¹ Herbart’s indebtedness to Kant was so strong, that one commentator stated that every interpretation of Herbart also needs an interpretation of Kant (Langewand 1993). Indeed, **it was precisely Herbart’s research program** that sought to answer **the challenges Kant’s Transcendental Philosophy**

posed for the notion of an external influence (i.e., education) **upon morality (given that Kant’s idea of practical reason did not allow for external influence if it wanted to continue to be addressed as reason).**

propositions, logically constituting a whole and where possible proceeding one from another—corollaries from fundamental principles, and fundamental principles from axioms. What comprises an art? A sum of skillful devices and methods which must be combined in order to secure a certain purpose. Science, therefore, demands the derivation of propositions from their logical grounds—philosophic thinking. Art demands a constant activity in conformity with the mere results of science. An art while it is being exercised **must not become lost in speculation**” (Herbart 1896: 17).²

It is with those words that Herbart introduces simultaneously his idea of a scientific (and in German, the notion of *wissenschaftlich* refers to all thorough academic explorations) theory of education and his understanding of the characteristics of the practice of education, which he addresses as an art (the German word *Kunst* here refers to what in Latin is called *ars*, i.e., related more to notions like *ars vivendi* than to “the” arts like painting & sculpture). A theory, therefore, is a set of propositions, derived from fundamental principles and axioms. Such an understanding places Herbart squarely in the tradition of a system philosophy as it has developed over centuries since the Early Enlightenment. The practice of education, on the other side, is supposed to be a way of engaging with the (pedagogical) world that is ordered and purposeful, and successful in achieving the goals and aims it has set. As such, it should conform to the propositions set out by the theory while avoiding getting lost in mere speculations.

This demand creates a certain problem caused by the very nature of both theory and practice:

“Theory in its universality stretches over an expanse of which any one in his practice touches on but an infinitely minute part. On the other hand, in its indefiniteness, which is the immediate consequence of its universality, it passes by all details, all the individual circumstances that surround the practical teacher at every given moment, and all the individual measures, reflections, and exertions by which he must respond to those circumstances. In the school of science, therefore, we shall learn both too much and too little for **practice” (Herbart 1896: 18).**

Whereas theory in its universality attempts to embrace and include, comprehensively, all possible instances of education, the momentary demands of the practice of the educator are at once narrower in their scope while being much deeper in their detail. Theory and practice are, therefore, seemingly never really aligned. To be a real theory, the propositions constituting a theory and derived from principles and axioms have to be far wider than the actual case demands, while they can never include the absolute individual circumstances of each pedagogical situation. Theory is necessarily too wide and too narrow at the same time. The question then arises as to how the relationship between theory and practice could be described. Such is the systematic problem that Herbart needs to solve if he thinks of educational theory in terms of a truly academic theory that somehow has to guide and inform educational practice.

² Cited here is the translation from 1896, published in New York. As the following will be an exploration of the reception

of this text, it seems appropriate to refer to the text that was available. For a newer translation, see Friesen (2022).

b) *What is the relationship between theory and practice?*

In his text, Herbart suggests at least three different ways in which the theory and practice of education could, in principle, be related.³

i. *No relation – Practice without theory*

The first relation of theory and practice is one of absence: here, the educator does not at all relate his/her practice to a theory as described above. Here, the educator ignores all theory that would take him beyond her/his own horizon, his/her own experiences. It is only past experiences that guide this practice, and in the absence of any other sort of imagined practice (enshrined in theory), there will be no intentional development, and changes that are happening are by mere chance. (Herbart 1896: 18f.)

ii. *Ideal Relation – Practice completely ruled by theory*

The second imaginable relation between theory and practice would be one of an ideal alignment. Already above, it has been questioned whether this could ever be possible. And indeed, Herbart repeats that – because **“such a recollection, such a complete application of scientific propositions, would require a supernatural being” (Herbart 1896: 20)** – to **retain “strict consistency with the rule” while at the same time answering to “the true requirements of the individual case” (Herbart 1896: 20)** is impossible. At this point, Herbart blames the incapacity of human educators for such failures while remaining silent here about the very possibility of such a theory (e.g., how would a complete theory, i.e., description of

human behavior and life, relate to ideas of human freedom and spontaneity).

iii. *Best Possible Relation – Practice inspired by theory*

No relation to theory would render educational practice unreflective; perfect alignment between theory and educational practice is impossible to achieve. There inevitably will be a gap between theory and practice in education, and it is exactly this gap that makes the practice of educating an art. If theory was to govern practice completely, the practice would cease to be an art but would represent a mechanical reaction to a specific situation, turning the educator into an automaton. However, the artfulness of educational practice suggests a certain type of intuition; a bridge between the theory – which is always to be wide to be applicable to practice – and the practice – which is, necessarily, too individual to be described by universally valid propositions. It is here that Herbart introduces a notion that subsequently became one of the fundamental and widely discussed (Metz 1995) theorems of German educational reflections: *Pedagogical Tact*.

2. The Arrival of a Systematic Solution

In formulating the problem as the question for the theoretical propositions that would cover a specific individual case, Herbart follows Kant in his explorations of the *Power of Judgement (Urteilskraft)* (Pleines 1980).

“The power of judgment in general is the faculty for thinking of the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, the principle, the law) is given, then the power of

³ For a more extended discussion, see KenKlies (2012).

judgment, which subsumes the **particular under it [...], is determining**" (Kant 2000: 66f.; emphasis in original).

It is this faculty of judgement (in pedagogical situations) that Herbart calls (pedagogical) tact. He formulates:

"[I]n every theorist, no matter how good a one he may be, if he practises his theory, and provided only that he does not proceed with the cases occurring in his practice with pedantical slowness, **[...] there inserts itself quite** involuntarily a link intermediate between theory and practice. There is, to wit, a certain tact, a quick judgment and decision, not proceeding like routine, eternally uniform, but, on the other hand, unable to boast, as an absolutely thoroughgoing theory should, that while retaining strict consistency with the rule, it at the same time answers the true requirements of the individual case **"(Herbart 1896: 19f.).**

The systematic problem that arises by attempting to theorize a relation between universal theory and individualistic practice is solved by referring to a general human faculty of judgement that enables the practitioner to subsume a given situation under a pre-formulated rule expressed in theory. Having said that, it seems necessary to shed a little more light on this faculty. Especially with respect to its later reception, which will be based on a severe misunderstanding of the nature of this faculty.

The first question that maybe needs to be asked is why Herbart changed the notion from *judgement* (which clearly is a notion that relates to faculties of reason) to *tact* (which seems to be related much more to sentiment and feeling or emotion). Although it still retained its

meaning of *being in order* (complying with the rhythm or being tactful as complying with an order of morals or etiquette), it seems that most people would understand tact to be an emotive capacity. That, however, is not what Herbart has in mind. And again, it is Kant – and more **specifically, Kant's notion of *logical tact*** – to which he refers with that choice of word:

"This much is certain, that if the solution to a problem is based on general and innate rules of understanding (possession of which is called mother wit), it is more dangerous to look around for academic and artificially drawn-up principles (school wit) and thereafter to come to their conclusion, than to take a chance on the outburst from the determining grounds of masses of judgment that lie in the obscurity of the mind. One could call this *logical tact*, where reflection on the object is presented from many different sides and comes out with a correct result, without being conscious of the acts that are going on inside the mind during this **process" (Kant 2007: 250; emphasis in original).**

As it becomes clear: decisions based on (logical) tact are not decisions resulting from some sort of feeling or outburst of emotion or emotional bond (between educator and student), but they are indeed based on movements of the **mind (Kant's word is *Gemüt*)** – with the difference to decisions made based on reflection being that the latter are made consciously (indicated by the very word reflection), whereas, with decisions based on tact, the musings of the mind remain somewhat hidden and unconscious. In light of this, the formulations of Herbart seem somewhat ambiguous, as he does speak of judgement and decision (two notions clearly indicating intellectual processes) but then

seems to favor emotive language in its ongoing description:

“**[T]here inevitably originates in man as he is, out of continued practice, a mode of action which depends on his feeling [*Gefühl*] and only remotely on his conviction [*Überzeugung*]**—a mode of action rather giving vent to his inner movement, expressing how he has been affected from without, and exhibiting his emotional state [*Gemütszustand*], than the resultant of his thinking [*Denken*]” (Herbart 1896: 20).

It may seem that indeed Herbart is talking about an emotional capacity that is needed here to be tactful, i.e., to apply theory to practice correctly, a universal rule to an individual case. However, this would direct the interpretation in a direction that is less located **within the intellectual scope of Herbart’s** philosophy but more within the horizon of later understandings of specific notions. The German notions *Gefühl* and *Gemüt* – translated here as *feeling* and *emotion* – are not necessarily notions that refer to such psychological aspects of human life but are, especially within the German tradition of 18th and 19th philosophy, notions referring to states of the reasoning mind (it may also be worth to remember that psychology as an independent discipline is just about to develop – **not least based on Herbart’s** works on psychology) (Frevert 2009). *Gemüt* is a notion that does not have a very defined meaning in German; it often refers to the feature that makes a person a person (being, therefore, another word for *Seele*, i.e., soul). (Bollnow 1974) Therefore, it cannot be narrowly understood as some form or cause or effect of emotion. And *Gefühl* is equally not a necessarily individual-emotive word (in contrast to most modern usages): Kant, for example, speaks of *Achtung* (respect for the moral law) as a *Gefühl*

that is not caused or related to pleasure/displeasure caused by external objects (Kant 2015). It was indeed also Kant who pointed out that reason is at work no matter whether one is conscious of it or not, which also means that often one judges by reason although one believes to have judged by sentiment (Kowalewski 1965: 242).

What is very clear from this is that tact is not some form of emotional reaction to the individuality of the case or even an emotional reaction based on some emotive bond between educator and student; tact is not a feeling of love or respect for the individuality of the student as a person, but an intellectual judgement whose internal movements and iterations remain unconscious in contradistinction to the very much conscious act of reflection. It is for that reason that the Herbartian Tuiskon Ziller later called it *rational tact* (*rationaler Takt*) (Ziller 1856: 28; 1876: 38). And indeed: should it need yet another proof, it is very enlightening to look at the suggestion Herbart makes in relation to the way in which the educator learns to be tactful.

“It [tact, K.K.] is only formed during practice, and by the action of our practical experiences upon our feelings. This action will result differently as we are differently attuned. On this, our mental attuning, we can and should act by reflection. It depends upon the correctness and weight of this reflection, upon the interest and moral willingness with which we give ourselves up to it, whether and how before entering upon the office of education and, whether and how, consequently, during the exercise of that office, our mental tone will order our mode of feeling, and finally, together with the latter, will guide the employment of that tact upon which

rests success or failure in pedagogical endeavor. In other words, by reflection, reasoning, inquiry, in short, by science, the educator must prepare not his future action in individual cases so much as himself, his tone of mind, his head as well as his heart, for correctly receiving, apperceiving, feeling, and judging the phenomena awaiting him and the **situation in which he may be placed. [...]** There is then—this is my conclusion—a preparation for the art by means of the study of science, a preparation of both the understanding and the heart before entering upon our duties, by virtue of which the experience which we can obtain only in the work itself will become instructive to us. Only in action do we learn the art and acquire tact, aptness, quickness, dexterity; but even in action only he learns the art who has in previous thinking learned the science; has made it his own; by it has attuned himself; has predetermined the impressions to be made upon him by **future experience” (Herbart 1896: 21f.).**

As becomes obvious, Herbart presents an answer to the question of how pedagogical theory and practice are related. While the inevitable gap between the universal statements of theory and the individual cases of practice can only be closed by a tactful act on the side of the educator, it is the very theory itself that is needed to develop this capacity to act tactfully. The ability to pass, unconsciously, the correct judgement will only arise within actual educational practice – but only if this practice has been prepared by studying theory. A knowledge of theory enables the educator to give **a correct interpretation of the situation (Kant’s determining judgement)** and supports in choosing the appropriate way of action in

response to an individual situation; only when the educator has absorbed enough theory will she/he be able to unconsciously and swiftly pass correct judgement about any given situation without having the time to consciously reflect on the situation. Tact, therefore, is a theoretically prepared and intellectually formed intuition that is based on extensive knowledge of the possible interpretation of a situation represented by the universalist propositions that make up a scientific/academic theory (Kenklies 2012). Tact is not some feeling that arises out of the special knowledge the educator may have of the individual student – it is not an intuition that emerges through bonding with the student or emotional divination on the side of the educator.

It is well worth remembering why Herbart introduces the concept of *Pedagogical Tact* in the first place: because he finds a systematic problem to which he must provide an answer. Assuming that the art of education needs to be guided by theory, he needs to explain how a universalist theory can respond to individual cases. If theory is always too broad and the individual situation always too particular to align easily, the educator needs to have some sort of capacity to relate both. This capacity is tact: the ability to unconsciously and swiftly pass judgement about the nature of the situation and therefore the appropriate pedagogical reaction. This problem arises only because Herbart assumes that the art of educating needs to be underpinned by a universal theory. Without such an assumption, the necessity for theorizing about a solution to this problem would not arise, and *Pedagogical Tact* as a concept would not need to be introduced. And as a solution to a general systematic problem, tact is always there in theory-guided educational practice. As the translation from universal into particular has always to be made somehow, every educator who

tries to follow a theory (rules, principles) will inevitably be tactful with the only difference that some have developed an appropriate, i.e., successful, form of tact, while others have failed to do so. Everyone uses tact in educational practice when following some principle or theory, but only some use a correctly developed form of tact – an intellectually developed form of tact. To be tactful in this sense is not a moral decision that one could also reject making; it is not a decision at all once one has succumbed to the idea that theories and academic reflections should guide practice. It may be a moral expectation to be better in it, i.e., to develop the right kind of tact, but to be tactful here is not the result of some deliberation.⁴

3. The Gradual Disappearance of a Problem

The arrival of Herbart's doctrines in the United States and the UK is far too complex to be presented here in great detail (see De Garmo 1895; Selleck 1968; Dunkel 1969a, 1969b; Dunkel 1970; Cruikshank/Knoll 1994; Leinster-Mackay 2002; Scholz 2020). In general, it may suffice to say that at first, Anglophone students did not actually encounter Herbart's ideas directly: they travelled to Germany, which was perceived to be the most advanced country regarding pedagogy. The universities of Jena and Leipzig were of particular interest, and it was here where the international students came under the spell of two of the most famous followers of Herbart: Wilhelm Rein in Jena and Tuiskon Ziller in Leipzig. Those two were members of a group called the *Herbartians* (espousing what is known as *Herbartianism*) – educational theorists and practitioners who not only promoted the works of Herbart but also led

pedagogical seminars or practice schools in their universities where they could put their theories into practice in teacher education courses. In applying those theories, the Herbartians adapted, redeveloped, and transformed **Herbart's original theories to their own context** and persuasions. Fundamentally Herbartian, the teachings of Herbartianism did not represent a mere copy of Herbart. This is especially relevant regarding the many international students, as it was in those slightly adapted forms that they encountered Herbart for the first time. It was then in Germany that they did get the chance not only to read Herbart in his original form (in German) but also to begin to work on the first translations of Herbart into English. Between 1892 and 1901, several works of Herbart were published in translation, preceded and accompanied by several descriptive accounts of **Herbart's pedagogy (through the eyes of their Herbartian professors)** (e.g., De Garmo 1891; McMurry 1892; Lange 1894; Felkin 1895; Ufer 1896; Adams 1898; Dodd 1901; Hayward 1903).

Of special interest for our context is the **fact that the lecture that includes Herbart's** exploration of *Pedagogical Tact* was published only in 1896 (Herbart 1896). This creates, of course, an interesting phenomenon regarding the reception of the text. Those who did indeed read the German Original of Herbart had access to the text, and it seems that Felkin (1895) quotes from Herbart directly, given that she presents the central quote on tact on page 186, in addition to quotes from Rein and Lange. However, interestingly, the quote she offers does leave out the most important sentences addressing tact as the medium between theory and practice: it seems this was of little interest. Others had to rely on their Herbartian teachers

⁴ It could perhaps also be argued that even those who do not apply theories to practice still are tactful in this sense: in extrapolating or analogizing from one experience to inform the practice in another situation rests on the ability to find a

common ground in both – which represents an act of abstracting that justifiably could be called “theorizing.” And as such, it would also need tact to build a bridge between one and another experience or situation.

to be taught about tact, and not much seems to have made its way into the English writings. This may not be surprising in relation to Wilhelm Rein (as he does mention *Pedagogical Tact* in his writings, but it is not a central term for him), whereas for Ziller, as mentioned above, (rational) tact plays a crucial role in his descriptions of the pedagogical process, and so it is rather astonishing that none of his Anglophone pupils seems to have shown stronger interest in this. There is, on the other hand, an awareness of the relevance of educational theory if engaging in educational practice, as Dodd puts it:

“We are beginning to atone for our past neglect of educational theory, and to recognise that a study of principles and ideals of education is of greater importance than a study of the external devices employed by the teacher to make the child acquire knowledge” (Dodd 1901: 6).

And in his Introduction to Dodd’s book, Wilhelm Rein emphasizes the same thought:

“Personality, no doubt, is of the highest importance, if the teacher possesses the qualities necessary for true education. But even the best natural gifts can be still further developed and improved by systematic reflection, and study of the theory of education and its value in practice” (Rein 1901: 8).

But besides such general remarks about the role of theory, Dodd does not explore the notion of tact, and McMurry mentions it only fleetingly in his Herbartian *Elements of General Method* (1892).

There seems to be, however, one exception to the general disinterest: Charles & Frank McMurry’s *The Method of the Recitation*

(written 1897 – **after the publication of Herbart’s** lecture in English – and published for the first time in 1903). Focusing on the question of whether there is a uniform method for teaching, **the McMurrays’ interest shifts** increasingly more toward the problem of the relation of general and individual notions. At first, this problem is one of teaching: what are we to teach in schools, and how do we teach to enable children to move freely between the particular to the universal? However, it soon becomes clear that this also touches upon the question of teacher education: how are teachers to be educated so that they are enabled to move between universal rules or laws (of teaching and instruction, of psychology and ethics) and individual situations, pupils, and topics? Those explorations do deserve much more discussion than can be offered here (e.g., they include an interesting investigation into the beneficial role types, or exemplars, play in teaching – a topic that recently has again gathered interest again). Some quotes, however, should be enough to show that the McMurrays **have indeed taken a leaf out of Herbart’s book** in discussing those matters:

“Nature everywhere locks the door and bars out the intruder. But whoever carries a bundle of bright keys in the form of principles and laws, and is constantly turning and testing them in use, will rapidly gain the freedom of the realm. This is, indeed, the goal toward which instruction should move, and never lag till the end is reached; namely, such a working mastery of general truths as shows itself in ready instinctive tact in common use. [...] The old question of the relation between theory and practice is here at issue” (McMurry 1903: 210f.).

“Moreover, this constant variation and readjustment of the principle to new objects and conditions necessitates a genuine thoughtfulness at every step. It is principles, not a mechanical routine which simply repeats the same action time and again. To apply general notions requires a rational self-activity. We never meet exactly the same situation a second time” (McMurry 1903: 221).

“The freedom of the teacher consists not in disregarding the law, but in finding it out and obeying it. If psychologists and teachers have been so fortunate as to find the natural highways of human thought, all this crying out against mechanism and formalism is only so much railing at the laws of nature. The whole question of freedom and originality in the teacher may be one of obeying the laws of nature, or of constantly blundering in the effort to be free and original. The teacher must have either an instinctive tact or a conscious insight into the simple laws of mental life and action, or this much-lauded freedom and originality is entirely **eccentric and unreliable” (McMurry 1903: 316f.).**

From this, it should be obvious that the McMurrays does indeed see the systematic problem to which Herbart answered with the introduction of the notion of *Pedagogical Tact*; and it also shows an emphasis on rationality that they could have taken from Ziller. This might well be one of the clearest addresses of this problem using Herbartian notions in the Anglophone context. And it will also be the last for a while. Once the notion of *Pedagogical Tact* reappears in an Anglophone discussion, it will have changed its meaning considerably.

4. The Re-Signification of a Notion

In 1991, a book is published that refers already in its title to the very notion in question here: *The Tact of Teaching* (van Manen 1991). In this book as well as in the other texts following (van Manen 1995), the author refers explicitly to Herbart and his notion of *Pedagogical Tact*, placing himself squarely into the line of tradition. It is worth quoting here a somewhat lengthy piece of text as it at once shows the connection that is made to Herbart as well as the re-orientation following this attempt of relating:

“It is perhaps surprising that the notion of tact has not been of any systematic interest and study for educational thinkers in the English-speaking world. The person who introduced the notion of tact and tactfulness into educational discourse is the German educator Johann Friedrich Herbart. In 1802, in his first lecture on education, Herbart told his audience that: ‘The real question as to whether someone is a good or a bad educator is simply this: Has this **person developed a sense of tact?’ Herbart posited that tact occupies a special place in practical educational action. The main points of his lecture **pertaining to tact were that (a) ‘tact inserts itself between theory and practice’; (b) tact manifests itself in everyday life in the process of ‘making instant judgments and quick decisions’;** (c) tact forms a way of acting which is **‘first of all dependent on *Gefühl* [feeling or sensitivity] and only more remotely on convictions’ derived from theory and beliefs; (d) tact is sensitive to ‘the****

uniqueness of the situation’; and (e) tact is ‘the immediate ruler of practice.’

However, in spite of this fluid early conceptualization, Herbart’s later writings, and especially that of his followers, assumed a more instrumental relation between educational knowledge and practical action. Even in these phrases, from Herbart, there is evident a somewhat mechanistic concept of the mediating role of tact between theory and practice. But rather than see tact as a device for converting theory into practice we may see tact as a concept that can help us to overcome the problematic separation of theory from practice. And rather than understand, tact as a process of making instant **‘decisions,’ we may reconceive tact as a mindfulness that permits us to act thoughtfully with children and young people” (van Manen 1991: 128).**

The departure of van Manen from Herbart is easy to recognize, if maybe not immediately comprehensible. Several points are of interest here: 1) van Manen is, of course, only partially right in stating that *Pedagogical Tact* has been of no interest in the Anglophone world. As we were able to see, some of the American Herbartians did indeed take an interest (notably the McMurrays), and their explorations deserve more attention; 2) van Manen is incorrect in stating that Herbart speaks of tact as that which manifests itself in instant judgements and quick decisions *in everyday life* – Herbart clearly and deliberately speaks of tact as that mediator between theory and practice, which therefore plays a role only *for the theorist who practices his theory* (so, not everyone shows the tact Herbart is speaking of, and for those few people it is relevant not in everyday life but only in those activities that attempt to follow a theory);

3) van Manen is too quick in interpreting the German *Gefühl* (unhelpfully translated here as *feeling* or *sensitivity*) as some kind of emotional reaction to a situation, whereas for Herbart the emphasis lies on the unconsciousness of the reasons for the action (which means they still result from some sort of intellectual activity without this being a conscious series of acts of reflection); 4) van Manen refers to tact as somewhat mechanistic without giving reasons for this kind of evaluation, while for Herbart, as well as for Ziller, tact is a capacity to act according to reasons and principles without being able to recall the reasons in every given moment (which does make tact not mechanistic – at least not more than reasoning itself may be called mechanistic as it invites us to act constantly according to rules and principles (i.e. theories); 5) van Manen proposes that tact **should not help “converting theory into practice”, but should support the educator in overcoming the “separation of theory from practice”** – shifting here from an interpretative framework (in which notions are used to interpret reality, and in which, therefore, educational theory is used to interpret a given situation as an educational situation in the first place, and in which the main question is whether or not the interpretation of a situation, i.e. the application of notions to world, is appropriate or successful) to a more phenomenological framework (in which apparently the situation reveals itself somehow to the observer or participant without the additional act of interpreting – interestingly a position that comes close to what Herbart describes in his explorations of education as the aesthetic representation of the world); and 6) van Manen arrives consequently at a point where he re-interprets *Pedagogical Tact* not as a mediator between theory and practice – the systematic problem that Herbart tried to solve –, but as an **educator’s state of mind in which the situation,**

i.e., the student, can unveil itself in a way that **allows the educator to react “thoughtfully” to the situation**, whereby this now has little to do with thoughts but more with an emotional sensitivity that is able to “feel” the student. Consequently, in the rest of the book van Manen develops a psycho-emotional concept of *Pedagogical Tact* that now refers to a certain set of approaches **towards the student: “Tact shows itself as holding back [...] as openness to the child’s experience [...] as attuned to subjectivity [...] as subtle influence [...] as situational confidence [...] as improvisational gift” (van Manen 1991: viii f.)**.

Such an understanding of *Pedagogical Tact* has little or nothing to do **with Herbart’s** understanding of this notion. Introduced as a solution to the systematic problem of relating universal theory to particular practice, the concept of a *Pedagogical Tact* has now become an answer to a completely different question. The most important difference is now that while **Herbart’s concept is ethically or morally neutral, van Manen’s is decidedly not neutral**. Herbart’s *Pedagogical Tact* fills the gap between any pedagogical theory and the practice allegedly guided by it; van Manen – not really interested in systematic questions relating to general problems of educational thinking – develops his concept of *Pedagogical Tact* as referring to a condition that needs to be fulfilled when attempting to educate in a very specific way, or better: with a specific aim towards a specific **goal**. Herbart’s *Pedagogical Tact* is a universal systematic concept – **van Manen’s is an ethical or moral concept bound to a specific normative idea of education**.

5. Final remarks: Different cultures

The difference between the two presented conceptions of *Pedagogical Tact* is

one of different pedagogical cultures: Herbart, together with Schleiermacher (Schleiermacher 1826/2022), founded what became known as *Wissenschaftliche Pädagogik*, i.e., the Science of Education (remembering that the German *Wissenschaft* refers to all academic studies and not only the Natural Sciences, this would then be the academic study of education), that not only reflected on different aims, goals, and methods of education and their anthropological foundations, but also on the theoretical foundations of the scientificity of the newly developed educational theories, including the very problem of the relation of theory and practice. This continued to develop into what is now known as *Allgemeine Pädagogik*, or Systematic/ General Pedagogy (the field of Education Studies in which the discipline reflects on itself and its reflective notions, i.e., the investigations in which an academic discipline establishes self-reflexivity). **Van Manen’s considerations**, on the other hand, are typical for an Anglophone approach to pedagogical thinking, in which *education* as a notion is never really understood as a neutral & descriptive notion but always already conceived of as a specific morally desirable activity or state of being whereby the emphasis in discussions lies on the concrete form of this desirable activity or state. It would not be out of place at **all to apply Herbart’s reflections, in their universal scope, to the educational practices in Ancient Sparta** (hereby asking the question of how the prevalent rules and principles of education are to be interpreted in each individual situation), whereas it would make **little sense to look for van Manen’s notion of *Pedagogical Tact* in Spartan society**: they simply do not share the same ethical framework in which the formulations of van Manen regarding **“good educator’s behavior”** would only make sense. And while for Herbart and Schleiermacher, the very question of how (any

kind of) educational theories and educational practices can relate at all is absolutely central to the reflections of Education Studies (Kenklies 2012), such questions are rarely addressed in Anglophone educational cultures, in which Education Studies has not developed into an independent academic discipline that would need to reflect on its own preconditions. The act of distancing that van Manen envisions here in relation to Herbart, i.e., the Classic exponent of the continental tradition of pedagogy (Friesen & Kenklies 2022), is nothing but an expression of the separation the Anglophone educational culture has gradually executed in the first two decades of the 20th century. With historical consciousness gradually disappearing within educational discussions, hardly anyone seems to remember that there used to be a lively exchange between the two different pedagogical worlds that have emerged – pedagogical worlds whose inhabitants do find it difficult now to communicate with each other.

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