

Didaktik*^{*} and Hermeneutics: On the Ontological Ground of the Art of Teaching and the Philosophical Nature of *Didaktik

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ABSTRACT. This paper retraces the history of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics and argues that these two disciplines, seemingly unrelated at first, are deeply intertwined. The paper shows how *Didaktik* and hermeneutics first appeared in the 17th century, after a long period of gestation begun in Ancient Greece and carried further in the Middle Ages, as twin disciplines meant to address the basic needs of spiritual life. But it shows, their existence was short-lived, for they will disappear without a trace for more than a century only to be reborn again in the thought of Friedrich Schleiermacher under the impetus of the idea of alterity. This, the paper shows, will determine Schleiermacher to probe into the ontological ground of the act of teaching and will transform *Didaktik*, when understood in its full breadth, into a philosophical discipline.

Keywords: *Didaktik*, hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Wolfgang Rathke, Caspar Seidel, Jan Amos Comenius, Johann Joachim Becher, childhood, ontological difference between adult and child.

* In keeping with the current practice, widespread in the literature, throughout this paper we will use the German original name "*Didaktik*" rather than its English equivalent "didactics" because the latter is actually a false friend. In the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Eleventh Edition), "didactics" is defined as "systematic instruction, pedagogy" (11th Edition, s.v. "Didactics"). In the on-line edition of the Oxford English Dictionary it is defined as "the science, art, or practice of teaching." (s.v. "didactics", <https://www.oed.com/search/advanced/Meanings?textTermText0=didactics&textTermOpt0=WordPhrase>, accessed 30 May 2025). As we shall see though, "*Didaktik*" and its equivalents in other Continental European languages ("didactique" (Fr.), "didattica" (It.), "didactică" (Rom.), "didaktika" (Hun.)) has a precise sense. It is not simply the science or the art of teaching, but the *theory* of the art of teaching. It is an academic discipline which assumes the practice of teaching, generally regarded as an "art" in rigorous epistemological terms, as its object. In this sense it must carefully be distinguished from pedagogy whose object is education in general. The sense of *Didaktik* will be further clarified later in this paper.

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Introduction

In this paper, we will retrace the history of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics in pursuit of two goals. First of all, we aim to show that these two disciplines share an intricate and deeply intertwined common past. As we will demonstrate, their roots go back to Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle in Ancient Greece, pass through Saint Augustine's work in the Middle Ages, emerge in the 17th century as twin disciplines called upon to cover the two basic faces of spiritual life – the preservation of past culture and knowledge and its transmission to future generations – only to soon disappear without any historical trace. They are then reborn in the 19th century in Friedrich Schleiermacher's work, prompted by one and the same impulse: the discovery of alterity.

Second of all, we want to show how, under the impetus of the idea of alterity, Schleiermacher's pedagogical thought is lead to an inquiry into the ontological ground of the art of teaching which transforms *Didaktik*, when taken in its full breadth, into a philosophical discipline.

Didaktik and Hermeneutics: Definitions

In Europe, *Didaktik* is a pedagogical discipline situated epistemologically in the vicinity of pedagogy and educational psychology. Its role is to regulate the practice of teaching in general (referred to as general *Didaktik* or, in German, "*Allgemeine Didaktik*") as well as of specific subjects (known as special *Didaktik*, or in German, "*Fachdidaktik*"). The basic theoretical aim of *Didaktik* is to answer the question "How to teach (a subject)?" and to translate this answer into practical advice for teachers.

In its development, *Didaktik* is guided by two vectors:

1. By the subject (subjects) whose teaching it is called to regulate. Each school subject has a specific epistemological profile, so each poses specific didactic challenges. When teaching algebra, the teacher must help students acquire certain algorithmic strategies for problem solving. When teaching biology, on the other hand, the challenge is to help them understand the basic criteria leading to the identification of the classes described.

2. By the legal, political, ideological, etc. context within which school operates. For instance, in an authoritarian or totalitarian regime, each subject becomes a vehicle for cultivating discipline and instilling respect for authority in students; in a democratic one, the fundamental educational objective pursued through all subjects will be critical thinking.

Hermeneutics, on the other hand, is a philosophical discipline, one of the central disciplines of 20th century continental philosophy. It is the theory or, more accurately, the body of discourses and debates centered on the problems of interpretation and understanding, and by extension, of communication, translation, language, the sign, and other closely related topics. More accurately a “body of discourses” because every major figure in the history of hermeneutics has his own understanding of what hermeneutics theory is and what it is supposed to do. For Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher, hermeneutic theory is a reflection on the conditions of possibility and the rules of interpretation and understanding. For Gadamer, on the other hand, it is an inquiry into what happens when something is understood.

In general, though, the fundamental questions of hermeneutics are: “How to interpret?” and “How to understand?”

So, at first glance, there seems to be no connection between *Didaktik* and hermeneutics. And yet, a closer look into their past reveals that their core themes and problems have always been closely tied.

Intersections: The Prehistory of *Didaktik* and Hermeneutics

The (pre-)history of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics begins in Ancient Greece between 450 and 350 BCE during the “Time of Pericles,” as it was called (Flacelière 1965). During this period, the practice of interpretation – understood in the strong sense we attribute to it today, as the intellectual act of taking something as something else – becomes widespread. Socrates, Plato and Aristotle present the natural universe as the material expression of a higher, immaterial realm of Ideas or Forms. At the same time, Plato and Aristotle undertake the first systematic investigations into language, exploring the relationship between word and thing (Plato in *Ion* (Plato 1997, 937–49)), and the nature of the linguistic sign (Aristotle in *On Interpretation* (Aristotle 1952a, 25–38)). As we mentioned, this is the problematic core around which 19th– and 20th–century hermeneutics will revolve.

But Plato and Aristotle tackle also the problem of education, the central questions for them being “What is learning?”, “How does it take place?”, and “What should be learned?” The issue at stake being whether virtue can be learned or not.

Plato addresses the first two of these questions in *Meno* (81a-86c; Plato 1997, 880–86), in the famous passage where Socrates presents a young slave with a geometry problem, and argues that learning is, in fact, a process of recollection

[*anamnesis*] of the truth known by our immortal souls before incarnation enacted through maieutic dialogue.¹

In his turn, Aristotle approaches the first question in *Posterior Analytics* (71a1-11; Aristotle 1952a, 97) and *Metaphysics* (992b24-33; Aristotle 1952a, 511). And the third, in book II of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle 1952b, 348–55).

Plato and Aristotle's answers to these questions lead, in today's jargon, to the first rudiments of philosophy of education and educational psychology (the first question), the first rudiments of pedagogy (the second) and the first rudiments of curriculum theory (the third).

The second step in the (pre-)history of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics takes place in the Middle Ages. Out of these three questions the Middle Ages retain only one: What should be learned? The other two – What is learning? and How does it take place? – are replaced by a new one: From whom should we learn? Who should be taken as teacher?

This latter question is first addressed by St. Augustine in *De magistro* (388-289 AD) and taken up again nearly nine centuries later by St. Thomas Aquinas in an homonymous work (St. Thomas Aquinas 1929). Here though, the problem of education is no longer independent from the hermeneutic problematic, as it was in Ancient Greece. They co-determine one other.

De magistro is in fact a treatise of semiology. In order to answer the question "Who should be taken as teacher?" Augustine begins with an analysis of the linguistic sign and the mechanisms of its functioning. For, as he argues, all teaching is done by signifying (Augustine 1924, 67). His thesis, however, is that language exhausts its communicative power in signifying and is completely incapable of effectively referring to something outside itself, in the world. Because of this, language separates and estranges our thought from the things it is supposed to reveal. Therefore, language proves incapable of serving as an instrument for teaching.

For Augustine, corporeal or "carnal" objects come to be known through the senses, while the objects of the mind, "spiritual" things, are known through our "inner truth" [*interiorem veritatem*] (S. Aurelii Augustini 1871), or the "interior evidence," as it was translated into English. Hence, the only teacher, the true teacher is God herself (Augustine 1924, 79).²

¹ This answer will be further refined in *The Republic* (514a-520a; Plato 1997, 1132–37) by the appeal to the allegory of the cave where learning and the pursuit of knowledge are presented as an ascension of the soul from the underworld of sensory illusion to the light of reason.

² The English edition of Augustine's text is not faithful to the original in that it downplays its deep theological and religious tone.

The other question – What should be learned? – finds an answer in *De doctrina christiana* [On Christian Teaching] (Augustine 1873). As it has been widely acknowledged in the literature, *De doctrina christiana* was conceived explicitly as a “handbook and a guide for the Christian education” (Kevane 1970, 176). In essence though, it is a hermeneutic treatise, a complex and comprehensive one. As Martin Heidegger remarks in *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*: “Augustine provides the first ‘hermeneutics’ in grand style” (Heidegger 1999, 9).

Because the good Christian is held to know what is written in the Bible, their good education requires the acquisition of the hermeneutical precepts necessary for the correct interpretation of the text. In order to discover these precepts Augustin embarks again in a semiological analysis that delves into the nature of the linguistic sign and the types of signs, as well as the origin of writing and the sources of misunderstanding.

Within this world, in this conceptual universe, there is no place for *Didaktik* in a strong sense. Its fundamental question – How to teach? – is completely absent. The situation seems to change with the dawn of Modernity.

The Birth of *Didaktik* and Hermeneutics in Modernity

From the beginning of the 17th century, we witness a true inflation of works dedicated to the question of teaching. In 1612-1613 Wolfgang Rathke outlines a “general introduction to *didactica*” the main tenets of which are disseminated first by two of his collaborators who, in 1613, publish a *Kurtzer Bericht von der Didactica, oder Lehrkunst Wolfgang Ratichii* (Helwig and Joachim 1613) and later by Rathke himself in *Desiderata methodus nova Ratichiana* (1615) and in *Methodum Linguarum generalis introductio* (1617) (see Walmsley 1990, 31). In 1621 Elias Bodinus publishes *Didactica sive ars docendi*.³ In 1638 Caspar Seidel publishes *Didactica nova* (Seidel 1638). In 1657 Jan Amos Comenius publishes *Didactica magna* (the book was begun in 1627 and finished in 1642) (Comenius 1657). And in 1668 Johann Joachim Becher publishes *Methodus didactica seu clavis et praxis super novum suum organon philologicum*.⁴

³ Apud. Bârsănescu 1935, 6 and Comenius 1896, 9. Unfortunately, this work was inaccessible to us and, aside from these two references, we have found no other mentions of it.

⁴ The year of publication remains problematic. In the abstract of his paper “Johann Joachim Becher (1635-1682), A Little Known Opponent of Comenius’ Theory of Language and Language Learning” Werner Hüllen cites 1668 as the publication year (Hüllen 1996). In contrast, the German Wikipedia article dedicated to Becher lists the year as 1669 (cf. https://benjamins.com/catalog/hl.23.1-2.04hul?srsltid=AfmBOooD_3zNc8ViNPmgn5R2QOR1hUIP2Zjk5yOQVGGmWEH-8B6H5gD5 and https://als.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Joachim_Becher; both accessed June 2, 2025). However, in his paper Hüllen draws on the second edition of Becher’s text from 1674. This is also the version available to us.

On the other hand, in 1630 Johann Conrad Dannhauer publishes *Idea boni interpreti* (Dannhauer 1630), a treatise on general hermeneutics wherein this discipline is also finally called by its proper name. And in 1654 the same Dannhauer will publish another treatise where the name of the discipline figures in the title: *Hermeneutica sacra sive methodus exponendarum sacrum literarum* (Dannhauer 1654).

The fact that teaching and interpretation – a topic completely absent for two millennia and one just marginally present – burst onto the scene of history; the fact that within such a short time span (there are only 13 years between Rathke's *Didaktik* from Dannhauer's hermeneutics) these topics give rise to full-fledged disciplines might be bewildering at first. However, any bewilderment soon vanishes if we take a closer look at what these books set out to do. For, upon closer inspection, it becomes apparent that *Didaktik* and hermeneutics were not born together by accident. They are twin disciplines, called upon to address the two faces of spiritual life: the preservation of past culture and knowledge, and their future transmission.

Dannhauer's general hermeneutics describes a method for interpreting all types of texts and discourses, one that is capable of leading not only to their understanding, but also to the discernment of truth and falsehood within them. Comenius's "great" *Didaktik* describes the method of teaching "all things to all men" (Comenius 1896, 155), as the subtitle goes. Just as the "smaller" *Didaktiks* of Rathke, Seidel and Becher describe methods of teaching Latin and other foreign languages.

However, the situation of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics, absent for more than two millennia, only seems to change in Modernity. And this, for two reasons.

First, because the intellectual efforts of all these thinkers have been almost entirely lost to the mists of time. Their works leave virtually no trace in history. Both Rathke's and Comenius's writings start to circulate only late, at the end of the 19th century, with their translation into German and English.⁵ Becher is remembered throughout time for introducing the concept of phlogiston, rather than as a pedagogue. His *Didaktik* project gaining attention only in the second half of the 20th century. While Elias Bodinus and Caspar Seidel remain virtually unknown to this day.

Second, and more importantly, because what these authors do is not *Didaktik* per se, but rather "*Methodik*," the methodology of instruction, a label which, most probably, they would have willingly attached to their work had they have distinguished between these two pedagogical disciplines as we do today. For although they tackle the question "How to teach?" head-on, they offer only partial answers, as they all fix their attention on just one element of the didactic triangle – the educational

⁵ Rathke's work appeared in German as *Allgemeine Anleitung in der Didacticam* in J. Müller, "Handschriftliche Rathchiana," *Pädagogische Blätter*, XI, 1882, 250-274 and XIII, 1884, 446-460 (Walmsley 1990, 31). Comenius's *Didactica magna* appeared in German as in 1871 (Comenius 1871) and in English in 1896 in the edition cited (Comenius 1896).

content – completely losing sight of the other – the pupil to be taught. The methods of teaching proposed by Rathke, Comenius, Seidel, and Becher segment the educational content into discrete units and prescribe the order in which these should be approached, with no regard for the pupils' intellectual capacities, interests, or needs. One of the basic principles of method for all these authors is to start from the simple (easy) and to progress toward what is more complex (difficult). What is simple though is always determined from the point of view of the teacher, and never from that of the child. In his *Didactica nova*, Seidel notes it explicitly. What is taught should be "facilimus, sehr Leicht," very easy, but "Einmal für den Lehrmeister, hernach auch für den Discipul oder Lehrjüngern." [First for the teacher, and afterwards also for the disciple or the young learner.] (Seidel 1638, 58).

The reason why these authors lose sight of the figure of the pupil in the development of their *Didaktik* projects is the same reason why the question "How to teach?" was not, could not have been posed in Antiquity and the Middle Ages. As Philippe Ariès shows in his monumental *Centuries of Childhood* (Ariès 1962) for all this time the child does not exist.

The idea of childhood, the notion that there is, in principle, a difference between the adult and the child, is foreign to the medieval mind and only slowly begins to take shape in the modern one.⁶ Rousseau, who is generally acknowledged as the author of the first systematic treatise on the philosophy of education, perceives this difference and seems to understand that it poses a pedagogical problem. In the preface to *Emile*, in a passage which reads as a direct tirade against the four authors mentioned above, he writes:

"Childhood is unknown. Starting from the false idea one has of it, the farther one goes, the more one loses one's way. The wisest men concentrate on what it is important for men to know without considering what children are in a condition to learn" (Rousseau 1979, 33–34).

And further on, in the second book, he adds:

"Childhood has its ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it. Nothing is less sensible than to want to substitute ours for theirs..." (Rousseau 1979, 90).

⁶ See especially chapter 2, "The discovery of childhood," 33–49.

But even though he acknowledges the problem, he ultimately eludes it. Rousseau does not investigate these specific “ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling” and treats the difference between the adult and the child as a purely negative difference: the child in an incomplete adult, an adult in the making.

The (Re-)Birth of *Didaktik* and Hermeneutics with Schleiermacher

The first to fully grasp the radical difference between adult and child – and thus the one with whom *Didaktik*, in the proper sense of the term, is born – is also the one with whom hermeneutics is (re-)born, namely Friedrich Schleiermacher. These two disciplines (re-)emerge in Schleiermacher’s thought from one and the same intellectual impulse coming from Schleiermacher’s felicitous encounter with a text: David Collins’s *Remarks on the Dispositions, Customs, Manners, etc., of the Native Inhabitants of New South Wales* (Collins 1798, 543–616).

As Stephen Prickett shows in “Coleridge, Schlegel and Schleiermacher: England, Germany (and Australia) in 1798” (Prickett 1998, 170–84), Schleiermacher stumbles upon this text by chance. At the end of 1798 or the beginning of 1799, he is approached by a publisher from Berlin named Johann Karl Philipp Spenser with the proposal to translate and publish it in 1800 in a collection entitled “The Historical Genealogical Calendar or Yearbook of the Most Remarkable Events of the New World.” Schleiermacher is completely absorbed by this text which he reads and translates at once and which determines him to plunge deep into the subject (Prickett 1998, 178–79). His fascination with it comes from the fact that here Collins adopts (maybe for the first time in European history) an axiologically neutral attitude toward the people he describes, an attitude free of the two anthropological prejudices dominant in his time portraying the other, the inhabitants of other continents, either as just a tool at our (the Europeans’) disposal or, on the contrary, as “noble savages,” as John Dryden’s formula goes (Dryden 1695, 6), not to be interfered with. This gives Collins the possibility to discover three things inconceivable for the European mind until then.

First, that there are people on the face of the earth who are entirely devoid of religiosity, people for whom there is no transcendence, and in whose lives the divine plays no role. This observation is nothing short of revolutionary in a time when religion was regarded as an anthropological constant of man. The prevailing belief then was that to be human is to have a god.

Second, that these people, completely deprived of religion, nonetheless distinguish between good and bad and right and wrong; that they lead a rational existence (generally assumed to be the exclusive privilege of the Europeans) despite

living in ways radically different from ours. For they are polygamous, they display no sense of shame or modesty, and they do not consider chastity a virtue. They pierce their septum and punish the close ones of the deceased for negligence (rather than the perpetrators themselves when the death is the result of a murder).

And third, that they speak a language radically different from ours. Something inconceivable for us, Europeans, who, by virtue of our geographical proximity, speak closely related languages, each bearing within itself a significant lexical fund from the others (Collins 1798, 543–616).

Collins thus attests, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that there are other kinds of people; that the other who happens to stand before me may not be an other like me, but an other than me. He discovers alterity.

This discovery radically changes the data of the hermeneutic problem and leads Schleiermacher not toward a “general” theory of interpretation like the one proposed by Dannhauer before him, but toward a “fundamental” theory, one dealing with the very foundations of interpretation and understanding, because it makes two questions unavoidable: First, how can I understand an other who addresses me in a language radically different from mine? How can I make contact with the other without any bridge between us? And second, how can I be sure that I understand the other who addresses me in a (seemingly) common language if the other might be radically different from myself?

These questions prompt Schleiermacher’s famous reversal of the relation between understanding and misunderstanding and his strange definition of hermeneutics. Earlier hermeneutics took understanding to be the norm and misunderstanding an exception, typically attributed to the ambiguity of the text or the interpreter’s lack of familiarity with its language. With Schleiermacher, misunderstanding becomes the norm, while understanding “must be desired and sought at every point” (Schleiermacher 1998, 22). And so, hermeneutics becomes the art of avoiding misunderstanding (Schleiermacher 1998, 21).

But, on the other hand, this discovery of alterity prompted by Collins’s *Remarks* helps Schleiermacher understand the difference between adult and child as a positive difference. It makes him realize that the art of teaching poses a philosophical problem and leads to the birth of *Didaktik* in the proper sense of the term.

At first, nothing announces a radical transformation of pedagogical thought in Schleiermacher. Most probably, he approached the field compelled by external circumstances.

In 1763 Frederick the Second of Prussia issued a decree, the *General-Landschul-Reglement*, making daily school attendance mandatory for children between the age of 5 and 13 (Green 1990, 119). This led to an explosion in the number of

students and, of course, to a growing need for qualified teachers. To address this need, Prussian universities were mandated to offer courses in pedagogy, which were sometimes taught in rotation by philosophy professors.

This is how Kant came to lecture on pedagogy in 1776-1777 and a decade later in 1786-1787 and to write *Über Pädagogik* (Bowen 2003, 212), a book that will have a lasting impact on the history of education in both Europe and the New World.⁷ Most likely, this is also what steered Schleiermacher toward pedagogy, a field in which he lectured in 1813-1814, 1820-1821, and during the summer semester of 1826 (Friesen and Kenklies 2023, 2).

Right at the beginning of the introduction to his 1826 lectures, Schleiermacher mentions *Didaktik* with that partial sense attributed to it in the 17th century, but he does not give the impression that it was of particular concern to him. Schleiermacher writes:

“Every science and every art has its own method which springs much more directly from the content itself rather than from the relation between teacher and learner. *Didaktik*, the methodology of instruction, is hardly something for itself, but a supplement to the sciences and arts to be transmitted” (Schleiermacher 1957, 8).⁸

But he soon moves on to other matters. The lecture continues with an overview of the epistemological status of pedagogy and its sphere of application, distinguishes the stages of education and the various forms of schooling, and proceeds to establish the specific educational objectives associated with each.

Yet, in the middle of the course, after a long and patient discussion of whether and how each traditional school subject – reading and writing, foreign languages, history and geography, mathematics and natural sciences, vocal and instrumental music, drawing and crafts, and physical education – contributes to the attainment of the objectives of the popular school [*Volkschule*]⁹ Schleiermacher raises the question of teaching, the basic question of *Didaktik*:

“We have covered the whole range of popular education; the question that immediately arises is this: Is there a common principle for all subjects taught in popular school, or must they also be separated from the point of view of method and must each seek its own principles?” (Schleiermacher 1957, 266).

⁷ As Tero Autio shows, *Über Pädagogik* contains the seeds of the divide between the Anglo-American approach to education in terms of curriculum theory and the European approach in terms of pedagogy and *Didaktik* (see Autio 2006, 99–124).

⁸ All translations from Schleiermacher’s *Pädagogik* are mine.

⁹ The equivalent of today primary school, mandatory for all children regardless of their social class.

As Schleiermacher carries on to show, in his time, Pestalozzi's method came to be regarded as such a unitary principle for teaching all school subjects. Much like his 17th century predecessors though, the Swiss pedagogue advocated for a progressive approach in teaching, from known to unknown, from concrete to abstract, from simple to complex. His whole method consisting, as R. H. Quick, a 19th century English educationist aptly describes it, in "...analyzing the knowledge the children should acquire about their surroundings, arranging it in a regular sequence, and bringing it to the child's consciousness gradually, and in a way which their minds will act upon it."¹⁰ The only real difference from the methods proposed in the 17th century by Rathke, Seidel, Comenius, or Becher lying in his insistence on anchoring educational contents in the learner's intuition [*Anschauung*] (Pestalozzi 1894, 32–33).¹¹

For Schleiermacher though, insofar as it is focused, again, exclusively on the educational content to be taught to the detriment of the learner, this method (like all the others similar to it) suffers from a vice which makes it unusable as such.

"Pestalozzi himself recalls how a very spirited man [looking to apply his method to all subjects] told him what he was up to, namely, to mechanize everything. And Pestalozzi recognized in this the hard core of his method and took it as an appropriate name for it. But mechanization cannot be a merit, because it is the death of spirit. The mechanical is the dead. [*Das Mechanische ist das Tote.*]" (Schleiermacher 1957, 266).

For such methods to be usable, if they are to avoid mortification, they must assume as guiding principle what is proper to the child. So, Schleiermacher sees himself forced to start searching for this.

In this search, Schleiermacher refrains from taking the adult as reference. Having learned from Collins that there are other kinds of people, that people might look and speak like us but still be radically different from us though, he knows not to project onto the child the life of the adult (only to return and show that it is incomplete, unsaturated, or otherwise deficient in some way). He knows to turn his gaze on the child themselves and keep his eyes wide open. And so he comes to understand that what is proper to the child is a particular mode of being, a "specific human existence" [*ein bestimmtes menschliches Dasein*]:

¹⁰ Apud. Ebenezer Cooke, Introduction to Pestalozzi 1894, xlvii.

¹¹ The English edition translates *Anschauung* by "sense-impression." Even though Pestalozzi often refers to the psychology of the child in the description of his method, that is simply projected onto the child rather than discovered based on the study of childhood.

“Regarded from the point of view of his appearance, man is, like everything temporal and becoming, in a state of constant change. Strictly speaking, every moment man is otherwise than before. Man’s inner life activity, which is also manifest, is subject to change as well. If we take two distant moments in time, one from childhood and one from later life, when self-conscious activity appears in the most distinctive way, everyone will admit that these moments are different. If we isolate one of these moments, we are confronted with a specific human existence” (Schleiermacher 1957, 46–47).

The adult and the child have radically different modes of being in the world. The difference between them is an ontological difference. The child lives in the present, the adult in the future. For the child, the past is an integral part of the present. For the adult, the present is a reflection of the future. As Schleiermacher argues:

“It is a generally known fact that, just as the continuity of consciousness develops gradually, so too develops the relationship every moment has with the past and the future. But at this age [popular school age, between 5 and 13], the relationship with the past will be much more alive because it already belongs to real life and has been inscribed in it through the continuity of consciousness. For this age the future does not mean much, and we will not obtain much if we will ask the child to do something for the sake of the future. This will always be a weak motive for the young, and we will have to take recourse to strange means to sustain it. A thing we want to avoid as much as possible” (Schleiermacher 1957, 267).

This ontological difference which Schleiermacher uncovers goes unnoticed by Martin Heidegger despite the fact that, in *Being and Time* (Heidegger 1962), he assumes explicitly the task of bringing to light the fundamental mode of being of human Dasein (in general). For Heidegger comes to posit a particular mode of being, dominated by care [*Sorge*] and oriented toward the future, as specific to us regardless of age. To his credit, Hans-Georg Gadamer, his pupil, saw the problem confronting his master’s thought. In *Truth and Method*, after warning against the tendency of authors like Otto Bollnow to reduce the ontology of *Being and Time* to a mere anthropological discourse, he quickly adds:

“It is nonetheless true that the being of children or indeed animals – in contrast to that ideal of ‘innocence’ – remains an ontological problem. Their mode of being is not, at any rate, ‘existence’ and historicity such as Heidegger claims for human Dasein” (Gadamer 2004, 253).

That is to say, children do not live “outside themselves” (this is what Heidegger means by “existence”)¹² and out of a past, on the ground of a past, because they do not yet have one. However, just like Rousseau before him, Gadamer does not dwell on this issue, nor does he ask how children live.

The discovery of the ontological difference between adult and child confronts *Didaktik* from the very beginning with an ethical dilemma. If the specific way of being of those in front of the teacher is tied to the present and for them the future does not exist, what entitles the teacher to ask them to do something else than what they want to do? This is, after all, what we do in school: we ask pupils to give up on themselves for a future that exists only for us. As Schleiermacher notes: “Every pedagogical influence presents itself as the sacrifice of a particular moment for a future one. The question arising is whether we are allowed to make such sacrifices” (Schleiermacher 1957, 46). In fact, one is bound to as in general: “Are we allowed to sacrifice a moment of life as a mere means to an end for another moment of life?” (Schleiermacher 1957, 46).

Schleiermacher’s answer is categorically no. For, as he shows, “[o]ur entire life activity manifests constant reluctance to such practice” (Schleiermacher 1957, 46).

So, this Kantian maxim to “act in such a way as to treat every moment as an end in itself and never solely as a means to another” becomes, for Schleiermacher, the fundamental principle of *Didaktik*. It is the common principle of teaching for all subjects searched for.

“... in education one must not sacrifice any moment entirely for the future, but every moment must be something for itself. [...] ... we must not fill children’s time with things which are solely means for something else, everything must be an end in itself. [...] The principle apparently lies in organizing everything related to teaching in such a way that each activity can be regarded as an end in itself and as carrying satisfaction in itself” (Schleiermacher 1957, 267).

This didactic principle alone can counteract the mortifying tendencies of the teaching methods deduced solely from the educational content to be taught. In itself, it is not meant to substitute them. Rather, it is called to complement them by guiding their application. Only with it and because of the ontological reflection on the specific mode of being of the adult and the child does *Didaktik* deserves to

¹² See in this sense Aho 2021, 268–70.

be recognized as an autonomous discipline, independent of both *Methodik*, the methodology of instruction, and *Pädagogik*, a systematic reflection on training, instruction and education in general, on their general means and individual and social effects.

Such an ontological reflection is the true ground of the art of teaching. We begin to teach only when we realize that the student might be, might think and live, otherwise than ourselves. And we can teach only if, and insofar as, we understand and respect (to the extent that it is possible) this different mode of being. Without such respect and understanding, when the student, the pupil, is treated as an adult, as such or in becoming, the teacher ends up speaking only for themselves.

Because it relies on an ontological reflection though, *Didaktik* is an eminently philosophical discipline. And this, regardless of whether it is applied to philosophy, mathematics, languages, or music or whether it aims to guide the art of teaching in general. That is to say, *Didaktik* is a philosophical discipline both as *Allgemeine Didaktik* and as *Fachdidaktik*, irrespective of the subject taught.

Never before has pedagogical reflection reached such depths and, as far as we know, never will it reach them again. Posterity has largely proven incapable of understanding Schleiermacher. Later, “scientific,” educational psychology scrupulously counts positive differences between the adult and the child without bothering to wonder what they amount to. While later *Didaktik* mostly reverts back to a 17th–century–style *Methodik* and is happy to multiply the methods of teaching conceived exclusively starting from the educational content. In the few instances when the figure of the child was not completely forgotten, it was dematerialized. The child was disfigured. It lost its face and stopped addressing us as an other. It has become a bundle of cognitive and affective processes. Today, we count on our fingers the number of pedagogues who do research on education for flesh-and-blood human beings.

On the other hand, in spite of its depth (or because of it?) Schleiermacher nevertheless misses something as simple but as essential for *Didaktik*. So, as it would seem, Paul de Man’s maxim according to which “[c]ritics’ moments of greatest blindness with regard to their own critical assumptions are also moments at which they achieve their greatest insight” (de Man 1983, 109) works also for authors and the other way round. For all the hermeneutic canons he establishes function at the same time as didactic canons and ought to be adopted by *Didaktik* as regulative ideas for the art of teaching. After all, to learn one must (first) understand. And to teach one must make the educational content and oneself understood.

Conclusion

In the present text, we have retraced the turning points in the prehistory and history of *Didaktik* and hermeneutics and argued that, even though these two disciplines seem completely unrelated at first, they are deeply intertwined.

As we have shown, *Didaktik* and hermeneutics were born in the 17th century after a long period of gestation beginning in Ancient Greece with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, the first to explore both the thematic nexus of hermeneutics and the problematic of education. This endeavor was carried further in the Middle Ages by St. Augustine who articulates the first full-fledged hermeneutic theory precisely with a didactic purpose in mind: to offer Christians a means to interpret Scripture and thereby to learn what they need to know. The fact that *Didaktik* and hermeneutics emerged virtually at the same time is no coincidence, for they were both conceived as theories of method called upon to cover the two faces of spiritual life, i.e., the preservation of the culture and knowledge of the past and its transmission to the future generation.

As we have shown though, when viewed through the looking glass of today's panorama of pedagogical sciences, the *Didaktik* theories put forth in the 17th century do not live up to their name. They fit under the heading of *Methodik* rather than that of *Didaktik* as such. For all the authors who dealt with the question of teaching approached it exclusively from the point of view of the educational content, leaving aside the other vertex of the didactic triangle – the pupil to be taught.

That is why, as we have shown, *Didaktik* proper emerges much later, at the beginning of the 19th century, from the same intellectual impulse which also gives rise to hermeneutics as we know it today. *Didaktik* begins with Schleiermacher. What makes Schleiermacher turn his gaze toward the pupil, so far forgotten, is the discovery of alterity, the realization that the other that stands before me may not be an other like me, but an other than me. This realization allows Schleiermacher to see that childhood involves a specific mode of being in a world, radically different from the adult's. The child lives in the present, the adult in the future. There is an ontological difference between them.

This ontological reflection on childhood, we argued, is the ultimate foundation of the art of teaching. We can teach only insofar we understand and respect the mode of being of the pupil; otherwise we speak alone. But this ontological reflection also makes *Didaktik* a philosophical discipline.

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