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## **The hermeneutic paradox: the secret power of education as self-education**

**Abstract:** The dialectic of power is one of the fundamental questions of pedagogy. Recognizing that power is a multidimensional phenomenon that manifests itself differently in different contexts, a number of disciplines and paradigms have exposed the dynamics of power at work in pedagogy and in the broader social and cultural contexts of education. A hermeneutic approach to power seeks to cultivate sensitivity and attunement to the interpretive experience of power as a lifelong and collective endeavor of (self-) education. Different situations of detecting, interpreting, critiquing, exercising, accepting, and resisting various manifestations of power in our lives all call for engaging in (self-)education as a constant seeking for the right measure, as a permanent formation (*Bildung*) to discernment, conversation, and responsibility. Learning and teaching to live with and think about power is an essential way of being in the world with ourselves and Others. The international, collaborative research project “Philosophy, Education, Power, and Violence” exhibited in this journal brings together diverse reflections and case studies on the dialectic of power in the spirit of fostering hermeneutic synodality as a model for the empowering experience of (self-)education.

**Keywords:** Theory of Education, Hermeneutic Pedagogy, Dialectic, Power, Bildung.

Violence and power exercised on behalf of a social group, as well as the subjective feeling of power over other human beings, are multidimensional phenomena that appear in different contexts. Also varying are the forms in which they are realized. Their scope is fluid and constantly debated. What did not qualify as aggression and domination in earlier times might be treated as violence today. Paradoxically, it is the direct actions that are the easiest to interpret. They are subject to legal interpretation and jurisdiction. However, violence can take on a much more sublime form, in which direct aggression is merely the consequence of psychological, social, cultural, or political mechanisms. These mechanisms may be a sanctioned form of social consciousness and serve to express a dominant message, cultural canon, custom or social ritual. Such violence manifests itself, in the first instance, at the level of culture and the organization of social life, and therefore, as Ernst Cassirer (2020) puts it, at the level of symbolic forms making up the intelligible code of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) in which we find ourselves.

In this context, a special role is attributed to the power of the Word. Paraphrasing the prologue of the Gospel of John, “in the beginning was the Word”: Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ Λόγος (J 1: 1) and “the Word became flesh”: ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο (J 1: 14), one can consider *Logos* as the principle of life. “The greater miracle of language lies not in the fact that the Word becomes flesh and emerges in external being, but that that which emerges and externalizes itself in utterance is always already a word” (Gadamer 1990, p. 424; 2020, p. 437). The word externalized by an individual, a social group, a cultural or religious tradition has creative power. It does not become flesh in the sense of a hardened fossil, but as the word it can create various incarnations, and these incarnations create further forms of reality — both positive and destructive.

Symbolic interactions are analyzed by various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences using a number of theoretical frameworks. One of the most important and historically established paradigms is hermeneutics. The origins of this approach can be traced back to antiquity. It has developed over the centuries as a theory of understanding and interpretation, as a theory of reading or assigning meaning to the reality being analysed. However, hermeneutic theory cannot be reduced to the definition and application of simple rules of interpretation. Rules are necessary, but understanding itself is a distinctive mental process that differs from rationalist or empirical thinking. Hermeneutics is an art, a creative intellectual artistry. In his texts on hermeneutics, published posthumously in 1838, Friedrich Schleiermacher claimed: “The practice of hermeneutics can be regarded as an art, not because it results in producing a work of art, but because in itself it bears the

character of art, as it isn't solely a matter of the mechanical application of some rules" (Schleiermacher, 1990, p. 81).

Traditional hermeneutics developed within three currents: theological, legal and literary. The first half of the 19th century saw the birth of philosophical hermeneutics, which was concerned not only with detailed principles of interpretation but also with a general theory of understanding. This approach was deepened on the one hand by ontological and existential aspects with the category of pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*), and on the other hand by questions of history, tradition, and memory with the concept of pre-judgment (*Vorurteil*). Moreover, not only cultural texts but also social life viewed in terms of cultural transmission became the object of hermeneutic studies. With the development of philosophical hermeneutics, pedagogical hermeneutics started to take shape.

Historicity and tradition are linked to social memory, collective identity, and intergenerational cultural transmission. These phenomena are mimetic in nature. Mimesis (*imitatio*) consists not only of its declarative dimension, but also an implicit one, especially at the level of social and cultural consciousness and sub-consciousness. In the Latin tradition, *imitatio* was often equated with the reproduction or imitation of certain patterns of thought and behavior. These patterns could range from the imitation of Christ, as expressed explicitly in the titles of books by authors such as Thomas à Kempis and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to the reproduction of mechanisms of exclusion and violence analyzed by, among others, representatives of critical theory or social memory theory.

The "dialectic of power," as the present volume is entitled, is inextricably linked to the fundamental dilemma of pedagogy. It has been defined by the classics of educational sciences. Already Schleiermacher entitled two chapters of the general part of his lectures on pedagogy (1826): "Theory of education, insofar as it is counter-effect" (*Theorie der Erziehung, insofern diese Gegenwirkung ist*) and "Theory of education insofar as it is support" (*Theorie der Erziehung, insofern diese Unterstützung ist*) (Schleiermacher, 2000, p. 86, 165). In "Democracy and Education" (1916), John Dewey also emphasized two vectors in the power of pedagogical action: education as direction and education as growth (Dewey, 1972, p. 36-76). The dialectic of pedagogical action has been inscribed in the canon of educational studies. This approach was articulated by the classics of humanistic pedagogy, such as Theodor Litt, who entitled one of his most important works *Führen oder Wachsenlassen. Eine Erörterung des pädagogischen Grundproblems* ("To Guide or Let Grow: A Discussion of the Fundamental Problem of Pedagogy," 1927), and in Poland

by Bogdan Nawroczyński with his work *Swoboda i przymus w wychowaniu* (“*Freedom and Coercion in Education*,” 1929). However, whereas in the first phase of the development of pedagogy, the power of directive influence and the power of emancipation were attributed to the intentional will of individuals and social groups, through critical theory and the anthropology of mimesis, the power of education has been exposed as hidden, symbolic, and cultural violence.

Considerable space in the volume *The Dialectic of Power* is devoted to the interpretation of the thought of René Girard, the author of classic works of modern cultural anthropology, such as *La Violence et le sacré* (1972; English: *Violence and the Sacred*, 1977; Polish: *Sacrum i przemoc*, 2019) or *Le Bouc Émissaire* (1982; English: “The Scapegoat” 1982; Polish: *Kozioł ofiarny*, 1987) and many others. Our intention has been to read Girard’s works hermeneutically. The central dimension of such a reading is scientific, but social and cultural mimesis is a timeless phenomenon, and, especially in times of crises, its practical consequences tend to reveal themselves in glaring ways.

Girard’s achievements are interdisciplinary. They fit into the subject domains of cultural anthropology, philosophy, communication sciences, sociology, religious studies, theology, and pedagogy. For this reason, we invited representatives of various disciplines from research centers on various continents to contribute to the volume. Each article includes information on the authors’ affiliations. Our intention was to accentuate not only the interdisciplinary and multifaceted approach, but also the pedagogical relevance and implications.

The volume we submit to readers broadens the spectrum of inquiry. While Girard remains an important point of reference, our research and reflections include other perspectives on the dialectic of power. The aim is not to present a hermeneutical synthesis of Girard’s work, but to enrich the body of knowledge by adding new hermeneutical and pedagogical inspirations. Hence, in addition to Girard, reference is made to representatives of philosophical and pedagogical hermeneutics, critical theory, and the history of hermeneutic research in pedagogy.

*The Dialectic of Power* is a result of international collaboration between the International Institute for Hermeneutics (<https://www.iih-hermeneutics.org/>), the Faculty of Artes Liberales at the University of Warsaw, and the Faculty of Social Sciences at the Christian Theological Academy in Warsaw. Our teamwork began in 2021 as an international collaborative research project, *Philosophy, Education, Power, and Violence*. Apart from individual consultations, we held several seminars with our colleagues from the University of

Coimbra, the University of British Columbia, Arizona State University, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, and the University of Scranton. In cooperation with the Institute of Cultural Studies at the University of Bialystok, we organized an international conference in Bialystok in 2023, *Authority, Power, and Violence*. With these initiatives, we had the opportunity to discuss our contributions and respond to one another in a hermeneutically hospitable manner. As the volume editors, we are grateful for the comments we received at those gatherings. We are also profoundly indebted to the reviewers, whose often detailed comments and suggestions we treated with the utmost editorial attention. The quality of the final result is an effect of constructive and creative collaboration between many scholars.

Our international collaboration also expresses an important aspect of our shared responsibility for the inhabited world. In the true sense of οἰκουμένη, we are aware of the blessings and challenges of dwelling in the world with Others. Rooted in the biblical tradition of the New Testament, we understand οἰκουμένη as the world that is the milieu of God's reconciling mission: The gospel of the reigning of God will be proclaimed in the whole world: καὶ κηρυχθήσεται τοῦτο τὸ εὐαγγέλιον τῆς βασιλείας ἐν ὅλῃ τῇ οἰκουμένῃ (Mt 24:14). Thus, our task is to grow in exercising our personal responsibility for the art of living together in our rapidly globalizing household. By widening our horizons, we need to take seriously the concerns of the whole planet. Ecology, from its etymological roots, is the true Λόγος of our home, οἶκος. We have to listen to this Λόγος and respond to its disclosure. Integral ecology is the only way to approach our common home.

This approach has to be an expression of synodality (συν, together, and way, ὁδος), walking together, thinking together, being inspiring and inspired. It means to search together for having hope in our divided and conflicted world. This common walk in the academic world means constantly exceeding our limits to be a source of life for our common home and all those who live in it. The notion of synodality is rooted in the primacy of conversation that is virtually impossible without permanent conversion. Only when we face each other in going through what needs to be understood (διάλογος) do we recognize the essential incompleteness of each other on our own. This incompleteness is the horizon of the human Dasein as finite, lingual, historical, and temporal. It is in conversation that we experience incompleteness uncovered by the presence of the Other. We discover the unmistakable otherness of the Other's points of view. This essential difference can be truly an obstacle to honestly and openly falling into a conversation. The recognition of the indispensability of the Other and our mutual incompleteness can successfully

open up the space for a conversation. A new opening can be initiated, an opening that happens beyond our wanting and doing, especially when we comprehend that this extraordinary power comes from God and not from us: ἵνα ἡ ὑπερβολὴ τῆς δυνάμεως ᾗ τοῦ Θεοῦ καὶ μὴ ἐξ ἡμῶν (2 Cor 4: 7). St. Paul is very vocal about this power and its “surpassingness” (ἡ ὑπερβολὴ τῆς δυνάμεως). The excess, ἡ ὑπερβολή, the surpassing excellence, is freely bestowed on us if we are willing to open ourselves up and respond to being addressed by God (*Angesprochensein*).

Crossing borders in an intimate conversation means communal discernment and, above all, learning together. In our thinking and acting, we have to recognize that, as human beings, we form ourselves into something (*sich zu etwas bilden*) (Gadamer, 1980, p. 139-140; 1998). This forming helps us to develop our (ἦθος), which is a necessary condition for exercising freedom and responsibility in our living with Others (*Mitsein, Mit-Anderen-in-einer-Gemeinschaft-Sein*). Alasdair MacIntyre writes (1991, p. 58):

There ought not be two histories, one of political and moral action and one of political and moral theorizing, because there were not two pasts, one populated only by actions, the other only by theories. Every action is the bearer and expression of more or less theory-laden beliefs and concepts; every piece of theorizing and every expression of belief is a political and moral action.

Ethics is not an additional reflection on our thinking and acting. As human beings, we always think and act ethically, albeit not always consciously and responsibly. Education toward responsibility calls for sharpening the hermeneutic senses, because we are not endowed with the animal instinct that orients us toward self-preservation and continuation of life. Therefore, those who have a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how* (Frankl, 1962, p. 126).<sup>1</sup> To face life is the ultimate call to which we have to give a response. “Each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible” (Frankl, 1962, p. 131).

*Bildung* can be perceived as constant formation to synodality, and is thus the never-ending formation to discernment. It is the process of intense collaboration that is oriented toward walking together and searching together (Nipkow, 1990). In this life-costing and life-giving togetherness, we can discover the true meaning of the right measure (*das richtige Mass, μέτρον*,

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<sup>1</sup> This leitmotif in Frankl is actually a quotation from Friedrich Nietzsche.

rather than μέτρον).<sup>2</sup> In the present educational context, it is particularly important to refer to the right measure rather than a rule and formula that can be obtained and applied whenever needed. Everyone needs to know the right measure, but it cannot be taught in any objectifiable way. It can only be slowly experienced by a person who is formed and transformed. It is a matter of maturing in the ability to discern and judge. We have a compelling example in a biblical story from Exodus 16:4-35. God listened to the cry of Moses and rained bread from heaven. The Israelites were miraculously fed in the desert. Some people gathered a large amount. Some gathered a little. But when they measured what they had collected, there was no shortage, and none left over, no excess and no deficiency. Everyone figured out just what they needed. The right measure (τὸ μέτριον) was clearly not the measure in the sense of the amount gathered, but rather more the fitting (τὸ πρέπον), the opportune (τὸν καιρόν), and the necessary (τὸ δέον) (Márquez, 2006; Mathiesen, 2014).

For Gadamer, Bildung in its multidimensional aspects as formation, self-formation, and cultivation, encompasses what is happening in us and to us when we live in our *Lebenswelt*. This happening takes place in language. Being is language: “Being that can be understood is language” (Gadamer, 2020, p. 470).<sup>3</sup> As the bearer of tradition, language

is by no means simply an instrument, a tool. For it is in the nature of the tool that we master its use, which is to say we take it in hand and lay it aside when it has done its service.... Rather, in all knowledge of

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<sup>2</sup> The distinction between the practicality and criteria of μέτριον and μέτρον is thematized in an ethical context in Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096a.20.

<sup>3</sup> “*Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache*”: “In language Being uncovers itself and makes itself understandable. ‘*Being that can be understood is language*.’ The dialectic of understanding, in which the same is always understood differently, originates in the infinite constellations of meaning characterizing human thinking. The language contains the one, which is at the same time, the other. Speaking is dwelling in the totality of meaning. Every lingual expression is grounded in that totality, which encompasses all individual expressions and overcomes them. The statement “*Being that can be understood is language*” might be interpreted as participation in that totality of meaning, and not as lingual idealism. In Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, Being, thinking, and language constitute the unity of Being and thinking (meaning ‘thinking of Being’) in language. Thinking is not possible outside of language. That which is thought is experienced as lingual being and is expressed in language, thus not only revealing Being (constituted lingually in itself), but also placing Being within a relationship with Dasein. Thinking and language are indivisible. The object of understanding is always determined by its lingual nature since *to be* means *to exist in language*.” (Wiercinski, 2019, p. 62).

ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own... Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us (Gadamer, 1976, p. 62-63).

Our responsibility toward Being (*Sein*) is disclosed in our commitment to the language we speak:

You must realize that when you take a word in your mouth, you have not taken up some arbitrary tool which can be thrown in a corner if it doesn't do the job, but you are committed to a line of thought that comes from afar and that reaches on beyond you. you. What we do is always a kind of changing back, which I want to call in a very wide sense "translation"... The translation process fundamentally contains the whole secret of how human beings come to an understanding of the world and communicate with each other. Translation is an indissoluble unity of implicit acts of anticipating, of grasping meaning as a whole beforehand, and explicitly laying down what was thus grasped in advance. All speaking has something of this kind of laying hold in advance and laying down (Gadamer, 2020, p. 552).

This line of thought (*Richtung des Denkens*) is the task of understanding. What is most difficult for us is to bring together the beginning (ἀρχή) and the end (ἔσχατον).

We live in a very terrifying time of instability of peace and war. Peace is much more than just a mere lack of war. It is a permanent striving to develop ourselves toward being genuinely open to the Other. The cultivated person (*der Gebildete*) is not a person who has cumulated an impressive amount of information but somebody open (*aufgeschlossen*) to the unexpected, unpredictable, new, and unknown. The happening of education takes place in the in-between of familiarity and strangeness, concealment and unconcealment, sympathy and suspicion. In this hermeneutic in-between, hermeneutic sensitivity is constantly at play.

The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension by attempting a naive assimilation but consistently bringing it out. This is why it is part of the hermeneutic approach to project a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present. Historical consciousness is aware of its own otherness and hence foregrounds the horizon of the past from its own (Gadamer, 2020, p. 305).



An educated person is capable of embracing a plurality of viewpoints. Following Hegel, this implies being able to turn things around and consider them in various aspects. Therefore, the general characteristic of *Bildung* indicates:

keeping oneself open to what is other [*Anderes*—to other, more universal points of view. It embraces a sense of proportion and distance in relation to itself, and hence consists in rising above itself to universality. To distance oneself from oneself and from one's private purposes means to look at these in the way that others see them (Hegel, 1995, p. 355).

Heraclitus writes in Fragment 18 (Diels & Kranz, 1960): ἐὰν μὴ ἔλπηται, ἀνέλπιστον οὐκ ἐξευρήσει, ἀνεξερεύνητον ἐὼν καὶ ἄπορον — “If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it; for it is hard to be sought out and difficult.” The undertaking of education is to recognize a multitude of possibilities and develop a corresponding ability to feel addressed by them as tasks. Hope is needed to expect the unexpected. Without transgressing ourselves, without going beyond what is familiar and customary, the unexpected and unpredicted will remain unobtainable and inaccessible. Education is an invitation to progress, develop, and become. It is a way of opening up to the Open, to what comes to us from the future. It is a possibility of approaching the unknown with an open mind and heart in order to let ourselves be formed and transformed. Here, we touch upon and are touched by the phenomenon of learning: To let ourselves be on the way toward understanding that is constantly transgressing the boundaries of the familiar, known, and expected. Only the wise person (φρόνιμος) can do this, and, in turn, it is also the Truth (ἀλήθεια) that only the wise person can recognize in its splendid radiation. The ultimate task of education is living by appropriating wisdom that matures and grows with time. To be a φρόνιμος means to be able to recognize a good wine that is good because it embodies its own history of maturation. However, this is not a matter of the metrical age, but a question of personal development and response to the call that is always individual, personal, and happens in a community with Others.

The paradoxical nature of education is intrinsically connected with the paradoxical nature of language, which is in a permanent state of formation and transformation. Like in the process of landscape formation, the flow from one form into the other is not something that we can project and do, but is rather happening, building itself largely independently from our controlling and determining ambitions. If there is a secret to education, it must

be in pious attentiveness to our *Lebenswelt* in the sense of letting-happen (*Geschehenlassen und Wachsenlassen*). The more we understand that we are less leading our self-education than being led (*sich Erziehenlassen*), the more we can benefit from being constantly gifted. The receiving of the gifts of understanding and maturing involves our active cooperation. It might be very hard work, but it cannot blind the essential insight that great things are happening to us *beyond* our wanting and doing: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow” — ἐγὼ ἐφύτευσα, Ἀπολλῶς ἐπότισεν, ἀλλὰ ὁ Θεὸς ἡΐξανε (1 Cor 3: 6). Interestingly, the verb αὐξάνω (Latin *augeo*) implies growing, increasing, enlarging, thus indicating the necessity of constant development that becomes the imperative for being a human being in *status viatoris*.

This volume is published in *Studies on the Theory of Education (Studia z Teorii Wychowania)*, a journal that has an established scholarly reputation in Poland and is published by a university whose mission is to explore social and pedagogical issues in the context of religious, social, and cultural minorities. The publication of this volume, therefore, not only has an academic dimension, but is directly linked to the mandate to conduct critical research on social exclusion and inclusion.

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