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## The Concept of '*Bildung*' and Contemporary Education

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### **Biography**

I am an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. My research focuses on the intersection between metaphysics and political philosophy, especially from the standpoint of German Idealism and Critical Theory.

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# The Concept of '*Bildung*' and Contemporary Education

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## Abstract

The guiding notion of what it means to educate a person in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century German thought revolved around the concept of "*Bildung*," which has the multiple meanings of self-cultivation, learning, education, and culture. The underlying driving force of the concept is that education is not a process of memorizing facts or a mastering of certain techniques, but rather a method of developing oneself morally and spiritually. Given the realities of the current economic and political climate, the concept seems somewhat antiquated. Part of what every educator has to contend with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is that education has become largely instrumentalized – one goes to school in order to build a career. I believe that it is precisely for this reason that we have to take a fresh look at the concept of *Bildung* from a contemporary perspective. By relying on the work of Hegel, Gadamer, and the German Romantics, I explore here how to employ the notion of *Bildung* in the classroom as a way of guiding the teaching of philosophy, and as a means of addressing social and political injustice.

## Keywords

Philosophy of Education, *Bildung*, German Idealism, Hermeneutics, German Romanticism, Social Justice

## Introduction

The notion of '*Bildung*' is one of the key, if not *the key*, concept of philosophical education in German thought. There are multiple meanings intertwined in the concept, and depending upon the time period in which it is used, some aspects of *Bildung* are emphasized above others. The various meanings of the term include "culture," "learning," "self-cultivation," simply "education," and during the height of late eighteenth century of the German enlightenment period, it came to be closely associated with the very idea of "enlightenment." Given the explicit instrumentalization of education that continues to take place across universities in the West, and given various post-modern critiques of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century German thought, it seems as though *Bildung* is an idea that is doomed to be relegated to the pages of history (although it should be mentioned that it is still often invoked by the German university system). All educators must deal with the fact that the most significant motivating force for many students is the ability to obtain work after graduation. Given the economic realities of our world, I find myself hard-pressed to blame them.

The aim of this paper is to re-examine how the idea of *Bildung*, understood especially as "self-cultivation," can be practically used in the philosophy classroom.

For Hegel and the Romantic thinkers, self-cultivation is the central way in which one overcomes alienation and achieves political freedom. Approaching the issue from the standpoint of philosophy and art respectively, Hegel and the Romantics argue that the person who has not undergone the process of *Bildung* is perpetually caught up in one's selfish interests, thus never realizing that one's own interests are always intertwined with those of everyone else and the larger social good in a strong manner, which in turn means that we become socially and politically alienated. The only way to overcome this alienation is to self-cultivate. This, however, does not and cannot entail that cultivation is achieved in isolation. Rather, it is always done in social, intersubjective context. As such, *Bildung* is the ongoing effort by both students and teachers to develop oneself into a full individual, so when it takes place in the classroom it involves a more collaborative model of learning. Overall, by relying on the work of Hegel, Gadamer, and the German Romantics (to a lesser extent), I will explore how to employ the notion of *Bildung* in the classroom as a possible way of guiding the teaching of philosophy and as a means of addressing social and political injustice.

### **What is *Bildung*?**

Before we can go on to understand how *Bildung* can be used as a pedagogical device and a means of addressing at least some social and political injustices, we must first explore the historical and philosophical background of the concept. Although I have chosen to focus more on self-cultivation than the other aspects of *Bildung*, the term does carry with it multiple meanings at once. In its initial and earliest usage, it was largely associated with the idea of "culture." The cultured individual was one that knew certain things, acted in the correct manner in public, and did the sort of things that a proper medieval aristocrat ought to do. This is by far the most problematic and philosophically least interesting aspect of the notion, and it was quickly abandoned in the philosophical discourse both because of the changes in what it means to be educated and what it meant to be cultured. As it was already mentioned, for the German Enlightenment thinkers, to be cultured meant to be enlightened, and this was a task to be undertaken by *all* human beings.

As such, in the hands of thinkers such as Lessing and Moses Mendelssohn,<sup>1</sup> *Bildung* is moved away from its aristocratic origins and applied to the people as a whole. For

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1. I should note here that there are elements of the notion of *Bildung* in the medieval German mystical tradition, so it isn't simply the case that the notion begins to be philosophically developed only in the

example, for Mendelssohn, who was a rationalist most known for furthering the projects of thinkers such as Christian Wolff and Leibniz, one of the primary aspects of *Bildung* is understood as the education of a citizen for the sake of the improvement of the nation as a whole (Mendelssohn 1997, 317). He further notes that, “the enlightenment that interests the human being as a human being is universal, devoid of any class distinctions; the enlightenment of the human being considered as a citizen, is modified based on standing and profession” (Mendelssohn 1997, 315). What this entails is a radical (for the time period) rejection of the aristocratic ways of being. It is the task of *every* person to become cultured and educated such that they have at least a basic understanding of the nature of reality, and, as a citizen, humans are to understand how and why their profession contributes to the greater good of the whole state. It is the task of human reason, used by each individual separately, to come to a strictly rational way of understanding reality. One must also approach one’s vocation in the same rational manner.

For a thinker such as Lessing, whose thought is mainly grounded in a theological rather than strictly philosophical framework (albeit heavily influenced by Spinoza), education or *Bildung* is both a religious *and* a rational process; Lessing thus contrasts education with revelation. Strictly speaking, education is applied to the betterment of the individual, and undertaken by the individual, while revelation is the shortcut by which humanity as a whole is educated (Lessing 2005, 218). The education of the human race is taken from the standpoint of humanity learning to move away from the worship of individual, national gods (the gods of Egypt, Rome, etc.) to the worship of a universal, single being. This process is accompanied by the teaching of a universal morality. Thus, religious development for Lessing is simply a means of using revelation as a way of demonstrating universal, rational truths that would have taken too long to develop if left to each individual attempting to reach enlightenment her or himself (Lessing 2005, 236). This places him squarely in the enlightenment view of *Bildung*.

The revolution in France, with its explicit rationalistic and universalist tenets had at first given hope and inspiration to many of the German thinkers who first saw enlightenment ideals being used in practice, but the infatuation ended abruptly with the Reign of Terror. The enlightenment project of a rule of reason looked much less appealing after reason was so forcefully and efficiently used to justify mass murder. One gets a dissatisfaction with *Reason* in the early nineteenth century that is once again repeated on much greater and horrible scale during World War II. Scathing

criticisms of the enlightenment project and its notion of *Bildung* emerge both from the Romantic thinkers (the Schlegel brothers, Novalis, Schelling, etc.) and from their more rationalist minded counterparts (Hegel and Fichte, for instance).

While I do not have the space here to fully develop the full Romantic argument for the need of *Bildung*, given the multitude of thinkers and positions, it should be mentioned that they add certain elements to the notion of self-cultivation that are quite relevant to a contemporary context. First of all, the Romantic thinkers unanimously agree that the proper development of emotion and feeling is just as important, if not even more important, than the development of reason (a point that will not be not be truly made again until the emergence of feminist thought). This point is made explicitly against the enlightenment in light of what transpires during the French Revolution in the name of reason. Reason did not in fact triumph; it resulted in chaos as people's unbridled and undeveloped emotions took control of them leading to the Reign of Terror (Beiser 2003, 94). Secondly, for the Romantics education, or *Bildung*, is the absolutely highest good for human beings in a similar way that eudaimonia through virtue is the highest good for someone like Aristotle. In the article "The Concept of *Bildung* in Early German Romanticism," Frederick Beiser explains the importance of education for the Romantic Movement. He writes: "first, it [education] is the *final* end, a goal that does not derive its value from being the means to any other end. Second, it is a *complete* end, a goal that comprises all final ends, so that nothing can be added to it to give it more value" (Beiser 2003, 91). This is about as high of praise as we can find in the name of education. The reason for such high praise is because education understood as *Bildung* is a life-long process of the correct shaping of the human character (with certain parallels in virtue ethics). For the Romantics, through the study and creation of art, one learns how to properly channel one's emotions such that one's very *character* becomes a work of art (Beiser 2003, 96). This is done both simply for its own sake, insofar as this the highest good for humans, as well as for the sake of others insofar as it leads to the development of correct political institutions and organizations. What these organizations are is a bit vague (I would also argue unrealistic) for the Romantics.

With this in mind we now turn to Hegel. While much of Hegel's thought can be accurately described as the *Bildung* of *Geist* or Spirit (the process by which human consciousness comes to have knowledge of itself), I have chosen to focus on his development of the notion in the *Philosophy of Right*. In his book *Starting With Hegel*, Craig Matarrese provides a cogent summary of what *Bildung* means for Hegel. He writes:

There is a general shape to the process of *Bildung* for Hegel, which echoes the way he sees other problems work themselves out dialectically: it is typically the movement from a stage of immediate unity, immersion, and harmony, through a stage of difference, deflection, and alienation, and then finally achieving a stage of reconciliation. (Matarrese 2010, 24)

The stage of immersion and harmony plays a similar role that the fictitious state of nature does in the writing of the early liberal theorists such as Locke or Rousseau. It is a sort of pre-societal period in which human beings live in harmony with nature and themselves. However, this is conceived by Hegel as a stage of human infancy; a point at which we have not attained full self-awareness. Furthermore, since this is just a methodological or philosophical extrapolation, since human beings are really intrinsically social, this unity and harmony is really just a fiction. We currently find ourselves in period of difference and *alienation*, caused by many different social ills (unfortunately, we are still plagued by similar social ailments since Hegel wrote the *Philosophy of Right*. With the exception of medicine and Netflix, not much has changed for the better).

According to Hegel, alienation occurs in society on multiple levels. We are alienated from one another due to the pursuit of individual, selfish economic interests, not realizing that these interests are best accomplished through social cooperation. We are alienated on the political level when the state does not recognize one's fundamental rights. We can unfortunately think of hundreds of examples of this taking place, with the recent victory being the fight for equal marriage rights by the LGBTQ community. Finally, we are alienated on a social level when our individuality and individual accomplishments are left unacknowledged. Although all these can be spoken of separately for the purpose of philosophical analysis, they are in fact intertwined in practice. The two related mechanism by which alienation is overcome are the processes of recognition and *Bildung*. The process of recognition is the means by which consciousness comes to understand itself as self-consciousness through being acknowledged as such by another. It is the means by which the dialectic is propelled forward in much of Hegel's corpus (especially his political writings). While recognition is always-already at play wherever there are conscious beings, *Bildung* is the final push, so to speak, by which human beings finally come to realize what it means to be truly human and how it entails a strong, even ontological, interdependence. This is the stage of reconciliation that is mentioned by Matarrese. Thus, Hegel writes:

*Education*, in the absolute determination, is therefore *liberation* and work toward a higher liberation; it is the absolute transition to the infinite subjective substantiality of ethical life, which is no longer immediate and natural, but spiritual and at the same time raised to the shape of universality. (Hegel 1991, 225)

What we observe here is that education or *Bildung* is connected to the realization of freedom. By the life-long process of *Bildung*, we come to the kind of self-understanding that allows us to see the universality of ethical life. Ethical life is the concrete realization of human freedom through the establishment of the kinds of institutions that allow us to flourish. This also allows us to realize that we as human beings are fundamentally *interdependent*; we rely upon one another to have our basic needs met, for love, for the obtainment of a culture, language, shared history, and all of the things that are necessary to make us human beings. Thus, the realization of interdependence and universality is *liberatory* insofar as it allows us to relinquish the myth of self-sufficiency and independence, which is at the root of much human suffering.

*Bildung* or education envisioned in this manner is much different from the process of the memorization of facts or the learning of certain techniques in order to be proficient in one's line of work. This is certainly a part of *Bildung*, but it is only an instrumental, incomplete part. *Bildung* means much more than that for Hegel, and it contains an essential socio-political element which we leave out of the process of education (or, rather, we pretend to leave it since much of contemporary education does in fact propagate a certain neoliberal, capitalist worldview. This is why people are always asking philosophers what we do with our degree). In order to properly self-cultivate, then, one must have an understanding of the greater social good and how a person fits into that. That is, one must learn to think of the universal. As it was stated above, this gives a person the concrete ability to realize one's freedom. Matarrese writes:

One is free when one can identify with one's actions and ends, where these are taken to be conceptually tied to other individuals in determinate social, political, and historical contexts, and when one comes to understand through these actions and ends the wider structured context that mediates them. (Matarrese 2010, 122)

In many ways this point is easier to explain from the negative end of being alienated from one's actions. When one is working in a job that is completely routine, for a

company that pays minimum wage and overworks its employees, never seeing the result of one's repeated actions day in and day out, it is difficult to care for one's work or company, or the wider social context which makes such meaningless work necessary. According to Hegel, this alienation can only be overcome through the correct sort of education and through the correct sort of structural change. Only then can one identify with one's actions and the wider social context in which they are practiced. The correct structural change includes the development of a state that is geared toward looking out for the interests of the people as a whole, as well as the development of organizations (essentially massive trade unions) which allow the individual to be a part of the greater whole.

While Hegel emphasizes universality as a guiding post of *Bildung*, Gadamer focuses on the notion of *history and historicity* as the guiding themes of self-cultivation, thus adding what I believe is an essential element into the notion. Perhaps more than any other thinker in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gadamer is responsible for placing *Bildung* in the heart of what he calls the human sciences. As such, the notion of *Bildung* in Gadamer's thought is caught up with his theory of interpretation. He therefore states that: "Bildung is a genuine historical idea, and because of the historical character of 'preservation' it is important for the human sciences" (Gadamer 1975, 11). The reason that *Bildung* is so important is that it allows us to preserve that which we learn through the process of hermeneutic interpretation as a part of who and what we are. For Gadamer, that which makes us what we are is *our history*. We are so fundamentally conditioned by our language, custom, and culture that the only real universal understanding is reached through the realization of our historicity, and the situating of this historicity in a wider human context.

Like the other thinkers we have discussed, for Gadamer *Bildung* can only be understood as a continuous process: "the result of Bildung is not achieved in the manner of a technical construction, but grows out of an inner process of formation and cultivation, and therefore remains in a state of continual Bildung" (Gadamer 1975, 10). Through the proper avenues of study, this continuous process involves placing oneself into the standpoint of the other. Gadamer argues:

That is what, following Hegel, we emphasized as the general characteristic of Bildung: keeping oneself open to what is other – to other more universal points of view...The universal viewpoints to which the cultivated man (gebildet) keeps himself open are not a



fixed applicable yardstick, but are present to him only as viewpoints of possible others. (Gadamer 1975, 15-16)

What this entails is not the enlightenment grasp of a “purely human” point of view that is capable of understanding the world dispassionately and objectively. The opposite is in fact the case – a universal standpoint is one that acknowledges one’s own historicity while at the same time continually exploring the history of the other (thus expanding one’s interpretive horizon).

Unlike Hegel (or at least Hegel as Gadamer understands him), Gadamer does not think that there is any possibility of transcending one’s historical standpoint in order to occupy the space of the purely universal.<sup>2</sup> *History* is that which makes us what we are at our very core, and our philosophy, as well as art, must be historically situated in order to be properly comprehended. As Anders Odenstedt points out in “Hegel and Gadamer on *Bildung*,” “Gadamer still insists that the fusion of horizons does not permit the individual to wholly abandon her particular standpoint precisely insofar as the horizons confronting each other are fused” (Odenstedt 2008, 568-69). Thus, the essential element that Gadamer explicitly adds to the notion of *Bildung* (which I believe is implicitly found in Hegel’s thought) is the importance of *history* for the process of *Bildung*, as well as the importance of history for understanding philosophical problems. What this concretely entails is that the process of *Bildung* must incorporate a thoroughly historical component. That is not to say that we simply teach history to students. This would certainly be an important element, but it would miss the larger critical point. The critical point is that we are shaped by our history to such a significant extent that a misunderstanding of our own history, as well as the history of others, makes self-cultivation a difficult, if not impossible, enterprise. Recognition of others as robust, living breathing human beings entails knowledge of who they are and where they come from, and this knowledge is an indispensable condition for our own self-understanding. This is all to be understood as an ongoing process of interpretation

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2. I would argue that Hegel’s own view on this is essentially the same as that which Gadamer proposes, given that the realization one comes to at the point of Absolute Knowing is simply that one is always-already caught up in one’s own time and place. *However*, the realization of this particular insight is a big deal for Hegel since it frees oneself from a purely formal and abstract way of thinking. Making a complete argument for why Gadamer and Hegel are actually in agreement on this position is well outside the scope of this project. For an extensive comparison between Hegel’s and Gadamer’s views on *Bildung*, and the relative similarity of their positions, see Anders Odenstedt’s “Hegel and Gadamer on *Bildung*.”

and reinterpretation (via the study of philosophical texts, art, history, and concrete encounters with others), rather than a task to be accomplished once and for all.

### ***Bildung* in the Classroom**

According to both Hegel and the romantics, the task of *Bildung* is one of cultivating one's talents and character for the sake of *both* personal improvement and the greater good of the whole. The important Romantic addition to this varied notion is that this education cannot simply include the cultivation of reason, but of emotion as well. This *process*, which is considered to be the ultimate end for human beings both by Hegel and the Romantics, is undertaken through the study of philosophy, art, history, and the other humanities. It is here that Gadamer's emphasis on interpretation in the human sciences can become an integral component for the furthering of *Bildung*. He gives us the methodology by which we may study these disciplines and, as we saw above, directly connects this methodology to *Bildung*. In order to understand a particular text or piece of art, one must situate it within its own historical framework, think about how it fits into *one's own* historical framework, and then proceed to interpret and reinterpret. For example, we can think of the meaning that Platonic dialogue as situated in the Greek discussion of human flourishing; the status of the dialogue in the wider Platonic corpus; the historical framework in which the dialogue was composed (the particular socio-political challenges facing Athens and the surrounding city-states at the time, along with its cultural practices, and so forth); and our own historical idiosyncratic way of looking at a Platonic dialogue.

However, I should note that the process of *Bildung* is meant to be undertaken through the study of *anything and everything*. For example, Hegel argues that if one is working as a carpenter or plumber, one ought to be a member of what he calls a corporation, which is the equivalent of a trade union or medieval style guild. There one's work is recognized by one's peers, protected, and placed in a wider social context such that one can identify with what is accomplished and see it reflected in the greater good.

Given all of this, it seems as though *Bildung* is an unrealistic ideal in an age where education has been made instrumental and the union is under attack from almost all angles (at least in the United States). After all, we don't want to leave our students unprepared for the realities of 21<sup>st</sup> century existence by using outdated methods of education. However, I believe that it is because of the very corporatization and instrumentalization of education that we must once again think of what *Bildung* can

do for us from the standpoint of praxis in the classroom (I mainly have the philosophy classroom in mind here, but this can of course be extended to other realms of study). I do not think that teaching any particular set of texts<sup>3</sup> is necessary for emphasizing this kind of model of education, and I do not think that we necessarily need to include some subsection titled "*Bildung*." As someone who has taught various introductory philosophy courses to students who first have either no idea or very little initial interest in philosophy, what I have found is that abstract philosophical concepts *must* be presented in the most concrete fashion possible. The emphasis of all material, whether it is abstract metaphysics, or discussions of race and gender in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, is done in such a manner that it highlights the improvement of the person and how this person fits in the greater socio-historical context. To go back to a tried and true cliché, as teachers we first spread the seeds of *Bildung* and nothing more. We try to get the students to think about their lives, their worldviews, and how certain choices they make (their career choices, their friendships and interactions with others, and so forth), have an impact on the greater good. I have unfortunately found that even the very simple idea that one ought to care for the greater good, or that there even is such a thing, is sometimes novel to students. To get students to think about this and how they might have an effect on it is often all we can do in an intro course.

The process of *Bildung* must also be self-motivated. After all, the emphasis is in fact on *self-cultivation*. People must continue what is started in the classroom on their own. This, however, never means that the process is undertaken in isolation. This would be true in an atomistic framework, but the Hegelian, Gadamerian, and Romantic worldview is anything but atomistic. The self can only be understood as such in a social, intersubjective context. One becomes a self only through inheriting a language, culture, history, and so on – in other words, one becomes a self through the process of *Bildung*. This begins with the education one gets from parents and the classroom, but it must then be carried out through continuous learning in the same way that virtue can only be accomplished in and through virtuous acts directed toward others, or the mastery of an instrument is gained through continued practice. This means that the initial burden for *Bildung* lies not on the self but on the other – the parent and teacher. As such, the initial goal for us as educators is the modest one that I propose above: get students to conceptualize education as a continuous process of bettering oneself, and connect this to the notion of the greater good. I believe that

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3. I have found that the work of thinkers such as Aristotle, Confucius, Mengzi, and even Augustine to be helpful in articulating the notions of self-cultivation and the greater good.

philosophy is especially proficient at accomplishing this task, especially since so much of the traditional philosophical cannon, beginning with many of the Platonic dialogues, emphasizes precisely this sort of idea.

### **Conclusion**

What has been demonstrated in this paper is that the notion of *Bildung* can and should be re-evaluated in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to serve as guide for philosophical education (and perhaps even education in general). What the *Bildung* paradigm provides is a means to understand the process of education as an ongoing effort to make the individual a better person. As such, it functions along similar parameters as virtue theory. By continuously situating philosophical texts and discussions in the context of one's lived experience and history, and evaluating this experience in an intersubjective context based on the experience of others, we deepen our knowledge of who we are as a person and how we can continuously aim at promoting the greater good. This process is first initiated by teachers and parents, and then continually undertaken by the person all throughout life. What this means is that in order to grow as human beings we are continually engaged in the process of *Bildung* long after all formal education has been completed. Thus, the task of the educator is to lay the ground for this process in order for it to flourish later on in life, with the ultimate aim being the good of the individual and the good of the community as a whole.

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