

The German *Bildung* Tradition

In this paper I provide a brief summary of the German *Bildung* tradition, in an effort to lay groundwork for our discussion of *Bildung* in Dewey's mature philosophy. I will begin with some history of the term *Bildung* and then focus on Hegel's unique usage of the term.

The German term *Bildung* dates to 16th century Pietistic theology, according to which, the devout Christian should seek to cultivate (*Bildung*) his talents and dispositions according to the image of God, which was innate in his soul. In addition to this theological usage, Paracelsus (1493-1591), Jakob Böhme (1575-1624), and Leibniz (1646-1716) also used the term in natural philosophy to refer to "the development or unfolding of certain potentialities within an organism."^[1] In the 18th century, Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the founding father of the Jewish Enlightenment, used the term in the sense of unfolding one's potential in an influential essay in 1784, "What is Enlightenment?," identifying *Bildung* with Enlightenment itself. Pedagogical theorists, like Joachim Heinrich Campe (1746-1818), also focused on how pedagogical reform could promote the development (*Ausbildung*) and education (*Bildung*) of the citizenry. By the end of the 18th century, *Bildung* was becoming a term with not only spiritual, but also philosophical and political connotations. Increasingly, *Bildung* was associated with liberation of the mind from tradition and superstition, but also liberation of the German people from a pre-modern political system of small feudal states that owed allegiance to the Holy Roman Empire.

This political usage is apparent in the writings of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), in which he went beyond the sense of individual formation or development to the development of a people (*Volk*). For Herder, *Bildung* was the totality of experiences that provide a coherent identity, and sense of common destiny, to a people. Although Herder is rightfully associated with late-eighteenth-century German nationalism, he conceived the German *Volk* as including both royalty and peasants, envisioning a classless society. Accordingly, Herder's cultural nationalism required that social unity be promoted from the bottom up, in contrast to the top down political nationalism to which many historians have attributed the rise of German militarism that ultimately culminated in the Third Reich.

Because of the quality of his ideas and pervasiveness of his influence, it would be difficult to overemphasize Herder's importance in Western intellectual history. It has been said that Goethe (1749-1832) was transformed from a clever but conventional poet into the great artist we remember today by his encounter with Herder in 1770, and his continuing friendship with the philosopher. Herder

developed fundamental ideas about the dependence of thought on language that are taken for granted today, and that inspired work by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) that are widely viewed as the foundation of modern linguistics. Herder developed the methodological foundations of hermeneutics, or the theory of interpretation, that Schleiermacher (1768-1834) later built upon, and that ultimately culminated in nineteenth-century German classical scholarship and modern Biblical scholarship. Herder's writings also led to the establishment of the modern discipline of anthropology and its methodology.^[2] Additionally, Herder profoundly influenced intellectuals as diverse as Hegel, J.S. Mill (1806-1873), Nietzsche (1844-1900), and Dilthey (1833-1911).

In a series of works written over a period of almost fifty-years, Herder developed and defended the conception of philosophy that is at the very heart of the German *Bildung* tradition. The titles of some of these works are revealing: *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People* (1765), *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* (1774), *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity* (1784-91), and *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* (1793-1797). As these titles suggest, Herder believed philosophy must have a practical result, which can be summarized as human growth, and that philosophical ideas have to be understood within their social and historical context. Similar to the Renaissance Humanists, Herder believed that the proper study of man is man, and thus sought to displace academic philosophy with philosophical anthropology. For Herder, philosophy is, quite simply, the theory of *Bildung*; more precisely, philosophy is the theory of how the individual develops into the sort of organic unity that will constantly work toward the full development of its talents and abilities and that will drive social progress or social *Bildung*. For Herder, properly understood, philosophy must transform individuals and, at the very same time, it must have a broad social impact. John Zammito rightly asserts that the conception of philosophy Herder defended carried “forward from Herder to Wilhelm von Humboldt and G.W.F. Hegel, to Friedrich Schleiermacher . . . to the Left Hegelians . . . and Wilhelm Dilthey: the tradition of hermeneutics and historicism.”^[3]

At about the same time that he encountered Herder, Goethe and Friedrich von Schiller (1759-1805) inaugurated the pre-Romantic Sturm und Drang movement in literature, which emphasized the unpredictable emotional life of the individual.^[4] Thus in Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), the protagonist is driven to suicide by despair. In the late 1780s, Goethe and Schiller launched a new literary movement that became known as Weimar Classicism. Spurred on by Enlightenment themes as well as efforts to recover ancient aesthetic values, Weimar Classicism sought the enlightenment or liberation of man through an organic unification and harmonization of thought and feeling, mind and body.

Both men were also critical of the contemporaneous movement of German Romanticism. Although there are distinct similarities between Weimar Classicism and German Romanticism, no doubt owing to the fact that both developed in the same milieu, unlike the Romantics, Goethe sought to harmonize the vivid emotions he had emphasized in his Sturm and Drang period with the clarity of Enlightenment reason. Moreover, Goethe criticized the Romantic notion that an individual could intuitively tap into their genius in order to apprehend transcendent truth. Similarly, Goethe followed Herder's lead by rejecting the transcendent reason of the Enlightenment, claiming, for example, that the laws of a country cannot be based on pure reason because geography and history shape the habits of individuals and their cultures. For Goethe, both the Enlightenment and Romanticism had erred by their excessive devotion to their respective ideals, thus undermining the sort of inner balance and harmony that he championed.

Unlike his earlier novel, in *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* the protagonist undergoes a journey of *Bildung*, or self-realization. Thus Goethe initiated the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel of formation. The only sort of transcendence that Wilhelm seeks in the novel is to rise above the soulless life of a bourgeois businessman by reconciling or shaping his particular interests so that they serve a greater good, which is service to his society. W.H. Bruford correctly points out that this novel represents "the very essence of German humanism," the ideal of which is the formation of individuals whose conduct is governed by a highly developed inner character rather than imitation of the conduct of others.^[5] The type of character formation sought requires the identification and molding of one's talents and inclinations through wise education and life experience. This education teaches Wilhelm that the individual must find his vocation, a calling to which he is well-suited and that contributes to the growth and maturation of the culture in which he lives. In so doing, the individual harmonizes not only mind and body, but also self and society.

As this tradition develops through Goethe, into what is often called German neo-humanism, it is assumed that all individuals have different talents and thus need to live in a society in which the unique talents of others compliment their own. Hence a well-developed society is one that allows wide scope for the unique development of each individual as the very catalyst of social harmony. Rather than depict the individual as at odds with his society, German neo-humanism champions a harmony of the individual with his society through the development of his uniqueness and an acceptance of his social responsibility as the avenue toward self-development. Self-realization is unattainable for those who wallow in their own narrow emotions or self-interest. Satisfaction is not found in a romantic transcendence of social bonds, but in the activities of concrete social life. Goethe

developed these ideas further in the sequel to *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*. As Thomas Mann explains, *Wilhelm Meister's Travels* (1821) “begins with individualistic self-development through miscellaneous experiences and ends in a political utopia. In between stands the idea of *education*...It teaches us to see the element of education as the organic transition from the world of inwardness to that of the objective; it shows how the one grows humanely and naturally out of the other.”[\[6\]](#)

In my recent book, I argued at some length that Hegel was profoundly influenced by German neo-humanism, eschewing transcendent realities and timeless truths, and championing a metaphysics of experience according to which philosophy deals with the world of human experience rather than a noumenal realm that transcends possible human experience.[\[7\]](#) Hence, Hegel’s logic is not a theory of the categories of reality, but a theory of the categories according to which we experience reality. But most importantly, I contend that Hegel was first and foremost concerned with *Bildung*, the self-development of the individual human spirit as well as the self-development of the human race. As Josiah Royce and others have noted, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* can be read as a *Bildungsroman*, a story about the individual’s, as well as humanity’s, development. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel shows the reader the development of an open and intelligent mind in a complex society that lacks universally accepted values, as the main character encounters a wide variety of experiences. As is typical of a *Bildungsroman*, the center of interest is the links between the main character’s successive experiences and his gradual achievement of a fully rounded personality and well-tested philosophy of life.[\[8\]](#)

For Hegel, the self is always engaged in a project and ordinarily proceeds in a state of harmony with its environment, which Hegel calls “natural consciousness.”[\[9\]](#) In this state, there is no subject/object dualism because the self is at one with its environment. Periodically, the self encounters an obstacle to its project, which Hegel terms a negation. When this occurs, consciousness is rent asunder, identifying an object over and against the self, that is to say the obstacle that disrupted its project. After analysis of the negation, the self imagines solutions that will alter itself, by modifying its project, and alter the object in such a way that consciousness can be reunified and the self can resume its project. When the self succeeds at reunification, the negation becomes a “determinate negation,” meaning a negation that leads to progress or growth. The self emerges from experiences of this kind not only unified but also enlarged because it has gained valuable experience. Rather than a metaphysical reality, subject/object dualism is a moment within experience that serves a particular function. The process I have described here is Hegel's dialectic, but it also *Bildung*. Accordingly, rather than a theory of knowledge, Hegel developed a theory of learning, and philosophy became the philosophy of education.

Although textbook accounts claim that the dialectic is driven by contradiction, this term oversimplifies Hegel's concept of negation. Although, for Hegel, negation can lead to a fairly routine learning process, it can also lead to existential crises. In either case, rather than a contradiction of propositions, negation is a disruption of the process of living, which Hegel often describes as a pathway or road. To use Hegel's words, when the self encounters a negation, it loses

its truth on this path. The road can therefore be regarded as the pathway of doubt, or more precisely as the way of despair. For what happens on it is not what is ordinarily understood when the word 'doubt' is used: shilly-shallying about this or that presumed truth, followed by a return to that truth again, after the doubt has been appropriately dispelled—so that at the end of the process the matter is taken to be what it was in the first place.^[10]

The self presumes to have knowledge until it encounters a negation, which leads it into a state of doubt or despair. If and when the self successfully resolves the problem that initiated the process, it gains knowledge that it has tested for itself. Quite literally, the self gains self-determination.

Hegel's concept of *Bildung*, which is prominent throughout all of his works, dovetails with his view that knowledge is gained only from experience, and that it also requires us to seek, like the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*, the widest variety of experience. Furthermore, on the *Bildung* model, learning involves activity. Hence Hegel rejected Locke's passive spectator theory of the mind, according to which we should restrain our passions in order to gain objective knowledge. For Hegel, learning requires a passionate search for truth; it is a matter of conscious self-development that requires arduous individual effort and responsibility. For Hegel, fulfillment must come in the activities of real life. Finally, Hegel's emphasis on self-knowledge, an accurate perception of one's talents, interests, and abilities, explains his criticisms of the Enlightenment's fixation on a narrow conception of knowledge as a search for indubitable truth. The notion of timeless truth worried Hegel for very practical reasons. He was convinced that the French Revolution had turned to terror because revolutionaries believed they had apprehended transcendent truth that provided them with a preconceived blueprint to which their society must conform.^[11] In short, Hegel argued that the notion of transcendent truth tends toward an inflexible dogmatism that not only foreshortens inquiry, but can also lead to fanatical, and even violent, devotion to an ideology.

As rector of the Nuremberg *Gymnasium* from 1808 to 1815, Hegel developed a philosophy of education that opposed past German models as well as the Enlightenment model of education, the latter of which he identified as "utilitarian."^[12] Hegel described education, the dialectic, as a process of alienation and return, in which the mind is continually stretched beyond its ordinary point of view. Hegel contended

that *Gymnasium* education is accomplished best by alienating the child's mind from its received point of view through the study of the ancient world and its languages. Ancient civilizations are sufficiently alien, he argued, to separate the child from his natural state, but sufficiently close to his own language and world for him to return to himself enlarged and transformed. On the practical level, Hegel argued that education in the *Gymnasia* should prepare students for life rather than merely for jobs, but he supported the teaching of religion for the secular rationale that it would link students to social customs and traditions. He also averred that students should be treated with respect, as ends in themselves, and at the Nuremberg *Gymnasium*, he encouraged discussion in class, but would not tolerate giving students complete freedom in the schools.^[13] The goal of education, for Hegel, was to help students realize the ideal of modernity, which is for the individual to become a self-directed, self-formed person.

In this way, Hegel expanded upon the German *Bildung* tradition's emphasis on education that liberates one from blind obedience to superstition, tradition, or any sort of belief in realities that transcend the possibilities of human experience. Hegel was also consistent with past proponents of *Bildung* in emphasizing the social nature of the self. The notion of a self that can transcend its social and historical context was as untenable to Hegel as any other abstract concept without a context. Although the liberated, or enlightened, individual learns to think critically about his society, he cannot transcend it. This brings us to a crucial difference in Hegel's use of the notion of *Bildung*. Rather than the unfolding of a form immanent in an individual, or in a people, as James Schmidt has noted, Hegel "presents *Bildung* as a process of relentless self-estrangement."^[14] Thus in the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel writes that consciousness "suffers...violence at its own hands" because it must confront its own naïve certainty to go beyond itself and experience growth.^[15] *Bildung* is not an autonomous activity, nor is it divorced from one's desires and passions. On the contrary, *Bildung* requires self-knowledge, discerning one's own talents by discovering activities that bring satisfaction, and even a sense of fulfillment. And the greatest sort of fulfillment for Hegel is activity that promotes *Bildung* for one's society.

The person of *Bildung* promotes cultural progress through the same process of alienation and return, which Steven B. Smith characterizes as a method of immanent cultural critique.^[16] According to Smith, Hegel intended the dialectic as a method of cultural criticism that identifies the standards of rationality within an existing culture or system of thought and then criticizes practices that do not accord with those standards of rationality. This method is immanent critique in the sense that it criticizes a culture on its own terms, on the basis of its highest ideals, rather than some apodictic first principle or

transcendent, abstract moral standards.^[17] Smith perceptively points out three key features of Hegel's dialectic. First, Hegel's dialectic "must be immanent or internal to its subject matter." There is no God's eye view or Archimedean point from which we can investigate a subject matter. We cannot legitimately ask if a theory accurately describes its subject matter, because to some degree a theory always creates the subject it seeks to explain. We can examine a theory's internal coherence, however, and ask whether it accomplishes the goal(s) it sets for itself. Second, Hegel's dialectic is "dialogical in character."^[18] The dialectic does not take place within an internal, private mind, but is always a conversation between past, contemporaneous, and future interlocutors. For Hegel, all thinking is mediated by the intellectual tradition we have inherited from our predecessors. For this reason, his works generally have the character of a conversation with illustrious predecessors in which he recognizes their contribution to our current point of view. Rather than refute his opponents, Hegel engaged them in conversation. Third, Hegel's dialectic is based on the assumption that all theory has a vitally important historical dimension. He accepted Kant's contention that the mind actively categorizes sense data, but historicized the categories. For Hegel, our conceptual structure is historically and culturally relative; all logical categories, even those that appear to be the most permanent, are temporally contingent.

Hegel sought to counter the charge of historical relativism by claiming historical epochs fit into a larger narrative. For Hegel, the person of *Bildung* can discern a moral unity to history. He hypothesized that the *Weltgeist*, or world-spirit, tirelessly moves in the direction of ever increasing human freedom. To claim that Hegel's *Weltgeist* is some sort of transcendent reality, however, is to render his thought radically inconsistent. Thus I have argued that Hegel's *Weltgeist* is more properly understood as an interpretation of the history of the human race, which can be known only by its actions. *Geist*, for Hegel, has no pre-existing essence, it is known only by what it has actually done thus far, nor does it have a predetermined end. Hence, for Hegel, the disciplines of philosophy and history are inextricably linked because, together, they are the source of individual and cultural *Bildung*.^[19]

Finally, *Bildung* is a central motif of Hegel's 1821 *Philosophy of Right*, in which he illuminated the concept by repeating the advice of a Pythagorean philosopher to a father about the best way to educate his son: "Make him the *citizen of a state with good laws*."^[20] Thus the *Philosophy of Right* highlights the political connotations of *Bildung*. *Bildung* requires a well-ordered society in which the individual has the freedom, and even luxury, to develop his unique talents and abilities. *Bildung* also requires a society in which there is scope for all kinds of complementary individuals and activities because exposure to different kinds of people and experimentation with different types of lives is crucial to the sort of moral

development Hegel had in mind. Hegel made it apparent throughout the *Philosophy of Right* that *Bildung* should begin in the family, continue more systematically in school, and be taken to a higher level in the university. After formal schooling is completed, in civil society the individual should achieve the final stage of *Bildung*, recognition of the rational basis of his society's institutions. Despite portrayals of Hegel's political thought as reactionary, the final stage of *Bildung* does not require acquiescence to the status quo. On the contrary, the man of *Bildung* is capable of independent thought and is thus exceptionally well prepared to engage in immanent critique of his society's practices. That is to say, he is able to appraise the extent to which his society's actual practices measure up to its rational basis.

In conclusion, according to the German *Bildung* tradition, philosophy and education are virtually synonymous terms that designate an ongoing process of both personal and cultural maturation. This maturation is evidenced in a harmonization of the individual's mind and heart and in a unification of society. Harmonization of the self is achieved through a wide variety of experiences and challenges to the individual's accepted beliefs; in Hegel's writings, these challenges entail agonizing alienation from one's "natural consciousness" that leads to a reunification and development of the self. Similarly, although social unity requires well-formed institutions, it also requires a diversity of individuals with the freedom to develop a wide variety of talents and abilities. Rather than an end state, both individual and social unification is a process driven by an unrelenting succession of determinate negations. Most explicitly in Hegel's writings, the *Bildung* tradition rejects the pre-Kantian metaphysics of being for a post-Kantian metaphysics of experience that eschews speculation about timeless realities. Learning requires a passionate search for continual growth, tempered by reason that is developed through intense study of one's intellectual tradition. Fulfillment comes through practical activity that promotes the development of one's talents and abilities as well as development of one's society. Rather than acceptance of the socio-political status quo, *Bildung* includes the ability to engage in immanent critique of one's society, challenging it to actualize its own highest ideals.

[1] James Schmidt, "The Fool's Truth: Diderot, Goethe, and Hegel," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57.4 (1996): 630.

[2] John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[3] *Ibid.*, 7-9. Michael N. Forster has recently argued for Hegel's debt to Herder, at least in the *Phenomenology*. Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[4] See Goethe's tragic play "Götz von Berlichingen" (1773), the poem "Promethius" (1773), and the novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774).

[5] W.H. Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: Bildung from Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 55.

[6] Quoted in *Ibid.*, 88.

[7] James A. Good, *A Search for Unity in Diversity: The "Permanent Hegelian Deposit" in the Philosophy of John Dewey* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005).

[8] Josiah Royce is generally credited as the first English-speaking scholar to articulate this reading of the *Phenomenology* in his *Lectures on Modern Idealism*, originally published in 1919). For a more recent reading along this line see John H. Smith, *The Spirit and Its Letter: Traces of Rhetoric in Hegel's Philosophy of Bildung* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), 174-238.

[9] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §78.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] See Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, "Absolute Freedom and Terror," §§582-595; as well as relevant sections of *The Philosophy of Right*, such as "Abstract Right," §§34-40.

[12] Terry Pinkard, *Hegel: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 269ff.

[13] Pinkard, *Hegel*, 288-290, 304-307, 324-326, 504-505.

[14] Schmidt, 630.

[15] Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §80.

[16] According to Steven B. Smith, Hegel was "the great champion of...immanent critique." Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism: Rights in Context* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 10.

[17] *Ibid.* Cf. Lewis Hinchman, *Hegel's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Gainesville and Tampa: University Presses of Florida, 1984); and William Maker, "The Science of Freedom: Hegel's Critical Theory," *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 41-42 (2000): 1-17. On this note, in his *Science of Logic*, Hegel wrote, "refutation must not come from outside; that is, it must not proceed from assumptions lying outside the system in question and inconsistent with it. The system need only refuse to recognize those assumptions; the defect is a defect only for him who starts from the requirements and demands based on those assumptions. . . . The genuine refutation must penetrate the opponent's stronghold and meet him on his own ground; no advantage is gained by attacking him from somewhere else and meeting him where he is not." Hegel, *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: 1969), 580-581.

[18] Smith, *Hegel's Critique of Liberalism*, 167-168.

[19] Good, *A Search for Unity in Diversity*.

[20] Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §153 (emphasis in the original). Hegel also quoted this advice in his *Natural Law* essay, written in late 1802, early 1803. Hegel, *Natural Law: The Scientific Ways of Treating Natural Law, Its Place in Moral Philosophy, and Its Relation to the Positive Sciences of Law*, trans. T.M. Knox (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975), 115.