

Theory of Bildung¹

Wilhelm von Humboldt
Gillian Horton-Krüger (Trans.)

Wilhelm von Humboldt's fragment, "Theorie der Bildung des Menschen," was probably written in 1793 or 1794. Earlier, in a letter written in November 1793, Humboldt had remarked on the absence of anything more than an embryonic theory of Bildung. The fragment develops a few general principles for such a theory.

A substantial and exquisite piece of work could be produced if someone were to undertake to portray the peculiar faculties that the various fields of human knowledge require in order to expand successfully; the proper

¹Translation of Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Theorie der Bildung des Menschen." In Wilhelm von Humboldt, 1969, *Werke in fünf Bänden: Vol. 1. Schriften zur Anthropologie und Geschichte* (Andreas Flitner & Klaus Giel, Eds.) (pp. 234-240). Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buch-

mankind, and consistently male pronouns, when referring to "a person" in general. In this instance, we have chosen to be source oriented. Although the use of an inclusive term such as *men and women* might be more acceptable to a modern readership, it would convey a view of the world that would not reflect that of Humboldt.

spirit in which they must be worked on and the relationship in which they must be placed to one another in order to accomplish, as a whole, the development of mankind. The mathematician, the naturalist, the artist, indeed even the philosopher commonly commence their business without knowing its real nature and without viewing it in its entirety; and indeed only the few later attain this higher standpoint and this more universal view. In an even worse position, however, is the person who does not choose one field exclusively but wishes to draw on them all for the benefit of his education. In the embarrassment of such choice and lacking the skill to utilize any of these fields beyond its narrow confines to his own more general end, he will sooner or later be forced to surrender himself to chance alone and to use whatever he takes up for inferior purposes only, or as a mere toy to pass the time. Herein lies one of the preeminent reasons for the frequent, not unjustified, complaints that knowledge remains idle and the cultivation of the mind unfruitful, that a great deal is achieved around us, but only little improved within us, and that the more generally and more immediately useful development of principles is neglected in favor of the higher scientific education of the mind that is suitable for only the few.

At the convergence point of all particular kinds of activity is man, who, in the absence of a purpose with a particular direction, wishes only to strengthen and heighten the powers of his nature and secure value and permanence for his being. However, because sheer power needs an object on which it may be exercised and pure form or idea needs a material in which, expressing itself, it can last, so too does man need a world outside himself. From this springs his endeavor to expand the sphere of his knowledge and his activity, and without himself being clearly aware of it, he is not really concerned with what he obtains from the former or what he achieves outside himself by means of the latter, but only with his inner improvement and elevation, or at least with the appeasement of the inner unrest that consumes him. In pure, ultimate terms, thought is never more than an attempt of the mind to be comprehensible to itself, whereas action is an attempt of the will to become free and independent in itself. Man's entire external activity is nothing but the striving against futility. Simply because both his thought and his action are not possible except by means of a third element, the representation and cultivation of something that is actually characterized by being nonman, that is, world, he seeks to grasp as much world as possible and bind it as tightly as he can to himself.

It is the ultimate task of our existence to achieve as much substance as possible for the concept of humanity in our person, both during the span of our life and beyond it, through the traces we leave by means of our vital activity. This can be fulfilled only by the linking of the self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay. This alone is the yardstick by which each branch of human knowledge can

be judged. For in each case, the only true path is that on which the eye is able to follow steady progress toward the final goal, and here alone may the arcanum be sought that animates and makes fruitful those things that would otherwise remain eternally lifeless and vain.

At first glance, the linking of the self to the world may appear to be not only an incomprehensible expression, but also an overextravagant idea. On closer inspection, however, the latter suspicion at least will disappear, and it will be seen that once the true endeavor of the human spirit is perceived (embodying both its greatest vitality and its greatest impotence), it is impossible to stop at anything less.

What do we demand of a nation, of an age, of entire mankind, if it is to occasion respect and admiration? We demand that *Bildung*, wisdom, and virtue, as powerfully and universally propagated as possible, should prevail under its aegis, that it augment its inner worth to such an extent that the concept of humanity, if taken from its example alone, would be of a rich and worthy substance. And the demand does not stop here. It is expected that man leave a visible impression of his worth on the constitutions he forms and even on inanimate Nature around him, indeed that he should breathe his virtue and his strength (in such might and dominance are they to permeate his being) into his progeny. For only in this way may the acquired merits be perpetuated, and without these, without the comforting thought of a certain sequence of elevation and *Bildung*, human existence would be more transient than the existence of a flower that, upon withering, has at least the certainty of leaving behind the germ of its likeness.

Although all these demands are limited to man's inner being, his nature drives him to reach beyond himself to the external objects, and here it is crucial that he should not lose himself in this alienation, but rather reflect back into his inner being the clarifying light and the comforting warmth of everything that he undertakes outside himself. To this end, however, he must bring the mass of objects closer to himself, impress his mind upon this matter, and create more of a resemblance between the two. Perfect unity and constant interplay are contained within him; thus he must apply both to Nature. Within him are several faculties to represent one and the same object to himself in various guises: now as a concept of reason, now as an image of the imagination, now as an intuition of the senses. Using all of these as so many different tools, he must try to grasp Nature, not so much in order to become acquainted with it from all sides, but rather through this diversity of views to strengthen his own innate power, of which they are only differently shaped effects. But it is precisely this unity that determines the concept of the world, a concept that encompasses both the diversity of ways in which the external objects touch our senses and the independent existence through which these objects influence our feelings. For only the world comprises all conceivable diversity, and it alone pos-

sesses so complete an independence that it counters the obstinacy of our will with the laws of Nature and the decisions of Fate.

What man needs most, therefore, is simply an object that makes possible the interplay between his receptivity and his self-activity. But if this object is to suffice to occupy his whole being in its full strength and unity, it must be the ultimate object, the world, or at least (for only this is in fact correct) be regarded as such. Man seeks unity only to escape from dissipating and confusing diversity. In order not to become lost in infinity, empty and unfruitful, he creates a single circle, visible at a glance from any point. In order to attach the image of the ultimate goal to every step forward he takes, he seeks to transform scattered knowledge and action into a closed system, mere scholarship into scholarly *Bildung*, merely restless endeavor into judicious activity.

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This all would be most vigorously promoted by a study of the kind mentioned previously. Determined to observe and compare the various kinds of human activity in the directions they give to the mind and the demands that they make of it, such work would lead directly to the convergence point that everything must reach if it is to affect us. Under its guidance, our observation would take refuge from the infinity of objects in the narrower circle of our faculties and their diverse combinations; as though in a simultaneously brightening and mustering mirror, the image of our activity, which we otherwise glimpse in fragmented form and through external successes only, would be revealed to us in direct relation to our inner *Bildung*. The man concerned only with the heightening of his powers and the elevation of his personality would find an excellent lesson in this work, which would set out before him, simply and comprehensibly, the influence that every business of life can exercise on our inner *Bildung*.

At the same time, however, the person who pursues a single task will only there learn to conduct his business in its proper spirit and with an awareness of its greater signification. He no longer wants only to prepare knowledge or tools for men's use, no longer wants merely to help further just a part of his *Bildung*; he knows the goal that is set for him; he sees that, executed in the right way, his business will give the mind its own, fresh view of the world and through this its own, fresh self-determination, so that he can achieve a full measure of *Bildung* from this, his own perspective; it is this he strives to achieve. If, however, he works only for power and its enhancement, he may satisfy himself only when he expresses his own power perfectly in his work. However, the ideal becomes greater if one measures the exertion it requires rather than the object that it is to represent. The

consuming purpose of genius everywhere is only to satisfy the inner compulsion. The sculptor, for example, does not actually wish to present the image of a god, but to express and make fast the fullness of his plastic imagination in this figure. Every business of life has its own characteristic intellectual attitude and in this lies the true spirit of its perfection, in this alone lies the genuine spirit of its completeness. There are always several external means of conducting any of life's business, but only this intellectual attitude can determine the choice among them, can determine whether it is to find a lesser or greater degree of satisfaction.

The procedure of our mind, particularly in its more mysterious effects, can be fathomed only by deep reflection and unceasing observation. But even this achieves little, unless at the same time attention is paid to the difference between minds and to the variety of ways in which the world is reflected in different individuals. The work I describe would therefore have to portray this diversity and should not overlook anyone who has distinguished himself in any field and through whom it has acquired a new form or a broader concept. These would have to be portrayed in their complete individuality, showing the whole of the influence their times and their nation had exerted on them. Thus one would survey not only the diverse ways in which every single field can be treated, but also the sequence in which the one gradually arises from the other. However, because this sequence is repeatedly interrupted by the influence of national character, of the period and of external circumstances in general, this would yield two different series with constant mutual influence: one comprising the changes that any intellectual activity gradually acquires as it proceeds, the other comprising the changes that the human character undergoes in particular nations and periods, as well as in general, through the occupations that it takes up; in both would be seen the deviations where individuals of genius suddenly disturb this otherwise uninterrupted natural progression and suddenly pitch their nation or their time into other directions offering new vistas.

Only by proceeding step by step and finally surveying the whole can one reach the point of explaining completely to oneself how human Bildung manages to progress evenly and endure, yet without degenerating into the monotony by which physical Nature goes through same transformations time after time, without ever producing anything new.