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Liberal Education/*Bildung*: Arguments For and Against

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Introduction

In this seminar, we will discuss – as the title states – arguments for and against liberal education or *Bildung*. We will consider different lines of objection against this educational ideal, and discuss three types of justification for it.

It is contested whether school curricula should be designed in accordance with this ideal, but another question arises as soon as we discuss this issue: What exactly does liberal education or *Bildung* mean? This problem is particularly pressing in German, where *Bildung* is one of the basic concepts of educational thought. The term ‘liberal education’ refers to a particular type of education – ‘liberal’ education. So, there is a basic term – ‘education’ – that is specified as ‘liberal education’. German educational thought, however, suffers from the fact that there is no basic term that covers all of what goes on in education. There is the term *Erziehung* that is usually distinguished from *Bildung*.

In contemporary German, *Bildung* is used to refer to schooling – with terms such as *Bildungssystem* or *Bildungsstandards*. By contrast, *Erziehung* is used for family education. Often, *Erziehung* means moral education in families or schools, while *Bildung* refers to the transmission of knowledge. Many protagonists of educational thought make the distinction in a different way: they use *Bildung* for the individual process of self-perfection, and *Erziehung* for the attempt of educators to support this process. In this way, the terms are distinguished – for instance – by Wilhelm von Humboldt whose writings had a strong impact on the later debates on *Bildung*. Humboldt, however, does not use *Bildung* for any type of learning or self-development but for a specific educational ideal. If we use the term in a value-laden sense, we forfeit its use as a basic educational concept. Or, at least, we have to face the fact that there are different concepts of *Bildung* – a general concept that is compatible with various educational ideals, and a more specific meaning that expresses a controversial view of education. Then, there are two different concepts that require clarification: what exactly is the meaning of *Bildung*, when understood in an unspecific way? Is it possible to define the term in a purely descriptive way? And how do we specify the normative ideal of *Bildung*?

Obviously, the tradition of educational thought provides us with no clear-cut answer to either of these questions. The German educational philosopher Dieter Lenzen (1997) called *Bildung* a German “container word” (*Container-Wort*) – a word that can be filled up with a variety of different meanings; however, the fact that *Bildung* is used in various ways does

not mean that it has no clear-cut meaning. This was one of the insights that motivated the work of the English philosopher Richard Peters – a thinker who developed a specifically analytic approach to the philosophy of education. Peters, to be sure, does not use the German term *Bildung*. Philosophy of education should start, he thinks, with an analysis of the concept of ‘education’. His attempts to provide a conceptual analysis of the term, however, mirror the problems that arise in the German tradition. Peters proceeds with a usage-based approach that is indebted to the philosophy of the later Wittgenstein. Although ‘education’ is used in different ways, Peters claims, it is possible to fix criteria for an appropriate use of the term. One of the key elements of Peters’ conceptual analysis is that ‘education’ is distinct from ‘training’. Being trained, Peters says, is to have acquired specialized skills to fulfil particular tasks. The concept of ‘training’ – or ‘vocational training’ – corresponds to the German term *Ausbildung*, which is often contrasted to *Bildung*.

So, according to Peters’ conceptual account, the meaning of ‘education’ comes close to the specific meaning of *Bildung*. If *Bildung* expresses a particular educational ideal, the same must be said of ‘education’; however, if ‘education’ is normative in this sense, the term cannot be used as a basic term of educational thought. As in the case of *Bildung*, it might be necessary to distinguish between two different concepts of ‘education’ – a general and a more specific, normative understanding of the term. Indeed, Peters makes this distinction in some of his writings: “There is a general concept of ‘education’ which covers almost all processes of learning, rearing, or bringing up. Nowadays, when we speak of education in this general way, we usually mean going to school, to an institution devoted to learning” (Peters 1973/2010, p. 86). He goes on to say: “Of more relevance is the specific concept of ‘education’ which emerged in the nineteenth century as a contrast to training” (ibid., p. 87).

In the same period of time – during the nineteenth century – the term *Bildung* gained its specific meaning.¹ The term has been used since the Middle Ages – it was coined by the mystic Meister Eckhart (1260-1328) and refers to the idea of the human being as an image of God (*imago Dei; Gottes Ebenbild*). So, *Bildung* is etymologically related to *Bild* (image). In the following centuries, the term was used in various ways, but it was only in the nineteenth century – or at the end of the eighteenth – that its specific educational meaning became prevalent.

It is interesting to note that Kant, in his *Lectures on Pedagogy* (first published in 1803), uses the term in a rather unspecific way, referring to various types of education: *Scholastische Bildung* makes a person neat in the pursuit of his purposes. *Bildung zur Klugheit* (prudence) is necessary to be successful in the public sphere. Finally, *moralische Bildung* shall foster the development of moral autonomy. It is the moralization of the person that all education should ultimately aim to achieve, according to Kant, but he clearly does not reserve the term *Bil-*

¹ For an overview over historical uses of the term, see Lichtenstein (1971) and Menze (1970).

dung for this stage of the educational process. He does not assume that the acquisition of useful skills lies outside of the sphere of *Bildung*.

The term becomes important in German Idealism, especially in Hegel's philosophy. It was Humboldt's use of the term, though, that inspired educational debates in the nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century. So, it is worth examining some passages from Humboldt's work.

Humboldt is known as a defender of *liberal* ideas, and his use of the term *Bildung* is intertwined with his political views. So, we might consider *Bildung* as a specifically liberal ideal – *Bildung* might be translated as *liberal education*.

It is not fully clear, however, what the term 'liberal' – in liberal education – refers to (see also Cuypers 2012b). This educational ideal might be traced back to Greek conceptions of education – especially the educational program that Plato presents in the *Republic* – and the tradition of the so-called *artes liberales*. In this context, the term 'liberal' – although derived from the Latin *liber* (free) – is not associated with a political program of equal freedom.² The *artes liberales* were established in the period of Hellenism as an educational canon that draws on the knowledge of Greek culture. These arts or disciplines were called 'liberal' because they were deemed appropriate for the education of *free* men – as contrasted to slaves. Later, in Christian times, the term liberal was interpreted differently: The *artes liberales* were said to free the human soul (Lindgren 1992, p. 5). They were opposed to the *artes illiberales* (also: *artes sordidae* or *mechanicae*) – practical and useful arts such as agriculture and blacksmithing. It is clear that these latter arts were considered as inferior to the liberal arts – just like mere training was later considered to be inferior to real education.

It was Boethius – in the sixth century – who created the classical canon of the seven *artes liberales*, which were divided into two groups – the *trivium* (grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic or logic) and the *quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy). So, the canon roughly distinguishes between language-based and mathematical disciplines. It does not comprise law, medicine, architecture, or physics. In late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, the *trivium* was the uncontested core of education. By contrast, few of those who had access to education engaged in serious studies of the *quadrivium*. In this period, much of the mathematical knowledge of the Greeks was lost (*ibid.*, p. 9). The early Middle Ages – in which knowledge was mainly transmitted through abbeys – were the hey day of the *artes liberales*. The canon started losing its relevance in the twelfth century, when the original texts of antiquity – especially Aristotle – were rediscovered in Europe. Later, in the period of the Renaissance Humanism, the study of the Ancients was seen as a means to develop a per-

² Later uses of the term 'liberal' might not only be traced back to the Latin *liber* (free) but also to *liberalitas* (generosity, broadmindedness).

son's moral self and to free his mind. In these times, the expression *studia liberalia* was in use, but also the term *studia humanitatis* (Buck 1996).

Humboldt is not only known as a liberal in the political sense but also as a lover of the cultural heritage of the Greeks. He is considered as a protagonist of the so-called "Neo-Humanism" in nineteenth-century Germany. It is still common today to refer to *humanistische Bildung* as an ideal mainly for the *Gymnasium*. The expression 'liberal education' can be seen as a close relative to *humanistische Bildung*. In contrast to Humboldt, Cardinal Newman – one of the main defenders of a liberal education in nineteenth-century England – was not known as a *political* liberal. Newman, a Roman Catholic convert, stood for a modern "liberal" form of Catholicism but made no political claims (Hoeffken 1946).

The meaning of 'liberal education' is also discussed by Richard Peters: apart from his conceptual analysis of 'education', he tries to clarify the term 'liberal education'.

In this seminar, we will take a closer look at Peters' work on 'education' and 'liberal education', and we will shed some light on the German theory of *Bildung*. As stated at the beginning – if we discuss reasons for and against *Bildung*, we have to clarify what we mean by *Bildung*. We will further discuss this problem in the first part of the seminar – without too much hope of finding a definite solution.

In the second part, we will consider arguments for and against liberal education/*Bildung*. We will discuss three different justifications for this educational idea: first, the transcendental justification developed by Peters; second, so-called "perfectionist justifications" – one of them is provided by Stefaan Cuypers; and third, a justification based on the idea of equal respect.

1 Liberal Education/*Bildung* – What is it?

Bildung in German educational thought

So, let us go back to the late eighteenth century in the German-speaking world, and the work of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Humboldt – brother of the natural scientist Alexander von Humboldt – was born in 1767 into a wealthy family that not long before had risen to the aristocracy. The family owned a castle near Berlin – Schloss Tegel – as well as a flat in the city of Berlin, then the capital of the Prussian kingdom. The two sons enjoyed the best possible private education available. At age thirteen, Wilhelm was fluent in Greek, Latin and French, and was acquainted with the important literary works in these languages. Later, he studied law – as his mother had wished – but more eagerly philosophy, history, and the languages. In 1792 – he was then twenty-five – his influential political work, a foundation of liberalism, was published. Its original title is *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen* – an essay on the limits of state power. There, he argues for a "minimal

state“ – to borrow Robert Nozick’s term – that ensures its citizens’ freedom without fostering their positive welfare. In this book, the term *Bildung* plays a fundamental role.

Only about one year later, he wrote a short fragment entitled *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen* – “Theory of the *Bildung* of the Human Being”. The ideas presented there are not identical with – although compatible with – the educational ideas in his political work.

These two texts had great impact on the German debate on *Bildung*. Apart from his theoretical writings, Humboldt is known as a reformer of the Prussian education system. After the military defeat against Napoleon (battle at Jena and Auerstedt, 1806), the government of Prussia initiated a number of political reforms, among them a radical reform of the education system. Humboldt was charged with this task, in 1809, due to his liberal political ideas and his commitment to *Bildung*. So, Humboldt worked to re-structure and improve the *public* education system, although in his theoretical work, he had argued against state education. We will now examine short passages from his political theory and his fragment on *Bildung*.

As we go through these passages, let us keep the following questions in mind:

- a) What does Humboldt mean by *Bildung*?
- b) What role does the concept of *Bildung* play in his political argument as a whole?

Passages from *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*:

Chapter II (opening passages)

1a. The true end of man, or that which is prescribed by the immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development [*Bildung*] of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the grand and indispensable condition which the possibility of such development presupposes. But there is besides another essential, – intimately connected with freedom, it is true, – a variety of situations. Even the most free and self-reliant of men is thwarted and hindered in his development by uniformity of position.

1b. Der wahre Zweck des Menschen – nicht der, welchen die wechselnde Neigung, sondern welchen die ewig unveränderliche Vernunft ihm vorschreibt – ist die höchste und proportionirlichste Bildung seiner Kräfte zu einem Ganzen. Zu dieser Bildung ist Freiheit die erste und unerlassliche Bedingung. Allein ausser der Freiheit erfordert die Entwicklung der menschlichen Kräfte noch etwas andres, obgleich mit der Freiheit eng Verbundenes: Mannigfaltigkeit der Situationen. Auch der freieste und unabhängigste Mensch, in einförmige Lagen versetzt, bildet sich minder aus. (p. 64)

Chapter II (conclusion)

2a. I, therefore, deduce that reason cannot desire for man any other condition than that in which each individual [...] enjoys the most absolute freedom of developing himself by his own energies, in his perfect individuality ...

2b. Bewiesen halte ich demnach durch das Vorige, dass die wahre Vernunft dem Menschen keinen andren Zustand als einen solchen wünschen kann, in welchem [...] jeder Einzelne der ungebundensten Freiheit genießt, sich aus sich selbst in seiner Eigentümlichkeit zu entwickeln? (S. 69)

Chapter VI

3a. The grand leading principle to which every argument hitherto unfolded in these pages directly converges is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity, but national education, since at least it presupposes the selection and appointment of some one instructor, must always promote a definite form of development, however careful to avoid such an error. And hence it is attended with all those disadvantages which we before observed to flow from such a positive policy; and it only remains to be added that every restriction becomes more directly fatal when it operates on the moral part of our nature – that if there is one thing more than another which absolutely requires free activity on the part of the individual, it is precisely education, whose object it is to develop the individual. [...] I have only to conclude from what has been argued here, that national education seems to me to lie wholly beyond the limits within which political agency should properly be confined.

3b. Nach dem ganzen vorigen Raisonement kommt schlechterdings alles auf die Ausbildung des Menschen in der höchsten Mannigfaltigkeit an; öffentliche Erziehung aber muss, selbst wenn sie diesen Fehler vermeiden, wenn sie sich bloss darauf einschränken wollte, Erzieher anzustellen und zu unterhalten, immer eine bestimmte Form begünstigen. Es treten daher alle die Nachteile bei derselben ein, welche der erste Teil dieser Untersuchung hinlänglich dargestellt hat, und ich brauche nur noch hinzuzufügen, dass jede Einschränkung verderblicher wird, wenn sie sich auf den moralischen Menschen bezieht, und dass, wenn irgend etwas Wirksamkeit auf das einzelne Individuum fordert, dies gerade die Erziehung ist, welche das einzelne Individuum bilden soll. [...] Oeffentliche Erziehung scheint mir daher ganz ausserhalb der Schranken zu liegen, in welchen der Staat seine Wirksamkeit halten muss. (p. 109)

Commentaries:

- “The true end of man”/“Der wahre Zweck des Menschen”: Obviously, Humboldt thinks that the human being has, in himself, an end or purpose (*Zweck*) that is given by reason. So, Humboldt’s starting point is a teleological view of human nature. What is “the true end of man”?
- “... the highest and most harmonious (or proportionate) development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole”/“die höchste und proportionirlichste Bildung

seiner Kräfte zu einem Ganzen“: *Bildung*, as Humboldt understands it, refers to human “powers” (“Kräfte”) that can be cultivated. It is important for him that these powers are not only developed to a high level, but form a harmonious whole. It is the whole person – and not one single power or a specialized skill – that is to be developed.

- This passage is often cited as the essence of Humboldt’s concept of *Bildung*. The problem is, however, that it seems to be open to various interpretations. For instance, it might be compatible with an Aristotelian view of education as the development of certain specifically human virtues. Humboldt, however, does not intend to defend a substantive conception of human nature but highlights concepts such as individuality (*Eigentümlichkeit*) or originality. This becomes clear in the second passage:
- “ ... of developing himself by his own energies, in his perfect individuality/ ... sich aus sich selbst in seiner Eigentümlichkeit zu entwickeln“: This passage, I think, is at least as important for the understanding of Humboldt’s conception of *Bildung* as the opening passage. First, Humboldt describes the person himself – his own powers – as the source of *Bildung*. *Bildung* cannot be inculcated in persons but must evolve out of them. Second, developing individuality – or becoming an original person – is what *Bildung* is all about.
- What can be done to foster *Bildung*? In the first passage, we see that Humboldt starts from the statement about the true end of the human being (the *Bildung* of human powers) and goes from there directly to the demand for freedom. By “freedom”, he means the freedom to do what you want. It is upon this concept of freedom that liberal political theory is built. Humboldt thinks that the State should ensure persons’ freedom without positively fostering their welfare. *Bildung* – as the true end of the human being – is used to ground the liberal principle of freedom.
- *Bildung* demands freedom – and any attempt to positively foster it would be deemed to fail. Hence, Humboldt’s opposition to national or public education (*öffentliche Erziehung*). The main argument is expressed in the third passage: “... national education, since at least it presupposes the selection and appointment of some one instructor, must always promote a definite form of development, however careful to avoid such an error”. Public education does not leave room for various individual forms of development but tends to shape everyone in the same way. In other passages, Humboldt goes even further: he expresses the view that the State will inevitably use the public education system for his own purposes – it will use its citizens as instruments in his hands. Humboldt is thus opposed to the view that children should be educated for citizenship. They should be educated *as human beings*, in the first place.

Let us now turn to the second of Humboldt's contributions to the theory of education – the fragment *Theory of the Bildung of the human being*.

A passage from the fragment *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen*:

Im Mittelpunkt aller besonderen Arten der Thätigkeit nemlich steht der Mensch, der ohne alle, auf irgend etwas Einzelnes gerichtete Absicht, nur die Kräfte seiner Natur stärken und erhöhen, seinem Wesen Werth und Dauer verschaffen will. Da jedoch die blossе Kraft einen Gegenstand braucht, an dem sie sich üben, und die blossе Form, der reine Gedanke, einen Stoff, in dem sie, sich darin ausprägend, fort dauern könne, so bedarf auch der Mensch einer Welt ausser sich. Daher entspringt sein Streben, den Kreis seiner Erkenntnis und seiner Wirksamkeit zu erweitern, und ohne dass er sich selbst deutlich dessen bewusst ist, liegt es ihm nicht eigentlich an dem, was er von jener erwirbt, oder vermöge dieser ausser sich hervorbringt, sondern nur an seiner inneren Verbesserung und Veredlung, oder wenigstens an der Befriedigung der innern Unruhe, die ihn verzehrt. Rein und in seiner Endabsicht betrachtet, ist sein Denken immer nur ein Versuch seines Geistes, vor sich selbst verständlich, sein Handeln ein Versuch seines Willens, in sich frei und unabhängig zu werden, seine ganze äussere Geschäftigkeit überhaupt aber nur ein Streben, nicht in sich müssig zu bleiben. Bloss weil beides, sein Denken und sein Handeln nicht anders, als nur vermöge eines Dritten, nur vermöge des Vorstellens und des Bearbeitens von etwas möglich ist, dessen eigentlich unterscheidendes Merkmal es ist, Nicht-Mensch, d. i. Welt zu seyn, sucht er, soviel Welt, als möglich zu ergreifen, und so eng, als er nur kann, mit sich zu verbinden. Die letzte Aufgabe unsres Daseyns: dem Begriff der Menschheit in unsrer Person, sowohl während der Zeit unsres Lebens, als auch noch über dasselbe hinaus, durch die Spuren des lebendigen Wirkens, die wir zurücklassen, einen so grossen Inhalt, als möglich, zu verschaffen, diese Aufgabe löst sich allein durch die Verknüpfung unsres Ichs mit der Welt zu der allgemeinsten, regesten und freiesten Wechselwirkung. (235f)

My reading of this passage focuses on one particular point not explicitly stated in Humboldt's political work. The text starts with notions that are known from what we have already read, especially the concept of powers (*Kräfte*). Humboldt says that the human being wants to give his being (*Wesen*) worth (*Wert*) and duration (*Dauer*) by strengthening and improving the powers of his nature (*die Kräfte seiner Natur*). Then comes the crucial passage:

“Da jedoch die blossе Kraft einen Gegenstand braucht, an dem sie sich üben, und die blossе Form, der reine Gedanke, einen Stoff, in dem sie, sich darin ausprägend, fort dauern könne, so bedarf auch der Mensch einer Welt ausser sich”.

For their development, human powers need an object outside of the self, and the mere form – or the pure thought – needs material. In the same way, the human being needs a world outside of himself. The important point is not what the human being takes up from outside, but that the outside world is necessary for his inner refinement (*innere Verbesserung, Veredelung*): Bildung can only take place if there is something that is not human (*Nicht-Mensch*). Against this backdrop, Humboldt formulates what he takes to be the ultimate task of our existence – *die letzte Aufgabe unseres Daseyns*:

Die letzte Aufgabe unsres Daseyns: dem Begriff der Menschheit in unsrer Person, sowohl während der Zeit unsres Lebens, als auch noch über dasselbe hinaus, durch die Spuren des lebendigen Wirkens, die wir zurücklassen, einen so grossen Inhalt, als möglich, zu verschaffen, diese Aufgabe löst sich allein durch die Verknüpfung unsres Ichs mit der Welt zu der allgemeinsten, regesten und freiesten Wechselwirkung.

What is the ultimate task of our existence? “... to give the concept of humanity in our person – during our own life and beyond [...] the fullest possible content ...” How is this possible: “... by connecting our self with the world and thereby creating the most general, most active and free interaction”. This is one of the most cited sentences in German educational philosophy.

The idea that Bildung has to do with the interaction between self and world, inspired – for instance – Wolfgang Klafki's influential conception of *Bildung* (Klafki 1959/1963). Klafki's thought is rooted in the so-called *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*. This school of educational thought dominated German university *Pädagogik* in the early twentieth century and after World War II, until it was challenged by empirical forms of education science. Through the decline of the *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*, the term *Bildung* lost its position as a core concept of educational thought – it was replaced by other concepts, such as learning (*Lernen*). Nevertheless, Klafki's account is still present in today's educational – and especially didactical – theory.

Klafki starts from a classification – and a critique – of traditional views of *Bildung*. He first distinguishes “material” from “formal” accounts: according to the material accounts, acquiring *Bildung* means to take up certain contents. The formal accounts, by contrast, focus on what happens in the learner's mind. Klafki distinguishes between two types of formal conceptions – “functional” and “methodical” accounts. Functional accounts – among them Humboldt's theory of *Bildung* – see the aim of *Bildung* in the development of individual powers (*Kräfte*) or functions. The idea is that these powers develop through the interaction with cultural contents (or “the world”). The question, then, is which types of content are apt to foster the development of powers. The classical answer to this question is, as Klafki explains, that the study of ancient languages and mathematics serves this purpose (ibid., p. 33). Klafki rejects the functional view of *Bildung* mainly for one reason: he says – rightly, I think – that this view presupposes the idea that there is a pre-given set of powers (functions or potentials) that have to be realized. These powers, Klafki notes, are understood in analogy to the biological sphere, that is, as “mental muscles” that have to be trained (ibid., p. 34).

According to the methodical view of *Bildung*, education should initiate learners into the use of certain methods that help them acquire contents. Klafki's intention is to develop an account that integrates aspects of all these views on *Bildung*. We can see this in the following passage from the essay *Kategoriale Bildung*:

Bildung nennen wir jenes Phänomen, an dem – im eigenen Erleben oder im Verstehen anderer Menschen – unmittelbar der Einheit eines objektiven (materialen) und eines subjektiven (formalen) Momentes innewerden. Der Versuch, die *erlebte* Einheit der Bildung sprachlich auszudrücken, kann nur mit Hilfe dialektisch verschränkter Formulierungen gelingen: Bildung ist Erschlossensein einer dinglichen oder geistigen Wirklichkeit für einen Menschen – das ist der objektive oder materiale Aspekt; aber das heisst zugleich: Erschlossensein dieses Menschen für diese seine Wirklichkeit – das ist der subjektive oder formale Aspekt zugleich im “funktionalen” wie im “methodischen” Sinne. [...]

Diese doppelseitige Erschliessung geschieht als Sichtbarwerden von allgemeinen, kategorial erhellenden Inhalten auf der objektiven Seite und als Aufgehen allgemeiner Einsichten, Erlebnisse, Erfahrungen auf der Seite des Subjekts. Anders formuliert: Das Sichtbarwerden von “allgemeinen Inhalten”, von kategorialen Prinzipien im paradigmatischen “Stoff”, also auf der Seite der “Wirklichkeit”, ist nichts anderes als das Gewinnen von “Kategorien” auf der Seite des Subjekts. (Klafki 1959/1963, pp. 43-44).

In the first sentence, Klafki says that *Bildung* – understood as a unity – has an objective (or material) and a subjective (or formal) aspect. It does not suffice, he thinks, simply to state that *Bildung* is both material and formal. Instead, he intends to develop one “unified” conception of *Bildung* that integrates the relevant aspects in a “dialectical” way. This is the “dialectical” formulation that expresses the core of his account:

Bildung ist Erschlossensein einer dinglichen oder geistigen Wirklichkeit für einen Menschen – das ist der objektive oder materiale Aspekt; aber das heisst zugleich: Erschlossensein dieses Menschen für diese seine Wirklichkeit – das ist der subjektive oder formale Aspekt zugleich im “funktionalen” wie im “methodischen” Sinne.

Bildung means that a material or mental reality is opened up for (or made accessible to) a human being – this is the objective or material aspect.

Bildung means at the same time that this human being is opened up for this reality – this is the subjective or formal aspect both in the functional and the methodical sense.

In the process of *Bildung*, Klafki says, certain general contents or categorial principles are revealed. This is the objective side of *Bildung*. At the same time, the individual develops certain general insights and gains the right categories to access the world. In Klafki’s words:

Das Sichtbarwerden von “allgemeinen Inhalten”, von kategorialen Prinzipien im paradigmatischen “Stoff”, also auf der Seite der “Wirklichkeit”, ist nichts anderes als das Gewinnen von “Kategorien” auf der Seite des Subjekts.

Klafki thinks that the acquirement of categories can be fostered by presenting certain types of paradigmatic or exemplary materials to the learner. Being educated does not mean, then, knowing everything or as much as possible but having the right type of categories to gain access to the relevant phenomena in the world. This account of *Bildung* is not explicitly tied to ideals such as individuality or autonomy. It seems compatible with a variety of moral

and political views.³ Nevertheless, it should not be considered as a “value-free” account of education. This view expresses that *Bildung* has to do with how the person sees the world and responds to it. The idea is that educators should not simply transmit pieces of knowledge, or train their students’ in specific skills, but rather foster their development as persons – and support them in acquiring the right kind of categories to gain access to the world.

In his *Theorie der Halbbildung* (Theory of Half-Education), published in the same year as Klafki’s *Kategoriale Bildung* (1959), Theodor W. Adorno does not deal with Klafki’s account of *Bildung* but attacks the theoretical tradition in which it is situated. He accuses Wilhelm Dilthey – the founder of the so-called *Geisteswissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* – to have fostered the decay of *Bildung*. I cannot give you, today, a comprehensive account of Adorno’s *Theorie der Halbbildung*, but let me point to some important passages.

One of Adorno’s starting points is the fact that well-educated people – who were acquainted with Plato, Goethe, or Kant – did not resist the Nazi government and in some cases even supported it. Adorno writes:

Wenn Max Frisch [the Swiss writer] bemerkte, dass Menschen, die zuweilen mit Passion und Verständnis an den sogenannten Kulturgütern partizipierten, unangefochten der Mordpraxis des Nationalsozialismus sich verschreiben konnten, so ist das nicht nur ein Index fortschreitend gespaltenen Bewusstseins, sondern straft objektiv den Gehalt jener Kulturgüter, Humanität und alles, was ihr innewohnt, Lügen, wofern sie nichts sind als Kulturgüter. Ihr eigener Sinn kann nicht getrennt werden von der Einrichtung der menschlichen Dinge. Bildung, welche davon absieht, sich selbst setzt und verabsolutiert, ist schon Halbbildung geworden. Zu belegen wäre das an den Schriften Wilhelm Diltheys, der mehr wohl als jeder andere den Begriff von Geisteskultur als Selbstzweck dem gehobenen Mittelstand schmackhaft und den Lehrern überantwortet hat. (Adorno 1959/1980, p. 94f).

Adorno presupposes that some sort of *true Bildung* – that is linked with autonomy, emancipation, and humanity – is worth pursuing. He claims, however, that *Bildung* has turned into *Halbbildung*. The cultural goods are celebrated for their own sake (*als Selbstzweck*), especially by the higher middle class, but they have lost their emancipatory force.

Im Klima der Halbbildung überdauern die warenhaft verdinglichten Sachgehalte von Bildung auf Kosten ihres Wahrheitsgehalts und ihrer lebendigen Beziehung zu lebendigen Subjekten (ibid., p. 103).

In the climate of *Halbbildung*, cultural contents are “warenhalt verdinglicht”, that is, they become mere commodities or objects. They lose their validity and their vital relation to living subjects. While *Bildung* breathes the spirit of autonomy and humanity, *Halbbildung* turns into barbarism (ibid., p. 94).

³ In later years, Klafki (1985) developed an account of general education (*Allgemeinbildung*) that is grounded on ideals such as autonomy, the ability to participate in public processes, and solidarity.

Halbbildung has much to do, for Adorno, with popularisation of classical cultural goods. He is appalled, for instance, by a popular introduction to the symphonies of Beethoven and other composers. Adorno, himself a composer and music theorist, finds it barbaric that the themes of well-known symphonies are presented in the style of popular hits. Obviously, Adorno's view of *true Bildung* is quite elitist. He would probably be horrified if he knew how literature or philosophy is presented in today's schools.

In his elitism with regards to *Bildung*, Adorno is close to Friedrich Nietzsche who – in an early series of lectures delivered at the University of Basel (1872) – attacked the educational culture of his time (and of our time as well):

It seemed to me that I must recognise two main directions in the forces at work – two seemingly antagonistic tendencies, equally deleterious in their action, and ultimately combining to produce their results: a striving to achieve the greatest possible *expansion* of education on the one hand, and a tendency to *minimise and weaken* it on the other. The first-named would, for various reasons, spread learning among the greatest number of people; the second would compel education to renounce its highest, noblest and sublimest claims in order to subordinate itself to some other department of life – such as the service of the State. (Nietzsche 1872/1930, pp. 35-36)

Es schien mir, daß ich zwei Hauptrichtungen unterscheiden müsse – zwei scheinbar entgegengesetzte, in ihrem Wirken gleich verderbliche, in ihren Resultaten endlich zusammenfließende Strömungen beherrschen die Gegenwart unsrer Bildungsanstalten: einmal der Trieb nach möglicher *Erweiterung* und *Verbreitung* der Bildung, dann der Trieb nach *Verringerung* und *Abschwächung* der Bildung selbst. Die Bildung soll aus verschiedenen Gründen in die allerweitesten Kreise getragen werden – das verlangt die eine Tendenz. Die andere mutet dagegen der Bildung selbst zu, ihre höchsten, edelsten und erhabendsten Ansprüche aufzugeben und sich im Dienste irgendeiner andern Lebensform, etwa des Staates, zu bescheiden. (Nietzsche 1872/1930, p. 397)

Nietzsche thinks that the school – and especially the *Gymnasium* – in the second half of the nineteenth century was in the course of betraying the ideal of *true Bildung*; *Bildung* was provided for too many people, and was weakend and subordinated to the purposes of the State. This latter issue reminds us of Humboldt's account of *Bildung*, but Nietzsche does not pursue a liberal political project, and his view is clearly anti-democratic. *Bildung*, he thinks, can only take place when students – or certain types of highly talented students – subordinate themselves to a highly educated teacher and let him guide them into the sphere of Greek culture and the German classics. One of the most appalling aspects of the educational culture of his time is, for Nietzsche, that students are encouraged to think for themselves and to produce their own texts. This kind of creative autonomy is, according to Nietzsche, only appropriate for the genius. So, this view of education is far from the Enlightenment ideal of education as a means for emancipation. Adorno could, of course, never subscribe to

Nietzsche's view, but these very different authors share a certain contempt for those who think they are highly educated although they are in fact only "half-educated".

So, what is the upshot of this short overview of some traditional accounts of *Bildung*? My experience is that the more accounts you consider, the more it becomes unclear what is actually meant by the term. *Bildung* is indeed, a "container word" that can be used for various purposes. It has, first, strong *emancipatory* implications and can therefore be defended from a liberal or progressive standpoint. Second, it can also be used in a *conservative* way. Third, there is a tendency towards *elitism*.

The German authors who have been discussed so far did not give much attention to the clarification of the concept of *Bildung*. It was the analytic movement within educational philosophy that put weight on conceptual analysis. One of its protagonists was Richard Peters.

R.S. Peters on education and liberal education

Richard Peters was born in India in 1919, and grew up in England. He died at the end of 2011. Peters developed his philosophy of education during his time at the University of London's Institute of Education (1962-1983). I will focus on some passages from his 1966 book *Ethics and Education* and two essays on liberal education from 1977 – later on, we will also consider an essay from 1973 on the justification of education.

Peters thought that the primary task of the philosophy of education is to achieve clarity about the concept of 'education' – although he rejected the idea that the term can be precisely *defined* (Peters 1966, p. 23). He claimed, however, that it is possible to formulate certain criteria that "are co-extensive with most of its central usages" (*ibid.*, p. 24). Peters proposes three main criteria for 'education', and he obviously thinks that these criteria also express the core of 'liberal education'.

Question: Is this an appropriate analysis of 'education'/'liberal education'?

This analysis of the different ways of conceiving of 'liberal education' has revealed, perhaps, some ambiguities in the concept of what is 'liberal'. It has also helped to confirm that the criteria implicit in central cases of 'education' are those that have been made explicit in this chapter. These are:

- (i) that 'education' implies the transmission of what is worthwhile to those who become committed to it;
- (ii) that 'education' must involve knowledge and understanding and some kind of cognitive perspective, which are not inert;
- (iii) that education at least rules out some procedures of transmission, on the ground that they lack wittingness and voluntariness on the part of the learner (Peters 1966, p. 45).

Commentaries:

The first of these criteria contains different elements: first, 'education' is considered as involving the *transmission* of knowledge. Alternatively, it has been stated – in the tradition of educational thought – that education cannot (or should not) be transmitted to the learner, but must evolve out of his own mental activity.

In other passages of the book (*ibid.*, p. 35), Peters says that 'education' implies the *intentional* transmission of content – this excludes all those processes of learning not intended by an educator.

Second, 'education' involves the transmission of what is *worthwhile* (to those who become committed to it). This does not imply that what is transmitted is *objectively* valuable but that it is *seen as* valuable. Peters says that this is "a purely conceptual point" (*ibid.*, p. 25): we would not say that 'education' takes place if nothing worthwhile is (or should be) achieved.

The second criterion states that 'education' has to do with knowledge, understanding, and a cognitive perspective "that is not inert". Peters provides a detailed account of these various elements (*ibid.*, p. 30-32), but let me stick to the basic idea behind this criterion: this is his way of saying that 'education' concerns "the whole person". The educated person has not only acquired particular skills and pieces of knowledge but has developed his own "outlook" – that is, a way of seeing the world.

The third criterion excludes certain manners or methods of education as "non-educational". All those methods that bypass the person as a minimally free and rational being – such as behaviourist conditioning – lie beyond the conceptual sphere of 'education'. In the practice of 'education', the learner is not seen as an object that must be shaped but as a subject that voluntarily accepts what is presented to him. Interestingly, Peters says that indoctrination satisfies this criterion (*ibid.*, p. 41-42). According to his view, respect for the learner's individuality or autonomy is not conceptually implied by 'education'.

In what follows (i.e., in Chapter II of *Ethics and Education*), Peters develops a "synthetic" (*ibid.*, p. 46) account of 'education', that is, an account that synthesizes the three criteria. As a result of his deliberations on the issue, Peters writes: "'Education', therefore has to be described as initiation into activities or modes of thought and conduct that are worth while" (*ibid.*, p. 55).

He says that the concept of "initiation" implies both the second and the third but not the first of his criteria of 'education'. This is why, according to Peters, 'education' cannot simply be considered as "initiation" but must be described as initiation *into worthwhile activities*. It might be doubted that the second criterion is fully covered by the concept of initiation: is it

not the case that persons can be initiated into specialized cultural spheres – such as chess – without developing a broad perspective?

The idea of initiation, Peters notes, is closely connected to a specific conception of the human mind. The mind, he says, must be seen as intersubjectively constituted. The idea is then that the child's individual personality evolves in the process of being initiated into a shared form of life. Now if "initiation" is at the core of 'education', this means – seemingly – that a particular picture of the mind is conceptually implied by 'education'.

One decade later, Peters wrote two papers in which he focuses on liberal education and its "ambiguities" and "dilemmas". He does not intend to provide criteria for the appropriate use of the term but states that "[l]iberal education is no one thing" (1977/2010b, p. 68). Nevertheless, he formulates a *unifying idea* that he considers to be at the core of the various conceptions of liberal education: liberal education has to do with the untrammelled, unimpeded, unconstrained – the *free* – development of the mind (1977/2010a, p. 46; 1977/2010b, p. 68). Moreover, it involves a commitment to knowledge and understanding (1977/2010, p. 46) – the second of the criteria in *Ethics and Education*.

Peters' classification of different interpretations of liberal education starts from the notion of liberal education as unconstrained development. The three different interpretations, he says, object to three different types of constraints: the first conception relies on the Greek idea that knowledge – or some sort of knowledge – is worth pursuing "for its own sake". This means that knowledge should not be pursued for practical (vocational, utilitarian) ends.

According to the second reading, liberal education is general education. This is, as Peters says, the most common understanding of liberal education. *Allgemeinbildung* (general education) is, in the German debate, a widely accepted understanding of *Bildung*. The demand for general education is directed against early specialization in the education system: young people should not be confined to one particular discipline but rather gain insight into various forms of knowledge.

The third interpretation relies on moral and political ideas such as freedom, autonomy, or individuality. It is opposed to certain dogmatic or authoritarian forms of teaching.

Positive account	Constraints objected to
Knowledge “for its own sake”	Pursuing knowledge for practical (vocational, utilitarian) ends
General education	Narrow specialization
Development of the free man	Dogmatic methods of teaching indoctrination, authoritarianism

Instead of reviewing Peters’ complete discussion of these three accounts, I would like to address one particular problem connected to the first interpretation: it is often said that (liberal) education and *Bildung* – as opposed to training or *Ausbildung* – are valuable for their own sake (or intrinsically valuable). The first account – that highlights the intrinsic value of knowledge – provides us with one particular interpretation of this idea: education has to do with pursuing knowledge for its own sake.

Discussion: Does this lead to an appropriate account of the intrinsic value of education? Are there alternatives? Does it make any sense to ascribe an intrinsic value to education?

In his papers from 1977, Peters points out some problems of the first interpretation of liberal education. He states that “the dichotomy between ‘knowledge for its own sake’ and ‘knowledge for practical ends’ is too coarse to shed light on the attitude of the learner towards knowledge” (1977/2010a, p. 51).

As he states, there are at least two different understandings of this distinction. The first corresponds to the distinction between practical and purely theoretical knowledge. Practical knowledge – such as knowing how to use a saw – is important for some further (practical) ends – such as producing a wooden table. Similarly, knowing about anatomy is important for medical purposes: you need it if you want to cure people. Theoretical knowledge, by contrast, does not serve further purposes – it is, in this sense, valuable for its own sake.

It should be noted, however, that practical knowledge is intimately connected with certain ends. Both – the practical knowledge and the ends pursued – are part of a practical activity.

By contrast, certain enterprises can be undertaken for “extrinsic” ends, that is, ends such as financial rewards or social status. Ends of this type are not “intrinsic” to certain practices. Both practical and theoretical activities can be pursued for extrinsic ends: someone might want to become a doctor because he strives for social status. A philosopher might write a book about Hegel – a purely theoretical enterprise – because he wants to impress his colleagues.

Correspondingly, we can distinguish intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Learning processes within the school are to a large extent *extrinsically* motivated – students work, for instance, to earn a good mark.

Someone who acquires practical knowledge – without being pressed – is intrinsically motivated by a certain practice and its inherent ends. The intrinsic motivation for theoretical knowledge is independent from further practical ends – it is nourished, we might say, by pure curiosity or interest. So, is this what liberal education is all about?

Let me present two more lines of critique that are developed by Peters. First, he says that persons' engagement in intellectual activities should not be seen as detached from the problems of everyday life. Very often, persons become interested in intellectual problems and disciplines by reflecting upon their everyday experiences. Thus, they are neither motivated by pure curiosity, nor are they striving for certain practical ends; they are thinking about questions that arise "from the general conditions of human life", says Peters (1977/2010a, p. 54).

Second, Peters proposes to distinguish the situation of a scientist or philosopher who *advances* knowledge, from that of the person who *acquires* knowledge in school. Some scientists indeed pursue knowledge for its own sake. The educated person who is not a scientist, by contrast, is unlikely to spend his days with purely theoretical activities. Thus, being educated cannot mean pursuing knowledge for its own sake. So, what does it mean? Peters makes an interesting proposal:

A person without a consciousness of the historical dimension of current social problems is poorly educated; but does he have to work systematically as a historian to develop such consciousness? The sort of knowledge that enables a man to understand better the layout of a town in which he is spending his holiday, to appreciate features of the rocks and rivers, or to speculate about the customs of the local inhabitants, is not the product necessarily of any specialized study on his part in history, geography, or anthropology. But it is very much the hall-mark of an educated person. Did he acquire such knowledge for its own sake? Or to accomplish any practical purpose? Parts of it perhaps. But it is just as likely that he picked it up because of his concern to assess the significance of the context in which he has to live his life. Or perhaps he just picked it up from a talkative friend over a pint of beer.

In brief, my argument is that there is a body of knowledge, entertained with varying degrees of understanding, that is extremely significant or 'relevant' to a person in so far as it determines his general beliefs, attitudes and the general conditions of human life" (ibid., p. 55).

This might be connected with a passage from *Ethics and Education* that was already mentioned: the crucial point of education – or liberal education – is that knowledge is taken up and processed in a way that transforms a person's "outlook" – i.e., the way he sees the world, others, and himself (Peters 1966, p. 31). A similar idea is implicit in Klafki's account of cate-

gorial *Bildung*: being educated, in this sense, means having developed the right kind of categories that open up the world to us. Peters states that there is a “body of knowledge” that has to be acquired in order to develop an appropriate outlook. Klafki’s account is different: he thinks that we can develop our system of categories by becoming acquainted with *exemplary* problems or issues.

2 Arguments for and against liberal education / *Bildung*

Objections to liberal education / Bildung

It was not possible, in the first part, to develop a clear-cut account of *Bildung* or liberal education that could guide our further discussion.

One thing, however, is clear: adherents to this ideal think that the school should do *more than* train students for the labour market and prepare them to compete for economic wealth and social status. They think that the education system should *not* in the first place serve the needs of the national economy or help to ensure its international competitiveness.

All those who hold that the education system should focus on fostering the development of economically useful competencies will thus be opposed to *Bildung* as a (general) educational ideal. So, if we want to justify (liberal) education, we have to clarify why it is important or valuable although it is – in some sense – quite useless. Of course, we could argue that *Bildung* is not useless. We could state, for instance, that studying Latin fosters some economically relevant skills. This line of justification, however, bypasses the core of the ideal of *Bildung*: *Bildung* was established in opposition to utility-based demands.

One line of objection against *Bildung* (or maybe *Halbbildung*, to speak with Adorno) is that it is not so useless after all but serves specific social purposes. In the nineteenth century, *Bildung* became a means of emancipation for the middle class. The German term *Bildungsbürgertum* indicates that *Bildung* was seen as a status symbol for the *Bürgertum* – the bourgeoisie. The ideal of *Bildung* was directed against the social dominance of the aristocracy, but it also allowed the middle class to distinguish itself from the lower classes. The *Gymnasium* – the school type traditionally committed to *humanistische Bildung* – helped the middle class to stabilize their social position.

In the early twentieth century, John Dewey argued against segregation in the American school system. He said that the establishment of an academic school type (corresponding to the German *Gymnasium*) and a more “practical” or vocational branch mirrors the segregation of the social classes: The lower classes are prepared for work, while the higher classes are expected to have the leisure to engage in intellectual or cultural enterprises. A system of this kind, Dewey says, would amount to “a plan of social predestination totally foreign to the spirit of democracy”. He goes on to say: “The democracy which proclaims equality of

opportunity as its ideal requires an education in which learning and social application, ideas and practice, work and recognition of the meaning of what is done, are united from the beginning and for all“ (1915/1976, S. 404).

In contemporary Germany (and Switzerland), middle-class children are still highly over-represented in the *Gymnasium*. Although the humanistic ideal of *Bildung* has lost its influence, the *Gymnasium* still provides students with a special type of “cultural capital” – to use Pierre Bourdieu’s term. Students acquire types of knowledge and develop certain attitudes or ways of talking that are advantageous in the competition for social rewards. So, the *Bildung* of the *Gymnasium* is still a means of social distinction. If *Bildung* is used by one social class as a weapon against the lower classes, then it is devoid of the commitment to autonomy and emancipation. One way of establishing *Bildung* as a general – and democratic – ideal is to return to these values. Acquiring *Bildung* means, then, to develop the capacity for autonomy.

In other words: the *emancipatory* strain in the tradition of *Bildung* should be strengthened.

At this point, another line of objection arises: some parents are opposed to the idea that their offspring should be educated for autonomy or individuality. Instead, they want their children to become committed to certain religious (political, ethical) values. These people might say that *Bildung* or liberal education expresses one particular worldview or conception of the good that is incompatible with certain other views of the good.

The basic question is, then, whether it is possible to justify *Bildung* as an ideal that a) goes beyond purely economic purposes, and b) is inimical to dogmatic forms of education (or indoctrination) that undermine persons’ autonomy.

Two questions must be distinguished, here:

1. Does every person have a *right* to this kind of education?
2. Should every person be *committed* to this kind of education – independently of his own or his parents’ personal views?

The justification of education, as I understand it, is a *political* issue. It does not suffice, then, to argue that *Bildung* has value or fosters the personal good. The question is:

1. Whether the (liberal democratic) state has the obligation to provide this kind of education to everyone; and
2. Whether the (liberal democratic) state is justified to constrain parents’ (and students’) freedom to choose a type of education that has nothing to do with *Bildung*.

R.S. Peters and the justification of education

In what follows, I would like to consider three different types of justification. First, we turn again to the work of Richard Peters and his 1973 paper “The Justification of Education”⁴. After having analysed the concept of ‘education’, he strives for its justification. He notes that there are instrumental and hedonistic justifications, but his aim is to justify the (intrinsic) value of education in a way that is independent of hedonistic concerns.

I would like to review one passage of his paper (Peters 1973, pp. 99-105) to spell out the basic idea. Peters states, first, that *knowledge* implies that what is thought is *true*, and that the holder of knowledge has *reasons* (grounds) to think what he thinks (ibid., pp. 99-100). He goes on to say that *being concerned about truth* is intrinsically or ultimately valuable, and then asks: “How, then, is this concern for truth relevant to the attempt to justify knowledge and understanding?” (ibid., p. 100). The aim is thus to justify the value of knowledge and understanding as important aspects of education.

Peters writes: “Surely because the activity of justification itself would be unintelligible without it” (ibid.). By “it”, does he mean *concern for truth*? Or *knowledge and understanding*?

In the following explanations, he refers to understanding, knowledge, *and* truth. Later, he writes: “This argument, which bases the case for the development of knowledge and understanding on its connection with justification ...” (ibid., p. 105). So, here it seems that the value of knowledge and understanding is derived from the idea of justification. In any case, the practice of justification is the starting point of Peters’ argument: the value of justification, Peters points out, cannot be queried because any attempt to do so presupposes its value: “For to discuss its value is immediately to embark upon reasons for or against it which itself is a further example of justification” (ibid., p. 102). This transcendental argument for the value of justification is embedded within a broader picture: “Man is thus a creature who lives under the demands of reason”, Peters states (ibid., p. 103). He goes on to say:

But does it help the argument to show that human life is only intelligible on the assumption that the demands of reason are admitted, and woven into the fabric of human life? It helps because it makes plain that the demands of reason are not just an option available to the reflective. Any man who emerges from infancy tries to perceive, to remember, to infer, to learn, and to regulate his wants. If he is to do this he must recourse to some procedure of assessment. For how else could he determine what to believe or do? In their early years all human beings are initiated into human life by their elders and rely for a long time on procedures connected with authority and custom. They believe what they are told and do what others expect of them. Many manage most of their lives by reliance on such procedures. This fact, however, is a reflection of human psychology rather than the logic of the situation; for ultimately such procedures are inappropriate to the demand that they are meant to serve. [...]

⁴ Peters already addresses the question in *Ethics and Education* (1966).

Thus those who rely permanently and perpetually on custom or authority are criticizable because they are relying on procedures of assessment which are not ultimately appropriate to the nature of belief and conduct. To say, therefore, that men should rely more on their reason, that they ought to be more concerned about first-hand justification, is to claim that they are systematically falling down the job on which they are already engaged. It is not to commit some version of the naturalistic fallacy by basing a demand for a type of life on features of human life which make it distinctively human. For this would be to repeat the errors of the old Greek doctrine of function. Rather it is to say that human life already bears witness to the demands of reason. Without some acceptance by men of such demands their life would be unintelligible. But given the acceptance of such demands they are proceeding in a way which is inappropriate to satisfying them. Concern for truth is written into human life. There are procedures which are ultimately inappropriate for giving expression to this concern. [...]

This argument, which bases the case for the development of knowledge and understanding on its connection with justification, does not make a case for the pursuit of any kind of knowledge. It only points to the importance of knowledge that is relevant to the assessment of belief, conduct and feeling. It does not show, for instance, that there is value in amassing a vast store of information, in learning by heart every tenth name in a telephone directory. And this accords well with the account of the sort of knowledge that was ascribed to an educated person. For to be educated is to have one's view transformed by the development and systematization of conceptual schemes. It is to be disposed to ask the reason why of things" (ibid., p. 104-105).

Two brief remarks:

1. In this passage, Peters' core argument seems to run as follows: since we are always already under *the demands of reason*, we must use and cultivate our reason. Otherwise, we are "systematically falling down on a job on which [we] are already engaged". In this way, Peters argues for the rational necessity of emancipation: If we go on relying on authority, we act against those demands that are written in our life.

2. At the end of the passage, he says that to be educated "is to be disposed to ask the reason why of things", that is, to ask for justification. Here, being educated is *identified* with being engaged in the practice of justification.

Perfectionism and the justification of education

Under the heading of "perfectionism", I present three different justifications for education, only one of which is explicitly perfectionist.

Consider, first, Humboldt's justification of *Bildung* as the true end of the human being. This is a teleological – and in this sense maybe perfectionist – account that highlights persons' individuality. What will Humboldt say to those who simply state that developing one's individuality is not the true end of human life? These opponents might claim, for instance, that it is the true end of the human being to subordinate himself to God's will. Others will say that the most important thing in human life is to become economically and

socially successful. An appropriate justification of education must, I think, be able to respond to these challenges.

This is a general problem of perfectionist accounts, but what exactly is perfectionism? “*Perfectionism*, as defended for instance by Aristotle, is a type of objective list theory which maintains that besides pleasure and desire-satisfaction, some human excellences or ‘perfections’, such as knowledge, virtue and achievement, are intrinsically valuable” (Cuypers 2012a, p. 9). Humboldt’s account cannot be counted as perfectionist in this sense.

Three things are characteristic of perfectionism: objective value, intrinsic value, and the focus on human perfections. Cuypers distinguishes a *narrow perfectionism* as rooted in an account of human nature, from a *broad perfectionism* which starts from our everyday normative judgements (ibid., pp. 10-11). Cuypers develops a broadly perfectionist justification of education that highlights the intrinsic and objective value of knowledge. He proposes to reformulate Peters’ transcendental account in perfectionist terms.

He says that “knowledge is intrinsically valuable, for it involves the exercise of cognitive abilities to some degree of excellence by some appropriate standard (which is minimally set by the demand for justification)” (ibid., p. 11).

Finally, let us examine the account developed by Kirsten Meyer (2011, Chapters 3, 4 and 5). This account is not perfectionist but relies, more broadly, on the notion of the human good. Meyer’s basic idea is that *Bildung* is justified because it is good for the human being to be educated in this way. She agrees that *Bildung* has to do with intrinsic value, but she refuses to subscribe to an objectivist view of the good. Instead, she proposes to connect the value of education to the value of the experiences that education enables us to have. For example, the educated person can have valuable experiences by reading a good novel. Thus, the good lies in subjective experiences but should not, as Meyer points out, be understood in a purely hedonistic sense.

Meyer describes her account as *subjectivist*, and she claims that it avoids the problematic *political* implications of an objectivist perfectionism (ibid., p. 119). I am not sure, however, that this is the case. Her account is subjectivist in the sense that value is tied to subjective experiences, but it is not subjectivist in an epistemic sense: whether something has value (for me) does not fully depend on my subjective judgement. From the fact that I deny the value of reading a novel, it does not follow that reading a novel has no value (for me). If I were properly educated – and would try to read a novel – valuable experiences would be open to me. This line of thought justifies forcing students to acquire certain capacities, attitudes, and forms of knowledge, and to read novels, despite their (initial) unwillingness to do so. It is the “objectivist” strain in Meyer’s position that makes it useful for educational purposes. At the same time, this creates political problems: as we have seen, there is contro-

versy, in our societies, as to whether school curricula should be designed in accordance with the ideal of *Bildung* or liberal education.

Consider someone who is – for some reason or other – opposed to the idea that literature should figure on the curriculum. The question is: what justifies overriding this person’s value judgement in the context of a liberal democracy? Is it enough to point to the valuable experiences that persons can have when properly educated?

Equal respect and the justification of education

I think that the controversial ideal of *Bildung* or liberal education cannot be justified, in the liberal democracy, with reference to controversial conceptions of the human good or the true end of the human being.

My view is inspired by the so-called *political liberalism* – as formulated by John Rawls (1993), Martha Nussbaum (2011) and others (see especially Larmore 1999, Neufeld 2005). I will briefly outline my position without detailed reference to these authors.

My starting point is what I take to be the normative basis of the liberal democracy – the idea that each citizen has equal status to claim respect from others. I do not take this principle as ultimately justified, but I assume that most – not all – citizens of our Western democracies factually endorse it. In any case, you cannot build up a liberal democracy with people who reject it.

To respect others as citizens means, among other things, to respect their autonomy, i.e., their authority to live in accordance with their own conception of the good. This implies, some will say, the autonomy of parents to educate their children according to their own views – which might be incompatible with *Bildung* or liberal education.

If *Bildung* is justified as an aspect of the good life, it remains unclear why this notion of the human good should have more weight than the parents’ conception of the good. I think, however, that the normative basis of the liberal democracy provides the theoretical resources to justify *Bildung* – or some relevant aspects of it – as a general educational ideal.

Being a citizen with equal status means being entitled to make claims, but it also involves certain obligations – that are derived from others’ standing to claim respect. My basic idea is that functioning as an equal requires a certain type of education. Children should be educated to endorse the normative basis of the liberal democracy. They should be educated, among other things, to respect others. As Martha Nussbaum (2010) points out in her defence of liberal education⁵, literature and art – what she calls *narrative imagination* – can

⁵ Nussbaum, by the way, does not use the German term *Bildung* to express her views. In an interview with the Swiss national radio DRS 2 (“Eine Philosophin für Gerechtigkeit”, February 3 2012), she said: “We’re using *Bildung* without feeling entirely satisfied by that because it has a kind of traditionalistic implication that I don’t really want ...”

help to foster understanding and sympathy for others and help to develop respect and concern for them. Initiating children into literature and art is, for Nussbaum, an essential aspect of an education for citizenship.

Apart from this, children should be enabled to participate in processes of democratic decision making. This requires various types of knowledge and the capacity for critical thinking.

So, an education for citizenship – or political autonomy, to use John Rawls' term – involves much more than training in useful skills. Humboldt, however, would reject this type of justification for *Bildung*: *Bildung*, in his view, should not prepare persons for citizenship but develop their humanity.

We have seen that Humboldt's political argument starts from a conception of the true end of the human being – that is, to develop his individuality. It is interesting to consider this view in the light of John Rawls' distinction between a *comprehensive* and a *political* liberalism. Comprehensive liberal accounts are grounded in one particular – a liberal – conception of the good that highlights values such as individuality and personal autonomy. Humboldt's conception is a good example of this.⁶ The problem is, however, that these values are controversial, in modern societies. Rawls thinks that liberal political principles should be justified independently of particular ethical or religious views. The idea of political liberalism is thus to develop a specifically *political* account that can be endorsed by people with diverse views about the good. As Rawls notes, this approach has consequences for education policy: in the liberal state, schools should not be committed to liberal values such as individuality and personal autonomy – in other words, the school system should not be designed in accordance with Humboldt's ideal of *Bildung*. Rawls states, however, that all children should be educated for *political* autonomy.

I think, by contrast, that an education for autonomy *in personal affairs* can be justified on political liberal grounds. I propose to distinguish the idea of an autonomous form of life from the capacity to choose one's own form of life. Some forms of life – such as the life of the Benedictine monk – are non-autonomous (and non-individualistic). These forms of life are incompatible with the liberal conception of the good, but – in this point, I agree with Rawls and Nussbaum – they should not be denigrated in the liberal democracy.

By contrast, the capacity for autonomy – that is, the capacity to choose one's own form of life – is constitutive for the status as an equal citizen. Respecting children in their autonomy means, at least, fostering the development of the capacity for autonomy. This demand outweighs, in my view, the parental claim to educate children in non-autonomous ways.

⁶ Rawls does not mention Humboldt, but Mill and Kant. Mill's liberalism is influenced by Humboldt's views.

This leads me to a final point: educating children for autonomy involves that they become acquainted with different options for a good life. They should acquire knowledge about various religious and ethical views. Moreover, they should be initiated into different cultural and intellectual practices – such as reading good books, playing music, or doing philosophy.

My conclusion is, then, that this type of argument (1) provides a justification of important aspects of liberal education/*Bildung*, (2) without facing the problems that arise from perfectionist justifications.

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