

The Topicality of Hegel's Concept of "Bildung" for Our Liberal Society



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Abstract: In the following article, I will explain Hegel's definition of modernity from the point of view of his understanding of "Bildung," since this is a fundamental and newly relevant theme of Hegel's philosophy nowadays. "Bildung" can be transliterated as education, but may also be interpreted as a general formative or developmental process, or cultivation (culture, respectively). With the term "Bildung" Hegel also refers to the formative self-development of the mind, its coming to individual as well as collective flourishing. The objective spirit manifests itself in the culture of humans. However, education in the sense of "Bildung" does not take place primarily through the transmission of information, values, norms, etc. by the teacher, but through "experience" [Erfahrung], which signifies the conflicting process by which a spiritual being discovers its own identity or self, while at the same time striving for self-consciousness, which is in the process of self-discovery. Through education, the human mind develops its capacity for understanding, reflection and judgment, and thus overcomes its natural intellectual, spiritual, normative, aesthetic, etc., poverty.

Keywords: Hegel as 'the last Greek'; Bildung; paideia; the realm of education; liberal society; human development.

I. Historical Contextualizations

In the history of philosophy, Hegel is considered a classic. We study classics because in their works we find clues on how to orient ourselves in our lives, how to solve our problems; and they help us to answer our questions. In the classics we always find something imperishable that remains inspiring for us as critics and interpreters of these works. Especially regarding the subject of education, Hegel is a good and skilful choice.

In his essay *Hegel and the Greeks* (1958), Martin Heidegger characterized Hegel as "the last Greek" among German philosophers (Heidegger 1998, 324; Heidegger 1967, 428). The main reason for this unusual judgment was Hegel's onto-theo-logical conception of his philosophy. Hegel transformed the Platonic model of the dialectical method in such a way that he elaborated dialectics as the process of grasping absolute knowledge, whereby dialectical thinking culminates in the comprehension of the absolute idea, which is the

highest reality in Hegel's philosophy. From the Greek philosophers Hegel also adopted the concept of spirit or mind (Νοῦς) and concluded his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* with the quotation from Book XII, ch. 7 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*: "The activity (*energeia*) of thinking is the life of the mind", knowledge of truth is the purpose of philosophizing. The highest way of existence is the activity of the spirit, "its life is freedom" (Hegel, TWA X, 411).¹ Accordingly, Hegel claims that the Aristotelian purposiveness of thought (ἐντελέχεια; *entelechia*; in other terms – *causa finalis*) is the highest stage of knowledge: "noēsis noēseos" (νόησις νοήσεως). *Entelechia* has particular relevance to Hegel's concept of education [*Bildung*] because it presupposes a striving for a goal and the attainment of that goal. *Entelecheia* is a kind of completeness, whereas "the end and completion of any genuine being is its being-at-work" [*energeia*]. Hegel interpreted the highest point of Aristotle's philosophy as his own absolute idea, the spirit, and the realm of truth. Hegel's affiliation with Aristotelian theory of the divine Νοῦς is an attempt to understand and interpret life from the perspective of absolute truth, *sub ratione veritatis*.

Hegel owes his concept of spirit primarily to Aristotelian philosophy, as is evident from his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* from the Jena period (1805). The philosophical appropriation of the Aristotelian Νοῦς is not only a hermeneutically reconstructed understanding of the same, but, a historically immanent spirit, which should reach its completion at the end of history. Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) is a history of the formation of uneducated – or increasingly self-educating – natural consciousness approached from the standpoint of culture and science, and as a philosophical look at the development of culture and science as well. Furthermore, as M. Somr emphasises, in Hegel's *Phenomenology* "education is understood as an active tackling of the moral life and nature"; "this education process is simultaneously a transition from thought-of substance to a reality and vice versa – from individuality to substantiality"; and "spiritual nature was added to an individual in order to be mastered for himself" (Somr 2013, 293, 300 and 293–294) and by himself as well. Labor (work) seems crucial here, as "work is an education in the double sense of the word: on the one hand it creates the world, develops it, and humanizes it, on the other it creates a human being, educates and nurtures him, humanizes him, implements his or her ideas that were until then just an abstract ideal" (Somr cf., 294; see also Lumdsen 2021; Bykova 2020; Brune et al. 2013).

Especially important for Heidegger's assessment of Hegel as 'the last Greek' is Hegel's conception of education [*Bildung*] in its essential correspondency to the Greek concept of "paideia" (παιδεία). Werner Jaeger, the German expert on ancient Greek philosophy, has characterized "paideia" as the formation of the Greek man, "it was culture, the formation of the human soul" (Jaeger 1944, 314 and 144). Paideia was in the classical time of Plato and Aristotle synonymous with civilization and culture at the same time the name for an education which, in contrast to the barbarian, distinguishes the civilized man. In Latin, *paideia* was translated as "humanitas" and referred to the spiritual development

¹ The works of Hegel will hereafter be referred to in abbreviated form as TWA.

and formation of human person through philosophy, literature and art. Hegel's model of education presupposes an integration of the contents of the traditional humanistic disciplines, which have been handed down to us under the name of artes liberales, the arts of free citizens. Research and study of the contents of the artes liberales has led to the constitution of a society in which freedom and education is a property of our spirit.²

In the following article I would like to show how it came about that Hegel, although he appropriated concepts and terms from ancient Greek philosophy, nevertheless became the philosopher par excellence of modernity and liberal society in the sense represented nowadays by Rawls and Habermas. What is so typically modern about this 'last Greek' of classical German philosophy? Hegel analyzed and redefined the concepts of classical Greek philosophy, such as Logos, Νοῦς, dialectic, education, practical wisdom [*phronesis*], in the context of his *Zeitgeist*. He emphasized education [*paideia*] and logos as the quintessence of the human being and philosophy. In this analysis, he essentially distanced himself from the ancient Greek *Weltanschauung*. The Christian doctrine that all persons are free and equal was decisive for Hegel. The British expert on the classical culture of antiquity Myles Burnyeat has convincingly demonstrated that a translation of the Declaration on Human Rights (1989) into ancient Greek would have no effect:

it would sound strange and pointless in a world which never seriously challenged the institution of slavery. In our politics certain minimum decencies are due to each and every individual without their having to deserve or qualify for them; their being human is enough. And that, it seems to me, is progress (Burnyeat 2012, 288).

And it is precisely this progress in the consciousness of freedom that Hegel characterized as the world history of the spirit.

Hegel was particularly impressed with the Aristotelian *phronēsis* and defines it as the ability to deliberate [*überlegen*] well and appropriately. The object of deliberation and consideration is factual human life and its institutions. As a rational living being, man has the Logos (*zoon logon echon*) not only as an ornament; it is his substantial being. Hegel transformed the Greek term logos (for instance, Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle) as historical spirit and human history, and interpreted it from the philosophical point of view as the *Phenomenology of Spirit* [*Phänomenologie des Geistes*]. Aristotle defined the human being as "zoon logon echon" in the first book of his *Politics*: "λόγον δὲ μόνον ἄνθρωπος ἔχει τῶν ζώων" (Aristotle, *Πολιτικά/Politiká* I, 1253a): "But Logos has only man among the living beings." This well-known definition implies two segments:

(1) the theoretical ability of man to think and judge;

² I characterize our liberal society, following Samuel Huntington, as a Western civilization in which freedom dominates as a basic value, in contrast to Islamic and Asian countries where freedom is not yet established as an intrinsic value (cf. Huntington 1996).

(2) the practical ability to act morally, deliberate and consider the best options and to integrate ethical virtues as part of one's own person.

The second segment of the definition is particularly relevant to Hegel's philosophy of law and to his concept of institutional morality [*Sittlichkeit*] as well.

In the context of Aristotle's definition of the human being, Hegel discusses the concept and structure of education [*Bildung*] in detail in his Nuremberg writings on philosophical propaedeutic, where he expressly states that the human being is distinguished from the animals by the capacity for education, because only by education does the human being become what it ought to be by nature. Education is, because of its universality, particularly important for the formation of human personality. It is therefore the goal of education to develop the skills of prudent decision-making with a view to judging and evaluating things and events under the broad aspect of human actions and the consequences arising therefrom.

II. Education According to Hegel. On *Bildung*

Education is for Hegel a constitutive aspect of spirit in the process of the reconciliation of spirit and history, reason [*das Vernünftige*] and reality. Hegel's emphasis on identity as self-consciousness confirms that identity is not only a fundamental philosophical concept in an abstract sense. It is through self-consciousness that the human individual differs from the animal, for it is through the capacity for self-conscious reflection that the human individual can rise above the experience of the particular to the formulation of general concepts and universal norms. This is the proper task of education.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel defines "Bildung" as "the long process of education toward genuine philosophy, a movement as rich as it is profound, through which spirit achieves knowledge" (Hegel, TWA III, 62). It is the "education [*Bildung*] of consciousness up to the standpoint of science" [*Wissenschaft*] (Hegel, TWA III, 71). In Hegel, the concept of "Wissenschaft" has a much broader scope of meaning than the term "science", and closely corresponds to the Greek *epistēmē*.

The path of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is an ascent from natural consciousness to true and complete knowledge. It is presented as the process of the formation of the mind, as an ideal course of the philosophical method leading to a true science; a course of the process of knowledge that the human mind has taken in history. For example, a particularly important stage in the development of consciousness is the well-known master-slave dialectic in Chapter IV of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

With his famous interpretation of the master-slave dialectic Hegel explored the connection between and interdependence of liberty and recognition [*Anerkennung*].

According to my judgment, this master-slave dialectic could be interpreted as process of revolution; but I rather think that it should be understood as a process of recognition in which the individual person is established in his or her autonomy. This process is characterized by the formation of the mind where the slave, in the struggle for recognition, puts everything on the card of education, because only through education [*Bildung*] and self-education [*Selbstbildung*] can one come to the realization that all people are equal in realized freedom. The spirit of education proves to be the way to establish personal freedom. On the other hand, the master can also become a slave to his own hedonism and uncontrolled lust. In *The Republic* (Plato 1994), Plato explains that people dominated by the lustful part of the soul (*epithymētikon*) are not autonomous, for they become slaves of their own desires and lusts, and they are not able to decide independently. In his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel takes up this Platonic passage and considers the purpose of education to be the establishment of the intelligence of the individual person. This point was explained by S. Lumsden in the following way:

An individual's place in Greek society is not determined by their 'particular standing' on the basis of a fixed naturalistic or patriarchal order. In aristocratic and paternalistic social orders, standing was based on family and so individuals had no need to prove themselves before others or develop their capacity, since their standing was a given. In Greece this was different: one had to prove oneself before others and take pleasure in the evidence of oneself so displayed (...) The self-respect and self-awareness of the Greeks lay precisely in their knowledge (Lumsden 2021, 5),

and their respect for knowledge as a kind of dignity manifesting itself in individuals engaged in education, self-education and achievement of knowledge.

In his work *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992), the American political philosopher Francis Fukuyama criticized the model of freedom in the US-Constitution by juxtaposing the Hegelian model of freedom as recognition. Fukuyama claims that the "American Founding Fathers like Jefferson and Madison believed that rights to a large extent existed as a means of preserving a private sphere where men can enrich themselves and satisfy the desiring parts of their souls" (Fukuyama 1992, XVIII). Fukuyama expressed his conviction that the modern US democracy is based on a model of the lustful part of the human soul, as it was conceived by Plato. In Book IX of *The Republic*, Plato defined 'slave' as a subject who executes the purposes of other subjects, and – as already mentioned above – one enslaved to her own, blind desires (see Dewey 1938).

The natural will, in which drives and lusts dominate, is for Hegel a sign of lack of education and culture, in other words, of ignorance of objective knowledge. Not until the systematic process of education is complete does the natural will become free, to the effect that it makes its decisions on the basis of deliberation, that is, prudently and responsibly. Only when it has raised itself to the status of universal knowledge and education does the will become free, that is, in Hegel's words, "thinking intelligence" (Hegel, TWA VII, § 72) because it is only as such truly free. In the Preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*,

Hegel asserts that it is the task of the individual to raise herself by means of education to the level of universal knowledge, of universal normativity, such that she abandons the standpoint of lack of culture and education and reflects on “the universal individual, which is self-conscious spirit in its cultivation” [*Bildung*] (Hegel, TWA III, 31).

Hegel’s concept of education is one of the core ideas of his philosophy. Hegel interprets the education as a process of formation of one’s own personality, which is guaranteed by the assimilation of cultural content, knowledge, social conventions and technical skills. According to Hegel, education is the axis of critical thinking, which he characterizes as “reasonable thinking” [*speculatives Denken*].

In the context of education, in § 209 of his *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel explicitly affirms the interdenominational, individual and social character of freedom. In this work, human subjects are defined in such a manner as to make freedom their fundamental characteristic:

It is significant for education [*Bildung*], for thought as consciousness of the individual in the form of generality, that the ‘I’ is understood as person in general, according to which all are equal in worth. The human being has this specific character, because he is a person, not because he is a Jew, Catholic, Protestant, German, Italian and so on (Hegel, TWA VII, 360).

With this definition of the position of human beings in the state, Hegel rejects every possible form of denial of freedom and creates the institutional framework for concrete realization of freedom, which he calls a ‘system of morality’ [*System der Sittlichkeit*]. Freedom of the individual requires also respect for the rights of others and cooperation within social institutions in order to be able to concretize its essence. Freedom should not be interpreted as arbitrary behavior, with the focus on hedonism playing a dominant role in private and social life.

As freedom has such an important social and institutional impact, it is necessary to promote freedom of cooperation within social and political institutions, in order that the freedom of the citizen may be as completely realized as possible. Through his concept of freedom, Hegel became above all a philosopher of modernity, because he integrated elements of the Christian doctrine of freedom, according to which there must be no more slaves, into the secular system of state institutions, and elevated freedom to the basic value of personal life and the social order. Hegel recognized that among the principles of modernity achieved as a result of the struggle for recognition and considered the pillars of bourgeois society are the following:

- (1) individual freedom;
- (2) the right of criticism;
- (3) autonomy of action;
- (4) individual and social responsibility;
- (5) the recognition of the individual as a person;
- (6) the fundamental right to property.

Due to the specifically individualistic characteristics of the aforementioned pillars, Hegel is justifiably viewed as the true originator of the idea of modernity and secularism (Habermas 1985, 27). Hegel's concept of freedom should also be considered as providing a perspective on "positive" freedom, which assumes the active involvement of the individual within the context of social institutions. Positive freedom presupposes furthermore that the citizen observes the laws of his own state, because his self-determination does not take place in abstraction outside social institutions, but rather as part of a complex process of communication in which the rights of other persons to freedom and equality are respected. Hegel justifiably perceived that fundamental characteristics of modernity, such as freedom, the right to critique, self-determination and autonomy of action, must not and cannot remain abstract concepts, but represent a part of the human being's 'life world', as his 'other nature', which he gradually constructs in the course of his history from the standpoint of existing knowledge and education.

The transformation of our 'first nature' – or original state (*status naturalis*) – into the "realm of education," cannot be achieved by abstract proclamations, but by social practice and affirmation within social and state institutions, something Hegel explained by his concept of a 'system of morality' [*System der Sittlichkeit*]. According to Hegel's explanation, human beings don't exist as isolated individual subjects who claim their rights. Rather, they live in concrete social institutions within which they are guaranteed their freedom, which they can realize or not realize.

In order to realize his fundamental rights, man needs the state, which Hegel paradoxically calls the "Vernunftstaat" (the reason-state). According to Habermas and Rawls, Hegel is considered the father of European modern liberal society because he took freedom of the spirit as the fundament of society (Rawls 1989, 330; 34 sq. 63). John Rawls characterized Hegel's political philosophy "as an important exemplar in the history of moral and political philosophy of the *liberalism of freedom*" (Rawls cf., 330) where "the concept of person and society fit together, each requires the other and neither stands alone" (Rawls cf., 366).

At the same time, Hegel criticized Kant's idea of freedom and cosmopolitanism as abstract and convincingly proved that we need a state where we can realize such an idea, where man can exist as a person and be active in society as a person. The idea of a person must not be bound to any religion, but is independent of religious affiliation.

In elaborating the concept of a "ethical life" [*Sittlichkeit*], Hegel sought to show that education implies not only the individual component of education in which we form and cultivate our nature, but also the effort by which the social structures transform themselves into a system of institutionalized morality that transitions into awareness of social responsibility.

On the other hand, the primary obligation of the state is to care for its citizens by supporting the arts, culture and cultural institutions such as universities, museums,

theatres, and cultural monuments so that the individual as citizen can realize her education. Universities have designated their own place and role in the practice of “Bildung” where “the free realm of the spirit flourishes in the state” (Hegel, TWA VIII, 12).

Educational integration into the existing system of morality of the life world, which Hegel calls „second nature”, is the primary task of pedagogy as a scientific discipline. In the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, it is explicitly stated that the task of the pedagogical craft is to make a human being moral [*sittlich*]. Pedagogy treats the human being as a natural being, and shows the path by which he may be born again, insofar as his first nature is transformed into the second, spiritual nature so that the intellectual [*das Geistige*] becomes a habit [*Gewohnheit*] (Hegel, TWA VII, § 151, 301).

It is thus the intention of education to develop the skills of prudent decision-making with a view to judging and evaluating things and events under the broad aspect of human actions and the consequences arising therefrom. Education presupposes that we should consider each thing in its social context under the aspect of purpose and functionality, especially in terms of its contribution to the system of morality.

With regard to the analysis and valorisation of reality, Hegel explicitly points out that an educated man will refrain from passing judgments too quickly, or from more than a limited perspective, before having understood the issue, problem or person adequately. An educated person is, Hegel points out, is well aware of “the limits of his ability to make judgments” [*Urteilsfähigkeit*] (Hegel, TWA IV, 259).

When Hegel argues that only by means of systematic education can we determine a ‘sense of an objective in its freedom’, then this primarily presupposes the development and cultivation of the individual capacity for judgment and its application in a wider social context. One of the central aspects of cultivation of judgment is the integration of the traditional humanistic disciplines, in other words, the continued cultivation of the educational tradition that we have inherited in the classical disciplines of the *artes liberales*, because they preserve an interest in the study of science that transcends the criterion of individual utility.

An individual who is educated in the humanities promotes, in Hegel’s view, social welfare and the general good, contributing to the development of social cultivation and raising the level of critical awareness. Hegel would say in this regard that “interest in fine art is not directed to one’s own advantage. It shows things in their living independence, rejecting from within all that is miserable and pathetic which suffers under external circumstances” (Hegel, TWA IV, 259). In education, the autonomous integration of educational content which contributes to the formation and maturation of the individual person is at work.

Since human beings exist in the context of “the realm of the spirit,” a variety of capacities are available for their development and elevation from the level of particularity and individuality to the universal level. This gradual expansion of our own horizons, in which we integrate knowledge, normativity and system of ethics, thus elevating ourselves

to the stage of universality, represents for Hegel a complex process of education in which human beings create, or rather develop, their own personality.

People of all eras drew educational content from sources that Hegel generally calls "the realm of the spirit." They formed their identity by means of the substantiality of ethos, culture, religion, art and law. Human nature is not just determined by a certain natural talent, but also by the intensity of assimilation of the achievements of the objective spirit, or second nature, in which the individual is existentially rooted. By education, we form our identity, by integrative education we become part of the cultural world, contributing to its betterment in the manner of a reconciliation of mind and reality.

With these considerations, Hegel has conceived an extensive complement to the occidental metaphysical conception of an abstractly conceived identity. He has shown, furthermore, how the concepts of *paideia* and *humanitas* are in close connection and interdependence, as they represent the intellectual process of human growth in education and the skills of cultivated judgment. The world of second nature is for Hegel the world of integrated understanding, in which the spirit or intellect constantly purifies its intellectual achievements from the standpoint of universal validity and overall acceptability.

What we mean today by the general term culture is almost identical to what Hegel designated by the term 'the objective spirit' [*objektiver Geist*] and its productivity. Assimilating and taking into account the results of the knowledge and creativity of the human spirit throughout history, human beings achieve through education the status of universality that is characteristic of knowledge. The individual is in terms of education and knowledge imperfect and her mission is to work on her own education afforded by the human spirit in its universality and to integrate into her personality the achievements of universal spirit.

Institutionalized life forms which are shaped by human culture, by education and libertarian progress, make up human beings' "second nature", their culturally or habitually transformed nature. The institutional forms in which we feel ourselves free and secure are the result of social and cultural mediation and mutual recognition [*Anerkennung*] among human beings. It is, in fact, the phenomenon of *ethos* [*das Sittliche*] which enables the natural self-interest and arbitrariness of the desire of every individual to be abrogated, that is, replaced by the substantiality of the spirit of freedom and responsible behaviour.

III. Conclusions

I could conclude my first lecture on Hegel with the assertion that the main task of Hegel's philosophy of education is to fathom how we can cultivate our nature and improve our intellectual faculties or judgment. Rarely do we have an equation of philosophy and education in a philosopher as is the case with Hegel. Therefore, Hegel's concept of education is also important for students at universities, because a process of shaping one's personality is achieved through education, i.e., through critical appropriation of the

existing forms of knowledge and culture.

That is one of the reasons that Hegel advocates for the rights of the individual to knowledge and education, because only when the individual has achieved familiarity and cognitive insight into the forms of knowledge, is he or she in a position to decide freely and, in accordance with such knowledge, to assume responsibility for his or her actions. He or she thereby evokes the respect and recognition of others and creates the preconditions for effective cooperation.

The question of developing confidence in the state and state institutions is one of the fundamental issues of civic education. In § 153 of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel provides an illustrative example of the relationship between the citizen and the state, and of the crucial role of education:

To the question of a father as to the best way raise his son ethically, a Pythagorean (...) gave the following answer: by becoming a citizen of a state with good laws (Hegel, TWA VII, 303).

A good citizen in Hegel's view is not one who merely conscientiously fulfils his professional obligations, particularly those of some social significance (e.g., of a doctor, a policeman, a cook) or the one who regularly pays his taxes, but also the advocate of civil disobedience who by his activity aims to change existing laws, i.e., to reach a higher level of civilization, to improve standard and education.

Every systematic analysis of the laws from the perspective of universality of mind reveals opportunities of their improvement; something which has proved effective in the case of changes to legislation on the protection of nature and the environment, to improve the status of national minorities, and legislation regarding gay rights in modern democratic societies. Belonging to a particular system of ethics [*Sittlichkeit*] implies the need for its evaluation and revision. Demands for revision of the law and the improvement of social institutions have often ended in fiasco and failure.

Hegel believes that institutional life forms, which have been formed through education, culture, technical and social progress, constitute the "system of ethical life" [*System der Sittlichkeit*] of human beings. The immediacy of institutional forms which act as humans' "second nature" is the product of social and cultural mediation. The phenomenon of morality is here of central importance, because through morality the natural arbitrariness of the will is transformed and the substantial spirit of freedom [*Geist der Freiheit*] prevails.

The question how to realize intelligent judgment is a common feature of Hegelian philosophy because Hegel discussed intensively personal freedom as substantial feature of human beings which lives in the institutional life-world of objective spirit or mind [*objektiver Geist*]. Hegel asserts that it is the task of the individual to raise herself/himself by means of education to the level of universal knowledge such that she/he abandons the standpoint of lack of culture and education and reflects on "the universal individual,

which is self-conscious spirit in its cultivation" [*Bildung*] (Hegel, TWA III, 31).

In the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821) philosophy was conceptualised as "its own time comprehended in thought" [*ihre Zeit in Gedanken erfaßt*]. Accordingly, we, philosophers, should apply our efforts to forming a judgment with regard to our own era. At present, we are living under conditions of constant uncertainty in a fluid, globalized society which lacks thoroughgoing and homogenous ethical norms.

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