

Bildung is not easily defined; it may even be among our most evasive and complex philosophical terms, both because of its inescapable historicity and cultural contingency, but also due to the scope of its conceptual relevance. We could say that it designates the process of 'civilization' or 'humanization,' of becoming a human being, and therefore encompasses pedagogy, education and maturation without being reducible to any of these. Hans-Georg Gadamer, for instance, understands Bildung as an 'aesthetic' process in which the individual acquires a profound 'sense' (*Sinn*) for one's social and ethical environment by nurturing such qualities as taste, judgment, and tact that tend to be all but ignored in Western discourse on the grounds of their ostensible lack of 'objectivity.' Others take different approaches and have different foci while they may still be dealing with Bildung.

As Straume explains in her informative and accessible introduction, the philosophy of Bildung has had considerable and lasting impact on the education systems and ideals in Norway, Denmark and Sweden. In contrast to Germany, where it gradually came to be associated with a certain elite, and later may even have degenerated into a superficial and uncritical 'snobbery' that was eventually incapable of resisting the takeover of political extremes, the Scandinavian version revolved around universal 'folkedanning' or 'public education' and was closely associated with the ideals of a democratic society. It is well worth asking whether the emergence of these peaceful, prosperous welfare societies may owe more to the specific development of the Bildung philosophy than usually held, and, alas, whether we may currently be witnessing the erosion of its ideals by narrower and more self-centered values and considerations in the political, social and not least economic arenas. At least it can be stated with certainty that if Bildung ever had any impact in Iceland, arguably a part of cultural Scandinavia, that impact seems all but lost in the present.

Straume explains that there is no English word for Bildung (*danning*). While this is for the most part correct, the word 'edification,' used for instance by Richard Rorty, may by now have become an adequate designator. But the historical lack of a clearly equivalent term in English - or French, or in most other languages for that matter, including Icelandic - has the consequence that a selection of topics and thinkers that are to constitute the 'history of the philosophy of Bildung' is subject to debate. From one point of view, Bildung refers to the particular tradition of thought that began with Herder and Wilhelm von Humboldt and was further developed in German idealism by Hegel and the hermeneutical and phenomenological disciplines. From another, however, many of the implications involved in the concept of Bildung are present in most if not all streams of thought dealing with pedagogy and the philosophy of education. The volume under review is undeniably, and

perhaps inescapably, strained by this ambivalence. For those leaning to the former understanding of *Bildung*, the selection of thinkers and periods may appear too broad and some sections somewhat out of place. And those leaning to the second may find that other topics should have been covered. Be that as it may, putting together a volume on this important and fascinating topic will always be a complex and formidable task which is certain not to satisfy all readers. In the opinion of this reviewer, however, the selection has been largely successful. By introducing various ways of thinking in history that could be subsumed under a philosophy of *Bildung*, the volume is intended first and foremost as a textbook for teaching, but should also be of value to the general reader who seeks to gain an overview. The editor further deserves credit for including sections on non-Western approaches such as Confucianism and Islam, thus introducing to Western readers divergent approaches that ought to be able to stimulate fresh views on what it means to be an educated, civilized or 'gebildet' human being.

Most sections are well composed, organized and lucid. They are written in altogether three different languages, Norwegian Bokmål, Norwegian Nynorsk and Danish, which, however, should present no obstacles to readers of the Scandinavian languages. The editor has made a surprisingly successful effort to ensure that the length of each section is more or less the same, around 10-12 pages, which makes the book ideal for teaching. Due to the brevity of the sections, however, they are necessarily condensed, and will lend themselves to being picked at for their omissions. The following are some brief suggestions that could serve to improve later editions of the book.

The section on Confucianism is clear, informative and surprisingly comprehensive, but seems to rely excessively on an Aristotelian 'virtue ethics' reading of Confucianism in its rather artificially (or Occidentally) systematic presentation of the Confucian 'virtues' (de). It is regrettable that it leaves out the demands on the individual practitioner of self-cultivation to come up with creative responses to new social circumstances, especially in the practice of *li*. For it is precisely these that most prominently constitute the self-reflective aspect of the *Bildung*-process in the Confucian view of education. Furthermore, considering the inclusion of Confucianism in the volume, one may wonder whether other Asian approaches, say, for instance, the Buddhist self-cultivational quest for eliminating ignorance (*avidya*), should not deserve to be included as well.

While Kant's epistemology and ethics are certainly important for an understanding of his overall project, it would have been useful to consider as well his attempts to systematize his entire philosophy in a comprehensive whole from a *Bildung*-perspective. These are evident in

the latter half of his *Critique of Pure Reason* as well as in his discussions of pedagogy, history and Enlightenment. The author certainly makes reference to some of these, but perhaps they should have been pulled more to the forefront. As a point of comparison, the author of the section on John Rawls does well to explicate the all-too often ignored second part of his *A Theory of Justice*, which is revelatory for the ultimate purpose of his well-known but not always well-appreciated concepts of 'original position' and 'veil of ignorance'. In a similar fashion, the elements of Kant's elaborate philosophy can similarly be made more meaningful by contextualizing them within his philosophical framework – or architectonic – from the perspective of *Bildung*. It is readily admitted, however, that composing such a synthesizing account in 10-12 pages is easier said than done.

The section on Hegel would have profited from a somewhat more elaborate discussion of his specific understanding of 'experience' (*Erfahrung*). It had considerable influence on *Bildung*-thinkers such as Dilthey, Dewey, Gadamer and Habermas, and is, as a matter of fact, treated in some detail in the section on Habermas. Experience for Hegel is really a formative kind of experience. The subject's transformation to self-reflection, its 'reversal of consciousness,' when exposed to objects of the world and other subjects is a vital factor in enabling and initiating the *Bildung*-process. A more striking omission, however, is the notion of 'growth' in the section on John Dewey, while it receives some discussion in the one on Rorty. In Dewey's terms, growth could be said to be the outcome of the civilizing process. But the aim of growth is simply more growth. It enables the individual in question to continuously expand on his or her experience and apprehension of the world and make it more sophisticated and open to other and novel experiences. Dewey's notion of growth makes it all the more easy to appreciate his visions of a civilizing process towards the necessarily non-specified aim of a flourishing humanity.

But all this is nitpicking for the sake of academic discourse and primarily intended to be enriching. The editor and contributors should be commended for a bold but successful project that should serve to keep alive a certain family of ideas belonging to humanity's most ambitious and lofty, yet realizable, ideals. Their survival can only depend on accessible publications such as this one, and, of course, on those of us who make use of them.

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