

***Bildung*: freedom – know thyself**

I want to do two things in my PAPER. The first is to illustrate my understanding of *Bildung* in Hegel through the experiences of a student (Jacob) on the Education Studies and Modern Liberal Arts programmes at the University of Winchester (UK). The second is to offer some philosophical comments on this interpretation of *Bildung*. As you will see, I am particularly interested in the terms formation and re-formation, and in what *Bildung* means for education with regard to modern subjectivity. The two halves of the paper tell the same story.

INTRODUCTION

Bildung, along with other existential forms of education like *paideia* and humanism, is called upon in the present day to counteract the dehumanizing effects of technology, bureaucracy, performativity etc. The hope is to find the human being somewhere under the layers of objectification that are part of the modern condition. In short, perhaps what is sought is education with subjective or existential significance – something like Know Thyself– or education that can still work in the name of humanity, even despite the collapse for some people of the universal conception that is implied by ‘humanity.’

Bildung in Hegel is about the relationship between objective social forms and subjective inner forms. When he says in the *Philosophy of History* (1956: 417/1970: 496) that the work of culture is the production of the form of universality in thought, he means that culture is how universality, the objective and subjective, is known by us. Yet this knowing of universality is anything but straightforward. For one thing, how it is known will be different in different times and places. Equally, it is often mistaken as straightforward when *Bildung* is understood only objectively as the act of making men ethical – as if we are cultured when we bring together subjectivity and objectivity in the morality of duty, a kind of inner ethical objectivity. This shows no understanding of the way freedom is played out in such an education. And it is a mistake to understand *Bildung* in Hegel without taking into account his most important educational concept, the *Aufhebung*. The complication that the *Aufhebung* brings is carried by the phrase with which I title my paper: Freedom – Know Thyself, which could equally well say ‘freedom is to learn’. This is the version

of *Bildung* and the *Aufhebung* that we are working with on two undergraduate degrees in the University of Winchester.

To illustrate this I want to relate parts of the story of one of our students, who we will call Jacob.

JACOB

I don't think he would mind me saying that Jacob came to us with a bit of a history. He was a bit of a drinker, a scrapper, and his parents, who are teachers, worried that he had no direction in life. He says now that he put them through hell. After leaving school his mother suggested that he take a part time job in a special school for kids with behavioural difficulties. He found he could connect with them, but in doing so he experienced a problem. He found himself in a position of authority for the first time and questioned, rightly, why on earth he should have any kind of authority over these kids. He didn't shirk his responsibility, he just questioned it, and at a level which he himself was not yet aware of. At this stage, let us say of Jacob that he found himself representing an objective social form – being part of state education – but subjectively he could identify himself with it. His subjectivity and his objectivity were at odds.

He felt intrigued by this strange contradiction that pulled at him. It asked him for honesty and integrity in the face of it, but he hadn't really got a clue how to deal with this. So, it was with a sense of integrity that he decided to go to university. He was not completely sure why... just a kind of feeling that it was the right thing to do, that this problem needed understanding more deeply. He came to Winchester, and not straight away to train to be a teacher, but to give himself time to think about becoming one first. But in the process of failing his first year he dropped out. He re-took year 1 and I first came across him in a symposium where he was arguing passionately for Kant's principle of freedom through enlightenment, and for the equality of the principle that no one is a means to an end, only an end in him or herself. We can say here that he was again representing the objectivity of universality – a kind of duty to mankind – but with a singular passion that sounded anything but objective.

I now want briefly to follow Jacob's progress through the remaining two years of his degree. In a module called *Power of the Teacher* he began to revisit the dilemma of teaching in the special school. Why should he have power, and having it, what should he do with it? Then he studied the *Philosophy of the Teacher*. Here he learned of philosophical attempts to mediate power in ways which make one neither completely master of others nor completely slave to others. The question of freedom was now near at hand. A sea change in his thinking came about in a module called *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Here two ideas in particular challenged him. The first was that the dialectic of enlightenment shows that, as he says, there is 'nothing outside the box.' Hegel would understand this as the box of reason, taken as spirit, or ethical life, or the Notion. Subjectivity has no escape from the forms of objectivity that we have to presuppose as the condition of the possibility of our existence.

Second, he likened the education of the dialectic of enlightenment to a train ride. You can get off at any station you like if you find the journey too difficult, but that won't put an end to the difficulties; in fact they will just point you back to the train. Getting off the train is just trying to avoid what can't be avoided. In this sense this train is on the circle line, and if we were to quote Hegel here it might be to say that this is the circle that has 'its end also as its beginning' (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, para 18).

Soon Jacob began to put the ideas of the box and the train together, but before that, one week he suddenly announced that in being trapped in the box and on the train he nevertheless feels a freedom. This he then explored in his final module called *Know Thyself* where he used Hegel's master/slave dialectic to express this strange idea that he is carrying with him of freedom in the box. Now he is able to put the two ideas together. He likens the train journey in the box to a philosophical education in modern society. Freedom is in the learning *because*, he says, we must learn continually that we are not free. As he said, you can't begin to be free until you know that you're not free. This is his modern Socratic wisdom: and it is also a modern version of Know Thyself. It is summed up by the phrase *freedom is to learn*, carrying as it does two meanings. Freedom is in the learning, and freedom requires still to be learned. It is Jacob's way of expressing Hegel's most infamous idea that the True is the Bacchanalian revel and repose.

We can describe this again in terms of Hegelian *Bildung*. The box is objectivity. His experience of its lack of freedom is his subjectivity. They are in a broken relationship. His train journey is his learning of this broken relationship; it's his pathway of doubt or way of despair, as Hegel calls it. He can get off the train in the hope of mending this broken relationship. But his awareness of the totality of the dialectic of enlightenment reminds him that any such mending will collapse again, and he will be back on the train. This is what Hegel means when he says in the *Phenomenology* that 'consciousness suffers this violence at its own hands: it spoils its own limited satisfaction. When consciousness feels this violence it may well make it retreat from the truth, and strive to hold on to what it is in danger of losing. But it can find no peace. If it wishes to remain in a state of unthinking inertia, then thought troubles its thoughtlessness, and its own unrest disturbs its inertia' (para. 80). In addition, when Jacob says that he finds freedom in the negation of freedom, or on this train journey of doubt and despair, this is the *Aufhebung*. What is destroyed – freedom – is preserved, but known differently, known philosophically. And when he says that freedom is in the learning, this is the truth of the *Aufhebung*, because it is how subjectivity and objectivity are brought together in philosophical experience, or in our philosophical education. This *Aufhebung*, or Jacob's train ride in the box, is the experience of freedom in modern society. In Hegelian terms this is Jacob's experience of absolute spirit, and it is the logic of the Notion.

And when you tell Jacob that there are people who think that Hegel's absolute is dogmatic, he is incredulous. How could anyone think that in the absolute, or in the Notion, that the *Aufhebung* is anything other than self-negation, unable to withstand its own self-critique and eternally having to re-learn about itself? To call it dogmatic is in fact to be dogmatic. Such people, says Jacob, are those who think that truth is like the night in which all cows are black; in other words, that in truth nothing happens. Such dogma, says Jacob, would require one to get off the train, and to refuse further learning. The train *itself* can't be dogma unless it too stops. But freedom demands that it doesn't stop. Freedom, says Jacob, and I think Hegel would agree, is to keep learning, and absolutely to stay on the train.

Jacob also points out that if and when the train does stop there is the ever present danger of fascism. Anything that refuses its implication within the dialectic is refusing to mediate itself, and refusing to allow anything else to mediate it. This is where education settles into dogma. It is the

job of freedom to oppose such ideologies. In Jacob's version of the dialectic of freedom, the strength of learning is that it is free because it is open to learning always of its own downfall. So, 'freedom is to learn' is also his critique of fascism, and he is vigilant in his reading in watching out for anyone who believes they can mend the broken relationship of objective social forms and subjective experience of them.

In his Final Year Dissertation Jacob explored whether the broken relation of subjectivity and objectivity in modern rational *Bildung* could be applied to the broken relationship between macrocosm and microcosm, and whether the thing called God is in fact our representation of the universe learning of itself. It's a kind of Platonic cosmic Know Thyself, not unlike the *Timaeus*. And currently, you won't be surprised to know, he is taking our MA in Modern Liberal Arts with us, before training, finally, to be a teacher.

If one of our hopes is to counteract the objective forms that threaten dehumanization, and to find the human being somewhere under the layers of objectification that are part of the modern condition, then I think Jacob has done this. His education began with a very human dilemma of how to relate to other human beings while working in an objective social form, and he has now found its subjective significance. And he knows too of the importance for freedom that he works with both of them, objectivity and subjectivity. And I add on his behalf, that in carrying their broken relationship he is expressing this very modern sense of humanity in all its difficulties and ambiguities.

BILDUNG

This version of *Bildung* in Hegel comes from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* rather than the *Philosophy of Right*. It often appears at first glance that Hegel's 'philosophies' are presented without the ambivalence they are describing. Therefore, the 'Philosophies' of Hegel have to be read carefully, as their presentational form seem to remove the struggle that is their actuality. This is when Hegel appears to be dogmatic, i.e. when he is describing the totality of social and political relations. One famous example is the sentence 'the rational is the actual'. It looks like a very conservative statement of political acquiescence; in fact, within it, is the whole

phenomenological structure of aporetic modern experiences, and of social and political opposition to all modern abstract social and political forms.

The *Bildung* of the *Philosophy of Right* is perhaps the most generally discussed. It gives an account of *Bildung* as the education in which the individual learns of its universal character, or how subjectivity learns of its objective form in law and the state.¹ This same concern of the relation between inner rational development and outer political structures can be found in Humboldt's notion of *Bildung*. And I think that both he and Hegel would agree, in Hegel's words from the *Philosophy of Right*, that *Bildung* is the act of 'making men ethical' (1967: 260). But in my reading of what Hegel means by *Bildung*, it is only fully understood when this objective definition is coupled with the phenomenology, or subjective experience of *Bildung*. Understood in this way, *Bildung* carries within it the brokenness between subjectivity and objectivity that characterizes the modern ethical order. I don't share the view, therefore, that is so common, that Hegel's statement here is a quietist statement advocating conformity to the status quo. If anything, he is expressing the difficult relationship between conformity and opposition to conformity.

Bildung is often translated as 'culture' or 'formation'. But this idea of being shaped often gets reduced to something like socialisation. Its status is raised slightly by this process being referred to as that of becoming cultured. But I think Hegel has a much more philosophical purpose in mind in the way he uses *Bildung* as culture. As we noted above, he gives a very specific definition in the *Philosophy of History* (417/496) where he says that the work of culture is the production of the form of universality in thought. I think this has at least three layers of meaning. The first, to which I would apply the term formation, is the idea of a universality formed in its being thought. I also want to call this kind of thinking *immediacy*. The second is the undermining of this universality, also in thought, and this I would describe as *re-formation*. Let me give two brief examples.

¹ Knox in his notes says that *Bildung* can mean the actual process of education as well as the cultured state of mind arrived at through education. The phrase *gebildeter Mensch* or educated man has its roots in the literary men of the Renaissance.

Remember that Adorno used to argue that going to the cinema was an ideological act within a totality that is false. I think this idea is also carried by *Bildung*. A youth walks by my window as I am writing this. He wears jeans and a t shirt, but I notice in particular he has his hair cut so that it falls forward like a wave across his face. I am reminded that when I was at school there was no surer way to look naff than to comb your hair forward. This wasn't seen as a relative judgement, it was an actual fact: hair forward was naff. I don't want to go into how such fashions change. I want instead to observe that the youth who passed my window was producing a form of universality in the thought of himself. He knows he *actually* looks cool because this is what cool is. It's not a relative truth. It's a truth. However, for me, as he walks by, it's only a culture, or a cultural production, because for me it's only a relative fact (an oxymoron that's part of Hegelian philosophical education). I can see his truth for what it is. One man's production of a form of universality is another man's culture. And here the formation of universality is re-formed when understood as culture.

My second example concerns what I call *fossil fuel culture*. Whenever we turn on a light, or fill up the car, we produce a form of universality, the universality of our total dependence upon fossil fuels. We are formative of this universality because to us it is our ordinary lived life. It is in a sense completely normal, too normal to make us question it. We would say it is 'natural' to turn the lights on when it's dark. But to the South Sea Islander whose home may be engulfed by rising sea levels, or to the child labourer making cheap electrical goods to serve the Western lifestyle, our presupposed universality of modern life is a culture of unthinking and uncaring greed and exploitation. The universality of turning lights on is our ethical life, but it is less ethical when viewed from a different universality. (It is interesting to mark these things against those in natural science regarding loss of absolute time and space, and quantum uncertainty of observation.) For us to learn of the formation or production of our universality as a culture is to re-form this universality and to begin to re-educate ourselves about the presuppositions that determine our everyday reality.

Now, if we stopped our analysis of *Bildung* here, we would have a simple and very recognisable model of formation and re-formation. In it, we teach for self-awareness of social determination and political contingency, and we teach of the unethical cultures of the Western lifestyle, and in

doing so raise a generation of critical thinkers. This is as far as many models of critical education go; as if it was just this simple.

In Hegel's *Bildung* there is an even more significant aspect to contend with, namely that seeing and understanding the culture of formation and re-formation of universality is itself just such a culture – formative and re-formative of itself. Where for Adorno this dialectic of enlightenment might be said to have led to the famous melancholic science of negative dialectics, for Hegel the significance is slightly different. This education about culture, about *Bildung*, about the totality of the dialectic of formation and re-formation, has its significance as the *Aufhebung*. This is the most important educational aspect of *Bildung* in Hegel because it is where culture learns about itself, that is, the culture of culture. This is to say, we are re-formed even in understanding formation and re-formation. The truth of this education and learning is to be found where we are, in our unavoidable complicity within the culture of universality. And of great significance here, because the *Aufhebung* is the culture of universality that opposes itself, this can be called a universal education in and for itself. But it is not a dogmatic version of universality. It can't be, since it only exists in its own downfall. The universality of this education is precisely that it destabilizes all of its dogmatic appearances. It is remarkable, then, that Hegel is seen as a dogmatic philosopher, and not seen as the philosopher who, with the *Aufhebung*, offers modernity a much needed notion of education that has education as its truth in and for itself.²

In passing, I want to mention the idea that it is when the *Aufhebung* is missing that political cultures of opposition can become fascistic. Facing their own inconsistencies of theory and practice, they justify these inconsistencies as means to a greater end. The *Aufhebung* challenges this turn to dogma by teaching about the unavoidable re-form even of opposition, or we might say more simply, about its complicity with the system it opposes. Now a political opposition can either accept its complicity and re-formation within these conditions, or stick to a simple model of them and us. It is the job therefore of the *Aufhebung* to oppose even the

² I haven't mentioned here the third element in Hegel's educational trilogy, that of *Entwicklung*. The latter is the cyclical element of self-production, and can refer to the growth of a seed, to a tree back to a seed, or to the growth of spirit as it returns to itself. The difference between them is *Bildung*, for unlike the seed, spirit's development is interrupted by its self-consciousness, or by subjectivity, and reformed in its development by the oppositions that ensue. In shorthand, *Bildung* is the subjective experience of *Entwicklung*, and the *Aufhebung* is our learning from the experience. They constitute the educational process by which spirit develops.

opposers, those who threaten freedom in the name of freedom. One makes few friends in doing so. But it is a vocation for those who understand that freedom is to learn, not to impose.

I want to say two other things here about culture. I think Hegel believed philosophy would cease to be a culture once it had thought its own truth. Alienation, for example, would be overcome by subjective substance in the moral spirit, a kind of inner objectivity. But the age of philosophy has not arrived. Theory and practice, subjectivity and objectivity are not conjoined. Hegel knew this of his own time, and we know it of ours. His predicted end of the culture of art has not arrived; instead the end of art has itself become a culture. It can't do philosophy, but it has in certain ways become philosophical, and this applies to any art in which art is its own object. Similarly religion is not exhausted as a culture. It too becomes philosophical when its own end is what it represents; this is God, for example, in Nietzsche's story of the subjectivity of Zarathustra.

So the time of philosophy has not come. How, then, to educate ourselves about this culture of the continued non-arrival of philosophy? One answer, my answer, is the education being offered in Modern Liberal Arts and indeed in the more established degree in Education Studies, at the University of Winchester, and this education or *Bildung* might be seen, as we said, as the retrieval of a modern version of education in and for itself. Let me try to describe in a few words how this works. To begin with our students bring with them their formative experiences and we try to give them the opportunity to make some of them the content of their degree so that *Bildung* can do its critical work. At some point a student may ask about the meaning of such thinking. In asking this she is ready to think about the culture of her own role as a thinker. It is here that the *Aufhebung* offers her the idea that the meaning of culture is education in and for itself. This is because it is where culture – the production of the form of universality in thought – learns about itself in thought. In doing so, it is expressing its own truth – the truth of the rise and fall of universality, known by itself. In this sense, but only in this sense, universality can know itself, but only as learning, not as fact. I recognise that in our desire for freedom this may not be enough. But to push for more is to ignore what freedom is teaching us about its own present limitations. Freedom, for the moment at least, is to learn.

Let me finish with one last observation about *Bildung* in our thinking about the degree, and related specifically to a comment made above at the beginning of the paper. *Bildung*, along with other existential forms of education like *paideia* and humanism, is called upon in the present day to counteract the dehumanizing effects of technology, bureaucracy, performativity etc. The hope is to find the human being somewhere under the layers of objectification that are part of the modern condition. In short what is sought is education with subjective or existential significance – something like Know Thyself.

In modernity, and in line with what we have said about *Bildung*, to Know Thyself means learning of the culture of one's identity. In this process, subjectivity presupposes itself as a natural formation, and then, from this standpoint, criticizes its appearance within specific social forms. This is the model of critical education described above which has no idea of itself as a culture that is already (re-)formed by the formations which it seeks to overcome. This is what so infuriates many students who lament 'why don't these post-modern thinkers who critique all grand narratives, see that their critique is just another grand narrative?' What they mean here is that critical thinking – in this case post-modern – does not recognise its re-formation as culture. As we have seen, *Bildung* in Hegel has the additional significance of being able to critique the culture of this critique, and to implicate the subjectivity that's doing the critique. No longer just commentator on culture, now the critique of subjectivity as culture is itself a culture of subjective critique. This is the broken, difficult yet unavoidable relationship between subjectivity and objectivity in modern ethical life. It is, we might say, Know Thyself as the culture of modern subjective freedom (or morality) within the objective forms of the state and civil society. This is what I understand Hegel to mean when he says *Bildung* is the act of making men ethical, but now 200 years later. And it's partly why we have called our programme *Modern Liberal Arts*, to try to practice the idea of Know Thyself within modern social relations, such that freedom might take up the challenge to Know Thyself.

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