

On the Free Will that the Free Will Wills

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As Krassimir Stojanov suggests in his enlightening discussion of Hegel, we have, as philosophers and as educators, paid too little attention to Hegel's ideas about *Bildung*. I agree. Hegel has been one of the central figures, along with Kant, Herder, Goethe, Fichte, Schiller, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Schleiermacher, and others less famous, I have been studying to clarify the importance of formative experience in human life. I've begun to question my initial understanding of *Bildung* in their work. I want to introduce these doubts as a basis for indicating a reservation I have about Stojanov's interesting article.

Does *Bildung* identify a complex development, something like "mass democratization" might in modern life, or does it indicate a specific agency significant within a development, akin to say the role of advertising in affecting popular tastes? By translating Stojanov's title into German, a redundancy becomes evident, for "*Bildung* as formation of mindedness ..." becomes "*Bildung als Bildung der Geistigkeit*."

Are we looking at a general phenomenon, the formation of mindedness, or at an agency, *Bildung*, key in developing mindedness? Later educational efforts to impart *Bildung* through a pedagogical effort suggest the second construction—*Bildung der Geistigkeit nach Hegel*, the educational cultivation of mindedness according to Hegel.² But Hegel wrote when a formal pedagogy of *Bildung* was only beginning to emerge from literary, historical, philosophical, anthropological, theological, and pedagogical writings. These included frequent uses of the noun, *Bildung*, and the verb, *bilden*, and their many compounds. The root verb, *bilden*, very old and powerful, spawned a family of common words used then

and now with a wide spectrum of meanings.³

Here I want to sketch a hypothesis. Although later critics interpret important uses of *Bildung* by Hegel as indicating ideas about formal education, Hegel primarily used *Bildung* as a summative term, a descriptor that itself did not indicate an active agency, but rather served as a catch-all identifier for the complicated process through which *Geist* creates itself through personal and collective life. The whole process was *Bildung*. By fulfilling this summative *Bildung*, *Geist* creates itself as *Recht*, as right, “the free will that the free will wills,” (which Hegel explained in *The Philosophy of Right*, ¶1-¶29, quotation, ¶27, translated by Robbie McClintock).⁴

Hegel initially explained that process in his long introduction where he presented, step by step, the hard work that *Geist* performs in forming itself as Right. Whether incarnated collectively in historical experience or in our personal lives, *Geist* creates itself through an immanent, dialectical recursion, using its capacities to actualize itself, in-and-for-itself in the world. This recursive activity does not take place in a long, causally linear sequence, but in multiple interactions, immanent and reciprocal, operating within a temporal duration and over a spatial extent.⁵ *Geist* emerges through nonlinear self-formation. The Introduction gave a compact phenomenology of *Geist* forming itself as *Recht*.

Throughout his work, Hegel refers to aspects of *Geist* with the term *das Moment*—not “moment” in its temporal sense, but “element, factor, viewpoint, aspect, situation.”⁶ *Geist* can manifest itself in three moments or factors—will (*Geist* in-itself acting), thought (*Geist* for-itself conceptualizing), and actualized *Geist* (*Geist* in-and-for-itself, a rational actuality). Unlike temporal moments, *Geist* in the form of these factors has substantiality, enduring through significant transformations. Will, the in-itself of *Geist*, and thought, the for-itself of *Geist*, and actual *Geist*

as the in-and-for-itself, interact in and with a moot world, characterized by a striving,⁷ which Hegel often spoke of as expressing *Triebe*, drives. But a *Trieb* in Hegel's time had a special, somewhat animistic meaning, indicating an effort or endeavor.⁸ All three factors—will, thought, and *Geist*—in all their manifold instantiations, expressed this restless endeavor to flourish in the world, and any instantiation of *Geist* would encounter limits and insufficiencies in its endeavoring, which were opportunities for *Geist* to *sich aufheben*, to heave itself up into some other instantiation of itself, reconfiguring its in-itself, its for-itself, and its in-and-for itself in a way that incorporated its factors in another form.⁹

These *Aufhebungen*, upheavals to use the noun, appear to give some historical and biographical sequence to the self-formation, for they help shape the recursive process taking place over an extended duration. Hegel's having to explain the whole process sequentially in a linear text amplified this impression of sequence, but if one considers his analyses carefully, it becomes evident that the recursive self-creation of *Geist* takes place with *Geist* forming itself through many parallel *Triebe* heaving themselves up through various *Aufhebungen*. Hence, *Geist* does not form itself through a sequence with a beginning, middle, and end, but through a complex, enduring recursion that achieves completion when all the possibilities of *Geist*, the in-and-for-itself of life, are actual.

Hegel explained the philosophy of right on this vitalistic grounding. The Introduction (*Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, ¶1-¶29) presents it largely from the phenomenological standpoint, explaining the experiential process of *Geist's* self-formation, and the body of the work presents it largely from the standpoint of achieved *Wissenschaft*, science. ¶1-¶3 delimit the science of right and differentiate it from jurisprudence. Hegel then starts the phenomenological forming of *Geist* as *Recht*, right, with the will as it finds itself free in the world, and in ¶4-

¶10, Hegel explicated how *Geist* experienced this existential basis of the free will. Then in ¶11-¶21, he examined how the subjective will, pursuing all manner of goals contingently, encounters their contradictions, and using thought works to clear away the conflicts. That frees them from the contingency of their content.

But that is only the subjective side, the will experiencing itself as an *in-itself*. In ¶22-¶28, initiative shifts to the for-itself, showing how the subjective will strives to objectify its freedom as a substantial actuality, something *for-itself*, embodied in the world it inhabits. In doing that, ¶29-¶32, Hegel indicates how the will, now becoming in-and-for-itself, constitutes the combined subjectivity and objectivity of the system of right, which he would present, now as philosophy, not phenomenology, in the three aspects in which the will “is free in and for itself” (¶33): first as abstract right (property, contract, and tort), second as morality (purpose and responsibility, intention and welfare, the good and the conscience), and third as ethical life (the family, civil society, and the state).

An important passage in the phenomenological introduction, ¶20, a short paragraph, stated the role of *Geist* as thought, the for-itself, in purifying the various drives, *Triebe*, of their contingency by bringing out the formal universality immanent in them. It concludes, “This effort to bring forth the generality of thought is the absolute value of *Bildung*” (cf. ¶187). In sending readers here to ¶187, he is sending them to the part on ethical life where *Geist* shifts from its incarnation in familial experience to its participation in the diverse experiences of civil society. Its sense of self—formed within the family, immediate, and particular—enters into the complexities of civil society and must raise its immediacies and particularities to a higher level of generality. Hegel uses the noun, *Bildung*, and the verb, *bilden*, significantly in examining the transition.

In his article, Stojanov interprets Hegel's usage in ¶187 as one pointing to a pedagogical effort to form mindedness among the members of civil society, a plausible reading of Hegel's language and one highly consistent with what has taken place in practice globally during the past two centuries. I think Stojanov effectively separates a pedagogical program of *Bildung* on Hegelian principles from those who would make it "an appropriation of a canon of classic 'high culture' for its own sake."¹⁰ And he astutely explains Hegel's ideas about the formative power of properly studying Greek and Latin language and literature in the gymnasium as an instance of the productive alienation, the *Entfremdung*, that people undergo in making their places in civil society. Stojanov concludes that Hegel calls for *Bildung* that develops mindedness (*Geistigkeit*), "in the form of conceptual self-articulation."¹¹ Only a dialectical or Socratic education of this sort can reconcile the individual *Geist* with the full objective *Geist* of civil society. "This end can be reached only with the help of formal education which mediates between the subjective life-worlds of the students and the objective world of concepts."¹²

To me, this conclusion is a bit disquieting, although Stojanov leaves it unclear the degree to which he espouses the position he finds Hegel to have taken. It makes me uneasy, first as I'm not sure formal education has such power, and second as I doubt it would lead to a desirable democratic humanism if it did have such power. I think, however, that reading *Bildung* in these passages as a summative descriptor of a broader process would lead in less problematic directions.

As phenomenology, what Hegel described as taking place in ¶187, is precisely what takes place in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in the section on "Self-alienated Spirit. Culture [*Bildung*]."¹³ It would be a stretch to take that section in the *Phenomenology* as a discussion of *Bildung* as

formal education. We can understand what Hegel described in ¶187 as the self-alienation of the individual Geist into objective cultural works in the objective lifeworld. If we do so, the continued discordance between personal *Geist*, as we each experience ourselves in-and-for-ourselves, and historical *Geist*, the in-and-for-itself of our lifeworld, suggests that the duration of the whole formative process yet endures, and we each and all have much formative work to do in our lives to keep moving it towards fulfillment. I think a philosophy of *Bildung* in its comprehensive sense might offer persons greater clarity about how they, each from their respective life situation, can better manage their work of self-formation. The free will that the free will wills should carry on.

1 Krassimir Stojanov, “*Bildung* as Formation of Mindedness in Hegel’s Philosophy,” in *Philosophy of Education 2018*, ed. Megan Laverty (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2019).

2 Many learned interpreters have examined *Hegels Theorie der Bildung*. See the text and commentaries collected by Jürgen-Eckardt Pleines in his work of that title (2 vols, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1986).

3 As a verb, *bilden* [to form, constitute, compose, generate, educate, shape, build, develop ...], and a noun, *Bildung* [education, creation, learning, generation, formation, accumulation, culture ...], the term has many meanings and serves as the key constructor of numerous compound terms. Hegel used these terms in many different ways throughout his work dependent on the context. There are many discussions of the historical usage of *Bildung*, and “Bildung” by Rudolf Vierhaus is a good place to start with them: Rudolf Vierhaus, “Bildung,” in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, eds. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972), 508–551.

4 For this essay I have used the German text of *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* in G. W. F. Hegel, *Sämtliche Werke* (Band VI, Leipzig: Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1921), both the translation by T. M. Knox (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965) and the translation by H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Citations are by paragraph numbers, marked ¶, the standard mode of reference for the text.

5 Hegel would demarcate the duration and extent of collective *Geist* by the historical epochs of different civilizations and of personal *Geist* by the span of a life in its specific circumstances.

6 *Das Moment*, neuter, differs from *der Moment*, masculine. (Compare *das Moment*

on Duden Online, https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Moment_Umstand_Produkt, with *der Moment* on Duden online, https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/Moment_Zeitpunkt_Zeitspanne). The masculine *Moment* is cognate to the English “moment.” Translating Hegel’s *Moment* consistently as “element” or “factor” would make his work in English easier to grasp, but translators all seem to use “moment,” with explanations of its special meaning tucked in here and there. The problem may exist in German as well, for *der Moment*—meaning *Zeitraum von sehr kurzer Dauer; Augenblick*, an instant—is the more common usage compared to Hegel’s, which is now rarer.

7 Interpreters often speak of Hegel’s dialectic as giving rise to a formative movement. It is more accurate to think that the incessant vitality of *Geist*—it distinguished life from dead matter—gives rise to the dialectic as its churning activity creates conflicts and contradictions that it needs to reconcile.

8 See the authoritative DWDS on *Trieb*: “an inborn or acquired, strong inner striving towards acting...” (<https://www.dwds.de/wb/Trieb>). The anonymous 1792 translator of Blumenbach’s influential *Bildungstrieb* is particularly illuminating in explaining his unwillingness to translate “*Trieb*” as “drive,” sticking with the Latin, “*nisus formativus*,” the “formative endeavor,” which Blumenbach sometimes used. (Johann F. Blumenbach, *An Essay on Generation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Library, 1792), ix-x, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ecco/004837133.0001.000/1:3?rgn=div1;view=fulltext>).

9 *Aufhebung* and *aufheben* have vexed translations. It seems simple to me. In spoken English, the verb “heave” and the German *heben* are the same word, as are the prefixes, “up-” and “auf-.” “To heave up” and “upheaval” give the sense of *aufheben*, a verb with separable prefix (*Ich hebe auf*) and *Aufhebung*. The OED etymology for “upheave” links it to the German *aufheben*. An *Aufhebung* is an *upheaval*, and in both languages it purports to cancel the prior condition while ironically including its features in the new.

10 Stojanov, “*Bildung* as Formation of Mindedness in Hegel’s Philosophy.”

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 294–363.