WAITING FOR SUPERMENSCH? ON THE USE AND ABUSE OF BILDUNG IN EDUCATION

Erik John Child

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master’s of Arts in the School of Education.

Chapel Hill
2012

Approved by:

Dr. Lynda Stone
Dr. Madeline Grumet
Dr. James Trier
ABSTRACT

ERIK CHILD: Waiting for Supermensch? On the Use and Abuse of Bildung in Education
(Under the direction of Dr. Lynda Stone)

This thesis will investigate the formulation of Bildung in Nietzsche’s lectures, On the Future of our Educational Institutions. Four strands in this formulation are as follows: 1) The natural world as educative influence. 2) Bildung as an aesthetic discipline. 3) How wonder is the end goal of a classical education. 4) Nietzsche’s argument that Bildung and democracy are incompatible. A critique of Nietzsche’s ideas follows. In tension with Nietzsche’s account of Bildung is education scholar Klause Prange’s argument that Bildung is compatible with and necessary to democracy. Two contrasting understandings of Bildung emerge. The first is Nietzsche’s notion of the term as preparatory for an eventual genius. The second is Prange’s account of Bildung as a preparation for more humane institutions. The latter alternative to Nietzsche is considered as a potential model for a more hospitable culture to learning in U.S. educational settings.
DEDICATION

In memory of my Grandfather, John W. Hardwicke
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the continued support and guidance provided for this Master’s Thesis from my academic adviser, Dr. Lynda Stone, and for the encouragement of my entire family—Chris, Anna, Kathryn, and most of all from my mother, Sandra.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction..................................................................................................................1

Chapter

I. OVERVIEW AND THESIS .................................................................4

II. RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY OF BILDUNG.......................6

III. KLAUS PRANGE AND THE PARAGDIGM OF BILDUNG..............9

IV. NIETZSCHE AND BILDUNG........................................................11

Introducing Nietzsche..............................................................................................11

Overview of the Lectures.........................................................................................13

Nietzsche on the pertinence of nature’s influence..............................................16

Nietzsche’s Aesthetic Battles against Quantitative Methods.........................17

Nietzsche’s Emphasis on Wonder..........................................................................18

Democracy as Developmental Antithesis for Nietzsche.................................20

Critique of Nietzsche’s Conception of Bildung......................................................21

V. KLAUSE PRANGE’S RECONSIDERATION OF BILDUNG...........24

Four Criteria in Prange’s Account.................................................................24

First Criterion: Intrinsic worth and potential.................................................25

Second Criterion: Aesthetics and worth of learning....................................26

Third Criterion: Learning as a humane endeavor.........................................28

Fourth Criterion: Bildung and preparation for participation in civil institutions.................................................29
INTRODUCTION

American schools suffer from a culture that is arguably inhospitable to intellectual pursuits. The teaching profession in particular is inhibited by a perception of inferiority next to the worlds of business, government, media, law, medicine, or other research sciences. There is at least a popular perception of teachers as having chosen their profession for lack of having other avenues of success. As intellectual endeavors go, teaching, sadly enough, does not compare favorably to those mentioned above. The study of education has been criticized as having neither intellectual depth and cultural resources (subjects at least traditionally associated with the humanities), nor specialized knowledge and sound, applicable research (often associated with both pure and applied sciences).

How education can actually be pursued as a division within the core humanities—a question of history, literature, political science, and philosophy—became a matter of personal concern. That education was one of the highest priorities of some of the most seminal minds in the history of ideas was clear: Dewey, Arendt, Matthew Arnold, Newman, Emerson, Schiller, Kant, Rousseau, Vico, Locke, Montaigne, and back to Aristotle and Plato—all have strenuously directed their thought to the question of human upbringing, and what quality of learning would best serve. Both the anti-intellectualism I experienced in the public schools, together with the problems plaguing the study of education (especially what struck me at the time as a disarming distance from the history
of ideas) furthered my interest in the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s critiques of education. I soon learned of his own work addressing universities and schools alike, albeit in early 1870’s Germany: *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions* (1872). The title of these lectures at least seemed to promise a healthy anachronism, a possible voice for reengaging the roots of education in our time.

Having spent a fair share of time familiarizing myself with both the lectures and this general period in Nietzsche’s philosophy, however, led me to conclude that this was ultimately a narrow route for education, less a clearing through the intellectual wasteland as a detour into a strange wilderness in the form of Nietzsche’s abstruse re-conceptualization of Greek tragedy and pre-Socratic philosophy. Nietzsche’s reactionary tone, confined to his own view of the Greeks, his discounting of scientific research (as if “wonder,” a quality he admires, could only arise from philosophical and aesthetic endeavors and not from empirical studies as well), his unilateral emphases on the preparation for the genius, and his relentless critique of democracy as impeding his realization, gave serious pause to my previous hope in philosophy as something practicable in the public sphere, a sphere to which public schools manifestly belong.

This does not mean that I do not concede that educational matters, whether research in curricula, policy, school planning, pedagogy, learning and motivation (or the practice of teaching and learning), are not still in great need of wisdom. If history-of-ideas are not the right approach to educational concerns, then neither is the lack of intellectualism seen in the preparation of teachers and the general ethos of public schools. On the contrary, my principle problem with Nietzsche is that he too is not intellectually curious enough, unwilling to go beyond the boundaries of pseudo-mythical narratives of culture, uninterested in the astonishing diversity of attributes and interests in young learners and
the challenges of how to best nurture them in a world of dramatic disparities between professional specialization of knowledge on the one hand, and near ignorance or unaffected and ineffective general information on the other. Nietzsche, in short, does not give guidance to actual educational institutions and educators, but only to his dreams of a literary Overman, a mythologized Greek antiquity, and a romanticized Germany.
CHAPTER 1
OVERVIEW AND THESIS

This essay will consider how Bildung is used for Nietzsche’s early philosophy, to which it will be contrasted with alternate, and arguably more humane, wholistic accounts. The first section will deal with arguments for taking up a serious interest in Bildung in the first place. I will then discuss what Klaus Prange’s article posits concerning what Bildung is, including its power to mitigate dehumanizing tendencies in both the school and work environments.

Following Prange’s account, I will introduce the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. After a brief sketch of his life, I will provide a synopsis of key points in the lectures themselves, calling attention to four arguments that emerge over the course of these lectures: 1) Bildung seeks to shape a poetic reader of nature; in order to realize this end, the student must necessarily be formed by a Greek understanding of nature itself. 2) Bildung can never be reduced to a science, because it is an inherently aesthetic discipline. 3) Both the result and the process of forming human beings of genius, is “wonder,” and therefore Nietzsche’s conception of the future of Bildung is essentially a preparation for the future creative philosopher he aspires to be. 4) Finally, Nietzschean Bildung sees democracy as a serious impediment to the development of talent. Taken together, Nietzschean education means the perception and formation of a self that succeeds in contributing a work of dramatic art to posterity, rather then viewing art as a means to
shape the human psyche. Following the exploration of these themes, I will take up certain disagreements, difficulties, and inadequacies related to Nietzsche’s text.

I will then consider a view of Bildung that not only embraces compatibility with democratic institutions but that moreover seeks for their improvement. This entails an articulation of four criteria within Bildung that results in a setting or community amenable to learning and teaching. These are explored in sections 5—8 as follows: 5) Seeing the intrinsic worth and potential in all educational participants. 6) Valuing curricula reflecting human significance and aesthetics. 7) Conceptualizing students, teachers, and all others concerned with education, as life-long learners. 8) Participating in and communicating effectively with institutions beyond the school, in the infrastructures of sectors both public and private. All such criteria regard Bildung as a way of bringing about the general improvement, development, and dedication to learning in more communities, and as a preparation for the wise mediation of political responsibilities between authority and the general citizenry. This entails finding a clearer conception of what kind of human beings and institutions a democratic view of Bildung would produce, in contrast to Nietzsche’s aristocratic type.

Therefore, this essay explores two ways of thinking about the idea of what it means to “build” educators and educated—Nietzsche’s Bildung for the sake of a higher form of Man, or Bildung for the sake of an environment more formative of human beings. Of the two, I argue that the latter is preferable as a prescription for the present-day malaise, dehumanization and dissatisfaction in too much of U.S. education policy.
CHAPTER 2
RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY OF BILDUNG

Just what Bildung is can be taken for granted insofar as it is the kind of term on which a number of opinions and justifications can rest unexamined. Yet when probed, such a word is seen to be multi-faceted, complex, indeterminate, and highly allusive of aims of a historical and philosophical nature. It is all-too malleable to define outright. Nevertheless, a question of the “culture in the schools today,” or “the present educational culture or climate” may serve as a point of departure. In order to move closer to what culture is in education, or what it can be at its best, and on what grounds this is so, exploring Nietzsche’s conception will reveal the sometimes esoteric and strange appropriations in its name. Consideration of what “an education” even means, and to what ends, if any, it is directed, is actually an inquiry into the nature of human culture. To do this, a different educational tradition is needed to help articulate culture as a form of education.

In addressing the question of culture in education through the idea of Bildung, several dimensions are possible: love of learning for its own sake, human development, and the larger culture within which the individual develops in concert with others. Bildung has an advantage over the English word “culture,” whose connotation does not so readily include specifically educational concerns. On the one hand, “development” does not suffice because it carries mainly psychological associations—a scientific, as
opposed to aesthetic, notion of maturity. Aesthetic development, on the other hand, is very much in the province of Bildung. Within the context of Bildung, education is a distinctly aesthetic process. Bildung can therefore engage all of these permutations—culture, development, learning, aesthetics—an aggregate word, speaking through a discourse that is holistic, aesthetic, and conscious of human form and formation throughout life.

**Bildung** therefore serves as a gathering to the many disparities and incongruities within the education world, and can possibly serve as a bridge over the abyss between the theory of what education could or should conceivably be (especially as seen in the traditional philosophies of education) and what it often is in the dreary realities faced by students and teachers in U.S. public schools. This is because Bildung is both content that has no utilitarian function (a work of art, a prelude, a poem), and metamorphoses (training, personal change, psychological struggle, transformation, and eventual greater realization of interests). It can be used both as noun (as in when one says “he has good form”) and verb (“her skills in analysis form rapidly”). These dichotemies continue—at once external, overcoming time (what the Greeks refer to as Kairos) and yet also highly contextualized and dependent on it (associated with the more familiar Greek word for time, Kronos). It seeks integration between the architecture and physical-natural environment within which a school is set and the organization within a young mind of the curricula that exercises, nurtures, absorbs, and eventually augments the expression of who each person is.

Possibilities for Bildung should therefore be seriously considered out of a desire to find a more perfect archetype for educational environments, aims, practices, quality curricula, student motivations, and teaching roles. This impetus also calls for at least an
initial inquiry into the nature of Bildung itself. Doing so will reveal contrasting notions of exactly who the recipients of Bildung should be, what Bildung seeks to develop, and why. Such contrasts of intellectual perspectives will offer a way to explore an aspect of the radical dynamism inherent to this word, and to consider what important similarities these visions offer for what it means to think of education as a conscious attempt to intellectually and experientially “make,” or “remake” a person. It is, in sum, asking how best to approach the famous analogy for education provided by philosopher Friedrich Schiller (1982) in his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man in a Series of Letters*:

> With the pedagogic or the political artist things are very different indeed. For him Man is at once the material on which he works and the goal towards which he strives. In this case the end turns back upon itself and becomes identical with the medium; and it is only inasmuch as the whole serves the parts that the parts are in any way bound to submit to the whole (p. 20-21).
CHAPTER 3
KLAUS PRANGE AND THE PARADIGM OF BILDUNG

Writing for the European Educational Research Journal, Klause Prange draws attention to the rich panoply of meanings that are associated with Bildung. Included (besides education and culture) is “formation,” “growth,” “shape,” “refinement” and intellectual discipline (Prange, 2004, p. 502). He views such diversity as the foundation for its strength and endurance as a concept. The very ambiguity and wide-ranging meanings make it adaptable to the highly complex interaction of topics within the study of education and the age-old topic of how learning actually takes place. Early on, Prange identifies Bildung as learning characterized by self-determination, and apart from the “indoctrination” of state educational agendas. In spite of this, Prange concedes that Bildung often is associated with an “aristocratic and elitist heritage” (p. 502). He nevertheless also asserts that a case can be made for it in the context of 21st century norms.

These norms, for Prange, neglect the “aesthetic and spiritual” sides of lives in favor of hallow methodologies (Prange, 2004, p. 503). He explores how such methods are based on instrumentalist, utilitarian accounts of life, accounts well suited to the codes and conventions that often rule in professional settings. Though such “rules of the game” may at times be necessary, Prange argues that the work of education should attend to the “individuality and moral accountability” (p. 505-506) of the person entrusted with
responsibilities in the modern world. He likens this to steering a ship: “one hand for the boat, the other hand for the man” (p. 506).

Prange connects Bildung to 19th century Germany and to what it shares with the Paideia of Greek antiquity. By asking how the term Bildung can regain its relevance, one can profit from an examination of how Bildung was articulated two centuries ago. The arch-term for development underwent a crucial development of its own from the time of Schiller (1759—1805), to the that of Nietzsche (1844—1900), from an optimistic view of human maturity, compatible with democracy, to a severe, aristocratic, Hellenic focus on the formation of a higher type of man, or genius.
CHAPTER 4
NIETZSCHE AND BILDUNG

*Introducing Nietzsche*

Friederich Nietzsche arguably cast the longest shadow over 20th-century intellectual thought. He was born in 1844 to a Protestant minister. As a youth, he showed an intense fascination with the metaphoric power of language that remained with him throughout his life, informing the aphoristic literary qualities of his philosophical prose. He began his formal study of classical philology at the University of Leipzig in 1865. Around this time, he became familiar with Schopenhauer’s major oeuvre, *The World as Will and Representation*. A few years later he came into contact with the dominant personality and influence of later 19th century music, the composer Richard Wagner and his wife Cosima. Before turning twenty-five, Nietzsche was appointed in 1869 to an associate professorship in classical philology at the University in Basel. There, Nietzsche commenced his friendship with the historian of antiquity, Jacob Burckhardt. Aside from Burckhardt and a few other friends, Nietzsche disliked his university post, and resigned in the year 1879.

Nietzsche then began a nomadic life, publishing during this time his mature works, including *The Gay Science* (1882), *Thus Spake Zarathustra* (1883--1885), and *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886). In January of 1889, he suffered a mental breakdown, and spent the last ten years of his life in psychiatric institutions or under the supervision of family and
friends, including his mother. This breakdown was in some sense an intensification of his alternating extreme moods, from depression to exuberant megalomania. Nietzsche died on August 25, 1900.

It is significant for present purposes that Nietzsche was hypercritical of the democratic and contemporary reforms taking place in educational thought. Together with mass politics, modern educational tendencies remained a persistent enemy throughout his published work. Consider, for example, this passage on education in one of Nietzsche’s last works, *Twilight of the Idols*:

> In present-day Germany no one is any longer free to give his children a noble education: our “higher schools” are all set up for the most ambiguous mediocrity, with their teachers, curricula, and teaching aims. And everywhere an indecent haste prevails, as if something would be lost if the young man of twenty-three were not yet “finished,” or if he did not yet know the answer to the “main question”: *which calling?* A higher kind of human being, if I may say so, does not like “callings,” precisely because he knows himself to be called...at thirty one is, in the sense of high culture, a beginner, a child. Our overcrowded secondary schools, our overworked, stupefied secondary-school teachers, are a scandal. (p. 510-511).

Much of the scholarly literature approaches Nietzsche’s views on education as a recurring motif in most of his books, drawing on both passages explicitly related to education, or highlighting his general role as a philosopher-educator, even if these writings do not directly bear on the German university and gymnasium. Different from other treatments, this thesis does not utilize education as a vehicle to understand some larger aspect of Nietzsche’s work. Instead, it is focused on the formulation of *Bildung* found in five lectures delivered early in his career, between January and late March, 1872, entitled *Uber die Zukunft Unserer Bildungsanstalten*, or *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*, recently published in English by St. Augustine’s Press, 2004. These lectures serve as the basis for the consideration of *Bildung*. 
Overview of the Lectures

Nietzsche’s lectures, delivered at the University in Basel, present something of a puzzle to readers seeking a coherent understanding of his views on education. Their form fluctuates from conversation between an older teacher and students, to the hortatory tone of an impassioned speech aimed at rousing a distinguished audience towards a new, quasi-mythic narrative of education rooted in classical antiquity. This audience included the Wagners as well as Burchardt, whose overview of an interdependent and flourishing culture in Civilization of Renaissance Italy remains a standard of its kind (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 1). Nietzsche himself was rather dissatisfied with On the Future of Our Educational Institutions, canceling the contract for what was intended to be his next book after Birth of Tragedy, also of 1872 (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 2). He also used portions of this work in the Untimely Meditations of 1874, a collection of four extended essays (Nietzsche, 2004 p. 4). Indeed, there is the sense that many of the recurring ideas in these lectures had yet to assume a more developed and decided form. Significantly, Nietzsche had intended for six lectures, but the last was never written (p. 3).

Now a turn to the extent lectures: Lecture I introduces readers to students seeking an oasis from their university life. They arrive in the slopes of the Rhineland, where they will commemorate past conversations involving their future aspirations. Some time after their arrival, they discover that they are not alone. An older man, initially is rather understandably disturbed by these students, who begin to practice pistol shooting into the late afternoon air (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 26). Referred to only as the Old Philosopher, he has chosen the same location for a reflection with his former pupil on, of all matters, the state of educational institutions in Germany. When the two parties realize they have mutual interests about education, they become better disposed toward each other (p. 31),
and begin sharing their respective reflections. The first lecture winds down with the Old Philosopher’s tirade against the popular press as constituting a tyranny of public opinion, making philosophy itself more rare (p. 40).

Lecture II critiques journalistic style that then leads to a prolonged discussion on the state of academic writing (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 44-57). The students and the teacher both agree that the handling of language by educational authorities is barbaric and that students should study models of classical rhetoric to appreciate the artistry involved, as well as tremble at their own attempts to write.

Lecture III provides further cogent critiques of the state of “classical education” and the scholarly methods employed in Nietzsche’s time. The suggestion is that modern philology has an effect on antiquity similar to that of invading barbarians in 5th century Rome. Just as they left broken colosseums and ruined palaces for posterity, so also the recent scholarship, with its scrutinizing skepticism of authorship, serves only to break texts attributed to Homer or Aeschylus into incompatible shards (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 71).

Lecture IV outlines the special importance of nature in the development of the genius (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 83-84). This education according to nature establishes a connection to the literature of Germany, as well as to the metaphysical nature of the pre-Socratic philosophers. Within the dialogue, the teacher contrasts the nobility of this education against one rooted in economic necessity. In this lecture, the philosopher makes the case for why the genius would have need of an educational institution in the first place, when many artists and thinkers seem to favor independence from the public sphere (p. 90). The philosopher counters that it is precisely a sign that a culture has failed when it is able to the greatest minds are alienated from the public (p. 92-93).

Lecture V explores the condition of the modern student who is deprived of actual
development by having at best only a superficial understanding of the Greeks. Remove their literature, together with genuine philosophy, and there is no ladder upon which to ascend to a meaningful education (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 110). The result is a student who is misled into believing he has been educated, only to discover too late that he lacks the confidence necessary to lead a truly independent life. Instead he is always blindly led and at the mercy of public opinion and economic and political interests other than his own (p. 111-112).

To create a type of man immune and invincible to the modern individual’s absence of a cause (a why to live rather than a how), one who is able to realize “genius,” Bildung provides Nietzsche with a rhetorical medium for his attempt at formation. This is for the sake of a lasting work, like the artist wishing to sculpt a nature to outshine and outlast his own. The point is that Nietzsche’s lectures on education are a working-towards a genius, an Übermensch. The medium for this higher man is found in the qualities stemming from aesthetic creation. His project is in this sense more an elevation of the artistic work produced by an elite circle than it is of the human worker. The subject, humankind, is not simultaneously both the means and the goal of an education but something seemingly to be metamorphised into an aesthetic artifact. Nietzsche says those who work within such institutions are prolegomena for the coming of the genius, and the genius for sake of the magnum opus:

These individuals should complete their work, that is the meaning of their communal institution—and indeed a work, that, as it were, should be purified from the imprint of the subject and carried out above the interplay of the times, as the clear mirroring of the eternal and unchanging essence of the same. And all who have a part in that institution should take trouble through such a purification of subjectivity to prepare the birth of the genius and the begetting of his work (2004, p. 97).
Nietzsche on the pertinence of nature’s influence

The prerequisite out of which such a work is to grow is a highly attuned perception of nature. Such elements should speak a language of their own: the “forest, rock, vulture, flower, butterfly, meadow, mountain slope...speak in their own tongues” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 83). Such connections to the undeveloped wilderness help a creative inner life blossom. Nietzsche writes, “in [nature] must he at some time recognize himself again as in countless dispersed reflections and mirages” (p. 83). This disposition is central to the study of nature according to empirical measurements, which diminish artistic and philosophic intuitions. As Nietzsche puts this,

Here that naive metaphysics is at an end: and physiology of plants and animals, geology, inorganic chemistry compel their followers toward a completely altered consideration of nature. What has been lost through this new compulsory consideration is...the instinctive, true, and singular understanding of nature, in whose place a clever calculation and outwitting of nature now has tread (p. 84).

Continuity between these traditionally separate categories arises when the poetic observer can relate his interior self within the outer-appearances, the “reflections and mirages” (2004, p. 83) of natural phenomena. Self-realization arises simultaneously from the extent to which the world of nature discloses itself to the self. Yet Nietzsche’s conception of nature already goes beyond self-realization. It is a means to teaching higher wisdom and includes the importance of being able to “calm himself in [nature’s] eternal persistence and necessity” (p. 83).

Nietzsche’s Bildung seeks to cultivate this Greek disposition in relation to nature. Perhaps because he rightly understood how deeply embedded nature was to the poets and philosophers of antiquity, the presence of nature is an inextricable part of Bildung for him. The presence of this meaning, poetically intuited, ensures an essential continuity in the study of Greek classics. Otherwise, Nietzsche fears scientific measurement as the
uncontested, unquestionable parameters of nature, or as a scientific explorer’s journey into the unknown (a view of science consonant with wonder that Nietzsche does not seem to embrace). Nietzsche criticizes the “clever calculation and outwitting of nature” resulting in scientists’ alienation from “the contemplative instincts of their childhood” (Nietzsche, 2004, p.84). Systemization does not disclose actual knowledge of nature even while it allows for the “outwitting of nature” (p. 84). “Self knowledge” could not be trusted; here, rather, what is sought is the inspiration of nature as a source of self-creation.

Nietzsche’s nature is not, as one might expect, a fanciful, sentimental attachment to “poetic phantasmagoria” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 84). Rather, it is a wish for the human produced by Bildung to be characterized by effervescence, effectively replacing the natural environment’s bringing forth with the theoretical progeny of philosophic composition. The narrative of Nietzsche’s lectures themselves seeks to demonstrate at least a minor degree of artistic improvisation. The text is imbued with extended descriptions of natural imagery. Near the beginning, for example, the narrator mentions how the “evening clouds above us reddened all the more and the evening became even quieter and milder, while we almost overheard the regular breathing of nature, as it concluded its day’s work, satisfied with its work of art, the perfect day” (p. 30). Such imagery forms the metaphoric architecture of Nietzsche’s visionary educational “institution.”

**Nietzsche’s Aesthetic Battles against Quantitative Methods**

Nietzsche’s adversity to quantitative measures comes across most forthrightly in the preface opening the lectures. He provides a taste of hallmark sarcasm, apologizing for being “unable to satisfy the friends of tables” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 18). Nietzsche does
not single out a particular work of pedagogy for criticism, and what literature he actually has in mind is not known from the lectures. So strong is his resistance to the very form taken by educational research that his lectures embrace just the opposite: tableaux replaces table, poetic allusion replaces scientific research. In addition, the dialogue seems written to appeal to the dramatist and composer.

Even beginning such a journey is comparable to “climbing a passable mountain” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 18). As Nietzsche himself puts it, he will have “permitted myself to delight in the free view” (p. 18) of the culture he finds indispensable to educational growth. Those who only pretend to have seen should take heed. Here is Nietzsche again—“the feeling for the classical-Hellenic is so rare a result of the most strenuous educational struggle and of artistic talent that the Gymnasium can already raise the claim to wake this feeling only through a coarse misunderstanding” (p. 55).

**Nietzsche’s Emphasis on Wonder**

Nietzsche’s lectures culminate with an effect. This is the influence of Bildung, a profound sense of philosophic wonder about the world at large (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 108). For his Philosopher, a genuine education will be measured by “three barometers: once by his need for philosophy, then by his instinct for art, and finally by Greek and Roman antiquity as the embodied categorical imperative of all culture” (p. 108). Nietzsche waits to reveal this purpose in lecture V. “The human being,” he writes, “is so surrounded by the most serious and most difficult problems that, led to them in the right way, in time he comes to that lasting, philosophic wonder, upon which alone, as upon a fruitful subsoil, can grow a deep and noble culture” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 108). Such astonishment in Nietzsche’s view is necessary to a philosopher. As with Plato, he finds wonder as a state of mind necessary for philosophy.
Nietzsche, however, contrasts with Plato where he reveals his anti-modernism. For Nietzsche, there are less pleasant feelings to proceed wonder. Given the prevalence of the “glutted and colorfully adorned caravan of education of the present,” a person of culture should be “horrified” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 81). Whereas the Socratic dialogue seeks the students’ epiphany of knowing they do not know, in Nietzsche’s view the weaknesses in both education and modern sciences is comparable to the condition of Oedipus—that there is too little that remains unknown.

Wonder, to a philosopher like Nietzsche, does not lend itself to acquisitive tendency, nor to any simplification. Wonder is the antithesis of the reductionism involved in learning about a text, as opposed to actually ruminating with a text. Deeply personal to the human being’s struggle through experience, one’s “own experiences lead him to these problems, and especially in the stormy period of youth, almost every personal event mirrors in a doubled glimmer, as an exemplification of an everyday matter and at the same time as an eternal, astonishing problem, worthy of explanation” (Nietzsche, 2004, 108). Nietzsche’s novel reading of Greek tragedy and philosophy seeks to lay the groundwork for this disposition. By means of the sentiments of these texts and the elevation of wonder, he seems to express hope in the philosopher who can use the very obscurity of antiquity as an authority over and rival to the dominant scientific paradigms of thought in his time.

**Democracy as Developmental Antithesis for Nietzsche**

Nietzsche’s conception of *Bildung* is at odds with democratic sentiments. As he says, “One democratizes the rights of genius in order to be relieved from the personal task of education” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 35). The form of democratization Nietzsche most frequently fulminates about in these lectures is the proliferation of information via
The natural consequence of these sentiments is a habituation to laziness. As Nietzsche says, “in an empty and disconsolate mood he sees his plans go up in smoke: his condition is abominable and undignified: he alternates between overexcited activity and melancholic enervation” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 111). Meanwhile, individuals become less able to comprehend the linguistic rigor of the past, and therefore, less able to recreate it for the sake of the future. Again, in Nietzsche’s words: “In sum: the Gymnasium neglects…the mother tongue: therewith, however, it lacks the naturally fruitful soil for all further educational exertions” (p. 52). Cultural flourishing for Nietzsche rests on the authority of the culture-makers, those whose imaginations are fertile enough to give birth to a whole way of life. Nietzsche wanted his own philosophy to serve as analogous to a physician curing an unhealthy patient.

A philosopher, to be healthy, must shun the power of public opinion. Nietzsche demands cultural resources, a shared discourse within which a philosopher’s words are heard. The undertaking of Bildung is for the sake of a genuine philosophy that can only be realized many years later. Not having a culture with which to engage, the Old Philosopher’s sentiments are somewhat embittered. He now has only his former student with whom to confer. Yet the expected long-time friend he speaks of never appears. Thus Nietzsche posits a philosopher whose thoughts are free, but unheard, except through the written word.

**Critique of Nietzsche’s Conception of Bildung**

Nietzsche uses the idea of Bildung to produce a higher genius (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 42). His character is more literary than actual. He idealizes a higher human type, one with a charismatic personality able to transform institutions of culture in his image. Nietzsche
memorably illustrates this through the simile of a conductor over an orchestra:

With winged imagination, set for once a genius, a real genius in the midst of this mass--immediately you notice something unbelievable. It is as if this genius, in a lightning transmigration of souls, had traveled into all these half-animal bodies and as if now from all of them in turn only one demonic eye peered out. But now listen and look--you will never be able to hear enough! When you now consider again the orchestra, loftily storming, or tenderly lamenting, when you sense nimble eagerness in every muscle and rhythmic necessity in every gesture, then you will feel sympathetically what a pre-established harmony between leader and followers is, and how in the order of spirits everything presses toward the construction of an organization of that sort (2004, p. 119).

With this analogy, Nietzsche effectively elevates a higher archetypal being over a shared humanity. He seeks this higher man (likely in himself) to justify his harmonious conception of Bildung. Because of this dependence on a prophetic philosopher that no actual person seems able to embody, Nietzsche must wait in vain in these lectures for him to actually appear. Yet the last lecture is never written. The Old Philosopher is right after all: “‘You know whom we are awaiting here: but he is no longer coming. We were here so long for nothing: we should go’” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 86). Meanwhile, Nietzsche foregoes a consideration of realizing Bildung within human beings and their institutions as they are, with all of their uneven qualities.

The lectures comprising On the Future could also be taken more as literature than a plan that can be left to the vicissitudes of experience. If therefore, Nietzsche’s educational thoughts are not to be applied outside a literary-philosophical work, the text could simply be understood as an improvisational sketch that he would go on develop in his more mature period. Those seeking an understanding of Bildung as a substantive and intellectually rigorous program for education, however, may be disappointed. Nietzsche’s Bildung seems forever encased in a quasi-literary narrative, confined to a world that can only exist in text. The question remains in On the Future of just how Bildung can manage
to be more than an aesthetic theory of education.

A further difficulty is that even on the literary level, Nietzsche’s characters seem opaque, like rudimentary sketches, with the two students too similar for dramatic differences to emerge. There is the absence of character names. They remain static, yearning for development. The dialogic aspect is less a carefully crafted dramatic confrontation of educational ideas as multiple outlets for similar declamations against bourgoise literature, media, and scholarship. Meanwhile, the lectures deify the Greece of the 5th century. Moreover, there is the possibility in *On the Future* that readers fall prey to the notion that the higher elite Nietzsche constantly extols becomes the only class of existence to which they would wish to belong. Nietzsche feeds on any latent sense of grandiosity in these lectures, perhaps as a way of impressing his lecture audience.

Delusional notions of genius aside, Nietzsche’s exhortation could indeed be inspiring to anyone who seeks in education the meaning and personal fulfillment to which Prange refers (2004, p. 508). Yet Nietzsche all too easily dismisses those for whom education is part of the struggle for the “necessities of life” (Nietzsche, 2004, p. 85).

Challenging this notion, for example, is Frederick Douglas’ *Narrative*, whose story of maturity, or *bildungsroman*, is an eloquent portrait of moral courage and the human spirit, just as it also a struggle to survive and escape slavery. Nietzsche’s lectures do not address *Bildung* in the face of such desperate hardship. He continually promotes an education in which need and survival are seen as inferior, always writing off the “struggle for existence” as unworthy of a great culture or character. Against this view, a philosophy of human formation could actively support human beings in the most oppressive physical circumstances, providing possible routes and concepts of participation for them to one
day become living cultural resources, authorities on matters like ethics, science, aesthetics, politics, and education.
CHAPTER 5
KLAUSE PRANGE’S RECONSIDERATION OF BILDUNG

Four Criteria within Prange’s account

Nietzsche’s view of Bildung, therefore, is at odds with a democratic conception of the self and state in which educational flourishing is to take place. However, Bildung itself need hardly rest on the authority of Nietzsche’s narrative. Preoccupation with Bildung can also mean seeking an amenable learning environment, or to refer to an earlier passage in this essay, the “underlying structure” that characterizes the experience of education within the walls of a school, in the disposition of teachers toward their jobs, students toward their classes, the nature of what is studied, the way it is evaluated, and the purposes to which success is directed. Nietzsche had his own answers to what characterized the best educational objectives and participants, to be sure. Yet difficulties with aspects of Nietzsche’s lectures, as discussed above, should encourage further openness to what constitutes “best” in terms of a culture for student learning and teaching.

Bildung considered anew can be defined as fostering a conception of education that assumes an uncommon degree of confidence in human beings, while placing a premium on the value of learning and the content learned. This is a matter of creating a culture where all participants in the educational process—especially the teachers, the students, and those who plan curricula—would both provide confidence and support in the goal of development. Such confidence in both present and future human worth seeks to develop
these qualities as ideal “representatives” of a collective community; “community” in this context is primarily the school. Such a notion of Bildung is only achieved by the active participation and passionate persuasion of all involved. This consideration of Bildung, unlike Nietzsche’s, is far from opposed to democratic education. Rather than being a reaction against the democratic self, this education seeks its realization for a community of citizens.

A democratic conception of Bildung posits five criteria for sustaining a positive educational climate, suitable to high expectations and for the acquisition of human cultural content. These five criteria seek to express what is meant by a “positive educational climate.” Each will be discussed separately, though their overlapping relations are important.

Four criteria described below are arguably transformative at both the individual and community level. Bildung at the individual level recognizes the intrinsic worth of the student and assumes diverse and as yet undiscovered possibilities for his or her future. Bildung for the school community essentially results in what the Greeks referred to as an Agora—an energetic marketplace for the free exchange of ideas. This ideal of learning is motivated by curiosity about the curricular content and from the integration of the varying abilities and casts of mind in teachers and students that respond to this curriculum. Such an Agora is a supportive, “pro-learning environment,” one with positive emotions on the part of teachers, students and parents. Below, the four criteria are turned to in more detail.

**First Criterion: Intrinsic worth and potential**

The human being is the ultimate topic of education. What such a person is “worth” lies outside of economic or social functions. The latter is not sufficient, as Prange notes,
in view of the inalienable claim to personal perfection. This is where Bildung comes in” (Prange, 2004, p. 501). *Bildung* assumes the worth of human beings by engaging the aesthetic and spiritual sides of experience. *Bildung* in this way promotes a positive, noble view of human beings (which does not necessarily fall into the trap of self-flattery) “by its very existence as a living memory of our potential to give a meaning to what we do and experience” (p. 508).

Prevailing educational methodologies do not accept this complete view of humanity. Quantitative and psychological observation, for example, would present a vastly more limited view of the human subject (Prange, 2004, p. 501). The same can be said for equating teaching with testing, insofar as it would eliminate “the unpredictable variability of human responses to the moral, mental, and aesthetic qualities of education” (p. 504). Prange sees such methodologies as representing a counter, mechanistic view of men and women, citing a disarming proximity to achieving La Mettrie’s 1748 tretise, *L’homme machine*. The French thinker’s idea that humans are automatons, Prange says, “is not a dream, but nor is it a nightmare” (p. 504), or something impervious to near-universal acceptance. Prange views the technological edifices of modern education as encouraging the surrender of human reason. While such edifices cannot be eradicated, a total reliance on them ignores the natural human abilities that should be respected and practiced. Finally, prolonged ignorance of the unexplored possibilities of both reason and imagination could have the consequence of “a new kind of obedience,” (p. 504) where inevitably persons are dispirited by the “imperatives of organized reason” and the “rules of the game” (p. 505).

**Second Criterion: Aesthetics and worth of learning**

Just as *Bildung* helps provide a view of humans as wondrous, as the focus of
teaching, so also does it take great care in the content that serves to nourish students in their thinking, reasoning, imagining, constructing and acting. Such is the purpose of a curriculum informed by *Bildung*—conscious nourishment. The content of such a curriculum reveals basic as well as subtle truths about how people understand themselves and what constitutes a tactful relation to others. Classics from both the ancient and modern worlds offer students opportunities to consider meaningful questions about their own place in the world, and what relationships might be seen in the course of events, actions, and the chance encounters of their own experience. Classic literature is especially apt to present these relationships in their most aesthetically pleasing and suggestively significant light.

In a *Bildung* for today, students study a body of literature belonging to one or more cultural traditions. Prange, for his part refers to the western cannon: the “cultural heritage from Homer down to James Joyce” (Prange, 2004, p. 505). Although a curriculum of European sources suits *Bildung* (which is, after all a Western idea), the more important principle for a contemporary adaptation of the term is to highlight the intrinsic worth of learning itself by making sure that the content has value in terms of how today’s world may be organized and why. Thus, a Chinese classic like the *Analects* of Confucius, or a recent breakthrough in astronomy or possibility for transportation would both be examples of this quality. Such content is thus examined in terms of the resonance and challenge it provides in our learning experiences (p. 508).

Any of such curricula holds interest both for the profound way it entertains student curiosity and for the excitement of exploring the unknown. Even though the study of a high quality curriculum would never fail to challenge students, the sense of importance and interest in relation to individual and societal questions aims at producing more
satisfaction in perceiving the diversity of human experience. Such satisfaction taken from the learning process is a matter of responsibility corroborating with inclination.

What is described above may seem too broad for what is possible within the constraints of a school, where daily lessons must be implemented and classrooms must be organized around specific accomplishments. Yet this approach to curriculum need not exclude the infrastructure of school settings. As Prange notes, “Method and systematic instruction are by no means superfluous, they serve as a stepping stone, or to put it formally: method is a necessary condition of, not a sufficient reason for, Bildung” (Prange, 2004, p. 508). The practical business of teaching the steps to obtaining satisfaction in this curricular material would still be quite necessary. Bildung again would serve as an appreciation for these works as a whole, just as it would create an environment hospitable to learning. Bildung can be considered “a sort of educational surplus beyond measurement” (p. 508), serving to imbue whatever is studied as deeply beneficial, together rewarding both teacher and student participation.

Third Criterion: Learning as a humane endeavor

Both the value of human beings and the value placed on what is learned combine in a view of human beings as learners. This view informs a school modeled on principles of Bildung. Rather than make distinctions between “proficient” and “remedial” students, or “highly competent” and “weak” teachers, Bildung arguably views all human beings on a continuum of lifelong learning. Learning and personal growth are not somehow thought of as apart.

This attitude of human beings as ever unfinished, or always a story en medias res would seem strange to a system of rigid evaluation. As Prange says, it would “be somewhat irregular, if not ridiculous, to give marks for the state of Bildung. We cannot
measure the personal equation that characterizes our interpretation of what we learn” (Prange, 2004, p. 507-508).

Consider how this person-as-learner dynamic impacts students and teachers. Each student focuses on communicating what is learned, on refinement in thinking, and awareness of new interests. Teachers can then serve as model learners, demonstrating an inquisitiveness and tenacity about their subjects. They do not assume that they know everything there is to know about their students and how to instruct them. As fellow-learners, teachers would show sensitivity and curiosity about the quality of character and diversity of abilities in their students. They appreciate and work with the complexities and irregularities in those they teach. Effective teachers arguably demonstrate genuine and unassuming interest in their students, and have more success with procuring trust.

**Fourth Criterion: Bildung and preparation for participation in civil institutions**

This microcosm of Bildung, this community of learners, wherein learner and learning are passionately valued, can be applied to the larger political and economic spheres of work. Its impact is to make civil institutions far more humane and intelligent. At present, work environments are dominated by what Prange refers to as “adherence to the codes of our jobs, our professions” (2004, p. 505). These codes are equally if not more stringent than the rigid forms of assessment taking place for teachers and students. As Prange puts it idiosyncratically, such codes, for employee and student alike, is “right or wrong my job, my profession, my firm” (p. 505).

The absolutism of a company or school ideology can take a severe toll on any sense of individual worth or obstruct the possibility of friendship between colleagues within an institution. Yet social cohesion and mutual interests are some of the very qualities that Bildung would seek to cultivate. Public virtue relies on encouragement of greater
cooperation, maturity and ability in a given body of citizens, whose education should expand their own faculties, and seriously value the talents of their peers. Such maturity is realized via participation in government infrastructure and other civil institutions. This democratic sense of worth and possibility is lost sight of, eventually occluded by narrow, technical aims set in some schools and continued in the work place. As Prange notes, “standards and professional codes of ethics are neither strictly based on the morality of the individual nor on the legality of the general public order; they are placed in between, exercising the authority of what is technically appropriate” (2004, p. 505).

Therefore, education as a form of culture should prepare more human beings to exercise wide-ranging responsibilities, thus making places of work, from economics to the arts, more intelligent, creative, and ethical. Exclusive reliance on testing-measures for educational performance encourages a feeling of being inadequate to the expectations of a classroom, and soon enough this sense of inadequacy carries over to the professional setting. It therefore continues to exclude a variety of human talents that may not be so easily measured, such as synthesis of seemingly paradoxical ideas, or a comfort with complexity. A more democratic account of Bildung places greater confidence in the variety of human strengths, and on the value of pursuing one’s career as an inquisitive learner rather than through a default demand from the powers-that-be for a ready-made final authority of assessment.

Bildung, with its emphasis on quality cultural sources and confidence in human potential, provides necessary tools in thinking and imagination to defend against altogether dull conglomerations of information. Examples of this in the present include financial, technological, and media institutions that see education as an opportunity for conditioning young minds to become obedient consumers. Prange points out an
underlying structure and organizational approach to education similar to *Bildung* from the ancient world--*Paideia*. This word, like *Bildung*, has the same dual definition of both child rearing and the culture or civilization of a people.

At least in Prange’s view of the term, *Paideia* provided communities that were relatively isolated from power (perhaps in the conquered cities of Greece?) with wisdom, validation and quiet purpose within their schools, working “as a counter-authority to Roman power and superiority. It was weak in terms of political or economic strength, and yet strong as a mediating force” (2004, p. 508). Prange goes on to describe *Paideia* as “the expression of intellectual and moral autonomy” situated under the “restrictions,” of Roman might and pragmatic politics. Students of *Bildung* today can similarly gain confidence in their ability to “mediate” with government and private authority. Not necessarily possessing the influence of wealth and political connections to which such authority is usually privy, students of *Bildung* are able to turn to their substantive educations for confidence in their ability to persuade public officials away from narrowminded or abusive policies, and in favor of what contributes to a community. Although such a state is surely more of a theoretical ideal than an actuality, *Bildung* is again that mediating force for education between this either/or dichotomy of idea versus practice. Or as Prange puts it, *Bildung* thrives at the meeting point of “what belongs to the seeming reality of the world and the true reality of ideas, eternal values and practical issues here and now” (2004, p. 506).
CONCLUSION

Education is often an inherently frustrating effort. The variables involved seem innumerable, and perversely subject to change. What curricula, what level of challenge is appropriate, how to assess, who the teachers and students ought to be, what pedagogies to consider, what means of motivation are effective and why, what environment should situate a given school, what rationales are offered for learning, how money should be allocated, what role technology should play, whether students learn by discovery, guided instruction, or direct instruction--all such questions have persisted so long as there have been schools. That ancient philosophers well before Plato disputed what learning was, and how it took place, can be heard in a fragment passed down from Heraclitus, sounding somewhat like a quip: *Much learning does not teach thought.*

The confusion experienced by students and teachers defines the work of education as they alternately succeed or fail at teaching and learning. Scholars of education, then, are presented with a field arguably more fraught with challenge than any other, where all that is researched is radically dependent on the whims of individual and collective consciousness. This in turn impacts young minds passively observing or participating in their classrooms, and in the attempted strategies of teachers based on their moment to moment attempts to communicate knowledge and information that for various reasons and agendas are deemed relevant.

Not surprisingly, the attempt to formulate a unified science out of educational processes has yet to come to any satisfactory ends. Instead, there are innumerable, fragmented methodologies involved in the study of education. Research purporting to
demonstrate the effectiveness of say, core standards curricula, is attacked by equal quantities of opposing evidence. They argue instead, for example, for a heavy reliance on information technology and students’ purported “media savvy.”

Educational policy makers (in our society often those with substantial political and financial power) dismiss jostling, competing educational perspectives, convinced instead of the infallibility of their own agendas for school reform. The latest such program to be implemented on a national level, of course, is the infamous No Child Left Behind Act. In total, it is a blank, default collection of demands for schools with no intelligible (or intelligent) idea of how growth can occur for individuals within educational contexts, let alone arrive at some higher goal. In NCLB, goals do not exist--there are no higher ends beyond a quantitative score deeming a student, a teacher, an administrator, a district as “proficient.” Neither does NCLB offer a well-thought out process, or means, even for the narrow demands of quantitative performance. This is left to the devices of students, teachers, parents and other support structures. Consequentially, students with the least degree of infrastructure are those most vulnerable to fall short of NCLB’s demands. As even the shallower means (testable strategies of retention and “means” in the monetary sense) to these measurable demands are lacking, there is the more critical deficiency of how an embodied process of humanization might be experienced, appreciated, and at least partly if never fully demystified.

_Bildung_, can be considered as a way to fulfill this vital principle. It is both a means and an ends for education. The means is the value assigned to the process of growth in the learner. The goals, or ends of _Bildung_ result in individual and collective meaning found in one’s self, one’s relationship to others, and to the larger world. The content of
this end, of the meaning, takes on an aesthetic value, in contrast to a “measurable outcome” that seeks to be fully self-explanatory. Whereas a high test score, or a high income, are portrayed as property successfully attained, the satisfaction taken from both a moral direction and a disposition to wonder cannot be owned or used like a commodity. This satisfaction that Bildung hopes to bring about becomes aesthetic rather than completely intelligible in the same way that the power of art does not necessarily stem from its intelligibility but rather from its more emotional connection. Such means and ends for Bildung seek to go beyond a human’s immediate, though very real, need for survival.

Consider briefly another precedent set by Bildung during the highly tumultuous, revolutionary period in Europe from the 1780’s to 1840’s: The “Romantic circle” during these years assumed that political upheaval could allow for greater participation by greater numbers of people in the institutions of civil society, and that this would also mean greater economic opportunity as a result of such participation (Beiser, 1998, p. 284). Intellectuals and poets at the close of the 18th century initially supported the hopes for a more democratic citizenry before the onset of the French Revolution (1998, p. 284). As ideals of universal fraternity gave way to the terror of indiscriminate executions, men and women of letters appealed to education through culture, to Bildung, as the best hope for the recently liberated (p. 285).

In the present, Bildung can seek to foster more far-sighted development, including economic. Such growth does not have to be defined by statistical quantities each moment, always fluctuating. Economic growth would be a beneficial by-product of an education that prepares more of the public for participation in government infrastructure and other
civil bodies, wisely guided by leaders entrusted to seek a common good. In this view, economic and political growth is understood as in tandem with the development of humanity.

Such a concept of Bildung is greatly needed, when development on all fronts—economic, political, social, intellectual, imaginative—seems inert, thwarted, powerless. A series of factors, from federal and state educational policies to the preparation of teachers to the priorities of students, does little to convince or inform the public of the possibility of an educational vision that would inspire a serious commitment to learning and allow humans to flourish in more than one particular, narrow sense. Bildung, in truly cultivating the whole human being, eschews the reductionism of human faculties so prevalent in this time. Bildung can serve to broaden the notion of “profit” associated with monetary gain as something far greater when considering questions of how one can best spend time (in the sense of kairos).

Bildung, then, serves as a synthesis for the fragmentation of disparate educational concerns, such as the debate between a “general” well-rounded curriculum or the preparation for a specific task in the knowledge economy, or whether learning should respond to students’ individual levels of ability and interest, or encourage social cohesion. It seeks to connect the curricula being learned to the cultural sources and foundations embedded therein. The nature of what is studied is not isolated from the human being who desires to learn, nor from the individual philosophies of education to which learners best respond. It seeks to elevate an appreciation of education as the very human quest to better express who and what people are. Unlike in Nietzsche’s conception, this concern is a shared inquiry and activity by all members of the human
family. *Bildung* permeates effective schools, those in which quality learning transpires, when they encompass the range of human interests, teaching methods, learner preferences, curiosity, motivation, and environment. This combinations forms a living aesthetic, wherein schools become macrocosms of individuals.
REFERENCES


