

## Varieties of *Bildsamkeit*

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### Abstract

Every theory of education endorses an image of a human being as someone who can be educated and is capable of self-education and self-cultivation. Since J.F. Herbart, educationalists have been sketching this image under the title *Bildsamkeit*, which has become a central element of the specific German way of speaking about educational reality. Herbart famously claimed that the *Bildsamkeit* of the one who is to be educated is the basic concept of scientific pedagogy. In the first half of 20th century, W. Flitner claimed that *Bildsamkeit* is one of the key concepts of a general theory of education. *Bildsamkeit* is even more difficult to translate than *Bildung*. Possible candidates could be educability, malleability, perfectibility, and plasticity. While the richness of this notion cannot be exhaustively translated into a single term, and while the meaning of a concept is, after all, in its use, this article aims to make explicit how this concept is used in different contexts. First, the philosophical anthropology behind this concept will be discussed. Second, the focus will be on the question of how *Bildsamkeit* is entwined in educational interaction. Finally, the connections between *Bildsamkeit* subjectivity and individuality will be thematized. These contemplations might give some provisional guidelines for future translations of this concept.

### Keywords

*Bildsamkeit*, *Bildung*, anthropology, education

### Introduction

Every theory of education endorses an image of the human being as someone who can be educated and is capable of self-education and self-cultivation (Benner, 2017; Tenorth, 2020). Since J.F. Herbart, educationalists have been sketching this image under the title *Bildsamkeit*, which has become a central element of a German way of speaking about educational reality. Herbart (1984) famously claimed that the *Bildsamkeit* (of the one who is to be educated) is the basic concept of scientific pedagogy. While the concept of *Bildung* and thus theories of *Bildung* appeared during the early years of the 20th century and made an integral part of the emerging discipline of *Pädagogik*, the notion of *Bildsamkeit* was cemented as a proprium of educationist language. The “cultural and human scientific pedagogics” – often called in German textbooks: *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik* – drew inspiration from the philosophical and humanistic tradition of *Bildung* and aimed to

preserve it, despite the rise of the new scientific approaches applied to the research of education. Pedagogics as an academic discipline had to confront the increasing application of such disciplines as psychology, psychiatry, medicine, and biology to the research in the field of education, and *Bildung* seemed to offer the possibility of a genuine pedagogical view of the social reality associated with problems of human development, maturing, teaching, and learning in various formal and informal contexts. Most notably, Hermann Nohl (1933), and above all, Wilhelm Flitner (1968), used *Bildsamkeit* as a conceptual tool for the development of a pedagogical theory that was neither a subdiscipline of philosophy (philosophy of education) nor an application of the other types of research following the methodological ideal of modern natural sciences. Hence, they utilized the basic idea set by Herbart, according to whom pedagogics as a discipline on its own right must cultivate and develop its own concepts. Against all odds, *Bildsamkeit* has survived until the last

decades of the 20th century. For example, Klaus Mollenhauer (1985) suggested that the problem of *Bildsamkeit* is an integral part of every contemplation on education.

*Bildsamkeit* is not easy to translate. Possible options could be, for example, educability, malleability, perfectibility, and plasticity (Benner & English, 2004; Brezinka 1990; Weiß, 2018). While the richness of this notion cannot be exhaustively translated into a single term, this article aims to make explicit some ways of its usage in different contexts. In the end, the meaning of a concept is in its use. First, the philosophical anthropology behind the concept will be discussed. Second, the focus will be on the question of how *Bildsamkeit* is entwined in educational interaction. Third, the connection between *Bildsamkeit* and subjectivity will be thematized. These contemplations might give some guidelines for future receptions of the concept almost impossible to translate.

### **Philosophical Anthropology and human *Bildsamkeit***

In his general theory of education, Flitner (1968) makes a distinction between *Bildsamkeit*, in its general sense, on the one hand and *Bildsamkeit* in its specific or actual sense, on the other. It will be under the concept of general *Bildsamkeit* (*allgemeine Bildsamkeit*) that general attributes of the human species will be discussed. Flitner (1968) speaks about “human as such” (*Mensch überhaupt*) and “*Bildsamkeit an sich*” (pp. 87, 89). One of the central attributes of the human species is, according to him, the ability of the “human as such” to behave during their process of development in a plastic way and respond to whatever intentional educational influence (teaching, upbringing, etc.) is done by an educator who feels deep responsibility for the development of the other person (Flitner, 1968,

p. 92). Flitner (1968, pp. 88–89) emphasizes that *Bildsamkeit an sich* is merely an abstract concept illustrating some universal characteristics of the human species in general and detached from the contextual and historical preconditions defining the actual forms of human existence. Although *Bildsamkeit* in this sense is not yet an educationalist concept per se, it plays an important role as one of the key concepts in the theory of education because general discussions about the fundamentals of human existence should clarify why individual humans can be educated in the first place.

Flitner (1968, p. 89) states that human *Bildsamkeit* means “natural plasticity,” typical for human beings as a species. This feature of the human as an organic natural being has an “objective biologic basis for adaptation for her environment” (Flitner, 1968, p. 89). Although the notion of plasticity might encourage us to think that human *Bildsamkeit* means passivity (Langewand, 1995) (from the perspective of a human organism, so that the environmental influences mainly induce development of the potentials which are immanently given for the organic nature of the human species), Flitner (1968) emphasizes that our relationship to our environment is both passive and active. Essentially, the human species can be characterized by its facility for developing various forms of behavior necessary for the self-preservation of the individual and the species. The forms of behavior become, in the course of time, relatively constant habits. Part of the human *Bildsamkeit* is the habituation to the given environment. The human as a living organism (*Lebewesen*) (Flitner, 1968, p. 89) responds to certain elements of the environment. In this process of habituation, human beings not only passively respond to the environment but pro-actively strives to learn those forms of behavior, allowing them to

become inhabitants of their environment (Flitner, 1968, p. 89.).

Although Flitner (1968, p. 21) admits that the theory of *Bildsamkeit* can utilize results from biology and medicine, he takes a critical stance against the robust naturalism presented by those disciplines. Human *Bildsamkeit* cannot be understood wholly in terms of the biological and organic nature of the human species, alone. The human being is a natural being (*Naturwesen*), a living organism, whose growth is, without any doubt, based on its natural potentialities. However, *Bildsamkeit* is not purely a natural phenomenon. *Bildsamkeit* means a natural tendency or potentiality for human beings as embodied organisms to gain and develop *Geist* or Spirit for themselves. The notion of *Geist* stands for the realm that humans themselves have brought into existence and which is sustained by human beings individually and collectively. *Geist* is a product of human activity and *Bildsamkeit* refers to the human ability to produce and reproduce this realm. Flitner (1968) defines this as a typically human facility to “use tools and understand symbols and ability to produce these both” (p. 35).

Hence, *Bildsamkeit* refers to two aspects of an essentially human potential. Humans as a species are able to work on their material environment and additionally, form communities, which are structured by intersubjectively-shared meanings and language. Human *Bildsamkeit* marks our ability for labor and interaction. It also allows for the development of forms of interaction between human beings and the physical world, on the one hand, which we as human species use to secure the material basis of our existence and, on the other, develop social formations between human beings.

Flitner’s notion of *Bildsamkeit* seems to float between naturalism and cultural historicism – between nature and spirit (*Geist*). Human *Bildsamkeit* is always a part of nature. It is something defining the human species in general and is actually an expression of “biologic needs” (Flitner, 1968, p. 94), which must be satisfied so that both the self-preservation of the species and the individual are secured. Flitner (1968, p. 94) discusses the vitality and human urge for life (*Drang zum Leben*). These are the very essence of human *Bildsamkeit* as a natural phenomenon. Vitality has its expression in the active relationship of humans to their environment, in which they seek to satisfy their needs rooted originally in their organic nature. This relation to the world is a dynamic and active one.

Human beings share this aspect of *Bildsamkeit* with other animals, but what makes *Bildsamkeit* a typically human feature, however, is that, based on the vitality and fundamental urge for sustaining their life, humans seem to begin to develop much more complex ways of interacting with their environment: humans gradually form a social and cultural world, which largely mediates their relation to the material and physical environment important for the satisfaction of organic and biologic needs. In other words: besides the natural urge for the self-preservation of its own vitality, the human species has the urge for social life, which eventually becomes cultivated into the urge to spiritualization (*Vergeistigung*) (Flitner, 1968, p. 94). Becoming spiritualized or attaining the spirit, *Geist*, does not mean for Flitner some sort of uplifting experience of supernatural or divine realm. It rather refers to the enculturation and development of human consciousness intertwined with the possibility that humans can develop for themselves collectively-shared cultural resources such as language, knowledge,

and technologies, and use them jointly for the purposes of sustaining both their individual life and the human species (Flitner, 1968, pp. 94, 96).

The realm of *Geist* appears to be a reality in its own right and yet rooted in human nature. While *Geist* is basically a product of the human species and its activity, it remains in the same trajectory with the evolution of human organic nature and stems from the fundamental human need to secure life and vitality. According to Flitner (1968, pp. 94–95), the essentially human urge for attaining the realm of spirit, ranging from the use of language and diverse ways of being conscious to cultural formations, such as systems of values and aesthetic products, originate already from the ensemble of various factors typical for human organic life. The human enterprises for knowledge, understanding, comprehension, indicating, and describing the things in the environment, they all have their evolutionary fundament in the need for human self-preservation. The most rudimentary forms of consciousness are responses to natural (biologic and organic) needs. They are functional for the satisfaction of those needs: “Language and knowledge, recollection and memory with foresight and calculation of coming are biologic needs” (Flitner, 1968, p. 94). Hence, spirit is for the human being also a “pure outer necessity of life” (*Lebensnotwendigkeit*) (Flitner, 1968, p. 94).

What Flitner calls *Geist*, is vitally important in a twofold way: first, the realm of *Geist* is the result of the struggle for survival of humans as a biologic and organic species. Its evolution secures the survival of the human species in the natural and material environment. Second, *Geist* (i.e., human culture in the broadest sense) offers a reservoir of various ways or means for satisfying the needs typical for us as human species. The development of *Geist* is

initially rooted in these rudimentary forms, but gradually leads to appearances of human and cultural existence, which become constantly more complex, so that, eventually, it can hardly be reduced anymore to the original needs based on the organic constitution of the human species (Flitner, 1968, p. 95).

*Bildsamkeit* does not simply refer to the ability of the human species to adapt and react to diverse physical and material environments, but have the potential to detach themselves from their initial natural and immediate relation, which stands between their living organism and environment (based on the needs and desires given by their organic nature) and eventually shift toward an existence structured by culture and consciousness. (Flitner, 1968, p. 96). That humans have the potential to move forward from the pure natural existence to the realm of culture and become conscious does not exhaustively explain the meaning *Bildsamkeit* seems to have. *Bildsamkeit* is not only a human potential in the positive meaning of the word, but the whole concept is defined by negative anthropology. The human species develops, and it must develop in a culturally and symbolically mediated relation to the world, because, quite simply, the genetic qualities resulting from the natural evolution of the species are relatively modest. Accordingly, *Bildsamkeit* is perhaps more an expression of human imperfection than human potential. The human is an imperfect being who must produce with his own conscious activity the means, tools, and cultural resources that can be used to secure human self-preservation in varying environments (Roth, 1966, p. 115).

Hence, *Bildsamkeit* is not solely the potential of the human species, but the result of its inability for self-preservation based solely on its organic capacities. The human species compensates for this natural inability by

creating an environment that is no longer just a natural and material environment consisting of objective and observable entities, which can be exploited and consumed immediately by human beings, but the realm of culture, tradition, language, habits, and conscious action. According to the tradition of classical German philosophy, which can be traced to Hegel, this very realm has been called *Geist*. It offers “constantly growing resources of linguistic and other means of symbolization, of images and concepts as knowledge,” (Flitner, 1968, p. 96) which are available for individuals and the whole human species, and can be used for self-preservation. *Geist* therefore makes it possible for humans to compensate for the organic deficits occurring naturally to them and eventually inhabit various material environments and transform them into a world of their own making.

Flitner’s contemplations of *Bildsamkeit* are dependent on the intellectual context in which they originally emerged. The theoretical language reflects some aspects typical for German intellectual culture of the first half of the 20th century. In particular, the extensive use of the notion of *Geist* (Spirit) and the quite poetic (Reitemeyer, 2019, p. 17) expressions indicate the intellectual context quite clearly. However, the idea of *Bildsamkeit* can be re-conceptualized and updated quite easily, as Klaus Mollenhauer (1985, orig. 1983) shows while summarizing the standard interpretation of *Bildsamkeit*. He gives an updated version of the notion of *Bildsamkeit*, which was developed originally by Flitner in the context of *Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*. Mollenhauer (1985, p. 83) writes as follows:

*Bildsamkeit* is the case with all mammals, human children are born with a genetic endowment; but humans need to be cared for and protected over a

much longer period. This gap between the child’s initial physical endowment and what is needed for survival must be compensated for. Children make up for this gap through their malleability (i.e. *Bildsamkeit* A.K.) – an openness to learning and to new experiences that is unknown elsewhere in the animal kingdom. Collectively (i.e. during the history of humans as species beings; A.K.), this compensatory process is driven by “culture;” ...Children have an organic predisposition to malleability (plasticity). But a child’s *Bildsamkeit* can only be described as a response to the challenge posed by culture.

I follow here the translation by Norm Friesen (Mollenhauer, 2004), although his use of the word “collectively” is perhaps not the best option here. Originally, Mollenhauer uses an expression “*gattungsgeschichtlich*” (Mollenhauer, 1985, p. 83). The notion of *Gattungsgeschichte* (species history) has a much richer meaning than expressions like “collective” or “collectively.” It stems from the philosophical anthropology of the Marxian philosophy. Species history combines two inseparable aspects typical for the development of humanity. Human development is a part of natural history. The human species is a result of natural evolution, which has formed the essence of human beings in a particular way. The human being is a species-being (*Gattungswesen*), having specific organic characteristics and biological needs and desires, which it aims to satisfy by using and “manipulating” the natural environment. With those organic needs and their satisfaction, the human species is a part of nature. However, it cannot be totally subsumed under the category of nature, because the human species is also a historical being. It sustains its own existence while satisfying the organic and

biological needs in action, which mediates human organic nature with the objective processes in the material environment. At the same time, the human species begins to use new historical ways and habits to satisfy its needs. Eventually, it produces and forms itself through its own action by producing new needs and ways of satisfying these needs. Basically, this was the main idea in the famous Feuerbach-chapter of German ideology by young Marx and Engels (Marx, & Engels, 1973). Of course, it can be said that humans produce themselves collectively while aiming to satisfy the needs typical for human nature. Individual members of the species join their efforts and gradually form collectively-shared types of action, which make the satisfaction of those needs, and hence, also human self-preservation, much more efficient at the level of the human species. The emergence of collective and intersubjectively shared forms of action (family, distribution of labor, language, institutions, and culture) is a part of species history, but the species history and the alleged essence or nature of human species-being cannot be replaced with the concept of a free-floating collective alone. Despite the deep anthropologic train of thought which also contains some naturalistic overtones discussed above, *Bildsamkeit* is not just “natural fact” or something invariant. Instead, it is a historical phenomenon and must be understood historically. The historicity of *Bildsamkeit* leads to the next variety of *Bildsamkeit* typical of German educational theory.

### **Bildsamkeit and educative Interaction**

What makes *Bildsamkeit* truly one of the basic concepts of educational theory is that *Bildsamkeit* depends on diverse forms of interaction and interpersonal relations oriented by the educational intentionality of an educator – the educative will (*der erziehende Wille*), as Flitner (1988, p. 143) puts it. Not only social and

historical context are relevant for our understanding of *Bildsamkeit*, but the specific will or intention to educate and a specific educational reality must be taken into account while theorizing about it (Flitner, 1968, p. 90).

The *modus operandi* of the educational situation is that the one who educates considers the addressee of education (i.e. student) as someone who can be attributed with *Bildsamkeit* and, based on this expectation, aims to organize the situation so that eventually the latter begins to bring their *Bildsamkeit* into appearance (Flitner, 1968, pp. 93, 95). Herman Nohl, Flitner’s contemporary and colleague, makes clear that *Bildsamkeit* is an aspect of educational interaction and has something to do with an educator (teacher, parent, mentor etc.) and their attitude toward the one who is about to be educated. Nohl (1933, p. 36) writes as follows: “Yet, it is clear, that the concept of *Bildsamkeit* itself stems still from the perspective of educator. It is the decisive prerequisite her educational work.” Mollenhauer (1985) summarizes the traditional educationalist understanding by stating simply that *Bildsamkeit* is the result of a specific educational attitude: educational interaction is based on the trust or even belief that a child has an ability or inclination or will to learn. Despite Mollenhauer’s clear reference to children, *Bildsamkeit* as a theoretical concept covers every educational situation, regardless of the age or developmental stage of the addressee of education. Adults also can be attributed with *Bildsamkeit* when educational deeds are addressed to them (Flitner, 1968, pp. 86, 95).

A person who educates assumes that every person is, in principle, a creature attributed with *Bildsamkeit* (Flitner, 1968, p. 95). In this case, *Bildsamkeit* refers to an interpretation or image constructed by an educator during the interpersonal pedagogical

relationship. It concerns the assumed possibilities, developmental abilities, and inclinations of the other person. Hence *Bildsamkeit* is a construct of the potentialities and possibilities that an educator suggests or even hopes to characterize in the other person in the educational situation. It is a result of interpretative achievement and an act of understanding done by an educator. Flitner (1968, p. 87) underlines that this cannot be done simply by applying a scientific theory of *Bildsamkeit* to a concrete, individual case. Instead, intuitive contact with the other (i.e. child, pupil, student), accompanied by a knowledge of human nature (*Menschenkenntnis*) and a general understanding of diverse aspects of human life (*das allgemeine Lebensverständnis*) appears to offer the only way for such interpretative work by an educator encountering the developing and growing person.

Unfortunately, Flitner does not elaborate what the intuitive encounter would mean or how it is done in the educational situation. Yet, he underlines that commitment to a *Bildsamkeit* of the other is the methodical main principle (*Hauptsatz*) of education (Flitner, 1968, p. 143). Accordingly, every intentional pedagogical activity is based on some sort of interpretation of *Bildsamkeit*, but this interpretation itself must remain always vague, un-secure: The interpretation of a concrete *Bildsamkeit* remains a venture (Flitner 1968, p. 98) that must be undertaken fearlessly by an educator so that educational activities can be initiated. Mollenhauer (1985) sharpens the view sketched out by Flitner (1968), in the following way:

Pedagogical activity takes the form of an “experiment,” in the sense that it is directed through hypotheses and is always open to the future of the child.

The hypothesis is a necessary component because it serves as the image the educator has of the child’s *Bildsamkeit*. If such a hypothesis is not constantly open to correction in pedagogical engagement – if it petrifies so that it actually bars the way to new experiences with the child – the open experiment of pedagogical activity becomes a closed ritual that threatens to extinguish the child’s *Bildsamkeit* (pp. 103–104).

*Bildsamkeit* is not only an educator’s hypothetical interpretation of the abilities and potentials belonging to the one being educated. It is not just a hypothetical interpretative construct, always involving a risk. It can be successful or false and incorrect, as well as pertinent and apt. It is eventually more or less fluid and constantly convertible, depending on the abilities of the educator, who aims to understand and interpret the other in the flow of various educational encounters. Without being an invariant fact, *Bildsamkeit* is, nevertheless real, as Flitner (1968, p. 143) reminds us. After all, *Bildsamkeit* is a concrete phenomenon, deeply and in a very profound way intertwined with any interaction taking place in an educational situation. Flitner (1968, p. 90) expresses this as follows: “*Bildsamkeit* does not reveal itself outside the realm where it is expected, and where *Bildsamkeit* is already efficacious, it ought to show its own possibility.” Flitner tries to clarify this perhaps cryptic expression while accentuating how the *Bildsamkeit* of a pupil is not something that can be understood somehow and somewhere as self-contained and independent from intentional educative influence and the ideals behind it (Flitner, 1968, pp. 90–91).

*Bildsamkeit* and its appearance depends on the structure of interaction typical of

educational situations and their specific atmospheres created by a competent educator(s). Expected and anticipated – even predicted – by the educator is that the addressee of an educational influence has a kind of potentiality, which can manifest itself in the given educational situation or in the course of a series of educational situations and eventually in the future of that individual's chosen path of life (Mollenhauer, 1985, p. 98).

From the educationalist point of view, *Bildsamkeit* is neither a self-sufficient nor self-induced phenomenon. It can be manifested only in the complex network of human interactions designed to arouse or even provoke it (Mollenhauer, 1985, p. 103). Mollenhauer (1985, p. 90) describes the logic of a specifically educational interaction as an exchange of calls and answers. The description is a metaphorical one. Educational interaction has a quasi-dialogic structure, but not quite in the sense of exchanging arguments, so that consensus about the epistemic or moral state of affairs can be reached by communicatively competent agents. Neither can educative interaction be understood in the sense of giving and asking reasons in the form of linguistically well-formed sentences articulated by competent persons who collectively share the same social space, including norms, role-expectations, institutionalized rules, and so on. Rather, pedagogical interaction is based on the flow of calling and answering in a manner that an educator can organize and set up situations, which – metaphorically speaking – call on the assumed *Bildsamkeit* to manifest itself. Those manifestations in the actions of the one being educated are answers to calls, which are rather summons or demands (Benner, 2015, p. 82) to realize the *Bildsamkeit* as expected, hoped, and anticipated by an educator. Hence, *Bildsamkeit* is constructed time after time in the pedagogical

interaction or, as Mollenhauer (1985, p. 98) rephrases the Flitnerian ideas discussed above: “we know that a child's *Bildsamkeit* is either nurtured or damaged by the forms of interaction to which the child is exposed.” The manifested *Bildsamkeit* of the other person will always be something other than the suggested interpretative image constructed by an educator (Mollenhauer 1985, p. 89). Responses to educational deeds spring from the *Bildsamkeit* of the one being educated, which in the first place was not wholly grasped by the educator. The image of the other made by an educator can never be a perfect description of the factual potentialities of the other person.

Interestingly, with the concept of *Bildsamkeit*, the focus of theorizing about education shifts beyond the conventional and well-known dualisms between genetic heredity and environment or between nature and nurture (Benner, 2015). These dualisms go back to a traditional dilemma between the omnipotence and powerlessness of education and upbringing: the question, in other words, whether education can be understood as a kind of social technology, having supposedly more or less total and with high degree of certainty calculated control over its intended outcomes. Or should we instead suppose that education, despite all the hopes we willingly set to it, is senseless, hopeless, and more-or-less groundless – if not an impossible task – is actually a misleading one. According to Flitner (1968, pp. 88–89), discussions about *Bildsamkeit* in fact indicate that this kind of confrontation is simply false. Education or upbringing is not powerless and in vain simply because the best it can do is to provoke *Bildsamkeit* to manifest itself. And there is no reason for any kind of hybris or fantasy of omnipotence from the educator, because the *Bildsamkeit* of the other remains always partly out of reach from the educator and her attempts



to understand it. Something not wholly comprehensible and understood cannot be brought under control and mastered by educational actions. *Bildsamkeit* of the other can be only known to the degree it has manifested itself in the life of the other. Therefore, *Bildsamkeit* as a manifest phenomenon is not the end-product of educative influence. This manifestation, however, is induced by both the previous educational deeds and the partly unknown, while not yet potentialities and possibilities, of the one who should be educated. Hence, the notion of *Bildsamkeit* as a principle of the educative interaction is a way to thematize not only the possibility and even the necessity of education, but also the limits of educational influence (Flitner, 1968, p. 88).

*Bildsamkeit* as a principle or description of the specific nature of educational interaction seems to have three different meanings: first, *Bildsamkeit* is an interpretative image of the other constructed by an educator. Second, it seems to mark the potentiality of the other, which cannot be completely understood by an educator. Third, *Bildsamkeit* is the potential manifested in the educational situation or series of situations. The manifestation is possible only when it will be called by an educator and when the other responds or answers for those calls, based on the personal or individual *Bildsamkeit*, which always transcends even the most elaborate acts of understanding done by an educator.

Hence, every educational action is “bounded with *Bildsamkeit*” (Flitner, 1968, p. 143) in a twofold way. First, education would be impossible without the general *Bildsamkeit* typical for the human species. Second, a concrete *Bildsamkeit*, taking its appearance in the form of individual life, requires proper education; and thus, human *Bildsamkeit* is in fact a phenomenon that starts to flourish with

the right educational action. *Bildsamkeit* is at the same time an anthropologic category, describing something that makes the essence of human world-encountering and, likewise, a strictly educationalist concept, describing something about the pedagogical interaction.

### **Bildsamkeit between Subject and Individuality**

Eventually, *Bildsamkeit* is also a concept that seems to have something to do with subjectivity and the individuality of the one being educated. Flitner speaks constantly about *Bildsamkeit*, referring to concepts like person, individual, self, or subjective. In this sense, *Bildsamkeit* has something to do with the development of a person and its individual character (Flitner, 1968, pp. 91–93, 95). Additionally, Flitner (1968) suggests that an individual person has a “relation to herself as a person” (p. 93). In other words, *Bildsamkeit* at this subjective and individual level implies that persons are self-conscious beings in such a way that they clearly can have a twofold self-relation: first, they are aware of their existence and second, they have an ability for self-determination and self-reflection of their own individual actions (Flitner, 1968, pp. 93, 95). This particular use of *Bildsamkeit* can be traced to Johann Friedrich Herbart’s famous claim that the “*Bildsamkeit* of an educatee is the basic concept of educational science.” For him, *Bildsamkeit* is partly a unity of the mental or psychological features of an individual person, who is an empirical entity among other entities. Hence, *Bildsamkeit* appears to be a personal mental disposition or even aggregate of those dispositions, which have been since the days of Herbart clearly the theme for psychological (whether theoretical or empirical) inquiry (Flitner, 1989, 371; Hornstein, 1959).

Unfortunately, Flitner's contemplations in this respect are very fragmentary and tentative by their nature. Generally speaking, the use of concepts like subject, individual, and person, is not by all means unambiguous (Tenorth, 2020, 170–175) but rather highly dependent on a theoretical framework, the chosen theoretical paradigm, and even the diverse traditions ranging from German idealism to the contemporary philosophy of mind, sociology, and modern psychology. However, Mollenhauer has also made some interesting attempts to discuss *Bildsamkeit* and subjectivity or subject. Although *Bildsamkeit* can be seen as a subjective, personal, or individual feature, it does not follow that *Bildsamkeit* could be seen as a category covering only the psychological aspect or inner mental life. *Bildsamkeit* marks the border or line between subjectivity and intersubjectivity, or between the unspoken and spoken (Mollenhauer, 1986, 86–87).

The most elementary aspect of human development, which Mollenhauer (1985) understands in the sense of *Bildung* (pp. 127–128), is the acquisition of the ability to use language. Mollenhauer (1985, p. 89) describes this process as a “transformation of subjectivity into intersubjectivity.” It would be oversimplifying to claim this transformation means that a human organism would be first a pre-linguistic and a-socialized self (*das unsozialisiertes Ich*) who then gradually leaves this stage of development behind and enters in the realm of language and intersubjectivity (Mollenhauer, 1985, pp. 87–88). There is no doubt that these processes happen: individual human beings are initiated into and socialized in the social systems of using symbols and language. Initiation or socialization, however, is never perfectly complete so that it leads to the total identification of an individual person with

the linguistic structure (Mollenhauer, 1986, p. 128). Rather, Mollenhauer emphasizes the border between unspoken and spoken is not something that could be completely encountered during the individual ontogenetic development or maturation as if we could totally leave behind the pre-linguistic existence of ours. This border remains throughout of our life path (Mollenhauer, 1986, p. 123).

Our conscious being in the world or with the world is defined constantly by the spoken and unspoken. It could be said that our existence is constituted by the difference or rift between these two aspects. Accordingly, our conscious life is characterized by *Bildsamkeit* when we try to translate our subjective desires, aims, motives, hopes, and fantasies into the language and forms of action, which then can be communicated and made comprehensible and understandable for others and also ourselves.

Subjectivity itself remains beyond the spoken and intersubjective (Mollenhauer, 1985, p. 127), yet it is always present with our world encountering. One could say, alternatively: the unspoken accompanies our consciousness. Subjectivity does not simply vanish behind language, symbols, and cultural arrangements to which one has been more or less successfully initiated; nor will it ever be totally suppressed by the linguistic structure, which presents (Mollenhauer, 1985, p. 87) the given cultural and traditional forms of life and standards set by it for interpreting the world. On the contrary, subjectivity surfaces and manifests itself in our actions, in our interpretations of ourselves and the world, which for this reason cannot be wholly subsumed under collectively shared meanings. Subjectivity always leaves a trace in our existence, in some form or another. It comes into play “in our bodily movements, in remembrance and in discrepancies in the use of vocabulary” (Mollenhauer, 1986, p. 127). In this

sense, subjectivity is something that cannot be controlled or comprehended. However, humans struggle all the time, from the earliest stages of individual development, to transform the “subjective character” into the “objective” one (Flitner, 1968, 96–97). We try to make the originally-unspoken into the spoken, and express or articulate it so that it can be understood by those who share the same intersubjective space constructed by a shared language and cultural background.

Individual *Bildsamkeit* is an expression of our attempts to find our way of bringing or “transforming” (Mollenhauer, 1985, 89) our subjectivity into the realm of language, communication, and interaction. *Bildsamkeit* is clearly a word for the irreducibility of the individual existence. Despite acquiring language and intersubjectively-shared symbolic forms, and the whole system of meanings and rules defining the proper use of linguistic expressions, we are still not yet completely defined by them. Individual beings cannot be identified through the use of linguistic expressions, which follow linguistic rules, nor with the linguistic structure that dictates the individual expressions. The reason for this seems to be simply that in our conscious existence there is always a trace of something, which cannot be expressed and communicated or transformed completely into the public sphere, but which seems to be the source of our urge for individual self-articulation in the media of own actions and speech that constitute our relations to ourselves and the world. This something is traditionally called subject or subjectivity (Ameriks, 1995).

Although subjectivity is an element of our world relations, individuality is not something that can simply be deduced or derived from it. The concept of *Bildsamkeit* is a cipher for the consideration that, despite subjectivity, individual beings are not simply a

result of self-sufficient or self-induced activity. Subjectivity needs to open to the world, language, culture, and other beings, in order to become real. Simultaneously, the process of the opening of subjectivity will be determined by them, but not comprehensively. Hence, individual *Bildsamkeit* expresses subjectivity in the medium of language and symbols without giving itself totally in the collectively-shared forms of communication and intersubjectivity.

Mollenhauer’s (1985; 1986) treatise on *Bildsamkeit* is based on various theoretical vocabularies he does not discuss explicitly but, rather, uses them mainly as an inspiration for his own contemplations. Fortunately, the basic idea seems to be clear: The problem of *Bildsamkeit* emerges precisely on the boundary between subjectivity and intersubjectivity (unspoken and spoken) (Mollenhauer, 1985, pp. 86–90). This boundary is an integral part of individual consciousness. Our conscious life keeps hovering constantly between the boundary-lines within our own individual life. To the extent that we can transcend the line between subjectivity and intersubjectivity and start to articulate ourselves in intersubjectively shared forms of language, we simultaneously begin to belong to the world. And as long as we are not able to make this step, or just hesitate to make it, we remain in the sphere of our subjectivity and do not open up for the world of intersubjective meanings (Mollenhauer, 1985, p. 85).

This quite preliminary idea of individual *Bildsamkeit* can be elaborated further by utilizing the contemporary, continental, philosophy of mind and subjectivity: namely, the numerous works written by Dieter Henrich and Manfred Frank. Interestingly, Mollenhauer (1986) seems to be familiar with Frank’s contributions to the philosophy of subjectivity, language, and intersubjectivity (p. 177). The

idea of individual *Bildsamkeit* as a rift between subjectivity and intersubjectivity can perhaps be made more explicit with the concepts: subject, person, and individual. Both Henrich (1987; 1997) and Frank (2012) emphasize that the human as a conscious being is both subject and person. As conscious beings, we are inclined to “conceive of ourselves in a twofold way” (Henrich 1987, 119). We have two perspectives into our existence or into our “life within the world” (Henrich, 1987, p. 120; Henrich 1997, p. 107). Henrich (1987, p. 119) illustrates this duplicity inherent to the human consciousness as follows: “We are (1) entities within the world and among others of the same kind (persons) and (2) points of view and anchors of reference with regard to everything an even every world (subjects).”

These are two “equally original” (Henrich, 1997, p. 107) dimensions of conscious life (i.e., the life we live and conduct as individuals), and we tend to describe ourselves from these two perspectives. We are subjects in the sense that we have immediate certainty of our own existence and our ability to interact with the world and have an impact in it while “acting solely from” (Henrich, 1997, p. 119) ourselves. As persons, we are both embodied beings who live in the physical and natural world among other entities and beings who live in the social intersubjectively-shared world (i.e. culture). According to Henrich, we, as individual human beings, are simultaneously subjects and persons. These are the indisputable dimensions of our individual existence in the world and “we are the one only insofar as we are the other” (Henrich, 1997, p. 107). These dimensions cannot be reduced to each other; instead, subject and person are the facets that “rather presuppose their opposite, although they also tend to subsume it under their respective dominance” (Henrich, 1987, p. 119). However,

“none of two, neither person nor subject, can subsume the other entirely” (Henrich, 1997, p. 117). If self-centering subject were the proper reality of conscious life, then the former could render this life in principle independent of the course of the world. Inversely, if subjectivity were only derivative property of personality, then it would be tied up in the context of dependency that is to be observed in all worldly things. (Henrich, 1997, p. 118)

Our subjectivity is always embodied by its opening to the social world and, moreover, needing to be guided into it. Hence, we are never solely subjects as such. As persons, we are embedded in the social world: our world views and our conceptual ways or interpretations of the world are produced and determined by social life, traditions, and systems of using language. However, we are never just persons as such, either. We may have the peculiar experience of freedom and subjectivity which taints the otherwise pre-stabilized harmony of the language and mutual intersubjectivity. In action and speaking, we feel an independence and selfhood, which cannot be explained through social programming or conditioning into the life world (Henrich, 1997, p. 118). Since conscious life is structured by the two tendencies of being both subject and person, we live constantly as individuals in the tension between subjectivity and personhood. These cancel or contradict each other constantly. We are aware of our subjectivity in a way that cannot be made intelligible from the perspective stemming from “conditions of being person” (Henrich, 1997, p. 117) and “subject as such can never understand the reality of the world out of itself” (Henrich, 1997, p. 117).

Although we are “from the beginning of our conscious life torn between conflicting self-descriptions” (Henrich, 1987, p. 119), it can be said: “The human being realizes him- or herself

in everything that is essential to him- or herself out of the tension between the two perspectives that together structure his or her life in his or her world” (Henrich 1997, p. 117). The complexity of this process of self-realization, which, for lack of a better expression, I would call *Bildung*, is rooted in the tension constituting our conscious life in its relation to the world. Thus, the process of *Bildung* is not something brought up by the activity of self-centered and self-sufficient individual subject. Nor is it the process that just happens in the medium of language, either.

The process of *Bildung* is the manifestation of an individual’s attempt to find the reconciliation between the two tendencies of life: namely, subjectivity and personhood. However, this very reconciliation cannot be ever reached in our lives, because this would take the dynamics of our conscious life away. Thus, *Bildung* is something that ought to be understood as the never-ending or unending approach to the reconciliation, which we may experience in our individual conscious life as only momentary and fragmentary.

When Mollenhauer describes *Bildsamkeit* as a boundary between subjectivity and intersubjectivity, the spoken and unspoken, he thematizes as a matter of fact the very same problem as both Henrich and Frank. Both emphasize how subjectivity and personhood are two equally primordial, yet contradicting, tendencies of conscious life. What appears to be the *Bildsamkeit* of an individual is an exhibition of an attempt to overcome this rift and find a reconciliation between these tendencies structuring one’s conscious life.

It would be perhaps more appropriate to say that *Bildsamkeit* is an indication of individualization, that is: the transformation of subjectivity or “not yet discursive impulse” of

subject so that they could be integrated with the community based on communication and intersubjectivity (Mollenhauer, 1986, p. 128). The subjective impulses are interpreted from the perspective of personhood, which allows a conscious being to use linguistic and symbolic (i.e., cultural) capacities, while interpreting and reflecting the original subjective elements of her conscious life (Henrich, 1997, p. 118). Persons are rooted in the intersubjectively-shared world of meanings, but subjectivity signifies that individual conscious life has a character not to be “determinable like a thing in the world” (Henrich, 1997, p. 118).

Individual consciousness is not simply identical with the collectively shared forms of interpretations and meanings nor determined by them. According to Frank (1997), individuality means precisely that world views and the ways of making meanings and interpreting things do not simply echo the intersubjective pre-stabilized structure, with which we, as persons, are interwoven. Rather, they are unique “projections of meaning” that are not “predicted” by the knowledge of linguistic rules constituting the intersubjectivity or derived from the “semantic-pragmatic universals” (Frank, 1997, p. 26) on which we as persons are dependent; nor are they sheer expressions or products of a free-floating subject or subjectivity and its “self-sufficiency” and “self-production” (Henrich, 1997, p. 119) detached from the worldlines or the partial world-immanence vital for the emergence human conscious life and existence (Henrich, 1997, p. 109). This uniqueness can be explained only through our subjectivity and our human ability to bring the subjective element to communication and find an individual style to express the subjective in the medium of intersubjective communication so that “other individuals in the community of communication” (Frank, 1997, p. 26) can

comprehend it. The very meaning of individual *Bildsamkeit*, which Mollenhauer perhaps tried to capture is, put simply, the ability to make one's own subjectivity comprehensible for oneself, in one's own individual self-interpretation, as well as for other individuals living in the same realm of intersubjectivity. The integration of subjective with the intersubjective world (Mollenhauer, 1985, pp. 86–90) and finding “reconciliation” (Henrich, 1987) between being subject and person along with it, can only happen by way of “individuation” (Frank, 2004, p. 269).

### Concluding remarks: to translate or not to translate

As I have shown above, *Bildsamkeit* is a multifaceted and even fuzzy concept, having diverse varieties of meaning depending on the use of it. It can be applied to diverse contexts, ranging from the highly speculative use under the terms of philosophical anthropology (describing the essence of the human species or human conscious life) to descriptions of the *modus operandi* of educative interaction or pedagogical situation. From there follows that it is extremely difficult to translate it into one single concept.

How, then, can a concept like *Bildsamkeit* be translated into other languages? Or should we simply leave it untranslated, as it has become customary with the German concept of *Bildung*, which rarely becomes translated these days. No simple solution for the questions like this can be given. There are possible options for translation. Unfortunately, they are hardly ever able to grasp the concept of *Bildsamkeit* in all its richness. Those singular translations can only express a fairly narrow aspect of the whole spectrum typical for the original concept. For example, if *Bildsamkeit* is translated into “ability learn” or “learning ability,” the translation does

not take into consideration the philosophic-anthropologic aspects described by the traditional use of *Bildsamkeit* typical of the traditional German theory of education. If “malleability” or “plasticity” are offered as possible translations of *Bildsamkeit*, then the important aspect of human *Bildsamkeit* can easily fade away. Those translations do not take into account how the theoretical discourse about *Bildsamkeit* accentuates the active role of human subjectivity in the world-encountering. In addition, those translations tend to dismiss *Bildsamkeit* as the reason for why the possible outcomes of educational activities cannot always be calculated with great certainty. In this sense, *Bildsamkeit* is a traditional expression for the suggested self-reference and self-regulation of an evolving individual person. However, from translating *Bildsamkeit* into “self-reference,” further difficulties ensue. One might raise the fundamental philosophical issue of what “self” we are then talking about, and what kind of relation this self can take to itself. The problem of self-reflection and its possibility arises here. Concepts like self-reference or self-organization tend to shift the focus toward a systems theory, suggesting concepts and theoretical language that differs significantly from the humanistic tradition behind the pedagogical theory discussed here. *Bildsamkeit* could also be translated into a notion of ability or potentiality for *Bildung*. However, a translation of this kind would only create more problems, since *Bildung* and its possible variants and possibilities of translation would make things more complicated.

If it seems impossible to find a singular translation for *Bildsamkeit*, it would be perhaps important to ask how the whole way of thinking behind the notion *Bildsamkeit* could be made more accessible for a public unfamiliar with the tradition of German pedagogical theory. The

whole rich field of problems to which this notion obviously refers still exists, whether we have a suitable name for it or not. Our thinking about education and questions about what makes education possible in the first place is not possible without assuming the set of properties that can be distilled into the notion of *Bildsamkeit*. Whatever our theories from the historical, cultural, and paradigmatic reasons about education might ever be, and whatever singular concepts might be their structural components, there is little doubt that when we theorize or philosophize about education, we simultaneously endorse the claim that education is possible. This claim, however, is *a priori* in the sense that we must accept or anticipate the possibility of education before we start to make a theory about it. Otherwise, our attempts to make a theory about education are senseless. A German word, *Bildsamkeit*, has proved itself to be a convenient conceptual tool for pulling together the various aspects of human world-encountering, human interaction, and human subjectivity and individuality, which help us to understand why we humans are creatures who can be educated and need to be educated. Whether to translate or not translate the concept of *Bildsamkeit* takes, at the end of the day, a secondary status. More important by far is that those among us who understand themselves as theoreticians, philosophers, and researchers of education keep asking from themselves, why and how the ability to educate and to be educated is the essential attribute of humanity.

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