

WHAT IT MEANS TO BE HUMAN

Bildung traditions from around the globe,
past, present, and future

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Foreword by: Klaas van Egmond

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Editor: Lene Rachel Andersen



**NORDIC
BILDUNG**

What it Means to be Human:

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Foreword

Klaas van Egmond

Professor emeritus
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Around the globe there are many traditions that deal with the human need for belonging and formation: To be part of a group and to evolve as an individual and become you. In Europe, this goes by the name *Bildung*, in parts of Africa, it is called *Ubuntu*, in parts of Latin America, *Buen Vivir*, and in other parts of the world it has different names. It is a hallmark of humanity and our ability to build civilizations and keep social peace that we educate and form our minds and hearts so that we can live peacefully in mutual disagreement and even get to the point where we may appreciate differences and plurality.

In a rapidly changing world that is getting increasingly interconnected via digital technologies, this ability, this formation, this personal maturation becomes more important than ever. Nevertheless, our traditions for promoting *Bildung*, *Ubuntu*, *Buen Vivir*, and similar traditions, are being ignored in—if not deliberately expelled from—our formal educational systems. Instead of educating and forming whole persons who are deeply rooted in their culture and community, educational institutions are increasingly seen as workforce producing factories.

This is dangerous.

To take the West as an example, Western societies increasingly face dissident behaviour from populist groups against their societal institutions. We saw it in the raid on Washington's Capitol Hill in 2021 and in protests against the policies of many European governments during the Covid pandemic, and we now see it when governments want to drastically reduce the use of fossil fuels. Earlier, Brexit in the UK and the 'Gilets Jaunes' in France likewise reflected social unrest and dissatisfaction.

These developments can be understood both as causes and consequences of the gradual transition from the modern to the postmodern society, and from industrialized nation state economies to a globalized economy connected digitally. Herein, the collective, more general value orientations in society are weakened, and focus on the individual and the particular is taking over; the latter also manifested in various forms of identity politics, subcultures, and ethnic minorities. This process is further accelerated by the rise of social media where cultural filter bubbles can grow increasingly isolated and radical. As a consequence, society as a whole is fragmenting into a mosaic of more or less diverse parts. This 'diversity,' which is in fact more of an atomization, is further increased by the widening gap in wealth and income between the rich and the poor, as well as the labour driven immigration that does not consider culture and cultural differences. Add to this the potential for Artificial General Intelligence, which may revamp the human condition completely, and for which civilization is not prepared at all.

Since the 1980s, politics has increasingly focused on marketization instead of being a corrective to the market, and the process has left behind millions of people who used to live secure middle- and working-class lives. This has contributed to a lack of trust in governmental institutions, and this lack of trust is a common denominator in populist movements. As expected in the current postmodern times, this also turns into a lack of trust in science and its assessments of the state of the outside world. Examples are the denial of climate change,

assumptions of unproven health risks from Covid-vaccines, and far-fetched conspiracy theories.

At the same time, a civilization focused on materialist consumption makes economic insecurity so much the more painful. The anger caused by this is fully understandable but does not make a fertile soil for constructive civic engagement and societal progress. Both the inability of truth-assessment and decreasing civic empowerment are severe threats to democracy and peace.

The inability of truth assessment and a shortage of civic skills I interpret as the result of failed educational and bildung systems, which for the past couple of generations have not upgraded and sufficiently promoted that which allows us to make sense of the world:

- Philosophy and critical thinking, which allow us to assess the validity of truths
- Science and the scientific method, which allow us to create new fact-based knowledge
- History, which tells us how we got to where we are
- Culture and arts, which create the symbols that allow us to communicate (i.e. language) and convey to us the lessons learned from earlier experiences
- Age-appropriate religion, which allows us to confront existential questions through narrative

The consequence is increased confusion and anxiety and decreasing trust in collective institutions. The widening gap between the individual and the collective, more generally stands for the widening gap between the particular and the general, or even universal. Exploring the arts, philosophical inquiry, scientific method, an understanding of history, and an existential approach to narrative passed down through the generations are processes that the subjective individual can share with the societal collective (the others) in order to develop a reasonable objective, common view on the current state of affairs. As soon as the particular individual no longer

sees herself as a part of the general collective, a common understanding of societal reality is lost, and policy is no longer possible; the individual then is no longer part of a community, but of a world of differences. In a society of differences, the individuals no longer have a common perception of society. It involves a risk to take the part for the whole, as there is no whole anymore.

Here *bildung* comes in. Wilhelm von Humboldt stated that *bildung* is about linking the self to the world. More general humanist reflections on the nature of *bildung* share the idea that the individual and the general are brought to an inner harmony through *bildung*. As such, *bildung* is linked with very broad expectations of a better society, economically, morally, and politically. The Dutch pedagogical theorist Gert Biesta also states that the modern conception of *bildung* is the question of citizenship in an emerging civil society.

Amidst postmodern uncertainty, it is our hope that *bildung* can allow us a return from a society of differences to a society in which the existential balance is restored between individual differences and the collective common ground. To be human means to be both an individual and part of a community. Morality can only exist when they are combined.

This is very relevant as a decreasing sense of moral responsibility towards the whole of society must be addressed. The German philosopher Friedrich Schiller wrote *Letters on the Aesthetical Education of Mankind* in the late 1700s. Here, he pointed out the important role of arts and the aesthetical in relation to morality: Through beauty, the sensory person is led to form and rationality; through beauty, the spiritual person is led back to matter and the material world. So, beauty might bring about some equilibrium between the spiritual and physical condition of the human being. Schiller also states that a moral condition can only be developed from aesthetical development, not from our physical condition, our physical drives, and desires. The step from an aesthetically formed mind to morality is smaller than the step from physical desires to morality.

This insight into human formation is universal. It is through cultural traditions that we learn what it means to be a good person whom others can trust. Just as upbringing is a process of knowledge acquisition and truth-finding, the aesthetic upbringing seems to be a second and as important dimension of the inner harmony which is brought about by Bildung, Ubuntu, Buen Vivir etc. Both dimensions appear to be crucial to restore the notions of truth and morality in our current society.

The World That Might Have Been...

Thakur S. Powdyel

Minister of education 2008-2013
Bhutan

Granted that 'nothing stays ... everything flows', as in the old Heraclitus fashion, the manner and magnitude of change, whether natural or induced, if dramatic or subtle, momentary or enduring, carries with it a force that can affect and alter the fate of nations and of peoples often far beyond the realm of the normal and the desirable. The human race has witnessed the fall of empires, collapse of civilisations, decimation of cultures, and disappearance of institutions. Mighty symbols of power and prosperity, formidable bulwarks of human ingenuity, colossal spectacles of earthly deeds lie in ruins like the fallen face of Ozymandias, half-buried in the sand.

This is, perhaps, the more dramatic part of human history that reminds us of the inexorable law of impermanence that binds all phenomena. Enduring monuments to the marvels of human creativity continue to honour and cooperate with the infinite gifts of Mother Nature that sustain us and bless us. This is the reason for the faith that lives in us and that keeps us going despite the vagaries of time and chance. This might

Ubuntu & Bildung: Our Common Heritage

Dr. Mamphela Ramphele

Co-President, Club of Rome 2018-2024,
Co-Founder of Reimagine South Africa
South Africa

In the process of transitioning from old world orders in the context of multiple planetary emergencies, Africa offers not a new world order, but a place from where we all can engage in the process of remembering what it means to be human that is grounded in a relational ethical imperative of becoming-with-others.

Drawing from the well of generosity and solidarity within us, we are invited to forge 'new coalitions of becoming' by remembering the African conception of what it means to be human through which a new 'African human-ess' can be evoked. This form of remembrance does not draw on a superficial nostalgia for the pre-colonial traditions, but calls forth an even deeper view of what it means to be human in essence. Kofi Opoku, an African scholar, descendant of the Akan people of Ghana and elder, expresses this more eloquently in his talk at UNISA entitled '*Skinny and imperishable truth: African religious heritage*':

Personal growth, Lifelong Learning, and Democracy

Dr. Joseph Kessels

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Development, Twente University,
Professor emeritus in Educational
Leadership at the Open University
the Netherlands

The following three intriguing questions form the basis of this essay: How do lifelong learning and democracy relate? Does it make sense to differentiate between professional learning for economic progress and personal growth? And how could we promote personal growth and development in Europe? Can it be done globally?

Moreover, these questions are not only relevant for lifelong learning and adult education, but for all education and schooling in the public domain of civilized societies. As an adult, it is required to acquire the skills to make a living and becoming a responsible parent for a new generation. Moreover, the society we are a part of is under constant change, which requires new skills, capabilities, and an attitude of continuous adaptation.

Besides the necessary primary and basic needs, adults strive for a meaningful and fulfilling life. Therefore, they

The Significance of Bildung

Lene Rachel Andersen

Author, philosopher, and futurist,
Member of the Club of Rome
Denmark

Bildung is more than education, but what exactly? Friedrich Schiller made some rather precise observations about bildung in the 1790s as did other contemporary thinkers, yet bildung is a fluffy or “soft” phenomenon. This fluffiness and softness means that bildung has a hard time in our spreadsheet-craving world of today, where everything must be measurable and quantifiable in order to be considered of value. Love is fluffy and soft too, yet it is usually considered of value nevertheless, and nobody in their right mind would suggest that we quantify love, measure it, and compare loves in spreadsheets. So, could we somehow learn to appreciate bildung and find it significant even without using spreadsheets?

The world needs good education more than ever. Not only is the job market changing rapidly, societies are also facing wicked problems such as climate change, mass migration, digitization, and AI, etc. Overall, complexity is increasing, and individuals around the globe need to understand more and take individual responsibility for more than in any previous

Practical Implications of a Philosophy of Humane Education

Dr. Julian Nida-Rümelin

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Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, Munich,
former German state minister for culture
Germany

In the *Politeia*, Plato calls for an education which begins with music and sport, including men and women, young men and girls equally. Education through music and sport, this is the vision of a grammar school as a place of sport and not as a training centre for passive learning. Also today, everyday school life should begin with joint sportive activities. This would not just be good for pupils but also for teachers, even if they have not made physical education their profession. Moderate physical exercise at the start of the day awakens the senses, leads to the release of happiness hormones (endorphins), stimulates the blood supply to the brain, and thus prepares it for the effort ahead, relaxes the muscles, and also allows sedentary activity without the typical accompanying back pain, it promotes social cohesion and co-operation, and it creates self-esteem and serenity.

Let's Be Makers Instead of Followers

Dr. Peter Mesker and
Hanke Drop, MA

Teachers, vocational training
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A Europe-wide revival of the idea of *bildung* as a goal for education has been gaining momentum for a couple of decades. The main idea is that *bildung* enables teachers, researchers and policy makers “... to explore the ways in which education might be about something more than simply the transmission of our facts and values to the next generation,” to use a quote by Gert Biesta, the Dutch professor of educational theory and pedagogy at the University of Edinburgh. Others often narrow *bildung* down to a process of becoming a whole person or cultivating one’s self towards civic excellence. Those ideas come from an older tradition with *bildung* thinkers such as the 19th century Prussian minister of education, Wilhelm von Humboldt, who promoted *bildung* as a key objective of public education.

We think *bildung* has a political connotation as well, especially when educators start focusing on *bildung* as an active process in classrooms and schools. What we call “Bildung Making” is thus an invitation for learners to live a grown-up, responsible life in the world around them. It shapes active rather than passive citizens.

Bildung and Worldviews: Education through Ubuntu, Buen Vivir, and Happiness

Dorine van Norren

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of Pretoria, Decoloniality Research Group
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Modernist education has focused mainly on cognitive abilities on the one hand and practical skills on the other. And in the case of certain professions like psychology or theatre, also on emotional skills. At the same time, modern science favors empiricism and thus reductionist views of the world, despite calls for interdisciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity. Modernism favours individualism and materialism. This in turn has led to an increasing lack of meaning and trust in the power of the autonomous collective. It has also led to a disregard for our natural surroundings, as modernist man considers himself to be superior to nature, which is regarded as an object. The ensuing climate crisis as well as persistent poverty and unequal-

The Transformative Encounter

Dr. Marcos Sarasola

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Uruguay

In South America, the 1960s was a time of change, with social and cultural movements of unprecedented strength, influenced to some extent by the French May 1968. A strong tension between dictatorial governments and emancipation processes marked the societies of the time, and education was no exception. On the contrary, in this field there was also a search for new paradigms to accompany the new currents of thought.

Perhaps one of the internationally best known thinkers in this context is the Brazilian Paulo Freire and one of his most widely read books is *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Already at the end of the 1960s he had written *Education as the Practice of Freedom*, in which he argued that education had to be a force for change and liberation, that it could not remain an alienated or alienating act, but that the emphasis had to be placed on the relationship between teacher and student, on the interaction between theory and practice. He advocated a dialogical process as opposed to the simple transmission of

Confucian Bildung Past, Present, and Future

Cheng Yi-Heng
Guest Professor of Tongji University,
Member of the Club of Rome,
China

Chinese bildung in the Past: Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism

The Book of Change or *Yi Jing* is very often referred to as the hardest book about Chinese bildung. Even Confucius admitted that to study *Yi Jing*, one should preferably have reached the age of 50 when one has plenty of life experience and finally has a sense of one's destiny. The book is a summary of the wisdoms of indigenous peoples from many places, insights derived from the observations of evolutions of natural phenomena and human relationships, symbolized and correlated with the evolvments of an Octagram, and interpreted through the events and confrontations between the Zhou Dynasty's first emperor and the last emperor of the previous dynasty, the Shang Dynasty, around 1000 BCE. Politics, spirituality, and understandings of the natural world intertwined and seen through the lens of constant change.

Confucius created his own school of philosophy around 500 BCE, during the Zhou Dynasty, and though he did not write any books himself, Confucian literature was recorded

Human Ecology Education and Its Foundational Value for Trans- forming Society

Sandra Ericson

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Science Department at City College
of San Francisco for 28 years,
United States

Human Ecology education is an essential and transformative approach to learning, focused on the interplay between us and our human ecosystem. It is a multidisciplinary educational field combining physical and psycho-social life skills, daily living in the built and natural environments, social presentation, understanding cultural differences, and ethical decision-making to develop positive relationships for how we live in our world. By teaching the science and responsibilities of caring for life, Human Ecology empowers individuals to build true sustainability. Because the lessons are lived daily, the healthy rhythms and habits of life within family and community are learned, repeated in different contexts, shared, and naturally inherited by the next generation, making the impact of Hu-

From Bildung to Identity

Dr. Thomas Aastrup Rømer

Public intellectual,
senior consultant, the think tank Prospekt
Denmark

It seems to me that bildung has withered away as a driving force and purpose in society. I would like to argue that the reason for this is that the idea of “world” has been taken out of the whole concept of bildung. In the long run, the result of such withdrawal is a collapse of the possibility of both human experience, plurality, and existence as such. Instead, a new worldless posthumanism is emerging, consisting of identities, statistics, diversity, and strategic algorithms.

What is Bildung?

Bildung is fundamentally about a full and free interaction between the self and the world. This was the definition by Wilhelm von Humboldt back in 1793. Through this interaction, Man develops personally while the layers of the world and its things are constantly explored. In bildung, therefore, Man and World appear in a constant and emerging plurality.

The fact that the interaction between the self and the world is ‘free’ means that, in principle, the interaction takes place independently of social and economic demands and in-

Technology and the Decline of the Bildung Human

Dr. Steve Joordens
Professor of Psychology,
University of Toronto

Dr. Adam Frost¹
Post.doc., University of Toronto
Canada

Despite being an educational psychologist with a passion for enhancing public education, I had not encountered the Bildung concept until I was invited to write this chapter. Situated as I am in the present, as I began to learn more, I was intrigued. First, if it is not yet obvious to the reader after sampling other chapters in this book, bildung is a complex concept that touches on a number of theories of interest to the psychological community, connecting them in ways that are not typical. It represents an approach to education that is intended to help humans develop their character and autonomy in an informed way. That is, the intent of the approach is

¹ Initially, this was a sole author chapter by Steve, hence the extensive use of first person throughout. After several interesting discussions with my postdoctoral fellow Adam, however, it was clear his ideas were shaping this narrative and thus I appropriately asked to have him added as a co-author

The Last Educators

Dr. Zachary Stein
Writer. Educator. Futurist.
United States

Many believe AI is our only hope in facing the climate and energy crises. Many also believe that AI will help us improve medicine and healthcare. Faith is being put in artificial intelligence to solve all the hardest problems human natural intelligence never could. This same faith has AI poised to move on the hardest social problems of all, human development and socialization. These designs to replace teachers and parents with machines will end education as a social practice. The generations living today may hold the last teachers and students. We may be the last educators. Whatever comes next may be some as yet unknown subject of cyborg-anthropology.

Technology and education have always been intertwined. From papyrus and ink, through printing presses, radio, and television, changes in technology have radically changed education throughout history. Socialization, enculturation, and the processes of human development are inseparable from the technological surround. Ecosystems of technologies create the basic infrastructures within which humans live and learn. The “nest” in which we are born and raised is now in-

Bildung Brings Hope and Empowerment in Post-Conflict Contexts

Dr. Eliane Metni

Director, International Education
Association (IEA)
Lebanon

Lebanon remains a beacon of resilience and innovation in the Middle East, while it grapples with a myriad of challenges that have cast a shadow over its weakened education and structures. The nation has been entangled in a web of crises, each layer contributing to the erosion of its education infrastructure. From the scars of the civil war that spanned from 1975 to 1990, the influx of Syrian refugees since 2011, the financial collapse in 2019, to the devastating explosion on August 4th, 2020, Lebanon finds itself in the throes of its worst political, social, and economic crisis in its modern history. This turmoil seeps into every sector, none more profoundly impacted than education. The repercussions are stark. The Lebanese middle class, once a pillar of stability, has been thrust into poverty.

Against this backdrop, the education system faces an uphill battle to reform its curriculum and system while contending with rising school violence, plummeting retention rates, and children, Lebanese or refugees alike, grappling with a pervasive sense of helplessness. In such a fragile context, the

What it means to be human. Kōtahitanga, Unity, Togetherness

Dr. Noema Toia Williams

Great-grandmother
Aotearoa, New Zealand

Understanding our existence as sentient human beings gives cause for reflection on what it is to be human. What is valued in society or, what is not. From time immemorial the idea of what it means to be human remains elusive. Physiologically, human beings are similar if not the same genetically. An apparent ideal human has been characterised as white, of racial purity, with power and dominance over the non-white 'other'—an Aryan ideal. So, what does to be human mean for the indigenous peoples of the world? What it means to be human may reside in the Māori world view of *Kōtahitanga*, the whole of me, the whole of you: physically, psychologically, spiritually.

This article is written in free verse. It comprises three main