Rising up to Humanity: Towards a Cultural Psychology of *Bildung*

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1 Introduction

I have had the privilege of knowing Jaan Valsiner as a colleague at Aalborg University since 2013. Before that I knew him of course as a scholar and prolific writer of books and articles on cultural psychology and developmental science. Jaan Valsiner is the most generous, open-minded, and inclusive intellectual one can imagine. He is always able to facilitate the development of people's ideas and is extremely helpful in organizing collaborations between researchers around the world. Jaan Valsiner has not only provided innovative ideas for psychology and the human sciences at large but has also been a leading force in developing a necessary scientific infrastructure of journals, book series, and scientific meetings that has enabled cultural psychology to establish itself as a sustainable approach to the human mind now and in the future. For all this, and much more, we owe him enormous gratitude.

Personally, it was a great joy for me to have Jaan Valsiner as a colleague, since he really understood and helped me develop my writings on psychology as a normative science (e.g., Brinkmann, 2018). I have developed this view on the basis of the practice philosophies of the likes of Aristotle, Wittgenstein, and the phenomenological tradition (and also more recent thinkers like Rom Harré), and although Jaan Valsiner's cultural psychology of semiotic mediation has a different historical trajectory, both lines of thought end with many of the same conclusions: that psychology is the science of human conduct and that such conduct is susceptible to social norms that organize the psyche (Valsiner, 2014). I will not go into detail here, but simply say that the basic argument for the normativity of psychology is that

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whenever we are presented with some psychological phenomenon, we are dealing with something that does not simply happen – like a blind causal process – but rather something that can be done more or less well by skilled persons who can be held accountable. Thinking can be done more or less adequately, feeling emotions can be done in more or less sensitive ways, perceiving can be done more or less veridically, and so on.

What I would like to do in this brief tribute to Jaan Valsiner is ask if the very being of humans is normative too. In other words: Is it only what people say, do, feel, and think that is normative (and studied by psychology), or is it also people themselves? It seems that not only the acts of people, but people themselves can be considered as wholes that develop through normative frameworks. It is with much hesitation that I pose this question of normativity, for it is laden with significant risks. Particularly the risk of sorting people into categories of "normatively good enough" and "not good enough" based on an alleged scientific understanding of what good means in relation to human beings. This is a very dangerous endeavor.

Fortunately, we have the long historical tradition of *Bildung* that begins with the Greeks and culminates with German philosophy with the likes of Herder, Humboldt, and Gadamer. Here the point is not to conclude that some human beings are not good enough, but rather to understand that we all share a common humanity that can and should be realized – but always in and through the cultural processes of which we are a part. I thus wish to open a discussion about the relation between psychology – in the Valsinerian sense – and the tradition of *Bildung*. Unfortunately, there is no suitable translation of *Bildung* into English. Sometimes the term used is simply "education," while others refer to "formation" and even "ethical formation" specifically (see Lovibond, 2002). Lovibond defines it as "a process organized by values and interests emanating from the specifically *human* part of 'nature'" (p. xi). In the remainder of this text, I shall simply stick to the German word *Bildung*, which we call *dannelse* in Danish.

2 The Idea of *Bildung*

There are a multitude of definitions, theories, and traditions regarding the concept of *Bildung*, and I cannot go through the whole history of the concept here, so let me say very briefly that I find Gadamer's general approach helpful, which in turn builds on Herder's from the late eighteenth century. *Bildung* is here defined simply as "rising up to humanity through culture" (Gadamer, 2000, p. 10).

There are three keywords in this definition: rising up, humanity, and culture. The most important word is probably that in the middle: humanity. The notion of *Bildung*, which goes all the way from the Greek idea of *paideia* in antiquity and thus to Gadamer's in the twentieth century, is based on the notion of a universal humanity that is neither merely present in its actuality nor something that unfolds by itself and automatically. Humanity – whatever it is – is something that needs to be *cultivated*. Here we already arrive at the latter central concept: culture. As we also know

from Jaan Valsiner's tireless critiques of culture as a variable (see, e.g., Valsiner, 2007), culture is not a causal force that influences people from the outside, but rather semiotic and material resources that people use in the course of living their lives together. Rising up is the third key concept, and it appears to be almost synonymous with upbringing. To be raised is to be brought *up*. It can also involve being "elevated" from the position as a student or pupil, which, fittingly, is *elev* in Danish (literally someone who should be elevated).

Educational thinking is full of such vertical metaphors, which relate to the bodily experience of being able to see more when one gets up. It may also simply be about growing and gaining ever greater and broader views. Formation or *Bildung* is a process of elevation, where it is not proteins and carbohydrates that build one up, but cultural processes and forms of practice that make you grow.

If *Bildung* is the elevation of humanity through culture, the concept can be said to be opposed to other (more popular) concepts denoting human development, which are more connected to the individual's *self*-development such as competence development, self-optimization, personal development, or self-realization. There are many more in the same ballpark. These concepts refer to the person having a particular individual core, a set of signature strengths (as talked about in positive psychology), particular competencies, learning styles, or intelligences that should be realized to the largest possible extent. In short, self-development is about becoming oneself. You may even have to become "the best *version* of yourself," as it is called with the mystifying language of the time (as if people came out in versions).

In the words of the sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2020), self-development in that sense is a *singularizing* process in which one must be individualized to the widest possible extent and first and foremost be authentic. Reckwitz has analyzed the development of modernity as a story of how the economy, working life, culture, lifestyles, and politics are singularized. This means that less and less emphasis is placed on the general, on humanity in general, and more and more on the particular, the unique, the different, the extraordinary, the authentic. Reckwitz does not specifically discuss *Bildung*, but on the basis of his analysis, it is not strange if this concept has today been delimited by the singular. Reckwitz writes that the general faces a crisis, as it has become odious to refer to a common human nature in the first place. One can no longer talk about – or on behalf of – the general, because one is then accused of forgetting that "everyone is special" and that certain groups and subcultures give rise to specific experiences, which especially has been the starting point of the movements of identity politics. If one only takes the unique individual as a starting point or the identity group affiliation, however, it becomes difficult to talk about *Bildung* in the sense of rising up to humanity. When general humanity is cast in doubt, we get at best singularized conceptions of formation, such as crystallized in individualized concepts of self-formation.

I believe we need to resurrect the idea of humanity in general. Not because we should deny that all people are unique – for they certainly are – and not because we should downplay the importance of people taking part in particular groups, communities, and nations that give them identity and a sense of belonging. I just think there is reason to keep in mind Kluckhohn and Murray's (1953) classic

psychological dictum that "Every man is in certain respects (a) like all other men, (b) like some other men, (c) like no other man" (p. 53). Today, we should talk about "human beings" rather than "men," but the point remains valid: that we are all first and foremost simply human. Biology determines us as *Homo sapiens* and philosophy (at least Aristotle's) as zoon logikon, or rational animals. As such we share a lot with all other humans. Second, it means that we all share a language, a gender, a nationality, and much more with some other people, but not with everyone. And third, it means that we each have special stories, relationships, and commitments because we are exactly who we are as individuals. It's just me who's me. I'm like no one else.

A large part of the current culture of self-development and self-optimization focuses almost exclusively on the third aspect, i.e., where we are like no other (for a critique, see Brinkmann, 2017), whereas the culture of *Bildung* must necessarily also work from where we are like everyone else, if we are ever to rise up to humanity and in that sense realize not simply our inner selves, but our general humanity in a normative sense.

The Greek name for this process was, as already mentioned, *paideia*, which referred to the set of bodily, mental, and social capabilities one must acquire and develop as a human being. When the Greeks saw the Delphic maxim "Know thyself" over the temple of Apollo, it was hardly a call to identify one's particular learning style or realize one's own inner nature. Rather, it meant something like know yourself as an ordinary human being before entering the temple, as a mortal being among other mortals facing the sacred and the superhuman.

That everyone is like everyone else in certain respects is also the background to much ethical thought, since it is the springboard of a recognition that all human beings are created equal, as it is said in the American Declaration of Independence. Of course, this does not mean that all people are equally wise, skilled, or inventive, but simply that all people are equal in dignity and worth. This is the basic idea of humanism, which we have known in germ form since antiquity, and which grew stronger as an idea in the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, but which risks being challenged today if the very idea of a common humanity or a general human nature is questioned.

3 Thinking with Aristotle and Arendt

The most obvious connection for me between this approach to *Bildung* as rising up to humanity and Jaan Valsiner's semiotic cultural psychology is found in a common interest in thinking. Not just thinking as utility or problem-solving, but also thinking as free semiotic play. In other words, non-instrumental thinking. This is absolutely central to the process of *Bildung* for Aristotle and in particular for Hannah Arendt (1978) who developed his line of thought on this point. I will therefore ask: What role may thinking play in the rising up of humanity through culture? How does thinking relate to *Bildung*? To answer these questions, I will highlight the

intellectual connection between Aristotle in antiquity and Hannah Arendt in the twentieth century.

The former famously unfolded a teleological worldview that may be outdated in terms of the nature of the physical world, but which nonetheless seems inevitable when it comes to human life that is teleological and normative. We know today that stones fall to the ground and fire rises towards the sky due to causal forces of nature, whereas Aristotle believed that the stone wanted to be near the ground and the fire near the sun because they each belong here. Aristotle's teleological worldview, which read meaning and intention into the movements of everything, suffered a blow with modern mechanical science (Galileo, Newton, etc.), which disenchanted the world from the Renaissance onwards. Human deeds and experiences were also subsequently disenchanted, and the modern understanding of the mind – for example, from the emerging psychology of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – was based on causal explanations of human behavior. With notable exceptions, psychology modeled itself on the model of mechanical physics, most clearly in behaviorism, but also in parts of later neuro- and cognitive science. This is very problematic if psychology is about normativity, for humans cannot be understood causally in the same way as fire and stones, as people have intentions, perform actions for various reasons, and possess a human nature that can be brought to unfold. For this reason we can still read Aristotle's psychology and ethics with great benefit, whereas his natural science writings are more dated.

In his study of Aristotle's psychology, Daniel Robinson says that "Aristotle's 'human science' is a characterology, a theory of 'personality' as today's psychologists would call it" (Robinson, 1989, p. 94). Aristotle's developed psychology is not found in his *On the Soul*, but in his practical works, notably the *Ethics*, where he is concerned with the human being as an intentional creature whose operations demands teleological explanation. It is here that the very idea of psychology as a normative science originates, for Aristotle demonstrated that although psychological phenomena like emotions may have physiological (and thus causal) components, this is not what defines them as such. Rather, it is the ways that these phenomena are subject to praise and blame within human moral orders, given that they can be performed more or less well in a normative sense. As Harré (1983, p. 136) once noted, the reason why dread and anger are psychological phenomena (i.e., emotions) but not indigestion or exhaustion – although all have behavioral manifestations as well as fairly distinctive experiential qualities – is that only the former fall, for us, within a moral order. Harré says "for us," since he believes that classifications of what does or does not belong in the moral order are culturally relative, which means that what counts as a psychological phenomenon is culturally relative.

I think we need to be careful at this point and not draw this conclusion so quickly, for there might be features of human nature that transcend cultural differences, and this is where a common foundation of morality may reside. Or, as Robinson explains Aristotle's human science: "Aristotle put forth a species of social constructionism, but one limited by realistic ethological considerations and the unique problems created by a self-conscious creature able to give and expect reasons for actions"

(Robinson, 1992, p. 97). That "man is taught by the polis" (*polis andra didaska*) is a premise in Aristotelian "social constructionism," but there might be universal moral values that must be in place for the polis to teach humans anything and to which humans should be "raised." It might be not only that psychological phenomena are normative but also that not all normativity is conventional. Understanding this common humanity should be central to the process of *Bildung*.

In summary, according to Aristotle human beings have an inherent purpose, which must be developed through *Bildung*. Becoming human, according to this Greek thought, means that one realizes a potential one has within oneself. Not the potential to become "the best version of oneself" as a unique individual, but the potential to become a human being through rising up to humanity. Aristotle's ethics is all about understanding humanity and the good human life in a normative sense, and it is unfolded in a tension between the active life, where it is noble actions and political participation that are in focus as activities that have inherent value, and the contemplative life, where it is knowledge of and reflection on existential, ethical, and cosmological issues that are highlighted as goals in themselves (Aristotle, 1976). Humans can find deep joy in looking at stars and considering our pettiness in the vast universe, for example, and Aristotle sees this as an activity that contributes to a flourishing life, precisely because it is *not* useful in an instrumental way. In Aristotle's eyes, human beings are the only known creatures who can think for no other purpose than to think, and the cultivation of that ability is therefore a crucial component of *Bildung*.

It was this thread that Hannah Arendt picked up in her last – and unfinished – masterpiece *The Life of the Mind*. Arendt died in 1975, while she was writing it, and the book was published a few years later. In it, she would analyze the three basic functions of mental life, as she saw it: thinking, willing, and judging. However, she only made it through the first two functions, but this is also enough for a deep understanding of especially the life of thinking. One of the most important distinctions in the book is between thinking and knowing (Arendt, 1978, p. 14). The former has *meaning* as its goal, Arendt writes, while the latter has *cognition* as its goal. It is a somewhat specialized use of the concepts that is invoked here, but Arendt connects it to Kant's distinction between reason and intellect. We obtain cognition, according to Kant, when sensory impressions are connected with concepts, and this is necessary in order for us to survive in the world. But thinking has meaning as its goal and is thus an activity performed for its own sake. For meaning has no goal beyond meaning.

Here Arendt is in line with Kant as well as with the Greeks. In many contexts we – like other animals – are preoccupied with useful activities that provide us with food, reproduction, and ensuring survival, but through theoretical thinking we manage to rise above these instrumental matters, which is deeply meaningful. Arendt notes the etymological connection between the word theory, which is derived from *theos*, i.e., the divine, from which also the word *theatron* (theater) comes. As gods in a theater, one can view the world when one is able to think and philosophize, and this is true happiness. Achieving this requires an exemplary way of life, which is at least momentarily freed from labor, production, and consumption. It was called

schole agein in Greek, and it is of course from this that we have the concept of school, which basically means free time.

This is where *Bildung* can take place: When ordinary instrumental agendas and opportunistic motives are abolished, one can freely and vividly engage in "non-cognitive thinking" (which is not a contradiction in terms for Arendt). This kind of thinking consists of the elements "admiration, confirmation and affirmation" (1978, p. 151) and thus promotes the formation of meaning itself. According to Arendt, all this is connected with the human capacity for speech. Thinking cannot exist without speech, as the activities of the mind become manifest through words. *Bildung* can only happen when, in the true sense of the word, we converse with each other and are not preoccupied with persuading them for the sake of winning. Speech allows us to disconnect our animal bonds to the useful and opportune and to exchange thoughts and ideas with no other goal than to create meaning.

However, speech can also be internal. It does not begin as such at first in our lives, as developmental psychology has demonstrated, for we necessarily acquire a language precisely in conversation with others. But once we have become speakers, we can also talk to ourselves. Arendt celebrates this as something wonderful when the inner dialogue leads people to new meaningful insights or simply revolves around treasured memories. She pays tribute to Socrates, who discovered that one can have a conversational relationship with oneself as well as with others, as he was famous for suddenly being able to fall into spells and seemingly be preoccupied with his own inner life for a long time. It was his famous *daimon* that showed up, which in Greek means fate, conscience, and the inner voice, after which he could turn back to the outer, active life in the company of others. Such Socratic thoughtfulness can be seen as Western philosophy's version of the meditation practice of the East. Meditation has in modern times become mindfulness, a technique that can be learned in courses in personal development. But whereas mindfulness consists of being attentively present and simply registering the impressions one gets, Socratic thoughtfulness is a more active process where one enters in an engaged way with one's mind. In a sense, mindfulness is about thinking and pondering less, while thoughtfulness is about thinking and pondering more.

4 In Conclusion

Thinking is an activity; it is a way of life. It is something that people have practiced and described since the ancient Greeks and which must be handed down across generations and taken up again in a process of *Bildung*. And Arendt believed that that tradition was unfortunately disappearing, just as our general awareness of the significance of the past is:

> What has been lost is the continuity of the past as it seemed to be banded down from generation to generation, developing in the process its own consistency. The dismantling process has its own technique […]. What you then are left with is still the past, but a fragmented past, which has lost its certainty of evaluation. (Arendt, 1978, p. 212)

Jaan Valsiner's whole intellectual life and work is proof that Arendt was too pessimistic. Thinking is still possible. Even today it is possible to build upon a past of earlier scholars, as Jaan Valsiner does (e.g., Valsiner, 2012), and develop one's own voice and thinking that enables colleagues and students to see the larger pictures of history. Thus, *Bildung* is still possible, at least in certain academic oases where Jaan Valsiner has created spaces for non-instrumental thinking and meaning making in the service of the human mind. In addition to his great works, this is in my view the most important lesson we should all learn from Jaan Valsiner.

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