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Bildung as the Condition of Possibility for the Ideal Life in Modern Philosophical Anthropology

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Abstract: This article examines the possibility of rethinking the ideal life in modernity through the concept of Bildung. It begins with the crisis produced by the collapse of premodern metaphysical horizons and the rise of the autonomous subject. In this context, a unified and binding conception of the good life becomes increasingly difficult to sustain, creating a persistent tension among individual freedom, historical plurality, and the need for normativity.The article argues that three dominant responses to this crisis—perfectionism, self-actualization, and relativism—each face a fundamental limitation. Perfectionism imposes a rigid model of humanity; self-actualization reduces human formation to an inward process; and relativism weakens the possibility of a shared horizon of judgment and meaning.Against these views, the article presents Bildung as a condition for rethinking the ideal life in the modern world. Reconstructing Bildung conceptually shows that it is shaped by tensions between force and form, individuality and the shared world, and historical openness and normativity. From this perspective, the ideal life is not a fixed or final model, but a regulative horizon that guides human formation.Ultimately, the article shows that Bildung enables normative judgment without dogmatism and preserves plurality without abandoning standards. Thus, Bildung is reconstructed not merely as an educational concept, but as a philosophical framework for rethinking the relation between modern humanity and the ideal life.

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Introduction:

By breaking with pre-given metaphysical horizons and establishing the autonomy of the subject, modernity has progressively undermined the possibility of a unified and binding conception of the ideal life. What, within premodern traditions, could be understood as a relatively coherent vision of human perfection grounded in the order of the cosmos or in transcendent ends dissolves in the modern world into a plurality of value horizons and competing frameworks of meaning. The consequence of this transformation is the emergence of a structural gap between individual freedom and the possibility of providing a universal standard by which that freedom may be evaluated.

In the classical diagnosis, this condition is understood in terms of the plurality of value spheres. Although the differentiation and autonomy of such spheres as science, morality, law, art, and the economy promote functional rationalization, they simultaneously erode the unified horizon capable of providing an overarching direction for life as a whole. The result is an internal fragmentation of modern rationality, in which each sphere operates according to its own standards, while no unifying principle remains available to integrate them into a meaningful whole (Weber, 2004: 13–15).

This condition is further intensified by the expansion of instrumental rationality. Because instrumental rationality takes efficiency, calculability, and control as its governing standards, it is incapable of answering the question of the meaning of life. Consequently, the ideal life is either reduced to the sphere of private preferences or formulated in terms of comprehensive and homogenizing projects. Both trajectories throw the relationship between freedom and meaning into crisis (Taylor, 1989: 149, 509–510).

Against this background, the modern problem may be formulated as a fundamental tension. On the one hand lies the necessity of preserving autonomy and the plurality of forms of life; on the other lies

the need for a standard capable of evaluating and orienting plural forms of life. Contemporary theoretical efforts have sought to bridge this divide without appealing to a closed metaphysics by reconstructing the conditions of normative judgment.

The crisis surrounding the possibility of the ideal life in modernity, therefore, does not stem merely from the absence of an answer; it arises from the instability of the normative horizon itself. The issue is no longer that of determining a final image of the good life, but of elucidating the conditions under which such a life can become an object of judgment. Within this horizon, the idea of the ideal life, rather than being presented as a fixed model, remains an open question that is continually redefined through the interplay of freedom, history, and normativity.

In this article, the ideal life does not denote a complete and final model of living. Rather, it refers to a normative horizon that makes it possible to distinguish among different forms of life and to assess the quality of human formation.

In response to the crisis surrounding the possibility of formulating the ideal life in modernity, three dominant theoretical responses can be distinguished. Each seeks, in its own way, to address the resulting normative vacuum, yet each ultimately encounters a fundamental structural limitation.

First, perfectionism defines the ideal life by appealing to the idea of the objective good, according to which the good life consists in the flourishing of human nature or the realization of its intrinsic capacities. Within this framework, the good life is one that appropriately develops and actualizes the fundamental capacities of the human being (Dorsey, 2010: 59). Yet because this approach depends on a relatively fixed conception of "human nature," it is vulnerable to the objection that it overlooks the historical and individual plurality of forms of life and tends toward the stabilization of a rigid normative model.

By contrast, self-actualization, especially in the psychological tradition, locates the ideal life in the complete realization of individual talents and the inward development of personal capacities. On this view, every human being possesses an inherent tendency to actualize his or her potential capacities, and the good life consists in the realization of these possibilities (Rogers, 1961, p. 35). Nevertheless, despite its emphasis on dynamism and individuality, this approach lacks a general formal standard by which such realization can be evaluated and therefore cannot establish a normative distinction among different forms of life.

Third, relativism, which emerges as a reaction against any claim to universal normativity, fundamentally calls into question the very possibility of defining an ideal life. Within this approach, the plurality of values is understood in such a way that any shared standard is rendered illegitimate, while the good life is reduced to the sphere of individual or cultural preferences. The consequence of this position is the dissolution of the very idea of the ideal life, since no basis remains for judgment among different forms of life (Williams, 1985: 173–176; Taylor, 1989: 3–5).

Consequently, the three responses discussed above demonstrate that the problem of the ideal life in modernity cannot be resolved simply by choosing among a fixed model, an inward self, or plurality without standards. What is required instead is a concept capable of accounting simultaneously for individual dynamism, historicity, and the possibility of normative judgment. It is precisely in this role that Bildung is reconstructed in the present article.

The originality of this article does not lie in offering another historical examination of the concept of Bildung. Rather, it seeks to reconstruct Bildung as the condition of possibility for thinking the ideal life in the modern world, thereby elevating it from an educational or cultural concept to an anthropological and normative structure.

1 .Bildung: A Conceptual Structural Analysis

To defend the thesis advanced above, Bildung is reconstructed at the conceptual level. The aim of this reconstruction is not to provide a historical account of the various uses of the concept but rather to articulate its underlying structural elements. The central task is to formulate the conceptual structure that makes it possible to reconcile individual dynamism with normativity.

Accordingly, the analysis proceeds on three levels. First, it clarifies the relationship between force and form as the fundamental structure of Bildung. Second, it examines the meaning of non-static normativity through a secular formulation of the idea of the exemplar. Finally, it analyzes the dimension of historical-cultural mediation.

Taken together, these three levels of analysis provide the conceptual framework in light of which the function of Bildung as the condition of possibility for the ideal life can be explained.

1.1 .The Dual Structure of Bildung: Force and Form

Bildung is intelligible only in terms of the intrinsic relation between force and form. These are not external or supplementary elements but two simultaneous conditions of the possibility of human formation. The removal of either undermines the very logic of the concept.

At its most basic level, Bildung refers to the inner dynamism of human life. Human beings possess capacities that are given only in potential and unfold gradually through a historical process. Human formation, therefore, cannot be understood as a static or completed state. The natural capacities of the human being attain their fullest development only at the level of the human species and within the course of history (Kant, 1963: 3). In this sense, Bildung is intrinsically oriented toward a historical process of becoming.

Yet dynamism alone lacks direction. Growth without a principle of orientation culminates in dispersion and plurality without standards. It is for this reason that the moment of form becomes indispensable. Form, in this context, is not an

externally imposed mold but an internal principle that organizes the plurality of forces into a meaningful whole, thereby making coherence possible.

This tension is likewise reflected in the structure of human experience. On the one hand, the human being exists within the flux of change, temporality, and multiplicity; on the other, there is a corresponding orientation toward unity, stability, and lawfulness. These two orientations are articulated by the sense drive (Stofftrieb) and the form drive (Formtrieb) (Schiller, 1967: 73–83). The sense drive embodies life and dynamism, whereas the form drive seeks to establish stability and universality within multiplicity. Human fulfillment lies not in the elimination of either drive but in preserving the dynamic relation between them.

Within Bildung, this same structure appears as the harmonious development of the human capacities. The human end may be understood as "the highest and most harmonious cultivation of his powers into a complete and consistent whole" (Humboldt, 1993: 10). Here, the notion of powers expresses the dimension of force, while the complete and consistent whole expresses the dimension of form. Freedom is the indispensable condition of this cultivation, yet it culminates in genuine human formation only when it is organized into a harmonious totality (Humboldt, 1993: 10).

The structure of Bildung should therefore be understood as a fundamental tension:

Force → the principle of dynamism, becoming, and expansion
Form → the principle of coherence, proportion, and the possibility of normative judgment
This tension should not be regarded as a defect or a failure. On the contrary, it constitutes the very condition of possibility of Bildung itself:

The predominance of force without form → plurality without standards
The predominance of form without force → dogmatism and rigidity
Accordingly, Bildung cannot be conceived as a static equilibrium. Rather, it designates an ongoing process

in which the dynamism of human forces becomes genuine human formation only through its formation into a proportionate totality. It is crucial to emphasize that this totality is neither pre-given nor final; rather, it is continually constituted through the tension between force and form.

1.2 .Non-Static Normativity: The Idea of the Exemplar in Its Secular Sense

Building upon the structure of force and form developed in the preceding section, the normativity of Bildung must be understood as fundamentally non-static. The standard at issue here is not a fully realized model but a formal, orienting idea that makes it possible to assess the relation between the development of human forces and their coherence. Accordingly, Bildung can possess a normative standard without reducing that standard to a final or imitable model.

For this reason, the tension between multiplicity and coherence requires a regulative principle that makes the emergence of unity possible without suppressing the dynamism of experience. This structure appears, at the level of analysis, in the play drive (Spieltrieb), through which freedom and necessity are brought into a mediated relation with one another (Schiller, 1967: 107–121). Here, form no longer signifies a final and fully realized model; rather, its function consists in organizing multiplicity.

Accordingly, the idea of the exemplar cannot be understood as a predetermined content. At the level of experience, it never reaches complete realization, and it is precisely for this reason that it preserves the possibility of normative judgment. The standard is present, yet it is never reduced to a fixed state. Evaluation proceeds through assessing the relation between the development of human powers and their coherence, without presupposing any determinate model to be imitated.

The idea of the exemplar thus performs a regulative function within Bildung. It determines the direction of development, renders the relation between the development of human powers

and their coherence assessable, and preserves the possibility of normative judgment. Yet it never becomes a fully realized, final, or imitable model. For this reason, the normativity of Bildung remains historically open and non-static.

1.3 .Historical-Cultural Mediation

The realization of Bildung cannot be understood in isolation from one's relation to others. At every stage of life, human beings actualize only a portion of the possibilities inherent in human personality. Human formation, therefore, always takes place in relation to others. Participation in the "collective resources" of human capacities is possible only through a process of "reciprocal cooperation" (Humboldt, 1993: 11). Human formation, accordingly, is not simply a matter of actualizing inner capacities; rather, it takes shape through encounters with difference and through participation in a shared world.

Through encounters with what they do not already possess, individuals expand the horizon of their own capacities. In this sense, the other is not merely external to the individual but constitutive of the very process through which individuality is formed. Human formation thus depends upon a relation in which the intimacy of human association enables individuals to participate in the capacities and ways of being of others, while individual independence makes it possible to transform what has been received into a distinctive way of being (Humboldt, 1993: 11). Human formation therefore depends simultaneously upon openness to what lies beyond the self and the preservation of inner coherence. The tension previously articulated in terms of the relation between force and form is reproduced here as the relation between receptivity to the other and the constitution of individuality.

This tension does not remain confined to interpersonal relations; it is also present within the very structure of experience itself. Human experience is, from the outset, structured by two distinct orientations: one draws individuals toward the multiplicity of sensible experience, while the other directs experience toward coherence and form. Schiller

articulates these orientations in terms of the sense drive (Stofftrieb) and the form drive (Formtrieb). The issue here is not merely the existence of two distinct drives but the possibility of sustaining the relation between them.

For this reason, the manner in which multiplicity is preserved within the structure of experience becomes philosophically decisive. Such preservation does not amount to fixing a predetermined model. Rather, what matters is maintaining a relation in which multiplicity and coherence can coexist. Only under this condition does human experience avoid dissolving into complete fragmentation, becoming frozen in a fixed model, or losing its continuity as a livable horizon.

It is precisely at this level that historical-cultural mediation operates. Within the context of human relations, individuals encounter diverse possibilities and preserve them within the structure of experience in such a way that they can endure within a shared horizon. Consequently, the significance of Bildung lies not merely in the expansion of capacities or the diversification of experience. Its central concern is the possibility of preserving plurality within a durable coherence, and it is precisely from this point that its importance for understanding human life arises.

Historical-cultural mediation thus demonstrates that Bildung is not simply the inward cultivation of innate capacities but the process through which individuals undergo human formation in relation to a shared world. This conclusion prepares the ground for the critique of the three competing approaches, since each must explain how individuality, historicity, and normative judgment can be held together within a coherent conceptual framework.

2 .Competing Responses to the Problem of the Ideal Life in Light of Bildung

The preceding conceptual reconstruction of Bildung now provides the basis for evaluating the three principal responses to the problem of the ideal life: perfectionism, self-actualization, and relativism. In each case, the guiding criterion

is whether the approach can simultaneously preserve individual dynamism, historicity, and the possibility of normative judgment.

2.1 .Perfectionism

Within the tradition of perfectionism, the ideal life is understood in relation to the realization of capacities regarded as essential features of human nature. On this view, the value of a human life depends upon the extent to which the capacities that make human beings what they are are actualized. In his contemporary formulation of this tradition, Hurka defines perfectionism as the view that locates the human good in "the development and exercise of those properties that are essential to human nature" (Hurka, 1993: 3). Accordingly, the good life is realized when individuals actualize their fundamental capacities and organize them into a coherent form of life.

Within this framework, the idea of human nature plays a decisive role. Hurka emphasizes that perfectionism is concerned with those characteristics that are fundamental to human beings as living and rational creatures, including theoretical rationality, practical rationality, and capacities associated with human life (Hurka, 1993: 37–39). Consequently, the ideal life is not reduced to subjective satisfaction or the fulfillment of individual desires; rather, it depends upon the manner in which these fundamental capacities are realized.

The classical roots of this conception can be found in Aristotelian ethics. At the beginning of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle argues that every action and every choice aims at some good and that there must therefore be an ultimate end in relation to which all other ends are understood (Aristotle, 2000: 3–5). This teleological structure culminates in the idea of the human good, in relation to which human life is evaluated and from which it derives its meaning (Aristotle, 2000: 5–8). Within this framework, the good life is understood in connection with the realization of the human function, and the idea of human perfection accordingly serves as a criterion for evaluating different forms of life.

On this basis, perfectionism exhibits a structural tendency to establish a hierarchy among forms of life. If certain activities are taken to express human nature more fully than others, then some forms of life necessarily acquire a privileged normative status. Likewise, in his modern reconstruction of this tradition, Hurka defends a "complex," "integrated," and "comprehensive" life as a superior form of human fulfillment (Hurka, 1993: 84–91, 114–123). Consequently, the idea of the ideal life remains tied to a prior normative standard by which the value of different forms of life is determined.

Even in its later and more flexible versions, perfectionism never entirely abandons this orientation. In his interpretation of Emersonian perfectionism, Cavell emphasizes the idea of the further self and the individual's continual movement toward it (Cavell, 1990: 1–3). Here, too, human life is evaluated in relation to a horizon that has not yet been attained. The principal difference is that this horizon is no longer understood as a fully fixed end but instead appears as a process of transformation and transcendence of one's present condition. Nevertheless, it continues to preserve a privileged direction in relation to which human life acquires its meaning.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of Bildung, the fundamental problem with perfectionism lies precisely at this point. Even in its most flexible forms, perfectionism remains committed to specifying the human end in some determinate way. As a result, the historical plurality of human experience is ultimately assessed in relation to a model that is already accorded normative privilege. Consequently, the tension between the plurality of experience and inner coherence, which proved constitutive in the analysis of Bildung, is ultimately resolved in favor of a privileged form of life.

From the perspective of Bildung, the principal limitation of perfectionism therefore lies in its commitment to a prior determination of the human end.

Even its more flexible variants must ultimately regard certain forms of life as superior to others. As a result, the historical plurality of human experience continues to be evaluated against a model whose normative authority has already been established.

The critique advanced by Bildung is directed not against normativity itself but against its fixation in the form of a final and definitive conception of the good life. The ideal life must preserve the possibility of orientation and normative judgment; yet such orientation must not harden into a fixed, transhistorical model.

2.2 .Self-Actualization

Within the tradition of self-actualization, the ideal life is understood as the growth and actualization of the individual's inner capacities. This approach departs from perfectionism insofar as it does not explain the good life in terms of conformity to a fixed model of human perfection. Its primary emphasis is on the process of becoming, authenticity, openness to experience, and the flourishing of the possibilities already present within the individual.

Maslow explains this orientation through the distinction between deficiency motivation and growth motivation. At the level of deficiency, psychological life is organized around overcoming deprivation and reducing tension. At the level of growth, the central concern becomes the emergence of human capacities, creative capacities, and distinctively human possibilities (Maslow, 1999: 33–35). In Maslow's view, growth occurs when the next step is experienced as more meaningful and more fulfilling than the previous one (Maslow, 1999: 53–54). Self-actualization, therefore, is not merely the satisfaction of needs; it is a movement from defense and compensation toward growth, creativity, and the actualization of human capacities.

Rogers formulates the same idea in terms of becoming. In his account, the good life is not a final state but a process through which individuals become increasingly open to experience and gradually approach the self they experience as more authentic within their lived experience

(Rogers, 1970: 181–182). The fully functioning person, on this view, is one who experiences the self as engaged in a continuous process of being and becoming, remains open to experience, and preserves the capacity for change and growth (Rogers, 1970: 183–192).

This conception is also closely connected with the modern conception of identity. Taylor argues that, in modernity, moral sources are progressively internalized within the subject, while the distinction between the inner and the outer assumes a central place in self-understanding (Taylor, 1989: 143–144). With the rise of the expressivist turn, the individual's inner nature becomes the source of meaning and orientation, and human life comes to be understood in terms of self-discovery and self-expression (Taylor, 1989: 389–390). Self-actualization, therefore, is not merely a psychological theory; it represents the psychological expression of one of the fundamental modes of modern self-understanding.

Fromm likewise rejects an adaptation-oriented psychology and instead explains human formation in terms of productiveness, self-actualization, and the actualization of human capacities. He argues that psychology and ethics cannot be separated because any account of human personality is inseparable from questions concerning the values and ends of human life (Fromm, 2013: 6–9). For Fromm, productiveness is the human capacity to employ one's powers and to realize the possibilities inherent in one's own nature (Fromm, 2013: 89–90).

Nevertheless, from the perspective of Bildung, the self-actualization approach encounters a fundamental limitation. Although theories of self-actualization depart from rigid models of perfection, they locate the source of growth and orientation too exclusively within the individual. As a consequence, human formation is reduced to the unfolding of an inner core presumed to be already present. The world, history, language, culture, and

intersubjective relations are thereby treated primarily as conditions for the realization of the self, whereas, within the conception of Bildung, they play a constitutive role in human formation.

From the perspective of Bildung, the principal limitation of self-actualization does not lie in its emphasis on individuality, authenticity, or inner growth. Rather, it lies in locating the source of human formation too exclusively within the individual. On this view, the world, language, culture, and intersubjective relations are understood primarily as conditions for the manifestation of the self, whereas within Bildung they play a constitutive role in human formation.

Accordingly, the ideal life cannot be understood simply as the flourishing of an inner self. The human self is formed through its encounter with the shared world, with the other, with history, and with language. Human formation, therefore, is not a simple return inward but a movement through the shared world and a transformed return to oneself.

2.3 .Relativism

Within the horizon of late modernity, relativism is less an epistemological position than a response to the crisis of the shared foundations of meaning and normative judgment. Whereas perfectionism tends toward dogmatism by fixing a single model of the good life, and self-actualization risks reducing human formation to a predominantly psychological process through its emphasis on individual inwardness, relativism emerges from the opposite direction: the denial of the possibility of any shared horizon for evaluation and judgment. On this view, the plurality of horizons, languages, and forms of life gradually culminates in the rejection of any common or intersubjective standard.

Within this horizon, incredulity toward metanarratives is not merely a critique of the grand narratives of modernity; it also signals the collapse of the possibility of bringing diverse horizons together within a shared horizon (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). Knowledge is reduced to a plurality of language games, each governed by its own rules

of legitimation, such that no unified horizon remains within which they can be articulated (Lyotard, 1984: 10–15). Consequently, the plurality of languages and narratives comes to signify the absence of any common foundation rather than merely the diversity of human experience.

The same logic leads, at another level, to a conception of language and truth in which any final vocabulary or transhistorical foundation is abandoned. Human beings always think within historically situated vocabularies, without any external standpoint from which a final judgment among them could be rendered (Rorty, 1989: 3–22). On this view, truth is reduced less to the disclosure of a shared reality than to solidarity within a particular linguistic tradition.

The philosophical appeal of relativism lies precisely in its break with dogmatism. It rightly demonstrates that no subject stands outside history, language, or tradition and that every act of understanding takes shape within a historical horizon. By challenging absolutist claims, it likewise underscores the plurality of human experience and the limitations of every particular horizon. From this perspective, relativism should not be dismissed merely as a theoretical error; rather, it should be understood as a significant response to the internal crises of modernity.

From the perspective of Bildung, however, the problem begins when the plurality of horizons culminates in their complete fragmentation. If every horizon of meaning is regarded as entirely self-contained and incommensurable, the possibility of shared human formation, dialogue, and mutual transformation likewise disappears. Human formation is then no longer possible in relation to a shared world; instead, individuals become confined within isolated and closed horizons from which no genuine transition is possible. The ultimate consequence of such a condition is the collapse of the very possibility of historical-cultural mediation.

Nevertheless, the historicity of understanding does not necessarily lead to relativism. Understanding always takes place within tradition and history, yet this very historicity is also the condition of possibility for openness to the other. Prejudices constitute the conditions of possibility of understanding rather than obstacles to it (Gadamer, 2004: 277–279). Likewise, understanding takes shape through the fusion of horizons, in which the horizon of the interpreter and that of the text or the other are mutually transformed without being reduced to entirely closed and self-sufficient horizons (Gadamer, 2004: 305–307).

Accordingly, the plurality of horizons does not entail their absolute incommensurability. Human beings are formed within language, tradition, and history, yet these very conditions make dialogue and mutual transformation through encounters with the other possible. Historical understanding, therefore, is the historical mode in which truth discloses itself; it does not necessarily culminate in the denial of truth.

The same structure can also be observed in the relation between human beings and horizons of significance. No subject can generate meaning and value entirely from a position outside such horizons (Taylor, 1989: 27–32). Consequently, the rejection of all shared horizons ultimately undermines the very possibility of meaning itself. Human identity is always constituted in relation to goods and horizons of significance that individuals do not simply invent but rather come to inhabit.

The same structure is also evident within the tradition of Bildung. Human formation becomes possible only through freedom and the diversity of situations (Humboldt, 1993: 13–14). From this perspective, human beings are not formed in self-sufficient isolation but only through engagement with the plurality of the human world. Plurality is a condition of Bildung, yet it is not understood as a collection of entirely separate and incommensurable islands. Rather, it exists within

the horizon of a dynamic unity and openness to the world.

The collapse of the shared horizons of moral rationality likewise gives rise to a condition in which moral disagreements increasingly appear irresolvable because the parties no longer participate in a common horizon of concepts and ends (MacIntyre, 2007: 6–8). Here again, the issue is not a return to dogmatism but the possibility of preserving rationality within historical traditions.

Accordingly, from the perspective of Bildung, the principal limitation of relativism does not lie in its defense of plurality. Rather, the problem arises when plurality is transformed into the complete separation of horizons. Bildung shows that human beings are formed only through encounters with difference, yet such encounters are possible only insofar as a shared horizon for dialogue, transformation, and normative judgment remains. Bildung thus opens a path between dogmatism and relativism by preserving the possibility of normative judgment without fixing a rigid and final model of the ideal life.

3 .Bildung as the Condition of Possibility for the Ideal Life

The critique of the three competing responses has shown that the problem of the ideal life in modernity cannot be resolved by eliminating any one of its constitutive poles. Perfectionism preserves normative judgment at the cost of fixing a determinate model; self-actualization foregrounds individual dynamism at the cost of weakening the shared world; and relativism preserves plurality at the cost of undermining the normative standard.

What emerges from this critique is more than the inadequacy of these three approaches. Rather, it demonstrates that any defensible conception of the ideal life in the modern world must simultaneously satisfy three conditions: the preservation of individuality and freedom, the preservation of a relation to the shared world, and the preservation of the possibility of normative judgment. The exclusion of any one of these dimensions leads to

one of the impasses identified above. The issue, therefore, is not the search for a determinate conception of the good life. Rather, the solution lies in formulating a structure capable of holding these three conditions together in a stable relation.

It is precisely at this point that Bildung assumes its philosophical significance. Bildung is not a particular conception of the ideal life; rather, it is the articulation of this very fundamental relation. It seeks to preserve the relation between force and form, individuality and the shared world, and freedom and normativity.

3.1 .Bildung as a Mediating Structure

Bildung functions as a mediating structure insofar as it explains human formation through the relation between two poles: on the one hand, individual forces; on the other, the historical, linguistic, and cultural forms that make the actualization of those forces possible. Bildung is therefore neither the spontaneous unfolding of human capacities nor conformity to a pre-established model. Rather, it is the process through which human forces take form within the shared world.

Within this horizon, the human end consists in "the highest and most harmonious formation of one's powers into a whole" (Humboldt, 1993: 10). The significance of this formulation lies in the fact that neither force nor form, taken by itself, is decisive. What is decisive is the relation between them. Human forces can be actualized only insofar as they undergo a process of formation, while form remains alive only insofar as it is sustained by the movement of those forces. This is precisely why freedom and the diversity of situations are indispensable: only through engagement with the shared world can human beings cultivate their forces in a harmonious manner (Humboldt, 1993: 13–14). The central concern of Bildung, therefore, is not the accumulation of knowledge or skills but the formation of personality as an integrated totality. Unity is preserved only through the ongoing process of human formation and engagement with

the world (Bruford, 1975: 20–24).

Within such a structure, the idea of humanity likewise has no fixed or final form, nor is it reduced to a model to which individuals are expected to conform. Rather, it functions as a guiding principle that orders the plurality of human forces in relation to a living whole (Spranger, 1936: 5–6). Accordingly, the ideal in Bildung has a regulative character: it provides direction, confers organization, and makes normative judgment possible, yet it is never fixed in a closed or final form. It is precisely in this respect that Bildung maintains its fundamental distance from rigid perfectionist models.

The same structure can be discerned at a deeper level in the concept of mediation. The subject attains self-consciousness only through its encounter with the other, alienation from itself, and its return to itself. Human consciousness is not formed in inward isolation but develops through its movement between self and world (Hegel, 2018: 44–46). From this perspective, human formation is always a mediated process. Individuals can achieve unity with themselves only by moving beyond immediacy and establishing a new relation to themselves through the objective forms of culture, language, and history.

It is precisely here that Bildung becomes inseparable from openness to the other and from the capacity to transcend the limits of a merely personal standpoint. Human formation is possible only insofar as individuals are able to move beyond confinement within the narrow horizon of private experience and acquire the capacity to stand in relation to the universal (Gadamer, 2004: 11–15). Accordingly, form in Bildung is not merely an external framework imposed upon human forces. Rather, form is the very mediation that enables human beings to move beyond the fragmentation of desires and particular experiences and to find their place within the shared world.

This mediation is further developed at the level of the

philosophy of culture. Human beings can experience and understand the world only through symbolic forms. Language, myth, art, and culture are not external instruments but structures that make the human world possible (Cassirer, 1953: 73–82). From this perspective, form is not an obstacle to freedom but a condition of possibility of freedom. Human forces can become a meaningful world only insofar as they are given determinate form through cultural and symbolic forms. For this reason, Bildung cannot be understood merely as the spontaneous development of human capacities. Human formation always takes place within a network of historical and cultural forms that are at once enabling and orienting.

Accordingly, the significance of Bildung lies in preserving the fundamental relation through which human formation becomes possible in conjunction with both the dynamism of life and its process of taking form. Within this horizon, the ideal retains its regulative role: it provides direction and makes normative judgment possible without ever becoming fixed in the form of a final and closed model.

3.2 .The Ideal Life as a Regulative Horizon

Within the horizon of Bildung, the ideal life cannot be understood as a predetermined blueprint to which human beings are expected to conform. The idea of the ideal life possesses no static, final, or closed form. Rather, it functions as a horizon that orients human formation and makes normative judgment, differentiation, and evaluation possible without ever becoming fixed as a complete and fully realizable program. The significance of this conception lies in its ability to preserve normativity while avoiding the rigidity of perfectionist models.

Within such a horizon, human formation is not a movement toward a final destination but an ongoing process of continually reconstituting one's relation to the shared world, history, and culture (Humboldt, 1993: 10–11). Accordingly, the central issue is no longer the attainment of final perfection but the continuous formation of personality—a process that never reaches a definitive

endpoint (Bruford, 1975: 24–27).

The same structure can be observed in the distinction between regulative ideas and ideas that determine realizable objects (Kant, 2000: 217–220). Within this framework, the ideal functions as a regulative idea: it guides reason, makes orientation possible, and preserves the horizon of normative judgment, yet it is never given as a final and complete object. The significance of this conception for Bildung lies in freeing the ideal life from the status of a fixed and predetermined blueprint and reconstructing it instead as a regulative horizon that organizes the movement of human formation.

Within this horizon, human formation is possible only insofar as individuals are able to move beyond the limits of their own personal horizon and stand in relation to the universal (Gadamer, 2004: 13–15). Accordingly, Bildung does not consist in attaining a final state of perfection. Rather, it concerns preserving the capacity for openness, understanding, and transformation. A person shaped through Bildung retains the capacity continually to rethink his or her relation to the shared world.

Within the same horizon, human actuality becomes possible only through an ongoing process of movement, crisis, and reconstruction (Hegel, 2018: 31–34). The ideal life, therefore, is understood not as a final destination but as the direction of human formation.

Human beings can confer meaning upon their lives and distinguish among different forms of life only in relation to horizons of significance (Taylor, 1989: 27–32). Yet these horizons are neither closed nor final. They are transformed within history and culture and remain continually open to reinterpretation. The importance of this analysis for Bildung lies in demonstrating that normativity is possible without rigidity. The ideal life can possess normative orientation without being reduced to a final prescription for living.

Accordingly, Bildung makes possible a fundamentally different conception of the ideal life. Within this horizon, the ideal preserves its function as a standard of orientation and differentiation without becoming a final and closed model. Human beings remain continually engaged in the process of human formation, and it is precisely this enduring openness that makes it possible to preserve freedom, historicity, and normativity simultaneously.

3.3 .The Possibility of Normative Judgment Without Dogmatism

One of the most fundamental questions of modern thought is how the possibility of normative judgment can be defended without fixing human life in accordance with rigid, final, and transhistorical standards. If every shared standard is abandoned, distinguishing among different forms of life becomes impossible, and ethical life is reduced to merely individual preferences. Conversely, if the standard of the ideal life is understood as a completely closed and predetermined form, the historicity and dynamism of human formation disappear. The significance of Bildung lies precisely in preserving the possibility of normative judgment while avoiding normative rigidity.

The crisis of modern humanity can be understood in terms of the fragmentation of human totality—a condition in which individuals cultivate only some of their forces, while the remaining dimensions of their being are suppressed (Humboldt, 1993: xxxviii–xxxix). From this perspective, the fundamental issue concerns the achievement of an inner harmony and proportion among the human forces. It is here that the criterion of judgment emerges: one can distinguish between a life that approaches inner unity and richness and one that remains fragmented and one-sided.

Within the tradition of Bildung, the concept of totality occupies a central place in the idea of human formation, and human life is judged according to the degree of coherence, breadth, and harmony achieved in that process (Bruford, 1975: 23–26). The internal criterion of Bildung, therefore, refers primarily to the living organization of personality.

In reflective judgment, judgment is not always exercised through the application of fully determinate and antecedently given rules. Here, no predetermined concept is available, and the particular is judged in its own right and according to its inner coherence (Gadamer, 2004: 28). The significance of this insight lies in preserving the possibility of normative judgment without reducing the particular to the mechanical application of a rule. Accordingly, Bildung likewise makes normative differentiation possible through the discernment of proportion, coherence, and totality rather than through formal conformity to a fixed model.

Human beings always live within horizons of significance, and without such horizons the very possibility of evaluation and judgment disappears (Taylor, 1989: 27–32). Individuals can judge their own lives only insofar as they regard some ways of living as richer, deeper, or more fully human than others. Yet these horizons are neither closed nor transhistorical. They are transformed within history and culture and remain continually open to reinterpretation. It is precisely for this reason that the possibility of normative judgment is compatible with historical openness.

If shared standards collapse, moral judgment is reduced to individual preferences, and every moral principle becomes merely an expression of personal will (MacIntyre, 2007: 16–18). The modern condition arises when people continue to employ the language of objective standards while having lost their connection to those very standards (MacIntyre, 2007: 14–15). The significance of this analysis for Bildung lies in showing that the complete abandonment of internal standards undermines the very possibility of a meaningful ethical life.

Human life can be understood as the process of shaping a way of life that possesses unity and coherence, even though it does not conform to a completely fixed model. The central question is not whether one has lived in exact conformity with a particular model but whether

one can fashion such a life for oneself (Nehamas, 1998: 8–9). Within this horizon, judgment about human life rests not on conformity to a final formula but on the degree of coherence and the formative power with which a life is shaped.

Truth likewise discloses itself only within the process of human formation and through its relation to the movement of Spirit as a whole (Hegel, 2018: 29–32). From this perspective, no individual form of life can be assessed independently of the overall movement of human formation. The criterion is immanent to the process itself and emerges through the relation of the parts to the whole. Accordingly, totality in the horizon of Bildung does not denote a static or closed totality but a dynamic unity that comes into being through the very process of human formation.

Accordingly, Bildung makes it possible to defend the legitimacy of normative judgment without lapsing into dogmatism. Its internal standards—such as proportion, totality, coherence, and the richness of human formation—preserve the possibility of distinguishing among different forms of life, yet these standards are never fixed as rigid and transhistorical models. For this reason, the ideal life in the horizon of Bildung assumes an open, historical, and dynamic character while preserving its normativity.

4.Anthropological Implications of Bildung for Understanding the Ideal Life

If, within the horizon of Bildung, the ideal life is understood not as a final model but as a process of human formation, then our conception of the human being is fundamentally transformed. Human beings are no longer understood as possessing a complete, fixed, and predetermined essence whose task is to conform to a determinate ideal of perfection. Nor can they be conceived merely as self-sufficient subjects who discover the truth of themselves within themselves. Within the horizon of Bildung, human beings come into being only through processes of human formation that are historical, linguistic, and intersubjective, and their identity emerges in relation to the world, culture, the other, and

horizons of significance (Humboldt, 1993: 10–14; Gadamer, 2004: 305–307).

Accordingly, the question of the ideal life no longer concerns the realization of a fixed essence or the attainment of a final state of perfection. What becomes decisive is the manner in which human beings are formed in relation to historically situated possibilities of living. Within this horizon, human beings are understood as unfinished and open beings who can actualize their forces only through engagement with the shared world and the continual reinterpretation of their relation to it. For this reason, historicity is not merely an external condition of human existence but the very condition of human formation (Hegel, 2018: 29–34).

Accordingly, the ideal life itself cannot be understood as a destination lying beyond the process of human life. Rather, it refers to a quality of human formation in which individuals, while preserving their individuality, are able to stand in relation to the shared world without forfeiting the capacity continually to redefine themselves. From this perspective, human identity is constituted not in isolation but through its relation to horizons of significance and the historical forms of life (Taylor, 1989: 27–32).

4.1 .The Human Being as a Being of Human Formation

With the collapse of the horizons that once guaranteed the unity of life in advance, human life enters a condition in which no final form can determine its movement from without. Human beings find themselves within a plurality of possibilities for living, and it is precisely this plurality that relocates the problem of unity within life itself. Unity is no longer something already given to which human beings gradually conform. Rather, it can emerge only through the course of life itself. At this level, the question of the human being moves beyond the determination of a fixed essence and becomes a question of human formation.

Human formation begins precisely where life cannot close upon its present condition. A human being whose truth has

already been determined has, in the strict sense, no need of human formation; the movement of life would merely consist in progressing toward what has already been prescribed. Yet the absence of any unity whatsoever would leave life dispersed among fragmented experiences. The problem therefore resides in the tension that the unity of life must emerge without ever being enclosed within a fixed form.

It is at this point that engagement with the shared world becomes decisive. Human forces are not actualized in isolation; they can unfold only through their relation to the diversity of situations (Humboldt, 1993: 10–14). What takes shape through this engagement is not merely the accumulation of experience or the acquisition of additional capacities by the subject. Rather, the subject itself is constituted through this movement. The unity of personality does not exist at some point outside the movement of life but comes into being through this very encounter with the other. For this reason, human formation necessarily remains open-ended, since nothing fixes it in a final form.

This openness is also the condition of the movement of consciousness. Consciousness can enter into a relation with itself only by moving beyond immediacy and returning to itself through the other (Hegel, 2018: 44–46). By entering the objective world of language, history, and institutions, human beings move beyond their natural condition, and it is precisely this movement that makes human formation possible. Identity is not preserved behind experience as a fixed substance but comes into being within the very movement of mediation. Accordingly, historicity is not an accidental feature of human existence, for human beings can enter into a relation with themselves only within the historical forms of life.

4.2 .The Shared World and the Formation of Individuality

Human life is possible only insofar as it remains open to human formation. It is precisely this openness that situates human beings within a shared world that precedes them—a world of language, tradition,

history, and horizons of significance. Human beings never begin from a standpoint outside these horizons, and their relation to themselves likewise takes shape only within this shared world. Yet what makes human formation possible simultaneously carries the danger of becoming fixed within existing forms. Once individuals come to rest within their present horizon, they gradually lose the capacity to move beyond it. Individuality is constituted precisely through this restlessness—in the unfinished relation that human beings establish with the shared world, a relation that never reaches complete stability.

Language, at this level, does not stand outside experience. Before expressing anything, human beings already inhabit a linguistic horizon that makes experience itself possible. Meaning is not the product of the free choice of consciousness; rather, consciousness is formed from the outset within horizons that make understanding possible (Taylor, 1989: 27–32). Human beings who attempt to detach themselves from every shared horizon ultimately become confined within the closed sphere of their own private experience. Under such conditions, the possibility of new understanding gradually withers, because nothing remains capable of drawing consciousness beyond the inertia of its present condition.

It is at this point that the significance of the other becomes apparent. Encountering the other does not merely add new content to consciousness; it reorients consciousness itself. Human beings are confronted with a horizon that cannot be assimilated into their present condition, and it is precisely this dissonance that unsettles their relation to themselves. Understanding occurs through this movement: through distancing oneself from the horizon within which one has hitherto dwelt (Gadamer, 2004: 305–307). Individuality likewise comes into being through this displacement. Human beings who remain enclosed within their established horizon gradually

lose the possibility of human formation, for individuality is never constituted through stasis.

The significance of the diversity of situations becomes equally apparent at this point (Humboldt, 1993: 10–14). Through encounters with diverse forms of life, human beings do not merely expand the scope of their knowledge. Their relation to the shared world is transformed, and with it the relation they bear to themselves. Individuality is not preserved at some point outside the shared world but is constituted only through this very encounter. Human beings who are no longer exposed to horizons beyond their present condition gradually become enclosed within the settled form of their own lives—a closure in which the possibility of transformation is gradually exhausted.

Nor does the shared world ever come to rest in a final unity. Horizons of significance are continually transformed through history, and human beings themselves are formed through this ongoing transformation. For this reason, individuality is never given as something permanently secured. Human beings must continually reestablish their relation to the shared world, a movement in which the unity of life never attains complete security. It is precisely this enduring restlessness that keeps the horizon of human formation open.

5 .Conclusion

This article has argued that the crisis of the ideal life in modernity arises from the unstable relation among individual freedom, historical plurality, and the demand for normative judgment. Perfectionism, self-actualization, and relativism each illuminate an important dimension of this problem, yet none is capable of preserving all three simultaneously.

The central thesis of this article has been that Bildung can be reconstructed as the condition of possibility for rethinking the ideal life in the modern world. Through the constitutive relations between force and form, individuality and the shared world, and historicity and normativity, Bildung makes it possible to conceive of the

ideal life without reducing it to a static or predetermined model.

Accordingly, the ideal life is neither a final prescription for living nor merely a matter of individual preference. Rather, it functions as a normative horizon for human formation, preserving the possibility of normative judgment while remaining open to historical transformation and the ongoing process of human formation.

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