

***Bildung*, God, and the Ethical School**

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Abstract

The German notion of Bildung, which is one of the central concepts of pedagogy, had from the very beginning a relationship to ‘God,’ primarily in relation to the doctrine of man as the image of God. But since the epoch of Goethe and Hegel there has been a gradual secularisation of the concept of Bildung. Bildung’s connection to the notion of God is more or less absent in our time. This paper challenges such a view because it has led to a weakening of the concept of Bildung. By abandoning God, the theory of Bildung has left that which gives the concept of Bildung its strength. Against this perspective, this paper tries to argue that Bildung is dependent on God. This is also an attempt to reinvent the theory of Bildung. The paper will approach this task in five steps. First, the paper presents a brief history of the idea of Bildung that resonates with the problem of God. Then the paper criticises this history through Emmanuel Levinas’s ethical metaphysics. Thirdly, the paper tries to find answers to whom Levinas’s God is, as part of the argument that says that God ought to be part of Bildung. Fourthly, the paper attempts to form a Levinasian concept of Bildung, referring to it as ethical Bildung. This background leads the paper to conclude that ethical Bildung should be integrated in schools. That is to say that we ought to be open to God in schools because it is then possible to take a step beyond essence, or, ethical system. As soon as ethics is built on God, instead of rules and principles, it is possible to make room for genuine kindness, as opposed to a predicate and calculating relationship to the other.

***Bildung* and the Question of God**

The term *Bildung* is related to the German verb *bilden*, which means to form or to shape. In this way there is a close relationship to the Latin word *formatio*, which precisely means to form. This can of course centre on something quite concrete, for example the potter who forms clay into a jar. If we transfer this thought to mankind, that *Bildung* is directed towards, we can for example focus on the forming of an individual’s abilities and talents, as we see illustrated in Goethe’s two *Bildungsromans*, *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* (1795-96) and *Wilhelm Meister’s Journeyman Years* (1821-29). Secondly, the word *Bild* – picture or image – is already written in the term *Bildung*. Hans-Georg Gadamer (1965, p. 11) was aware of this and indicated that *Bildung*, in its early stage, took inspiration from the Christian mystic notion that mankind’s highest aim was to become an *imago dei*, i.e., an image of God. In other words, mankind carries in himself the image of God, and the process of *Bildung* depends upon cultivating this picture. What interests me in this paper is that this background tells us that *Bildung*, right from the ‘beginning,’ had a relationship to ‘God.’¹ This is also emphasised by Michael Wimmer (2001, p. 160), where he says that the roots of the concepts of *Bildung* and *bilden* is to be found in the biblical story of creation (Genesis 1.26-7). Several German mystics of the fourteenth century, including Meister Eckhart, related *Bildung* to the idea that man should transform himself in God’s image (Wimmer, 2001, pp. 160-161).

Despite this, God was strongly toned down during the Golden Age of *Bildung*, i.e., between 1770 and 1830. Goethe, who was one of the most influential people of that time, turned *Bildung* so that the aim was to become an image of the true human condition. Take for example Goethe’s famous journey to Italy (1886-1888). The aim of this journey was to live up to Classic Greek values (Goethe, 1999c). For Hegel’s part it was about looking back and gaining an historic and cultural understanding. The individual should be aware of his “inorganic nature,” i.e., his unknown historic past, because it is a way to recognise God (Hegel, 1995b, p. 33). For Hegel, God is almost made human (cf. Kierkegaard, 2002, p. 145) and became one of the actors in relation to the historic and cultural development that forms and educates us into cultivated people.

Kierkegaard attempted to correct the picture that the German Idealists and Romantics had drawn of God and at the same time connect him to *Bildung* (Kierkegaard, 1997, p. 140). However, it was an individual attempt that was not followed up in a meaningful manner. While thinkers like Marx, Nietzsche and Freud were almost hostile in their attitude to both God and religion, the philosophers Heidegger and Sartre compensated Kierkegaard's thoughts about God and eternity with death. But history looked at it differently. We had a new turn where God became current again. One of the main actors here was Levinas, who gradually got other thinkers on the same track, e.g. Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Marion and John D. Caputo. What was the main reason for God's return? In the aftermath of the evil and cruelty that reigned during the Second World War it was natural that ethics should be the order of the day. Mankind had weakened God, who – right from the times of the Age of Reason – had been substituted with science and reason. Now many began to realise that God must be recaptured and simultaneously linked to ethics (cf. Morgan, 2007). This can be said to be one of the main reasons why God returned.

My ambition with this paper is to open some space for the idea of God within the theory of *Bildung*. As I have already said, there has been, since the epoch of Goethe and Hegel, a gradual secularisation of the term *Bildung*. As many know this term came back relatively strongly in the 1990's, but the connection to God has more or less been absent. Many of the large journals in educational philosophy, for example *British Journal of Philosophy of Education* (vol. 36, no. 3, 2002) and *Journal of Educational Philosophy and Theory* (vol. 35, no. 2, 2003), published some years ago special issues with the theme *Bildung*. But a quick look at these issues shows that *Bildung* in our time seems to have no direct connection to God. After the secularisation of the concept of *Bildung* the theory of *Bildung* has not taken God seriously. But this is, I believe, a mistake, something Wimmer (2001, p. 161) seems to agree with: "One might be tempted to argue that this shift from a theological to an anthropological concept of *Bildung* is the source of the "mistakes" or "inadequacies" that make themselves felt in modern educational theory's theory of *Bildung* as stubbornly insoluble problems." The point is that the transition from a theological to an anthropological perspective has turned *Bildung* into a self-realisation project, with the result, indicates Wimmer (2001), that *Bildung* will be annulled. By abandoning theology one has also abandoned the idea that *Bildung* is something passive and impossible, which has to do with the idea that *Bildung* is a gift (from God), as opposed to the anthropological idea that *Bildung* is an activity, i.e., an active pursuit to become a self-realised human being. We should therefore challenge the modern tradition of thinking about *Bildung*, and I believe that we will do that by reclaiming God's connection to *Bildung*. To address the question of God will help us to reinvent the notion of *Bildung* and at the same time remind the theory of *Bildung* of something it has left and perhaps forgotten. By steering the course towards that which the theory of *Bildung* left doesn't mean, however, that we simply repeat the old ways of thinking about *Bildung* and God. Rather, God must be viewed in new ways, and also be inserted into a context that takes into account current political and social conditions.

On this basis I wish to investigate the thesis whether it might be the case that there can be no *Bildung*, referring to it as ethical *Bildung*, if God is excluded. *Bildung* is dependent on God, because without God *Bildung* cannot take place, if, that is, *Bildung* should be something more than the individual's self-realisation within the sphere of a universal morality. Therefore, the theory of *Bildung* needs to reclaim God. My task will thus be to attempt to reinvent a concept of *Bildung* that has a connection to God. With this, many questions come to mind, for example the question about God being associated with universal morality and essence. But this depends on, I believe, what notion of God we choose to follow. We should therefore examine and compare different views on God in relation to *Bildung*, in order to find a concept of God that moves beyond essence.

In this way I move into the religious field, and that, of course, entails many challenges. For example, religion has, through the years, led to fundamentalism. Hence, there has been a lot of cruelty in the name of religion and so on and so forth. Further, religion has, since the Enlightenment, virtually been neglected in favor of a scientific reason (Biesta, 2011, in press). This is also one of the reasons that the religious language has been neglected in relation to *Bildung*. I would however suggest that we should take the language of

religion seriously, otherwise one can risk to ignore important aspects with regard to ethical *Bildung*. However, it is not my intention to argue that we need religious elements or a religious language in an all too secular school. The occasion of my thinking is neither religious nor theological, but has to do with *Bildung*. In other words, I aim to place myself within the theory of *Bildung*. Neither is my ambition to reinvent a concept of *Bildung* that shall replace all other concepts of *Bildung*. On the contrary, I wish to contribute to a debate within the conversation of *Bildung*, whether we might give *Bildung* a new direction and therefore a new form.

In the following I shall try to substantiate the thesis, and this I shall do in five steps. To begin with I will, as a part of the argument, give a brief history of the idea of *Bildung* that resonates with the problem of God. Specifically, I shall refer to two different views on how *Bildung* and God relate to each other. I will first return to Germany's Golden Age of *Bildung*, particularly concerning Hegel. I am doing this to attain a certain clarification of the term *Bildung*, as I simultaneously try to highlight Hegel's view of *Bildung* in relation to the notion of God. In the same section I will examine closer an important turn, where Kierkegaard gives us a completely new notion of *Bildung*. Even though Kierkegaard introduced new and important elements with regard to *Bildung*, that is to say elements that Hegel and the German founders of the term had overlooked, I must view Kierkegaard with a critical eye. I do this in the second section. Here I give my support particularly to Levinas, who disputes Kierkegaard's basic idea that mankind must first know God in order to act ethically. Levinas opposes this and says that God cannot be 'experienced' directly, but only as a trace in the other's face. In the third section I try to find answers to whom Levinas's God signifies so that we can have a solid basis before we derive a concept of ethical *Bildung* in section four. I must say, though, that it is more demanding to talk about *Bildung* in the light of Levinas compared to Kierkegaard. This is simply because Kierkegaard himself derived a concept of *Bildung*, something Levinas never did. This means that we stand before a demanding assignment. Since Levinas doesn't give us a definite concept of *Bildung*, we must form such a concept from a background of his words and thoughts that indirectly can be connected to *Bildung*. After I have undertaken this laborious task I will, in the final step, contextualise the notion of ethical *Bildung*. That is to say, I intend to exemplify how the notion of ethical *Bildung* might be connected to our schools. The examples that are given will of course have its foundation in the concept of ethical *Bildung* that I have created. Thus, my reflections on the school's ethical responsibility will be solidly based and thoroughly grounded.

Two Main Turns in the History of *Bildung*

The aim of Hegel's notion of *Bildung* turns on conceptualising God (Hegel, 1995d, pp. 353ff.), which Hegel identifies with the term Spirit (*Geist*) (Hegel, 1995c, p. 273; 1995d, p. 374). Such knowledge about God as Spirit, or, in other words, understanding of the absolute is expressed differently depending upon where one is. In the field of art, God, or, the absolute is understood through intuition (Hegel, 1995e, p. 69, 73), while the absolute is understood through imagination in the religious field (ibid.). In order to attain the highest form of *Bildung*, on the other hand, it is not enough with either intuition or imagination. Rather, God shall be conceptualised as one does in philosophy. Just like Plato, Hegel places philosophy highest in the hierarchy. This is because God shall be conceptually understood, i.e., an absolute knowledge about the absolute (ibid., p. 73). In this way the highest form of *Bildung* is attained, while the Spirit's journey has – for the moment – come to the end of the road.

So, Hegel does not remove God from *Bildung*, but what we should notice is the fact that he connects God to mankind's history. However, God is not placed *over* history as someone who steers and plans history's path. Hegel places God *in* history (Hegel, 1995e, p. 53). That is to say that God unfolds himself through history's many conflicts. One can also say that God moves himself towards an ever-increasing self-awareness. In the book about the philosophy of history, Hegel writes that the Spirit of the World strides against ever new and higher self-realisation, more specifically he writes that the Spirit of the World has, with reference to self-awareness, four main stages. The first and least developed stage is the Oriental (ibid., pp.

142ff.), that is followed by the Greek (ibid., pp. 275ff.), and thereafter the Roman (ibid., pp. 142ff.). The fourth and highest stage is the German, where the Spirit of the World is conscious of its freedom (ibid., pp. 413ff.). This development tells, in accordance with Hegel, that the Spirit of the World has become even more complex and complete compared with the earlier Spirit of the World. Nonetheless, this doesn't mean that the old Spirit of the World has been rejected entirely. It is always so that the new Spirit of the World, e.g. in the form of the Germanic, has absorbed the earlier Spirit, e.g. the Roman (ibid., p. 419). This is not to say that the World history's development advances in a single great harmony and idyll. On the contrary, World history is full of dramatic battles and countless tragedies. A multitude of heroes must die merciless, but only as offer for history's good intention (ibid., p. 380). As soon as tragedy has occurred, the divine reason continues its development towards its goal, that is to say towards an ever-freer state (ibid., p. 30).

Does this mean that the Spirit, that also is identifiable with God, is an independent actor who attains his self-determination and identity independent of an adversary? This is an important question in relation to *Bildung*, because *Bildung* can not happen in isolation. *Bildung* is rather dependent on a relationship, and it is clear that Hegel is aware of this as he avoids to portray the Spirit as an actor who works independently. The Spirit is rather a relationship, more closely defined as a relationship between a single individual (I) and the collective individual (We). With the help of Hegel, the Spirit is "an *I* who is a *We*, a *We* who is an *I*" (Hegel, 1995b, p. 145; my translation). The Spirit is neither the individual nor the collective alone. On the contrary, the Spirit is both identical with itself and simultaneously un-identical with itself. There is talk of a dialectic relationship, and a dependent relationship, between the known and the unknown; or, the finite and the infinite. This will also say that none of the parts can come to consciousness without an opposition that invites resistance.

In fact, Hegel's well-known book of philosophy, *the Phenomenology of Spirit*, can be considered to be a project for *Bildung*, as the term is described in the above. Therein Hegel encourages the private individual, i.e. the reader of the text, to finish the very demanding and energetic work that he himself has begun (cf. Løvlie, 1995). In *the Phenomenology* he stores different experiences in the form of recollections about spirits. The reader is encouraged to rework and redescribe these recollections that Hegel has thoroughly prepared. This given, the single reader must work with, and reflect upon, that which is already recalled. This deals with taking on a task that calls for reflective activity. This is very demanding. Everyone who has read *the Phenomenology* know that it is a very demanding book, but it is a lot less demanding compared with having to understand world history. The reader of *the Phenomenology* escapes a good deal of work since Hegel has already began the task of conceptualising parts of world history. Nevertheless, the reader must suffer both pain and effort (Hegel, 1995c, p. 321) so that the Spirit of history shall be conceptually understood (Hegel, 1995b, p. 591), that also is the highest aim for the Hegelian *Bildung*. This includes, amongst other things, delusions and despair that demands that the reader must continually make new attempts. Only then will the historic figures; or, the "gallery of pictures" (ibid., p. 590; my translation) that are archived in *the Phenomenology*, become conceptually understood. In the moment when the already recollected spirits are conceptualised, one can say that God becomes revealed. Yet, God is first revealed when the Spirit appears as a new figure at the point when the reader's conscious reflection has exceeded *the Phenomenology's* story telling.

To sum up, the Hegelian *Bildung* is about how the private individual must "take upon himself world history's tremendous work" (Hegel, 1995b, pp. 33-34; my translation). Through the single individual's consideration and reflection, the earlier Spirit of history shall be born anew through knowledge (ibid., p. 590). In this relationship, where the new Spirit both preserves and continues the earlier Spirit, God may become current. *Bildung* is thus conceived as the individual's active work, wherein the objective is to become a self-realised individual. In this way we can see a clear difference between the Hegelian self-*Bildung* and education. Whereas education often focuses on transmuting knowledge and imposing norms and values as part of a socialisation process (Wimmer, 2001, p. 156), the Hegelian self-*Bildung* is about working for one's own independence and autonomy. This is not something the individual can learn through such

educational means as instruction and discipline. Nonetheless, there is still reason to ask whether Hegel's notion of *Bildung* is suitable in today's pluralistic and complex society. I would say no, and it is not difficult to find support for that position. Take this statement from Wimmer (2001, p. 153) for example: "Under the conditions of present-day pluralism the individual acquires a new quality. No longer is the individual the result of an appropriation of the general [...]" *Bildung* can not be conceived as becoming an ideal and perfect human being by, for example, acquiring the world history. We must rather look at the notion of *Bildung* in a new way. Specifically, we should, in our pluralistic world, turn the perspective towards the singularity and uniqueness of the individual (ibid., p. 155). *Bildung* should, in other words, be conceived as singularisation and uniqueness, and the first thinker who introduces these thoughts is Kierkegaard. He introduces a completely new turn in the theory of *Bildung*, which unfortunately has ignored his important contribution in relation to the notion of *Bildung*. In contrast to Hegel, Kierkegaard suggests that the individual should no longer relate to the history, in which God plays an important role. Rather, the individual must relate to the other, wherein God has a central role.

In the book *Fear and Trembling* (1843) Kierkegaard disassembles Hegel's determination of *Bildung* as cultivation. Kierkegaard's main reason for his opposition and critic against the term is that God only has a supporting role, as he is placed inside a system. Moreover, each individual must stand aside in order to accept the cultural and historic tradition. Against this view, Kierkegaard presents a religious-existential concept of *Bildung*, where God is the main person. The great difference between these two unlike perspectives of *Bildung* can, from the point of view of Kierkegaard, be explained with the help of two sentences: 1. To adhere to history and culture, like Hegel, means that each individual becomes one of the masses. 2. To adhere to God, like Kierkegaard, means that each individual becomes a singular and unique person. Kierkegaard:

What, then, is *Bildung*? I thought that it was the course that every individual goes through to catch up with himself, and the one that will not go through this course will not in the least be helped to be born in the most enlightened age (Kierkegaard, 1997, p. 140; my translation).

The great question that lies at the root of the definition is: How does one become a Christian? It is thus a matter of Christian *Bildung*. If we now search the question's negative form we can with great certainty say that one cannot be a Christian person by incorporating cultural values and norms of the Hegelian way. Rather, one must, maintained Kierkegaard, "catch up with oneself." How could this happen? Kierkegaard emphasises that the individual first is delivered and saved from his existence through an outside force that almost indicates a form for absurdity. People are particularly transformed in the moment when they are strongly touched, that is to say a strong incident (cf. Sæverot, 2010a; 2010b). The thought isn't that such a shock situation will lead the will to relate in a large degree to culture. On the contrary, it is believed that the shock will force the individual to want to catch up with himself; or, turn back on himself as he was *before* culture began to form his way of life. This is something totally different than Hegel's *Bildung* of cultivation, which – according to Kierkegaard – means that individuals are dependent because they have let the collective individual (We) decide for them. Such is one's life, claims Kierkegaard, really only a deception. Instead of being a cultivated or an educated (*gebildet*) individual who blindly follows what the masses mean, the individual must do something one cannot enforce; namely, repeat oneself. One cannot *will* the repetition, it must happen when it happens (Garff, 2000). It can, as mentioned, happen when one is touched by something or someone. In such moments one starts all over again, and instead of being cultured one has found the way back to oneself in God. In this manner the individual stands forth as unique and singular, who in his eccentricity is on a collision course with culture's conventionalism.

By taking a look at the world history, like Hegel, instead of going into oneself in order to meet God, one is, according to Kierkegaard, only present in the secular and temporal world. Yet the world alone doesn't create unique and singular individuals, claims Kierkegaard. Therefore Hegel's view of *Bildung* is in many ways a deception for Kierkegaard. We must however not think that Kierkegaard turns his back on the world.

The point is that one cannot relate to the world alone. The world and its temporality must stand as a dialectic relationship to God and eternity. In other words, we live *in* the temporal while we stand *before* the eternal (Kierkegaard, 2002, p. 518), that we must listen to – because it is that which singularises and individualises each single individual (Kierkegaard, 2002, p. 519; 2004, pp. 49-50). This background gives a certain picture of the Kierkegaardian process for *Bildung*, which has still yet another element that I have not gone into so far. It has a connection with God who sent his son Jesus Christ to Earth. In this way eternity came into the world and time. Jesus becomes thus the middle link to, and the prototype for, God. In concrete terms it means that Christ must be imitated so that one shall come near God. (This is explained deeper in the book *Practice in Christianity* (1850), that can – despite that it hasn't any particular story – be considered a Christian *Bildungsroman*.)

Despite Kierkegaard's innovations with regard to *Bildung* and God, it is still a question whether he really manages to move beyond essence. Is he really able to 'reach' the other, who is a precondition for *Bildung*? Let us compare Kierkegaard's views with someone who, quite recently, has investigated the same questions as Kierkegaard, but who has come up with different answers. I am thinking of Levinas.

Who Comes First – God or the Other?

We find much common ground between Kierkegaard and Levinas. They are for example both agreed that the self must take responsibility for their neighbour (Kierkegaard, 2004, p. 95; Levinas, 2009, pp. 9-10). With both it is about dealing ethically towards the next person one meets (Kierkegaard, 2004, pp. 66-67; Levinas, 2003, p. 39). Further, they are agreed that God cannot decree anything that is wrong or fraudulent (Kierkegaard, 2004, p. 69; Levinas, 1998, p. 69). Of course there are also differences between Kierkegaard and Levinas, some are more on the conceptual plane. For example, where Kierkegaard (2004, p. 44) talks about eternity, Levinas (2003) talks about infinity. On the other side, we also find essential differences between them. Perhaps the greatest difference is this: with Kierkegaard, God must come first. The individual must show his love to God, who then directs the individual to do a loving deed for his neighbour (Kierkegaard, 2004, p. 64). Levinas, on the other hand, changes the succession. With him, the other must come before God. Both are in agreement that the relationship consists of three, i.e., the I, the other and God, but in the question of succession they are in deep disagreement (cf. Westphal, 2008, p. 50). In the essay *Transcendence and Height* (1962) Levinas gives a good explanation as to why God cannot come first. At the same time this is his most pertinent criticism of Kierkegaard, as I see it. Levinas:

I do not want to define anything through God because it is the human that I know. It is God that I can define through human relations and not the inverse. [...]. The abstract idea of God is an idea that cannot clarify a human situation. It is the inverse that is true (Levinas, 1996, p. 29).

One of Levinas's points is that we don't know God, i.e., the abstract God. To relate to such a God, e.g. Kierkegaard's God, requires therefore an abstracted relationship. Because of this we must first and foremost relate ourselves to our fellow man. One begins with something concrete, something one knows from before and something that concerns one directly. In this way a concrete relationship occurs. An all powerful God, that we don't know, will moreover involve that we move away from situations that deal with responsibility. Levinas opposes cognitive situations where the individual reflects, speculates or uses his consciousness, like Hegel, in order to come to one or another form for knowledge and understanding. What this is about is responsibility. "Everything I wish to say comes from this situation of responsibility which is religious insofar as the I cannot elude it" (ibid., p. 29). In opposition to speculation, the individual must take his responsibility and actually let the other go before oneself (Levinas, 1998, p. 91).

Kierkegaard, for his part, insists that you shall love the neighbour as yourself (Kierkegaard, 2004, pp. 25-26). It requires that one must not love oneself more than the other, but one must not love the other more than oneself either. The love relationship must in other words be balanced and equal (ibid., p. 30). Levinas is, on the other hand, sceptical to what "as yourself" signifies (Levinas, 1998, p. 90). As usual he thinks otherwise

than that which is traditional, and underlines the following: By dividing the last word in the Hebrew verse, *kamokhah*, from the beginning of the sentence it gives an opening to interpret the sentence thus: “Love your neighbour; this work is like yourself”; “you’re your neighbour; he is yourself”; it is this love of the neighbour which is yourself” (ibid.). Consequently we get a whole different meaning than that Kierkegaard and many others have come to. Through Levinas’s interpretation the other is placed above the I. To those who will claim that this is a too original and different reading, Levinas answers that *the Bible*, seen as one, supports his interpretation. According to Levinas, one cannot read something out of its context. Therefore, the sentence that says one must love your neighbour as yourself must be seen in relation to the whole *Bible*. Then one will see, according to Levinas (1998, p. 91), that *the Bible* “is the priority of the other [*l’autre*] in relation to me.”

For Levinas it is therefore about “de-subjecting” oneself, that is to say that one must love the other more than oneself. To offer oneself for the other is ethical in light of Levinas’s philosophy. Therefore, he is very critical of Kierkegaard and his view of Christian *Bildung*. Levinas means to find an egotistical concern here (Levinas, 2003, p. 305). If one sees the real purpose for Kierkegaard’s Christian philosophy – that also is the hope of eternal salvation and happiness (Garff, 2000, p. 787) – one can perhaps say that Levinas is right. For will not such a hope lead one to easily overlook the neighbour? That would ultimately mean that *Bildung* will not take place, because *Bildung* is completely dependent on the other. To try to elaborate on this I will now examine Levinas’s notion of God.

Who is Levinas’s God?

There are four important issues with regard to the Levinasian notion of God: trace, height, responsibility, and justice.² All these issues also have relevance for the discussion about ethical *Bildung* that is to follow. Let me therefore attempt to clarify these four issues.

To approach an understanding of the trace I will begin by asking: where does God come from? From the other? No! God comes from transcendence (Levinas, 1998, p. 125), that must be understood differently than our traditional view. It is rather talk of a transcendence that is not present, i.e., a transcendence that always has passed and ‘emerges’ as a trace (Levinas, 2009, p. 91). God leaves a trace. This means that God cannot be seen. God is never present. God has always been. God ‘is’ always in the past. God is only a part of our life as a trace (ibid., p. 148), in contrast to a phenomenon that reveals itself in the present. Sure enough, Levinas keeps to the phenomenological tradition that stretches back to Husserl and Heidegger, but it is not talk about a traditional phenomenology where the phenomena first are hidden so as to be visible to the eye (ibid, p. 91). God is not a phenomenon. He is neither hidden in nor on the face, and one cannot simply adopt a patient attitude and wait until God will make himself visible. Neither is it about a traditional hermeneutic search where one digs deeper and deeper in relation to the case, so as to come to the core (Levinas, 1998, p. 105). The reason is simple: God doesn’t hide in/ on/ back anything. The simple polite phrase *après vous* (after you) is a better illustration of what it is about (cf. Levinas, 1996, p. 91). The host allows the guest to enter the house before him- or herself. That way we can say that the guest has already gone (to the past), after which the host appears as a witness to something that already happened. Therefore, no one can see God. Nor can we hear God either. We can only hear God from a remote past, but the paradoxical is that it is not him we hear. We can only hear God through our own words (Levinas, 2000, p. 197, 201).

The second issue, which is about height, is also very important for the following discussion on ethical *Bildung*. With Levinas, the face reveals a height. That is to say that God can be traced in the face’s height (Levinas, 2003, p. 79). What does the word height (*hauteur*) mean? The answer is that the term height has many meanings, and to avoid misunderstandings it can be advisable to begin by looking for the negative form of the question. Thus, one can say that the relationship between the other and I cannot be asymmetric in a way that I am lifted above the other. Nazism’s ‘*übemensch*’ is of course an extreme example, but it shows that as soon as one makes oneself into God, then God becomes totally absent.

Now, one would perhaps believe that the relationship between the other and I should be equal, but here, too, Levinas says clearly no. This is supported by his criticism of Martin Buber's I-Thou philosophy, where the relationship between the partners is – according to Levinas's reading – precisely equal. Certainly Buber's I-Thou relationship goes beyond an I-It relationship that can be compared with a subject-object connection (Levinas, 2008a, p. 10). An I-Thou relationship is, on the other hand, a subject-subject connection, where the involved persons are equal (ibid., p. 10). However, Levinas implies that the partners in such a relationship never really touch each other, and it follows that they are left to themselves (Levinas, 2003, p. 69). In fact, any dialogue philosophy that is built upon an equal relationship makes it impossible to be jerked out of one's egocentricity in order to take on a responsibility for the other (ibid.). Consequently one finds oneself in ontology, and coincidentally outside ethics.

This background is also part of the reason as to why we need God to be part of ethical *Bildung*. Why might that be so? For Levinas it is necessary that the partners are not equal. It must be an asymmetric relationship, but in such a way that the I must yield for the other and make oneself less powerful, while acknowledging that the other is less powerful than I because of his or her vulnerability (Levinas, 1996, p. 20). This involves that one must bend for the other so as to be humble and generous. In such a way one is also ready to receive God (ibid., p. 21). This is a way of understanding the term height. There must be a certain height difference between the partners because God comes to us from above (Levinas, 2003, p. 79). If, on the other hand, there isn't such a difference in position between the partners the I will continue to be locked within itself. One ends with an ego that only looks after itself. At the same moment the ego turns his back to God. The ultimate consequence of this is that the ego stays outside ethics, after which ethical *Bildung* is annulled.

The third issue, responsibility, is related to the fact that Levinas's God is an absolute remoteness, an *illeity* (that can be translated as he-ness), who becomes the I's responsibility (ibid., p. 69). This divine absence, *illeity*, leaves a trace of itself in the face of the other (Levinas, 2009, p. 158). This means that God has passed via the face of the other, and that is also one of the reasons why God ought to be part of ethical *Bildung*. The reason being that there occurs a moral force that invokes (ibid.), but not such as to understand that God stands forth as a moral decree like Kierkegaard's God. There are no ethical rules or the like that commands, it is rather a mild, moral force that calls for responsibility (ibid., p. 159; see Derrida, 2003, pp. 206-207 for an elaboration). More precisely, it is the other's suffering and need that is called to responsibility (Levinas, 2009, p. 50). Furthermore, *Illeity* invokes the single one, i.e., God has chosen you and no one else (ibid., p. 184). Thus, it is not about an ethical law where all should act in the same way so as to be ethical. Rather, it is about irreplaceability. It is only those who are called that can take responsibility in the particular situation. One cannot step aside in order to throw in a substitute. It would be to flee from the responsibility God has called one to.

Levinas's self must also make a judgement that is centred on what is just, which is the fourth issue with regard to the Levinasian notion of God. Yet, Levinas's view of justice is absolutely not the same as the court's or the law's view of justice that is founded on reason or essence. This can be explained by Fyodor Dostoevsky's magnificent novel *the Brothers Karamazov* (1880). The haphazard and good Alyosha Karamazov knows that his brother Dmitri is unlawfully judged for the murder of his father, but since all the clues point to him as the murderer he says that the court had no other choice than to judge Dmitri for murder (Dostoevski, 2002). The 'moral' is the following: as long as justice is built upon reason, then the other can be unlawfully judged. Therefore, Levinas (2006a, p. 92) says, love must ensure that justice will occur.

What role does God play in relation to justice? God doesn't want us to only love our neighbour. He wants us also to be just (ibid.), but it is not God that calls us to justice. God calls us to responsibility (Levinas, 2008b, p. 106). God is, in other words, the chief actor in this particular relationship between the other and the I. God is however not the chief actor with reference to justice, and social and common humane relations. Here the source is "the third part" (Levinas, 2009, p. 16). This third part, that consequently is the source of justice, urges the I to judgement. In concrete terms this means that the individual must take a step back and

assess how one shall execute one's justice, not only for the other but for society and state (ibid., p. 161). The third part urges the I to a just judgement, but not once and for all. Justice is not a term one can define in a particular manner. What is just in one situation will only be unjust in another. Clearly, this has nothing to do with an ethical dictum or law. Rather, each single situation demands its own special form for justice.

With this background one can say that God is not the one who urges justice, but despite this, justice cannot occur without God. This is to say that God is indirectly involved with that which concerns justice: God calls for responsibility and in order to arrive at a just judgement one must have a certain responsibility for the others.

To sum up: I believe that Kierkegaard can clarify Levinas's main views on the notion of God, but unlike Kierkegaard, who places God before the other, Levinas places the other before God. This shows that the two philosophers worry about two different things. Whereas Kierkegaard worries that the other might get in the way of his hearing God, Levinas worries that God might get in the way of his hearing the other (Biesta, 2011, in press). This is thus the main reason why Levinas places the other before God. He does not exclude God; he is just concerned that God may stand in the way of our ethical actions towards the other. To go directly to God can, in other words, lead us to exclude the possibility of providing space for ethical *Bildung*. Therefore, we must direct our attention to the other, which can cause us to 'hear' God, or, the ethical call. What we should now ask is: How is ethical *Bildung* to be conceived, and what are the new qualities for the self?

Ethical *Bildung* as De-Subjectification

Both the self and the humanistic tradition have been closely connected to the term *Bildung*. We see this quite immediately by taking a glance backwards. Herder, who was the young Goethe's mentor, was the one who explicitly linked *Bildung* to the western humanist tradition by emphasising that *Bildung* must have humanity as its goal. Later the *Bildungsroman* became the great and important genre for ideas about *Bildung*. With both Goethe and the other German Romantics we see that they write about a self, or, more precisely, a young and immature man who travels round the world in search of his place in society.

Levinas, however, cannot be linked directly to the tradition of *Bildung*, but in the book *Humanism of the Other* (1972) we explicitly see that he relates himself to the western humanist tradition. What about the self? Doesn't Levinas speak about the death of the self? Actually not, Levinas's project, we may say, is about letting the self be born anew. In concrete terms this means that Levinas gives the source to a responsible and de-centred self (Levinas, 2006b, p. 6). Thus, he distances himself completely from Descartes' *cogito*, where everything revolves around a self. In this way Levinas links himself indirectly to the tradition of *Bildung*. This assertion becomes even stronger because Levinas asks the same fundamental question that many of the founders of *Bildung* did, e.g. Hegel, Goethe, Schiller, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Fundamentally, Levinas is asking what it means to be a person (Levinas, 2009, pp. 7-9).

A great deal indicates that it was the Holocaust that drove Levinas to want to draw a totally new picture of the self. Neither the western Humanistic tradition nor Christianity had – according to Levinas (2006b) – the necessary ethic needed to form the new self after this inhumanity. Therefore, Levinas saw no other way out than to turn back, before both Christianity and the Greek philosophic tradition. He turned back to Judaism, as part of a criticism of Heidegger. According to Levinas (2006b), Heidegger was a brilliant philosopher, but no matter how exceptional he was, he deceived mankind. By claiming that the new self shall be-toward-death, as Heidegger (2001) consequently did, the self, according to Levinas (2006b), is imprisoned in itself. Being-toward-death leads us, in other words, out into total loneliness and, therefore, away from ethical *Bildung*. According to Levinas, there is nothing in Heidegger that leads to responsibility or justice for our fellow man. It is not death that certifies us as persons, says Levinas almost in opposition of what Heidegger claims, it is rather the other who certifies who the self is (Levinas, 2000, p. 43; 2006b, p. 62). Thus, Levinas takes a radical change in direction, historically speaking. It is no longer about my

humanity; on the contrary, it is the other's humanity that is important (Levinas, 2006b, p. 6). The self shall be good towards the other and see to it that those concerned don't suffer need or want.

Looking at the German tradition for *Bildung*, with Goethe and Hegel leading, it is the self that shall go out into the world to form itself as a human being (Goethe, 1999a; 1999b). The same tradition is gladly associated with the individual who shall create an identity. Levinas, on the other hand, is very critical of such *Bildung* for identity. Why? Because everything circles around the self. From this a paradox arises. One excludes that which actually confirms and determines the self. With Levinas the self exists through and for the other (Levinas, 2006b, p. 66). Without involving the other one doesn't exist, so to speak. With this background we can say that *Bildung*, in the light of Levinas's view, will have begun by welcoming the other. This claim is supported in *Totality and Infinity*, where Levinas says that one must open oneself for the other's teaching (Levinas, 2003, p. 69). Such an openness for the other requires that one places one's own freedom and identity in jeopardy (ibid., p. 101), so it follows that the risk factor is very high and one is in danger that one's identity becomes alienated (Levinas, 2006b, p. 62).

Doesn't Goethe talk about something similar when he emphasises that the fictitious character Wilhelm Meister must open himself to the people about him (Goethe, 1999a, pp. 236-237)? No, there is an infinitely great difference between Goethe and Levinas. The last mentioned is totally more radical than the Humanists and the founders of the term *Bildung*. Levinas goes so far as to say that the self must open itself and let its identity be invaded by the other (Levinas, 1989, p. 30). How can this be *Bildung*? Isn't this rather the opposite of *Bildung*, which traditionally is about the self gaining something, as Goethe did when he was changed as a person with his meeting with Rome (Goethe, 1999c)? With Levinas one loses something and it can seem that the self is totally subjected to the other. But this is not the whole case. Sure enough, we can say that the self loses something, but this is absolutely necessary in order to find oneself, which one does through being responsible to the fellow man. In *Totality and Infinity* Levinas supports this by saying that to welcome someone is to learn anew (Levinas, 2003, p. 27). In the end, both the self and the other gain something through this process.

Nevertheless, this must not be understood as a form of Hegelian dialectic. As previously said, the relationship between the self and the other is asymmetric in the light of Levinas's philosophy. One orientates oneself not towards the other for one's own gain, but *for* the other and consequently unto God (*A-Dieu*). Here one of the many essential differences between Hegel and Levinas is revealed. Where Hegel bets on the single individual and his meeting with history and culture, Levinas bets on the other. The French philosopher also separates himself radically from Goethe, where the self is the only one that can gain anything. With Goethe the other doesn't count for anything except that he is there for the self's own process of *Bildung*. Consequently, in the final analysis, Goethe becomes a lonely person: the other really doesn't enter the self's world, so that the self in reality hasn't gained anything apart from something purely egotistic.

With Levinas the process of *Bildung* begins totally different compared to Goethe, Hegel and other fundamental thinkers about *Bildung*. Wilhelm Meister, for example, actively searched to be a new and better person, but according to Levinas one is not oneself by being active. One becomes oneself not by perceiving the world about but by being seen, something that is only possible by being passive (Levinas, 2009, p. 92). What does this mean? The answer is that one cannot *will* be a new and changed person because then one orientates oneself actively in the world. To be passive means the following: it is not the self that starts the process of *Bildung*, it is God. By being passive it can happen that one is seen – and accused – by God. Such moments are 'the beginning' of a process of *Bildung*, because God is about to awaken us (Levinas, 1998, pp. 68-69). It is like being shaken out of the sleep or an egocentric and lonely existence, where afterwards one realises that one is, as Dostoevsky has expressed, more guilty than everyone else (Levinas, 1995, pp. 94-95).

The modern person, who is mainly bound by the tradition of the Age of Reason, orientates himself on the other hand in a world as if he were guiltless. Our time's world is in primarily secularised. God is declared dead, which means that anything is allowed. The implications of the post-modern credo where 'anything goes' are that the world was made for me. One is free of responsibility, and can instead enjoy all and

everything and let oneself be entertained by different cultural aspects, or the like. In marked contrast to this, Levinas talks about God who will intervene in our private world. Levinas's God disturbs us and even takes us hostage (Levinas, 1998, p. 68). Consequently God goes against our own will and practises a kind of violence against the self's identity, but to be a hostage in the Levinasian sense requires also that the self enters a kind of kinship with the other. In concrete terms this means something other than to be empathetic, quite the opposite, one places oneself in the other's place and takes on his or hers burdens (Levinas, 1998, p. 72; 2009, p. 14).

In the light of *Bildung* one can say that the self finds itself by responding to the face. In this way the self finds itself in God's image (*imago dei*), that is not about either the mystic God or his image as such. God's image, paradoxically enough, is not about the image at all. On the contrary, it is about finding oneself in the trace of God. Levinas: "To be in the image of God does not mean to be an icon of God but to find oneself in his trace" (Levinas, 1996, p. 64). 'Here' God speaks to us in the accusative (*ibid.*, p. 68). God tells us that we are guilty and that we must free ourselves from egocentricity in order to take responsibility for the other. In this way the self lives under God's judgement, and this judgement confirms one and all: I am who I am in that I am judged and called to responsibility (*ibid.*, p. 68). These thoughts about the new self are deeply related to *Bildung*, more closely defined as de-subjectification. (Thus, I introduce a new concept to the field of education.) The consequence of the argument that I have tried to work out is that God ought to be part of ethical *Bildung*, if, that is, our ethical actions should not submit to norms or rules. I will even go so far as to say that we need God in our schools, which is the premise for my closing argument.

The Ethical Responsibility of Schools

In the light of Levinas we stand before a large problem as soon as schools base order and peace in authority and control. A school that is just built on rules, principles or the like will, according to Levinas (2009), lead to active pupils. That is to say that one assumes a predicate and calculating relationship to the neighbour. In this way a genuine kindness will disappear. One will go from passive to active, from genuine kindness to moral principles. Consequently, God is weakened. This applies not only to the western schools as such, but also to the western societies in general. I say this because the school should not be treated separately from society, which Dewey constantly reminded us of (*cf.* Dewey, 1998, 246). Schools should, of course, take into account what is going on in the society, but not in such a way that it simply acquires what goes on in the society (*ibid.*, p. 247). Rather, schools must, as part of its ethical responsibility, be critical of what happens in society. Therefore, one must also know what is happening in society. Take our modern liberal democracy, for example. It is to a great degree secularised and has freedom and reason as its foundation. Therefore, the Welfare State has, in the light of Levinas (2009), failed with regard to realising justice, responsibility and goodness. Certainly our society strives towards more justice and less suffering and cruelty. This we witness almost daily through political debates and commentary. But as long as the goal is more justice and less cruelty and suffering, one cannot ignore God (Morgan, 2007). Such a goal must have its foundation in God. The reason is that one will not act on the basis of laws and directives, but from a sincere concern for others. Unfortunately the Welfare State has betrayed God, and at the same time become guilty in a deep moral betrayal in relation to having responsibility for the other. This is not an assertion taken out of the blue. We see it daily through the welfare organisations that in many ways strengthen our egocentric, and lack of responsible, actions. Admittedly, the Welfare State is supposed to ensure a given standard care for all its citizens. For example, everyone shall be given the right to education. This is in many ways very positive, but what is easy to forget is that such opportunities readily open for selfish actions, such as working for a career. In such cases, we are back to self-*Bildung* where the individuals are actively working to realise themselves. This is, of course, about self-gain, which occurs at the cost of others. In short, one focuses on oneself rather than others.

Unfortunately this trend has been strengthened in recent years by European education politics. In Norway, and many other European countries, one has built education politics on EU-politics. When this politic

became governing for schools, and other education institutions, one got a strong individual focus that raises the single person's freedom and rights. This is to say that one has deserted God, and at the same time looked away from the importance and necessity of ethics. One has, in short, deleted a form of ethical *Bildung*. Now, this doesn't mean that ethics shall be based in theology or idealistic religion. Rather, it must be centred on showing solidarity and helpfulness. Yet, one doesn't act such for one's own benefit. If one has a notion that solidarity is meaningful for me, then the premise is totally wrong. The premise must be that the other needs me. Help is not given for the sake of one's own gain, but for the other's sake. As soon as one's generosity, goodness and help lies beyond explanation and essence, one is within what Levinas would reckon as ethical *Bildung*.

This form of ethical *Bildung* ought to be worked on in the school, so that children and youths can take with them an ethically based attitude into the adult world, and consequently take part in promoting an ethical society where God is admitted. Against the school's strong individual focus one ought to be open to God in the classroom. In other words, one ought to work for ethical *Bildung* as de-subjectification, that is to say that one focuses on the uniqueness of each student. But what does it mean to be unique?

We are all unique individuals in that we are different from each other. The difference between people is perhaps even more evident in today's pluralistic society compared to earlier societies that were more homogeneous. If we go to contemporary Western schools we often see a rich mix of students. They are different in many ways, in relation to, for example, religion, culture, morals, clothing, taste, etc. This has resulted in many new challenges for the school. There are of course many ways to meet these challenges, but over the last few years we have seen a general trend that goes in the direction that many schools focus on students' different talents (Biesta, 2009b, p. 39). In this way, each student can appear to be unique and distinctive compared to other students. This kind of pedagogy can be seen as a counter-response to a pedagogy that is very authoritarian in the sense that all students should be formed so that they can be as similar as possible. By cultivating the talent of each student, however, one will establish a classroom, and eventually a society, which is full of different and unique individuals. Nonetheless, this has nothing to do with de-subjectification or uniqueness. The reason is that God is not present in such conditions where the teacher cultivates the talents of the students. God is not present because this form of education centers, in the main, on cultivating oneself. It is nothing more than self-centredness and narcissism, and has nothing to do with what is good and just. Rather, the education that focuses on the students' talents have almost become a form of therapy (ibid.). Ethical *Bildung* as de-subjectification is, however, not about cultivating the students' diversity, for example in terms of talent. What, then, is it about?

The key word is irreplaceability. We will only be unique in situations where the other is calling me, and nobody else. When someone asks for your support and help, either consciously or unconsciously, it is you who is called. The one who is called can not be replaced. This person is thus irreplaceable. One can of course choose not to accept the call, but in those situations where we do accept the call, where we do help the person who is calling, we are singled out. That is to say that we appear to be unique individuals because we have done something unique, something no one else could have done, because it was none other than me who was called. In such situations, God is involved, because the person who is called takes his or her ethical responsibility. God appears not as a phenomenon that becomes visible in its presence; rather, he commands us by our own voice (Levinas, 2000, p. 197, 201). This order from our own voice may cause us to suffer for the other, and it suggests that we have submitted to God who comes to us from above. Further, each situation requires its peculiar form of justice. Our general knowledge of justice can not simply be used in any situation, precisely because each situation opens for its particular form of justice, which goes beyond our laws and rules and what is perceived as legal.

This form of ethical *Bildung* causes severe educational challenges. For example, the teacher can not teach this form of ethical *Bildung*. In contrast to pedagogy as acquisition of knowledge, for example, ethical *Bildung* can not be produced (Wimmer, 2001, p. 161; Biesta 2008a). Ethical *Bildung* is something completely different than to transfer knowledge and then conduct a test so as to specify the learning

outcomes. If you do not acknowledge that, you will not come close to ethical *Bildung*. One is also in danger of being led into an authoritarian pedagogy where the teacher is the one who shall cultivate the other's autonomy and individuality. Ethical *Bildung*, however, can not be cultivated, with the result that the concept "marks the limit of the pedagogical project" (Wimmer, 2001, p. 161). The teacher who wants to focus on ethical *Bildung* stands in reality with empty hands (Biesta, 2008b), in sharp contrast to the teacher who focuses on teaching skills, knowledge and values. The school can, nonetheless, not choose to give up the project of ethical *Bildung*, I believe, because it implies an indifferent attitude towards ethical accountability. By giving up, the school disclaims its ethical responsibility. So what can be done? We are left with the following alternative: one can pave the way and hope that ethical *Bildung* will occur. For example, the school can create a union where the other is present. This must not be bound to time, but must occur all the time. The school must be organised so that each and all must live each moment with a feeling of responsibility for the other. The dilemma is of course that the teacher can not control students to take their ethical responsibility. It must always be done on a voluntary basis. Therefore, one might risk that there can be no ethical *Bildung*. One can actually run the risk that nothing happens in this classroom! But that is a risk the school must (sic) be willing to take, because ethical *Bildung* can not be forced. Such thoughts contradict current ideas about efficiency and profit. Politicians and others would like to see concrete, and preferably rapid, results of what they have invested. Therefore, this uncertainty, as seen with the eyes of the investors, is probably unfortunate. Seen with educational eyes, however, this uncertainty is not so unfortunate, as one can become more aware of one's ethical responsibilities (Biesta 2009a). One may also be aware that focusing on ethical *Bildung* is not about being active and producing something for the students. Instead, it is to keep the options open not to annul ethical *Bildung* (Biesta 2008a; 2008b; 2009a). This is in sharp contrast to the teacher who is so direct and tactless that he or she is in danger of dissolving any form of ethical *Bildung*. Focusing on ethical *Bildung* is more about preparing for something to happen. For example, the teacher can create space so that it is possible for students to meet. Nonetheless, there is no guarantee that ethical *Bildung* will happen, but as long as the options are kept open, the possibility exists. This is a way to work for an ethical school, which means that one also works for an ethical society.

Notes

¹ Of course the notion of 'God' is very complex and cannot be clarified immediately, but let me make it clear that I am thinking of God as an ethical category, hence I am not talking about God in heaven or some form of metaphysical God.

² Levinas tried to understand God from an ethical perspective, where responsibility for the other is the central aspect (Levinas, 1998, p. 69). In this connection Levinas (2003, p. 77) says something that is very unconventional and paradoxical. He says that one must be an atheist so as to come near God: "To relate [oneself] to the absolute as an atheist is to welcome the absolute purified of the violence of the sacred." What does this mean? I take it that it is an attempt to distance oneself from a primitive form for religion (ibid., p. 79). Levinas breaks with tradition. He wants us to stop relating ourselves to the traditional God, who is presented as infinite, almighty and predominant. This God that is associated with strength, transcendence and further as a dominating creature is quite simply a myth (ibid., p. 77). Instead we must, says Levinas (2003, p. 77), be open for humanity without myths. We must stop believing in a mythical God. This therefore demands of us to become atheists, as it is the only way we can relate ourselves to the other (ibid.). In this way one has come a step closer to God, because he 'talks' to us through the other's face. The divine begins in the human face (ibid.). Another paradox is that God cannot be God without first having been something else. This must not be understood that God literally has been something else, e.g. an interlocutor, before he was God (Levinas, 1998, p. 69; Morgan, 2007). It is rather that one cannot meet God direct. One can meet God first after an ethical act with the other (Levinas, 2008, p. 29). As such, Levinas disputes Kierkegaard's basic idea that mankind must first know God in order to act ethically (cf. Kierkegaard, 2004, p. 64). Levinas opposes this and says that God cannot be 'experienced' directly, but only as a trace in the other's face. This does not mean, however, that God is the other.

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