

Introduction

That Nietzsche would have something to say about education is not surprising. But if one were asked to name his primary concepts, one might list the *Übermensch*, eternal recurrence, will to power, death of God, morality as revenge, *amor fati*, the relation of sickness and health, the tension between truth and life, and other such things. Education is likely to be near the bottom of the list, if it turns up at all.

A look at Nietzsche's textual corpus, however, tells a different story. *Erziehung*, the term most straightforwardly translated as "education," occurs 408 times in Nietzsche's corpus. *Bildung*, a close relation of *Erziehung* that can mean either "education" or "culture" or "formation in culture" (Gjesdal 2015, 695), occurs 731 times. *Wille zur Macht*, by contrast, makes 174 appearances. Even if other concepts are more frequently celebrated, or constitute more fashionable objects of scholarly commentary, Nietzsche's preoccupation with education cannot be denied. Near the end of his studies in Leipzig, he writes: "The aim that lies before me is to become a really practical teacher and to be able to awaken the necessary reflection and self-examination in young people which enables them always to keep the why, the what, and the how of their science ever before their eyes."¹ Those taught by Nietzsche at Basel were impressed by his dedication. "When Nietzsche's students are asked about him, they seem to be united in the impression that they had sat at the feet not so much of a pedagogue as of a living ephor from ancient Greece, who had leapt across time to come among them and tell them of Homer, Sophocles, Plato, and their gods. As if he spoke from his own knowledge of things quite self-evident and still completely valid – that was the impression he made upon them." A few months before his collapse, he remarked that most of the students he taught performed well (*EH* "Wise" 4).

This Element, however, is not about Nietzsche's practice as a teacher. Nor is it an attempt to unearth his thinking about ordinary educational processes: lesson plans, class sizes, course modules, and the like. Such topics, belonging to what he calls the "means of education" (*Erziehungsmittel*, *FEI* Introduction 91), are not the ones that Nietzsche places at the center of his own thinking about education. This is not an accidental oversight on his part. It is a considered judgment that flows from his self-understanding: "At heart I belong to those involuntary educators who neither have nor need principles of education," he writes in an early draft of *EH*.²

¹ As quoted in Förster-Nietzsche 1912, 151.

² KSA 13:619, 1888,24[1], quoted at Small 2016, 15.

Nietzsche's apparent disdain for ordinary "principles of education" does not suggest his indifference to the fundamental problems of education as *he* sees them. Quite the contrary. A passage near the beginning of his third *Untimely Meditation*, "Schopenhauer as Educator," published in October 1874, indicates the nature and depth of his concern:

Your educators (*Erzieher*) can only be your liberators. And that is the secret of all education (*Bildung*): it does not provide artificial limbs, wax noses or corrective lenses – on the contrary, what might provide such things is merely a parody of education. Education is rather liberation, the clearing away of all weeds, rubble, and vermin that might harm the delicate shoots, a radiance of light and warmth, the kind rustling fall of rain at night; it is imitation and adoration of nature where nature is maternal and mercifully minded; it is perfection of nature when it prevents nature's fits of cruelty and mercilessness and converts them to good, when it throws a veil over nature's stepmotherly disposition and sad incomprehension (*SE* 1.166*).³

From Nietzsche's perspective, serious thinking about education must pose difficult questions that are often unasked, or asked only superficially. What is education's proper aim? What are the institutional or cultural forces that frustrate this aim? By what means can one attain liberation from these forces? How important are institutions, if the only education that ultimately matters (as Nietzsche himself sometimes says) is self-education?

My objective in this Element is to gain insight into Nietzsche's understanding of fundamental questions about education and to examine his main lines of approach to these questions. Although the text that frames the bulk of my discussion is *SE*, I will draw freely upon Nietzsche's later works, especially *HH*, *GS*, *Z*, *BGE*, and *TI*. But why privilege an early work like *SE*? Against the objection that Nietzsche would see *SE* as old news compared to his "mature" works, one may recall that shortly after he met Lou Salomé in 1882, he lent her a copy of *SE*. The first page of that text exhorts the "youthful soul" to listen to her conscience, which cries: "Be yourself! You are none of those things you now do, think, desire" (*SE* 1.163). That Nietzsche intended *SE* to help Salomé reach this goal is suggested by the conclusion of a letter he sent her: "Nature gave your glorious openness of will. Pindar says somewhere, 'Become the one who you are!'"⁴ Another reason not to dismiss *SE* on account of its early date may be gleaned from his correspondence with Georg Brandes, the Danish

³ Parenthetical references to *SE* include section followed by page number in Arrowsmith. An asterisk indicates that I have modified Arrowsmith's translation.

⁴ To Lou Salomé, June 10, 1882 (KSB 6:203, #239); see also To Salomé, end of August 1882 (KSB 6:247, #293).

literary critic with whom he exchanged letters throughout 1888. When Brandes reports that *SE* “seemed to speak to me from the soul,” Nietzsche responds: “This little work serves me as a touchstone. He to whom it says nothing *personal* has probably nothing to do with me either.”⁵

Nietzsche’s own high regard for *SE*, up to his last productive year, is a decisive reason not to dismiss it. There are other more specific justifications for making *SE* a primary textual focus in a treatment of Nietzsche’s thinking about education. Of all his published works, *SE* is the one that most directly addresses the relation between education and two other concepts: nature and culture. In the passage quoted earlier, Nietzsche asserts a complex relation between nature and culture. In some moments, the relation is one of “imitation and adoration.” But when nature is cruel and merciless, education’s relation to nature must change. Something beyond simple imitation is required, something more subtle, cunning, and *artful*. Nietzsche’s name for the artful attempt not just to imitate nature, but to perfect or redeem it, is “culture” (*Kultur*). The “fundamental idea of culture,” Nietzsche says, is “to promote the production of the philosopher, the artist, and the saint, within us and in the world, and thereby to labor for the perfection of nature” (*SE* 5.196; emphasis in original). In supplying what nature needs but often lacks, the philosopher, artist and saint are three types of the “redeeming human being” (*SE* 5.197; *SE* 6.198). These are the three human types that real education, as Nietzsche understands it, attempts to produce.

But one might justifiably ask: is not education’s real aim to foster the full development of the individual human personality? It is the aim of *Bildung* as envisaged by Humboldt and Herder, as well as Schiller and Goethe, both of whom Nietzsche admired greatly. For the Enlightenment *Bildung* tradition, to “form” an individual is not to make her into an instance of this or that type. It is to develop her capacity for being an individual. Some tension may exist between a conception of education that seems to value the autonomous cultivation of self, whatever that self happens to be, and the concept of culture articulated by *SE*, which seems to accord superior value to particular human types. Similarly, although there is clearly some connection between Nietzsche’s maxim “Become who you are!” and the *Bildung* tradition, commentators disagree about the precise nature of the relation between the two.⁶

⁵ To Brandes, April 10, 1888 (KSB 8:287, #1014).

⁶ Gjesdal, for example, reads Nietzsche as wanting to “rescue the notion of *Bildung* from its philistine defenders” (2015, 715). By contrast, Blue conjectures that “as Nietzsche matured, he became mistrustful of *Bildung* and even demoted it to secondary importance, transferring its salvageable aspects to his new maxim” (2016, 277).

In this Element, I will take up these issues by focusing primarily on *SE* and the three types that Nietzsche places at the center of culture. But since Nietzsche inherits some of these questions from the *Bildung* tradition, Section 1 begins with a series of five lectures that Nietzsche delivered in Basel in early 1872, just after he finished *BT*. These are the lectures titled *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*. (That is, *Über die Zukunft unserer Bildungsanstalten* – a title in which the link to *Bildung* is manifest). In these lectures, we hear Nietzsche recollect a dialogue between an aged philosopher and his younger companion (a teacher), witnessed by a younger version of himself and an unnamed friend. The dialogue attains no resolution of its problems, and Nietzsche chose to leave it both unfinished and unprinted. Nevertheless, it is an appropriate starting point for this Element. It is the first formulation of questions about education that Nietzsche never stops asking.

Section 2 considers the “education of the philosopher,” a topic that Nietzsche knows well from annotating and teaching Plato’s *Republic*. It shows that for Nietzsche, the philosopher redeems nature not by presuming to stand outside it, so that he can “conquer” it, but by showing us how to think and judge and feel naturally. “We speak of nature and forget to include ourselves: we ourselves are nature, *quand même*” (*WS* 327). What first needs redemption is ourselves, understood as part of nature. The philosopher is the human being who cultivates the power of thinking in a way that sees, with all clarity, the cruel and merciless side of nature. But he does not turn away from her: he “feels in himself the fullness and infinity of knowledge and love, of vision and power, who with his whole being loves nature and belongs to her, as judge and measure of all things” (*SE* 6.198). Accurately judging and measuring things, in a way that preserves and even heightens human feeling – this, rather than technical skill or scholarly sophistication, is what Nietzsche takes to be the distinctive mark of the philosopher.

Section 3 takes up questions that are generated by Nietzsche’s thinking about the education of the artist. Some of these questions arise from doubts that artistic genius can itself be brought into being, or even meaningfully shaped, by education. Rather than aim directly to produce artists by educational means, it seems both wiser and more practical to focus on “aesthetic education” for the public – or so might suggest Schiller’s 1794 text *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, which Nietzsche knew and admired. By creating the conditions under which artistic genius is able to thrive, aesthetic education empowers those whose initial relation to the artist is that of “supporter” or “enthusiast” to develop and cultivate the artist

within. This perspective runs like a spine through both “Schopenhauer as Educator” and “Richard Wagner at Bayreuth.” But in later works, particularly *HH*, Nietzsche questions his earlier acceptance of Schopenhauer’s notions about the strict limits on the education of genius. In the second half of Section 3, I discuss some options for the education of the artist that include but go beyond the “aesthetic education” perspective that dominates *SE* and *RWB*. What remains constant in Nietzsche’s thinking is the artist’s importance for nature’s transfiguration and redemption.

Section 4 turns to the education of the saint. If nature is truly to be redeemed, either “within us” or “in the world” (*SE* 5.196), neither the philosopher nor the artist is enough. The philosopher and the artist glimpse our need to overcome tendencies that favor petty self-enclosure. The saint acts upon the need, as the person “in whom the individual ego has entirely melted away and whose life of suffering is no longer, or hardly any longer, felt individually, but rather as a profound sensation of likeness, compassion, and unity with every living thing” (*SE* 5.197). The connection between this ideal and Nietzsche’s view of education is not obvious. Making the connection requires sustained attention to Nietzsche’s claim that education is liberation. Burning with a “most brilliant and amorous fire” (*SE* 5.197), the saint seeks liberation from “that which you customarily consider your ego” in order to move toward your “true nature,” which “does not lie hidden deep inside you, but immeasurably high above you” (*SE* 1.166). What is required for a person to see herself in this way and actively seek a higher self? *SE* gives a direct answer to this question, “love alone” – even as it declares that “love cannot be taught.” In later texts, however, Nietzsche returns to the question, arguing in both *HH* and *GS* that love can be learned. This reconsideration suggests the saint’s educability, as do multiple notebook entries contemporaneous with Zarathustra titled “Paths to the Saint.”⁷

A short conclusion queries the relation between Nietzsche’s educational project, expressed by *SE*’s “fundamental idea of culture,” and the education of a person as such, who may never be a philosopher, artist, or saint. The two are connected, I argue, in the ideal of “becoming whole.” Though for analytical or pedagogical purposes one might treat the philosopher, artist, and saint as distinct, Nietzsche does not ultimately regard them as *disiecta membra*. They are not specialized types that one must choose between, as if they were separable majors at a university. Rather, they point to qualities that must be integrated for a person to

⁷ See *CWFN* 16.252:1885,44[1]; 16.289:1885,1[126]; 16.293:1885,1[151].

attain wholeness. After showing that Nietzsche holds this “integral” view, I return to his stark distinction between real education and its counterfeits. I argue for the distinction’s relevance to our own time, in which anything resembling the liberating education that Nietzsche recommends has become increasingly vulnerable to consumerist models of education. The task of real education, as Nietzsche understands it, is not to gratify the whims or desires of students viewed as customers. Rather, it is to empower them to enter the circle of culture, where “the soul attains not only its clear, incisive, scornful view of itself, but the desire to look beyond the self and to search with all its strength for a higher self not yet revealed” (*SE* 6.198–199).

1 *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*

In his first extended reflection on the problem of education, *On the Future of Our Educational Institutions*, a series of lectures given in the city museum of Basel in early 1872, Nietzsche chooses a form that he first encountered in Plato’s *Symposium*, his favorite dialogue when he was nineteen (Förster-Nietzsche 1912, 119; see also Brophy 2023). The form is a remembered dialogue between an aged philosopher and his younger companion, along with two others (young Nietzsche, as a narrator, and his unnamed friend) who serve as the chorus and intervene at important junctures. Nietzsche’s choice of this form is not accidental. It enables him to state the problems of education as they appear from the standpoint of an elitist philosopher with uncompromisingly high standards, without committing himself to this standpoint. Moreover, his choice of the remembered dialogue enables him to voice the limitations of the philosopher’s approach, as discerned by the other three participants. Hovering in the background is the ideal of *Bildung*, as implied by the key term of the lectures’ title: *Bildungsanstalten* (“educational institutions” or “establishments devoted to *Bildung*”).

Before commenting directly on these lectures, it is necessary to gain some clarity about the historical context of *Bildung*. The term can take multiple senses, including “education,” “cultivation,” and “formation in culture” (Gjesdal 2015, 695). The most influential conception of *Bildung*, well known to both Nietzsche and his Basel audience, is that articulated by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), architect of the German *Gymnasium* in what became its canonical form, as well as the figure who “played a central role in revamping the educational system and founding the new university in Berlin” (Gjesdal 2015, 704). Pointing not so much to a particular project as to an ideal, Humboldt’s *Bildung* affirms the “absolute

and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity.”⁸ Implicit in *Bildung*, as suggested by the related German verb *bilden* (“to form”), is the aim of forming a person’s capacities so that her individual personality might be developed to the fullest possible extent. Since Humboldt saw *Bildung* as an absolute and essential human good, he wanted to make it available as widely as possible, without sacrificing its rigor. To that end, Humboldt consistently maintained a firm distinction between *Bildung* and vocational schooling. The latter is the prerogative not of the *Gymnasium* but the *Realschule*, whose aim was to equip its recipients for success in the world of business, commerce, trade, or professions that require narrowly specialized technical training. Nevertheless, Humboldt’s critics would argue that despite his good intentions, his version of *Bildung* was bound to become severely attenuated by two moves that he did little to resist, and in fact enabled. The first was his desire to universalize *Bildung*, to make it available on a wide scale. The second was to allow state-run educational institutions to administer *Bildung*, and thereby enable the state to co-opt *Bildung* for its own purposes.

Since Nietzsche opposes these moves in *FEI*, both in its Introduction and in the voice of the aged philosopher’s younger companion (a disillusioned teacher who bears a conspicuous resemblance to Nietzsche in 1872), we may reasonably number him among Humboldt’s critics.⁹ It does not, however, follow that Nietzsche is a critic of *Bildung* as such. *FEI* contains approving mentions of other heroes of *Bildung*, notably Lessing, Winckelmann, Schiller, and Goethe (*FEI* II.30, IV.63).¹⁰

Bracketing for now the formidable interpretive challenges posed by Nietzsche’s choice of literary form, I want to show how attending to *FEI*’s textual surface provides some important clues about Nietzsche’s educational lexicon. Its three primary terms are *Erziehung*, *Bildung*, and *Kultur*. His typical usage of these terms cannot be inferred from their dictionary meanings. Occasionally Nietzsche will run the first two terms together, speaking of “*Erziehung und Bildung*.” In these cases, a translator might understandably resort to “education and culture,” since “education and education” is nonsense. But universally rendering *Bildung* as “culture,” as

⁸ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Spheres and Duties of Government*. I am deliberately quoting the words chosen by J. S. Mill for the epigraph to his 1859 classic *On Liberty*.

⁹ Wilhelm von Humboldt’s friendship with Goethe (see Nassar 2022, 180–181) seems not to have inspired Nietzsche to think highly of the former, despite his endless admiration for the latter. Humboldt rarely appears in Nietzsche’s works; for an exception, see *D* 190.

¹⁰ Parenthetical references to *FEI* include section followed by page number in Searls’ translation. An asterisk indicates that I have modified Searls’ translation.

if the term were suddenly to lose its sense as “education” when paired with *Erziehung*, is highly misleading. Fortunately, *FEI* supplies some important clues about Nietzsche’s characteristic use of these terms.

Consider one revealing passage from Nietzsche’s Preface: “I can see a time coming when serious people, working together in the service of a wholly renewed and purified *Bildung*, will once again become legislators of an everyday *Erziehung* – the *Erziehung* toward that new *Bildung*” (*FEI* Preface, 93*). This usage suggests the instrumentality of *Erziehung* in relation to *Bildung*. As Nietzsche uses the term, *Erziehung* is for the sake of *Bildung* and not vice versa. In *FEI*’s fourth lecture, the aged philosopher distinguishes between an *Erziehung* aimed at “breadwinning” (*Brodgewinn*), on the one hand, and an “*Erziehung zur Bildung*,” on the other hand – that is, education geared toward self-cultivation (*FEI* IV.55). It is not that Nietzsche always or tediously emphasizes *Erziehung*’s instrumental relation to *Bildung*. At times he will consider the two jointly, as when Nietzsche says that his “intellectual exchange” with his auditors in the Basel city museum involves “questions of *Erziehung* and *Bildung*” (*Erziehungs- und Bildungsfragen*; *FEI* Introduction, 89). Nevertheless, *FEI* does not treat the concepts as simply coordinate. The superior concept is *Bildung*, even if its superiority does not eliminate the need for *Erziehung*. (Here as elsewhere, the higher cannot stand without the lower.¹¹)

In addition to illuminating the relation between *Erziehung* and *Bildung*, the utterance by the aged philosopher quoted above is helpful for understanding “*Kultur*.” In one usage of the term that recurs throughout *FEI*, “*Kultur*” names a trendy, “up-to-date” (*zeitgemäß*) social context. Seduction by “*Kultur*,” the philosopher says, leaves its victims “diverted from their path and alienated (*entfremdet*) from their own instincts” (*FEI* IV.67*). Such “*Kultur*” is not good for *Bildung*, and any *Erziehung* promoted or approved by “*Kultur*” is likely to be superficial or corrupt. In this negative sense, *Kultur* often appears with scare quotes, as “*Kultur*” – as it does in the passage quoted earlier; elsewhere *FEI* speaks of *Pseudokultur*. But *FEI*’s critical attitude toward “*Kultur*” and *Pseudokultur* does not imply that Nietzsche’s orientation toward culture is negative as such. On the contrary, *Pseudokultur* points to the possibility of the real thing, a superior *Kultur* – just as “*Pseudo-bildung*” points to a “true *Bildung*.”

¹¹ Even if *Erziehung* is “below” *Bildung* in some sense, Nietzsche does not denigrate the former. When he praises Schopenhauer as “*Erzieher*,” he means to honor him. An oddity of Huddleston 2019 is that it even as it has much helpful commentary about *Bildung*, it contains neither a single reference to *Erziehung* nor any mention of *SE* 5’s “fundamental idea of culture.”