

Bildung, the Beautiful Soul,
and the German Enlightenment Salon

This dissertation is submitted for the degree of *Doctor of Philosophy*

January 2019



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Preface

This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.

This dissertation does not exceed 80,000 words, excluding footnotes, bibliography, and headers.

I would like to thank my Supervisor, Dr. Martin Ruehl, to whom I am forever indebted for helping me discover my intellectual passions, for his unwavering support of my project and his perennial devotion to his students. It was an immense honour to have been guided by such a brilliant teacher and scholar who represents the spirit of *Bildung* in its truest sense. I would also like to thank my parents for their profound love and eternal support of my activities and ideas. They are the two most beautiful souls I know.

Justine Kathryn Kolata

Cambridge, January 2019

Now, this harmonious cultivation of my nature, which has been denied me by birth, is exactly what I most long for...With this, there is combined my love for poetry and all that is related to it; and the necessity I feel to cultivate my mental faculties and tastes, that so, in this enjoyment henceforth indispensable, I may esteem as good the good alone, as beautiful the beautiful alone.

– J.W. v. Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795/96)

Table of Contents

Introduction	5
Towards a New Conception of Bildung, die schöne Seele, and the Berlin Salons.....	5
The Theory of Bildung and die schöne Seele	11
Enacting Bildung: The Berlin Salon.....	24
Part I: Envisioning the Beautiful Soul	33
Chapter I: The Beautiful Soul as a Subjective Ideal.....	33
<i>The Infinite Potential of Man</i>	<i>33</i>
<i>Virtue and Aesthetic Morality.....</i>	<i>41</i>
<i>Subjectivity and Creative Freedom.....</i>	<i>49</i>
<i>Activity and the Full Life.....</i>	<i>56</i>
<i>The Struggle Against Utility.....</i>	<i>59</i>
<i>Rationality and the Passions.....</i>	<i>67</i>
<i>The Joy and Tragedy of Feeling</i>	<i>74</i>
Chapter II: The Beautiful Soul in a Collective	81
<i>Justice and the Good.....</i>	<i>81</i>
<i>Culture and Posterity.....</i>	<i>86</i>
<i>Egalitarianism: Educating Poets and Princes.....</i>	<i>93</i>
<i>The Real and the Ideal</i>	<i>103</i>
<i>On Beauty and its Significance for the Soul</i>	<i>112</i>
<i>The Art of Living: Forming a Beautiful Humanity</i>	<i>122</i>
Part II: Begetting the Beautiful Soul	132
Chapter III: The Beautiful Soul as a Subjective Ideal.....	133
<i>The Infinite Potential of Man</i>	<i>133</i>
<i>Virtue and Aesthetic Morality.....</i>	<i>136</i>
<i>Subjectivity and Creative Freedom.....</i>	<i>147</i>
<i>The Struggle Against Utility.....</i>	<i>152</i>
<i>Authenticity and Simplicity</i>	<i>155</i>
<i>Rationality and the Passions.....</i>	<i>157</i>
<i>The Joy and Tragedy of Feeling</i>	<i>161</i>
Chapter IV: The Beautiful Soul in a Collective	167
<i>Justice and the Good.....</i>	<i>167</i>
<i>Culture and Posterity.....</i>	<i>173</i>
<i>Inner Harmony and Friendships of the Soul.....</i>	<i>176</i>
<i>The Bildungsreise: A Journey into the World.....</i>	<i>192</i>
<i>The Real and the Ideal</i>	<i>194</i>
<i>On Beauty and its Significance for the Soul</i>	<i>198</i>
<i>The Art of Living: Forming a Beautiful Humanity</i>	<i>206</i>
Conclusion.....	212
Bibliography.....	221

Introduction

Towards a New Conception of *Bildung*, *die schöne Seele*, and the Berlin Salons

My dissertation explores two critical German philosophical concepts: *Bildung* (self-cultivation) and *die schöne Seele* (the Beautiful Soul) in the context of Berlin salon culture around 1800. It is the first systematic examination of the relationship between this philosophy and the institution of the salon. My principal goal is to demonstrate that during the period between the *Ancien Régime* and the *Vormärz*, the Berlin salons became the space in which this philosophy was performed and put into practice. Although I draw on the broader literature on this topic to elucidate this relationship, I focus on the theoretical formulations of the two most celebrated philosophers of the Beautiful Soul, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) and Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), and how their ideas informed the activities of the two most widely recognized salons in post-revolutionary Berlin, those of Henriette Herz (1764-1847) and Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833). My topic is significant for two related reasons: it lies at the intersection of aesthetic and moral philosophy which represents the core of the German philosophical tradition; and it explores the extent to which the tenets of this philosophy were vigorously debated and practiced in the salon, one of the most vibrant cultural institutions in Germany at the turn of the nineteenth century.

No single treatise by the proponents of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* provides a comprehensive explanation of the theory. The closest work is Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), which offers insights that are pertinent to this tradition, but frames them more generally. The concepts were always discussed within multiple contexts, such as reflections on the powers of the State, notions of personal liberty or aesthetics as a pedagogical discipline. The expansive application of *Bildung* suggests that it was a total philosophy, a grand theory, that could be applied to everything from one's personal development to politics and the public sphere. But, unlike ancient texts, its philosophy was never articulated in a single manuscript. Many of its propositions and practices were voiced and debated in the fluid, intersubjective context of salon conversations, rather than explicitly formulated in manuscripts. Since we lack a single, standardized text to analyze, I have chosen to construct a comprehensive account assembled from the fragments that identifies the commonalities amongst them, and, I believe, most accurately captures the ethos of the philosophy.

In this endeavor, I focus primarily on the writings of Goethe and Schiller, with secondary reference to other theorists of *Bildung*, for two reasons. First, their conception of *Bildung*, which, more than any other, proposed to transform life into a work of art, was adopted by the Berlin *salonnières*, and therefore most substantively connects this philosophy to the institution of the salon. Second, the development of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*, as well as public enthusiasm for it, was at its apex during the time of Goethe and Schiller. Their work, arguably, engendered its spirit in the purest sense. To make deductions about this philosophy's broader social and political relevance, I concentrate on the theorists who most significantly contributed to its articulation. I will not, therefore, address the many disparate and sometimes conflicting strands of thought across all of its theorists' writings spanning the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries. That is, I do not intend to produce an historical survey that catalogues these individual fragments of theoretical reflection. Instead I will offer the first account of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* as a philosophical system put into practice by unveiling the essential attributes of the theory during the period of its apotheosis.

Although I draw on philosophical and literary texts, my dissertation cannot claim to be purely intellectual history. Therefore, I do not follow the precise methodology of this discipline. Rather my work should be understood as a philosophical treatise in its own right, one that ventures to understand how the concepts were formulated and implemented in this time period, and how their status as *the* ideological premise of salon culture functioned. In short, this is a historical reconstruction of the ideas that informed the Berlin salons and a contribution to their philosophical development. Beyond examining the theory of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*, my contributions to the existing scholarship are threefold. First, by exploring the practical enactments of the Beautiful Soul and self-cultivation in the salon space, I will show that these concepts had far greater social and cultural significance than has been argued to date. Second, I articulate an aesthetic theory of the German salon that transforms the way we understand institutions for communication and deliberative democracy. Third, I demonstrate that there was a specific ideological underpinning to the activities of the Berlin *salonnières*. My dissertation reads the Berlin salons as projects of a radically political nature whose manifesto, as it were, was *Bildung*.

The praxis of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* has been overlooked in the literature despite the fact that they were rigorously pursued by some of the greatest German thinkers and widely

accepted among German cultural elites. W.H. Bruford's *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: "Bildung" From Humboldt to Thomas Mann* and Robert Norton's *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* are the only two works that offer a sustained account in this area.¹ Both provide a comprehensive surveys of the concepts. They fail, however, to advance interpretations that further our understanding of the philosophical, social, and political dimensions of these ideas, nor do they connect them to larger developments in German intellectual history and social thought.

Furthermore, despite portraying a generally favorable account of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* respectively, both books end rather despondently, highlighting their practical infeasibility, a claim that requires deeper interrogation. In particular, I will provide a counter-argument to Norton who ends his book by stating "To take hold of something actual was just what the beautiful soul, or at least its patrons, had always tried but failed to do."² I argue that this interpretation is exceedingly narrow in that it does not probe deeper into the social and cultural contexts in which the ideas of beauty and *Bildung* came to fruition. Beyond these two main works on the subject, Josef Chytry's *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* examines Greek aesthetic ideals in Germany during the eighteenth century.³ However, it only briefly touches upon *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* and, therefore, while it offers valuable context to the concepts, it does not adequately address them. There is a wealth of books with chapters on *Bildung* and articles that address specific works by its theorists or particular dimensions of the theory.⁴ But none of these works offer a sustained account of the concepts. Their narrow reach means that significant dimensions remain unexplored.

¹ Robert Edward Norton, *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), Walter Horace Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation: "Bildung" from Humboldt to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975)

² Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 282.

³ Josef Chytry, *The Aesthetic State: A Quest in Modern German Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989)

⁴ See, e.g., Raymond Geuss, 'Kultur, Bildung, Geist', *History and Theory*, vol. 35, no.2 (1996), 151-164, Daniel J. Farrelly, *Goethe and Inner Harmony: A Study of the "schöne Seele" in the Apprenticeship of Wilhelm Meister* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1973), Elizabeth Abel, Marianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland (eds.), *The Voyage In: Fictions of Female Development* (Hanover: Published for Dartmouth College by University Press of New England, 1983), Jeffrey S. Librett, 'Rhapsodic Dispositions: Engenderments of the Ground in the Discourse of the "Beautiful Soul" (Shaftesbury, Kant, Hegel, Heidegger)' (Doctoral Thesis,

Because *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* have not been considered in sufficient depth in their practical contexts, especially in relation to one another, the correlations among these ideas and the salons have never been delineated, or at least not in a systematic way, despite their convergent histories and philosophical foundations. This analytical lacuna could be related to the lack of emphasis placed on the importance of aesthetic sensibility to processes of communicative action and deliberative democracy in the space of the salon.⁵ Scholars seeking to analyze the socio-political legitimacy of the salons ignored a principal reason for their success: their intensely aesthetic nature. In revalorizing women as the leaders of the salon movement, scholars have decidedly underplayed the feminine, aesthetic qualities of their salons, depicting them in more masculine, “serious” terms. Yet emphasizing the elaborate aesthetic qualities of the salons provides a more comprehensive historical narrative. I aim to show that the feminine aesthetic impulse was not an obstacle to the salon’s legitimacy and political impact, rather it was the very element that rendered it powerful. The male dominated institutional counterparts of table societies and associations did not have the political influence or success that the salons experienced precisely because they rejected aesthetic qualities that made communication meaningful and desirable.

Just as Dena Goodman’s groundbreaking work, *The Republic of Letters*, disrupted the dominant historical portrayal of salons by emphasizing their most obvious yet overlooked aspect—the women who were their creators and curators—an aesthetic consideration of the

Cornell University, 1989), Benjamin C. Sax, ‘Active Individuality and the Language of Confession: The Figure of the Beautiful Soul in the *Lehrjahre* and the *Phänomenologie*’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1983), 437-466, Marjanne E. Goozé (ed.), *Challenging Separate Spheres: Female Bildung in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth- Century Germany* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006), Youngkun Tschong, *Charakter und Bildung: Zur Grundlegung von Wilhelm von Humboldts bildungstheoretischem Denken* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1997), Marie Wokalek, *Die schöne Seele als Denkfigur: Zur Semantik von Wissen und Geschmack bei Rousseau, Wieland, Schiller, Goethe* (Göttingen:Wallstein, 2011), Ernst Lichtenstein, ‘Bildung’, *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, vol.12 (1968) 7-29, Wilhelm Richter, *Der Wandel des Bildungsgedankens. Die Brüder von Humboldt, das Zeitalter der Bildung und die Gegenwart* (Berlin: Colloquium Verlag, 1971)

⁵ See, e.g., Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, trans. by Thomas Burger (Cambridge: MIT, 1989)

salons will fundamentally change our understanding of these critical spaces for public discourse. Equally, by exploring the aesthetic dimensions of salon culture, an underlying link to the concepts of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* is unveiled. We will see how the salon realized the ideals of these concepts in important respects, and therefore validated their theoretical foundations, and how *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* became the underlying philosophical doctrine of the salons, giving them an intellectual and social legitimacy. This was a reciprocal, recursive relationship of theory and practice, one grounded in aesthetics.

Like *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*, the literature on the Berlin salons is relatively scarce. The most important scholarly contribution in this area is *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin* by Deborah Hertz which provides a comprehensive statistical analysis of the salons and valuable information on their social context.⁶ There are other notable works in this area which offer insights into the structure and functioning of the salons and the personalities of the *salonnières*.⁷ None of these works, however, explore the ideological underpinnings of the salons and few provide sustained accounts. The topic, therefore, merits further consideration, particularly as it relates to the *salonnières* motivations for organizing their salons, sustaining them, and articulating their larger socio-political ideals and ambitions.

⁶ Deborah Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2005)

⁷ See, e.g., Emily Bilski and Emily Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons: The Power of Conversation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), Mary Hargrave, *Some German Women and Their Salons* (San Bernadino: ULAN Press, 2012), Ingeborg Drewitz, *Berliner Salons. Gesellschaft und Literatur zwischen Aufklärung und Industriezeitalter* (Berlin: Haude und Spener, 1979), Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*, trans by. Richard and Clara Winston (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1974), Heidi Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen: The Life and Work of a German Jewish Intellectual* (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1998), Petra Wilhelmy Dollinger, *Die Berliner Salons: Mit historisch-literarischen Spaziergängen* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2000), Petra Wilhelmy Dollinger, *Der Berliner Salon im 19. Jahrhundert: 1780-1914* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), Hannah Lotte Lund, *Der Berliner 'jüdische Salon' um 1800* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2018), Barbara Hahn (ed.), *Begegnungen mit Rahel Levin Varnhagen* (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 2015), Barbara Hahn, 'Mit Goethe im Bad. Begegnungen im Exterritorialen: Rahel Levin, Sara und Marianne Meyer', *Monatshefte*, vol. 92, no.3 (2000), 336-350, Deborah Hertz, 'Salonnières and Literary Women in Late Eighteenth-Century Berlin', *New German Critique*, no.14 (1978), 97-108, Peter Quennell (ed.), *Affairs of the Mind: The Salon in Europe and America from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Century* (Washington, D.C: New Republic Books, 1980)

My dissertation is divided into two parts, each containing two chapters. These parts are the mirror image of each other, with identical sections and subsections, to reflect that every conceptual dimension of this philosophy was represented within the space of the salon. First, I depict the self-cultivated person according to the concepts of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*. Subsequently, I examine how the *salonnières*' aspired to practice self-cultivation within their salons while helping their salon participants do the same. In both parts I identify the essential features of a Beautiful Soul as an individual and within a social collective. In doing so, I will demonstrate that the salon was the space in which beautiful souls were cultivated and concepts of a virtuous humanity had the possibility of being articulated.

For clarification it should be noted that I will use the pronoun "she" to discuss the perfect archetype of the Beautiful Soul, and I will use the pronoun "he" to discuss the individual who cultivated himself to become a more beautiful soul. I do so partly for the sake of accurately translating the article from the German. However, it also serves to show that historically both men and women were integral to the intellectual development and implementation of these concepts and, if the *salonnières* would have it their way, this philosophy was available to all.

In the first section of both parts, I will argue that the theoretical figure of the Beautiful Soul and the *salonnières* within their salons, respectively, were defined by the following characteristics. Both brought a wealth of latent potential into being through the fullest expression of their faculties; actualized an expansive set of virtues from a natural inclination towards moral law; understood the importance of autonomous thought and the need to develop inner freedom; and approached self-cultivation as a serious activity, towards which all of life should be directed. Overcoming the disenchanting demands of utility, they saw the world as multifaceted and interconnected; maintained genuineness and authenticity in interactions with others; embraced both sensory impressions and rational faculties; and intensely experienced the full spectrum of emotions, overcoming pain and world weariness to preserve their ideals.

In the second section of both parts, I explore the collective dimensions of the Beautiful Soul. I argue that both the theory of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* and the *salonnières* within their salons sought a metaphysical good through a life dedicated to justice as a secular alternative to religion; advanced humanity through cultural ends; developed an internal harmony which contributed to social comity through friendships of the soul; promoted tolerance, benevolence, and egalitarianism; embarked upon a journey of self-discovery through meaningful encounters

with other peoples and cultures; maintained their ideals while accepting the imperfections of the real; honed an acute sensitivity to beauty to improve the human condition; and transformed life itself into a work of art, contributing to the formation of a more beautiful and virtuous humanity.

Prior to this extended analysis, I will first contextualize both the philosophy and the activities of the Jewish *salonnières*, alone and in relation to one another.

The Theory of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*

The concept of *Bildung* first appeared in sixteenth century theology, but was most fully developed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. *Die schöne Seele* emerged from the discourse on *Bildung* in the nineteenth century. Although there is no exact translation in English, *Bildung* is sometimes roughly translated as “formation” or “self-cultivation.” It may be defined as a moral-aesthetic education, or more precisely, the rigorous cultivation of one’s intellect and the formation of one’s self. Education in this sense has a rich, multifaceted meaning; a process of intellectual, spiritual, and cultural poesis that conjoins enrichment of one’s own faculties with the objective of contributing to the commonweal. *Bildung* was an aesthetic ideal focused on developing human capacities and advancing knowledge and culture.⁸ Similarly, the concept of *die schöne Seele* entailed a rigorous pursuit of personal cultivation to create a convergence of the individual aesthetic impulse with a collective, ethical ideal. The concept affirmed “that a profound affinity exists between beauty and goodness; that there is a point at which aesthetic and ethical values commingle to form a new, indivisible unity.”⁹ The Beautiful Soul was a virtuous soul, one that possessed a sense of justice, pursued wisdom, and practiced benevolence through an aesthetic proclivity for the good.

Bildung and *die schöne Seele* had their own history and strands of thought that may be considered separately, but they were, in a fundamental sense, convergent concepts. Self-cultivation was an active process and the Beautiful Soul was an idealized form. But the pursuit of a beautiful soul was essentially synonymous with the pursuit of self-cultivation; both were directed towards attainment of the same enlightened state and the metaphysical ends of beauty,

⁸ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 251.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. IX.

goodness and truth. Together I define them as the aesthetic cultivation of one's intellectual, moral, and imaginative faculties for the purpose of self-realization, cultural refinement and collective human flourishing.

Many of the most prominent German intellectuals of the time, including Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813), Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832), Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), Friedrich Schlegel (1772-1829) and Novalis (1772-1801) were instrumental in advancing the concepts and practices of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*. They devoted much of their intellectual careers to their definition and development through philosophical essays, letters, literary works, and the theatre. Arguably, the most important primary texts in this area, and the one's I focus on, include Schiller's complete aesthetic and philosophical essays, especially *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795), *Kallias Letters*, written in 1793 and published posthumously in 1848, and "On Grace and Dignity" (1793), as well as Goethe's *Bildungsroman Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795/96), Wieland's *Bildungsroman The History of Agathon* (1766), Humboldt's *On the Limits of State Action*, written in the early 1790s and published posthumously in 1852, Schlegel's *On the Study of Greek Poetry* (1797), Novalis's "Fragments" (1798), Fichte's *The Vocation of Man* (1799), and Herder's *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1800). Although these concepts were elaborated in other European countries by philosophers like the Third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671-1713) who greatly influenced their development, they remained a distinctly German tradition, one which engaged overlapping circles of intellectuals, artists, educators, politicians, and a critically debating public for over two centuries.

The development of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* in Germany can be traced to the revival of Hellenism and an obsession with Greek ideals. Philhellenism penetrated all areas of philosophy from politics, to ethics and epistemology. The core element of Greek philosophy that unified its different branches, and particularly attracted the Germans, was its strong emphasis on aesthetics, which they would form into its own discipline. Schiller and Goethe idolized the Beautiful and respected the Greeks because they believed that their art and culture reflected this higher form.¹⁰ German humanists turned to Hellenic ideals as a solution to the problems they

¹⁰ Suzanne L. Marchand, *Down from Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 3.

identified in their increasingly materialistic society. The Ancients, they believed, had demonstrated that beauty could ennoble art, life, and politics. To have a historical model to lionize gave them hope that their aspirations for a more beautiful and virtuous society were possible and the world could return to the poetic glory that they imagined Antiquity had possessed.

The art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768) may be considered the scholar most responsible for having initiated these developments. The excavations which took place at Herculaneum in 1738 and Pompeii in 1748 were the inspiration for his ground breaking work *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture* (1756) and later *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764). Winckelmann believed that modern civilization could only become great if it imitated the ancients. He famously argued that Greek art had a “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” which made it superior to the creations of other cultures and time periods. The beauty of Greek art came from the greater freedom and harmony that it expressed. These claims catalyzed a wealth of scholarship and interest in this area.

Taking inspiration from Winckelmann, Schiller believed that the Greeks put modern society to shame by virtue of their simplicity and wisdom. He particularly admired their ability to unite fullness of form and fullness of substance, philosophizing with creating, gentleness with vitality, and to marry the excitements of youth with a matured faculty of reason.¹¹ The Greeks understood that the good life entailed balancing the pleasures of the sensory world with intellectual endeavors. Schiller contrasted the harmoniousness with which they approached life with the inharmonious condition of modern man enslaved by economic realities that created artificial needs. The only way to restore the harmony that was lost in the development of civilization was to look back to the Greeks for their wisdom and inspiration. His influential poem, “The Gods of Greece,” was a tribute to the beautiful world that they created with the hope that their heightened states of aesthetic self-cultivation would once again inform society’s course. Schiller claimed the “Greeks are what we were; they are what we shall become again.”¹²

¹¹ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, trans. by Reginald Snell (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), pp. 37-38.

¹² Frederick Beiser, ‘Schiller and Pessimism’, in *Aesthetic Reason and Imaginative Freedom: Friedrich Schiller and Philosophy*, ed. by María del Rosario Acosta López, Jeffrey L. Powell (Albany: State University of New York, 2018), pp. 83-101(p.94).

Goethe, who also drew heavily on Winckelmann, echoed Schiller's sentiment when he argued that we must return to the ancient Greeks as their model was the greatest.¹³ He maintained that "of all peoples, the Greeks have dreamt the dream of life the best."¹⁴ This, he believed, was because they were so highly cultivated that their daily realities were elevated by their poetic imagination.¹⁵ Like Schiller, he considered the modern society in which he lived to be constrained and joyless in comparison with that of the Greeks. Goethe's nostalgia for antiquity informed most of his writings which borrowed from Greek themes. For example, he endeavored to reconstruct Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, a book that he read as a young boy which greatly influenced his intellectual development. His play *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1779) was a rewriting of the tragedy by Euripides, and his literary works that were not as explicitly Greek, such as *Wilhelm Meister*, nevertheless had strong Greek undertones.

The unifying theme that informed his collective works was his ambition to arrive at a concept of the perfected man. With their notions of *arete* (moral excellence) and *eudaimonia* (an enlightened state of happiness), the Greeks touched upon the issues that concerned him most. Related to this quest was his desire to discover the original plant and color from which all others derived.¹⁶ This interest in human *Bildung* mirrored in plant life, and his passion for nature more generally, which he shared and discussed often with Schiller, was, again, the product of Greek inspiration from his interpretation of their natural philosophies.¹⁷

From Winckelmann to Wieland, Schlegel, Goethe and Schiller, the Germans shared the belief that Greek art and philosophy were the foundation of *Bildung* and they were the first to acknowledge that the concept of the Beautiful Soul had its origins in Antiquity. They viewed their theory as an elaboration upon ancient Greek ideas. Therefore, although it is true that the formal philosophy of *Bildung* originated in the sixteenth century and reached its pinnacle in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, its genesis can be attributed to notions formulated in millennia past.

¹³ Johann Peter Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe with Eckermann and Soret*, trans. by John Oxenford (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1850), p. 204.

¹⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Collected Works of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe* (Hastings, East Sussex: Delphi Classics, 2013), p. 3535.

¹⁵ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 265.

¹⁶ Humphry Trevelyan, *Goethe and the Greeks* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. xxxviii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xvii.

The Germans found particular inspiration for *Bildung* in Plato's theory of the forms and Plotinus's notion of *kalokagathia*, roughly translated as a person who exhibits *καλός* (the beautiful) and *ἀγαθός* (the good or the virtuous).¹⁸ The Platonic triad was systematically intertwined in the theory of *Bildung*. Herder, for example, stated that the ultimate purpose of a classical *Bildung* education was to imprint upon the youthful soul "the eternal, inviolable rule of the true, the good, and the beautiful."¹⁹ He argued that:

Truth, beauty, and love are the objects at which man aims in all his endeavors, even without being conscious of it, and often by the most devious paths; the perplexities of the labyrinth will be unfolded, the seductive forms of enchantment will vanish, and everyone will not only see the center, far or near, to which his ways tends, but though, maternal Providence, under the form of the genius and friend he needs, will guide him to it themselves, with a gentle and forgiving hand.²⁰

Herder understood the Platonic forms to be the teleological objective of man, and argued that a *Bildung* education would bring humans closer to this objective. Schlegel asserted that the Greeks reached the highest level of *Bildung* of any people in history because of their interest in beauty for beauty's sake and that their self-determination was derived from the equilibrium which they had found in the Platonic forms.²¹ We can see, therefore, that the aim of *Bildung*, to strive towards a metaphysical Beauty, Goodness, and Truth, was one that Greek philosophers first identified as the ends most worthy of human pursuit.

The historical setting of this Hellenic burgeoning in the intellectual landscape of Germany that gave rise to the development of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* was the *Aufklärung*, the German Enlightenment. In order to contextualize these concepts, perceptions on the place of the *Aufklärung* within the European Enlightenment more generally, therefore, merit consideration. Much of what we define as the Enlightenment today, especially that grounded in the critique of instrumental reason, comes specifically from interpretations of its emergence in

¹⁸ James Conant, 'Nietzsche's Perfectionism: A Reading of Schopenhauer as Educator', in *Nietzsche's Postmoralism: Essays on Nietzsche's Prelude to Philosophy's Future*, ed. by Richard Schacht (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 181-258 (p. 252).

¹⁹ Bas van Bommel, 'Between "Bildung" and "Wissenschaft": The 19th century German Ideal of Scientific Education', *European History Online*, (2015), 12-14 (p. 3).

²⁰ Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. by T. Churchill (London: Bergman Publishers, 1800), p. 107.

²¹ See Friedrich Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, ed. and trans. by Stuart Barnett (New York: Suny Press, 2001)

France. Although the French may be seen as the initiator and driving force, the Enlightenment was a trans-European movement, with a shared set of values in rationality, *fraternité*, individual freedom, and religious tolerance, as well as a rich variety of distinct ideas that appeared in different countries. Yet, the French Enlightenment has dwarfed others, such as the *Aufklärung*, which is often considered relatively insignificant by comparison.

A central reason for this perception is that, as Joachim Whaley points out, “[I]n contrast to French Enlightenment, German Enlightenment was not characterized by an inherent antagonism to the demands of the state.”²² During the rule of Frederick the Great (1740-1786), there was a relative level of intellectual freedom that allowed both intellectuals and servants of the state to engage with Enlightenment ideology without fear of suppression. In certain cases, it was easier to advance these ideas with the support of a monarch sympathetic to the cause than to criticize the monarchy and risk freedom of expression.²³

Later philosophers, such as Humboldt, Goethe, and Schiller, saw the negative effects of the radical political strands of the French Enlightenment that culminated in The Terror.²⁴ Their disillusionment with the revolutionary cause fueled the perception that the *Aufklärung* was apolitical and therefore a less significant version than that of the French. But this is not an entirely accurate portrayal. The German *Aufklärung* was *inherently* political in nature, but its thinkers chose to develop their political philosophy along lines that they considered to be more sustainable, holistic and, in their eyes, imbued with the possibility of producing perpetual peace.²⁵

An analysis of the *Aufklärung* through its *Bildung* tradition, which came at the end of this period, challenges this apolitical critique. It exemplifies the approach its theorists took founded upon their conviction that every individual could master his destiny, not through violent social

²² Joachim Whaley, ‘The Transformation of the *Aufklärung*: From the Idea of Power to the Power of Ideas’, in *Cultures of Power in Europe during the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Hamish Scott and Brendan Simms (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp.158-179 (p. 158).

²³ Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), p. 56.

²⁴ Frank A. Kafker, James Michael Laux, and Darline Gay Levy (eds.), *The French Revolution: Conflicting Interpretations* (Florida: Krieger Publishing Company, 2002), p. 222.

²⁵ Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, p.10.

outbursts and political chaos, but through self-cultivation in the name of a greater social good. Kant, Schiller, and Humboldt did not believe that the Enlightenment's ideological ends could immediately be brought to fruition, but rather would only emerge through a continuous process of education of the citizenry, thereby developing the capacity of the public to legitimately govern itself. Premature revolutionary action of the uninformed masses would only lead to despotism, more catastrophic for the public than monarchy. The theorists of *Bildung* turned to aesthetic philosophy, not as a means of *avoiding* the political sphere, but for precisely the opposite reason. They wanted to engage directly with politics, incorporating each individual into a grand vision of human progress through the aesthetic impulse, elaborating upon notions of an Aesthetic State formed in Antiquity. A nuanced understanding of the experience of the beautiful upon the human soul was their political solution to the irrationality and chaos that they observed in France which overpowered and perverted the once promising universal principles that the European Enlightenments had shared.

In the tradition of Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) and his *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1496), the theorists of *Bildung* believed that only by activating each person's potential could Europe reach its ideological ends of equality, liberty and fraternity. The soul, while metaphysical and eternal, was reinvented within a humanistic framework such that the individual possessed the agency to shape it, and by doing so, contribute to the advancement of humanity. Just as an individual might ask "what is the state of my physical health?" it was expected that they would pose the question "what is the present condition of my soul?" and work towards its improvement. What was once referred to as moral beauty became the Beautiful Soul, a revealing ontological evolution which placed greater emphasis on peoples' ability to better their condition and take the future of Europe into their own hands.²⁶

The importance placed on subjectivity demonstrates that this was a time of transition in which Enlightenment thought was colored by Romanticism. Ideas from the *Sturm und Drang*, the German artistic and literary movement of the late 1760's to the early 1780's, which opposed the extreme rationality of the French and saw value in emotions, feelings, and the passions, influenced the theoretical development of *Bildung*. Although its theorists' ideas were still firmly

²⁶ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 138.

embedded within the Enlightenment tradition, they offered a more human approach to its ends, overcoming strict rationalism in favor of a balance between reason and feeling.

By reclaiming the soul and asserting the individual's innate freedom in the governance of his inner world, the philosophy of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* liberated individuals from preexisting social, religious and political doctrine. It offered clear paradigms for lived experience, which spoke directly to the individual and his circumstance in the world. A substantive argument can be made that, if we assess the political dimensions of the *Aufklärung* from its *Bildung* tradition, it was the stronger of Enlightenments since its vision was truer to these shared, European principles. It proposed a longer-term horizon for the triumph of reason, knowledge, and freedom from oppression which resided in every individual's agency and, as such, was radically egalitarian and inclusionary as the Enlightenment's philosophy had professed. A further exploration of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*, therefore, expands our notions of what Enlightenment meant historically and what it could mean today.

The Rise of Berlin Salon Culture

Most historians have identified the rise of salon culture in Old Regime Berlin with a specific moment of political transition in Germany associated with the reigns of Frederick the Great (1740-1786), Frederick William II (1786-1797) and Frederick William III (1797-1840). Prior to Frederick the Great's ascendance to the throne in 1740, the Holy Roman Empire lacked a courtly life that facilitated the development of salon culture.²⁷ There are a number of reasons why this was the case and why salon culture emerged later in Germany than in other European countries, such as Italy or France. One of the principal reasons was the political fragmentation of Germany into small princely states, territories, and cities. This fragmentation impeded the emergence of a cosmopolitan culture in which salons could flourish.²⁸ Another reason was the dominance of universities and the competition among German principalities to found them.²⁹ Male controlled scholarly institutions had a stronghold on the intellectual climate of the time, inhibiting the

²⁷ James van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe: New Approaches to European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 215-216.

²⁸ Bernhard Giesen, 'Cosmopolitans, Patriots, Jacobins, and Romantics', *Daedalus*, vol. 127, no.3 (1998), 221-250 (p.230).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

possibility for a traditionally female led intellectual institution to be established and to gain traction. Furthermore, the Prussian court's hostility towards Protestantism detached the monarchy from broader developments in Enlightenment ideology and fostered antagonism towards the influences of French society where salon culture was most prevalent.³⁰

In Germany, the emergence of salons and their heyday from 1780 to 1807 is associated with a number of important social conditions and political developments immediately prior to and during this period. One condition was the willingness of the government to utilize its resources for the advancement of ideas and the arts, rather than solely for military or economic purposes which depended on a leader amenable to investing in culture. Frederick the Great, who established many spaces and institutions for the public to self-cultivate, was this leader. Prior to his rule few places existed for social and intellectual exchange, but, by his death in 1786, countless public areas including parks, theatres, and an opera house were erected. The expansion of cultural institutions and their wider demographic reach was born from Frederick the Great's personal devotion to Enlightenment principles, his patronage of the arts, and his love of philosophy and music, all of which contributed to a revived intellectual and cultural landscape in Prussia. His proclivity towards enlightened absolutism and his desire to be remembered as a philosopher king advanced a political environment hospitable to new intellectual developments, a communicative culture, and a better educated populace. His passion for French ideas and his efforts to bring French scholars to Germany also contributed to German interest in the intellectual life of France, including its salons.

Frederick the Great contributed to a more enlightened and cultured Prussian society, which was a necessary precondition for salons to emerge. However, it was only after his rule with Frederick William II's assumption of power that the court actively took an interest in and encouraged different forms of sociability.³¹ After the brief reign of Frederick William II from 1786 to his death in 1797, Frederick William III and his wife Louise of Mecklenburg (1776-1810) furthered this receptiveness to enlightened social exchange. The royal couple were avid supporters of the literary scene and salon culture in Germany. Queen Louise befriended a number of important *salonnières*, most especially Duchess Dorothea von Courland (1793-1862),

³⁰ Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 216.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

whose salon she attended on numerous occasions.³² These changes in courtly and political life in Germany created a more amenable environment for intellectual exchange, but they were not necessarily the proximate cause for a vital salon culture.

Although not all salons in Germany were run by Jewish women, the majority and the most important ones were. Therefore, to understand their history, one must also attend to the history of the *Haskalah* and Jewish high society during this period. The *Haskalah*, from the Hebrew *sekhel*, “reason” or “intellect,” which began in the 1770s and ended in the 1880s, was a Jewish intellectual movement inspired by the European Enlightenment which promoted integration, religious tolerance, rationality, freedom of thought, and emphasized the importance of secular education. It sought to simultaneously preserve Jewish cultural identity and to integrate Jews into wider European culture and society. The *Haskalah* emerged during a moment of economic prosperity for the Prussian Jewish elite who had the resources to invest in culture and a more stable position from which to consider the place of their people in society. Despite the hostile financial and legal conditions imposed on the Jewish mercantile class, and the extreme tax burdens they were forced to pay, a new kindred of affluent Jews came into being.³³ This golden age of Jewish economic prosperity allowed for ideas to flourish and for Jews to gain wider social and intellectual acceptance and influence.

The gradual maturation of salon culture in Prussia was enabled by a number of important *Haskalah* intellectuals.³⁴ The most prominent of these was the philosopher and literary critic, Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) whose works ranged from subjects in metaphysics and epistemology to aesthetics and political theory. Mendelssohn’s prolific writing and intellectual eminence made him the paragon of Jewish scholarship. He became a public personality celebrated by the Jewish community for his efforts to advance their civil rights. His encouragement of secular education catalyzed an intense period of intellectualism and engagement with high culture.³⁵ Within the context of the *Haskalah*, under the guidance of

³² Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 81.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³⁵ Dan Cohn Sherbok, *Judaism: History, Belief and Practice* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 243.

Mendelssohn's intellectual leadership, affluent Jewish women became the visionaries of a vibrant culture of salons in Germany.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, salons were a relatively ubiquitous form of social gathering in the circles of high society in cosmopolitan areas. They appeared across the lands of the Holy Roman Empire in cities such as Weimar, Jena, Heidelberg, and Leipzig. I focus on the Berlin salons for three reasons. First, we have more detailed historical information on the celebrated Berlin *salonnières*, Rahel Varnhagen and Henriette Herz. This is largely because their salons attracted publicly recognized intellectuals and, as a result, are more thoroughly documented in the primary and secondary literature. Moreover, the Berlin *salonnières*, more than others, wrote autobiographies and extensive letters that aid in better understanding their motivations and ideological orientations, particularly as they relate to *Bildung*. Second, the Berlin salons were spaces in which the literature on this philosophy was most fervently discussed and its primary theorists, including Humboldt, Goethe, and Schiller, frequented these salons and cultivated their ideas within them. Varnhagen and Herz had a particularly strong interest in *Bildung and die schöne Seele*, as well as a shared obsession with the work of Goethe, which makes the connection between institution and philosophy all the more apparent. Third, the Berlin *salonnières* were close friends and their salons formed an interconnected social network of Jewish intellectual elite within which their endeavors converged in the shared ideology of *Bildung*.

Rahel Varnhagen is the principal focus of my analysis of Berlin salon culture, not only because she was the leading and arguably most influential of the German *salonnières*, but also because her direct concern with the philosophy of *Bildung*, and her internal struggles to find a place and a purpose in the world, reveal the more ambitious and idealistic socio-political ends towards which her salon was directed. Henriette Herz who established the first Berlin salon is another central figure to this analysis. Sara Levy (1761-1854), Sara Grotthuis (1763-1828), Dorothea Schlegel (1764-1839), and Amalie Beer (1767-1854), each of whom held their own smaller salons and were part of the intellectual circles of Varnhagen and Herz, will also be referenced to provide a more comprehensive framework in which to explore the social intersection of institution and philosophy that emerged in Berlin.

Varnhagen and Herz, in particular, emblemized the sisterhood that the *salonnières* established. These women maintained close personal relationships, strengthening their salons'

foundations through demonstrations of camaraderie and mutual support. As childhood friends, relatives, or mentors, they began their salons after learning from others and they often attended their friends' salons for sustained periods over the course of their lives. They were not afraid to concede the successes and qualities of the other *salonnières* who they viewed not as competitors, but as friends. Herz, for example, generously acknowledged that Varnhagen was “The highest blossom of the new spirit” and was impressed by her accomplishments.³⁶ The *salonnières* typically planned their activities on different days of the week in order not to interfere with each other, while also exchanging ideas and alternating topics. The spirit of reciprocity and the intersections that took place, therefore, make a collective analysis of their shared aims and activities feasible.

At the core of salon culture was the exploration of ideas and the acquisition of new knowledge through the art of conversation in a participative community. The structure of the Berlin salons was modeled after those of the French in the Age of Enlightenment.³⁷ The topic of conversation would change each time and spanned the spectrum of disciplines from philosophy and the arts, to the natural sciences. Usually during a salon, an invited speaker would read a text chosen by the *salonnière*, such as a philosophical treatise, a poem, or a scholarly article, and give a short lecture on the topic. Thereafter, salon participants would engage in conversation moderated by the *salonnière*. The presentation was meant to stimulate discussion and the emphasis was placed on the conversation that it inspired, which distinguished the salon from other cultural institutions of the time that separated the conveyor of knowledge from the listener. In a salon, everyone present both offered their ideas and heard those of others in a mutually rewarding meeting of minds. The *salonnière* artfully guided the conversation and gave it structure, but the atmosphere was natural and conducive to free flowing dialogue. The salon was a space for polite sociability to meet other curious people who shared an affinity for culture and ideas and a chance to encounter perspectives and lived circumstances disparate from one's own. Salons were the only institution of their time in which people of different classes, genders, and religions met as presumptive equals for mutual betterment, a defining feature that I will discuss in depth.

³⁶Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 25.

³⁷ Roswitha Burwick, ‘From Aesthetic Teas to the World of Noble Reformers: The Berlin Salonière (1780 to 1848)’, *Pacific Coast Philology*, vol. 29, no.2 (1994), 129-142 (p.129).

Salons were hosted in the intimate setting of the home, usually the drawing room, over tea or a meal. Although the setting was personal and informal, the *salonnière* took her role as host seriously, viewing it not as a pastime but as a career requiring apprenticeship.³⁸ *Salonnières* spent days preparing for their salons, reading the literature, speaking with experts, and writing in their journals so that they would be well versed on the topic in order to successfully conduct the conversations. Minutes of proceedings were generally not taken, so most of our knowledge of their contents and happenings derives from letters between the *salonnières* and participants. Unfortunately, these letters “assumed rather than discussed the details of how salons functioned,” so some useful historical information is missing.³⁹ Nevertheless, we have sufficient evidence to draw a vivid picture of what would have happened in the Berlin salons, which I will explore in due course.

Most scholarship has interpreted the Berlin *salonnières* motivation for founding their salons in straightforward terms as a form of social assimilation. Salons represented an opportunity for acculturation, to intermarry, convert, and gain noble titles. Demographics on high conversion rates and intermarriage corroborate this interpretation.⁴⁰ From this reading, the aristocrats who attended salons, and wanted to profit economically, engaged primarily for instrumental reasons, to borrow money from and marry the daughters of wealthy Jewish families. Although there is sufficient evidence to suggest that these factors played a role in salon sociability, it would be a grave error to conclude that this was the principal reason that a thriving salon culture emerged. As Deborah Hertz has suggested to attribute the creation and success of salons to such a utilitarian calculus is not a sufficient explanation.⁴¹ Furthermore, as Hertz explains, the *salonnières* themselves did not view their activities as an opportunistic advancement of their social position, nor as a betrayal of their religion; they rather saw their salons as an act of emancipation from traditional gender roles and social norms as well as their own contribution to a humanistic ideal. In a telling passage Hertz remarks:

Their (the *salonnières*) behavior has been judged as the socially opportunistic betrayal of their religion and people, yet much other evidence suggests that this was not how the women saw their own acts. Instead, they seem to have viewed their salon circles, conversions and intermarriages as the achievements of an often

³⁸ Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 207.

³⁹ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p.19.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 204-229.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

painful fight for personal freedom...the Jewish salon women defined their emancipation in the same way as the upwardly mobile male intellectuals of the era: as social integration into high society and high culture, which was seen as the model of civilized humanity.⁴²

While Hertz repeatedly argues that wealth and social standing were by no means the predominant reason for the rise of salon culture in Jewish high society, she, like other scholars, fails to elaborate on the humanistic, ideological, or philosophical reasons why Jewish *salonnières* began their salons and sustained them for decades, and why people of different religious, social, and economic positions chose to partake in the salons as presumptive equals. The extant literature fails to offer a compelling non-instrumental or assimilative theory on the “mysterious developments” of Jewish social integration through the salons.⁴³ The moral principles, beliefs, and foundational ethos of the *salonnières* that would contribute to an explanation, therefore, remain unexplored. Given the successes of Old Regime Berlin’s salon culture in socially integrating divergent strands of the population and contributing to the cultural and intellectual products of the time, the more complex reasons and motivations for participation must be interrogated. By demonstrating that the basic tenets of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* were concretely realized in the space of the salon, I offer an alternative theory for why and how salon culture flourished.

Enacting Bildung: The Berlin Salon

It is widely acknowledged that German Jews of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries affirmed the basic principles of *Bildung* and endeavored to integrate themselves into German culture through the practice and definition of this philosophy.⁴⁴ The Jewish elite “embraced the values of the *Aufklärung*, the German Enlightenment, and the ethics of *Bildung*, following the model set by Mendelssohn.”⁴⁵ They professed *Bildung* both for the benefits it could bring for the

⁴² Ibid.,p. 222.

⁴³ Ibid.,p. 47.

⁴⁴ Leo W. Riegert, ‘The Practical Side of Bildung: From Moses Mendelssohn’s “Was heißt aufklären?” to Karl Emil Franzos’s Moschko von Parma’, in *Yearbook for European Jewish Literature Studies*, ed. by Alfred Bodenheimer and Liska Vivian, vol.1, no.1 (2014), 255-279 (p.255).

⁴⁵ Yael Sela Teichler, ‘Music, Acculturation, and Haskalah between Berlin and Königsberg in the 1780’s’, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, vol. 103, no. 3 (2013), 352-384 (p.354).

assimilation of Jews into German culture as well as for the universal value that it held and the possibilities it represented in promoting tolerance, empathy, and understanding.

One of the most well-known inquiries into *Bildung* in Jewish thought is George L. Mosse's collective lectures, *German Jews Beyond Judaism*, in which he explores how:

The ideal of cultivating a personal identity beyond religion and nationality, the liberal outlook on society and politics, and the desire to transcend history by stressing what united rather than divided individuals and nations infiltrated Jewish life, became an inspiration for many men and women searching to humanize their society and their own lives.⁴⁶

Mosse argues that *Bildung* inspired the Jews to both partake in an existing cultural narrative and to contribute to its development, overcoming a painful history through personal identity that looked beyond religion or nationality and focused on what could be shared. Hannah Arendt is another prominent scholar who emphasizes that many elite Jews in Germany believed that the practice of *Bildung* offered them a significant prospect of assimilation.⁴⁷

Bildung's meritocratic principles proffered a form of cultural assimilation that did not require a negation of one's roots or personal identity. It did not depend on conditions set at birth, but rather on choices made by the individual through the cultivation of the mind. Although *Bildung* was first formulated by non-Jewish philosophers, the concept embraced essential aspects of Jewish culture: a deep appreciation of art, music, and ideas. It adhered to principles practiced through the exercise of one's reason, integral to the *Haskalah* tradition. As such, it could serve as a common point of reference for Christian and Jewish communities.

Bildung was also an attractive philosophy to a Jewish elite for whom community was an important value since it advocated moral development through friendship and encounters with others. The possibility of finding common ground through personal relationships, like the exemplary friendship and intellectual collaborations between Moses Mendelssohn and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), offered prospects of cooperation towards mutual goals and more immediate prospects for assimilation. Given their established commitment to secular education, and the emphasis they already placed on cultivating intellectual and aesthetic faculties, if *Bildung* were to be adopted by the population as a whole, the Jewish people would naturally become integrated into German society and the tensions of religious difference would be diminished.

⁴⁶ George L. Mosse, *Jews Beyond Judaism* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1985)

⁴⁷ Liliane Weissberg, 'Stepping Out', *New German Critique*, no. 53 (1991), 149-162 (p.150).

It was not just its meritocratic quality, alignment with basic Jewish values on education, and promises of assimilation that so greatly appealed to the Jewish gentry. The philosophy of *Bildung* was also inherently attractive from an aesthetic and political perspective. Mendelssohn, for example, fervently believed in the power of beauty to improve the human soul and the possibility of aesthetic pleasure to advance man's moral faculties. He argued that "the delight in metaphysical perfection will outweigh all pain and attune man to a recognition of his moral duties," a sentiment at the core of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*.⁴⁸ In his essay, "What Is Enlightenment?" (1784), Mendelssohn defines the terms "*Aufklärung*," "*Kultur*" and "*Bildung*," arguing that *Bildung* is the most essential of the three. Enlightenment, associated with knowledge and reason, and culture, affiliated with art and morality, are the two pillars of *Bildung*, but it is ultimately *Bildung* towards which man should strive.⁴⁹ Mendelssohn argues that *Bildung* is the realization of the Enlightenment itself and that Enlightenment cannot be achieved without it.⁵⁰ In this essay alone, we can see the centrality of the concept to the concerns of Jewish intellectuals and the position it was granted at the forefront of the *Haskalah* tradition.

In the 1780s, in particular, there were many Jewish attempts to materialize *Bildung* and enact its basic tenets. One such example was the establishment of associations, such as *The Society for the Promotion of the Good and the Beneficent* (1786), which addressed both Jews and non-Jews alike in advocating for the proliferation of the arts and representing the core values of *Bildung*.⁵¹ The Society's organization of classical concerts, open to all, was an attempt to practice *Bildung*. Music was considered to be superior to all other arts, the most effective pedagogic means to advance the theory because of its "cathartic effect on the sentiments."⁵² As Yael Sela Teichler has demonstrated, the society's concerts may be seen as:

A strategy of Jewish civic improvement, the performances of the piece would have served two interrelated purposes: externally, to influence public opinion concerning Jewish emancipation by making collective acculturation and the beautification of Judaism publicly visible; and internally, toward shaping a new kind of Jewish

⁴⁸ Sela Teichler, 'Music, Acculturation, and Haskalah', p. 375.

⁴⁹ Alexander Altmann, 'Das Menschenbild und die Bildung des Menschen nach Moses Mendelssohn', *Mendelssohn-Studien*, vol 1. (1972), 11-28.

⁵⁰ Reinier Munk (ed.), *Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), p.35.

⁵¹ Sela Teichler, 'Music, Acculturation, and Haskalah', p. 377.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 355.

public by establishing a link between aesthetics and ethics, inherent to the notion of *Bildung*.⁵³

Lavish gatherings and musical performances in the home also became a way for the Jewish elite to practice *Bildung*. “Illustrious home gatherings demonstrated the assimilating Jew’s commitment to *Bildung* (the fashioning of the self through classical learning) and *Sittlichkeit* (moral respectability), that is to upholding the stalwart values of the ascending bourgeoisie.”⁵⁴

The actors behind the institutional advancement of *Bildung* became political and cultural leaders of the Jewish people. Prominent families, such as the Mendelssohns, were considered the human embodiment of *Bildung*: a model for a new, more enlightened and humane German citizenship. The Jewish elite began to train their children according to the principles of *Bildung* and they received a broad humanistic education that included literature, history, languages, music, and the liberal arts.⁵⁵ It was within this pedagogical context of a fervently embraced *Bildung* philosophy that many of the Jewish *salonnières* were educated.⁵⁶ Herz, for example, had a rigorous secular education that applied the values of *Bildung* with a special emphasis on music. Sara Grotthuis was educated in the tradition of *Bildung* by Moses Mendelssohn himself. Dorothea Schlegel was the daughter of Moses Mendelssohn, who also directed her *Bildung* education. Subsequently she married Friedrich Schlegel, one of *Bildung*’s most important theorists, who she met in the salon of Herz. When the *salonnières* became adults, *Bildung* became the “guiding force” of their lives, shaping their identity, belief system, and aspirations.⁵⁷ Their letters reveal the centrality of the concept to their intellectual development as well as the psychological significance that they attributed to it.

Given the educational importance placed on *Bildung*, the Jewish people’s special reverence for its principles and the *salonnières* personal engagement with and dedication to its teachings, we can clearly see how it became the foundational ethos and motivation behind the establishment of their salons. Like the Jewish societies that promoted the principles of *Bildung* through their musical events, creating salons and sustaining a community dedicated to mutual enlightenment was a pragmatic way to advance this philosophy. Indeed, the secondary literature

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 382.

⁵⁴ Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*, p. 16.

⁵⁵ Sela Teichler, ‘Music, Acculturation, and Haskalah’, p. 373.

⁵⁶ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 27.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

explicitly suggests that the salons were the real-life enactment of *Bildung*. “One of the goals of the salon was the achievement of *Bildung*, a rather vague concept encompassing education, refinement, and the harmonious development of character.”⁵⁸ While the primary literature reveals that salon participants viewed the pursuit of self-cultivation and “the cultivated personality” as the common element of the salon that brought coherence to the institution.⁵⁹

Although it is acknowledged by scholars of the Berlin salons that there was a direct relationship between the salon and the philosophy of *Bildung*, the motivations behind the adaptation of *Bildung* have been misinterpreted or not fully understood. In a telling passage Deborah Hertz states:

The public happiness achieved in these salons was a real-life enactment of the ideal of *Bildung* so often discussed at the time. *Bildung* encompassed education, refinement, the development of character; *Bildung* was what commoners could work at to become noble “in spirit”; it was what Jews could work at to become more like the gentiles.⁶⁰

I would contest the end of Hertz’ statement when she says that *Bildung* was a means for Jews “to become more like the gentiles.” I argue instead that, according to the way in which Jewish scholars such as Mendelssohn and the *salonnières* themselves described their relationship to *Bildung* in their letters, its enactment was not a way to emulate the Christian gentry. Rather it was a means of finding mutual understanding around shared principles to advance the Jewish cause, or at least to emancipate themselves from the prejudice that restricted their personal and intellectual freedoms and, in doing so, figuratively emancipate the Jewish people as a whole. This philosophy introduced “Jewish women to new possibilities of self-realization” and the further these women went in their adoption of *Bildung*, the more they depended on the doctrine to affirm their radical assertions of independence and their self-determined identity.⁶¹

The salon became the embodiment of *Bildung* through the practice of its values as well as a space in which to debate its ideas in a diverse audience, marking an important development in the transition of *Bildung* from concept to reality:

⁵⁸ Susanne Hillman, ‘The Conversions of Dorothea Mendelssohn: Conviction or Convenience?’, *German Studies Review*, vol. 29, no.1 (2006), 127-144 (p.133).

⁵⁹ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 56.

⁶⁰ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p.7.

⁶¹ Hillman, ‘The Conversions of Dorothea Mendelssohn’, p. 132.

The Berlin Jewish elite not only subscribed to these new ideas but also participated in the discourse around aesthetics in public commentaries and private salons as early as the late 1770s, not the least through personal acquaintances with prominent musicians and aestheticians.⁶²

The *salonnières* were not merely emulating gentiles but rather actively taking part in the intellectual development of *Bildung's* philosophical system. The primary literature reveals that many of the ideas discussed in the salons concerned questions that related directly to this philosophy. A play by Schiller might be read out loud or a poem from Goethe recited that would subsequently be debated in this space.⁶³ The *salonnières* used their salons as a space for the theorists of *Bildung* to congregate so that they could further these ideas in a receptive environment. It was common to find the most celebrated proponents of *Bildung* attending on a regular basis. One particularly evocative description depicts illustrious figures including Wieland, Schiller, Herder, and Goethe in a salon:

And while we are still dreaming, thinking we see Wieland, meager, the skull cap on his high forehead, striding toward us while haggard Schiller, one arm on the table, reads with his Swabian accent a philosophical theme, and Herder, portly but disapproving, makes discontented faces, and Goethe, with the sober dignity of a counselor, listens attentively, leaning on the window-sill- we are bidden to enter a friendly looking room, whose pale green coloring is wonderfully restful to our eyes after the red, white and gold of the outer apartment.⁶⁴

Another telling passage reveals the extent to which the theorists of *Bildung* would have interacted with one another in the space of the salon, arguing, debating, and exchanging ideas:

Mere nobility is almost barred at these dinners; one sees instead Wieland, Goethe, Herder, Schiller, Knebel, and anyone else who represents the arts. There are hot, wordy battles, for most of them have a grudge against some or all of the others; Herder against Schiller, Goethe against Wieland, Wieland against Herder. There are moments when Herder, through his arrogance, stirs the gall of the poet of Oberon, who will let his feelings have expression when he gets home.⁶⁵

⁶² Sela Teichler, 'Music, Acculturation, and Haskalah', p. 375.

⁶³ Valerian Tornius, *Salons: Pictures of Society through Five Centuries*, trans. by Agnes Platt and Lilian Wonderley (New York: Cosmopolitan Book Corporation, 1929), p. 259.

⁶⁴ Tornius, *Salons*, p. 253.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

In Herz's salon alone, prominent philosophers of *Bildung* such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Schiller, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Friedrich Schlegel were regular participants, and it was in the salon that these theorists garnered greater fame and recognition.⁶⁶

I include the *salonnières* themselves in this category of theorists of *Bildung* because they wrote extensively about the philosophy. Varnhagen, for example, produced a wealth of epistolary exchanges on *Bildung* and Schlegel wrote her own *Bildungsroman*, *Florentin* (1801). The *salonnières*, therefore, accomplished a triple feat of enacting *Bildung* by cultivating minds through conversations, while advancing *Bildung* by providing the necessary spaces for different people to discuss the philosophical significance of the theory, and by developing the theory themselves.

The male proponents of *Bildung* often acknowledged the role that the salon women played in inspiring their ideas and facilitating the interactions that allowed them to collaborate with others. They expressed their great admiration and appreciation of the *salonnières*, who were, in certain fundamental respects, their intellectual muses. Lessing, Herder, and Goethe, for example, praised Sara Grotthuis for the brilliance of her salon, as well as her personal qualities which reflected the beauty of her soul, such as her lively spirit and her particular talent for languages that allowed her to communicate with many different types of people.⁶⁷ The theorists of *Bildung* and the *salonnières* often kept in close correspondence and discussed pertinent subjects in their personal letters, which was another means through which the *salonnières* left an impression on them and influenced their work, as well as developed their own ideas.

It is likely that many of the characters in the *Bildungsroman* were inspired by the figures of the *salonnières* and the participants in their salons.⁶⁸ The *Bildungsroman* itself was very similar in tone and style to salon conversations and may plausibly be interpreted as a mimetic tribute to the salon.⁶⁹ In a *Bildungsroman* the protagonist typically undergoes a transformation to his personality by having his ideas tested by other people in new settings. From his formative experiences, he learns about himself and the world, and, as a consequence, becomes a more

⁶⁶ Burwick, 'From Aesthetic Teas to the World of Noble Reformers', p.132.

⁶⁷ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 108.

⁶⁸ Donovan Anderson, 'Franco-German Conversations: Rahel Levin and Sophie von Grotthuß in Dialogue with Germaine de Staël', *German Studies Review*, vol. 29, no. 3 (2006), 559-577 (p.566).

⁶⁹ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 179.

enlightened human being. This was precisely the objective of salon conversation: to overcome ignorance and prejudice through interactions with others and to enrich one's intellectual perspectives through meaningful encounters within the world of the salon.

The comprehensive devotion to the implementation of and engagement with *Bildung* in the salon can best be seen in the particular obsession that the *salonnières* had with the figure and work of Goethe, with whom they felt intimately connected. Goethe was at once their God and their lover, their idol, and their friend. He provided them with a sense of purpose and belonging in the world. He articulated the ideals they intuitively felt but had never before heard expressed with poetry and meaning. Goethe's formulation of *die schöne Seele*, in particular, rendered their own intuitions palpable and philosophically legitimate. Enthusiasm for Goethe was "an important and constant ingredient of these salons" and the most famous *salonnières* had a personal relationship with him or, at least, had met him on a number of occasions and were deeply inspired by their encounters.⁷⁰ It was not uncommon for Goethe to appear at a salon and leave a strong, and often overwhelmingly positive impression.⁷¹ Following their meeting in 1795, Goethe frequently visited the salon of Sara Grotthuis which he "used as a stage for disseminating his work."⁷² They were in close correspondence from 1795 to 1824 and she often consulted him on the intellectual questions she found most important.

The author and essayist of the *Sturm und Drang* movement, Karl Philipp Moritz (1756-1793), who regularly attended the salon of Herz:

Installed the cult of young Goethe in this circle. Later, the emphasis on German classical literature and neo-humanism brought forward the ideals of the so-called harmonious personality, the right and duty to strive for individual perfection of mind, soul and body. Free conversations, in which people could profit from each other's thoughts, tastes, ideas and samples of favorite literature, music and art, could best be put into practice in salon society.⁷³

Goethe's works continued to play a significant and recurring role in Herz's salon during the decades that it remained active.

⁷⁰ Petra Wilhelmy Dollinger, 'Berlin Salons: Late Eighteenth to Early Twentieth Century', *Jewish Women: A Comprehensive Historical Encyclopedia: Jewish Women's Archive*, (2009), 1-1 (p.1).

⁷¹ Tornius, *Salons*, p. 260.

⁷² Anderson, 'Franco-German Conversations', p. 559.

⁷³ Wilhelmy Dollinger, *Berlin Salons*, p. 1.

But it was Varnhagen who was most in love with the spirit of Goethe's work; so in love that after her first meeting with him in 1795, she feared what a personal relationship would mean, so powerfully did his presence affect her. In a letter to her friend David Veit (1771-1814) she wrote, "I cannot be blindly captivated by any person so that I don't go in for worship...because otherwise I would certainly have fallen in love with Goethe, and, you know, I only worship him."⁷⁴ Varnhagen understood that she had to obey "an impulse that comes from my innermost self, to keep a humble distance from Goethe" for fear that she would become so wholly devoted to him that she would lose all sense of self.⁷⁵ This acute self-awareness demonstrates that it was the ideals of *Bildung*, not simply the theorists themselves, that captivated the minds of the *salonnières*.

Varnhagen remained intellectually devoted to Goethe for her entire life and defended him against the unfavorable commentary of the second school of Romantic writers. According to Hannah Arendt, she:

Warmly sympathized with their recognition of Goethe as viceroy of the kingdom of poetry, but she was disapproving of the way the romantics ignored his classical ideals, and took the ingredient-such as Wilhelm Meister's aimless travels, his slow approach to things-as the main feature. She had a much deeper appreciation of Goethe than they. He was her great experience, and she was probably the first one to understand him completely.⁷⁶

The power and charisma that Varnhagen possessed as a *salonnière* was kindled by Goethe; she drew endless inspiration from his creative spirit and ability to show everything as essence.⁷⁷ "Rahel tended her admiration in her inmost soul in this lay her undoubted influence over her contemporaries. Nowhere was so much done for the spreading and understanding of Goethe's poetry as in her salon."⁷⁸ She begged her generation to "listen to Goethe" and indeed they listened when she spoke.⁷⁹

Varnhagen's impassioned adoration of Goethe's work demonstrates that *Bildung* was far more than a way to escape her Jewish roots; it was the very expression of her inner most soul, the

⁷⁴ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, pp. 34-35.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.188-189.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁷⁸ Tornius, *Salons*, p. 300.

⁷⁹ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 112.

demonstration of a highly individual intellectual longing that she found mirrored in another person's work. Her identification with this philosophy was not a calculated form of social aggrandizement but, instead, a yearning to be understood, to find meaning in existence, to come closer to eternal truths and to grapple with timeless questions that the theorists of *Bildung* had the courage to pursue. The case of Varnhagen and Goethe exemplifies the philosophical spirit in which her salon, and those of other Jewish *salonnières* of the time, was born. These pioneering women were intellectually consumed by *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*. Their belief in its philosophy was genuine, impassioned, earnest. They gave themselves wholly to its ideals.

Understanding the ideological foundation of their activities by reading their impassioned letters on the topic with the emotional sensitivity that was so highly cultivated in the Romantic era makes it harder to maintain the one-dimensional notion that the *salonnières* established their salons out of an opportunistic impulse to gain noble titles as much of the literature suggests.⁸⁰ This interpretation deeply underestimates the centrality that this philosophy had to their personal biographies and contributions to society. Instead, the creative act of maintaining their salons was sustained by the prospect of cultivating the beautiful souls that they had contemplated in the abstract but desired to produce in living form. The salons were their vision of a future in which cultivated individuals could take part in establishing a more beautiful world founded upon the poetic ideals and noble values which they so passionately held. By exploring the specific qualities that the *salonnières* systematically sought to embody and cultivate in others, we will see the extent to which they successfully created a more beautiful and virtuous world, elevating what it meant to be human and how to compassionately relate to others within their salons.

Part I: Envisioning the Beautiful Soul

Chapter I: The Beautiful Soul as a Subjective Ideal

The Infinite Potential of Man

At the core of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* was the idea that every person possessed an innate cognitive potential. Subject to the force of volition, this potential could be cultivated to strengthen character, ennoble the soul, and ultimately improve the human condition. Potential

⁸⁰ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 222.

was conceived in poetic terms as beautiful universes within the self; infinite realms of possibility that might positively inform one's life course and actions in the world. ⁸¹According to the theorists of *Bildung*, the soul's intellectual and moral potential was theoretically limitless. However, the vast majority lay dormant. The fundamental aim of this philosophy was to identify the most promising and valuable elements of one's latent state and bring them into full maturity. By acknowledging his infinite potentialities, man enriched his own life and played a critical role in the formation of a more just and virtuous society. ⁸²

Schiller described the wealth of ideas and possibilities held within a beautiful soul in his essay "On Simple and Sentimental Poetry" (1795) in which he comments "a soul of beauty bears in itself by anticipation all great ideas; they flow without constraint and without difficulty from its very nature—an infinite nature, at least in potency, at whatever point of its career you seize it."⁸³ Like Schiller, Goethe believed that the whole world existed within the human soul. The first task of *Bildung* was to acknowledge the many possibilities associated with one's nature and the realms of beauty that lived within before applying this knowledge to worldly experiences. In one of his conversations with Eckermann on February 26, 1824, Goethe says:

Yet, had I not the world in my soul from the beginning, I must ever have remained blind with my seeing eyes, and all experience and observation would have been dead and unproductive. The light is there, and the colors surround us; but, if we bore nothing corresponding in our own eyes, the outward apparition would not avail us.⁸⁴

Likewise, in *Pollen* (1798) Novalis affirms the importance of looking for the "germ" within before turning outward when he writes:

How can a person have the sense for something for which he does not have the germ in himself? What I should understand I should develop organically in myself; and what I appear to learn is only nourishment, incitement of the organism.⁸⁵

⁸¹ Novalis, 'Pollen', in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, ed. and trans. by Frederick C. Beiser, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 9-31 (p.11).

⁸² J. W. Burrow, 'Introduction' in *The Limits of State Action*, by Wilhelm von Humboldt, trans. by J. W. Burrow (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. liv.

⁸³ Friedrich Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, trans. by John Weiss (London: George Bell & Sons, 1884), p. 293.

⁸⁴ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 91.

⁸⁵ Novalis, 'Pollen', p. 12.

Only once the individual was fortified with full knowledge of his internal potentials could he grow from the influences of the world around him.

Among the innumerable potentialities available to develop in this infinite self were the ideal elements of one's own character, and the qualities necessary to become an exemplary member of society. Schiller observed that every man carried within him an ideal version of himself waiting to be awakened and to flourish in the world.⁸⁶ Man, he argued in his *Aesthetic Letters*, had the autonomy to discover and develop innate, positive characteristics that would perfect his being.⁸⁷ He could also form an individual essence that derived not simply from the innate, but from personal development. Cultivating this human potential occurred in two ways: first, developing the possibilities associated with the universal character and personality traits of a moral citizen; and second, developing the potential particular to one's being, which included character, but extended to work, life purpose, and human relationships.

Intrinsic to this interpretation was the belief that each person had his own *telos*, one that he was meant to discover and to fulfill through moral aesthetic education. As Friedrich Schlegel said of *Bildung*, "Our theory concerns the vocation of man. According to it, there is no universal vocation of man, because every person has his own ideal; and only the striving after this ideal will make him moral."⁸⁸ Finding one's *telos* was the first aim of any cultivated man, a highly personal task that no one else could assist in achieving. The theorists of *Bildung* were certain that man ineluctably desired to discover his *telos* since this was ultimately what gave meaning to life and defined both his individual character and his humanity.

Cultivating potential was therefore believed to be natural, and, consequently, it was often analogized to organic processes in environmental systems. Indeed the word *Bildung* may be translated as "formation" in reference to the shaping of natural forces.⁸⁹ Much, it was believed, could be learned about *Bildung* from nature and vice versa. As the Romantic scientist Henrik Steffens (1773-1845) observed:

Do you want to investigate nature? Then cast a glance inwards and in the stages of spiritual formation [*Bildung*] it may be granted to you to see the stages of natural

⁸⁶ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 31.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

⁸⁸ Schlegel, 'Philosophical Lectures: Transcendental Philosophy (excerpts)', p. 143.

⁸⁹ Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age: Volume II: Revolution and Renunciation, 1790-1803* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 30.

development. Do you want to know yourself? Investigate nature and your actions are those of the Spirit there.⁹⁰

Describing the process of self-cultivation through biological metaphors became a common practice around 1790, when Goethe's influential text *The Metamorphosis of Plants* was first published, and an easier way to describe otherwise opaque and immaterial processes. One of the most common metaphors was Humboldt's comparison of cultivating potential to a seed induced to blossom. However, if this seed did not blossom then it would represent what Goethe analogized in botany to the species of plant called the *Incompletae*, which remains incomplete and imperfect.⁹¹ Schiller warned that it was all too common for people to remain in a state of incompleteness:

With us, one might almost be tempted to assert, the mental faculties shew themselves detached in operation as psychology separates them in idea, and we see not merely individual persons but whole classes of human beings developing only a part of their capacities, while the rest of them, like a stunted plant, shew only a feeble vestige of their nature.⁹²

But, unlike a plant whose *telos* is physiologically pre-determined, to be human meant to dynamically evolve in an autonomous cognitive capacity in order to determine for oneself what constituted those ends. In this sense, the theorists of *Bildung* believed that man harnessed the capacities of his nature and in doing so he overcame them.⁹³ In his fragment "Theory of Bildung" (1793) Humboldt discusses the changes associated with the development of intellectual activity. He notes how the cultivated man can:

Suddenly pitch their nation or their time into other directions offering new vistas. Only by proceeding step by step and finally surveying the whole can one reach the point of explaining completely to oneself how human *Bildung* manages to progress and endure without degenerating into the monotony by which physical Nature goes

⁹⁰ Jürgen Barkhoff, 'Romantic Science and Psychology', in *The Cambridge Companion to German Romanticism*, ed. by Nicholas Saul (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 209-227 (p. 211).

⁹¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections of Goethe*, trans. by Bailey Saunders (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1906), p.8.

⁹² Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 38.

⁹³ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften: Ausgabe der Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, vols. I-XVII, (1903-36), vol. 2, p. 117.

through the same transformations time after time, without ever producing anything new.⁹⁴

Change, then, that was analogous to organic transformations yet developed through the capacity for self-determination was the means by which one achieved one's individual *telos* and advanced human interests. Not only was man able to escape the rule of nature, he could excel by embracing his autonomous capacities.⁹⁵ In "On Grace and Dignity" Schiller writes "He ought not only, as the other sensuous creatures, to reflect the rays of a foreign intelligence, were it even the divine intelligence; man ought, as a sun, to shine by his own light."⁹⁶ The creativity associated with a moral aesthetic education lay, therefore, in man's ability to illuminate the world around him from within by virtue of his free will.

The theorists of *Bildung* harbored great hopes in humanity's ability towards self-realization, precisely because of the existence of human agency. They implicitly denounced the ideological premise of deeply entrenched social hierarchies that envisioned most of humanity as submissive, passive agents in a predetermined order. They adamantly denied the constraints of inherited personality traits on the ability to change character; they affirmed that the individual could transcend the deterministic trajectory of his life and construct himself in the manner that aligned most with his individual aspirations. Even in certain imperfect environmental conditions or during times of social or political turmoil when an ideal of self-improvement was thwarted by external circumstances or compromised social values, the internal activity of the individual could challenge an imperfect status quo and his condition could evolve solely on the basis of his own volition. This philosophy shifted the conceptual locus of power from impenetrable social structures to the development of one's personhood.

It is true that ordinarily people cultivated just a fraction of the infinite possibilities of being available to them. With time these possibilities only seemed to narrow further and the assumption was made that a static state of certain adopted characteristics defined a person and their interactions in the world. Often those characteristics actively suppressed the most promising

⁹⁴ Wilhelm von Humboldt, 'Theory of Bildung', in *Werke in fünf Bänden: Vol. I. Schriften zur Anthropologie und Geschichte*, ed. by Andreas Flitner and Klaus Giel, trans. by Gillian Horton-Krüger (Darmstadt: Buchgesellschaft, 1969), pp. 234-240(p. 238).

⁹⁵ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 134.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

potentialities from coming into fruition, while self and socially-inflicted repression stymied personal growth. But there was no reason why this had to be the case; other more beautiful and virtuous ways of being could be discovered and nurtured from within. They might exist in an immature state, overpowered by character flaws or deleterious personal habits, but, once their value had been acknowledged, the necessity of their existence understood, but most importantly, the possibility of their coming into being affirmed, they could grow to form a spirit of the highest nobility. The problem was not an incapacity to become intellectually cultivated or morally good, since all of the latent possibilities of goodness were invested in a person at birth. Rather, the problem resided in disbelief in their realization or a social obfuscation of their importance. But by harnessing one's will and conquering one's apathy, these impediments could be overcome.

A person who was raised by cruel and self-centered parents, for example, was not fated to become cruel and self-centered himself. Rather than replicating problems, he could break from this cycle and overcome familial environments. Indeed, many of the characters of the *Bildungsroman* are depicted as escaping the conditions of their birth, ultimately triumphing over the constraints of their social contexts by exercising a self-determined identity.⁹⁷ Instead of yielding to the assumptions of the social worlds into which they were born, they defy them and reach more exalted states. In Humboldt's words "*Bildung* has its origin only in the interior of the soul and can only be occasioned by external arrangements, never produced by them."⁹⁸ Although this statement corroborates the argument that unfavorable conditions could be overcome, it was invariably easier to foster moral behavior in a milieu that encouraged it, rather than one in which the individual had to fight against the odds. This was evidently why the construction of environments which stimulated potential (such as the space of the salon) was fundamental to the wider attainment of *Bildung*. The point, however, was, that if people did not first recognize this potential within themselves, the course of their development would be predicated on an overdependence on their circumstantial position, which could be detrimental whether this position was good or bad. Environments could greatly encourage potential, but only when the

⁹⁷ See the "Confessions of a Beautiful Soul" = Book VI in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship and Travels*, trans. by Thomas Carlyle (London: Chapman and Hall, 1874), pp. 321-372.

⁹⁸ Boyle, *Goethe*, p. 30.

desire to improve came from the individual himself could it manifest and a level of autonomy necessary for self-cultivation be maintained.

It was evidently a formidable challenge and a lifelong pursuit to live up to these high expectations of character formation. The universal agency that this philosophy espoused came with the corresponding moral responsibility to cultivate inner faculties. If an individual neglected to develop his innate potential, he denied himself a more meaningful existence. More importantly, he shirked his duty to contribute to the betterment of humanity. Squandering potential was a sign of moral frailty, a tragic loss that impeded the progress of the entire human race.

Part of the way in which one satisfied this moral imperative was by developing the potentialities associated with a specific *métier*, life course, or purpose that brought value to the collective. Choosing a particular life path necessarily reduced the infinite possibilities of being that were available. As Schiller declared “When one note on an instrument is touched, among all those that it virtually offers, this note alone is real. When man is actually modified, the infinite possibility of all his modifications is limited to this single mode of existence.”⁹⁹ However, this choice, whether it was a specific personality trait or a profession, was by no means contrary to the theorists of *Bildung*'s conception of man as a creature of limitless possibility. Rather it allowed the individual to concentrate on a particular domain of practice, and thereby to maximize his prospects of character development in a way that would be impossible for a person who floundered in the realm of infinite possibility. The aspects of one's personhood that were nurtured in the act of making a choice and maintaining this commitment could be extrapolated to other areas of life; thus cultivating the particular was the pathway towards the infinite.¹⁰⁰

To strive towards the highest degree of potential in one's given *métier* was considered immensely more valuable, both to oneself and to society, than extending one's energies across different domains because it allowed a person to express the ultimate reality of the human condition. Humboldt argued that it is only the person pursuing a single task who will:

Learn to conduct his business in its proper spirit and with an awareness of its greater signification. He no longer wants only to prepare knowledge or tools for men's use, no longer wants merely to help further just a part of his *Bildung*; he knows the goal

⁹⁹ Friedrich Schiller, *Essays, Aesthetic and Philosophical* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1875), p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 91.

that is set for him; he sees that, executed in the right way, his business will give the mind its own, fresh view of the world and through this its own, fresh self-determination, so that he can achieve a full measure of *Bildung* from this, his own perspective; it is this he strives to achieve.¹⁰¹

Along these lines, if a venture or life course was undertaken in the true spirit of *Bildung*, then it would transcend its own limitations. Thus, what mattered was not the number of potentialities pursued but the quality with which those that were undertaken were carried out.

Of course not all paths followed would be correct, and the activities chosen might prove contrary to one's nature. For example, in *Wilhelm Meister*, Wilhelm acknowledges that his choice of the theatre as vocation was an error when he states "that I sought development [*Bildung*] in a place where none was to be found."¹⁰² The theatre proves incompatible with Wilhelm's talents, and yet he derives meaning from the lessons he learned along the way. Although this end was incorrect, he still actualizes his *Bildung* journey through circuitous means, and the story serves as an accurate portrayal of the trial-and-error process that personal cultivation requires.

Once one's characteristics, beliefs, and *métier* had been discovered through personal experimentation, the individual was meant to integrate his actualized potential with that of his social milieu, like organisms in an ecosystem maintaining their particular functions to serve the larger whole. The full breadth of human potential was represented by a conception of mankind in which every individual strove towards the ideal version of himself by strengthening his inner qualities and synthesizing them with the developed capacities of others. In *Wilhelm Meister*, for example, The Society of the Tower can be interpreted as the symbol of this socially realized potential. The attributes intrinsic to each individual are brought into an equilibrium with the social whole; the spirited character of Lothario, for example, is balanced by the doctor's rationalism.¹⁰³ The Abbé, the figure head of the Society of the Tower, presents the problem that "most men, even the most excellent of them, are limited...each one values certain qualities in himself and in other people; these are the only ones he favors, these are the only ones he wants to

¹⁰¹ Humboldt, 'Theory of Bildung', p. 238.

¹⁰² Boyle, *Goethe*, pp. 373-374.

¹⁰³ Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 67.

see developed.”¹⁰⁴ But the limitations of one individual may be overcome in the collective engenderment of disparate potentialities: “What can only be a potentiality in one man is realized in the practical activity of another.”¹⁰⁵ From this conception, an enlightened society would be one in which the full breadth of human capacities is present and a universal ideal of ultimate potential is symbolized by the individual who fulfills his own.

Part of what it meant to pursue one’s potential was to perceive the potential in others and to help them attain it too. As Goethe noted “If you treat an individual as he is, he will remain how he is. But if you treat him as if he were what he ought to be and could be, he will become what he ought to be and could be.”¹⁰⁶ Although the individual had to discover his potential for himself, other people could assist in drawing out his finer qualities, but only if they understood what he was capable of and believed in his abilities. Human possibility ultimately arose, then, from an optimistic spirit and an imagination vivid enough to see beyond the present. While most theoretical frameworks make inferences from observations about the current state of social affairs or the human traits on display in a particular time period or circumstance, the theorists of *Bildung* understood human nature, not in terms of what it was, or what it seemed to be, but in terms of what it could be according to the moral ideals that they held to be universally true. It was the difference between being and becoming, and the prospects associated with becoming were endless.

Virtue and Aesthetic Morality

The moral necessity of developing one’s intellectual potentiality was principally directed at the cultivation of and adherence to virtues. Indeed, beauty of the soul was often equated with a state of perfect virtue. Those in pursuit of a beautiful soul were considered to be those who aligned their life according to this state, while creatively adopting its virtuous tenets and defining them as their own.¹⁰⁷ The concern for virtue in the theory of *Bildung* first emerged after the translation of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁰⁶ Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister*, p. 211.

¹⁰⁷ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 131.

Shaftesbury's *The Judgment of Hercules* into German in 1712.¹⁰⁸ In the drawing by Paolo de Matteis, which Shaftesbury examines in this work, Hercules sits between the figures of pleasure and virtue. On the right, pleasure reclines partially nude with the symbols of enjoyment around her. On the left, virtue points to the fortress of morality which stands in the distance. Hercules, torn between the two, is turned towards virtue as she speaks, a harbinger of his eventual choice. In making his decision, the theorists of *Bildung* maintained that a process of *Bildung* was taking place within Hercules.¹⁰⁹ Like the fortress, the benefits of cultivation lay in the distance, while earthly pleasures promised immediate yet unsustainable satisfaction. Ultimately, virtue proved the worthier pursuit and the choice of the virtuous path epitomized the aim of this philosophy.

The virtues that the theorists of *Bildung* were principally concerned with advancing were those formulated by the ancient Greeks and the Prussian virtues instituted by Frederick William I (1688-1740), notably, courage, determination, humility, loyalty, reliability, sincerity, and a sense of service. One can find in the literature references to the self-cultivated person that touch upon the virtues of antiquity, such as prudence and fortitude, the Greek *agathos* defined by wisdom, bravery, justice, and the more extensive list of virtues found in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*.¹¹⁰ Drawing on these influences, Schiller claimed that a beautiful soul would find pleasure in exercising justice, charity, temperance, fortitude, and fidelity as well as beneficence, moderation, constancy, and good faith.¹¹¹ Since the Beautiful Soul was the perfected end state of *Bildung*, her fictitious figure exemplified these virtues and served as the inspiration for their enactment.

Plato's *Phaedo*, which identified courage and temperance as the virtues that constituted the Beautiful Soul, and Plato's *Symposium*, were particularly influential works to these discussions, especially Diotima's beauty of soul speech in the *Symposium*. Here Diotima differentiates between those who are pregnant in the body and those pregnant in their soul and

¹⁰⁸ Rebekka Horlacher, *The Educated Subject and the German Concept of Bildung: A Comparative Cultural History* (London: Routledge, 2015), p. 42.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹¹⁰ See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. by J.A.K. Thomson (London: Penguin Classics, 2004)

¹¹¹ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 134.

suggests that those with beautiful souls engender wisdom and virtue.¹¹² In her example, a poet outwardly expresses his inward state through his poetry. Likewise, virtue is the external consequence of one's internal development, the natural product of a cultivated soul. As Goethe's maxim went "A man's manners are the mirror in which he shows his portrait."¹¹³ The more fertile the inner world became, the more fruit it outwardly bore. Diotima's metaphor of birth is fitting, then, because it captures the organic expression of an internal process, framing cultivation not as a solipsistic pursuit without real world consequences, but one able to beget a set of virtues that were socially significant.

Given the Greek influence on the virtues that the theorists of *Bildung* conceived, we might classify those virtues according to the Platonic triad as represented within the soul and expressed in the physical world. Beauty was communicated through prudence, humility, sincerity, and most importantly, temperance and the harmonious balance of character traits. Truth was conceived as the logical exercise of rational faculties which involved wisdom, the courage to stand for what was correct, and the determination to pursue knowledge for its own sake. Goodness was found in a strong sense of justice, the exercise of kindness and benevolence, the capacity to feel compassion for others, and the loyalty and devotion necessary to respect another person's dignity and worth.

We can consider those virtues that fell under the Platonic category of the Good, especially kindness and empathy, to be the cardinal virtues of the discourse on *Bildung*, given that they were most often associated with fictional depictions of the Beautiful Soul. According to standard interpretations of this figure, the Beautiful Soul would humbly perform acts of charity, resolutely work towards the wellbeing of her friends and family, and unquestioningly help those around her in need, especially the poor and suffering. Her goodness was the mother of virtues, the life source from which all others derived. Without it, virtues such as prudence and bravery could easily become occluded by poor intent or take a false turn. As Schiller wrote "...virtue

¹¹² See F.C. White, 'Beauty of Soul and Speech in Plato's Symposium', *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 1 (2008), 69-81 and Plato, *Plato Complete Works*, ed. by John M. Cooper (London: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), pp. 483-494.

¹¹³ Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections*, p. 148.

itself only becomes beautiful through kindness.”¹¹⁴ The Beautiful Soul performed benevolent actions not from rigid adherence to moral law but rather through kindness and empathy. The propensity to be kind was the product of personal volition as well as her natural inclination towards the Good.

In “On Grace and Dignity” Schiller defines a Beautiful Soul from this perspective, in a subtle yet significant disagreement with Kant on the nature of moral responsibility. Kant makes a distinction between duty and inclination, favoring duty and pure practical reason, arguing that inclination cannot possess the features of morality. Schiller, on the other hand, reasserts the primacy of inclination with the contention that virtue is “an inclination for duty.” An ideal state of virtue (one which defined the Beautiful Soul) would be the harmony of reason and sensibility, duty and inclination. Here, Schiller bridges the gap that Kant left open between moral law and tendency with his concept of grace as “moveable beauty,” a beauty which is “not given by nature, but produced by the subject itself.”¹¹⁵

Unlike a person who maintains strict obedience to moral commitments that the Kantian perspective prioritizes, a Beautiful Soul “carries out humankind’s most exacting duties with such ease that they might simply be the actions of its inner instinct.”¹¹⁶ Schiller compares the former to a student first learning to draw who creates unsubtle lines while he diligently practices the craft as he has been instructed. While, the noble soul, on the other hand “... is like a painting of Titian; all the harsh outlines are effaced, which does not prevent the whole face being more true, lifelike and harmonious.”¹¹⁷ Like the painter whose merit can be seen in the fineness of his work, one could, to a certain extent, tell if the soul had been beautified by the ease with which it approached its moral responsibilities. As Schiller writes “an ideal person leading a truly good life would be one who spontaneously wanted to do what reason demands, that is, whose actions were in unforced harmony with the demands of reason.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁴ Friedrich Schiller, ‘Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gottfried Körner’, in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. by J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 145-185 (p. 174).

¹¹⁵ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 169.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

This instinctiveness of moral propensity is captured in a parable that Schiller gives to illuminate the type of virtuous actions that a Beautiful Soul would undertake. A man lies on the ground after having been brutally attacked by robbers and is left wounded, without his possessions or his clothing. He asks the first traveler he sees for help. The traveler agrees to come to his assistance but admits that his naked, wounded appearance revolts him and demands that he asks for nothing more. The second traveler who passes feels that he needs to fulfil his duty to help when asked, but demands that he be compensated monetarily for his time and effort. The third traveler listens to the poor man's story, but he is sick himself and hesitates to put the wellbeing of another at his own expense, although, in the end, to honor his sense of duty, he offers his coat. Then two men approach and it is revealed that they are sworn enemies of the wounded man. He expects only hatred and revenge from them, but instead they offer their clothing. Moved by this gesture, the wounded man expresses his gratitude and asks for their forgiveness. But they coldly reply that his transgressions are not forgiven: their acts of charity are nothing more than a demonstration of their own generosity towards a wretched man. Finally, the fifth traveler approaches with a heavy load. Disappointed by the state of humanity, the wounded man does not ask for help. But on his own volition the traveler puts down his load. He tells the wounded man to climb onto his back so that he can take him to safety. The wounded man asks him what will become of his load, to which the traveler replies that he does not know but it concerns him little, for giving a sick man help is more important than material goods.

In Schiller's interpretation of this parable, the first traveler makes a decision that demands no personal suffering and sets strict constraints on his generosity. The second is merely useful but not moral because he expects a benefit for himself out of his charitable act. The third man is moral in that he agrees to follow a prescribed duty, but his reluctance to act reveals a state of moral vacillation. The two enemies assault the dignity of the wounded man seeking self-aggrandizement which sullies the goodness of their act. All, in the end, help the wounded man; some offer to do so at their own expense, but only the fifth traveler does so without solicitation or consideration of the ramifications of his actions for himself. He ignores his own needs and thereby fulfills his duty "with the ease of someone acting out of mere instinct." His actions, Schiller concludes, are morally beautiful.

A Beautiful Soul, then, performed duties in this selfless and instinctual way. Her morality was as natural to her as breathing, without a trace of affectation, self-interest or irresolution. The

facility with which the Beautiful Soul was able to unite duty and inclination through grace made her entire character, not just particular actions, moral. Those in pursuit of the Beautiful Soul might make mistakes along the way; not all of their actions had to be beautiful. But a soul who performed virtuous actions from time to time could not, merely through these actions, become beautiful. Even if the wounded man had benefitted from the first four travelers' charity, this charity would not reveal a beauty of soul because these actions did not emerge naturally and were distorted by an underlying instrumentality. As Norton comments, a Beautiful Soul:

Into which nature has engraved the lineaments of virtue (as Cicero says), which is gifted with the most tender sensibility for the Beautiful and the Good and with an innate facility for performing every social virtue, can be hindered in its development by a confluence of unfavorable occurrences, or its original form (*Bildung*) can be disfigured. [However] the principal features of the soul remain incorruptible. A beautiful soul can go astray, it can be deceived by delusions and lies: but it cannot cease to be a beautiful soul.¹¹⁹

Schiller was skeptical of those for whom virtue did not come naturally and questioned if they could really be said to be virtuous when they could not even trust themselves.¹²⁰ If the feelings around moral duties were suppressed or not present, the virtue appeared to be less true, and despite a favorable outcome, the individual would be considered a weaker moral agent. This did not mean that Kantian obedience to duty could not become inclination too. Through *Bildung*, a predilection towards virtue might form and Schiller's skepticism could be overcome. However, it should be emphasized that a *feeling* for morality was just as important to cultivate as particular moral outcomes.

Schiller conceded that the truest and most beautiful expression of virtue was an aspiration and not always a reality. Sometimes we would fail to achieve virtue when our sensibility conflicted with the moral law. In "On The Sublime" Schiller imagines a man who delights in practicing virtues and "all the duties whose accomplishment is prescribed to him by circumstance are only a play to him, and I admit that fortune favors him in such wise that none of the actions which his good heart may demand of him will be hard to him."¹²¹ Although, Schiller says that this man would be charming to us because we find the harmony between his instinct and the prescriptions of reason pleasing, he questions whether he could really be called a

¹¹⁹ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 163.

¹²⁰ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 202.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

virtuous man. This is because we do not know the purity of his actions in this situation since they have never been challenged and he has not been confronted with the possibility of acting in any other way. Schiller goes on to imagine the misfortunes that befall this man whose virtue is in question. “He is deprived of his possessions; his reputation is destroyed; he is chained to his bed by sickness and suffering; he is robbed by death of all those he loves; he is forsaken in his distress by all in whom he had trusted.”¹²² In this terrible situation Schiller encourages us to investigate whether or not the same virtues manifest as those that did in times of happiness and prosperity. He goes on to posit that:

If he is found to be absolutely the same as before, if his poverty has not deteriorated his benevolence, or ingratitude his kindly offices of good-will, or bodily suffering his equanimity, or adversity his joy in the happiness of others; if his change of fortune is perceptible in externals, but not in his habits, in the matter, but not in the form of his conduct; then, doubtless, his virtue could not be explained by any reason drawn from the physical order...¹²³

Schiller concludes that in this case the man perceives and acts above the constraints and possibilities of the material world and beyond his very nature since his inclination towards virtue does not waiver. In this ultimate victory of his moral being over physical necessity, he now transcends all fortune and circumstance and enters an unalterable realm of concept and idea. This ideal state of virtue, while undeniably difficult to reach, must be the aspiration of any cultivated man.

Schiller’s perspective has implications for *Bildung* in several important ways. First, the conception of virtue to which he directs his readers is unconditional. It does not waver when challenged. It is therefore less fickle than “situational moralities” that rely on specific outcomes, and not on the spirit in which those outcomes were derived. Second, unlike pure duty, which risks rigidity, Schiller’s perspective depicts virtue as an end which can pleurably coincide with one’s cultivated nature. As Schiller warned “the idea of duty is delivered in Kantian moral philosophy with a severity that frightens away all the Graces, and that could easily tempt a weak understanding to seek moral perfection along the path of a gloomy and monkish asceticism.”¹²⁴

¹²² Ibid., p. 135.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 135.

¹²⁴ Anne Margaret Baxley, ‘The Beautiful Soul and the Autocratic Agent: Schiller’s and Kant’s “Children of the House”’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, vol. 41, no. 4 (2003), 493-514 (p.496).

By contrast, Schiller's positive approach makes following virtue more desirable and so ultimately proves more effective in following moral law. As Schiller argued, the moral perfection of man should not require protracted struggle, and, even if there was initial struggle, it could ultimately be overcome through the refinement of attitudes. Third, this perspective is also persuasive in granting people agency in its assumption that they are capable of beautiful feelings and need not subserviently adhere to abstract principles to perform moral actions. Through cultivation, inclinations could develop and instincts evolve to such an extent that they would transcend moral prescriptions.

Agency and autonomy, therefore, distinguished the Beautiful Soul. This complete state of virtue was subjectively derived: in fact, it had to be so if it were to produce the free, unmediated moral inclinations that Schiller envisioned. Although there were certain virtues often associated with a Beautiful Soul, there was no model or set of principles that a person was required to maintain nor a singular state of being that was espoused. Indeed, the theorists of *Bildung* were adamant in their desire not to define a Beautiful Soul or to prescribe a particular set of virtues to follow. Of course, since all humans are imperfect, there would be positive characteristics that needed to be developed to approach an ideal state. And indeed there were some virtues, such as kindness, that a Beautiful Soul could not be without. However, the establishment of a more extensive list of virtues was subjective and their harmonization was thought to be unique. Furthermore, the path to virtuous self-realization could not be exogenously imposed; areas of personal weakness would become apparent in the process of self-cultivation. It was, in the end, the responsibility of the individual, in a highly personal act, to determine which virtues to adopt and interpret what these virtues meant to his own lived experience.

Part of the reason why this was so important was that if virtue did not take shape autonomously and the individual did not internalize a set of values for himself, he would not truly grasp morality or reach knowledge. As Schiller remarked:

The reflective man conceives of virtue, truth, happiness; but the man of action will only exercise virtues, only apprehend truths, only enjoy happy days. To lead back these latter to the former—to achieve instead of moral practices, morality, instead of things known, knowledge, instead of happy experiences, happiness, is the business of physical and ethical education; to make Beauty from beautiful objects is the task of aesthetic education.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 82-83.

Furthermore, if he only aspired to practice certain prescribed moral principles not to attain a state of morality for himself, then his performance could devolve into an imperfect condition to which, according to Schiller, even the most refined people were susceptible:

In the so-called ages of refinement therefore, we shall see tenderness degenerating not infrequently into softness, plainness into platitude, correctness into emptiness, liberality into licence, lightness into frivolity, calmness into apathy, and the most despicable caricature side by side with the most splendid humanity.¹²⁶

In other words, if the approach to virtue was false or mechanical, a virtue could easily become confused with, or contorted into, a vice. Furthermore, a person might perform good acts or exercise certain virtues, but that did not mean that he was necessarily good or virtuous. So, to propagate actions or codes of conduct as the end of *Bildung* would largely miss the point. Thus, the truest dispositions towards virtue had to be subjectively conceived and organically felt.

Subjectivity and Creative Freedom

The proponents of *Bildung*, then, advanced a complex notion of subjectivity and individual freedom, but they did so explicitly for the purpose of promoting universal ends that attended to the social collective. This subjective-universal relationship was a reflection of a precise moment in history: the transitional period between the Enlightenment, focused primarily on universal values, and Romanticism, grounded in a strong conception of individual agency. *Bildung* was a compelling theory because it balanced and integrated the two.

The importance of freedom cannot be overstated, for it was the cornerstone of *Bildung* and distinguished it from its Ancient formulations. Novalis argued that “All education (*Bildung*) leads to nothing else than what one can call freedom, although this should not designate a mere concept but the creative ground of all existence.”¹²⁷ This new conception of the creativity intrinsic to freedom allowed the theorists of *Bildung* to expand the definition of freedom itself and to demonstrate that it was not something that was assumed, but rather cultivated. Schlegel’s very definition of *Bildung* was “the development of independence.”¹²⁸ While Humboldt likewise placed a strong emphasis on freedom in *Bildung*, writing in one instance to Georg Forster (1754-

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

¹²⁷ Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, p. 100.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

1794), the naturalist and revolutionary, on November 1, 1792 that “the cause of freedom, or rather of one’s own energy, has to be the cause of every cultivated man...”¹²⁹ Freedom, therefore, did not simply mean exerting one’s will on the world independent of external constraints, as some modern definitions maintain.¹³⁰ Rather, it meant possessing the intellectual capacity to imaginatively determine precisely who one was in all one’s specificity and what one wanted to become. Before freedom could be granted or taken away, it first had to be determined where one’s freedom lay. Equally, in preserving this freedom, it was as important to question personally imposed limitations as those externally enforced. Cultivating one’s being was the only way to determine the wider spectrum of one’s liberties, beyond the most basic and intuitive ones.

Subjectivity was embedded within this notion of freedom because it was understood that every individual was unique. As Schlegel said “All independence is original, and all originality is moral, the originality of the whole person. Without it there is no energy of reason or beauty of soul.”¹³¹ Since an important objective of *Bildung* was to harness individuality in order to contribute to humanity, advancing a doctrine that limited personal growth not only diminished the self but also hindered social progress. If a person was forced to do something that was fundamentally against their nature, they would be unable to produce anything that was significant for humanity. It was all too common for people to pigeon hole themselves into careers and ways of being that were actively destructive. To make worth contingent on specific ends, such as undertaking particular professions, that applied to some but not to all, was to have a stunted conception of humanity. The task of *Bildung*, then, was to ensure that people did not maintain a myopic view of life and that they could see beyond the simplistic expectations of society. As Goethe said “Every man must think after his own fashion; for on his own path he finds a truth, or a kind of truth, which helps him through life.”¹³² The life of the Beautiful Soul was one that “works with the greater freedom.”¹³³

Freedom through personal development was, in other respects, vital because it was a necessary safeguard against oppression. The theorists of *Bildung* were directly responding to

¹²⁹ Boyle, *Goethe*, pp. 30-31.

¹³⁰ See, e.g., Quentin Skinner, *Liberty before Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

¹³¹ Schlegel, ‘Ideas’, p. 139.

¹³² Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections*, p. 75.

¹³³ Goethe, *Truth and Poetry*, p. 449.

Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?" (1784) when they argued this point. In this essay, Kant asserts that "Enlightenment is man's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity."¹³⁴ He challenges the individual to recognize the power of his own intellect and break from ignorance born from spoon-fed dogma through the cultivation of his mind. Kant argues that this ignorance is self-imposed:

Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large part of mankind gladly remain minors all their lives, long after nature has freed them from external guidance. They are the reasons why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as guardians. It is so comfortable to be a minor. If I have a book that thinks for me, a pastor who acts as my conscience, a physician who prescribes my diet, and so on-- then I have no need to exert myself.¹³⁵

Bildung was naturally suited to address this obstacle to Enlightenment because of its emphasis on the intellectual development of the self. In Kantian terms, it challenged the individual to Dare to Know, *Sapere Aude!* The theorists of *Bildung* firmly believed that people should think critically and rationally, never blindly accepting orthodoxy or the opinion of the majority. If the individual unthinkingly followed rules and laws, he ran the risk of being coerced into conformity and thus to unwittingly perpetuate the worst social ills. Humboldt, especially, cautioned that people must act on their own subjective judgments, for, the more they conformed to particular norms or became part of larger associations, the more they risked becoming the instrument of power interests.¹³⁶ As Schiller said "the voice of the majority is no proof of justice."¹³⁷

Contrary to Kant, however, intellectual freedom was ultimately more valuable to the theorists of *Bildung* than social order because it affirmed the capacities of human faculties and protected against false doctrines. As Schiller commented:

Liberty, with all its drawbacks, is everywhere vastly more attractive to a noble soul than good social order without it, than society like a flock of sheep, or a machine working like a watch. This mechanism makes of man only a product; liberty makes him the citizen of a better world.¹³⁸

¹³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *An Answer to the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?'*, trans. by H.B. Nisbet (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 5.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.5.

¹³⁶ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p. 36.

¹³⁷ Tryon Edwards, *The New Dictionary of Thoughts: A Cyclopedic of Quotations* (Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2008), p. 324.

¹³⁸ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 140.

However, just like conformity which could lead to tyranny and oppression, liberty could become a threat to society if the individual's conception of it was still in development. As Schiller remarked:

The gift of liberal principles becomes a piece of treachery to the whole, when it is associated with a still nature; the law of conformity becomes tyranny towards the individual when it is combined with an already prevailing weakness and physical limitation, and so extinguishes the last glimmering sparks of spontaneity and individuality.¹³⁹

Therefore, a certain level of internal liberty had to be exercised in the process of self-cultivating before the expression of external liberty could follow. People earned the right to exert themselves through rational reflection, critical thinking, and intellectual activity.

Schiller's poem "The Song of the Bell," addresses these themes. In the poem, he cautions American revolutionaries, whom he supports, to learn from the failings of the French revolution and consider what their newfound freedom means and how to respect it. In a letter written after the poem's publication in 1799, Schiller wrote:

This effort of the French people to establish their sacred rights of humanity and to gain political freedom has only brought to light their unworthiness and impotence; and, not this ill-fated nation alone, but with it a considerable part of Europe and a whole century have been hurled back into barbarism and servitude...Freedom, political and civil, remains ever and always the holiest of all possessions, the worthiest goal of all striving, the great rallying point of all culture; but this glorious structure can only be raised upon the firm basis of an ennobled character and before a citizen can be given a constitution one must see that the citizen be himself soundly constituted...¹⁴⁰

Thus, soundly constituting oneself through the practice of *Bildung* was the surest way to gain freedom and to honor this freedom, both of which were of absolute importance, but the latter of which was rarely considered.

The challenge that Schiller identified was that most people did not desire to undertake the laborious exercise of employing their rationality. It was easier to be led than to think in an autonomous capacity which was why it was so common to blindly submit to authoritarian structures and to never develop a coherent, self-determined set of values. As Schiller declared:

¹³⁹ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 46-47.

¹⁴⁰ Marianna Wertz, 'Friedrich Schiller's "The Song of the Bell"', *Fidelio*, vol. 14, no. 1-2 (2005), 36-45 (p.41).

The greater part of humanity is too much harassed and fatigued by the struggle with want, to rally itself for a new and sterner struggle with error. Content if they themselves escape the hard labour of thought, men gladly resign to others the guardianship of their ideas, and if it happens that higher needs are stirred in them, they embrace with eager faith the formulas which State and priesthood hold in readiness for such an occasion.¹⁴¹

Despite this challenge, the individual was encouraged to overcome the seduction of political and moral lethargy; he was expected to live “a more active kind of citizenship” through *Bildung*.¹⁴²

Even if the benefits associated with an active populace informing social and political structures were far in the distance, it was still valuable to set the process in motion as it was the only way that true progress could be made. Living an active intellectual life did not mean that the individual necessarily had to be at odds with the ideologies and institutions of their time. They rather had to be cautious of their influences and, most importantly, maintain a definitive measure of control over themselves. This was a moderate approach to the ideal of citizenship, not a gratuitously reactionary one. As Schiller reflected as a general principle that could be applied in different contexts, but is also relevant here:

Live with your century, but do not be its creature; render to your contemporaries what they need, not what they praise. Without sharing their guilt, share with noble resignation their penalties, and bow with freedom beneath the yoke which they can as ill dispense with as they can bear it.¹⁴³

Part of the way in which the individual maintained this control over the institutions and associations which bound him was through spontaneous action. For Humboldt, spontaneous action was a necessary condition of liberty and a sacred right of the individual to sustain personal dignity. Without this possibility progress could be undone by the hate, ignorance and irrationality that breeds in the stagnant waters of total conformity and the tumultuousness of mob mentalities. Any steps forward could quickly be taken back and history would fulfill the dispiriting prophecy of repeating itself. Even worse was when these actions were undertaken in the name of seemingly noble ends. Nothing was more dangerous than division promoted under the guise of equality or justice imposed through unjust means. Once again, these thinkers cited the devastation of the Terror that had taken place in France which was born from admirable

¹⁴¹ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 49.

¹⁴² Burrow, ‘Introduction’ in *The Limits of State Action*, p. lii.

¹⁴³ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 54.

republican principles and sacred universal ends that were shattered in their enactment by an angry, irrational mob.

However, the theorists of *Bildung* were social optimists. They believed that the history of humanity was, or at least could become, a positive trajectory. The practice of *Bildung* would ultimately lead to the complete freedom of the individual's inner world, the crucible of progress.¹⁴⁴ *Bildung* became associated with the struggle against oppression “on which the whole greatness of mankind ultimately depends.”¹⁴⁵ In humanity's long, gradual evolution through *Bildung*, freedom would manifest itself not only in the minds of individuals, but also in the institutions and associations that these individuals occupied, thereby paving the way for human progress. The subjectivity that *Bildung* advanced was, even for today, deeply progressive since most ideologies depend either explicitly or implicitly on the individual conforming, before or after giving consent. In contrast, *Bildung* was intended to be a liberating doctrine of personal action that could flourish independently of the judgement or authority of others. It was this optimism in individuals' abilities, paired with an acute perception of the problems that must be overcome in the face of political and social discord that made this theory both idealistic and pragmatic.

The conceptual development of freedom and spontaneity were intimately connected to the aesthetic dimension of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* since beauty was considered to be free, and as such could assist in freeing the mind and spirit. Schiller's animal metaphors are relevant to this discussion. In his *Kallias Letters*, he argues that we would not call the work horse free or beautiful because it treads along tiredly, “its movement no longer springs from its nature” robbed of its natural motion by the wagon it must bear, it lets gravity pull it down. The stallion, on the other hand, who lithely trots through the fields is light and free. By actualizing the possibilities of his nature through graceful movement, he becomes beautiful. Schiller argues that beauty and freedom overcome heaviness which is why, for example, when we attempt to describe Psyche's freedom, we depict her with butterfly wings.¹⁴⁶ We can apply this metaphor to human life and argue that the man who is forced into conformity, who figuratively bears weights that hold him

¹⁴⁴ Immanuel Kant, *On Education*, trans. by Annette Churton (Boston: D.C Heath and Co.,1900), p. 30.

¹⁴⁵ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁶ Schiller, ‘Kallias’, p. 164.

down, will never realize his natural faculties. The Beautiful Soul by definition must be intellectually free, with a lightness of being and a profoundness of thought that moves her beyond enslavement to the will of others. She lives, according to Schiller, with grace, the “beauty of form under freedom’s influence” and this grace is derived from her “personal merit” because she has acquired it through the force of her own volition.¹⁴⁷

The theorists of *Bildung* did not believe that the grace of freedom negated the seriousness of one’s communal responsibilities or infringed upon the liberty of others. The emphasis on the individual was not intended to remove a person from the world but rather to integrate him into the full breadth of human experience. Indeed, according to Schiller, personal freedom sprung from “the beauty of social relations” and vice versa.¹⁴⁸ He believed that the first law of gentility was to “have consideration for the freedom of others” and the second was to “show your freedom.”¹⁴⁹ As Goethe argued à propos the purpose of poetry, everything that is subjective has the general contained within it. Therefore, the expression of one’s individuality should not be feared because it appears different, but instead embraced as a unique contribution to society:

Besides, while you content yourself in generalities, everyone can imitate you; but, in the particular, no man can, because no man has lived exactly your life. And you need not fear lest what is peculiar should not meet with sympathy. Each character, however peculiar it may be, and each object which you can represent, from the stone up to man, has generality; for there is repetition everywhere, and there is no thing to be found only once in the world. On this step of representing what is peculiar or individual begins what we call composition.¹⁵⁰

We can extrapolate from the discussion on the creation of poetry to the exertion of one’s distinct position in the world. Falling into generalities for lack of imagination would produce nothing of greater value and could not be legitimized as being more conducive to social cohesion. Fitting into the crowd, was the outward display of inner suppression, not an admirable effort at consensus. Embracing individuality, then, was, in the end, the most sincere and legitimate attempt at achieving community.

Schiller represented this interplay of the individual and the collective will in beautiful social relations with the image of a well-performed English dance:

¹⁴⁷ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 181.

¹⁴⁸ Schiller, ‘Kallias’, pp. 173-174.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.

¹⁵⁰ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 58.

The spectator in the gallery sees countless movements which cross each other colourfully and change their direction willfully but *never collide*. Everything has been arranged such that the first has already made room for the second before he arrives, everything comes together so skillfully and yet so artlessly that both seem merely to be following their own mind and still never get in the way of the other. This is the most fitting picture of maintained personal freedom and the spared freedom of the other.¹⁵¹

This image of dancers who respect their own freedom by gracefully moving in resonance with the freedom of those around them is a far cry from the exertion of brutish individual force with which freedom so often has come to be associated. *Bildung*, therefore, offered a cultivated and refined understanding of human liberty, one which incorporated empathy and subtly considered the position of others while never negating one's own. Its theorists maintained that individual rights are only true liberties when they are pursued in reference to the collective wellbeing upon which the individual undeniably depends. While this nuanced conception of subjectivity was more complex, it was possible to achieve accord in even the most contentious matters through artful diplomacy and displays of rational understanding that any beautiful soul would have cultivated in the very exercise of her inner freedom.

Activity and the Full Life

The expression of individual freedom and the articulation of one's personhood and values was defined through action. The theorists of *Bildung* believed that no good could come unless it was enacted. Schiller noted that:

Alone of all known beings-man, in his quality of person, has the privilege to break the chain of necessity by his will, and to determine in himself an entire series of fresh spontaneous phenomena. The act by which he thus determines himself is properly that which we call an action, and the things that result from this sort of action are what we exclusively name his acts. Thus man can only show his personality by his own acts.¹⁵²

Action constituted the condition of the soul and determined its future flourishing. Accordingly, the soul was not an immutable entity but a malleable force susceptible to continuous change and development. Like the body which regenerates itself entirely over the course of a lifetime but

¹⁵¹ Schiller, 'Kallias', pp. 173-174.

¹⁵² Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, pp. 188-189.

also maintains a constancy so that the adult can still be identified with the child he was, the properties of the soul were in a state of perpetual metamorphosis, yet something essential remained. A person could not assume that the soul was in a good state without working to maintain and improve its condition through concerted effort.

Action began inwardly with the cultivation of the self. In his *Monologues* (1800), the philosopher and theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) captures how internal reflection leads to a felicitous external state:

Oh, how much richer my life has become! What a happy self-consciousness of my inner worth, what a heightened feeling for my own life and existence, crowns my self-reflection now that I consider the rewards of so many beautiful days! Not in vain was my quiet activity, which externally seemed like idleness. It has nicely aided my inner development.¹⁵³

In mentioning idleness he alludes to the standard critique of this philosophy which is that cultivating the soul could surely not produce tangible results. Animalistic instinct, uncultivated response, and injudicious decision-making is quicker to action than contemplative response. But just because cultivated activity underscored by intellectual processes took longer to develop did not mean that it was any less effectual. On the contrary, it was only meditated action that could produce lasting results. According to Schiller, there was nothing more agreeable to the Beautiful Soul than inner activity.¹⁵⁴ For Goethe, all worth was derived from doing. As one of his maxims went: “How can a man come to know himself? Never by thinking, but by doing. Try to do your duty, and you will know at once what you are worth.”¹⁵⁵ Humboldt similarly argued that the more activity one did the more likely one was to do good, and that it is only man’s active energy “that can turn the most promising seed into a full and precious blessing for himself.”¹⁵⁶

In one of the few examples that the theorists of *Bildung* gave of a living Beautiful Soul, Goethe discusses the artist Claude Lorrain, who he believed truthfully rendered the beauty of his internal state of being through the activity of his art. In a conversation with Eckermann on April 10, 1826, Goethe places a collection of Claude Lorrain’s landscapes in front of him and says: “Here you see, for once, a complete man... Beautiful were his thoughts and feelings, and in his

¹⁵³ Schleiermacher ‘Monologues II and III’, p. 182.

¹⁵⁴ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 350.

¹⁵⁵ Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections*, p. 61.

¹⁵⁶ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p. 13.

mind lay a world, such as you will not easily find elsewhere. The pictures have the highest truth, not the truth of actual life. Claude Lorrain knew the real world by heart, but used it only as means to express the world of his beautiful soul.”¹⁵⁷ Goethe presents us with a clear example of how a vibrant inner world might display itself through the medium of painting, alluding to the theorists’ perspective that activity was not a formulaic undertaking but a creative expression of the imagination.

The imaginative impulse towards activity, however, did not mean that it could be taken up unsystematically. To self-cultivate was not a pursuit that one casually adopted; its ends could never be achieved in a desultory, cavalier fashion. *Bildung* was an integral way of life, the ultimate activity to which all man’s thoughts and actions should be directed if he was to lead a meaningful existence.¹⁵⁸ Beyond basic subsistence, what was the purpose of life if not to improve one’s moral, aesthetic, and intellectual faculties, and by doing so, to create goodness and beauty in the world? *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* seemed obvious and instinctual to any person with even the most basic disposition towards the Good and the inclination to utilize their higher faculties. And yet they appeared striking and original in a world where often the most evident truths are the ones most occluded. If one accepted the fundamental tenets of *Bildung*, then not orienting one’s entire life towards them was nonsensical. It showed nothing more than a weakness of character, which along with indolence, epitomized the human frailty that the theorists of *Bildung* so assiduously worked to overcome. As Friedrich Schlegel said “Whoever remains indifferent and lazy does not care for the dignity of art and humanity. What use are the achievements of *Bildung* without a secure foundation? What use is vitality without a sure direction, without proportion and balance?”¹⁵⁹ The theory of *Bildung* therefore demanded indefatigable, lifelong dedication and practice. Personally constructed and continuous forms of self-improvement constituted the core reality of these concepts.

The figure of the Beautiful Soul was not acquiescent or weak, but strong and active, with a mind constantly animated and actions perpetually in flux. The determination to improve her

¹⁵⁷ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 305.

¹⁵⁸ David Kettler and Gerhard Lauer, ‘The “Other Germany” and the Question of Bildung: Weimar to Bonn’, in *Exile, Science, and Bildung: The Contested Legacies of German Intellectual Figures*, ed. by David Kettler and Gerhard Lauer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp.1-18 (p. 13).

¹⁵⁹ Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, p. 37.

being and strengthen her character was her declared goal. Her commitment is demonstrated by the Beautiful Soul in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* who, once she discovers that her ends are those of a spiritual nature, relentlessly gives herself to their pursuit. It is not the particular ends she chooses but the passion with which she pursues them that distinguishes her and legitimizes her appellation as a Beautiful Soul. Her uncle acknowledges that this is what makes her so special.¹⁶⁰ He concludes that decision and perseverance are the noblest qualities known to man and that his primary vocation is activity.¹⁶¹

The activity that the uncle identifies as the purpose of man is represented by the characters of the Beautiful Soul and Wilhelm Meister, respectively. With her spiritual devotedness, which is more a representation of the non-physical dimensions of existence than religion, the Beautiful Soul personifies the need to develop values and beliefs. With his adventures into the outer world and the evolution of his character by doing, Wilhelm Meister represents the value of experience. Each perspective proves important to the formation of the self but presents its own challenges if not maintained in balance with the other. The Beautiful Soul, for example, is so adamant about her internal development that she forgoes important experiences in the world; Wilhelm Meister could at times benefit from greater self-reflection before acting. We can therefore learn from both. The ideal soul of beauty would live up to her responsibility to act by integrating her mental states with her worldly representations of them and vice versa until a perfect balance had been found.

The Struggle Against Utility

An ethic of activity should not be confused with one of utility for this philosophy was without proximate instrumental purpose and any utilitarian approach to it was met with great suspicion. Schiller warned of the "bread and butter man," the individual who focused only on his career without making conceptual links between subjects and remained blind to the possibilities of his existence.¹⁶² Novalis likewise described the prosaic man who destroyed all beauty and significance with the predictability of his routines and the vacuous nature of his means to

¹⁶⁰ Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister*, pp. 359-360.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 368.

¹⁶² T. J. Reed, *Light in Germany: Scenes from an Unknown Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 148-149.

uninspired ends. With great foresight, he depicted the course that humanity would follow in his observations on what was already taking place on the individual level:

Philistines lead only a daily life. The chief means appears to be their only end. They do everything for the sake of their earthly life, as it seems and must seem from their behavior. They mingle poetry with their lives only according to need because they have grown used to a little distraction from their daily routine. Usually this diversion happens every seven days and could be called a poetic weekly fever. On Sundays work ceases; they live a little better than usual and this festivity ends with a deeper sleep; but only so that on Monday everything can resume a brisker pace. Their *parties de plaisir* must be conventional, habitual and fashionable; but even their pleasure are worked through like everything else, laboriously and formally.¹⁶³

The man that Novalis somberly portrays embodied the inhuman regimentation of existence and the soulless path of conformity that was becoming a feature of modern life. With his mindless schedules of labor and his artificial allotments of pleasure, he stifled true productivity and suffocated the very poetry that he generically sought to consume. How could any great ideas, brilliant innovations, or astute observations be discovered by this modern man who ran around in the circles of his self-erected cage, never stopping to witness the tragedy of his own imprisonment?

The theorists of *Bildung* did not negate the importance of applying oneself. They were rather concerned with the rigid mentalities that could arise from specialization and the prosaicness of a society that prioritized economic realities at the expense of unquantifiable developments in culture, the arts, and sciences. It was a pedestrian mode of being devoid of any higher truth or meaning that they contested. They understood that human progress could be thwarted by practical outcomes if ends of a greater nature were not re-established as the ultimate objective of man. The predicament which Goethe and Schiller believed defined the modern age was the blind pursuit of profit and efficiency, even when it was in conflict with Beauty, Goodness and Truth.¹⁶⁴ A re-conception of human worth that advanced more elevated forms of being than the quotidian concern for functional outcomes could provide was therefore required before the individual could undertake his moral-aesthetic education.

The theorists of *Bildung* advocated an intellectual engagement with the world that could extrapolate from circumstantial conditions, making connections across different domains such

¹⁶³ Novalis, 'Pollen', pp. 24-25.

¹⁶⁴ See Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 25-27.

that the necessarily limited material of subjective knowledge could disclose more objective values. Through the gifts with which he had been endowed and the interests he forged, man could touch upon other epistemic foundations and disciplinary truths. As Schiller observed:

If nature has endowed him with the gifts for plastic art, he will study the structure of man with the scalpel of the anatomist; he will descend into the lowest depths to be true in representing surfaces, and he will question the whole race in order to be just to the individual. If he is born to be a poet, he examines humanity in his own heart to understand the infinite variety of scenes in which it acts on the vast theatre of the world. He subjects imagination and its exuberant fruitfulness to the discipline of taste, and charges the understanding to mark out in its cool wisdom the banks that should confine the raging waters of inspiration.¹⁶⁵

A greater understanding of the world required opening one's mind to the web of interconnections available and displaying characteristics of a polymath by making imaginative connections between subjects. The self-cultivated individual, then, was open to everything from philosophy and literature to theatre, medicine, the visual arts and sciences. He understood that knowledge had no boundaries and curiosity need not be relegated to a single area of interest or study. Humboldt argued that "an interesting man, therefore, is interesting in all situations and all activities, though he only attains the most matured and graceful consummation of his activity when his way of life is harmoniously in keeping with his character."¹⁶⁶ Those in pursuit of the Beautiful Soul maintained a focus, one which aligned with their character, while remaining well versed in many schools of thought and ways of seeing, retaining an intellectual suppleness and receptivity to new impressions. They never allowed their capacity for wonder to be stifled by quotidian responsibilities and social conventions.

The proponents of *Bildung* embodied these traits in their own lived experiences. Goethe, for example, was not only a philosopher, poet, and playwright but also a scientist. His poetic mind informed his scientific mind and his enthusiasm and sensitivity for beauty made conceptual connections between the two. As T.J. Reed notes:

The scientist was formulating what the young poet had intuited when he linked the bursting forth of plant growth, birdsong, and human emotion in a single verb, *dringen*. His science had grown out of that passionate embracing of the world and still retained the force of poetic vision, so much so that he could feel convinced he was concretely seeing what was for others an abstract idea.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 240.

¹⁶⁶ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁷ Reed, *Light in Germany*, p. 126.

Schiller, who was a physician and playwright in addition to being a historian and philosopher, spanned disciplines and integrated seemingly disparate subject matters. In a letter to Goethe on April 7, 1797, for example, Schiller refers to a Hebrew dialogue on love that he found in the library that combines mythologies, chemistry, and astronomy, making “ingenious comparisons of the planets with human limbs.” He recounts his delight in reading this text and writes that he intends to give the “astrological material a poetic dignity.”¹⁶⁸ These comments suggest the meaning the proponents of *Bildung* derived from exploring different disciplinary systems and cultural approaches to knowledge which they drew from and creatively elaborated upon in surprising ways. In turning to nature to inform their art, they demonstrated the degree to which they observed the interconnectivity of all things. Even if their philosophical observations were generally more acute than their scientific ones, their philosophy undoubtedly benefited from the breadth of their interests and their sensitivity to the world around them.

The transdisciplinary curiosity that these theorists maintained was precisely the spirit in which their philosophy was intended to be undertaken. Like Schiller and Goethe, Humboldt spanned many disciplines as a diplomat, philosopher, linguist, and educational theorist. But beyond his own career, his wide-ranging approach to learning was reflected in his ideas on *Bildung*, especially his passion for the integration of the arts and sciences within educational models. In his “Theory of Bildung” for example, he states that:

It is the ultimate task of our existence to achieve as much substance as possible for the concept of humanity in our person, both during the span of our life and beyond it, through the traces we leave by means of our vital activity... by the linking of the self to the world to achieve the most general, most animated, and most unrestrained interplay.¹⁶⁹

Like seeing the pattern in a constellation of stars, Humboldt believed that creating links between subjects would form more complex systems of understanding and a finer network of relationships from which to draw in answering fundamental questions of a more objective validity. In his conception, before a person specialized it was the responsibility of the State to transform him into a well-rounded person through a liberal education. This was the only way that

¹⁶⁸ Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Correspondence Between Schiller and Goethe*, trans. by George H. Calvert (London: Wiley and Putnam, 1845), p. 237.

¹⁶⁹ Humboldt, ‘Theory of Bildung’, p. 235.

he could reasonably fulfill his responsibilities as a citizen and exercise his agency as a member of a rational and enlightened society. He argued that:

There are undeniably certain kinds of knowledge that must be of a general nature and, more importantly, a certain cultivation of the mind and character that nobody can afford to be without. People obviously cannot be good craft workers, merchants, soldiers or businessmen unless, regardless of their occupation, they are good, upstanding and – according to their condition – well-informed human beings and citizens. If this basis is laid through schooling, vocational skills are easily acquired later on, and a person is always free to move from one occupation to another, as so often happens in life.¹⁷⁰

However, despite the successes of Humboldt's educational model and the extent to which he realized these ambitions, the goal of a well formed citizenship, versed in a wider range of subjects, contrasted sharply with the direction that society was headed at the time. The problems that these theorists struggled against were of a larger order at a historical moment when Germany, and the rest of Europe, was on the brink of unprecedented industrial change. People who narrowed their intellectual horizons were a product of an increasingly utilitarian society. The theorists of *Bildung* were among the first to criticize the emerging social and economic structures that led to the degradation of intellectual autonomy. They anticipated the dangers of industrialization and the detrimental effects that an ethic of extreme pragmatism had on the human soul. They observed how quickly people could be turned into automatons fulfilling functions that were economically efficient but degraded the scope of human faculties and the integrity of moral ends. As Schiller noted in his *Aesthetic Letters*:

Eternally chained to only one single little fragment of the whole, Man himself grew to be only a fragment; with the monotonous noise of the wheel he drives everlastingly in his ears, he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of imprinting humanity upon his nature he becomes merely the imprint of his occupation, of his science.¹⁷¹

The fragmentation to which Schiller refers here reduced man to a tool in an economic system, no longer a person capable of a full expression of his humanity but one limited to a singular, methodical task. The pettiness of necessity robbed the individual of his dignity and reduced the

¹⁷⁰ Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), p. 174.

¹⁷¹ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 40.

meaning of his life. Schiller captured the wide-reaching consequences that the obsession with pragmatism had for the arts when he stated:

But today necessity is master, and bends a degraded humanity beneath its tyrannous yoke. Utility is the great idol of the age, to which all powers must do service and all talents swear allegiance. In these clumsy scales the spiritual service of art has no weight; deprived of all encouragement, she flees from the noisy mart of our century. The very spirit of philosophical enquiry seizes one province after another from the imagination, and the frontiers of art are contracted as the boundaries of science are enlarged.¹⁷²

And yet, despite the dismalness of an overly functional society, there was hope. The philosophy of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* offered an alternative to the fragmentation of modern life, elevating man to something greater than the sum of his economic value. Beauty assisted in the process of breaking from the yoke of utility and envisioning more illuminated ends. It was by definition free and as such it existed independent of practical purpose. As Schiller said, we call something beautiful “if we do not need to be helped by the idea to see the form, if the form is free and purposeless and comes from itself, and all the parts seem to limit themselves from within themselves.”¹⁷³ The Beautiful Soul surpassed a utilitarian conception of worth. She defied the dehumanization of homogenization with the extent of her learning, the breadth of her curiosity, and the originality of her cultivated displays of unquantifiable value. This philosophy can be understood as one of the first theoretical critiques of capitalism and industrialization. The issues its proponents anticipated became only more pronounced in the centuries that were to come and their socio-economic insights are perhaps more relevant today than they ever were when they were written.

Authenticity and Simplicity

On the surface, it would appear that such a non-utilitarian approach to *Bildung* would contradict its call to action. The concept, however, was not simply a process; it was first and foremost a disposition and a way of being that, if it did not exist naturally, could be developed. In viewing *Bildung* from a contemporary perspective, we might interpret it simply to mean education in an

¹⁷² Ibid., p. 26.

¹⁷³ Schiller, ‘Kallias’, p. 170.

instrumental sense, but this does not capture the spirit and the essence of the word. *Bildung* was not a practical end *per se*, such as a student who sought university education to gain a prestigious job, or a painter who learned the techniques of his *métier* merely to sell his work. Although cultivation might include these ends, it could not be reduced to them. Rather it was a commitment to a nobler way of thinking and being.

This nobility of being came, in part, from doing things for their own sake with no reason other than a commitment to the end itself. Actions of a Beautiful Soul that were often cited in the eighteenth century were, for instance, a good deed that was performed without the public knowing and pursued for no other purpose than to do good; an instrument that was played without the intent to receive accolades from an audience; or a subject that was mastered without seeking adulation for one's erudition. As Schleiermacher commented in his *Monologues*, self-cultivation must be pursued without consideration of how one's thoughts and actions were perceived, for "I have neither time nor inclination to trouble myself about this. In this short life I have to move on and, as far as possible, perfect my individual nature through new thoughts and deeds."¹⁷⁴ In removing self-cultivation from external forms of validation, the individual was freed to follow the true course necessary for his personal development and to overcome superficiality and appearances. In so doing, he moved beyond evanescent pursuits and feckless social expectations derived from fashionable preferences and transitory circumstances that had little significance for the ultimate ends of human worth.

A Beautiful Soul was not swayed by external judgement or the opinions of others nor was she seduced by fame, power, or recognition. Those who undertook a moral-aesthetic education for ignoble or self-seeking reasons were thought not to be truly educated in the most profound sense of the term. He who craved immediate gratification and social admiration lost the motivation and qualities necessary to perfect his soul. One could turn to the educated middle class, as an example of persons who, in theory, subscribed to the tenets of *Bildung* but, with their common displays of cultural superiority, did not embody its spirit in any meaningful sense. The theorists of *Bildung* decried the distortion of its noble ends by the elite's vanity, false erudition and self-aggrandizement. They consistently valued an authentic spirit over action whose intention was misplaced. As Schiller remarked:

¹⁷⁴ Schleiermacher 'Monologues II and III', p. 178.

The civilized classes present to us the still more repugnant spectacle of indolence, and a depravity of character which is all the more shocking since culture itself is the source of it. I forget which ancient or modern philosopher made the remark that what is more noble is in its corruption the more abominable; but it is equally true in the moral sphere. The child of nature, when he breaks loose, becomes a maniac, the disciple of art an abandoned wretch. The intellectual enlightenment on which the refined ranks of society, not without justification, pride themselves, reveals on the whole an influence upon the disposition so little ennobling that it rather furnishes maxims to confirm depravity.¹⁷⁵

The theorists of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* placed a high value on authenticity to avoid hypocrisy and keep their philosophy true to its ends. In an example Schiller gave following Kant, he argued that we cannot delight in a bird's song if we learn that it was produced by human imitation, for it would not accord with its own laws, and it is in this accordance that we find pleasure, because it is moral. If something we think is beautiful and true turns out to be artificial:

Our heart at once closes; our soul, which at first advanced with so much vivacity to meet the graceful object, shrinks back. That which was mind has suddenly become matter. Juno and her celestial beauty has vanished, and in her place there is nothing but a phantom of vapour.¹⁷⁶

A person who artificially followed the principles of *Bildung* out of disingenuous motivations, or in the interest of their own social advancement, could not possess a Beautiful Soul because their actions did not coincide with their nature.

Implicit to this definition of authenticity was simplicity and innocence. In "On Simple and Sentimental Poetry" Schiller describes a state of simplicity with two examples. The first example is that of the child who, upon hearing of a person dying of hunger, offers his purse so as to relieve him of his misery as immediately as possible. The child represents this state of innocence in which goodness is not confused by judgement or artificiality. The second example is that of a good-hearted man who blindly divulges his secrets to a deceitful friend. While his actions may be injudicious, they demonstrate his unconditional trust, which is pure and true. Both of these examples appear naïve in a society that elides the simplicity of moral responsibilities through establishing elaborate rules and manners in a world in which people can be mendacious and cruel. However, it is this naiveté which elicits our love and admiration. A society built upon inauthenticity in which people speak differently from what they truly think,

¹⁷⁵ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 35-36.

¹⁷⁶ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 186.

and act according to artifice and social façade, is exposed by the innocence of the child, or the adult who has retained childlike simplicity. Despite the treachery of its ways, even the most artificial society will respond to the child's goodwill with kindness because it is genuine. As Schiller remarked on the expressions of a child "They make us smile because they are in opposition to received manners; but men would always agree in the bottom of their hearts that the child is right."¹⁷⁷

A Beautiful Soul, then, was one who, in her simplicity, exhibited the features of a child. Through her genuineness, she brought humanity back to its pure, ideal form. "Having reached a state of total simplicity and of unrestricted communication with others, the beautiful soul restores the pristine 'transparency' of human nature."¹⁷⁸ A soul of beauty who possessed this youthful transparency preserved the pure ideals of *Bildung*.

Rationality and the Passions

Living genuinely in *Bildung* entailed engaging all that was inextricably part of the human condition, which meant embracing both rationality and the senses. By placing both on equal footing, the theorists of *Bildung* were responding to the legacy of the Enlightenment and its preoccupation with reason, which they believed had triumphed at the expense of the senses. Schiller, for example, "...diagnosed a profound practical failure of the theoretical culture of the Enlightenment in addressing man's mixed nature of reason and the senses."¹⁷⁹ He observed that man's capacity for feeling was the most important need of the times.

This shift in perception came partly from the admission that man is ineluctably bound to his senses. If he were to be the bearer of knowledge and human advancement, then his necessary dependence on them must be acknowledged. As Humboldt stated in *On the Limits of State Action*:

Whatever man beholds in the world around him, he perceives only through the medium of the senses; the pure essence of things is nowhere immediately revealed

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 275.

¹⁷⁸ Louis K. Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 126.

¹⁷⁹ Alexander Schmidt, 'Introduction', in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, by Friedrich Schiller, trans. by Keith Tribe (London, Penguin Classics, 2016), pp. vii-xxxv (p. xvii).

to him; even what inspires him with the most ardent love, and takes the strongest hold on his whole nature, is shrouded in the thickest veil.¹⁸⁰

Evolving epistemological perspectives and the receding dogma of religion in popular consciousness undoubtedly inspired this revelation. A humanist philosophy, such as *Bildung*, which demanded that the individual internalize and develop concepts through his own lived experiences, not blindly follow abstract precepts dictated by the church or a monarch, required that man not only accept, but actively use his senses as a guide in navigating the material world. Plato's metaphor of reflection in which constant, immutable ideas were represented in the world of feeling was an inspiration for this new philosophical orientation, and demonstrated the possibility that objective truth could be found through moments of sensory perception.

To overcome the dangerous comfort of reliance on institutions to guide action, the senses had to be trusted. If people feared their instincts, they would only relinquish further control of their personhood and remain in servitude. As Goethe observed "The senses do not deceive; it is the judgment that deceives."¹⁸¹ Schiller believed that if the senses were brutally constrained, in what constituted a "defective education," only bad outcomes would follow. Anything natural that was suppressed would eventually have detrimental consequences. The theorists of *Bildung* therefore embraced the "sensuous aspects of knowledge" and saw virtue in qualities of the spirit that had previously been stifled, using them as a catalyst for new ideas.¹⁸²

Humboldt believed that not only were the senses an inevitable part of the human condition, they were essential to the vitality of the soul. In *On the Limits of State Action*, he claimed:

The impressions, inclinations, and passions which have their immediate source in the senses are those which first and most violently show themselves in human nature. Whenever, before the refining influences of culture have given a new direction to the soul's energies, these sensuous impressions, etc. are not apparent, all energy is dead, and nothing good or great can flourish. They constitute the original source of all spontaneous activity, and all living warmth in the soul. They bring life and vigor to the soul; when not satisfied, they make it active, ingenious in the invention of schemes, and courageous in their execution; when satisfied, they promote an easy and unhindered play of ideas.¹⁸³

¹⁸⁰ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p. 60.

¹⁸¹ Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections*, p. 147.

¹⁸² Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p. 60.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

The “refining influences of culture” to which Humboldt refers turned the senses from this raw, morally neutral energy, into a force for good. It was the role of a *Bildung* education to purify this vital force through the guiding presence of culture and to reconcile it with reason. As Goethe commented, “A man is well equipped for all the real necessities of life if he trusts his senses, and so cultivates them that they remain worthy of being trusted.”¹⁸⁴

Schiller, in particular, was preoccupied with integrating sentiment with reason and exploring the connection to morality and aesthetics, which was the central aim of his *Aesthetic Letters*. In this work, Schiller identifies two drivers of human cognition and experience: the “sensuous drive” which offers immediate physical impressions, and the “form drive” which was constant and eternal, establishing abstract universal laws. Schiller believed that “our animal needs and desires provided essential first impulses of man’s spiritual perfection of both the individual and mankind as a whole.”¹⁸⁵ He gave equal status to the sensuous and rational faculties, a decisive break from earlier Kantian ideas by offering a notion of freedom in which sensuous nature was not suppressed but rather reunited with the intellect.¹⁸⁶ Enlivening the senses opened the floodgates of affect before rationality made sense of new information from a more detached, reflective perspective. The harmonization of the two could be found in the “play drive” which freed man of the command of either one. The object of the play drive was what Schiller described as “living form” or Beauty. Experiences of Beauty, then, unified these distinct, yet equally essential drives into something that was simultaneously ephemeral (living) and eternal (form).

This symbiotic relationship which found its union in Beauty is portrayed in the literature, particularly by Goethe who had an astonishing talent for perceiving the smallest beauty from which he derived profound meaning. His powers of perception are apparent throughout his written work. In his novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), for instance, Goethe’s protagonist exclaims:

When I first came here and looked down into that lovely valley from the hill, the way the entire scene charmed me was a marvel –That little wood!-ah if only you might walk in its shade!-That mountain-top-Ah, to view this vast landscape from there!-And the chain of hills, and the gentle valleys!-oh, to lose myself amongst

¹⁸⁴ Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections*, p. 147.

¹⁸⁵ Schmidt, ‘Introduction’, in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. x.

¹⁸⁶ Leonard P. Wessell, ‘Schiller and the Genesis of German Romanticism’, *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 10, no.3 (1971), 176-198 (p.179).

them!-And I hastened there, and returned without having found what I was hoping for. Oh, distance is like the future: before our souls lies an entire and dusky vastness which overwhelms our feelings as it overwhelms our eyes, and ah! We long to surrender the whole of our being, and be filled with all the joy of one single, immense, magnificent emotion...¹⁸⁷

This passionate declaration of ecstatic wonder captures the significance that was given to the senses in animating a new relationship to the world. Goethe adamantly believed that sensory responses played a profound role in shaping the psyche and informing the character and consciousness of the perceiver. In a conversation with Eckermann on April 2, 1827, he relates the extent to which he believed that sensory impressions had a lasting effect on the mind and the soul:

After dinner, Goethe had a laurel, in full flower, and a Japanese plant, placed before us on the table. I remarked what different feelings were excited by these two plants; that the sight of the laurel was calculated to produce a mild, serene, cheerful mood—that of the Japanese plant, one of barbaric melancholy. ‘You are right,’ said Goethe; ‘and great power over the mind of man has been conceded to the vegetable world which surrounds him. Surely, he who passes his life amid solemn, lofty oaks must be a different man from him who lives among the airy birches. Yet we must remember that men, in general, have not cultivated sensibilities like us, and live away busily, without being so much affected by such impressions.’¹⁸⁸

What Goethe touches upon here is that, although these impressions could influence the development of consciousness, not all people had the “cultivated sensibilities” to be affected by the world around them. Most were too blind and detached to gain any profound insights from their external environments. They absorbed little from their impressions of physical reality and their inner life suffered as a consequence. The discussion around the senses was futile if the ability to experience them had not been cultivated. The task of *Bildung*, therefore, was not only to integrate senses and reason through the experience of beauty, but to excite the ability to feel and to see in the first place.

Perhaps the main point of unity amongst the theorists of *Bildung*, which allowed them to formulate such a subtle philosophy on human capacities, was their inordinate sensitivity to their sensory faculties and their acute appreciation of beauty. Goethe described it as the “poetic

¹⁸⁷ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, trans. by Michael Hulse (London: Penguin Classics, 1989), p. 44.

¹⁸⁸ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, pp. 286-287.

mood,” a state of being which impregnated experience with an aesthetic pleasure that transformed even the most banal objects into sources of meaning and interest. In a letter to Schiller on August 16, 1797, for example, Goethe describes how such a feeling can emerge from that which is not entirely poetic itself, referencing the public square where he lived and his grandfather’s house. These sentimental objects which carried such symbolism for him made an impression “when the ideal is directly united with the common.”¹⁸⁹ This episode underscores the fact that for the theorists of *Bildung* beauty could be found in even the most mundane situations. The sensory perceptions which made an impression upon the cultivated soul were varied and infinite. Thus one could never blame one’s external environment for a lacking play drive.

Art, in particular, was the instrument Schiller identified that could induce this capacity for feeling, and it was in art that the theorists of *Bildung* found much of their inspiration. Winckelmann’s moments of high elation when observing the *Apollo Belvedere*, an iconic example of the aesthetic sublimity of classical art, for example, were significant to the *Bildung* tradition. “In his loftiness, the *Apollo* elevates Winckelmann to thoughts of ‘eternal spring’ to the contemplation of Elysium. As he ascends in platonic rapture to the realm of incorporeal beauty, a beauty that transcends what we find in this world...”¹⁹⁰ This description of Winckelmann’s reaction to the sculpture is indicative of the inclination amongst the proponents of *Bildung*, and their fictional protagonists, to be particularly attune to their senses, experiencing intense states of emotion derived from the acute receptivity that they had cultivated. This type of aesthetic response was connected to the Schiller-Kant debate about the respective demands of duty and inclination. Schiller believed that an “aesthetically uncultivated” moral agent would be less capable of performing moral duties.¹⁹¹ Feelings like the ones that Winckelmann experienced were related to morality because they were derived from the perception of pure form.

From the impressions of a majestic landscape to the noble lines of the sculptures of Antiquity, the moral nature of this sensuous embrace of the world was distinct and could be

¹⁸⁹ Schiller and Goethe, *Correspondence*, pp. 304-305.

¹⁹⁰ Paul Barolsky, ‘Winckelmann, Ovid, and the Transformation of the “Apollo Belvedere”’, *Notes in the History of Art*, vol.33, no.2 (2014), 2-4, p. 2.

¹⁹¹ Jeffrey A. Gauthier, ‘Schiller’s Critique of Kant’s Moral Psychology: Reconciling Practical Reason and an Ethics of Virtue’, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 27, no. 4 (1997), 513-543 (pp.535-536).

defined in three ways. First, the emphasis on sensory experience was not associated with hedonism, vanity, or an obsession with pleasure. Nor was it an attempt to avoid higher intellectual pursuits. Quite to the contrary, the senses could bring both positive and negative emotional responses, and sometimes a full range of complex feelings. The entire spectrum of affect was considered intellectually significant and revealing. The aim of the senses was truth, and although happiness or pleasure might be a byproduct, they were not the end. Furthermore, the objects that excited such a sensual response were richly evocative and elicited the attention of higher faculties. Despite its visceral quality, sensory engagement, then, evoked profound states of contemplativeness and reflection.

Second, and most important from an epistemological frame of reference, the emphasis on the senses was meant to establish their indispensability in generating new knowledge of the world. In other words, although the immediate emotional response to the birds' song or the Apollo Belvedere might have been dismissed as a superfluous experience in a society that privileged rational thought above all else, which these thinkers believed marked the earlier phases of the Enlightenment, such experiences were now considered an essential conduit to knowledge and a gateway to ultimate truth. Thus, for the philosophers of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*, immediate sensory experiences and their spontaneous effects upon the soul became the foundation of rational thought, logical deduction and a pedagogical premise for self-cultivation. Watching a lark's parabolic trajectory in the sky, observing the fractal patterns found in nature, or contemplating the concentric circles produced by rain droplets in pools of water became opportunities to understand the universe and reach a heightened cognitive state that could never be attained from a radically rational worldview alone.

Finally, sensory impression was now defined by what can be described as a transcendent nature. By this I mean that the exceptional reception to sensory experience, not sensory experience itself, was what led to knowledge. The senses could both obstruct hidden truths about the universe or they could act as the vehicle for their revelation.¹⁹² What mattered, then, was the spirit in which sensory material was experienced and undertaken. That which was automatic, unimaginative, or banal, such as the mechanical consumption of a meal or the unengaged contemplation of a work of art, could not produce greater truths or new ways of understanding

¹⁹² Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, p. 112.

life. The mind was literally and metaphorically inured, and, in these cases, the senses could impede, not illuminate, the path to knowledge. Reaping the benefits of the senses, therefore, required an acute attentiveness and sensitivity to beauty that surpassed the ordinary and the quotidian; only a mindful, reflective engagement could reconcile physical, sensory input with the faculty of reason.

Transcendence is an appropriate word in this context given that it alludes to the moral dimension of the senses. It was increasingly believed that we perceive moral qualities through feeling rather than apprehend them through cognition.¹⁹³ Like the primary emotional pull of the sentiments, this feeling was the basis from which practical reason could develop. Internal excellence, therefore, became an obsession that originated in the passions but ultimately, through *Bildung*, was integrated with reason, producing an equilibrium of the two. On the nature of this delicate balance, Schiller imagines three relationships. The first is when a person governs themselves according to their rationality by suppressing their senses. This, he argues is like a monarchy in which the monarch represses all freedom. The second is when a person follows only his senses and is governed by instinct alone. This he compares to an ochlocracy in which the rightful sovereign is subverted by mob rule. The third is when reason and the senses come into a perfect harmony, in which neither one is sacrificed at the expense of the other, and all parts favorably inform each other, a relationship represented by the figure of the Beautiful Soul. Unlike most people who are either a savage when feeling dominates principles or a barbarian when principles destroy feeling, a Beautiful Soul made nature her friend “and respects her freedom while merely curbing her caprice.”¹⁹⁴ We can see this equilibrium in Danae, the Beautiful Soul of Wieland’s *Bildungsroman*, *The History of Agathon*. As Norton describes:

The love of virtue, the desire to reform (*umbilden*) oneself after this divine ideal of moral beauty, takes possession of all our inclinations; it becomes a passion. As a ‘beautiful soul,’ Danae is now not only seized by this passion, she also inspires it in others, who thus try-like Agathon- to assimilate themselves to the ‘divine ideal of moral beauty’ by bringing the entire store of their feelings and thoughts into some sort of equitable balance.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹³ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 40.

¹⁹⁴ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 34

¹⁹⁵ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 163.

The Beautiful Soul was therefore supposed to perfectly integrate intense emotional states and rationality with the greatest mastery, indexing the full development of her faculties, while embracing all parts of the human condition without allowing any single one to dominate and corrupt the others. She was passionate and intense, receptive and awake, while also remaining logical and fair, reasonable and wise. This was the ideal balance that the cultivated individual sought to maintain so that they could become intellectually engaged, experiencing the highest sentiments that a person is capable of feeling, while also working equitably and judiciously towards rational ends.

The Joy and Tragedy of Feeling

The emphasis on embracing all that was human, including the senses, related to a new concern for emotions and a subtle interest in peoples' complicated psychological states, especially the joy and the tragedy which marked their worldly experiences and perception. An ideal of "the man of feeling," and a new theory of moral sentiments emerged.¹⁹⁶ The proponents of *Bildung* displayed joy in their "aesthetic optimism" which was pervasive throughout their writings. They decided to see this world as the most beautiful one possible and to enthusiastically partake in its beauty. As Schlegel remarked "against Candide one can counter with only an aesthetic optimism: that this world is the most beautiful."¹⁹⁷ This optimism was not unfounded or naïve. Rather, it was a choice, weighted by observation and experience, contingent on the belief that reality is malleable. It was a duty, therefore, to remain positive and productively contribute to the betterment of the world. There was no point in adopting pessimistic narratives that only further diminished society and added to human misery. Nothing was more reprehensible than bitterness, disenchantment, and self-imposed despair. Futility born from cynicism was diametrically opposed to a philosophy that identified human strength in man's capacity for improvement.

A joyful disposition was encouraged and viewed as an indication of a strong constitution, good character, and a product of noble feelings.¹⁹⁸ It was believed to be an admirable demonstration of the determination that the individual had developed to defy hardship,

¹⁹⁶ See Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, ed. by Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001)

¹⁹⁷ Schlegel 'Philosophical Fragments from the Philosophical Apprenticeship (excerpts)', p. 162.

¹⁹⁸ Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister*, p. 228.

negativity, and resentment while overcoming life's obstacles. A joyful disposition was considered both the precondition and the byproduct of the successful attainment of the other defining features of a Beautiful Soul. According to Schiller, it therefore became a principle of this philosophy to:

Show by induction and by psychological means that a feeling of pleasure must flow from the combined concept of freedom and appearance, the harmony between reason and sense, which is the same as pleasure and which regularly accompanies the representation of beauty.¹⁹⁹

Ill humor and indolence, on the other hand, were considered signs of self-indulgence, moral fragility, and undeveloped character.²⁰⁰ These negative traits implied that the soul was sickly from neglect which was, ultimately, the failing of the individual, not the fault of an imperfect world, as some would like to assert to absolve themselves of the responsibility for their own fate.

Many of the fictional characters created by the theorists of *Bildung* found themselves in this struggle to find happiness and remain optimistic despite the pain and weariness of life. Wieland's Agathon depicts a sensitive soul "for whom a single pleasant feeling is sufficient to make them forget all their woes, past and to come."²⁰¹ Goethe's novel *Werther* was revolutionary in its overt exploration of emotional states and intimate, highly subjective feelings. As Werther says in one of his better moments:

We often complain that there are so few good days and so many bad ones ...but I think we are wrong to do so. If our hearts were always open, so that we could enjoy the good things God bestows on us every day, we should also have the strength to bear the misfortunes that come our way.²⁰²

Like his author, Werther possessed heightened emotions and an exceptional, aestheticized fervor for living.²⁰³ Before his descent into depression, brought on by the torturous nature of his unrequited love, he captures the vitality and joy that characterizes the aesthetically awake person, the rare and beautiful creature that *Bildung* was supposed to cultivate. In one passage Werther remarks that "It is good that my heart can feel the simple and innocent pleasure a man knows

¹⁹⁹ Schiller, 'Kallias', p. 160.

²⁰⁰ Goethe, *Werther*, p. 48.

²⁰¹ Michael Beddow, *The Fiction of Humanity: Studies in the Bildungsroman from Wieland to Thomas Mann* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 34.

²⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 48.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

when the cabbage he eats at table is one he grew himself.”²⁰⁴ In another he comments, “I have never felt happier, and my feelings for nature, down to tiny pebbles and blades of grass, have never been so full and acute...”²⁰⁵ Much joy could be gained from becoming truly receptive to all that existed in nature. Happiness was the product of this aesthetic sensitivity as well as the impetus for further explorations and encounters. Schiller believed that “Beauty alone makes all the world happy, and every being forgets its limitations as long as it experiences her enchantment.”²⁰⁶

A Beautiful Soul, then, was a person with a joyful heart and a cheerful disposition.²⁰⁷ Her happiness could be aroused by the simplest circumstances, a consequence of her refined faculties and sensitive perception. She displayed a rapturous curiosity and an elevated exuberance in partaking of what Goethe and Schiller described as the “beautiful world.”²⁰⁸ She was often portrayed as a person who was exceptionally moved by art, nature, and human relationships, perpetually receptive to experience and particularly grateful for the opportunities that were presented to her to admire the miracle of existence in its myriad forms. She retained the jubilation of a mind receptive to experience and the gratification derived from an imagination left to wander.

The theorists of *Bildung* emphasized intense emotional states because, as described in relation to sensory perception, there was something distinctly moral about the elation of a Beautiful Soul. The experience of beauty, in particular, had the effect of producing a joy that was intimately connected to our pleasure in the good. Schiller argued that the happiness we find in beauty strengthens our moral sentiments. Art is moral “not only because it employs moral means in order to charm us, but also because even the pleasure which it procures us is a means of morality.”²⁰⁹ The quality of seeing the world in a positive light, and, as a consequence, reaching towards moral goodness was in line with Shaftesbury’s formulation that virtue was “naturally” adorned by the qualities of beauty that arouse affect, and that it was on the uninterrupted

²⁰⁴ Goethe, *Werther*, p. 45.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

²⁰⁶ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 139.

²⁰⁷ Kant, *On Education*, p. 71.

²⁰⁸ Reed, *Light in Germany*, p.110.

²⁰⁹ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 353.

experience of these rationally validated sensations that our real happiness rests.²¹⁰ The vast majority of the population who remained in lethargic states of emotional apathy, unmoved by the great beauty that surrounded them, were discontented because they lacked essential elements of a moral nature and the individuality which comprises true happiness. A joyful person who felt the beauty of existence intensely, by contrast, was the product of autonomous thought, which made them more capable of performing moral imperatives.

The happiness in beauty also had the function of making the pursuit of a Beautiful Soul a joyous undertaking, one that was inherently attractive and desirable. Thus, despite the stringent demands of this philosophy, its holistic adoption was not considered a burden, but rather an exciting undertaking, one which promoted exploration, adventure, wanderlust, and curiosity, all of which were an important part of becoming cultivated. Humboldt advocated this enlightened understanding of the good life because he believed it ensured a more reflective and stable society.²¹¹ His ideas on education afforded individuals the greatest opportunities to have edifying experiences and to find fulfillment in the products of culture. The emphasis on disciplined hard work in self-improvement, yet equally on the pleasure found in knowledge was liberating and satisfied the immediate experience and future prospects of the individual.

Delighting in sensory impressions, however, did not mean that the Beautiful Soul was always happy. As an acutely sensitive being, she was often depicted as enduring long periods of extreme agony and suffering. The tragedy she experienced was derived in part from her intense aesthetic sensitivity. With such a vivid imagination and multidimensional worldview, in which even the smallest experiences could profoundly inform her perception of reality, negative emotions and unfavorable human interactions could more easily imprint a sense of melancholy upon her soul. The cultivated complexity of her mind lent itself to a sense of existential loneliness and an increased sensitivity to the harm that others caused. But more than this sensitive state, her suffering came from the traumas that she endured.

As we have seen, Schiller emphasized that the virtuousness of a person could only be known through trials of character and hardship. For this reason, The Beautiful Soul was depicted as experiencing tragedies that challenged, but ultimately proved her moral worth and demonstrated that her happiness had a noble quality to it, as a person who had triumphed,

²¹⁰ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 37.

²¹¹ Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation*, p. 16.

through the strength of her character, over the unfortunate fates that befell her. Portraying these tragedies made it harder for those who had not experienced such suffering to critique this philosophy for its disconnection from reality. The cynic could no longer justify the fact that they remained unmoved by the beauty of the world, which even those who had suffered greatly could feel. The critique that a poetic perception receptive to beauty was somehow a privilege of those who were fortunate was exposed as the product of individuals who found it easier to be critical than to see.

A Beautiful Soul, therefore, was not inured to negative emotions; in many ways she experienced them even more acutely than others. However, she distinguished herself in her ability to control this pain, turning it into wisdom and learning from her ideals being challenged without abandoning them.²¹² She used negative emotions to fortify her character and to stimulate her moral development, while never allowing herself to wallow in self-pity. The elements of tragedy that the person of true cultivation endured were, then, essential to their self-realization. Hardship expanded the profundity of lived experience and augmented the meaning derived from beauty. According to Schiller, tragedy was a means by which to cultivate a sense of the sublime.²¹³ A soul who suffered but ultimately overcame the pain and loss that they experienced escaped complacency and demonstrated independent cognition.²¹⁴

When a Beautiful Soul endured pain she became heroic and represented the highest form of human dignity through this demonstration of moral strength.²¹⁵ On this point, Schiller offers an example of a person who experiences severe physical pain yet overcomes it. In such a case, his “veins swell, his muscles become cramped and taut, his voice cracks, his chest is thrust out, and his lower body pressed in.”²¹⁶ But his intentional movements are serene and relaxed. His stoic composure and the internal peace that he outwardly expresses during his suffering reflects his dignity. Grace and dignity unite in the Beautiful Soul, the ultimate expression of morality.²¹⁷ This aesthetic suffering, Schiller claims, can be witnessed in the Laocoön, the Hellenistic

²¹² Beddow, *The Fiction of Humanity*, p. 47.

²¹³ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 155.

²¹⁴ Robert Edward Norton, ‘The Aesthetic Education of Humanity: George Eliot’s “Romola” and Schiller’s Theory of Tragedy’, *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 25, no. 4 (1991), 3-20 (p.7).

²¹⁵ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 204.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

sculpture that Winckelmann had described in *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764). As Laocoön and his sons are slain by the serpents, he maintains an internal composure rendered, in the sculpture, on the brow.²¹⁸ He valiantly battles his fear and pain without allowing his moral nature to be degraded by physical harm. As Schiller remarked:

An ordinary soul confines itself entirely to this suffering, and never comprehends in the sublime or the pathetic anything beyond the terrible. An independent soul, on the contrary, precisely seizes this occasion to rise to the feeling of his moral force, in all that is most magnificent in this force, and from every terrible object knows how to draw out the sublime.²¹⁹

The Laocoön, whose noble suffering is sculpted for eternity, represented this independent creature who had experienced the sublime. Schiller believed that those truly moral souls who had restrained their ego would be able to endure even the cruelest loss through the aesthetic detachment of themselves from their own experience. They could gain valuable knowledge about the human condition in the aestheticized contemplation of their fate. The Beautiful Soul who suffered, then, was able to detach herself from this suffering and to observe from a more objective perspective what it might teach her; therein lay her strength.

Goethe identified Susanna von Klettenberg (1723-1774) a relative of his mother, as a Laocoön-like figure who retained a sense of peace and serenity and an aesthetically detached consideration of her position, despite her poor health and the suffering that accompanied it. In his autobiography *Poetry and Truth* (1811), Goethe describes with tenderness her grace and patience, genius and liveliness, which overpowered the pain that she endured. Her steadfast morality and dedication to her principles was all the more admirable given the gravity of her condition.²²⁰ Susanna was the inspiration for The Beautiful Soul of the sixth book in *Wilhelm Meister*. This fictitious character's suffering is an important part of the moral evolution of Goethe's work. In one passage she says:

During the nine months, which I then spent patiently upon a sick-bed, it appears to me the groundwork of my whole turn of thought was laid; as the first means were then afforded my mind of developing itself in its own manner. I suffered and I loved; this was the peculiar form of my heart. In the most violent fits of coughing, in the depressing pains of fever, I lay quiet, like a snail drawn back within its house: the moment I obtained a respite, I wanted to enjoy something pleasant; and as every

²¹⁸ Ibid., p. 152.

²¹⁹ Ibid., p. 156.

²²⁰ Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, p. 290.

other pleasure was denied me, I endeavored to amuse myself with the innocent delights of eye and ear.²²¹

During this period of suffering, the Beautiful Soul defined her moral principles while still finding happiness in the beauty that she heard and saw, and once she overcame her illness, was more determined than ever to live according to what she had discovered. By contrast, the moment of suffering reveals the flaws in Goethe's character Werther. Although Werther's ability to think for himself, to feel deeply, and to truly grasp the meaning of aesthetic experience, like the Beautiful Soul, is admirable, he eventually succumbs to self-pity and ends his life. Ultimately, he does not live up to his own recognition that "we should all have the strength to bear the misfortunes that come our way."²²² He demonstrates the dangers of what this philosophy sought to avoid in overindulging sentiment to the point of neurotic self-obsession. While he understood *Bildung* in theory, he was too narcissistic to grasp its humble spirit and the way that it conquered pain. In a telling passage, Werther remarks:

I have been intoxicated more than once, my passions have never been far off insanity, and I have no regrets: because I have come to realize, in my own way, that people have always felt a need to decry the extraordinary men who accomplish great things, things that seemed impossible, as intoxicated and insane.²²³

He goes on to accuse others of his own failing to maintain his poetic vision of the world. Suddenly the beauty of his perception is ruined by a sense of superiority and the poison of bitterness that he has allowed to corrupt all that was once good in him. No longer can he continue on the path towards self-cultivation which he alone has obstructed with his inflated ego and self-importance. His suicide is a metaphor for the dangers associated with those who allow their vanity to corrupt the aspects of their perception that once made them beautiful, and many have interpreted *Werther* as a cautionary tale.²²⁴ Lessing, for example, remarked that Werther is a character who is poetic but without moral beauty.²²⁵ The acknowledgement of Werther's poetic nature came from his ability to perceive of the world in a beautiful way, but his judgement on the

²²¹ Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister*, p. 320.

²²² Goethe, *Werther*, p. 48.

²²³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²²⁴ Michael Bell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to European Novelists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 128.

²²⁵ Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, p. 132.

deficiency of Werther's moral beauty came from his inability to act upon this poetic perception or serve as a model for humanity to aspire towards.

Goethe himself chronicled his struggle with depression and thoughts of suicide during the time that he was in love with Charlotte Buff (1753-1828) who was betrothed to Johann Christian Kestner (1741-1800), fictionalized in the love triangle of *Werther*. The character of Werther may be interpreted as a depiction of the road that Goethe might have taken had he allowed soured prospects of love and the degradation of what he described as "the eternal and infinite," the "separation of the sensual from the moral" to destroy him. We can sympathize with Goethe, the man, because he triumphed over his suffering, even in the face of a loss of innocence. He used this suffering as material for his novel, and therefore something productive came out of it. However, we cannot sympathize with Werther, his character, for the reason that Schiller touches upon in his philosophical essay "On the Tragic Art":

I admit that the suffering of a weak soul, and the pain of a wicked character, do not procure us this enjoyment. But this is because they do not excite our pity to the same degree as the hero who suffers, or the virtuous man who struggles.²²⁶

Werther's appeal is diminished by his moral weakness and, perhaps most tragic of all, the beauty of his poetic vision is degraded along with him.

The suffering of the Beautiful Soul, by contrast, gave her a more compassionate disposition and a gentler nature, which underscored her noble character. Through difficult experiences, she was able to empathize with others and create something beyond herself. In maintaining grace and dignity and never succumbing to self-indulgence or cynicism, she preserved the ideal of humanity within her. The virtue found in the perennially optimistic Beautiful Soul, and the intense sense of compassion that she felt, was only heightened by the fact that she knew the pain of the world.

Chapter II: The Beautiful Soul in a Collective

Justice and the Good

The cultivation of individual qualities was ultimately directed towards the collective good. If every person was more rational, virtuous, and intellectually free then naturally only positive

²²⁶ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 344.

social outcomes would arise. Concern for the individual was simultaneously a concern for the wellbeing of society comprised of those individuals. Cultivating citizens who were morally and intellectually sound was the most effective way to improve the world, especially when one acknowledges the fact that individual decisions can have larger social and political consequences. The character features that the proponents of *Bildung* sought to develop, therefore, were the foundation for the shared ends and common set of values encompassed within a concern for the greater good, a good which Goethe and Schiller believed could only be attained through *Bildung*.

As a testament to the power of these concepts, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, The Beautiful Soul became the very symbol of morality and the ethical ideal, the cornerstone of philosophical thought and popular discourse on the good. The extraordinary extent to which this was the case is summarized by Norton who comments that:

By the end of the 1780's, particularly, but by no means solely, in the German-speaking states, the discourse generated by the concept of moral beauty had been completely absorbed, and largely accepted, by the learned and laymen alike. The 'beautiful soul'- the '*Schöne Seele*' and the '*belle âme*'-appeared in countless works and contexts: in philosophical essays and private letters, in novels, poems, and plays, and if Lavater would have had his way, in the streets and salons of Europe as well.²²⁷

Norton continues by discussing the phenomenal rapidity of The Beautiful Soul's traction as *the* moral ideal, in late eighteenth century Germany and its astounding ubiquity, crossing cultural, gender-based, socio-economic, and ideological divides. These concepts had a universal appeal precisely because of their resoluteness on moral issues and their affirmation of a good that rested, not upon subjective, or culturally specific ends, but upon Platonic values that any person could affirm. They maintained integrity through their ethical certainty and clarity on moral issues and sought nothing less than a totalized state of perfected decency.

Goethe and Schiller, in particular, adamantly affirmed that an objective good existed towards which people were naturally inclined. Schiller went as far as to say that every man, without exception, always prefers good over evil, simply because it is good. He explains that conflict occurs only between that which is good and that which is agreeable, the difference between reason and desire. This conflict, he argues, can be overcome when reason is

²²⁷ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 210.

strengthened or the inclination towards temptation is broken. He advocates the second possibility because it bolsters the will and is most compatible with a moral character.²²⁸ The point, however, is that a lack of goodness is not caused from a desire for evil, but rather from weakness, which, unlike an intrinsic condition, might be overcome.

Unlike frail mortals who needed socially imposed value structures to uphold their sense of decency, the figure of the Beautiful Soul maintained the good even in dystopic settings where all morality appeared to be absent. The unconditional good that she embodied, which acted as the inspiration for those in pursuit of self-cultivation, was conceived in two interrelated senses. The first use of the term was that of an empirically demonstrable social good—the enlightenment of inner faculties as a means of bringing about a consonance of people. In this regard, one of the foremost attributes of a Beautiful Soul was her strong sense of fairness and justice.²²⁹ Her desire to stand for what was right, even if it was not fashionable to do so, was the impetus for her actions and a quality that she sustained whether or not it brought any personal advantage. She was able to reflect on the world from more objective perspectives and considered the needs of others as if they were her own. She exhibited goodness in every social relationship, always choosing the road of empathy and decency. She accorded each individual the dignity and respect that they deserved without falling prey to a sense of righteousness or self-flattery. To be good was not an act of charity or a source of admiration, but rather a natural disposition, one that demanded no praise or encouragement.

The second sense of the good was of a more abstract nature as an object of philosophical inquiry that carried ethical and political significance. The Beautiful Soul, in this sense, was preoccupied with the development of more perfect ethical laws and normative principles that would eventually bring humanity closer to uncovering moral truths. Though she was concerned with her immediate reality, and the quality of the social relationships which comprised it, her ambition to achieve the good extended far beyond these limited parameters. She did not focus on one or two issues but was interested in larger structures and complete systems, interrogating the fundamental assumptions and philosophical theories that governed society as a whole. In identifying problems and contradictions that inhibited goodness from manifesting, she could

²²⁸Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 120.

²²⁹ Joachim Lütke mann, *Der Vorschmack göttlicher Güte durch Gottes Gnade*, ed. by Philipp Julius Rehtmeyer (Braunschweig: Rudolph Schröder, 1720), p. 543.

propose reforms and in doing so contribute to society on a far larger scale. A Beautiful Soul's motivation, therefore, knew no limits in bringing about a goodness that her entire life's work was directed towards.

Believing in the possibility of an objective morality and the eternal condition of the soul was a correlated dimension of this discussion. Although each Beautiful Soul was unique, what she represented was universal, and it was in this universality that the theory was able to derive wider value for its moral ends. The theorists of *Bildung* fervently defended the existence of a metaphysical Good against those who denied the reality of such a universal value. They also maintained a conviction that those elements of one's moral being that the individual had endeavored to cultivate would endure. It was perhaps as close to a matter of faith as this philosophy espoused. Goethe, for example, fundamentally believed in the enduring quality of the soul. As he said in a conversation with Eckermann on May 2, 1824:

At the age of seventy-five...one must, of course, think frequently of death. But this thought never gives me the least uneasiness- I am so fully convinced that the soul is indestructible, and that its activity will continue through eternity. It is like the sun, which seems to our earthly eyes to set in night, but is in reality gone to diffuse its light elsewhere.²³⁰

His perspective on the nature of the soul made making that which was eternal morally beautiful all the more significant.

However, if it was determined that an abstract Good or the perpetuity of the soul was not true, it would not detract from the goodness that was created in its pursuit. Its belief, not its objective reality, provided the clarity and motivation necessary to create this goodness in the world. Furthermore, a sense that morality was not merely subjective and ephemeral but had a universal value was not a necessary precondition to the observance of this philosophy. The nihilist could still pursue a Beautiful Soul. However, it did make this theory more widely attractive to the large portions of the population who wanted to believe in something larger than themselves; it provided greater incentive to maintain one's moral nature if an objective Good which exceeded the perimeters of physical reality was assumed to exist.

Advancing the good was, then, both an individual and collective process of understanding the good for oneself, contributing to the construction of a moral framework that aligned with

²³⁰ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 108.

overlapping conceptions of the good, and continuously improving this framework as knowledge was gained through personal experience, existential questioning, and shared intellectual reasoning. The belief in a transcendental Good, and notions on the eternal condition of the soul, replaced religious thought, and *Bildung* evolved into a secular alternative to religion. Despite the fact that the Judeo-Christian tradition was not compatible with the humanistic, secular ideas upon which *Bildung* was based, there was still the need for some form of religious meaning to remain embedded within the concept (whose origin, after all, was theological). *Bildung*, therefore, superseded its pedagogical ends and became an entire belief system in its own right. Schlegel commented on the almost accidental religious aspect of this philosophy when he said “Your goal is art and science, your life love and culture (*Bildung*). Without knowing it, you are on the way to religion. Recognize this and you will be sure of achieving your goal.”²³¹

Because the Beautiful Soul referenced the non-physical and eternal, it could answer fundamental eschatological questions relating to life after death. Yet, unlike many religious belief systems (which Goethe and Schiller were particularly critical of) the experience of eternity was not dominated by a powerful and fear inspiring God. Instead of an anthropomorphized figure, God evolved into the trinity of the Platonic forms and priests were replaced by poets, “the priests of the beautiful.”²³² Artists and intellectuals, the bearers of culture, were thought to be the educators and the agents of morality who, by virtue of creating aesthetic experience, could bring individuals closer to these Forms. They would fill the void of meaning that the religious figures had left open when they were dismantled by modern thought. As Frederick Beiser explains:

The task of modern man was to recreate on a self-conscious and rational level that unity with ourselves, others, and nature that had once been given to early man on a naive and intuitive level. Such indeed was the vocation of the romantic poet, who would attempt to revive our lost unity... The key to recreating that unity consisted in the re-mystification of the world, in romanticizing the senses, because only when we were reawakened to the beauty, mystery, and magic of the world would we re-identify ourselves with it.²³³

Schiller encouraged man not to despair that this unity was lost or that the world had become demystified in the evolution of rationality. He argued that man could restore this unity within himself and in doing so, discover the divine. An individual in pursuit of a Beautiful Soul,

²³¹ Schlegel, ‘Ideas’, p. 135.

²³² Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation*, pp. 142-143.

²³³ Schlegel, ‘The Concept of Republicanism’, p. 102.

therefore, reestablished the ultimate ideal, “a kind of unity of unity” that Schiller envisioned, by becoming receptive to all that was beautiful and true, by re-enchanting the world through his poetic perception of it and making life magical in the splendor of his interactions with other living beings.²³⁴ He cultivated his faculties as if it were a spiritual exercise, a kind of secular prayer. His intense engagement with culture had a ritualistic quality and a daily significance that provided a framework for living and a coherent structure of action. The religious dimension of *Bildung*, was, then, nothing other than the sustained contemplation of the universe in all of its unity and poetic force.²³⁵

The metaphysical significance of *Bildung* saved it from being construed merely as a practical exercise with no larger philosophical ambitions. Equally, its pragmatic dimensions rescued it from its other extreme, of being an abstract ideal with no empirical application. Unlike classical religions, the concepts remained active, never becoming a permanent system of fixed and inflexible rules of conduct that were impervious to change. They were specific enough to be binding and character building, but at the same time, abstract enough to reflect upon the human condition writ large, and thereby to remain relevant in an ever-evolving social milieu. The pursuit of a Beautiful Soul, ultimately became the humanists’ alternative to religion for those who had faith in the eternal oneness of Goodness, Beauty, and Truth.

Culture and Posterity

A life directed at contributing to the good found actualization in the realm of culture and engaging in cultural creations was a primary means by which one practiced the secular religion of *Bildung*. German society’s reverence for high culture simultaneously discovered a home in this philosophy. As Schlegel argued, the highest good and everything that was valuable to society was the advancement of culture through *Bildung*.²³⁶ Culture was important to this tradition because it emphasized the universal nature of these concepts and facilitated trans-generational creation in which one age built upon the artistic and intellectual legacies of those past. In doing so, they contributed to a common quest for meaning and knowledge which the

²³⁴ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 285.

²³⁵ Schlegel, ‘The Concept of Republicanism’, p. 103.

²³⁶ Novalis, ‘Fragments from the Notebooks’, p. 88.

ambitious theorists of *Bildung* believed that every man should participate in out of a sense of collective responsibility and the desire to extend personal flourishing (for the benefit of society) beyond death. If one imagines, for example, the good that Schubert and Beethoven continued to do long after their demise with the enduring nature of their contributions to the German cultural landscape, this perspective makes sense.

The effort to perfect one's soul by becoming cultured and participating in the theatre, visual arts, music, literature and poetry, among other media was, then, not a transient pursuit, but rather a lasting source of material for the benefit of future generations. Culture gave the individual who undertook their moral-aesthetic development a collective purpose and application. Self-cultivation, therefore, was believed to have a greater social value, one that exceeded the individual through the cultivated creations that they put forth in the world. The theorists of *Bildung* believed that culture was a collective patrimony with tangible, objective importance. This philosophy, therefore, maintained the German notion that the arts and ideas were by no means superfluous, but a most fundamental part of the human condition which held a perpetual relevance and universal value.

Analogies drawn from aesthetic practices were often used to describe *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*, the most popular of which was the comparison to an orchestra which Goethe made in *Wilhelm Meister*. As the character Jarno says:

Make yourself a first-rate violinist, and you may be sure that the conductor will gladly find a place for you in the orchestra. Make yourself competent in one thing, and see what position society will assign to you in the life of the whole.²³⁷

In playing an instrument, one exercises a certain level of autonomy and imagination. At the same time an orchestra, which represents a collective creation, cannot function if the individual musicians stray from their well-defined, respective roles. The individual plays an instrument (pursues self-cultivation) for the sake of the orchestra (society), in a shared project. Culture, in this sense, celebrates the union between the beautiful (the music) and the good (contributing to the commonweal) which is brought about from this individual-collective dynamic.

Like an instrument that was left un-played, a Beautiful Soul placed in an environment shorn of cultural products would not live up to her full potential. Reading evocative pieces of literature, partaking in stimulating conversations, or listening to moving musical compositions,

²³⁷ Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation*, p. 98.

while not the ends of *Bildung*, were the medium by which a Beautiful Soul could be cultivated. If she did not have this cultural stimulation, she would find it more difficult to refine her faculties and bring something of greater value into the world. The Beautiful Soul of *Wilhelm Meister* describes the depravity she felt living in a milieu with little sensitivity to culture or ideas and the detriment that this caused her:

The hurry and the crowd I lived in dissipated my attention, and carried me along as in a rapid stream. These were the emptiest years of my life. All day long to speak of nothing, to have no solid thought, never to do anything but revel: such was my employment. On my beloved books I never once bestowed a thought. The people I lived among had not the slightest tinge of literature or science: they were German courtiers, a class of men at that time altogether destitute of culture.²³⁸

In a bureaucratic, materialistic society that busied itself with chasing superficial ends, the poetic soul who yearned for culture could be overcome with what Goethe described in *Poetry and Truth*, as, *taedium vitae*, the weariness of living, from the emptiness of a social order bereft of artistic inspiration. The Beautiful Soul of *Wilhelm Meister* pursues an inner *Bildung* because the culturally and spiritually deprived milieu in which she finds herself cannot facilitate her formation and development. She retreats into an internal world because she believes it is necessary for the sanctity of her soul. Although we might question this decision, we may concede that had she lived in a cultured environment, one which facilitated, not inhibited, her self-cultivation, this withdrawal would not have been required.

If society, therefore, valued the wellbeing of its citizens, and wanted them to positively engage and contribute to the world, it would need to provide them with the cultural resources that revived the poetic force of their spirit and excited their imagination, lifting them above the banalities of modern life. Championing the arts was not an unwarranted excess which always lost when placed against economic gain, but an investment in the very stability of society. Those who were morally and aesthetically cultured were the ideal citizens that any rational community who recognized the importance of a well-rounded education for prosperity and social cohesion would readily seek to cultivate. Making culture more widespread and accessible and placing a higher value on it, as Humboldt did with his education models and public projects, was therefore a

²³⁸ Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister*, p. 325.

pragmatic way to facilitate the maturation of an enlightened citizenship, with extensive policy implications that could be explored.

The figure of the Beautiful Soul became a cultural phenomenon herself, acting as a muse, symbol, and secular deity to many artists and intellectuals. Those who were thought to exhibit the features of a Beautiful Soul were considered influential cultural figures and became sources of artistic inspiration. Goethe was greatly inspired by the people he encountered who displayed such beautiful character traits. Of his dear friend Charlotte von Stein (1742-1827), he wrote “It would be a wonderful spectacle to see how the world is reflected in this soul. She sees the world as it is, and yet through the medium of love. Thus gentleness is the general impression.”²³⁹ Contemplating the souls around him who embodied an inner beauty was the material for his art, an art which constructed the ideal from living models whose admirable characteristics proved that human goodness was possible. The narrative of the life that a Beautiful Soul lived illustrated the essence of the human experience that culture ultimately sought to reflect at a time when art was still concerned with representing what was beautiful.

Inner Harmony and Friendships of the Soul

Like a musical instrument brought into consonance with an orchestra, man was meant to integrate himself into the fabric of society after having defined his identity and selfhood through sensory experience and rational reflection. To successfully engage in creating moral frameworks, laws, contracts, and forms of association that would shape a more perfect reality, the individual needed to become part of a larger social whole. *Bildung* was essentially a social philosophy that depended on people working together to reach common goals.

Social harmony was not only a pragmatic necessity required to establish order, it also created *communitas*, the meaning and kinship derived from a sense of belonging. Although self-cultivation was a pursuit of individual subjects, *Bildung* was framed through the integrative dimensions of a quasi-religious cultural identity as a collective undertaking in which individuals joined together to improve their own condition as a community.²⁴⁰ In *Bildung*, harmony was a

²³⁹ Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, p. 144.

²⁴⁰ Burrow, ‘Introduction’ in *The Limits of State Action*, p. lviii.

multidimensional process, starting first with the harmony of the self in balancing one's inner constitution, and then the harmonization of this unified self with the social whole.

The first stage of harmonization entailed delicately balancing the individual characteristics of *Bildung* in one's soul; infinite potential with reality, virtue and morality, subjectivity with freedom, activity with non-utilitarianism, authenticity and naturalness, rationality with the senses, and joy with tragedy. An aesthetic education, in which individuals harmonized these qualities and engaged in activities such as writing a poem or listening to music, could produce a harmoniousness among human faculties.²⁴¹ Herder, in particular, emphasized that *Bildung* was not an arbitrary set of traits but a cohesive whole.²⁴² Harmony existed both on the level of individual activity as well as in the totality of actions that came to define a person's life. Since beauty was defined by both Goethe and Schiller as harmonious, the Beautiful Soul reached a state of perfect harmony by aesthetically balancing her faculties and this constituted her goodness.²⁴³

If a person's character was not harmoniously balanced, the danger, according to Schiller, was that they would have an unfavorable attitude towards the harmony that existed in nature or in other people. Resentfulness, hostility and cynicism would fester from this internal imbalance.²⁴⁴ However, if harmony had occurred within, then, as Novalis suggested, the person would appear at peace and their relationship with the outer world would be beautiful and harmonious too.²⁴⁵ Furthermore, if a person's internal world was in consonance then this consonance would be reflected in beautiful works. Schiller believed that the most ennobled music or the greatest statue, like those of antiquity, possessed this unity of form which so pleased us with its calming, peaceful effect because of the internal unity which it represented.²⁴⁶

In reaching individual harmony through the balance of human faculties and the creation of harmonious works, Schiller believed that the soul of beauty was inclined towards enlightened

²⁴¹ Geuss, 'Kultur, Bildung, Geist', p.161.

²⁴² Ibid., p.155.

²⁴³ Elizabeth E. Bohning, 'Goethe's and Schiller's Interpretation of Beauty', *The German Quarterly*, vol. 22, no.4 (1949), 185-194 (p.185).

²⁴⁴ Hans Reiner, *Duty and Inclination: The Fundamentals of Morality Discussed and Redefined with Special Regard to Kant and Schiller* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1983), p. 519.

²⁴⁵ Novalis, 'Pollen', p. 30.

²⁴⁶ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 105-106.

sociability. Those who had cultivated themselves could more easily feel the “electric charge” of community and intuit the slightest movements and subtlest needs of others.²⁴⁷ This meant that the second phase of harmonization was born naturally from the successful realization of the first. “Individual harmonization through aesthetic experience, allowing for the development of moral freedom and for a reunification of our human faculties, creates a sociable character which, according to Schiller, lead to a further harmonization of social relations in society.”²⁴⁸ Since self-cultivation was an all-encompassing pursuit representing the totality of what it meant to be human, it was only natural that people would aspire to reach this accord and want to share their “soul-awakening” experiences with others. The harmony of their own faculties could be developed in a community, whose creation the very act of self-cultivation had inspired.²⁴⁹

The foundation of community in *Bildung* was friendship, the most basic unit of social cohesion. It allowed for the possibility that human ingenuity might emerge through the development of intimate relationships of the mind. A person could only become truly cultivated if he was able to look beyond himself, to readily learn from others and to take part in a collective practice. As Schlegel remarked “Humanity cannot be inoculated, and virtue cannot be taught or learned, other than through friendship and love with capable and genuine people, and other than through contact with ourselves, with the divine within us.”²⁵⁰ Social encounters in which mutual understanding emerged proved valuable since every person had a perspective that could inform the acquisition of knowledge. If these distinct perspectives were placed into communication with one another, then that which exceeded the perception of one person could be revealed in the collective. The act of conjoining faculties in communicative exchange through friendship, then, became the means by which to advance one’s own *Bildung* practice.

Harmonious friendships were also personally beneficial because they were indispensable to the generation of new creations and ideas. In a letter to Goethe from July 21, 1797, Schiller captures how his friendship with Goethe (inspired by their shared interest in moral-aesthetic cultivation) informed his art:

A relation thus built on reciprocal perfectibility must ever keep fresh and active, and gain the more in variety, the more harmonious it becomes... The most beautiful

²⁴⁷ Schleiermacher, ‘Monologues II and III’, p. 187.

²⁴⁸ Schmidt, ‘Introduction’, in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. xxxi.

²⁴⁹ Geuss, ‘Kultur, Bildung, Geist’, p.155.

²⁵⁰ Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, p. 105.

and most fruitful way that I profit by our mutual communications, and appropriate them to myself, is always this, that I apply them immediately to the work I have in hand, and use them at once productively... And thus, I hope, shall my Wallenstein, and whatever of importance I may in future produce, contain and show in the concrete the whole system of that which in our intercourse has been able to pass into my being.²⁵¹

The very philosophical system that these two intellectuals were constructing was used in the creation of their art through the formidable bond of friendship.

A conception of Platonic love was closely connected to the importance placed on friendship. These were not ordinary, superficial, affiliations, but those of intense emotional connectivity, the truest union of souls and deepest meeting of minds. The relationship between love and friendship within the *Bildung* tradition was characterized by Schlegel who said:

All feelings and impulses, hence all sympathetic virtues, if they are beautiful, must be able to be referred to love. But from what can one see whether one can ascribe love to oneself or to someone else? From whether one is capable of friendship.²⁵²

For Schlegel, a moral education began with the ability to love and love was the motivation for its development.²⁵³ Love was vitally important to a concept of social harmony because it most effectively inspired the individual to overcome his own self-interest in favor of a concern for the common good. Those who felt a deep affinity with their beloved were more capable of acting in their interest, and this powerful dynamic represented the birth of the social bond. For Schiller, love was the “sacred fire that consumes every egotistical inclination, and the very principles of morality are scarcely a greater safeguard of the soul’s chastity than love is for the nobility of the heart.”²⁵⁴ Love in friendship was the primordial foundation of social morality and the very core of one’s humanity existed in this realm.

A Beautiful Soul, then, was represented as a figure distinguished by her resounding warmth towards others and her love of humanity. She welcomed spontaneous connections and sought disparate interactions. Although she did not have to be gregarious (she could be shy and contemplative), she became a sociable member of society because she valued human relationships through which she could learn. She advanced her cultivation through a

²⁵¹ Schiller and Goethe, *Correspondence*, p. 285.

²⁵² Schlegel, ‘Lectures on Transcendental Philosophy’, p. 153.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

²⁵⁴ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 244.

compassionate understanding and interest in the lived experiences of others. Although she was open to those around her, she also maintained an intellectual autonomy. For she had perfected the balance between sociability and individuality, retaining her individual integrity while remaining harmoniously embedded within her social whole.

Egalitarianism: Educating Poets and Princes

The discussion around harmony and friendship involved a concern for one's fellow man and an interest in sharing in the fruits of self-cultivation whilst acknowledging that all people were worthy and capable of this pursuit. The practice of *Bildung* was predicated on the supposition that anyone could become part of its tradition, a member of a new, progressive philosophical order that was meritocratic and inclusionary. To become cultivated was "in principle equally accessible to all rational agents regardless of their particular social circumstances."²⁵⁵ Although this principle of equality is affirmed consistently throughout the primary literature, it is often assumed that *Bildung* was elitist. This perception, which is usually based upon the modern prejudice that "high culture" is somehow implicitly exclusionary, should be disabused.

Self-cultivation was undeniably an undertaking that was more accessible to the upper classes who had the time and energy to cultivate their minds through philosophy, literature, and music. Furthermore, the *Bildungsbürgertum* tried to isolate themselves from other social classes and legitimize their privileged position through their practice of *Bildung*.²⁵⁶ This would appear to negate the egalitarian principle and demonstrates that a philosophy based on specific cultural practices can easily become fraught with social divisions and assertions of moral superiority. Although I do not wish to contest the elitism of the *Bildungsbürgertum* given that the literature on the subject has suggested that this was, at least in many circles, an undeniable facet of their *Bildung* practice, I would argue that, similar to the issue of authenticity treated previously, it is important to distinguish the theory from its practice by certain groups of people who superficially appropriated its aims.

In the classic formulations, the concepts were, in fact, radically egalitarian. They strongly affirmed the French revolution's principles of liberty and fraternity, encouraged tolerance and

²⁵⁵ Geuss, 'Kultur, Bildung, Geist', p.155.

²⁵⁶ See Klaus Vondung, *Das wilhelminische Bildungsbürgertum: Zur Sozialgeschichte seiner Ideen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Rupreche, 1976)

advanced egalitarianism by making the immaterial soul, the most elementary universal, the basis for its moral, social, and political ideals. *Bildung* not only reflected burgeoning notions on equality, it also galvanized interest in the novel political dimensions of its theoretical formulation of a complete (inner and outer) emancipation through personal practice. Throughout its principal theorists' philosophical essays, there is consistent reference to the fact that anyone can develop their faculties and, in the process, come closer to this ideal. At this time, the mere assertion of such a total equality was a revolutionary stance.

One of the reasons why *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* were such widespread belief systems was everyone had an intellect and a sense of morality that was capable of being developed, and this was the only condition that was required for its practice. *Bildung* did not depend upon social status, inheritance, or inherent states of being, but rather was formed through a strong work ethic, diligence, and personal commitment available to all. A Beautiful Soul was not something that could be materially acquired, nor was it the product of chance: its attainment was entirely dependent upon internal faculties invested in a person at birth. "It was therefore not so much the external beauty associated with a well-proportioned body, expensive clothes, or a noble name...but rather some internal qualities that were expressed in deeds."²⁵⁷ Since even the act of thinking beautifully was considered a pathway towards self-cultivation, all could pursue it, even those who did not have the time or resources to engage with culture and the arts. At its most basic, a Beautiful Soul was nothing more than an enlightened way of thinking and being which could be cultivated by everyone from the actor, the laborer, and the brick layer, to the prince, the poet, and the politician. Furthermore, it could be formed in every context from the garden, the studio, and the art museum, to the kitchen, the hay field, and the concert hall. Universal reach and applicability was a central fixture of its philosophy.

But, despite the fact that a Beautiful Soul required no particular material resources to pursue, many of its theorists were still deeply concerned with the conditions of the poor and the accessibility of the concepts to the lower and working classes, a testament to the extent to which they sought their universal implementation. Although formal education and access to cultural products were not the sole means by which to enrich the soul, they could substantively assist in the process. If the vast majority of people were excluded from these experiences, it might narrow

²⁵⁷ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 123.

their intellectual prospects and possibilities for self-cultivation. The theorists of *Bildung* were some of the first to acknowledge the class-based problems of poverty, unemployment, and inhumane working conditions that a society created around rigid social hierarchies faced on the verge of massive industrialization.²⁵⁸ They were ahead of their age in attempting to make sense of and address these perils to human survival and prosperity.

Beyond expressing the urgency of addressing basic needs, Schiller was well aware of the conditions of the lower classes and the problems associated with a lack of time and cultural resources that impeded their ability to achieve these ideals. One of the greatest obstacles to *Bildung* and the enlightenment it represented, he believed, came from the impoverished conditions of peasants.²⁵⁹ Class structures, he argued, were a great threat to morality. He considered it the responsibility of the state to improve the material condition of the poor so that they would be afforded the same opportunities to self-cultivate as more affluent members of society. “First the spirit must be liberated from the yoke of necessity before one can lead it to the freedom of reason.”²⁶⁰ From Schiller’s perspective, for man to liberate himself intellectually, he must be liberated physically from the bonds that constrained his ability to exercise his mind. Thus, the responsibility lay first on the state to ease economic inequalities. Once this was achieved, it became the responsibility of the individual to liberate himself further through self-cultivation.

Of course for an elite with the resources to act more easily, their own cultivation would include the exercise of benevolence and a concern for justice. As a result, an equitable economic state of affairs would inevitably come about in the more immediate horizon than if those in power remained ignorant of the social problems that others faced and were unwilling to assist in the amelioration of their condition. One of the aims of a *Bildung* education was to ensure that mankind would constantly preserve within themselves “the consciousness of all humanity.”²⁶¹ With this consciousness, whoever was in the better position would use their advantage to benefit others and to resolve the structural problems at hand. Therefore, even if *Bildung* first began with an elite, it would have positive economic effects for the lower classes who would soon be able to

²⁵⁸ Beiser, ‘Introduction’, in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, p. xxiv.

²⁵⁹ Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, p. 103.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁶¹ Schleiermacher, ‘Monologues II and III’, p. 173.

self-cultivate with fewer resource constraints. However, this was by no means a trickle down philosophy. Its beauty lay in the fact that it would lead to a kind of mutually considerate behavior in which the welfare of one's fellow man was of deep concern to the other without depending upon other peoples' empathy to materialize. The only person who one needed to rely upon to enjoy its benefits was oneself, and everyone, not just a privileged few, was included in its formulation.

This perspective challenges more contemporary narratives which frame *Bildung* as elitist.²⁶² These narratives are, ironically, often infused with elitism themselves, implicitly assuming that the lower classes are not truly capable of or interested in education. Distaste for a philosophy of culture is born from the prejudices concerning the working classes of those who would like to see themselves as progressive. The less privileged members of society are, therefore, excluded from the narratives maintained by an elite. What was so compelling about the theorists of *Bildung's* position on social equality was that they acknowledged the economic limitations placed on the lower classes and considered ways to address this problem, but also included all of humanity into their system with the implicit assumption that everyone had the competency to achieve its goals. This was not a feigned ideology of equality, but one which was truly progressive. Furthermore, it gave no special advantages to any one group. False piousness or obsequiousness was frowned upon and acts of charity undertaken from self-love were considered distasteful. A truly cultivated person would treat a prince or a pauper in the same way. The prince would not be flattered by the sycophant in order to receive social favors and the pauper would not be insincerely pandered to in order to display virtue; such actions would do nothing more than reinforce pre-existing hierarchies. Within the theoretical formulations of *Bildung*, no one gained favors from false means and everyone was treated with equal dignity and respect.

The literature of *Bildung* corroborates this perspective. Social hierarchies and the rigidities of class systems were often critiqued and a judgement of worth based on merit was encouraged. Schiller's play, *The Robbers*, for example, was a critique of class structures and

²⁶² Thomas Fuhr, 'Bildung: An Introduction' in *Transformative Learning Meets Bildung: An International Exchange*, ed. by Anna Laros, Thomas Fuhr, Edward W. Taylor (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2017), pp. 3-17 (p.8).

economic inequalities, while Goethe's characters often expressed opposition to social schisms and maintained friendships with people of different statuses. In *Werther*, the protagonist states:

I have often noticed, that people of some standing always keep coldly aloof from the common folk, as if they believe they would lose if they approached them...I maintain that he who supposes he must keep his distance from what they call the rabble, to preserve the respect due to him, is as much to blame as a coward who hides from his enemy for fear of being beaten.²⁶³

Here, social distance is rejected and the man in favor of hierarchies is likened to a coward. By contrast, the type of heterogeneous relationships that a cultivated person might have is depicted in *Wilhelm Meister* in which Wilhelm, along his *Bildung* journey, develops meaningful friendships with everyone from orphans, impoverished actors and destitute musicians to noble ladies and distinguished scholars. He learns from many different types of people all of whom help him grow in their own ways and bring out various positive aspects of his nature. His diverse friendships and social interactions are portrayed as equal in value, and never as self-congratulatory acts of benevolence towards social inferiors. His forays into new social spheres and desire to engage in mutual education with the wider social world represented what it truly meant to be cultivated.

This exploration of equality and inclusion merits further investigation in its relationship to gender politics. Like the vast majority of philosophical theories of the time, *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* were predominately directed towards male subjects. This issue has already been thoroughly explored by scholars and there have been multiple attempts at feminist rewritings of *Bildung* and the *Bildungsroman*.²⁶⁴ Nevertheless, dismissing the concepts as fundamentally sexist or ultimately unconcerned with female narratives would be too facile a conclusion. *Bildung* was principally a male-undertaking, but the idealized end, the figure of *die schöne Seele* was female, both linguistically in the article *die*, and in her depiction in literature. The feminine was glorified in the concept's formulation; it was commonly believed that women were naturally more sociable and artful, in other words, better suited to perfect their souls. As Humboldt commented:

Woman is, strictly speaking, nearer to the ideal human nature than man; and whilst it is true that she more rarely reaches it, it may only be that it is more difficult to

²⁶³ Goethe, *Werther*, p. 28.

²⁶⁴ See Sonjeong Cho, *An Ethics of Becoming: Configurations of Feminine Subjectivity in Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot* (New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 27.

ascend by the steep, immediate path than by the winding one. Now, how much such a being- so sensitive, yet so complete in herself, who therefore responds to everything with her whole being...²⁶⁵

Although I am aware of the argument that misogyny may be embedded in the muse archetype, I would differ from much of the existing literature on the subject. I suggest in the alternative that the Beautiful Soul's very representation as an ideal, feminine form, and the stereotypical female qualities that permeated many of the subjective characteristics of *Bildung*, demonstrate more favorable attitudes towards women through a willingness to adopt the feminine in male narratives, at least in theoretical and literary terms. In, for example, giving sentiment (stereotypically associated with the feminine) equal status as reason (stereotypically considered male), a significant paradigm shift in gender dynamics of the time occurred. This could be interpreted as a reflection of more progressive views on the status of women in society. Humboldt, in particular, spent much time balancing "feminine" and "masculine" forces and showing their different but equal qualities and mutual interdependence.²⁶⁶ In Goethe's work, there was a certain fluidity of gender norms in which "if, on one side, Goethe's Beautiful Souls are women, on the other one must note that these women do not have all the physical attributes of a 'woman' just like Wilhelm himself seems to be quite effeminate at times."²⁶⁷ The gender dynamics are undoubtedly complex and although historical details such as the fact that Humboldt and Goethe were greatly influenced by women in their formulations of the concepts might be revealing, they do not necessarily bring a deeper understanding of the concepts themselves. The basic characteristics of *Bildung* do, however, demonstrate that the philosophy, through its harmonization of "male" and "female" qualities with unclear divisions between the two, could be applied independent of gender norms.

Thus, this philosophy was radically egalitarian and inclusionary in its theoretical formulations. Although it could not immediately resolve larger social inequalities, this does not diminish from its equitable tenets. Furthermore, Humboldt's educational model is a trenchant example of a concrete, practical achievement that this philosophy inspired. Paired with the salon's demonstrable practice of egalitarianism, which will be explored in the next chapter, there

²⁶⁵ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p. 25.

²⁶⁶ Giovanna Summerfield and Lisa Downward, *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman* (London: Continuum International Publishing, 2010), p. 15.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.16.

is sufficient evidence to suggest that, contrary to certain portrayals, *Bildung* was, arguably, the most progressive doctrine of its time, both in its theory and in its applications.

The Bildungsreise: A Journey into the World

The features of a Beautiful Soul that have been explored thus far, especially this egalitarian vision of a society in which the individual learned from and assisted in the education of his fellow man, were rendered tangible through the literal and metaphorical undertaking of a journey. Since it was believed that the soul was found where the inner and outer world touched, it was imperative to its beautification that the outside world be discovered.²⁶⁸ The journey, in its literal sense, was a joyful period of time, usually in one's youth from the late teens to early twenties when the individual ventured out, freeing himself from the comfort and certainty of his upbringing and the narrow perspectives of his kin, to undertake an arduous but deeply revealing adventure while uncovering and developing his true self:

In its widest sense, *Bildung* is seen as movement. People break away from daily life, plunge into the unknown, and then later on take new experiences. *Bildung* is about venturing away from oneself into the unknown, stretching one's own limits in order to properly find one's true self.²⁶⁹

This journey served as the transition from childhood to an enlightened adulthood during which the individual overcame intellectual infantilism by searching for knowledge while enriching aesthetic and emotional faculties. It was a time for youthful discovery to allow "the human spirit to blow where it wanted," to encounter the mysterious and the unknown.²⁷⁰ This involved placing oneself in new situations and absorbing the impressions that they offered. As Schiller wrote:

Thus his culture will consist of two things: first, providing the receptive faculty with the most multifarious contacts with the world, and as regards feeling, pushing passivity to its fullest extent; secondly, securing for the determining faculty the fullest independence from the receptive, and as regards reason, pushing activity to its fullest extent. Where both qualities are united, Man will combine the greatest fullness of existence with the utmost self-dependence and freedom, and instead of

²⁶⁸ Novalis, 'Pollen', p. 12.

²⁶⁹ Øivind Varkøy, 'The Concept of Bildung', *Philosophy of Music Education*, vol. 18, no. 1 (2010), 85-96 (p.88).

²⁷⁰ Burrow, 'Introduction' in *The Limits of State Action*, p. liv.

abandoning himself to the world he will rather draw it into himself with the whole infinity of its phenomena, and subject it to the unity of his reason.²⁷¹

A person could make the greatest number of contacts in the world and test the limits of his understanding through “cultural cross fertilizations” in which he embraced lived experiences disparate from his own.²⁷² In doing so he induced epiphanies and awakened dormant aspects of his personhood. He also strengthened his character through the hardships that he endured along the way and the challenges that were posed to his assumptions.

What it meant to cross-fertilize was to adopt a cosmopolitan attitude and embrace different cultures and certain aspects of their systems of knowledge. Although much pride was taken in German culture, gone was the age of myopic, insular thinking. No longer were ideas limited to the circles of one’s ancestry. Education extended to the traditions and wisdom of other peoples. Goethe captured this new cosmopolitan spirit, arguing that the epoch of World literature had arrived.²⁷³ The theorists of *Bildung* did not focus education within a specific discipline or intellectual tradition, but rather encouraged the acquisition of knowledge through a complete immersion in the wider world; a cosmopolitan perspective was the best way to expand the material from which to inform this self-determined identity and belief system. As Schleiermacher commented:

Hence I cannot develop myself in isolation, as the artist does. In isolation all the juices of my mind dry up, and the course of my thought is arrested. I must get out and join a community with other spirits, to see the many forms of humanity and what is alien to me, to know what can become of myself, and to determine more securely through give and take my own nature.²⁷⁴

That which was alien was not feared or automatically judged but considered rationally and assimilated into the rest of one’s value system if it was determined to be true. Inspiration came in many forms and Goethe readily acknowledged that he found his influences in different cultural traditions arguing that we can thank “...a thousand influences of the great world, from which we appropriate what we can and what is suitable to us. What is important is to have a soul which

²⁷¹ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 69.

²⁷² Burrow, ‘Introduction’ in *The Limits of State Action*, p. liv.

²⁷³ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 204.

²⁷⁴ Schleiermacher, ‘Monologues II and III’, p. 178.

loves truth, and receives it wherever it can find it.”²⁷⁵ Truth was supremely important to the *Bildung* journey, and truth could be found in many places, but never in isolation.

In drawing from various traditions from an early age, the individual discovered and rediscovered himself, overcoming his own weaknesses through experimentation while solidifying the values he would come to hold later in life. The moving encounters of his youth, in which the Platonic forms were revealed through experience, would inspire a life dedicated to their pursuit. Beauty was the compass in this revelatory journey, helping the traveler navigate through new social milieus, protecting him from influences that were unvirtuous, and sustaining his natural inclination towards moral goodness. Beauty also served “to maximize contacts with the world” which could consequently lead to truth.²⁷⁶

Goethe described the Platonic structure of the poetic man who discovered himself through his *Bildung* journey. He searches for a common humanity found not within the arbitrary boundaries of territorial divisions, but in a universal quest for Goodness, Beauty and Truth:

The poet may, as a man and citizen, love his native land; but the native land of his poetic energies and poetic action is the Good, Noble, and Beautiful, which is confined to no province nor country, which he is to seize upon and body forth wherever he finds it. Therein is he like the eagle, which hovers, with free gaze, over all countries, and to which it is of no consequence whether the hare, on which he pounces down is running through Prussia or through Saxony.²⁷⁷

That patriotism could expand to something that was inclusive and universal, based upon shared values not upon inherited territorial boundaries, was one of the ways in which this philosophy was extraordinarily progressive, even for today, striving to unite divided peoples and bring about a consciousness of all of humanity. Nationalism became shared Platonic ideals that anyone could hold and identity was found in values that superseded geographical, ethnic, and historical frames of reference.

Although it was the individual who undertook this journey, he did so in a spirit of camaraderie with others working towards common ends:

Because this movement {the journey} is both individual and collective, dialogue and conversation are necessary concerns of *Bildung*. Individuals are formed when they meet what is common to all humanity. Humans become human through contact

²⁷⁵ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 267.

²⁷⁶ Paul Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 126.

²⁷⁷ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 412.

with other humans. People objectify themselves in the world. *Bildung* is not possible if one remains in the subjective and private.²⁷⁸

Bildung represented the willingness to explore concepts through a web of interconnected relationships with different people and ideas and the desire to forge affinities through affairs of the mind.

The journey metaphor was not only rendered meaningful in the *Bildungsroman*, its philosophers often had significant experiences of travel or discovery in their youth that shaped their ideals. The Grand Tour, the *Bildungsreise* in the German context, was an educational journey that took a young bourgeoisie across Europe to witness the artistic and cultural marvels of classical antiquity and the Renaissance, while improving their language skills and discovering themselves through encounters with other peoples and cultures. Goethe, like his character Wilhelm, was profoundly influenced by his travels, in his case in Italy from 1786-1788, which he chronicled in *Italian Journey* (1816).²⁷⁹ His experiences viewing objects from antiquity and immersing himself in Italian traditions inspired his ideas on aesthetic education. Some of the finest hours of his life, when he enjoyed the most elevated feelings, were had during this time.²⁸⁰

Perhaps from their personal experiences the theorists of *Bildung* recognized the power of youthful explorations to solidify moral frameworks and systems of understanding. They believed that if the optimism, excitement, and energy of one's early youth was fully actualized, then it would inform the moral and intellectual trajectory of a person's life. Youthful ideals were not meant to be maintained in the abstract, but rather firmly embedded within the world. Even though the process of aspiring to live a life of noble ideals could begin at any age, it was most advantageous to start early when the soul was still malleable and open to the possibilities of change.

Once the initial journey had taken place in one's youth, either in the literal or figurative sense, the metaphor continued with the corresponding duty to systematically integrate oneself into the fabric of society through the perpetual re-evaluation of subjective experience in communication with others. To be self-cultivated meant to continuously refashion one's existing

²⁷⁸ Varkøy, 'The Concept of Bildung', p. 5.

²⁷⁹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Italian Journey (1786-1788)*, trans. by W. H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer, (London, Penguin Classics, 1962)

²⁸⁰ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, pp. 254-255.

knowledge and remain open to new knowledge. None of the essential features of the concepts were given; all required continual effort, re-interpretation, revision, and a commitment to expand and elaborate upon the values discovered in young adulthood. In the end, the journey was a metaphor for the life of a Beautiful Soul. This life was not without its missteps and misfortunes, but it was lived with purpose and there was an evolution that could be traced from beginning to end. As Goethe declared “He is the happiest man who can set the end of his life in connection with the beginning.”²⁸¹

Bildung itself was implemented through this journey and the life cycle of the Beautiful Souls who enacted it. In the future, when the larger social reality would reflect the structures of *Bildung*, it would be far easier for new generations to adapt its basic tenets, hold its values, and educate themselves accordingly. It was always harder to be a pioneer in uncharted terrains of thought than to follow a path that had been treaded before, even when the philosophy was so individually specific. To keep society progressing while this transformation was taking place was, according to Schiller, like the work of a mechanic who fixes a watch as the wheels run. Measures must be taken to support a society that was trying to emancipate itself without resorting to a potentially devastating deconstruction through revolution. Encouraging citizens to start their *Bildung* journey by breaking from the structures of their predetermined environment was the best way to mend an imperfect society as it continued to spin.

The Real and the Ideal

The characteristics that comprised a Beautiful Soul’s journey can be summarized as the pursuit of an abstract ideal of Platonic perfection. Conversations around the ideal mirrored those on human potential. The cultivation of a perfect latent state was only achieved when an ideal acted as the source of its inspiration. The concepts were therefore a forward looking meditation on what the human condition could be if individuals aspired to improve their present condition, and in doing so, optimized their capacities through concerted action. In affirming an ideal in which Beauty, Truth, and Goodness were the objective values, the theorists of *Bildung* challenged people to rise above the imperfections that impeded their capacity to fully utilize their faculties. As Schiller wrote: “the soul swells with noblest emotions when a divine ideal is placed before

²⁸¹ Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections*, p. 86.

it.”²⁸² Like the instinctual desire to find one’s *telos*, a vital life force, it was believed, stimulated the soul into the pursuit of perfection. Through Wilhelm in *Wilhelm Meister*, Goethe claimed that most people live impoverished, fragmented existences but that within them an energy could be harnessed to achieve the ideal.²⁸³ This force was as tenacious as the will to live, a primordial urge that acted as the catalyst for the ascent out of personal imperfections and bleak social realities. Even the most ordinary individuals could achieve the extraordinary when this energy was recognized and set in motion. *Entfremdung* or alienation, a term that Hegel concretized in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), but was already explored by Fichte and Schiller, can be employed here to describe the impoverished state to which Goethe refers.²⁸⁴ The alienated human soul waited to be animated by this inner spark, facilitated by the right social, philosophical, and environmental conditions (which will be explored at depth in the context of the salon). It sought to triumph over the gravitational pull towards mediocrity and character deficiencies, coming closer to the ideals toward which every life was ultimately directed. Fichte addressed human limitations by uniting the phenomenal and the spiritual world:

Insofar as man is spirit, therefore, he is not merely a part of this world but rather the ground of its existence. And by virtue of his consciousness and reason, it is within his power to reassert his primacy over it, by coming to recognize where the true dependence lies.²⁸⁵

Within this framework, he developed a concept in which man could rise above his current state and attain the ideal. In a similar vein, Schiller demonstrated the discrepancy between man’s present condition and his essential nature. But he believed it was the purpose and destiny of man to harmonize the two and enter the realm of perfection.²⁸⁶ Schiller concluded that a spark was vivified and a man was on his way to the ideal if he risked the reality of his material conditions for the “embellishment of his existence,” preferring form over substance.²⁸⁷ Goethe argued that this expressed inclination towards perfection, which transcended the base demands of earthly comforts, was the measure of a man. As one of his maxims noted: “Perfection is the measure of

²⁸² Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 334.

²⁸³ Beddow, *The Fiction of Humanity*, p. 88.

²⁸⁴ See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by Terry Pinkard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 281-306.

²⁸⁵ Richard Schacht, *Alienation* (New York: Allen & Unwin, 1971), p. 14.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁸⁷ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 132.

heaven, and the wish to be perfect the measure of man.”²⁸⁸ To sacrifice for beautiful ideals and to give them primacy demonstrated the true worth of their believer.

Despite the seeming utopian nature of this perspective, the philosophy also acknowledged human embeddedness in an imperfect reality and the inevitability of incompleteness or even failure in one’s attempt towards self-cultivation. Its theorists were aware of the impracticality of principles that advanced utopic visions without taking into account the frailty and moral flaws to which humans were naturally inclined. They avoided the hypocrisy of demanding unattainable ends in the development of a humanist philosophy that was meant to empower, not to oppress people. They also conceded that the ideals of one’s youth might be more difficult to maintain when the realities of everyday life dismantled the dreams of the past. In a passage of Schiller’s poem, “The Ideals”, he captures the sad truth implicit in this sentiment:

The glorious suns my youth enchanting have set in never-ending night; Those blest ideals now are wanting that swelled my heart with mad delight. The offspring of my dream hath perished, my faith in being passed away; The godlike hopes that once I cherish are now reality's sad prey.²⁸⁹

However, acknowledging the experiences that might compromise one’s youthful ideals with time did not mean accepting defeat. To preserve one’s ideals was not a function of living under perfect circumstances, but rather a choice that required individual effort. Thus, no matter how difficult it may be, it was always possible, and, as such, these ideals could provide a source of resolve, meaning, and direction. To believe that ideals were nothing more than the charming follies of one’s youth diminished the prospects of the adult who had allowed himself to forget the great beauty that he had experienced in the past. Though understandable, given the strains of life, this was perhaps the most tragic mistake of all.

Furthermore, even if it was true that a pure ideal could never be fully effectuated by people who would always be bound to their human shortcomings, it still had the possibility of being achieved at least in part, and this was, in the end, what mattered. As the Beautiful Soul of *Wilhelm Meister* said, what was important was “That I am still advancing, never retrograding; that my conduct is approximating more and more to the image I have formed of perfection...”²⁹⁰

²⁸⁸ Goethe, *Maxims and Reflections*, p. 147.

²⁸⁹ Friedrich Schiller, *The Poems of Schiller*, ed. and trans. by Henry Wireman (Philadelphia: I. Kohler, 1871), p. 109.

²⁹⁰ Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister*, p. 371.

As Goethe reflected in his autobiography, “All men of a good disposition feel, with increasing cultivation, that they have a double part to play in the world,—a real one and an ideal one, and in this feeling is the ground of everything noble to be sought.”²⁹¹ In his *Aesthetic Letters*, Schiller similarly respected both the inevitable constraints of the real and the prospects of the ideal. He maintained that the ideal could be preserved if reality did not injure form, or form injury reality. His poem, “The Ideal and the Real Life”, elegantly captures this sentiment:

The weavers of the web--the fates--but sway
The matter and the things of clay;
Safe from change that time to matter gives,
Nature's blest playmate, free at will to stray
With gods a god, amidst the fields of day,
The form, the archetype, serenely lives.
Would'st thou soar heavenward on its joyous wing?
Cast from thee, earth, the bitter and the real,
High from this cramped and dungeon being, spring
Into the realm of the ideal!²⁹²

The final phrase, “spring into the realm of the ideal,” powerfully expresses the forward looking, aspirational tenor of this philosophy. In the spirit of this phrase, Schiller and Goethe analyzed their own limitations and weaknesses, while tracing their development in their attempts to ennoble themselves. It was in the constant striving for perfection that they shed their faults and slowly reached closer to the ideal.²⁹³ This was the ethos with which they hoped people would embrace life and uphold the rigorous standards upon which this philosophy had been founded.

Beyond their personal conviction in the truth of the ideals that they espoused, the theorists of *Bildungs*' acute understanding of the human condition revealed the psychological need for these ideals. The rhetoric surrounding the notion of perfectibility demonstrated the practical nuance of their philosophy. In *On the Limits of State Action*, Humboldt expressed this need based on his observations that an ideal was highly motivating and offered an irreplaceable source of direction and purpose:

The idea of perfection will still hover in front of a man, even if he is not accustomed to think in terms of the sum of all moral excellence in one absolute ideal, and to conceive of himself as in a relation with an ideal being: it will be to him the incentive to activity, and the stuff of all his happiness.²⁹⁴

²⁹¹ Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, p. 400.

²⁹² Schiller, *The Poems of Schiller*, p. 209.

²⁹³ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, pp. 102-103.

²⁹⁴ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p. 57.

An unalloyed ideal was considered essential to inspire humanity, for just like no one would have faith in a god who was envious and greedy, for these undesirable characteristics would largely negate the reason for worshipping him, no one would want to pursue a humanist ideal that was pessimistic about the possibilities of the human condition.

But unlike Christianity, which, according to Goethe and Schiller, espoused a sterile, joyless ideal, this new philosophy was life giving and embraced humanity. Both poets admired the Greeks, for, as Schiller declaimed in his poem “The Gods of Greece,” their gods were more human and their humans were more divine.²⁹⁵ To become godlike, or to theoretically have the capacity to possess qualities of the divine, was integrated into the concept of *Bildung*. As Schlegel wrote “every good person becomes more and more God. To become God, to be human, to cultivate oneself, are expressions that all mean the same thing.”²⁹⁶ The aim of this idea of perfection was, therefore, to inspire humans to believe in something greater than their present state and to sanctify the soul without succumbing to the fear or subservience that other ideologies appeared to require. As Humboldt argued:

This very idea of perfection, the goal of all his actions, is really not a mere cold abstraction of the reason but a warm impulse of the heart, which draws his own being towards that of others. For in them too there exists a similar capacity for greater perfection, and this he may be able to elicit or improve upon.²⁹⁷

The theorists of *Bildung*, however, identified a significant problem: most individuals with influence in character development, such as teachers, spoke not of the ideal, but of what was real, and, in doing so, inhibited people from attaining higher ends.²⁹⁸ To propagate ideals was a responsibility that lay in the hands of those who held positions of creative power. Artists and intellectuals, in particular, were responsible because, through their use of the imagination, they could most compellingly portray the ideal and make people believe in what otherwise might appear futile. They had the unique ability to lift their work above quotidian reality while

²⁹⁵ Jeffrey L. High ‘Friedrich Schiller, Secular Virtue, and “The Gods of Ancient Greece” (1788)’ in *Enlightenment and Secularism*, ed. by Christopher Nadon (Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), pp. 315-325 (p. 316).

²⁹⁶ Schlegel, ‘Athenaeum Fragments’, p. 119.

²⁹⁷ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, p. 58.

²⁹⁸ Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 307.

retaining the indispensable influences of the sensual world.²⁹⁹ Fiction, especially, could grapple with everyday concerns while descriptively upholding an ideal that reality might not allow. Goethe argued that the tendency to see oneself in the noblest characters of novels and “place oneself on equality with something higher” was healthy and necessary to fight the boredom of everyday life and to preserve the vision of something greater.³⁰⁰

Since these concepts were intended not only for abstract contemplation, but also as a foundational belief system and practical philosophy that could be enacted in the world, the theorists of *Bildung* deployed fiction to convey the core elements of the philosophy to a wider public. Literary accounts served to advance a perfect, god-like ideal to inspire awe and admiration that was motivating and life-affirming. At the same time, they depicted the tribulations of persons who exhibited characteristics of goodness, yet nevertheless, were condemned to human shortcomings. The integration of an affirmative, enlightening ideal with compassion for and acceptance of limitations offered a compelling framework for an optimistic, yet realistic assessment of the human condition.

The artful amalgamation of the real and the ideal in philosophy and literature was a gift particular to the theorists of *Bildung*. Wieland’s originality, for example, was that his prose maintained an ideal while also exploring human realities.³⁰¹ Goethe and Schiller portrayed characters who effectively popularized the concepts because they were vulnerable to the same imperfections and excesses as any ordinary person. None of their characters could be said to have achieved the perfect state of a Beautiful Soul, their shortcomings are made apparent, and it is their struggles in this journey that are the most insightful.

Literary figures such as Wilhelm Meister, for example, are undoubtedly on a *Bildung* odyssey, but they never fully attain the status of *die schöne Seele*. Schiller, for example, was not certain that Wilhelm had truly become self-cultivated because he did not demonstrate the ability to perform “a proper aesthetic judgment.”³⁰² Their frustrations with the world, missteps on their journey, misfortunes, and feelings of existential uncertainty, loss, and loneliness, are all part of what makes their story meaningful and compelling. If these authors had depicted supremely

²⁹⁹ Schiller and Goethe, *Correspondence*, p. 329.

³⁰⁰ Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, p. 400.

³⁰¹ Beddow, *The Fiction of Humanity*, p. 24.

³⁰² Marc Redfield, ‘Gender, Aesthetics, and the Bildungsroman’, *The Wordsworth Circle*, vol. 25, no. 1 (1994), 17-21 (p.19).

Beautiful Souls who were perfect from the beginning, there would be no lessons learned or questions for practical consideration. Wilhelm Meister's story is not only about the development of his personal capacities but, from another perspective, it "is at least as much about his attempts to orient himself realistically in the world, to discover what is in fact possible and what he wishes to do with his life."³⁰³ It was within this realistic orientation that elements of the ideal could be found. As Schiller remarked à propos *Wilhelm Meister* in a letter to Goethe on July 2, 1796:

If I had to express in so many words the goal which Wilhelm has finally reached after so many aberrations, I should say he enters from an empty and undefined Ideal into a defined actual life, but without thereby forfeiting the idealizing power.³⁰⁴

Commensurate with this interpretation, the ideal was discovered, therefore, not in the end state of the characters but rather in the definition of their lives in accordance with the will to idealize. This concurred with the definition of moral beauty which, as we have seen, was found not in an inherent condition but rather in the process of an individual overcoming personal failures, having his character tested under trying circumstances and ultimately improving his internal constitution despite hardship and pain. According to Schiller, Wilhelm's passage from the ideal to the real and back again, through his confinement within limitations, permitted him to relate to Nature more purely in his pathway towards perfection.³⁰⁵

The fundamentally human depiction of the pursuit of inner perfection in the literature reveals important aspects of this philosophy and addresses two of the main areas of concern or potential weakness in its reception. The first responds to one of the strongest critiques of the concept of the Beautiful Soul. The premise of this critique is that as soon as a Beautiful Soul enters the imperfect world, she necessarily becomes corrupted and cannot achieve her idealized ends. Hegel, in particular, attempted to put the Beautiful Soul to rest on the assumption that by virtue of operating in an unbeautiful world she would inevitably become corrupted and, in effect, self-liquidating.³⁰⁶ Yet, as the literary accounts demonstrate, these concepts were aspirational and did not require perfect realization. The individual could cultivate himself and in the process

³⁰³ Geuss, 'Kultur, Bildung, Geist', p.159.

³⁰⁴ Schiller and Goethe, *Correspondence*, p. 164.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 164-165.

³⁰⁶ Drew Milne, 'The Beautiful Soul: From Hegel to Beckett', *Diacritics*, vol. 32, no.1 (2002), 63-82 (p.63).

come closer to this ideal. He did not have to arrive at the ideal to validate its existence or to justify its pursuit. That is, this critique did not detract from the validity of the value system that was promoted. Hegel was commenting on the responsibility of the individual and the nature of the human condition. Nevertheless, his skepticism about the concept makes clear the high expectations placed on the Beautiful Soul to remain true to herself but also have demonstrable effects in the world. Literature reveals the intent of its authors (here I refer most specifically to Goethe, Schiller, and Wieland) to respond to this critique by using this medium to humanize the concepts and demonstrate that they could be compatible with lived experience and still retain a philosophical purity.

The second critique is one of a more contemporary nature. The words “perfectibility” and “ideal” in reference to humanity often have negative connotations, especially in the German context. The perfection of the human soul, a beautiful ideal to some, might signal an ideology ripe for fascist manipulation in which hierarchies of “superior” souls are created. However, it would be a mistake to impose a twentieth century understanding of these words on their eighteenth and nineteenth century formulation. The term perfection in this philosophy had nothing to do with conditions of birth, and therefore cannot be associated with racial theories. It was precisely the opposite: perfection was framed in reference to cultivated states of immaterial being. The figure of the Beautiful Soul was the antithesis of hierarchical structures, class stratification, or ethnic chauvinism, a point which becomes only further apparent when considered in relation to the concept’s centrality of subjective expression, egalitarianism, and a concern for the social good.

An exception to this foundational perspective is Johann Caspar Lavater (1741-1801), a Swiss pastor and philosopher of the controversial field of physiognomy. In a distorted appropriation of the concept, with pseudo-scientific observations, he suggested that Beautiful Souls were necessarily housed in beautiful bodies, introducing a physical criterion to a distinctly non-corporeal concept. Lavater’s conflation of corporeal essence with cognitive and spiritual capacities presents a threat to the legitimacy of the Beautiful Soul. His bastardization of the philosophy’s original intent has been well-recognized by scholars and is considered an apocryphal anomaly. Still, as Norton accurately suggests:

It remains, however, one of the strangest and saddest legacies of the eighteenth-century ideal of the beautiful soul, which had represented to its creators the very personification of moral goodness, that its fateful association with physiognomy

allowed it, in our own time, to become entangled in a pernicious ideology that embodied just the opposite.³⁰⁷

The unfortunate rise of the cult of physiognomy around 1775, when Lavater published *Essays on Physiognomy*, demonstrates how a concept can be grotesquely misappropriated and subsequently haunted by an illegitimate legacy that represents its opposite. However detrimental Lavater's ideas were, they had the positive effect of eliciting a clear rejection of such arguments which reinforced the true spirit of this philosophy. The rhetoric of *Bildung* surrounding perfection was demonstrated to be the antithesis of dogmatic substantiations of human inferiority or fascist ideologies. It accomplished a dual feat of resurrecting the perfected ends of antiquity while rescuing notions of the ideal from their perversion. If this philosophy had held greater prevalence in popular culture in the twentieth century as it had in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then perhaps the course of history would have been different and the tragic developments in Germany could have been contested with an ideology that was diametrically opposed to physiological determinism.

Since the ideal was reinterpreted within a humanist framework with the intention of worldly realization, it was important that each individual understand that he must never lower his aspirations to anything less than the ultimate perfection of the soul. If noble values of virtue and benevolence, as represented by the ideal form of the Good, were diminished to mere displays of power and wealth in a society where material gain triumphed over moral standing, then political figures would serve only themselves in their positions and citizens would seek nothing more than their immediate material needs. This would keep humanity subjected to animalistic impulses, immoral acts, and vulgarity that possessed no moral beauty. However, if duties associated with benevolence and decency were affirmed as reflecting the ideal, then people would find greater incentive to work towards their realization and humanity would benefit as a consequence.

Schiller argued that a vulgar mind will disgrace the noblest things by treating them ordinarily. A great mind, by contrast, would ennoble even the smallest things and those most common.³⁰⁸ In his opinion, the Dutch and Flemish painters were examples of the former and the Greeks and Italians, with their exceptionally good tastes, were examples of the latter, elevating every creation to the ideal and, as a consequence, elevating humanity as a whole. Like the artists

³⁰⁷ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 209.

³⁰⁸ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 247.

of ancient Greece and Italy, the aims of the cultivated man could never fall to earth nor could his ideals be lowered in order to attain them with greater ease.³⁰⁹ As soon as the ideal was reduced, all meaning was lost and morality was made vulnerable to indolence. Like a painting crudely rendered, the superficial person would never excite virtue in others. But, like the elegant form of a Greek statue which remained eternally inspiring, those who had a nobility of soul would animate the moral beauty in others.

On September 20, 1780 Goethe wrote in a letter to Lavater that “this desire to raise up as high as possible the pyramid of my existence-whose basis and foundation were given to me- outweighs everything else and can hardly be forgotten even for a moment. I dare not tarry. I am already at an advanced age, and perhaps fate will break me in the middle of life and the Tower of Babel will remain an incomplete stump. At least they should be able to say it was a daring attempt.”³¹⁰ Like the figure of the Beautiful Soul, Goethe’s attempt to reach the pinnacle of his existence produced a body of work that inspired others to do so too.

On Beauty and its Significance for the Soul

The theorists of *Bildung* embraced an aesthetic ideal composed of a Platonic Beauty which Schiller understood to be eternal and indivisible.³¹¹ Implicit in the name, beauty was the defining feature of a Beautiful Soul, the omnipresent force that constituted the essence of her moral being. The field of aesthetics was already well established in philosophy at the time that these concepts were at the height of their popularity, but its social dimensions remained relatively underdeveloped. The proponents of *Bildung* can be considered among the pioneers in Western thought to use aesthetics as the basis of a political doctrine, solidifying the intersection between aesthetics and ethics that was at the heart of the German philosophical tradition.

In its purest formulation, *Bildung* maintained the Greek notion that the beautiful possessed the characteristics of the good and the good features of the beautiful. The relationship was elegantly summarized by Goethe who remarked “The Beautiful is not different from the

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 248.

³¹⁰ Rüdiger Safranski, *Goethe: Life as a Work of Art*, trans. by David Dollenmayer (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), p. xxiii.

³¹¹ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 81-82.

Good: The Beautiful is the Good which shows itself to us pleasingly veiled.”³¹² Only persons with uncultivated moral faculties would fail to comprehend and internalize the full significance of this union, for those whose morality had been developed would be ineluctably drawn to beauty.³¹³ Like Goethe, Schlegel argued that beauty was the pleasurable manifestation of the good and he postulated that reaching towards a metaphysical Beauty could only occur through *Bildung*.³¹⁴ Therefore, in cultivating one’s aesthetic faculties, one came closer to the good:

If we have properly trained our “taste” and have thus adequately exercised the appropriate faculties of our mind, we will always and unerringly desire what is good because it is at the same time beautiful, that is, in conformity, or harmonious, with our “natural” constitution.³¹⁵

The relationship between the two was considered a natural union, the most basic law of the universe. As Goethe claimed “The Beautiful is a manifestation of secret laws of nature, which, without its presence, would never have been revealed.”³¹⁶

Schiller conceptually linked beauty and goodness to truth, restoring the tripartite unity of the Platonic structure, when he argued in his *Aesthetic Letters* that beauty requires a pure concept of human nature and this concept, rather than being born from experience, follows a “transcendental way” to truth.³¹⁷ “Before truth sends her triumphant light into the depths of the heart” Schiller believed that it was beauty and poetry that intercepted her rays “and the peaks of humanity will be glowing when humid night still lingers in the valleys.”³¹⁸ Since the concept of beauty completes the concept of human nature, when reason declares “humanity shall exist” it inexorably declares as well “there shall be Beauty.”³¹⁹ From this perspective, an ideal conception of humanity could be restored and a pathway to this truth was found through beauty.

³¹² Walter Horace Bruford, *Culture and Society in Classical Weimar, 1775-1806* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p.286.

³¹³ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 38.

³¹⁴ Alexander J.B. Hampton, *Romanticism and the Re-Invention of Modern Religion: The Reconciliation of German Idealism and Platonic Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p.142.

³¹⁵ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 38.

³¹⁶ Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections*, p. 186.

³¹⁷ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 85-87.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

Schiller clarified his definition of beauty by distinguishing between two types. The first is an “energizing beauty” that excites us and elicits an immediate response. This beauty is required for the “sensuous man” whose emotions are too intense and must be rebalanced with form and thought. The second beauty is a “melting beauty” which is calming. This beauty is required for the “spiritual man” whose concern for form and abstract thought must be reunited with the senses and his ability to feel. Energizing beauty alone can become excessive and melting beauty can become too constrained, but together they cancel each other’s negative extremes and represent perfection.

For Schiller, aesthetic experience, therefore, was a dynamic equilibrium between the senses and form. In what he refers to as “the aesthetic state,” the ideal condition towards which we should aspire, our consciousness would be dictated neither by the passions nor by reason alone. Thus, Schiller makes the transcendental deduction that beauty is the balancing point between reason and the senses. Aesthetic experience liberates us from uncultivated impressions and volatile emotions through the serene, freeing effect of beauty on the human soul. Simultaneously, it arouses excitement about *a priori* knowledge and abstract ends. This aesthetic intermediary state is discussed by Schiller as the “play drive,” a concept alluded to previously, which took inspiration from Winckelmann’s notion that art is the product of gaiety as well as Goethe’s earlier writings.³²⁰ The play drive has “as its object to suppress time in time, to reconcile the state of transition or becoming with absolute being, change with identity.”³²¹ Schiller’s interpretation of beauty, then, was a resolution of the problem that we previously explored, allowing for the reconciliation of the passions with rationality and harmoniously integrating faculties.

For both Schiller and Goethe, listening to a beautiful musical composition, for example, placed the subject in a state of sublime serenity which momentarily released him from the volatile pull of his passions. This harmonious state was active and awake, fully present in the immediate sensory experience, while also remaining intellectually detached, immersed in the conceptual realm. Goethe believed that music “Should set free the joy of living, moral confidence, whole-hearted energy, and above all, the impulse of reason; it should encourage the

³²⁰ Ibid., pp. 74-75.

³²¹ Wessell, ‘Schiller and the Genesis of German Romanticism’, p. 179.

spirit of clearness of thought, the sense of the eternal contempt for pettiness, and nothingness.”³²² Schiller made a similar argument when talking about beauty more generally. “Beauty is, to be sure, the work of free contemplation, and we step with her into the world of ideas-but, it must be observed, without thereby leaving the world of sense, as is the case with cognition of truth.”³²³ Beauty was able to combine the positive, world-disclosing dimensions of emotion with the enlightening meditations of the rational mind:

Beauty is therefore certainly an object for us, since reflection is the condition under which we have a sensation of it; but it is at the same time a state of our personality, since feeling is the condition under which we have a conception of it. It is then certainly form, because we contemplate it; but it is at the same time life, because we feel it. In a word, it is at once our state and our act.³²⁴

Beauty, therefore, possessed the unique ability to restore a divided nature and compose the soul in a state of perfect balance. This, we will see, had the function of making humans more capable of productively contributing to and existing within a social whole.

Although the beauty found in art or nature that *Bildung* was concerned with addressing was material in the sense that it physically existed in the world, its form contained a disembodied essence. The energizing beauty of a cliff or the calming beauty of a gently flowing river would not have aesthetic value if it did not hold a property that transcended the cliff or the river that the perceiver was able to subconsciously identify in his perception of it. We can conceptualize this relationship to be one in which aesthetic pleasure was found when the material vessels of cliff and river were suffused with the light reflected from the immutable form of the Beautiful. Thus, a divine dimension was discovered within every worldly experience of beauty and sensory impression entered the conceptual realm.

Furthermore, beauty, according to Schiller, had the distinct ability to excite both the imagination and the intellect.³²⁵ Its wide scope gave it an all pervasive force in positively shaping the condition of those who chose to embrace its powers, and by extension, the social structures to which these people were bound. In its imaginativeness, beauty offered the individual release from a quotidian reality of blunted emotions, inexplicable forces, and un-lived possibilities. It

³²² Marguerite Heller, ‘Goethe and Music’, *The German Quarterly*, vol. 22, no. 4 (1949), 205-208 (p.208).

³²³ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 121.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 122.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 104-105.

evoked fascination, while inspiring an acute receptivity to the world. Goethe's poetic imagination, for example, was excited when he went on "image hunts," solitary walks where he found symbolic meaning when he was struck by what he often referred to as an "aperçu" the transformative suddenness of an impression brought about by natural beauty.³²⁶ The unexpected immediacy of the experience overcame the anticipated routines of daily life and his artistic creativity formed in this vital exercise of his imagination.

In relationship to the intellect, beauty provided a means to access greater truths, to perceive the elegance of the universe, and to illuminate from within the ultimate purpose of existence. As Schiller wrote in his poem "The Artists," "Only through beauty's morning gate didst thou the land of knowledge find."³²⁷ Beauty brought a simplicity to thought and a clarity in understanding the nature of being and the value of worldly associations. To Schiller, the beauty of symmetry and reoccurring forms in nature followed rules which uncovered fundamental dimensions of knowledge.³²⁸ Goethe affirmed that a mathematical equation or scientific theory that was beautiful clearly communicated the theoretical truth that it sought to reveal, solidifying understanding through an aesthetic elegance that mirrored natural systems.³²⁹ Thus the spectrum of human achievement, from the imaginativeness of the arts and humanities, to the primal truths found in mathematics and the sciences, were immeasurably enhanced by, if not indivisibly tied to, beauty.

The ineluctable indeterminateness of aesthetic experience was precisely what made it valuable in expanding one's consciousness. Beauty offered profound "satisfaction without any interest" that was complete in and of itself.³³⁰ Ironically, since it sought no accomplishment or specific end, the most important things could be achieved because they came about organically without strain or force.³³¹ The ennobled mind that perceived of beauty wanted for nothing. It found pleasure in the contemplation of the phenomenon and did not desire to appropriate the objects that it observed. It was freed of the dependence on resources beyond its basic subsistence

³²⁶ Safranski, *Goethe*, p. 45.

³²⁷ Schiller, *The Poems of Schiller*, p. 83.

³²⁸ Schiller, 'Kallias', p. 148.

³²⁹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), p. 36.

³³⁰ Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), p. 3.

³³¹ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp.136-138.

and did not fear dispossessing that which it never wished to possess. These insights were based on Kant and Shaftesbury's earlier notions on the disinterested and representational nature of beauty. In his *Critique of Judgement* (1790), Kant argued that if something depends on beauty or if one's interests are interlaced with one's judgement, than the judgement cannot be considered one of pure taste.³³² Similarly, in his dialogue "The Moralists" (1709) Shaftesbury claimed that observing a lovely landscape was a gratifying experience in itself. The rolling hills, resplendent colors and trees that dotted the horizon would arouse feelings of intense sensory and intellectual pleasure bringing elation with a calming clarity. If the encounter with beauty had been true, it would not cross a person's mind to desire to acquire the landscape; the thought would be absurd, for its appreciation was complete in itself.³³³

Beauty was therefore demonstrated to be the most absolute phenomenon, the only time when the individual was entirely present in the perceptual realm, momentarily released from the shackles of his will and liberated from the tyranny of necessity. The disinterested, immaterial nature of beauty reinforced the fact that it was a theory that was available to all. Everyone could delight in the gentle sway of a willow's branches or a mountain landscape suffused in golden light. Schiller remarked that "the sublime, like the beautiful, is spread profusely throughout nature, and the faculty to feel both one and the other has been given to all men."³³⁴ This common feeling unveiled the universality that underpinned existence, giving aesthetics the form and structure of ethics with its universal laws.

In its universality, beauty provided a basis upon which positive social relationships could be developed, acting as a point of commonality for collective exchange. Since, it was believed that there was a natural human inclination to want to share beautiful experiences, they could afford an opportunity to bond individuals in a moment of ultimate meaning, conveying ineffable feelings that cut to the core of existence. Unlike material things, which were thought to evoke acquisitiveness, beauty in its infiniteness was meant to be shared. The meaning found in observing a landscape or listening to music was only intensified and enhanced in the company of

³³² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by J.H. Bernard (London: Dover Philosophical Classics, 2005)

³³³ See Anthony Ashley Cooper Earl of Shaftesbury, *The Moralists, a Philosophical Rhapsody: Being a Recital of Certain Conversations Upon Natural and Moral Subjects* (London: John Wyat, 1709)

³³⁴ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, pp. 136-137.

others. During the experience of beauty, therefore, either in nature or in art, the individual was made receptive to those around him and became attuned to their position which amplified his aptitude for making sound moral judgements. As an educating force, the proponents of *Bildung* believed that beauty made man aware of the universal essence in all things and his life was ennobled by the awesome interconnectivity which he perceived in the natural and social organism. This aesthetic sensitivity increased his capacity to act as a moral citizen, loving partner and benevolent friend.

Schiller drew on Kant when he argued that the good was attained by cultivating the subjective experience of beauty which, by opening one's horizons and developing the senses, strengthened faculties of empathy that led to compassion for others and concern for the well-being of nature and humanity. The act of looking at a beautiful painting, for example, elevated a person beyond ego and self-absorption into a realm of universal concern and contemplation. "As the instrument or expression of human reason, art is thus the activity responsible for creating the perfection necessary to happiness and morality, and its manifestations, as Leibniz wrote, is a soul that is correspondingly 'beautiful.'"³³⁵ The sublime knowledge derived from the experience of the beautiful inspired the desire for the good and awakened the sense of possibility necessary to live in its image. The story of *Saint Cecilia, or The Power of Music* (1810) by Heinrich von Kleist (1777-1811) perhaps most powerfully expresses this sentiment.³³⁶ As the legend set at the end of the sixteenth century goes, four brothers decide to attack a convent during the time of a village celebration. However, as they are about to begin their attack they hear orchestral music being played within its walls. They are so overcome by its beauty, and moved by the unexpected effect that it has upon their souls, that they withdraw and the convent is saved. Evidently, the story is exaggerated for dramatic effect, but the message remains compelling: in the face of great beauty, moral feelings are spontaneously aroused.

Beauty could both engender moral sentiments and suppress immoral propensities. In his essay on "The Moral Utility of Aesthetic Manners" (1796), Schiller argues that, like a maniac who fears an impending fit of madness and removes the knives in his vicinity to avoid bloodshed, man should seek the salutary bonds which aesthetics offers so that internal imbalances are put to

³³⁵ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, pp. 78-79.

³³⁶ Heinrich von Kleist, *Die heilige Cäcilie oder die Gewalt der Musik* (Berlin: *Berliner Abendblätter*, 1810)

rest and he causes no harm.³³⁷ It follows that the formation of taste, which searches for this higher beauty, is an exercise in the good, one that holds a moral urgency. As Schlegel asserted “Correct taste, one could say, is the developed feeling of an ethically noble mind. It is impossible, moreover, that the taste of an immoral man could be correct and in harmony with itself.”³³⁸ Schiller argued that it is taste that defines our inclination to take part in moral duty and more easily allows us to practice virtue. Furthermore, taste gives a virtuous direction to the soul and differentiates between negative influences and those that are morally desirable.³³⁹ The concept of taste implicitly introduces a hierarchy in which some things are considered tasteless and others tasteful, which was believed to correspond with moral weakness and moral strength. Just as morality needed laws to function, rules had to be established to maintain aesthetic standards. Without certain hierarchies, aesthetics would lose its moral direction. The cultivation of taste, therefore, implicitly necessitates an objective conception of beauty and a set of values towards which to aspire.

Schiller, however, makes clear that taste is not enough to make an action moral. He concedes that “morality could never have any other foundation than her own.”³⁴⁰ After liberating man from his instincts, taste can present a new set of constraints because of its association with pleasure and pleasure cannot determine morality. However, even if taste is not sufficient, it greatly assists in moral development by freeing man from brutal appetites and replacing them with “nobler and gentler inclinations.”³⁴¹ These inclinations may not be virtues in themselves but they share something in common with virtue, and, combined with a rational inclination towards moral law, they can more easily produce moral outcomes.

Cultivating taste and creating beautiful environments in the physical world or intellectual sphere was far more than a preference for certain aesthetic impressions. It was the vehicle through which transcendental truths were revealed, the means by which one accessed abstract moral laws and deontological ends, bringing them from the domain of concept to the earthly realm. Those without taste expressed more than just poor aesthetic judgement, they allowed

³³⁷ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, pp. 127-128.

³³⁸ Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, pp. 44-45.

³³⁹ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 125.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

misguided pleasures to blind them to ultimate moral principles, the knowledge of which could have been reached through the cultivation of their aesthetic faculties.

Eckermann reflected on Goethe's meticulous efforts to refine his tastes and act as a moral educator in this regard when he commented in a conversation on February 26, 1823:

We then looked at the drawings and engravings. Goethe takes great interest in forming my taste he shows me only what is complete, and endeavors to make me apprehend the intention of the artist; he would have me think and feel only with the thoughts and feelings of the noblest beings. 'This' said he, 'is the way to cultivate what we call taste. Taste should be educated by contemplation, not of the tolerably good, but of the truly excellent.'³⁴²

For the theorists of *Bildung*, the cultivation of taste by contemplating the truly excellent as a moral exercise extended to the production of their own artistic creations. To produce works that were worthy of representing an objective Beauty was their highest aspiration. Their contemporaries appeared to believe that they had succeeded in this regard and they were successful in arousing the moral effects that they had hoped to elicit in their readers. As Schlegel remarked of Goethe:

This great artist opens up a prospect to an entirely new level of *Bildung*. His works are an irrefutable attestation that the objective is possible and that the hope for the beautiful is not an empty delusion of reason. The objective is attained here already.³⁴³

Schiller shared Schlegel's sentiments, particularly of *Wilhelm Meister*. He praised Goethe for producing a work that aroused the feeling of the Beautiful and the moral sentiments that accompanied it in a letter on July 2 1796:

I cannot describe to you how deeply the truth, the beautiful vitality, the simple fullness of this work, has affected me. The excitement into which it has thrown my mind will subside when I shall have perfectly mastered it, and that will be an important crisis in my being. This excitement is the effect of the Beautiful, and only the Beautiful proceeds thence, that my intellect is not yet entirely in accordance with my feelings. I understand now perfectly what you mean when you say that it is strictly the Beautiful, the True, that can move you even to tears. Tranquil and deep, clear, and yet like nature unintelligible is this work; and all, even the most trivial collateral incident, shows the clearness, the equanimity of the mind whence it flowed.³⁴⁴

³⁴² Eckermann, *Conversations of Goethe*, p. 88.

³⁴³ Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, p. 41.

³⁴⁴ Schiller and Goethe, *Correspondence*, p. 149.

The beauty in *Wilhelm Meister* inspired a corresponding beauty in its reader and we can clearly see here how works of art could have a moralizing effect.

Although the creation of art which represented the beautiful was moral, to make art with the intention of morality was to assume a function that would destroy its capacity to elicit this faculty. As Goethe wrote:

In this sphere moral effects are required above all things; and here at once arises a dissension between the class that produces and that which uses; for a good work of art can, and will indeed, have moral consequences; but to require moral ends of the artist, is to destroy his profession.³⁴⁵

Furthermore, while beauty and goodness were metaphysically intertwined, beautiful art could still be produced by morally imperfect people. Those who deny this proposition would, upon inspection, be required to eliminate most of the artistic works from the Western canon. However, the moral beauty of art could transcend the imperfections of its creators, and therefore it would still have the capacity to inspire humans to become something better than they were. As Schiller remarked in observing a Greek sculpture: “Man brought something here into being, that is more than he himself is, that hints at something greater than his own species—does this perhaps prove, that man is now less than he will be?”³⁴⁶ Having granted this concession, the ultimate aim of *Bildung*, however, was to make beautiful souls out of artists and art from beautiful souls. Only when the moral man produced works of beauty would these works reach perfection and most favorably serve humanity’s advancement. A moral-aesthetic education therefore fostered an improvement of the human condition as a whole, ennobling souls and their creations through beauty.³⁴⁷

The figure of the Beautiful Soul, therefore, integrated the experience of the beautiful into her daily reality, reading, observing nature, listening to music, engaging in poetic conversations, to make herself more receptive to others and the world around her. She followed Goethe’s prescription that “a man should hear a little music, read a little poetry, and see a fine picture every day of his life in order that worldly cares may not obliterate the sense of the beautiful which God has implanted in the human soul.”³⁴⁸ With this vision of a metaphysical beauty

³⁴⁵ Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, p. 470.

³⁴⁶ Marchand, *Down from Olympus*, p. 1.

³⁴⁷ Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, p. 124.

³⁴⁸ See Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister*, p. 256.

incorporated into her lived experience, she created aesthetically moving works in her given *métier* that reflected the moral nature that she had developed through the refinement of her taste. Beauty acted as the channel through which she lived a life of grace and dignity, awakening and sustaining the desire to exist and create in a spirit of kinship and solidarity with others.

The Art of Living: Forming a Beautiful Humanity

The aim of a moral-aesthetic education was to turn life itself into a work of art. The classic ideal of *Bildung* foregrounded the proposition that humans could become works of art.³⁴⁹ According to Schiller, the spontaneous goodness that a beautiful soul exuded and the relationship between the naturalness of her composure and the ease with which she performed moral duties were the product of her aesthetic development. The harmonization of her virtuous characteristics followed both aesthetic and moral laws and, as a consequence of the actions that transpired from her cultivated nature, her life became art.³⁵⁰ Although contemplating art was considered important to the cultivation of a Beautiful Soul, it was not what defined the theory in the aestheticization of life. Rather it was the goodness that came from the “aesthetic pleasure inherent in human excellence” that distinguished it.³⁵¹ A virtuous person who lived with dignity was aesthetically gratifying to observe and the pursuit of inner perfection brought a pleasure to its subject that was similar to that found in artistic creations. When a Beautiful Soul performed moral actions, she felt the same type of ecstasy that she derived from the experience of art. This important clarification saved Schiller from the critique of naïveté: although it was theoretically possible that people could be so moved by contemplating beauty that they would become entirely ennobled as a consequence, as in Heinrich von Kleist’s story of Saint Cecilia, the theory did not hinge on this outcome which Schiller was the first to admit was unlikely to occur. The theory instead made acute observations on the nature of the beautiful and the sensations that it elicited, which inspired its construction of the ideal man. It was more of a reflection on the human condition informed by a study of aesthetics than a reflection on art and its consequences, although the two were intimately interconnected. In analyzing the feelings aroused by profound

³⁴⁹ Helmut Danner, ‘Bildung: A Basic Term of German Education’, *Educational Sciences*, vol. 9 (1994), p. 16.

³⁵⁰ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 203.

³⁵¹ Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, p. 97.

aesthetic moments, lessons could be learned about the human experience as an artistic creation, and there was a way of contemplating art that was world revealing. Aesthetics defined a mode of perceiving that aggrandized life. Beauty became “the means by which humanity can be elevated to its highest and most proper station. Art, that is, ought to be designed to transfigure us all into beautiful souls.”³⁵²

By inspiring states of cognition that transcended the material world with its injuries, disappointments, and suffering, beauty made apparent what was important in life. But the harmonious psychological effect particular to the immediate experience of beauty might only last a few moments. In listening to music, for example, a person might feel a sense of existential tranquility and fulfillment, an expansive connectedness to others and a desire for the good. But this feeling would eventually subside, diluted by the disenchanting return to reality and the tedious demands of the will. To lose the force of the initial aesthetic experience was to diminish its moral power. It was the task of this philosophy, then, to capture this transient moment of unity, almost as if to identify and bottle a precious substance that could sustain a continuous aesthetic state of being. This aesthetic state was “a particular way of looking at things” that mirrored the immediate response to art, but for a sustained period.³⁵³ It was the primary condition for life to become art and to immortalize one’s being in the act of becoming. Beauty, then, was not only an object of philosophical interest but also a mode of living, a way of looking at the world and existing within it.

The theorists of *Bildung* took inspiration from the Greeks, especially Plotinus’s idea that life was an “odyssey,” during which an individual must “sculpt away impurities” until the soul transforms into a “work of art,” becoming virtuous by attaining self-knowledge (*gnothi seauton.*)³⁵⁴ As Plotinus said:

Withdraw within yourself, and examine yourself. If you do not yet therein discover beauty, do as the artist, who cuts off, polishes, purifies until he has adorned his statue with all the marks of beauty. Remove from your soul, therefore, all that is superfluous, straighten out all that is crooked, purify and illuminate what is obscure, and do not cease perfecting your statue until the divine resplendence of virtue shines

³⁵² Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 194.

³⁵³ Bruford, *The German Tradition of Self-Cultivation*, p. 151.

³⁵⁴ Susan L. Cocalis, ‘The Transformation of “Bildung” from an Image to an Ideal’, *Monatshefte*, vol. 70, no. 4 (1978), 399-414, p. 3.

forth upon your sight, until you see temperance in its holy purity seated in your breast.³⁵⁵

This artistic process heightened sensitivity to all aspects of living. If every action sculpted the ultimate form of a person's life, then each part was critical to the value of the final composition. Whether it was in personal relationships, vocational pursuits, or intellectual queries, all elements of one's daily existence could hold an aesthetic significance. Goethe, especially, affirmed this view, arguing that life was the greatest work of art, more important than his traditionally artistic literary and theatrical pursuits. In a letter to Reinhard on January 22, 1811 he wrote "I recall a complimentary reproach once made by a friend of my youth. He said, What you live is better than what you write, and it would please me if that were still true."³⁵⁶

The definition of an artist expanded as a consequence and anyone who lived life with beauty could be considered one. As Schlegel wrote, "An artist is everyone who makes the goal and centre of his existence the development of his mind."³⁵⁷ Schleiermacher argued that once we become aware of our being as an entirely original creation, life becomes art and the individual an artist, poeticizing his unique existence, rather than mechanically training his virtue.³⁵⁸ Schlegel posited that "Just as the Greeks termed those who rhythmically organized the ethical bountifulness of their inner minds, and ordered it into harmony, musicians; thus I term those who love beauty artists."³⁵⁹ Since art was, according to Goethe, "essentially noble" those who became artists of existence ennobled their life while boldly exercising their sovereign rights.³⁶⁰

Implicit to this new conception of the artist was a performativity bound to the creativity of a Beautiful Soul. Those who accepted the principles of this philosophy passionately enacted them; a life undertaken with aesthetic refinement was likened to a dramatic art form. The performativity of being transformed the basic material of existence into a poetic force that

³⁵⁵ Plotinus, *Complete Works*, trans. by Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, (California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017), p. 32.

³⁵⁶ Safranski, *Goethe*, p. 566.

³⁵⁷ Schlegel, 'Ideas', p. 126.

³⁵⁸ Brent W. Sockness, 'Was Schleiermacher a Virtue Ethicist? Tugend and Bildung in the Early Ethical Writings', *Journal for the History of Modern Theology*, vol. 8, no. 1 (2010), 1-33 (p.32).

³⁵⁹ Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, p. 94.

³⁶⁰ Goethe, *The Maxims and Reflections*, p. 189.

elevated existence into the realm of the infinite.”³⁶¹ Like any performative art form, a performance was contained within the limited space-time dimension of the stage, and yet its ephemeral nature was transcended when the work exemplified the greatest of human achievements. In the same way, existence for mortals was limited by the impending approach of death, but when life became truly beautiful, elements of it were sustained in a dimension of the universe where space and time collapsed and the transient was eternalized.

Goethe and Schiller were both preoccupied with theatre as a moralizing artistic form because it exemplified the aestheticized life of a beautiful soul. Besides literature, their other preferred art forms, theatre and the opera, were the closest representation of life. Sculpture and painting were immobile and music was too abstract, but theatre was an intense encapsulation of lived existence. We can understand how a life might become aesthetic through their discussion of the stage. Schiller offers the clearest illustration in his essay “The Stage as a Moral Institution” (1784). Here he argues that theatre comes to the aid of justice because it magnifies the thousands of vices that are left unnoticed. It also serves as the handmaid of philosophy, revealing its high principles in a lovely form. Of course, as Schiller concedes, the stage cannot remove egoism and many vices remain while many virtues make no impression on the “cold-hearted spectators.”³⁶² But even with this admission, he argues that the stage is undeniably a particularly powerful guide for civic life and makes a great impression on its audience by vitally expressing noble ideals while exposing ignoble actions. This is the line of argumentation that Goethe takes in *Poetry and Truth* when he defends the theatre against his father who considers it useless and explains that vice in prosperity and virtue in misfortune are set right by “poetical justice.”³⁶³

According to Goethe and Schiller, a feeling of compassion for our fellow man is brought about through the stage when human suffering is expressed in aesthetic form, and this gives us courage to persevere in the face of inequity and to struggle for the good. Here Schiller gives the example of Ariadne who, through the Isle of Naxos, descends the tower of starvation in Ugolino. We are there for this terrible moment of execution and “things remotely present in thought

³⁶¹ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, pp. 52-53.

³⁶² Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 334.

³⁶³ Goethe, *Poetry and Truth*, p. 87.

become palpable realities now.”³⁶⁴ The suffering of others becomes personal and we feel with the greatest intensity a perspective other than our own. The stage teaches us to be considerate of the unfortunate and to judge in fairness and with empathy for “we can only pronounce on a man when we know his whole being and circumstances.”³⁶⁵ It allows us to observe, from a multifaceted perspective, the condition of others because, by virtue of the objective position that the spectator holds, we maintain an intellectual omnipresence and our attention is focused on the particular situation at hand. Schiller succinctly summarizes the breadth of the moralizing powers that the stage represents when he says:

The stage is an institution combining amusement with instruction, rest with exertion, where no faculty of the mind is overstrained, no pleasure enjoyed at the cost of the whole. When melancholy gnaws the heart, when trouble poisons our solitude, when we are disgusted with the world, and a thousand worries oppress us, or when our energies are destroyed by over-exercise, the stage revives us, we dream of another sphere, we recover ourselves, our torpid nature is roused by noble passions our blood circulates more healthily. The unhappy man forgets his tears in weeping for another. The happy man is calmed, the secure made provident...the individual shares in the general ecstasy and his breast has now only space for an emotion: he is a man.³⁶⁶

This description mirrors the life and features of a beautiful soul who combined her passions with rationality, who pursued an ideal, who lived with compassion and overcame her own ego and suffering to bear the imprint of humanity on her soul. We observe, then, that in constructing this concept, Schiller practiced what he professed, making deductions from the truths uncovered in the theatre to form a perfected concept of humanity by studying the favorable psychological effects intrinsic to the experience of art. The life of a beautiful soul most closely resembled opera and the theatre because it poetically captured this infinite conception of man within every act. From listening to the euphonious bells of a church toll, to studying the Delphic visage of a figure deep in thought, or tracing the subtle spectrum of colors as day dissolved into night, as Goethe often did, every experience could hold the aesthetic intensity and significance that one usually only becomes receptive to when it is staged. If, like a playwright or a poet, we concentrated on small details and gave them the momentousness that they deserved, then every facet of being could become illuminated and life would hold a sacrality worthy of being preserved.

³⁶⁴ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 336.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.338-339.

Like the theatre, the aesthetic life of a beautiful soul was explicitly expressed in the communicative exchanges that she maintained which artfully concretized her poetic impressions. Communication was central to this concept of lived beauty because it was inherently performative. Like the sociability and friendship that emerged from an inner harmony, the ability to communicate came from the beauty that she perceived. According to widespread eighteenth-century definitions, such as Kant's in his *Critique of Judgement*, art was "a kind of representation that is purposive in itself and though without an end, nevertheless promotes the cultivation of the mental powers for sociable communication."³⁶⁷ Following Kant, Schiller believed that "our pleasure in beauty is inseparably linked to its communicability" so that by living beautifully we would necessarily become more communicative.³⁶⁸ He argued that all forms of communications that do not have beauty as their fundamental principle will divide society, while "the communication of the Beautiful unites society, because it relates to what is common to them all."³⁶⁹ Meanwhile Goethe emphasized the fact that beauty assisted in the art of the mutual communication of ideas while Schlegel's neologism *symphilosophy*, which meant to philosophize together, represented this new understanding of aesthetic communication, which we will see was adopted in the space of the salon.³⁷⁰

Schiller, whose aesthetic communicative views were inspired by Socrates, argued that the Socratic method of discourse best represented the good because it progressed from the known to the unknown and the beautiful because it advanced from both the head and the heart.³⁷¹ Socrates in some interpretations was thought to exemplify the Beautiful Soul of antiquity because he engaged in beautiful discourse.³⁷² Schiller elaborated upon what he meant with respect to the performativity of aesthetic communication when he argued that speaking in its widest sense includes every physical phenomenon which can represent a state of the soul.³⁷³ Thus, gesture and music, for example, could be included in the definition. This generality of terms was necessary for communication to become *the* activity that determined the artful living of the Beautiful Soul.

³⁶⁷ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, p. 44.

³⁶⁸ Schmidt, 'Introduction', in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. xxxii.

³⁶⁹ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 138.

³⁷⁰ Novalis, 'Pollen', p. 12.

³⁷¹ Schiller, 'Kallias', p. 172.

³⁷² White, 'Beauty of Soul and Speech', p. 80.

³⁷³ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 117.

According to Schleiermacher, a language developed in this expansive sense became “the clearest mirror of the times, a work of art in which its spirit comes to self-knowledge.”³⁷⁴ By forming their own aesthetic language, people could both create and communicate the content of their soul. However, if this language had not been developed or if the power of speech was dissolved, then, according to Schleiermacher, the inner world was lacking and it could be said that the person in question never truly felt the depths of humanity within themselves:

Someone knows nothing of their inner development, and has never felt the depths of humanity in themselves, if the foundation stones of their language have crumbled into dust, if the power of their speech has dissolved into empty phrases and superficial polish, and if their loftiest rhetoric degenerates into an idle play of sounds. No one can live harmoniously according to a simple beautiful moral than he who strives after his inner development, and so belongs to a future world. No one can become a true artist in the use of language than he who has looked into himself with a free view and taken possession of the inner essence of humanity.³⁷⁵

Schlegel argued that the publicness of *Bildung* through language was the only way to elevate the mind and that sociability was the solution to the sulking pride and strange caprices which came from excessive solitude.³⁷⁶ Thus, the soul performatively secured its beauty through language while seeking to unify every discursive act into a greater whole.

This interpretation of the aesthetic life of a Beautiful Soul actualized in communication with others was represented by the concept of a beautiful humanity. Goethe, in particular, was occupied with portraying life as a work of art which came about through a labyrinth of poetic experiences constructed in a social environment that fostered beautiful perception. He passionately explored ideas for forming a more beautiful humanity and for understanding the world as a poetic whole.³⁷⁷ Schiller believed that together the naïve and the sentimental poet could create this ideal “for the idea of a beautiful humanity is not exhausted by either, but can only be presented in the union of both.”³⁷⁸ He described the class of men who would comprise a beautiful humanity, arguing that they were active but not to an unhealthy extreme, that they had the ability to believe in an ideal without remaining cognitively detached, and that they accepted the reality of human affairs without being enslaved by them. In this case, the poles of

³⁷⁴ Schleiermacher, ‘Monologues II and III’, p. 195.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

³⁷⁶ Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, p. 92.

³⁷⁷ Chytrý, *The Aesthetic State*, p. 58.

³⁷⁸ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, p. 332.

extravagance, on the one hand, and excessive passivity, on the other hand, were overcome to produce human flourishing. Every person who had beautified their soul and lived in communicative accord with those who had done the same could take part in forming this beautiful humanity, a new community of people distinguished not by their class, gender, race, religion, or region, but by their intellect, compassion, and reason. Elaborating upon ancient Greek notions of an “Aesthetic State,” the theorists of *Bildung* envisioned a new poetic world order for this beautiful humanity to exist, the aesthetic assumptions of which had important political consequences.

This revival of the Hellenistic notion of an Aesthetic State can be traced to Italian influences from the early Renaissance, particularly the writings of the Florentine humanist Leonardo Bruni (1370-1444). Bruni developed ideas on an ideal city “an aesthetic vision of a material city of suitable splendor to house political virtues.”³⁷⁹ Within this aesthetically structured state, in which the artists were political visionaries, intellectual life and community would thrive and a golden age for music, architecture, poetry, literature, and rhetoric would emerge.³⁸⁰ The Italian resurrection of “the life of beauty in community” was expanded upon by Shaftesbury, who formulated ideas on the ideal political order comprised of artful dialogue and aesthetic principles, where musicians were the founders of the state. His aesthetic interpretation of political life according to the Athenian model greatly influenced the Germans.³⁸¹

Following Shaftesbury, Winckelmann’s revival of classicism in German intellectual culture, included notions on an Aesthetic State which centered around art as gaiety, political freedom, and beauty as the universal goal of Man. Goethe and Schiller drew from these ideas in their own writings, especially, *Wilhelm Meister* and the *Aesthetic Letters* respectively, which can be seen as their most definitive attempts to delineate what this Aesthetic State might look like. In *Wilhelm Meister*, for example, The Society of the Tower represents a community of cultivated peoples striving to live according to aesthetic principles, and in the *Aesthetic Letters*, Schiller argues that only the Aesthetic State can fairly reconcile the position of the individual with the communal will which is achieved through an aesthetic education.

³⁷⁹ Chytry, *The Aesthetic State*, p. xlv.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.* p.1.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.* p.7.

Goethe, Schiller, Wieland, and Herder, in particular, endeavored to put these ideas into practice, transforming Weimar into a center for self-cultivation and the site for this Aesthetic State to emerge.³⁸² Weimar was compared to ancient Athens, a place where the Greek emphasis on community and beautiful dialogue could be developed, and it became a city where artists and intellectuals congregated as aesthetic humanists in a common quest to make social and political life more beautiful. *Salonnières*, such as Madame de Stäel (1766-1817), found inspiration for their salons in the creative happenings and bohemian gatherings of this city of aesthetically minded people, which Goethe cheerfully confirmed “has ten thousand poets and some inhabitants.”³⁸³

Wieland was a particularly influential figure in Weimar’s literary scene and his ideas on virtuous citizens coming into being through the fine arts, especially the art of conversation, was foundational to the lived, communicative beauty that the theory of *Bildung* espoused.³⁸⁴ *The History of Agathon* was a model of this Aesthetic State, following the hero Agathon from tyranny to “the land of beautiful souls, of utopian republics.”³⁸⁵ But the theorists of *Bildung* were aware that to systematically bring this utopian republic into being outside of the poetic circles of Weimar, from which these ideas naturally sprung, was a formidable challenge, one which required a political theory which either worked within the current imperfect structures or rewrote them. Humboldt’s *The Limits of State Action*, was an aesthetically grounded political work that attempted to pragmatically assess how political institutions could advance this concept of man as a work of art and to evaluate their efficacy in reaching this end. The proponents of *Bildung* generally agreed, however, that a flawed political state was insufficient in supporting the development of beautiful souls. Therefore, beauty was identified as the essential instrument to create the social conditions necessary for a more beautiful humanity to emerge. As Schiller remarked:

All improvement in the political sphere must proceed from the ennobling of the character. But, subject to the influence of a social constitution still barbarous, how can character become ennobled? It would then be necessary to seek for this end an instrument that the state does not furnish, and to open sources that would have

³⁸² Ibid., pp. 39-40.

³⁸³ Ibid., p. 38.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 42-43.

³⁸⁵ Christoph Martin Wieland, *The History of Agathon*, trans. by John Richardson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1773), p. 512.

preserved themselves pure in the midst of political corruption. I have now reached the point to which all the considerations tended that have engaged me up to the present time. This instrument is the art of the beautiful; these sources are open to us in its immortal models.³⁸⁶

Aesthetics, for Schiller, offered a political alternative to the status quo and a theory of justice which did not depend on existing models that were fundamentally flawed.³⁸⁷ If, according to Schiller, people exercised their political power and formed this more beautiful humanity, then the state would not have to intervene and would only assist in the enhancement of the finer instincts that had already been developed. But if people were in conflict internally and with one another, then the state would be required to “assume the full severity of the law.”³⁸⁸ The theorists of *Bildung* arrived at aesthetics to define their political ideals because they believed it was the only solution to the political crises that they observed. Aesthetics offered the distinct promise of inducing greater freedom of the internal world, which in their diagnosis, was severely lacking and the major cause of turmoil. Their project was to transform the passive and uninformed citizen into an enlightened member of a new republic through moral-aesthetic education.

The individual works of art (the cultivated souls) as a community (a beautiful humanity) comprised this total work of art (the Aesthetic State.) If this Aesthetic State came into fruition, its ruler would be “the artist of artists” which according to the proponents of *Bildung*’s theatrical analogies was the director in a play comprised of actors.³⁸⁹ But this Aesthetic State would only come about through an aesthetic revolution, one whose basis was self-cultivation. Despite the obvious obstacles for implementation of this pacifist revolution over one of brute force, the theorists of *Bildung* were hopeful that it would arise. Schlegel, for example, acknowledged that like plants’ or animals’ natural development which eventually perishes, human *Bildung* could easily regress as indeed he believed was the case in Europe around 1795 when he published *On the Study of Greek Poetry*. However, again using analogies of the theatre, he argued that even when we assume that “aesthetic vitality” has died, one may observe that in fact “this drama is far from over.”:

It is truly wonderful how in our age the demand for the objective is everywhere astir, how the belief in the beautiful is being awakened, and unequivocal symptoms

³⁸⁶ Schiller, *Essays Aesthetic and Philosophical*, pp. 48-49.

³⁸⁷ Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, p. 117.

³⁸⁸ Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, p. 33.

³⁸⁹ Beiser, ‘Introduction’, in *The Early Political Writings of the German Romantics*, p. xiv.

announce a more refined taste. The moment indeed seems ripe for an aesthetic revolution, by means of which the objective could become dominant in the aesthetic development [*Bildung*] of the moderns.³⁹⁰

Schlegel's optimism is instructive in that it shows us that even in times of great political distress, when ignorance and irrationality are commonplace, there is always a distinct possibility that the noble ideals which appear all but lost are only in temporary abeyance, waiting for the moment when humanity believes in them once more.

The Beautiful Soul was a revolutionary figure because she could lead the struggle for the restitution of these ideals. She was at the vanguard of progress, radically reformulating what it meant to be human and how to harmoniously exist in a social whole. She became the archetypal member of a beautiful humanity and the model citizen of this Aesthetic State. However, as we have seen from Schiller's observation, she could only exist in theory within the current political reality and the morally destitute social environments which accompanied it. So the question then becomes, how did she come into being in the physical world? Now we may witness the union of concept and institution, for the figure of the Beautiful Soul, who would lead this aesthetic revolution, was born within the salons. In one of the few passages in the literature that explicitly connects the two, Frederick Beiser makes clear the conceptual links between the beautiful soul, her life as a work of art, the aesthetic state, and the salons that took place during this period. He notes:

This aesthetic whole would be a *Bildungsanstalt*, a society in which people would educate one another through the free exchange of their personalities and ideas. The Romantic salons, in Berlin and Jena, were fledgling attempts to put this ideal into practice. If life were only one grand salon, one long learning experience in which everyone participated, the Romantics believed, then society would indeed become a work of art, and this life "the most beautiful of all possible worlds."³⁹¹

In the next section we will see how the beautiful soul finally left the pages of literature and philosophy and entered the world of the salons.

Part II: Begetting the Beautiful Soul

³⁹⁰ Schlegel, *On the Study of Greek Poetry*, pp. 44-45.

³⁹¹ Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, pp. 97-98.

Chapter III: The Beautiful Soul as a Subjective Ideal

The Infinite Potential of Man

The Berlin *salonnières* shared the tenet proposed by the theorists of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*, that every individual possessed infinite potential that could be cultivated to form a spirit of nobility and integrity. This belief sustained their innumerable intellectual activities and was the motivation for founding their salons. Varnhagen perhaps most strongly affirmed the expansive development of the self and all its potentialities in a manner that corresponded closely to *Bildung*.³⁹² She believed that a truly cultivated person was one who used their particular capacities to their fullest and amplified the faculties invested in them at birth. Following Schiller, who had argued in “On Grace and Dignity” that it was more admirable and morally sound to assiduously develop potentialities than to be a natural genius for whom these potentialities appeared to emerge without effort, she understood self-cultivation not to be something that one inherited whole cloth. Rather it was a process of development that required bringing dormant qualities into being through concerted effort. In her own words, she stated:

An educated person is not one whom nature has treated lavishly: an educated person is one who uses the talents he has kindly, wisely and properly, and for the highest purpose... who can look firmly at where he is lacking and realize what he is lacking. In my mind this is a duty and not a gift; and constitutes for me solely an educated human being.³⁹³

In arguing that potential was a duty to develop she, like the theorists of *Bildung*, affirmed the individual’s agency in his ability to improve his condition, while also making explicit that with this agency came a set of responsibilities to oneself and one’s fellow man.

The correspondence between Varnhagen and David Veit are replete with hopeful references to human potential and *Bildung*. His letters encouraged her to self-educate and practice the principles of this philosophy in order to further Jewish social integration.³⁹⁴ In his view, only by bringing her potentialities into being could she overcome the limitations of her social standing. Rather than wait for political tides to turn or social attitudes to change, she could

³⁹² Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 32.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁹⁴ Weissberg, ‘Stepping Out’, p. 153.

contribute to the determination of her personal destiny. Varnhagen affirmed this sentiment and often acknowledged her identification with the ideal of *Bildung*.³⁹⁵

Like the theorists of *Bildung*, Varnhagen believed that the need to achieve one's ideal state should come naturally to all people. In a letter to her husband, the diplomat, Karl August Varnhagen von Ense (1785-1858), Rahel Varnhagen writes at length about the importance of his and her own self-cultivation as well as the all-encompassing nature of this pursuit:

Yes, you are yourself what you judge best and most impartially and therefore you are also the person most capable of acquiring cultivation, perhaps I ought to say the most cultivated person... We are also cultivated; we must cultivate ourselves as water must rush, such cultivation is happiness... Yours is a noble act of your whole moral being; it is not only the morality imposed by your nature, but a morality that should be demanded of all rational creatures; from you and from your nature it emerges of its own accord.³⁹⁶

Like a heart that must beat, Varnhagen believed that the desire to reach one's full potential was a property intrinsic to any healthy organism. Although from her perspective, the will to improve was inherent in mankind, its full actualization was only possible in an environment such as the salon that facilitated and explicitly focused on self-cultivation.

Varnhagen went as far as to say that if this desire was not present, then the person in question was dead. Mirroring Goethe's metaphor of the plant that did not grow, she believed that a human whose faculties remained stagnant and lacked the will to improve, could not truly claim to be alive beyond the rudimentary functioning of their biological system. In referring to Fichte's contributions to the discourse surrounding *Bildung*, specifically *The Vocation of Man*, Varnhagen stated "Whoever believes in a fixed, permanent, and dead Being, believes in it only because he is dead in himself."³⁹⁷ In this passage she acknowledges that potential must be nurtured if it is to ennoble one's character. She goes on to assert that "It depends upon ourselves to become human beings."³⁹⁸ From this perspective, to be human was not a pre-given or stationary state, but rather an earned condition that depended on the continual cultivation of latent qualities. Her ideas echoed those of Fichte and Herder on the Enlightenment ideal of

³⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 144.

³⁹⁶ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 155.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., p.129.

³⁹⁸ Ellen Karolina Sofia Key, *Rahel Varnhagen: A Portrait* (Bremen: Erscheinungsort, 2013), p. 40.

Humanität, a predestined state of human perfection that was not a given but one that individuals achieved, and, in doing so, fulfilled a necessary historical process in the formation of mankind.³⁹⁹

According to Varnhagen and her fellow *salonnières*, all people were given the equal possibility of being both alive and human at birth. But most people failed to do what was available to them. Instead of developing as a human should, they remained dead inside and existed in an inhuman state, their faculties numbed to new knowledge, emotion, and experience. They mechanically fulfilled functions, unmoved by the great beauty of their surroundings, uninterested in exploring the vast potentialities associated with their nature. Over time, the possibilities of being diminished until little remained. The *salonnières* understood that the problem was that a “dead being” could rarely escape its condition in isolation. Developing potential required the support of a community. It depended on a structure and a process for self-improvement. Very few people had sufficient volition or a favorable set of circumstances to do so on their own, but, more importantly, they lacked the right kind of community for this aim. Salons were conceived as a distinct opportunity to save individuals from this invisible “soul-death” by providing them with an environment dedicated to the development of the latent potentials of selfhood. The *salonnières* attempted to overcome the lethargy of a world of un-lived potential and the promise of a better future lost.

Hannah Arendt interrogates this motivation and its relationship to truth when she remarks “Had she [Varnhagen] not, on that account alone, created for herself in the salon another, pleasant and living world in order to escape this ‘permanent dead Being,’ in order not to be under bondage as a ‘link in a chain,’ but instead to be gripped directly by the truth?”⁴⁰⁰ In creating her salon, Varnhagen re-envisioned her own fate and invited her salon guests to do the same by giving them new opportunities for self-actualization. Man could not comprehend his own failings or live up to the promises associated with his nature when he was limited by impoverished environments and restricted perceptions; neither could he understand the flaws in his engagement with a world in which contingency and irrationality prohibited a linear path to personal

³⁹⁹ See Hans Adler, ‘Herder’s Concept of Humanität’, in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. by Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke (Rochester: Camden House, 2009), pp. 93-116.

⁴⁰⁰ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 129.

development. A small, enlightened community that acted according to the principles that the theorists of *Bildung* put forth was uniquely suited to nurture these latent qualities.

The *salonnières* as individuals were the catalysts of cultivation for their salons, perpetually considering the condition of their soul and working towards its improvement. They possessed the rare ability to bring that which remained in an incipient state into full maturation. As the theorists of *Bildung* professed, they chose a specific *métier* from the infinite universe of potentiality: their salons and literary careers which they ardently developed. But they also embraced the more expansive spectrum of potentialities available to them by playing musical instruments, learning new languages, reading widely, and perhaps most important, engaging in conversations and social relations that expanded their intellectual horizons.

For those who recognized the “germ of potential” within themselves and were determined to improve their condition, which was the antecedent requirement for anyone participating in a salon, the *salonnières* provided the regular occasion and structure for them to do so. They facilitated the development of the potential associated with character, morality and intellect, in curated conversations whose underlying motivation was to catalyze latent qualities and bring unborn ideas into being.⁴⁰¹ They contributed to the potential associated with artistic projects and intellectual pursuits by providing a space in which to develop the imagination and present works for constructive critique and creative formation. The *salonnières*’ aspiration was to make apparent the infinite possibilities of being, while helping each person reach their own version of an ideal self.

Virtue and Aesthetic Morality

The Berlin *salonnières* embraced the virtues associated with the theory of *Bildung* as a quintessential dimension of human potential ripe for cultivation in their salons. But, in the spirit of rational inquiry upon which this philosophy and their salons were founded, the *salonnières* did not blindly accept a set of classical virtues without interrogating their nature, validity and ultimately redefining them for themselves. Varnhagen, for example, was wary of duties and obligations that were fulfilled out of subservience to a moral order without critical inquiry:

⁴⁰¹ Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 201.

“Fulfilment of duty is often nothing else than a form of punctiliousness and officiousness!”⁴⁰² She resisted adopting virtues that were followed out of religious fear or thoughtless conformity to accepted codes of behavior. She believed that virtuousness came out of the self-determined recognition of one’s moral duties, advocating a kind of intellectual autonomy that aligned closely with the ethos of *Bildung*. In a letter to her friend and salon participant, the diplomat Georg Wilhelm Bokelmann (1779-1847), she argued that a person must never blindly assume that a system of morality is correct or over-depend on customs to guide practice, for this lack of critical thinking could be a threat to morality itself. The individual must remain mentally engaged at all times, constantly questioning the moral frameworks that he follows and always prioritize truth over convention.⁴⁰³ We can see that her ideas originated within this tradition and that, to her, a virtuous person was one who was profoundly conscious of the ethical stances that they took and the moral decisions that they made.

Varnhagen had strong views on the virtues required for the practice of *Bildung*. She believed that courage, as well as honesty and truthfulness, were supremely important in understanding one’s essential nature and the pursuit of what one believed to be just. She stated “When one is honest in one’s thoughts, one is true. And only in truth is health to be found.”⁴⁰⁴ Without these three integral virtues, she believed that it was impossible to arrive at the deeper form of self-awareness that represented true moral consciousness. “Some people have too little understanding to find the truth within them, others no courage to acknowledge it, and the great majority neither courage nor understanding, but they wander and lie and grope or stagnate through life even to the grave.”⁴⁰⁵ She also believed that it was important to practice self-discipline, loyalty, duty, and thoughtfulness in relationships, but she perpetually re-evaluated what these virtues meant in different contexts and the problems they may pose in certain situations.⁴⁰⁶

Varnhagen considered the period of one’s youth to be “the most virtuous, most beautiful, and easiest to set on fire” because young people had the courage to discover their best nature and

⁴⁰² Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 53.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

the purity not to allow cynicism or bitterness to impede sound moral judgements.⁴⁰⁷ A large percentage of salon participants were in their late teens and early to mid-twenties, when their minds were especially malleable and open to moral development.⁴⁰⁸ For those adults who participated in salons, Varnhagen suggested that they turn to the young to learn how to be virtuous, for, unlike the youth for whom virtue came more easily, experience thwarted its manifestation later in life. Without critical interrogation that which was once virtuous could become distorted or misrepresented in practice. To live virtuously with age therefore meant to ennoble experience with logical reflection. This task was one which the salon was naturally suited to facilitate through the rational inquiry, emotional sensitivity, and openness to ideas that defined salon conversations and kept even the older participants mentally young.⁴⁰⁹

Like Varnhagen, Herz was committed to the practice of the virtues associated with the theory of *Bildung*. She displayed this in her establishment of a *Tugendbund*, a society of virtue, whose members and mission were shared with her salon's.⁴¹⁰ This society promoted friendship and learning as well as mutual moral and spiritual education. The *Tugendbund* had its own statutes to further enlightenment in Germany and to promote mutual *Bildung*.⁴¹¹ Its aim was moral improvement through the discursive questioning and practice of the virtues that the secret society determined were integral and most significant to the concept's tradition. The society believed that by establishing secret relationships of the mind, each member would be able to sense the most essential dimensions of other peoples' characters which would, in turn, strengthen compassion and the ability to live congenially with others.⁴¹² In the intellectual gatherings that Herz organized, the Humboldt brothers, among other prominent intellectuals of *Bildung*, found a "virtuous union," the "exercise of working love," which in this case meant cultivating feeling and a moral inclination towards goodness. The society was believed to be the lifeblood of

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 67.

⁴⁰⁸ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 118.

⁴⁰⁹ Marjanne E. Goozé, 'Posing for Posterity: The Representations and Portrayals of Henriette Herz as 'Beautiful Jewess'', in *Body Dialectics in the Age of Goethe*, ed. by Marianne Henn and Holger A. Pausch (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), pp. 67-97 (p.76).

⁴¹⁰ Henriette Herz, 'Ein Tugendbund-Wilhelm von Humboldt' in *Ihr Leben und ihre Erinnerungen*, trans. by Herausgegeben von J. Fürst (Berlin: Berliner Ausgabe, 2015), pp. 91-96.

⁴¹¹ Ibid., p. 76.

⁴¹² Liliane Weissberg and Rahel Varnhagen, 'Writing on the Wall: Letters of Rahel Varnhagen', *New German Critique*, no. 36 (1985), 157-173 (p.158).

sensitivity, the most meticulous and comprehensive enactment of the virtues that the theorists of *Bildung* espoused.⁴¹³

The purpose of the *Tugendbund* was to first develop a set of virtues in a small, enlightened community to ensure that it was well considered, coherent, and comprehensive, and that its demands were feasible and fair, before propagating it among the larger population. Herz's sense of obligation, in this regard, extended from the conception of virtues to the wider dissemination of them which she believed, when adopted, could benefit all members of society. In her autobiography she recounts educating Jewish beggar children in the virtuous principles of her secret society so that they, too, could advance from this common set of values.⁴¹⁴ The Berlin *salonnières* shared in their belief that virtue was the common language of humanity, the only true metric to judge a person's worth, and the means by which one could improve society as a whole.

The *salonnières* personal practice and dissemination of the values they propounded gained them the appellation of the most virtuous women in the German speaking world. What was all the more impressive to their contemporaries was that they appeared to embody virtues at a time when it was not yet fashionable to be virtuous. In the spirit of admiration and encouragement that the *salonnières* maintained for one another, Varnhagen said of Fanny von Arnstein:

Attributes few women in high society possessed were noticed with wonder in a Jewish woman whose refinement and freedom of spirit, nurtured by the beneficial influences of Frederick the Second's reign, seemed all the more effective in a city where these virtues scarcely existed, but where they had begun to be desired and to be esteemed.⁴¹⁵

Although the specific virtues that the *salonnières* embodied differed from one to another, they shared the quality of compassion. One could interpret this virtue to be a part of the Judeo-Christian tradition rather than the expression of the ideals of *Bildung*. However, salon participants attributed the qualities which they observed in the *salonnières* to natural propensity and their *Bildung* education. Humboldt, for example, believed that it was Herz's goodness and cultivation in the tradition of *Bildung* which gave her the capacity to assimilate into German

⁴¹³ Wilhelmy Dollinger, *Die Berliner Salons*, p. 65.

⁴¹⁴ Herz, *Ihr Leben und ihre Erinnerungen*, p. 93.

⁴¹⁵ Spiel, 'Fanny von Arnstein', p. 50.

culture, implicitly associating her virtuousness with *Bildung*.⁴¹⁶ The painter Louise Seidler (1786-1866) praised Herz for her kindness saying: “The magic of her beauty and simplicity enveloped her whole being; she was distinguished by her genuinely feminine goodness of heart. Completely modest, she seldom revealed her many talents, especially her great gift of languages.”⁴¹⁷

Kindness and compassion were foundational virtues to the establishment of salons because they allowed the *salonnières* to understand others and to constructively facilitate communication and favorable social dynamics. Varnhagen, in particular, was remembered for her extraordinary empathy, sensitivity, and impartiality, which played a critical role in her eminence as a *salonnière*.⁴¹⁸ She was so sensitive that she found it to be a burden that hindered her capacity to live freely and, in her opinion, the extremity of her virtue turned into a vice. Varnhagen wrote:

These two qualities of mine are: too much gratitude and too much consideration for human feelings. I would sooner reach for my own heart...and hurt it than offend another person or even see an offended one. And I am too grateful because I always fared badly and always immediately think of helping and forgiving; and also because I alone always helped; ...like a plant which grows toward the earth: the most beautiful qualities turn into the most hideous.⁴¹⁹

Varhagen’s concern for others was, indeed, at times of pathological proportions; her empathy was constantly sharpened by repression which came from her overbearing father and the patriarchal expectation that she have physical charm, when it was her brilliance that distinguished her from other women of the time.⁴²⁰ She understood this empathy to be destructive because it was born from her own suffering: “Through my too great consideration...I therefore am really destroying myself, who strong in many ways, was intended for other things by carelessly prodigal nature. So it is! Thus I must continue to die: I have already died many

⁴¹⁶ Jeffrey A. Grossman, *The Discourse on Yiddish in Germany from the Enlightenment to the Second Empire* (Rochester: Camden House, 2000), p. 70.

⁴¹⁷ Carol Diethe, *Towards Emancipation: German Women Writers of the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998), p. 22.

⁴¹⁸ Gerlinde Roder-Bolton, *George Eliot in Germany, 1854-55: “Cherished Memories”* (London: Routledge, 2017), p. 124.

⁴¹⁹ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 22.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

times...⁴²¹ Yet, despite the personal pain that her profound sensitivity caused her, it was also a rare gift that ensured her success as a *salonnière*. It had the positive consequence of making her highly attuned to peoples' feelings so that her salon constituents felt included and respected in her presence. Her magnified receptivity to emotions allowed her to better empathize with different types of people and to understand their innermost nature. This placed her in a unique position to artfully moderate conversation and to cultivate the best qualities in her salon participants which another, less empathetic person would not be able to see.

Varnhagen acknowledged that her celebrated "social gifts were nothing but kindness."⁴²² She also understood that her extreme sensitivity had the consequence of making her particularly receptive to her sensory faculties as well as to the new ideas and cultural products debated in the salon: "From my youth up my inner life has been rich and in accordance with truth. Nature acted keenly and truly upon keen organs; it has given me a firm, sensitive heart which always duly put life into all other organs."⁴²³ The intellectual sensitivity and psychological prowess that Varnhagen and Herz possessed made them ideal arbiters of ideas and emotions in a social dynamic. The very nature of the institution depended on a facilitator sensitive to the subtleties of human feeling, one who cared about the condition of others enough to suspend her own ego to facilitate the group dynamic. A finely honed empathy was particularly germane to the position of *salonnière*.⁴²⁴

An essential dimension of their role was to employ this empathy to cultivate virtues in salon participants and establish forms of social exchange.⁴²⁵ In this role, the *salonnières* revealed the best qualities of their guests bringing out their particular brilliance. As Arendt remarked of Varnhagen, she:

Was able to play the part demanded by the moment. She could work her magic upon all who came to her; she was able to handle the miscellaneous personalities of her salon; she was in her element when she was able to play so upon her circle that each person said exactly what was most brilliant at the particular moment.⁴²⁶

⁴²¹ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 53.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, p.172.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁴²⁴ Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*, p. 28.

⁴²⁵ Steven D. Kale, 'Women, Salons and Sociability as Constitutional Problems in the Political Writings of Madame de Staël', *Historical Reflections*, vol. 32, no. 2 (2006), 209-338 (p.319).

⁴²⁶ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 62.

By acknowledging the admirable features of salon participants, the *salonnières* made each individual feel like a valued member of the community. They exercised particular skill in directing discourse without dominating the conversation. They never made themselves, or a single salon participant, the center of attention, but paid each person an equal measure of respect and consideration.⁴²⁷ An anonymous visitor to Varnhagen's salon best described the sense of purpose that she bestowed to all:

A kind as well as lightening quick grasp of human nature gave her the ease with which she could quickly find the favorable side of every person, which she then promptly brought to light and animated, while the less favorable side automatically remained in the shadow. In this way, she had a personal relation with each individual... Here then was a true coming together no...empty form...ever did anyone, man or woman feel like an empty social decoration, a lifeless salon caryatid; whereas, in other circles, I have often seen how, because they have nothing in common with their host, even outstanding persons served as mere room fillers...⁴²⁸

In this refined display of sensitivity and benevolence, in the recognition of each person who entered their space, the *salonnières* acted as models of the social graces, inspiring these virtues in others. But, in order to assist in moral development, it was also the *salonnières'* duty to compassionately identify and elicit the less cultivated virtues of each participant and diplomatically challenge their limitations through conversation. In a subtle, skillful, structured analysis of beliefs and ideas, the *salonnières* encouraged participants to overcome their intellectual shortcomings and to strive towards moral betterment in the carefully curated environment that they had created. To identify character flaws and to polish them away was a feat of great virtuosity, a delicate art in the navigation of human emotions that could only be accomplished by a particularly sensitive *salonnière*.

This delicate role of interpersonal diplomacy demanded that the *salonnières* appraise salon participants in order to hold them accountable for the moral education that was expected of them. As Arendt said of Rahel: "Her judgment was, so to speak, based upon the very substance of which a person was made, upon the consistency of his soul, the level he attained or did not attain."⁴²⁹ *Salonnières* learned not to show signs of deprecation or unconstructive criticality that

⁴²⁷ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 224.

⁴²⁸ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 183.

⁴²⁹ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 19.

would diminish the confidence of their salon participants. In their interpretation of *Bildung*, anyone had the capacity to improve their character, and so, everyone, especially those deficient in virtue, needed their support. This proffered charitability and generosity of perception solidified the *salonnières*' status as moral pedagogues who their participants could trust in revealing themselves without fear of judgement. The French aristocrat and writer, the Marquis de Custine (1790-1857) said of Varnhagen "she had the mind of a sage and the heart of an apostle..."⁴³⁰ while the diplomat and writer Friedrich von Gentz (1764-1832), called her "the first being in this world," "teacher," "oracle" and "friend."⁴³¹

Varnhagen admitted that while her credulity had its benefits, once again the extremity with which she practiced this virtue became a vice. "People had only 'to weep and wish' to make her believe them capable of the nobility they desired!"⁴³² Varnhagen was easily disappointed when her salon participants did not live up to her high expectations, which they almost invariably did not given the depth of her belief and the steadfastness of the ideals that she upheld. Nevertheless, it was also the extremity of this virtue that made her a particularly successful *salonnière* since her conviction in humankind imparted to her the capacity to extract the finest qualities out of those whose lives she touched.

When entering a salon, participants understood that they were submitting to the guidance of the *salonnière*, in matters not only of the mind but of the soul, a dimension unique to the German case. The duality of this position emphasizes the imperative of *Bildung* to cultivate both intellectual and moral-aesthetic faculties. A purely intellectual approach to cultivation would not achieve the moral demands that the philosophy required. This point is significant in understanding the influences of *Bildung* on the *salonnières*' activities. For while it may appear that the purpose of the salon was either intellectual or social, this was not the case. Rather, sociability through enlightened conversation was the means by which to cultivate the virtues and sense of moral responsibility that represented the primary end of the salon. Although reaching new knowledge was an important dimension of these discursive spaces, the particular *way* in which new knowledge and sociability were gained was most significant. Discussing a new work of literature, reading a poem, or investigating a scientific theory was futile if it was not expressed

⁴³⁰ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 1.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴³² Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 221.

with the nobility of spirit and sensitivity required to reach a refined standard of human conduct. Cultivating a gracious and humane *way of being* was given priority over specific intellectual outcomes and the success of a salon was determined by the spirit that the conversations took.

To understand this *way of being*, one must appreciate the cardinal virtues that became the focus of self-cultivation within the salon. The virtues that the *salonnières* cultivated were, like Herz's society of virtue, meant to act as a model to be propagated outside of the circles in which they were born. The ideal salon participant was a person who was intellectually curious, cultured, and kind. He possessed an innate love of learning, exhibited a reflective intelligence, and offered new ideas that were pleasing and well communicated to the group. He held principled opinions, but also demonstrated the utmost consideration towards the views of others and was willing to change his perspective if proven wrong. To be a good listener was as important as being a good orator for this allowed more people to take part in the conversation and to learn from one another. Erudition, wit, inventiveness and originality of thought were encouraged because they demonstrated an assiduous commitment to intellectual development and brought others pleasure.⁴³³ Platitudes, unimaginative proclamations, and conventional forms of idle conversation indicated an undeveloped inner world and a lack of capacity to cultivate the intellect and imagination. Careful preparation for a salon was praised because it signified a thoughtfulness and commitment towards the group that was more valuable than erudition alone. The manner in which ideas were expressed was of great importance, for, even if an idea was interesting and original, it would be unwelcome if it were communicated with pride or arrogance. These vices signaled the wrong motivation for participating in a space created for the purposes of self-betterment, not self-adulation; vanity had no place in an institution that gave priority to expressions of modesty and humility.

Because the *salonnières* required participants to adhere to a principle of sincerity to participate in this community, self-love was tempered, at least within the framework of the salon. Subtleties in considerate forms of communication were valued because they were indicative of the greater cardinal virtues of kindness, empathy, and forbearance that the *salonnières* were ultimately concerned with instilling in their constituents. It was inconceivable to imagine a beautiful soul without these characteristics given that benevolence and a goodness of spirit were

⁴³³ Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 202.

precursory to all other features associated with the theory of *Bildung*. Utmost respect and graciousness were expected at all times and the *salonnières*' role was to bring out these positive qualities in salon participants, teaching civility and intellectual bravery, while tempering animosity that might arise in conversations.⁴³⁴

In encouraging empathy and tolerance, the *salonnières* shifted the hierarchy of values in sociability from factors out of the control of the individual (gender, social rank, and to a large extent talent and wealth) to virtues that were, in theory, universal and in every person's power to exercise. In doing so, they affirmed the self-determination ethos of *Bildung* which democratized moral improvement. Their predilection for virtues that could be cultivated was expressed by Karl Varnhagen's articulation of them. "Where we are separated by talents and nature, we are united by friendship, understanding, forbearance, justice, loyalty, honesty, true cultivation."⁴³⁵ As this passage suggests, camaraderie was established by working towards a shared system of values. This collective goal bonded participants in a formative and lifelong process that garnered commitment to the group and a respect for its structures. Indeed, as Arendt remarks, it was these virtues, and the pursuit of a more beautiful soul, which sustained salon friendships and Rahel's marriage to Karl, even during times of tension and difficulty.⁴³⁶

Virtues were methodically practiced in the salon through its culture of *politesse* and carefully delineated rules of social etiquette. The German *salonnières* adopted this from the French with whom they shared the conviction that a culture of politeness would serve the ideals of the Enlightenment.⁴³⁷ *Salonnières* considered it their responsibility to create rules for civility that would inform social interactions. Etiquette made conscientious behavior explicit so that kindness could prevail.⁴³⁸ The poet Heinrich Heine (1797-1856), who was a young participant in Varnhagen's second salon, lamented the loss of these subtle rules of civility and understanding, after her death in a letter from 1840:

We, we understood each other by simple glances, we looked at each other and knew our innermost concerns- this language of the eyes will soon be lost, and the written monuments that we leave behind, for example Rahel's letters, will be nothing for

⁴³⁴ Kale, 'Women, Salons and Sociability', p. 320.

⁴³⁵ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 154.

⁴³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴³⁷ Kale, 'Women, Salons and Sociability', p. 318.

⁴³⁸ Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 207.

those who are born after us but indecipherable hieroglyphs- I know this, and I think of this with each new person departing, and returning home.⁴³⁹

His remarks demonstrate how significant these rules were to the institution of the salon and how easily they could be lost without this structure. They were a beautiful game of understanding, a ritual of togetherness that held the group together.

One of the reasons why politeness was so important, specifically to the institution of the salon or any manifestation of a public sphere, was that it maintained peace so that even the most contentious issues could be discussed with respect and the boundaries of knowledge could be breached without causing irreparable hostilities or animosity amongst the group. The *salonnières* firmly believed that differences of opinion and contrasting ideologies were necessary to express in a healthy and dynamic society. Environments in which everyone agreed with one another were potentially dangerous because they could easily lead to indoctrination and the treacherous irrationality that comes from not having an opinion for oneself. Furthermore, maintaining similar views would hinder ingenuity and impede cultural development. The *salonnières*, therefore, welcomed free speech; they embraced disparate perspectives, for this, after all, was the very purpose of their salons. However, difference could become divisive if people were aggressive and let self-regarding hysteria cloud their rationality and civility. A culture of politeness and respect was essential because it allowed for the expression of diverse ideas and for distinct personality traits to be accommodated by easing the tensions that might arise from rudeness through perceptions of otherness, ignorance, or misunderstanding.

The *salonnières* were particularly attuned to the possibility of conflict or dispute, especially in a discursive space that welcomed difference. They used their shrewd judgment and social skills to anticipate problems and overcome tensions.⁴⁴⁰ Varnhagen was remembered for her distinct ability to engage everyone in the conversation so that all felt listened to and included, to use her humor and intelligence to smooth tensions, to sustain the conversation when there were uncomfortable pauses or when someone said something that caused division.⁴⁴¹ She artfully moderated debate by drawing out individuality while gracefully enabling different ideas to peacefully coexist.

⁴³⁹ Weissberg and Varnhagen, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 159.

⁴⁴⁰ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 226.

⁴⁴¹ Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*, pp. 28-29.

The *salonnières* distinguished their salons from other intellectual spaces of the time through this institutionalized refinement of social graces. The difference between universities and salons, for example, was that universities emphasized the acquisition of knowledge alone, whereas salons aspired to teach politeness, civility, and human decency through the pursuit of knowledge.⁴⁴² This distinction reiterates the point that the salon was unique in its facilitation of a certain spirit and *way of being*. Therefore, it is impossible to understand its communicative structures purely from an intellectual or social perspective; they must be understood in the context of the manner in which they fostered moral behavior and the value system associated with the theory of *Bildung*.

For the Berlin *salonnières*, who differed in this regard from the French, an ennobled state of communication did not end with a culture of *politesse*, but continued into deeper terrains of ethical responsibility and direct engagement with notions of moral perfection.⁴⁴³:

The style of salon conversation also differed from the French. Irony and elegant ambivalence were replaced by direct commitment and mutual stimulus with regard to moral ideals. Here, self-realization was not achieved by constructing a distance from official rules but by showing excellence in the pursuit of moral perfection....the contra factual construction of moral consensus and the common good was held up as the only worthy guiding principle of good conversation.⁴⁴⁴

This commitment to moral ideals was embedded within the content and structure of the salons and the *salonnières* held their participants responsible to a high standard of decorum while engaging them in timeless questions on ethics. In this sense, the practice of social etiquette was far more than an elite norm that had no deeper meaning. It was the personification of the ideals that the *salonnières* professed, the earthly representation of the enduring good and eternal truths in which they so fundamentally believed.

Subjectivity and Creative Freedom

Although, as we have seen, there were certain shared virtues that the *salonnières* encouraged in their salons, it was ultimately the role of the individual to determine what he believed to be true

⁴⁴² Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 201.

⁴⁴³ For an examination of the French salons see Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994)

⁴⁴⁴ Giesen, 'Cosmopolitans, Patriots, Jacobins, and Romantics', p. 233.

and to forge his own character according to the principle of self-direction. Respecting and fostering the subjectivity of each participant was paramount to the intellectual freedom that the salon championed. Affirming the validity of each person's unique perspective came naturally to the *salonnières* who were themselves a creation of their own vibrant imaginations, whose startling originality and inventiveness was often lauded within the intellectual circles of their time.

The *salonnières* maintained a shared commitment to the ideals of *Bildung* and its practice which can be understood as the thread that united their endeavors. However, they differed dramatically from each other in fundamental respects and were not shy to express their originality.⁴⁴⁵ Each *salonnière* was remembered for specific qualities and personal attributes that were unique to her and her salon was constructed around these differences. Varnhagen was usually considered to be the most intellectual and soulful; Schlegel was considered the bohemian and most influential in Romantic circles; Herz was the beauty and the muse of the greatest thinkers.⁴⁴⁶ In particular, Herz was praised as receptive and open to new influences:

Freedom from all bias was translated into receptivity to virtually everything; everything became learnable... From this freedom was derived her striking manner of describing things, people, and situations... She could bring together in a witticism things that appeared to be utterly remote from one another; she could discover in the most intimately related matters the essential incoherence. This her friends praised as her "greatest originality"-which struck even Goethe about her when she was a girl...⁴⁴⁷

Varnhagen, by contrast, was thought to have an original brilliance, unconventional intelligence, and a particularly passionate nature.⁴⁴⁸ She was not afraid to wear her eccentricities on her sleeve and even described herself as being unique. "I am as unique as the greatest being on this earth... the greatest artist, philosopher or poet is not above me. We are made of the same element."⁴⁴⁹ Varnhagen understood this uniqueness, according to Arendt, not as an indication of an exceptional nature but because "It had pleased life to make an example of her."⁴⁵⁰ She was often compared to Philine in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* because of their shared

⁴⁴⁵ Burwick, 'From Aesthetic Teas to the World of Noble Reformers', p. 131.

⁴⁴⁶ Spiel, 'Fanny von Arnstein', p. 47.

⁴⁴⁷ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 34.

⁴⁴⁸ Weissberg, 'Stepping Out', p. 150.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁴⁵⁰ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 98.

unconventionality and affirmation of the principle of *Bildung* to exist with intellectual autonomy.⁴⁵¹

The originality that the *salonnières* possessed, the magic and fascination of their personalities, motivated an intellectual elite to associate with them and to frequent their salons.⁴⁵² The Austrian poet Franz Grillparzer (1791-1872) described the particular power of Rahel's enchanting presence, even during the second stage of her salons when her health had diminished considerably:

Then the aging woman, who has perhaps never been pretty and was now bent over by illness, who resembled a fairy, if not a witch, began to speak and I was enchanted. My tiredness disappeared or rather, gave way to intoxication. She spoke and spoke until almost midnight, and I no longer know whether they chased me away or I left on my own. Never in my life have I heard anyone speak more interestingly or better.⁴⁵³

Salon culture depended on charismatic *salonnières*, such as Rahel, who attracted loyal participants with the striking originality of their ideas and way of being. The riveting ingenuity of the *salonnières* helped liberate those in their presence from the suffocating tedium of the everyday. Like a political or religious leader, their success depended on a magnetism that transcended their personhood; they became the vessel for the hopes and ideals of others. This cult of personality coalesced the disparate parts of the salon and participants felt further committed to each other and engaged by an ever evolving and unreproducible space that became an indispensable part of their daily lives.

Individuality was an attribute that the *salonnières* naturally expressed but also encouraged in their participants in order to animate the salon and give conversations interest and appeal. As Arendt says: "The charm of the early Berlin salons was that nothing really mattered but personality and the uniqueness of character, talent, and expression. Such uniqueness, which alone made possible an almost unbounded communication and unrestricted intimacy, could be replaced neither by rank, money, success, nor literary fame."⁴⁵⁴ Eccentricities were actively

⁴⁵¹ Rahel Levin and David Veit, 'Rahel Levin and David Veit, Correspondence (1793-5)', in *The German-Jewish Dialogue: An Anthology of Literary Texts, 1749-1993*, ed. by Ritchie Robertson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 54-63 (p. 62).

⁴⁵² Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 67.

⁴⁵³ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, pp. 188-189.

⁴⁵⁴ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 60.

cultivated and idiosyncrasies in personality were considered to be an important part of the success of a salon rendering it entertaining, engaging and real.⁴⁵⁵ The diversity and uniqueness of the personalities, made the salon a particularly exciting space in which discourse went beyond the pedantic frivolities of polite society and entered deeper terrains of self-discovery.

Displays of individuality were valued not only because they made discourse interesting, but also because they revealed the essence of a person, which was crucial to a philosophy grounded in the cultivation of character. *Salonnières* could not assist in this cultivation if the participants' current state of being was occluded or disguised. The true nature of each guest must be revealed and understood before it could be improved and integrated with the social whole. Salons offered the rare visionaries of the time a place to congregate in which their uniqueness was not stifled but embraced. They facilitated self-expression within a collective that dared to venture outside the realm of what was to imagine what could be.⁴⁵⁶ As social pariahs who had experienced the injustice of being ostracized because of their Jewish identity, the *salonnières* made a statement of deviating from the norm to demonstrate the possibilities of a more diverse and inclusive intellectual environment.

The uniqueness exhibited by the habitués of the salon also represented a certain level of emancipation.⁴⁵⁷ Uniqueness suggested that the individual had embarked upon their *Bildung* journey, exercising the autonomy necessary to find their true self. This quality ensured that those present were not reinforcing old dogmas or entrenched political alliances. Rather, they were thinking for themselves and solidifying the salon's status as a critical space for rational decision making. In recognizing the importance of personhood, the *salonnières* successfully responded to the Kantian imperative to further the historical process of Enlightenment by acting rationally in an autonomous capacity, un-coerced by the manipulative influences of external powers, and by helping others freely determine for themselves who they were and who they wanted to become.

Activity and the Full Life

⁴⁵⁵ Giesen, 'Cosmopolitans, Patriots, Jacobins, and Romantics', p. 228.

⁴⁵⁶ Seyla Benhabib, 'The Pariah and her Shadow: Hannah Arendt's Biography of Rahel Varnhagen', *Political Theory*, vol. 23, no.1 (1995), 5-24, p. 17.

⁴⁵⁷ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 222.

To maintain this complex balance of developing one's personhood while advancing universal virtues and values as a community, both the *salonnière* and her participants committed themselves to a life of rigorous intellectual and moral work. Like *Bildung* and the Aristotelean ethic of virtue as practiced activity, salon participants understood that self-cultivation required diligent and continuous motion directed towards this end. Since the salons occurred regularly, usually every week with intervening visits to or correspondence with participants, salon culture encouraged personal development as an active process, an ongoing responsibility integrated into one's daily routine.

Intimate interactions afforded all those who were present the opportunity to strive towards a higher state of self-realization through the continuous expression and development of their ideas. Sustained interactions ensured that salon participants understood the core belief system and character of other participants so that they could first acknowledge one another's perceptions and then evolve from these assumptions. This proffered the possibility of developing more complex perspectives and nuanced ways of thinking that could not occur without ongoing socialization. Questions could be revisited and the various topics of different salons could be connected to shape a coherent intellectual trajectory, one that matured cognitive faculties and produced ideas and belief systems of greater depth.

Both the *salonnière* and her participants prepared throughout the week for the conversations that would take place in the salon. Those who gained entrance once were expected to participate thereafter for the purpose of sustained self-development. Regular attendance ensured that a salon was not a singular event but rather a serious commitment that could achieve its stated goals. With admittance came the obligation to continuously engage within the space and actively contribute to it. Varnhagen expressed the importance of activity to Bokelmann when she remarked "What makes the mind and soul of man older than inactivity?...Think always ceaselessly! This is the only duty, the only happiness."⁴⁵⁸

The *salonnières'* practiced this activity in their role as moral and intellectual educators, one that extended beyond the salons themselves. They discussed the latest ideas, challenged perspectives, and maintained lengthy correspondences on different issues. This was a position that the *salonnières* took seriously because they understood that self-cultivation could not end at

⁴⁵⁸ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 41.

the conclusion of a salon for this would diminish its significance in informing the moral and intellectual trajectory of a person's life. The salon had to be an uninterrupted and life-long pursuit. The *salonnières* engaged their participants in an individualized pathway towards improvement by discussing the subject matter of the salons and its members own reflections throughout the week in a sustained enactment of the values intrinsic to the concept. The salon, therefore, transformed *Bildung* from an abstract theory to a tangible structure of human activity performed with diligence and devotion. Its ability to encourage sustained practice may be considered one of its greatest achievements in successfully advancing this philosophy.

The Struggle Against Utility

Despite the *salonnières* propensity for activity, this activity was not meant to be directed towards a specific practical goal or instrumental achievement. In adopting *Bildung's* non-utilitarian premise, the *salonnières* prided themselves on acting without an explicitly instrumental purpose that would diminish the beauty and significance of their endeavors. Their distaste for the banality and limitations of pragmatic activities was part of a mentality among the intellectual elite in Germany that discouraged utilitarian approaches to knowledge and cared about ideas without the need to demonstrate quantifiable ends.⁴⁵⁹ It was considered profane to think about the strategic aims of the arts, culture, and ideas which possessed an unquantifiable meaning and value. Varnhagen captures this sentiment when responding to David Veit, who considered the possibility of becoming a doctor, to which she said that she cannot imagine him becoming anything specific.⁴⁶⁰ The *salonnières* did not oppose the need for a vocation, but rather contested the idea of identifying a person with a particular profession which they believed reduced the integrity of their being to a single end.

Varnhagen adamantly contended that ideas and sociability should be pursued for their own sake, a view reflected in her observations on pedagogical practice. Although she encouraged the practical application of knowledge, she also believed that it should derive from a natural, unforced passion and exist as an end in itself. She saw little purpose in imposing education on those who felt no desire to learn. She rejected the idea that pursuits of the mind needed an

⁴⁵⁹ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 12.

⁴⁶⁰ Kay Goodman, 'Poesis and Praxis in Rahel Varnhagen's Letters', *New German Critique*, no. 27 (1982), p. 130.

instrumental outcome to legitimize their worth.⁴⁶¹ Schleiermacher, who was a close friend and regular participant in the salons of Varnhagen and Herz, as well as a theorist of *Bildung*, developed his rules of sociability based on the model of the salons. He theorized an ideal of discourse that emphasized the unification of the fragmented parts of the individual which modern life had caused. He argued that conversation should be liberated from function and “free sociability, neither bound nor determined by any external purpose.”⁴⁶² He was referring to the relationship to knowledge that he witnessed in the salons when he remarked:

The most versatile is one who is at the same time the most polymath and original, one who is prepared to engage in any subject matter, even the most trivial and unfamiliar, and still know how to express his own uniqueness in a variety of ways.⁴⁶³

He acknowledged that the *salonnières* had perfected this ideal of sociability, and with it addressed the modern ill associated with the individual being reduced to “nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge” as Schiller had said.⁴⁶⁴

The dismissal of utilitarian calculus was, in part, due to the fact that the *salonnières*, like the intellectuals of *Bildung*, were interested in a range of different subjects and ideas reflected in the often interdisciplinary content of their salons. As polymaths whose education was rigorous and extensive, they saw purpose in spanning art forms and intellectual disciplines. Although the *salonnières* were, for the most part, particularly interested in ancient Greek and Romantic literature and music, they did not limit themselves to these areas; they were well-versed in myriad subject matters and read the latest works in the arts, politics, philosophy, and the sciences, while encouraging their participants to do the same. Varnhagen, for example:

Did not restrict her reading to fiction; she was equally interested in the theoretical aspects of literary production, literary criticism and issues of aesthetics, as well as philosophy. Her letters refer to Rousseau’s “Letter on Music,” Lessing’s *Theorie der Fabel* and his correspondence with Ramler and Nicolai as well as a biography on the admired author. She read the literary magazine *Die Horen*, edited by Schiller and Goethe, and immersed herself in a major philosophical work, Johann Gottlieb

⁴⁶¹ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 32.

⁴⁶² William Rasch, ‘Ideal Sociability: Friedrich Schleiermacher and the Ambivalence of Extrasocial Spaces’, in *Gender in Transition: Discourse and Practice in German Speaking Europe, 1750-1830*, ed. by Ulrike Gleixner and Marion W. Gray (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2006), pp. 319-341 (pp. 328-329).

⁴⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

⁴⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*. She was a thorough and actively engaged reader who considered literature and philosophy as nothing less than guides to life and self-knowledge.⁴⁶⁵

The intellectual variety of her readings inspired the multifaceted subject matter of her salons. The freedom with which she approached ideas led to rich and inventive connections between subjects.

The *salonnières*' erudition reflected the central purposes of the salon: to engage in subject matters that extended beyond single specialties or vocations. Musicians would take part in literary affairs; scientists would discuss philosophical questions; and poets would listen to music in the space of the salon. To be a cultivated person meant to be curious in the most general sense, not bound to the particular. In the joint salon of Henriette and Marcus Herz, for example, after some participants discussed the work of early Romantic writers in the room governed by Henriette and others discussed questions of science and reason in the room governed by Marcus, the group came together to share the questions raised in their conversations, thereby forming bridges between the arts and sciences.⁴⁶⁶ Their salon was a representation not only of the breadth of ideas discussed and the possibilities associated with interdisciplinary perspectives, but also of the particular moment in history in which the German salons emerged. Grounded in Enlightenment principles of science and reason, the Berlin salons equally strove to explore issues of affect, emotion and spirit, a critical theme to which we will return. Salons were simultaneously traditional in their subject matter, posing questions from antiquity and at the forefront of new intellectual and artistic movements and scientific discoveries that engaged with the most modern and novel questions of the time.

The *salonnières* circumvented the limitations of singular disciplines and utilitarian proclivity by avoiding topics that were explicitly politicized or required an immediate response. They imbued every question raised with meaning and metaphor, a philosophical abstractness and a poetry that eschewed instrumentality. The topics discussed could have political or pragmatic dimensions, and not simply entail abstract literary or philosophical reflections, but they were not burdened by the obligation to arrive at a particular solution. They afforded participants the liberty to creatively explore ideas unhindered by expediency or instrumentality. This

⁴⁶⁵ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 30.

⁴⁶⁶ Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 222.

multidimensional approach to learning differed fundamentally from clubs and associations that focused on one area of interest or study. Unlike these clubs, the salon required a certain intellectual suppleness and willingness to make oneself endlessly receptive to new forms of knowledge. This meant exploring questions of a higher order that elevated the conversations beyond the concerns of a specific group of people at a particular moment in time; to examine issues that, in theory at least, were universally significant. As Schleiermacher wrote “no topic should be broached that is not a part of the common sphere of interest.”⁴⁶⁷

The *salonnières* accompanied their efforts to avoid pragmatic subject matters by suppressing the participation of individuals who took part in the salon overtly for self-promotion or for a strategic benefit. This was difficult to police, especially when the salon adhered to a principle of continual openness to those who gained admission. However, by vigorously articulating the importance of living without a self-seeking utilitarianism, instrumentality became unfashionable and even those inclined towards it resisted doing so in the space of the salon. Varnhagen exclaimed: “I kill pedantry within a radius of thirty miles, I am such a poison tree for it.”⁴⁶⁸ This did not mean, however, that salon culture did not practically benefit those individuals who participated. The careers of the artists, intellectuals, and musicians who shared their work was unquestionably advanced and the *salonnières* acted as patrons for aspiring creatives in need. The unspoken rule of the salon was that one could derive practical benefit on the condition that one made a reciprocal contribution to the advancement of social relationships and knowledge and that the motivation for participation was not self-promotion but a true concern for the values at hand. This culture of purposeful purposelessness had the beneficial effect of allowing the expression of ideas that might otherwise be considered irrelevant, fostering a vibrant diversity of thought. Ironically this did more to achieve pragmatic, tangible ends, such as the production of influential intellectual works, than a culture attenuated by the preoccupation with self-advancement which prioritized career success over true creativity.

Authenticity and Simplicity

⁴⁶⁷ Rasch, ‘Ideal Sociability’, p. 330.

⁴⁶⁸ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 226.

The purposeful purposelessness that defined the salon ethos was interconnected with the concern for authenticity which affirmed the principle of *Bildung* to live according to one's own constitution. This authenticity was often cited as one of the main reasons for the salon's success and longevity.⁴⁶⁹ For example, the openness of Sara Levy's character and genuineness in her interactions with others was said to have kept her salon active for fifty four years (1800-1854).⁴⁷⁰ Varnhagen was also famous for her radical honesty about her internal struggles, aspirations and desires. She wanted to be understood in the most profound sense and this, she knew, required complete authenticity:

Why won't you show anyone a whole letter of mine? It would not matter to me; nothing I have written need be hidden. If only I could throw myself open to people as a cupboard is opened, and with one gesture show the things arranged in order in their compartments.⁴⁷¹

This passage from Varnhagen's letters suggests her impassioned commitment to be known, to have her soul displayed for all the world to see. It reflects her desire to overcome the artifice of power games or feigned social exchanges and to connect with others in the most truthful manner.

Varnhagen's raw, unmediated authenticity was sometimes disconcerting to those who knew her. Her husband recalled how when he first met her in her salon he was "at times perturbed by the inexorable candor with which she admitted to and explored her own strengths and weakness."⁴⁷² She expressed herself with a painful sincerity that was uncomfortable to those who felt the need to protect themselves from genuine feelings. However, this openness was born from a great courage of spirit, an admirable sense of closeness to humanity. While it made her vulnerable and exposed, it also allowed her to establish close bonds with her salon participants who revealed their belief and ideas more freely because she had given of herself so completely: "...she communicated so spontaneously the discoveries of her own soul, the experiences of her own heart, that everyone else produced his essential qualities and became more soulful, purer, and gentler than at other times."⁴⁷³

⁴⁶⁹ Wilhelmy Dollinger, 'Berlin Salons', p. 1.

⁴⁷⁰ Burwick, 'From Aesthetic Teas to the World of Noble Reformers', p.136.

⁴⁷¹ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 19.

⁴⁷² Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 42.

⁴⁷³ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 225.

Varnhagen emphasized the importance of truthfulness and sincerity in presenting oneself not only for its intrinsic value and the social connections that it forged, but also because of its relationship to freedom. In fragments of a diary entry from 1825, against the backdrop of the period of the Restoration, she writes:

The primary lack of freedom results from not being permitted to say what we desire and what we lack. We tell it in secret prayers to our God; or he knows it anyhow...From this again follows the thought that only he to whom we can show ourselves completely can be our friend...He...doubles our existence. Deepest requirement of all sociability. Aim and purpose of our language.⁴⁷⁴

She saw it as her responsibility to help others arrive at the freedom that artifice threatened to prevent by uncovering peoples' authentic selves through dialogue.⁴⁷⁵

The *salonnières* encouraged openness because they believed that there was nothing to hide when the content of one's motivations was of an honorable nature, connected to a genuine desire for self-improvement. As long as the individual was on their *Bildung* journey, even the undesirable or conflicted parts of their character were accepted because they could be rectified through discourse and the moral guidance of the community. The very purpose of the salon was to strengthen character weakness or misgivings. Participants were encouraged to present themselves truthfully to receive the intellectual and moral guidance that justified participation in the space. This willingness to overcome one's ego to be understood for who one was, and, most important, for who one wanted to become, was the foundation for meaningful communication within the salon. True dialogical relationships required expressing what one actually believed, not just declaiming what was considered acceptable. They depended on a sincere demonstration of self, which was possible precisely because the salon facilitated the meticulous inquiry and examination of the self. One behaved authentically and one became authentic in the salon. *Salonnières*, such as Varnhagen, therefore, shattered the norms of what was acceptable in polite society and replaced them with their own radical sense of truthfulness and honesty.

Rationality and the Passions

⁴⁷⁴ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 186.

⁴⁷⁵ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 225.

To act genuinely, in this way, required both the maturation of rational faculties as well as the full expression of emotions and the passions. Self-cultivation depended on pursuing logical practices as well as being open to influence from highly subjective affective states and sentimentality unmediated by the gaze of society's critical eye. The *salonnières*, who oscillated between the Enlightenment tradition's focus on rationality in which they had been educated and the emergent prominence of Romanticism's concern for the passions, readily embraced the theorists of *Bildung's* affirmation of the two.⁴⁷⁶ Rationality, they understood, was necessary for their intellectual practice to arrive at knowledge with rigor. Systematic, critical thought was imperative to personal freedom and intellectual autonomy. The *salonnières* were highly critical of the hysteria that was born from unmethodical thinking and wary of the ignorance that the unreflective subscription to ideologies could cause, such as those which arose from the political instability that occurred during and after the French revolution. However, they also believed that feelings and the passions were of equal importance. Raw emotions, while subjective, could reveal a matter in its truest form, offering visceral impressions that contained a meaning which could not be replaced by rationality alone. The *salonnières* believed that this undeniable dimension of the human experience would have adverse effects on one's personal development if it were suppressed. They therefore welcomed the natural expression of emotions which they controlled with rational capacities in a fusion of Romantic and Enlightenment ideals.

The *salonnières* themselves were passionate individuals who lived life with an aestheticized intensity.⁴⁷⁷ Little could be prosaic or mundane for those who wanted to know and to feel the ultimate, whose every action was a search for a Platonic divine. Their preoccupation with timeless questions concerning the human experience required dependence on all the cognitive faculties invested in them. They were open about their emotional states and unashamed to reveal the depth of their feelings.

Herz's success as a *salonnière* was, in part, attributed to her spirited nature, a quality she possessed since childhood.⁴⁷⁸ She was a lively creature, animated by a vibrant and energetic psyche with an acute receptivity to sensory impressions. She enjoyed theatrically expressing her

⁴⁷⁶ Jürgen Barkhoff, 'Romantic Sociability, Aesthetics and Politics' in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Berlin*, ed. by Andrew J. Webber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 33-52 (pp. 36-37).

⁴⁷⁷ Benhabib, 'The Pariah and her Shadow', p. 11.

⁴⁷⁸ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 99.

emotions in plays as a child and later in her salon as an adult. But, more than any other *salonnière* of the time, Varnhagen was thought to have an ecstatic nature, a German genius whose natural vivacity gave her the appellation of “the woman with the most *esprit* in the universe.”⁴⁷⁹ It was said of Varnhagen that whether she was “sorrowful or glad, ill or well, resting or active, she filled the cup of the moment to the brim with the fullness of her being.”⁴⁸⁰

Varnhagen’s particular brilliance was that she saw the insurmountable significance and meaning in everything.⁴⁸¹ Nothing was mundane for her; everything was cast in the poetic light of her perception and she derived great meaning from seeing the beauty in the world in this deeply emotional way:

To Varnhagen everything was revelation, great minds and little children, the perfect creations of art and the smallest works of nature. She, who paid her devotions in no church, lived devoutly at every moment, for, as she herself said, she found her church everywhere.⁴⁸²

So passionate was she that:

The divine was as near to her as the air, it was in this that her soul lived and moved and had its being. Indeed, it has been rightly said of her that the soul of the world vibrated in her soul with such strength that her fragile being trembled with the force of the God it enclosed.⁴⁸³

In her own words she wrote “I confine myself to the marvel of existence in general; if this is possible, then the incomprehensible will one day be comprehended. We must become better, we must be good; that is the problem.”⁴⁸⁴ In her emotive response to the sheer miracle of existence, Varnhagen found the inspiration to “become better” and therefore her emotional states can be seen as directly connected to her social activities.

Many people recognized the exceptional power of Varnhagen’s sensory perceptions which vividly colored her emotional life. Goethe and the Romantic writer Jean Paul (1763-1825), for example, agreed that she possessed such an intensity of feeling that, as the latter said, a flash from her soul “illuminated far wider expanses than sheets of dissertations.”⁴⁸⁵ The

⁴⁷⁹ Spiel, ‘Rahel Varnhagen’, p. 19.

⁴⁸⁰ Key, *Rahel Varhagen*, p. 46.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 188.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

exhilarating quality of her passionate character drew participants to her salon and secured their steadfast allegiances. Heinrich Heine expressed his vicarious devotion to this emotionally magnanimous spirit when he wrote: “You have cheered, and fortified, and taken the rough off of me, the morose, sick man, you have supported me with word and deed, and refreshed me with macaroni and spiritual food.”⁴⁸⁶ In another passage he states:

I run around in the world so impetuously, sometimes people come who would like to make me their property, but they were always the kind that didn't please me much, and as long as this is the case, I shall always have written on my collar ‘*j'appartiens à Madame Varnhagen*.’⁴⁸⁷

Despite the intense emotions that the *salonnières* exhibited and elicited in their salon participants, they did not succumb to the over sentimentalized influences of Romanticism. Emotional states were not solipsistically indulged, but rather communicated for the purpose of attaining wisdom through the influences of the rational mind. The metamorphosis of the unbridled energy of emotions into rational thought that simultaneously preserved their original vibrancy is revealed in the *salonnières*' letters that recorded the conversations in their salons.⁴⁸⁸ Letters were thought to be “an imprint of the soul” the “heart's blood in an envelope.”⁴⁸⁹ In passionate streams of consciousness, the *salonnières* expressed their innermost feelings, ideas, hopes, and frustrations with the world. Varnhagen recalled that in her letters it was “as if the heavy, full horizon of my soul thunders forth.”⁴⁹⁰ Epistolary exchange was a preferred medium to represent the salon's ends, in part because it was considered a more permissible format for women and allowed the *salonnières* to more easily contribute to the discourse on *Bildung* and gain intellectual influence “...[T]he letters could expose the emotions of those women who, as Varnhagen would claim of herself, lacked the opportunities of the head: the truthfulness of the heart served as an alternative aim for the display of *Bildung*.”⁴⁹¹ The *salonnières* committed themselves to this art form because it most accurately represented self-cultivation as an immediate and continuous pursuit. Like the *Bildung* journey to reconcile impressions of a visceral nature with a coherent worldview, letters indulged the sentiments and explored inner

⁴⁸⁶ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 194.

⁴⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

⁴⁸⁸ Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004) p. 281.

⁴⁸⁹ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 46.

⁴⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁴⁹¹ Weissberg and Varnhagen, ‘Writing on the Wall’, p. 165.

realms of feeling, while also reflecting on them more cogently than in a conversation during which immediacy could cloud reason.

Indeed, these letters were seen as a meditative reflection on the salon's happenings, and an indication of the level of self-cultivation that a person had attained within the salons. Letters were not only a means of communication but a measure of *Bildung*.⁴⁹² The *salonnières* have rightfully been credited with transforming the epistolary into this new art form of feeling which they themselves saw as the artistic medium best suited to eternalize the ideals of self-cultivation that they practiced in their salons.⁴⁹³ As Varnhagen wrote:

I want a letter to be the portrait of the moment in which it was written: it shall be primarily a likeness, as high as any demands of art on ideal ennoblement....Happy are the lovely images in a laughing moment of nature which, far from all human imagination, could serve the most artistic as a model!⁴⁹⁴

Thus the integration of emotions and rationality became the methodology that the *salonnières* used to arrive at new knowledge in their salons. Their prolific letters facilitated this artful discursive practice.

The Joy and Tragedy of Feeling

Like the balance between rationality and the passions, the *salonnières* sought to reconcile the joy and the inevitable tragedy of life. The metamorphosis of mind and being that the salon demanded might appear to be a moral burden shorn of pleasurable qualities. But this rigorous intellectual undertaking was not an impediment to happiness nor was it constrained by a severity that renounced pleasure. Instead, the salon was a source of great happiness and a place of inspiration. Accounts of the public sphere often present communicative action in sterile terms, but if non-obligatory forms of association are not enjoyable, then people do not have the incentive to participate. Simply, but significantly, salons were attractive to participants because they made pleasurable the serious work that was at hand.

Salon conversations, although intellectually demanding, were also meant to delight, to excite the imagination, to amuse and to entertain. Salons were “the art of pleasing others through

⁴⁹² Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 46.

⁴⁹³ Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*, p. 303.

⁴⁹⁴ Goodman, ‘Poesis and Praxis in Rahel Varnhagen’s Letters’, p. 132.

wit and refinement, which required ease of comportment and spontaneity of expression.”⁴⁹⁵ Madame de Staël, a French *salonnière* who had an active presence in the Berlin salon scene, summarized this vibrant spirit by calling conversation:

A means of reciprocally and rapidly giving one another pleasure; of speaking just as quickly as one thinks; of spontaneously enjoying one’s self; of being applauded without working . . . [a] sort of electricity that causes sparks to fly, and that relieves some people of the burden of their excess vivacity and awakens others from a state of painful apathy.⁴⁹⁶

This joyful approach to communication animated ideas and encouraged participation. The dynamic interplay between the speakers’ and participants’ perspectives ensured that conversation remained engaging while preventing tedious repetitions and lengthy disquisitions.⁴⁹⁷

Conversations were relaxed and informal to foster inventiveness in thought unrestricted by rigidity or convention that would stifle conviviality. They arose from “the pure pleasure and stimulation that cultural exchange brings to an intellectually curious and cultivated group of people.”⁴⁹⁸

The vitality of salon conversations was a reflection of the temperaments of the *salonnières* themselves, who maintained an intense desire to live joyously. As Varnhagen said of herself “It is still the way it used to be because my nature was not made for unhappiness. My nature was overflowing and proud wild with joy when the earth received me.”⁴⁹⁹ The joy she identified in her own spirit was the product of her *Bildung* education in which she had cultivated her ability to feel deeply. She shared this sentiment with the salon participants with whom she felt closest. In one passage she states of herself and her friend Pauline Wiesel (1778-1848):

...We have...a cheerful, childlike nature. And a bridge, a tree, a trip, a smell, a smile, in short the entire surface of the world engages our ten healthy senses and our precious inners. And so we'll try, a community will, must build up around such clever, cheerful, innocent creatures.⁵⁰⁰

⁴⁹⁵ Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 202.

⁴⁹⁶ James Como, ‘The Salon: Restoring Conversation’, *Arion: A Journal of the Humanities and the Classics*, vol. 22, no. 1 (2014), 33-49 (p. 37).

⁴⁹⁷ Giesen, ‘Cosmopolitans, Patriots, Jacobins, and Romantics’, p. 225.

⁴⁹⁸ Jane V. Curran, ‘Oral Reading, Print Culture, and the German Enlightenment’, *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 100, no.3 (2005), 695-708 (p. 699).

⁴⁹⁹ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 171.

⁵⁰⁰ Goodman, ‘Poesis and Praxis in Rahel Varnhagen’s Letters’, p. 137.

Varnhagen's letters reveal the extent of her joyfulness. She uses the word *Genuss*, enjoyment, often, a fact that Veit found excessive, to which she responded:

By the way, sir, I will use the word 'thing' [*Ding*] and 'enjoyment' [*Genuss*] as often as I want. Two charming words! What does it concern you! The enjoyment of everything at its proper time, is something that is permissible enjoyment, and therefore a full one, because an enjoyment in itself is already a pleasure, and therefore, the right one is a beautiful thing. There, with your authority! nobody can command me! I am not such a th...g! and you should not have the e...t of forbidding me words!!⁵⁰¹

These words are emblematic of her need to continuously express happiness and to maintain optimism about the human condition. She understood this to be a moral duty as much as a natural state.

In fostering an atmosphere of conviviality through their person vivacity, the *salonnières* allowed salon participants to distance themselves from their personal unhappiness and pessimistic worldviews. If the *salonnières* enthusiasm wavered, if they allowed cynicism to affect their vision or diminish their ideals, then they would never have been able to convince their adherents to have faith in the philosophy of *Bildung*. The salon's survival was contingent upon the *salonnières* propensity towards optimism and abiding faith in the possibility of human improvement. Their ability to identify exactly what made conversation satisfying and how social interactions could be pleasurable, to explore what constituted a good life and bring these elements to their salons, was an essential aspect of their social ingenuity for which they were most remembered.

Humboldt, for instance, stated that the salon of Herz gave him "some of the happiest hours of his life."⁵⁰² Varnhagen's friend, the poet and diplomat Karl Gustav Brinckmann (1764-1847), said of her:

With what freedom and grace she knew how to animate, brighten, and warm those about her. It was impossible to withstand her gaiety...Her sallies were wonderfully unexpected...I have heard magnificent saying of hers, true inspirations, often in a few words, which flashed through the air like lightning and reach the inmost heart.⁵⁰³

⁵⁰¹ Weissberg and Varnhagen, 'Writing on the Wall', p. 166.

⁵⁰² Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 185.

⁵⁰³ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 224.

These men were aware that this happiness was not the product of chance but rather produced in the conditions that the *salonnières* made possible.

Even though cultured pleasures were an all pervasive force in the salon and held social interactions together, the *salonnières* did not dismiss the significance of suffering. They were, in certain respects, ineluctably drawn to tragedy, and they fluctuated between the two extremes. Tragedy, like joy, was an intense emotional state which signaled that the individual was awake. In her reading of Goethe's *Tasso*, Varnhagen reveals what tragedy meant to her when she notes:

Tragic is that which we absolutely cannot comprehend, to which we must submit; tragic is that which no cleverness, no wisdom can either destroy or avoid; where our innermost nature drives, pulls, coaxes, inevitably leads and holds us; when this destroys us, and we are faced with the question: Why? Why me, why am I made for this? And all our intelligence and strength merely serve to grasp, to feel destruction or to let us be detracted from it.⁵⁰⁴

Varnhagen understood tragedy to be the conflict that arose between the individual, who was neither culpable nor self-destructive, and an imperfect world.⁵⁰⁵ For the innocent person to submit to tragedy and to try to understand what it represented from an intellectual perspective was the greatest consolation that one could hope to have. Apathy, on the other hand, was spurned because it suggested an intellectual deficiency that brought no greater intellectual clarity. The *salonnières* believed that it was preferable to feel something, even if it was negative, then to feel nothing at all.

With the new influences of the Romantic era, tragedy was fetishized and the *salonnières* inclination towards it only added to their allure and mystique as Beautiful Souls. Herz, for example, was considered "A statuesque figure swathed in melancholy... 'the tragic muse of the Romantic writers.'"⁵⁰⁶ A perspective emerged that this proclivity towards tragedy heightened the *salonnières* ability to feel complex emotions and to appreciate aesthetic influences. "The Jewess, like the romantic consumptive, is a being whose affliction confers upon her a heightened sensibility."⁵⁰⁷ The *salonnières*, however, did not romanticize their own suffering because it was acutely real to them, especially concerning the injustices they endured in their social position. They communicated their pain because this pain aroused feelings of moral responsibility which

⁵⁰⁴ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 131.

⁵⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁵⁰⁶ Spiel, 'Rahel Varnhagen', p. 14.

⁵⁰⁷ Weissberg, 'Stepping Out', p. 154.

needed to be expressed in order to be overcome. In a letter to Veit in 1795, for example, Varnhagen does not shy away from articulating the enormous unhappiness that discrimination caused her:

I have a strange fancy: it is as if some supramundane being, just as I was thrust into this world, plunged these words with a dagger into my heart: “Yes, have sensibility, see the world as few see it, be great and noble, nor can I take from you the faculty of eternally thinking. But I add one thing more: be a Jewess!” And now my life is a slow bleeding to death. By keeping still I can delay it. Every movement is an attempt to staunch it—new death; and immobility is possible for me only in death itself. . . . I can, if you will, derive every evil, every misfortune, every vexation from that. . . . this opinion is my essence.⁵⁰⁸

This heart-wrenching description of slowly bleeding to death demonstrates the psychological burdens that the *salonnières* endured, rendering the optimism they maintained in their role as *salonnière* all the more admirable. Like the archetype of the Beautiful Soul, the *salonnières* did not wallow in their suffering. Rather they turned it into the impetus to further their education, to make sense of life’s cruelties, and to do good. For Herz, for example, her sadness in loneliness and childlessness “led her to look to ‘friends, literature, and art for happiness.’”⁵⁰⁹ Varnhagen’s suffering from her devalued social position and childhood experiences gave her the motivation “to be better, to feel sympathy not to be indifferent towards the poor and afflicted.”⁵¹⁰ The weight of her pain was channeled into her efforts to ameliorate the pain of others, even those who were objectively in a better position than she. “Rahel fulfils her office of adviser with her usual art. She pours balsam on the distraught mind of the prince, and under her quiet ministrations his cares vanish; he forgets his remorse and becomes again his light-hearted self.”⁵¹¹ Varnhagen was able to overcome her pain and do good for others through her *Bildung* education and with the guidance of Goethe’s work. As she said “The poet accompanied me unfailingly throughout my life, and what was split into unhappiness and happiness, and I could not hold together, he brought into a strong and healthy unity.”⁵¹²

In certain respects, the *salonnières* intense joy for living was the cause of their suffering and only heightened their tragedy. For those with such sensitive hearts, who were so intimately

⁵⁰⁸ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 61.

⁵⁰⁹ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 270.

⁵¹⁰ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 176.

⁵¹¹ Tornius, *Salons*, p. 296.

⁵¹² Levin and Veit, ‘Correspondence’, p. 56.

aware of the beauty in the world and had a tenacious belief in the ultimate goodness in people, it was easier to be deeply affected by what was not and wounded by those who deceived them. The *salonnières*' belief in the nobility and virtue of others opened them to the misery of human fallibility and the scars of deception and betrayal remained.⁵¹³ The *salonnières*, however, never blamed people for the injuries they caused, nor did they acknowledge their pain from these wounds as the inevitable state of affairs. Instead, they saw their joy as the state closest to the truth and they did not permit their suffering to gain excessive psychological power over them or diminish from their conviction in the ultimate goodness of people.⁵¹⁴

One poignant example of the *salonnières* resolute will in this regard is that of Varnhagen and the period of her social isolation. Around 1808 when a wave of nationalism pervaded Germany and new legislation and reforms which opposed liberalization were implemented, the thirty-seven-year old Varnhagen expressed her feelings of abandonment, and the suffering she endured, when many of her participants no longer attended her salon due to the changing political climate and increased antagonism towards Jews. In a letter to Brinckmann from January 1808 she wrote:

At my 'tea table' as you call it, I sit alone with my dictionaries; tea is not being served, except every eight or ten days, when Shack, who has not deserted me, asks, for it. Everything is different. Never was I so alone. Absolutely. Never so thoroughly and definitely bored. Imagine, bored! Because only cleverness, kindness, hopefulness can sustain one who has been so wronged, so devastated... I am as I was, Brinckmann; the blows have fortified the old strengths within me, and prevailed and made me truly new and more arable. I am still capable of joking, delight, and the highest suffering; only, there is nothing that can upset me completely, for I am prostrate.⁵¹⁵

Despite the betrayal that she felt, having given so much only to be abandoned when circumstances turned, she continued to delight, to jest, and to sustain her salon and social activities in order to provide respite from a cruel world for others. This, we can infer from her letters, was because her ideals were bound to a concept of humanity, not to individual people. If she let her hopeful vision perish because of the injury that some had caused her, it would only prove the fragility of her beliefs.

The *salonnières*, therefore, strove to become powerful, enduring, beautiful souls. They

⁵¹³ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 99.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵¹⁵ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 92.

taught themselves how to make the most of the events that life brought and to productively channel the intense emotions that they experienced. They saw it as their duty to maintain their optimism while acknowledging the reality of tragedy. They compassionately inspired their salon participants to find the same strength. They overcame life's challenges and appreciated its pleasures, in the fullest expression of the human condition in all of its beauty and its pain.

Chapter IV: The Beautiful Soul in a Collective

Justice and the Good

The dialectic between the subjective and collective nature of self-cultivation, in which the self was perfected for the sake of a more enlightened humanity, was negotiated in the salon through the philosophy of *Bildung*'s concern for social justice and its commitment to the Good. The *salonnières* were believed to be the personification of goodness and the "mouthpiece of eternal justice."⁵¹⁶ They shared an intense devotion to help others and a resolute desire to contribute to the betterment of society. Schlegel, for example, was known to be thoroughly outraged whenever she saw injustice.⁵¹⁷ She often considered the position of the poor and did everything that she could to alleviate their suffering. In 1793, for example, she started a school for impoverished children and had plans to found an orphanage.⁵¹⁸ For, Varnhagen, no dogma, patriotism, power, or social pressures were believed to be able to corrupt her sense of justice.⁵¹⁹ She had an immovable sense of right and wrong and a steadfast conviction in the Good. One personal anecdote reveals this sense of moral conviction. During the time of the Wars of Liberation in 1813, Varnhagen saw the opportunity to volunteer as a blessing and delighted in discovering her talents in aiding the wounded, sick, and poor.⁵²⁰ She wrote "Making a business of doing good is my only amusement, consolation and source of strength!" and "...nothing interests me deeply but that which may make the earth better for us, the earth itself and our actions upon it."⁵²¹

⁵¹⁶ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 98.

⁵¹⁷ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 80.

⁵¹⁸ Lawler and Richardson 'Introduction' in *Florentin*, p. x.

⁵¹⁹ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 196.

⁵²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁵²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

In one of her many aphorisms Varnhagen describes her inability to grasp why anyone would want to harm anyone else:

We hate in a character everything we don't understand; the immoral is really incomprehensible as well. It is incomprehensible why a person would want to cause another disagreeable sensations: since he must surely desire agreeable ones for himself. But it is completely understandable that we want to do good to another: we desire for the other person that which we want for ourselves. Malice, which isn't' revenge- the latter derives from a sense of justice-is completely incomprehensible.⁵²²

Her sense of what was just was so intuitive that she could not understand the motivations of those who willingly sought to cause harm. Malevolence was a foreign concept that she struggled to comprehend.

Varnhagen often critically interrogated existing inequalities and expressed profound concern about the poor conditions of the lower classes:

I also considered the whole mass of human culture, and whether its quintessence, the highest delight of noble richly gifted persons in each other, and every other bright and lofty element in life, is worth all the suffering and misery of those wholesome it has required for centuries as its manure. Working carmen and myself suggested this through to me.⁵²³

But she believed that the intellectual and cultural resources that the elite were able to enjoy need not negate the amelioration of poverty, and that ultimately everyone could benefit from the privileges reserved to the upper classes. This perspective stemmed from the meritocratic foundations of *Bildung*, and without considering the economic feasibility of such an idea, the sentiment was a powerful one for the time.

It is easy to critique the *salonnières* for holding strong views on social justice while catering to an intellectual elite in their salons, but such a conclusion would be a mistake. Their intellectual activities did not diminish from their humanitarian endeavors; in fact, they strengthened them. Self-cultivation and cultural production were viewed as the vanguard of human progress that would address the social ills afflicting all of mankind. It was logical that the *salonnières* would choose to cultivate humane values and cultured forms of human association among the elite who held the power to improve the conditions of others. If fairer and more

⁵²² Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 209.

⁵²³ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 194.

benevolent perspectives emerged in these circles, then they could positively shape policies and institutions that affected all peoples' lives, especially the poor.

The *salonnières* were greatly admired for their seemingly endless devotion to social justice and the personal sacrifices that they made to advance the utopian worlds of their salons. They were thought to be generous in almost all aspects of their lives, with their ideas and actions, their time and their emotions, their home and financial resources, their patronage and charitable activities. They kept their salons open for decades and committed themselves to the personal relationships that they established because they wanted to maintain a vision of reality that aligned with their sense of the Good. Each salon participant was a case study into different manifestations of inequity, unfairness, irrationality, and prejudice that they could redress, and, in the process, resolve larger socio-political problems.

Their concern for justice was, in part, informed by their moral indignation at being treated unfairly as women and Jews. They turned to *Bildung* to find personal agency in changing an unjust world.⁵²⁴ However, the *salonnières* wanted to create a more humane reality not only for themselves and the people with whom they were identified, but for humanity as a whole. They believed that they were part of the human race, not simply members of a circumscribed social class. They were far too ambitious, and burdened by a sense of duty, to limit their activities to anything other than all of mankind. Furthermore, their understanding of justice was not bound to a single, politicized issue. Rather, it was an all-encompassing pursuit. They attempted to act in every circumstance with the reflection, fairness and objectivity necessary to arrive at the purest representation of the Good. Heinrich Heine captured the *salonnières'* sweeping and compulsive sense of responsibility when he remarked of Amalie Beer:

No day passes without her helping the poor; it even appears as though she could not go to sleep without having done a noble deed. In the process she does not discriminate between religions giving to Jews, Christians, Turks, and even infidels of the worst kind.⁵²⁵

Like the blindfolded figure of lady justice, they believed in acting with impartial benevolence towards all.

⁵²⁴ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 170.

⁵²⁵ Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*, p. 44.

The *salonnières* lived with exceptional compassion because they understood that a concern for an abstract notion of a universal Good began with a concern for those around them. In exercising empathy on the individual level, they believed that they could inspire improved forms of sociability, which would have far larger consequences for society. By bringing out the humanity in salon participants through their own displays of conscientious solicitude, they endeavored to form individuals with a moral goodness that could be exercised in their various spheres of social influence for they understood that individual practice is how all larger social norms emerge.

Concern for the Good came not only through good actions in the salons, but also in the choice of subject matter. Varnhagen's passion for social justice was explored in her salon through discussion of the writings of Claude-Henri de Saint-Simon.⁵²⁶ Often this took the form of a debate to refute moral skepticism. In one example, Varnhagen was wary of the Swiss political activist and writer Benjamin Constant's (1767-1830) criticism of social progress. "Just because he is right in saying that life is full of contradictions and confusion" she said, did not negate the fact that "the craving for reason, goodness, and justice, which is inherent in us, is a pledge that in some way we shall attain them all."⁵²⁷ Like the theorists of *Bildung*, the *salonnières* were adamant in their belief that people were naturally inclined to the Good. This was foundational to their conviction that by practicing *Bildung* humans would improve, and that this could be achieved within their salons.

Some have interpreted the *salonnières*' altruism as acquiescence to gender norms:

Forced by 'destiny' to find satisfaction in the glory and happiness of others, women cultivated the virtue of self-effacement and an 'habitual feeling of elevation' toward things other than themselves. The love of another, or of beauty or truth, which was merely 'an episode in [the life] of men,' was the only passion of women and its duration the only source of their happiness.⁵²⁸

But this interpretation wrongly reduces the *salonnières*' acts to the mere fulfillment of social expectations. In contrast, I interpret their magnanimity as the attainment of *Bildung's* imperative to direct one's life towards the Good. Their dedication to goodness was not performed out of subservience to the men in their salons but rather came from an emancipatory conviction in their

⁵²⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

⁵²⁷ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 185.

⁵²⁸ Kale, 'Women, Salons and Sociability', p. 320.

ideals. They displayed great autonomy in their belief that they could shape social behavior and individual action, despite the limitations of their position. This interpretation fits with how the *salonnières* understood their own actions.

Furthermore, their charitableness was not without personal benefit. It contributed to the *salonnières* rise in social status and enabled them to transcend some of the limitations placed upon them by their religion and gender. As Varnhagen conceded “no lady of her kind penetrated into the circle of the high nobility,” and the position she achieved was “through many years of self-reliance in dignity and splendor, through great charity and social activities, allied with spiritual courage and notable wisdom of the world.”⁵²⁹

In acting with benevolence and considering the position of others as if it was their own, the *salonnières* upheld a personal conviction in the Good, one that the practice of *Bildung* embodied. To be good, as a reflection of a transcendental form, held spiritual significance and the *salonnières* practiced *Bildung* as if it were a religion. Schlegel explicitly expressed the belief that she belonged to the “religion of *Bildung*,” a sentiment that she nurtured within the salons and the circle of the early Romantic writers.⁵³⁰ In her interpretation, which she jointly articulated with her husband, Friedrich Schlegel, God was a transcendental Good and priests were poets. Human *Bildung*'s symmetry with natural *Bildung* informed her pantheistic spiritual views and she searched for expressions of divinity in nature and culture, respectively. In one instance, God was likened to the foam of ocean waves or a poet's creation of a verse.⁵³¹ The spirit of this humanist religion in *Bildung*, which found actualization in the senses, was expressed in a passage of Friedrich Schlegel's *Dialogue on Poetry* (1800):

There is and never has been for us humans any other object or source of activity and joy but that one poem of the godhead the earth, of which we, too, are part and flower. We are able to perceive the music of the universe and to understand the beauty of the poem because a part of the poet, a spark of his creative spirit, lives in us and never ceases to glow with secret force deep under the ashes of our self-induced unreason...poetry bursts forth spontaneously from the invisible primordial power of humankind when the warming ray of the divine sun shines on it and fertilizes it.⁵³²

⁵²⁹ Spiel, ‘Rahel Varnhagen’, p. 53.

⁵³⁰ Hillman, ‘The Conversions of Dorothea Mendelssohn’, p. 135.

⁵³¹ Lawler and Richardson ‘Introduction’ in *Florentin*, p. xiv.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, xiv.

Here we see that within poetry a natural divinity was found and goodness emerged from the manifestation of this poetic impulse. Through the primordial expression of poetry, or *poiesis* in the more expansive sense, human *Bildung* and natural *Bildung* came together as one. Thus, to worship the God of *Bildung* (the form of the Good), was to turn to poetry and culture to contemplate nature and the universe in all of its magnificence. Dorothea Schlegel believed that it was the artist who brought divine inspiration and the musician whose work was the purest expression of this infinite realm. From her perspective, religious doctrine would no longer be necessary if people listened to more music, especially Bach. In her *Bildungsroman Florentin* (1801), the main character finds divinity in the priestess and musician's muse, Clementina. "Never had he understood the divinity of music as in front of this sight."⁵³³ God is reached through music, and, in a reversal of traditional gender roles, Clementina is the bearer of divinity in her position as a musician.

Although divinity was represented on earth through music, Schlegel understood one's religious duties in *Bildung* to be the practice of humanitarian actions. The demonstration of spiritual devotion was nothing other than improving the conditions of the poor, providing opportunities for all those in need, and helping others self-cultivate. This understanding of religion as humanitarian action was influenced by her father Moses Mendelssohn's ideas on *Humanitätsreligion*.⁵³⁴ Her salon became a secular church of *Bildung* in which her guests could access the divine through communication (both verbal and musical) and cultivate the humanitarian impulse to live with piety through acts of altruism, compassion, and the development of an objective sense of justice through shared moral reasoning.

Like Schlegel, Varnhagen discovered the divine in art, most especially poetry and literature. She turned to Goethe: "she professed him as a religion, kept 'company' with him, let him introduce her to German history" because he poetically captured the Good to which she aspired.⁵³⁵ Varnhagen was enamored with all of Goethe's writings. Unsurprisingly, *Wilhelm Meister* was her favourite since it was most connected to the *Bildung* tradition.⁵³⁶ Goethe had said that the soul that sees beauty may sometimes walk alone. This was something that

⁵³³ Ibid., pp. lxii-lxiii.

⁵³⁴ Karin Stuebben Thornton, 'Enlightenment and Romanticism in the Work of Dorothea Schlegel', *The German Quarterly*, vol.39, no.2 (1966), pp.162-172 (p.164).

⁵³⁵ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 114.

⁵³⁶ Ibid., p. 112.

Varnhagen intimately felt and *Wilhelm Meister* comforted her in times of need when she saw all the beauty in the world but felt isolated from people who did not share her powers of Platonic perception. The novel imparted conviction in her ideals and the ability to speak when she was voiceless.⁵³⁷ She read it as “one reads the Bible in misfortune.”⁵³⁸ In her words:

A new volume of Goethe was a feast to me...a dearly loved, respected, honored guest, opening new doors for me into a new life, unknown, but full of light. He accompanied me all through my life; I took seizing of his kingdom, he was my one, my truest friend, my rock, saving me from spending myself with ghosts; my superior and my consoling friend, for I knew the hell he knew, I grew up with him, and after a thousand separations I always found him again. I, who am no writer, can never express what he was to me!⁵³⁹

For Varnhagen, the impetus for all noble actions were reflected in the pages of this *Bildungsroman* which became the secular religious text that accompanied her *Bildung* education and informed that of those who were educated in her salons.

Instead of conforming to existing doctrines, the Berlin *salonnières* chose to form their own religion of human goodness in *Bildung*, a religion which most closely represented their egalitarian belief system and humanistic values. The eternity which they perceived in the Platonic unity and a soul of beauty was undoubtedly a spiritual belief, but one which they pragmatically and un-dogmatically achieved by advancing culture in their salons.

Culture and Posterity

An important dimension of the Good that was encouraged in the salon was the advancement of culture which offered a shared narrative and a common history that could unite members of the salon with each other, the rest of Germany, and a greater European heritage. The efforts that each individual made to cultivate themselves were bound to the collective will through culture. This inward process was justified and rendered relevant when the individual employed his moral-aesthetic education to produce something of collective significance in the setting of the salon.

The *salonnières* recognized the imperative of *Bildung* to advance culture, sharing Moses Mendelssohn’s conviction that this was the best means to achieve social progress. Their concept

⁵³⁷ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 115.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁵³⁹ Tornius, *Salons*, p. 300.

of culture was greatly influenced by Goethe:

Goethe's ideal of culture was also that of the age. And this ideal was the loftiest, for it involved a constant striving to unite organically the best intellectual values with one's own personality, and to make of one's self the highest possible intellectual value.⁵⁴⁰

They believed that human intercourse in salon conversations was the most important means by which to contribute to culture because it integrated every individual into a shared creation, one which was constantly evolving and birthed other cultural products.⁵⁴¹ Indeed, salons were traditionally at the heart of artistic movements, forging collaborations among the most important intellects and virtuosos of their day. Salon conversations established a forum for the collective production of a wider aesthetic and intellectual patrimony. We can trace many of the artistic and intellectual movements in Europe between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries to a manifestation of salon culture. At this time, the salons most greatly influenced the development of Romanticism in the visual arts, literature, and music.

Musical analogies were drawn that compared the role of the *salonnière* to that of a conductor, acknowledging her commitment to cultural ends. Unsurprisingly, these analogies were shared with concepts of *Bildung* which, as we have seen, likened the pursuit of self-cultivation for the sake of society to an individual who plays an instrument in an orchestra. According to these analogies, the *salonnière* was sensitive to the character (instruments) of each of her salon participants (the musicians). Her responsibility was to conduct discourse (the musical score) in a way that encouraged the best performance (attainment of *Bildung*'s notion of potential) for the purpose of a larger social good. In her capacity as conductor, the *salonnière* was able to facilitate the cultivation of each person which benefited them, but more importantly, produced something that surpassed their individual self. The use of the same analogy between philosophy and institution demonstrates that the *salonnières* were, in fact, tangibly enacting *Bildung*, and doing so successfully.

The *salonnières* understood, however, that their salons could only reach relatively few people and as a consequence their efforts to propagate this philosophy were limited.⁵⁴² They were aware that the power of the salon lay in its symbolism. Broader influence could eventually

⁵⁴⁰ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 211.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.* p. 221.

⁵⁴² Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 56.

come into being if they demonstrated the efficacy of their model. But since this would take time and they had only just set the historical process in motion, they emphasized cultural production within their salons in literary works, philosophical treatises, and musical compositions that engendered the spirit of this philosophy and were more easily disseminated than their institutional model. The *salonnières* were both the creators of culture (in producing their salons and in writing letters, novels, and musical compositions) and cultural matriarchs (facilitating the production of cultural works by others through engagement in their salons.):

Salons trafficked in the innovation and distribution of cultural forms. They hosted musical and theatrical performances, creating more intimate versions of court spectacles and a discerning audience rather than a merely obedient one. Through the private patronage of art, music, and literature, the salon was a laboratory for the new-failures and successes alike.⁵⁴³

The *salonnières* shared a dedication to actively support the artistic projects of their time. By giving artists and intellectuals the opportunity to present their work before a sympathetic group of private individuals, the salon served the pragmatic function of allowing them to receive feedback before performing or publishing in front of a wider public. Over two thirds of the salon guests were active in the literary world, so the salon provided authors with a constructive environment to develop and revise their ideas.⁵⁴⁴ They represented a new recognition of the fact that the value of a work was legitimized through public judgement and a collective process of creative exchange.⁵⁴⁵ Within this vibrant milieu, musicians and writers found and fostered inspiration.⁵⁴⁶

Salonnières also acted as patrons of the arts, commissioning pieces of fiction or musical compositions to be premiered in these spaces. Some, such as Fanny Mendelssohn, who was a talented musician and composer, even used their salons to promote their own art as a form of aesthetic self-expression.⁵⁴⁷

Perhaps even more significant for the history of the salon, she harnessed the power of this institution to stimulate her artistic development as composer; and in playing, conducting, and programming she assumed the role of impresario-perhaps the first woman to do so. Fanny Hensel [Mendelssohn] transformed the salon into her

⁵⁴³ Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*, p. 7.

⁵⁴⁴ Deborah Hertz, 'Salonnières and Literary Women' p. 99.

⁵⁴⁵ Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 198.

⁵⁴⁶ Burwick, 'From Aesthetic Teas to the World of Noble Reformers', p. 131.

⁵⁴⁷ Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*, p. 44.

muse.⁵⁴⁸

Promoting and creating cultural works represented a way for the Jewesses to shape German history from which they had been excluded. Now, “[T]he collective subject of history was understood no longer in terms of a particular person or religious community but as mankind.”⁵⁴⁹ If the *salonnières* produced (and were the reason for someone else producing) something of such universal significance that it would become a part of Germany’s cultural heritage, then they would finally receive the recognition and inclusion that they deserved. Their approach was to perfect and to expand upon the aspects of German culture that they embraced. This prospect invariably influenced their activities for they were careful to control the narrative of their legacy by monitoring the letters that were saved for posterity.⁵⁵⁰ Their efforts to preserve their ideas, especially as they related to *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*, as well as the happenings of their salons, illustrates their belief that their work could one day become an important part of the cultural patrimony and, most importantly, contribute to the trans-generational development of *Bildung*. The *salonnières* aimed at nothing less than contributing to the future of mankind for generations to come. Since political policies change, social attitudes transform and economic realities evolve, they believed that the only sphere with a lasting influence for the benefit of posterity was culture.

Inner Harmony and Friendships of the Soul

The cultural analogy of an orchestral conductor applied to the *salonnières*’ ability to integrate the distinct voices of their salon participants. This harmonization entailed reconciling personal conflicts and ideological discord to reach deeper understanding. It also meant bringing together aesthetic forms, intellectual disciplines, new ideas, and disparate ways of thinking into a unified whole. The *salonnières*’ ability to harmonize social relationships was due to the inner harmony that they had achieved through their practice of *Bildung*.

Goethe bestowed Varnhagen with the cherished title of a Beautiful Soul in large part because he identified the harmony within her. In the first section of Goethe’s reflections on

⁵⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 46.

⁵⁴⁹ Giesen, ‘Cosmopolitans, Patriots, Jacobins, and Romantics’, p. 227.

⁵⁵⁰ Anderson, ‘Franco-German Conversations’, p. 567.

Varnhagen, after meeting her in Carlsbad in 1795, he remarks:

She is a girl of extraordinary intellect, who is constantly thinking and full of feeling—where can one find the like? It is a rare thing. Oh, we were constantly together, we associated in a very friendly and confidential way... She is an affectionate girl; she is strong in all her feeling and yet easy in all her utterances; the former quality gives her a high significance, the latter makes her agreeable; the former causes us to admire her great originality, and the latter makes this originality amiable, pleasing to us.⁵⁵¹

Here he identifies her successful harmonization of rationality and the passions, and originality with sociability. Then he continues:

It cannot be denied that there are many people in the world who at least appear original; but what security have we that it is not merely appearance? That what we are inclined to take for the inspiration of a lofty mind is not merely the effect of a passing mood? —it is not so with her; she is, so far as I know her, herself at every instant, always stirred in a way peculiar to her, and yet calm.⁵⁵²

In this passage he recognizes her authenticity and genuineness. With the harmony of these qualities he bestows the sacred title: “- in short, she is what I might call a beautiful soul, the more intimately one gets to know her, the more one feels attracted and agreeably held by her.⁵⁵³ As Laura Deiulio states in reference to Goethe’s passage:

The term ‘beautiful soul,’ the embodiment of an Enlightened discourse that sought to locate virtue in a concept of harmonious beauty, had become by the late eighteenth century the goal of *Bildung*. Goethe, who created his own fictional model of the *schöne Seele* in his novel *Wilhelm Meister's Lehrjahre* (1795-96), was essentially recognizing the success of Rahel’s *Bildung* with his remark.⁵⁵⁴

Schleiermacher, who was known as “the connoisseur of personality,” agreed with Goethe’s analysis of Varnhagen, offering his own reflections on her harmoniousness:

Just because Varnhagen at every instant is in perfect harmony, one quality balances the other; her excitability does not become hysterical, her sensitiveness sentimental, her wit ironical, her analysis vivisection, her directness does not become license nor her consciousness a mirroring of self. Thought and feeling, meditation and action, seriousness and gaiety, everything with her is of a piece; nothing contradicts

⁵⁵¹ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, pp. 260-261.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁵⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

⁵⁵⁴ Laura Deiulio ‘The Voice of the *schöne Seele*: Rahel Levin Varnhagen and Pauline Wiesel as Readers of Weimar Classicism’, in *Challenging Separate Spheres: Female Bildung in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth- Century Germany*, ed. by Marjanne E. Goozé (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 93-109 (p.106).

or cancels, everything confirms and intensifies the rest in this harmonious nature.⁵⁵⁵

Varnhagen's salon participants greatly admired her inner harmony because it represented a well-formed constitution, a clear indicator that she was morally sound.

Harmonizing the various aspects of one's personhood to maintain a perfect balance as Varnhagen had done was a lifelong pursuit. The even greater challenge, however, was to harmonize the self with the social whole. The *salonnières* rejected the possibility of withdrawing from society. They continuously sought to harmonize themselves and their salon participants with others. They did this first on a smaller scale within their salons through friendship. Friendship was the symbolic representation of their social ideal and the salon quickly became a cult of friendship, a place where the pleasures of cultivating oneself were recognized by another person who shared the same values.⁵⁵⁶ Salons began with the immediate friends of the *salonnière* and naturally expanded to friends of friends as well as curious outsiders. Once a new guest was introduced to the group, he or she was always welcomed and did not require another invitation. Salon culture depended on the *salonnière's* openness to new people, on her welcoming attitude, and on her development of a strong community of friends who felt closely connected to one another by virtue of their dedication to personal interactions in this space. Salons differed from social clubs in that they did not have membership lists or fees nor a rigid structure or agenda. The *salonnière's* transformation of her home into a hospitable space for discourse allowed individuals to "gradually and gracefully become friends" developing a community around the collective appreciation of culture and ideas, not special interests, or the parochial concerns of pre-existing social groups.⁵⁵⁷

In the salon, friendships allowed individuals to move beyond their own limited perspective and understand that of others. Knowledge was gained by deepening human relationships that could expand one's consciousness and way of seeing the world. In this sense, friendship was viewed as critical to intellectual success because it augmented cognitive abilities.⁵⁵⁸ The *salonnières* not only provided the environment in which to discover a friend who could enrich one's inner world and established forms of association that strengthened these

⁵⁵⁵ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 47.

⁵⁵⁶ Wilhelmy Dollinger, *Die Berliner Salons*, p. 64.

⁵⁵⁷ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 100.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

relationships, they also meticulously paired those people who they thought were uniquely suited to each other, making connections that would not have occurred otherwise.

The *salonnières* maintained close relationships with those who took part in their salons because they were sociable beings who found meaning and satisfaction in connecting with people, and they had the natural ability to help others do the same.⁵⁵⁹ However, they also understood the importance of friendship in the development of *Bildung*. Through their auspices, many relationships were forged that could guide the participants' moral-aesthetic education. The *salonnières'* closest friends were often the ones most in need of their counsel. Prince Louis Ferdinand (1772-1806), a strong supporter of Berlin's salon culture, regularly brought his personal and intellectual concerns to Varnhagen, whom he called his "moral midwife, who delivers one so softly and painlessly that a gentle feeling comes to surround even the most tormenting ideas."⁵⁶⁰ The nobleman, Alexander von der Marwitz (1787-1814) described the profound effect that Varnhagen's friendship had on him:

I am supposed to reassure you again and again with regard to your volumes, you write, dear Rahel. Hear then, how I receive them. I read them three or four times in a row, certain passages much more often, then I put them down with the sentiment of a miser who sees his treasure increased...and then I walk around my room for an hour and more and let the contents of your lines reverberate within me; in this mood I cannot answer...This is the effect your letters have always had on me and always will.⁵⁶¹

One of the men most influenced by Varnhagen's *Bildung* guidance was the diplomat Karl Friedrich Alexander Count von Finckenstein (1772-1811) whose friendship with Varnhagen evolved into a love affair. Finckenstein insisted on his need of Varnhagen's direction:

I need you. I don't know but I am so dejected although there is nothing actually wrong with me, nothing excites me, nothing engages my feelings. It is so unbearably still and dark within my soul, and so I thought a letter from you would bring me some of that consolation I usually found with you, when my soul was not well and I only had to rush to you to become content and happy again...A letter from you must make life bearable again.⁵⁶²

He often said that she had "opened his eyes" and "given him his sense of self." In a revealing

⁵⁵⁹ Goodman, *The Republic of Letters*, p. 99.

⁵⁶⁰ Spiel, 'Rahel Varnhagen', p. 15.

⁵⁶¹ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 111.

⁵⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 74-75.

statement on the effect she had in his *Bildung* development he wrote, “[Y]ou have perfected my education ... You have given character and form to my person by giving life and movement to all that lay dead and still within me.”⁵⁶³ And yet, their relationship could not last. Varnhagen broke off their engagement because, despite all her efforts in Finckenstein’s *Bildung* training, he ultimately failed to act upon her influence and achieve self-realization. Varnhagen dismissed him (not without a measure of contempt): “I shall utilize the years during which you are away to become unacquainted with you. You can no longer persuade me. Be something, and I shall recognize you.”⁵⁶⁴

Unfortunately, this lack of initiative to act upon the principles of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* that the *salonnières* so painstakingly worked to teach was the case in other relationships too. As much time and energy as Varnhagen invested in cultivating souls and educating her salon participants, her efforts were, at times, in vain. For it was easier to accept the basic tenets of *Bildung* than to consistently practice them outside the setting of the salon. Varnhagen spent five years, for example, devoting herself to the cultivation of her friend, the writer, Rebecca Friedländer (1783-1850). She laboriously endeavored to make Rebecca more truthful and honest and to cultivate “nobler” ideas in her.⁵⁶⁵ But, after half a decade of these efforts, she admitted that Rebecca was incapable of achieving the moral education she had worked to give her. In a letter to Rebecca in September 1810, she remarked:

[N]ot that you haven’t gained immeasurably since our acquaintance! The entire horizon of your concepts is illuminated, a whole jumble of old opinions, judgements, and desires has been removed; entire fields have been planted anew; your mind has become more active. You have cast your eye upon a new world and let go a ridiculous, deceptive one. Yet your being has not gained in coherence. – And how is it possible that you admire emotional honest in someone else without immediately becoming so yourself?⁵⁶⁶

She later felt guilty for her own honesty and assured her friend that she was as demanding with her as she was with Louis Ferdinand.

Perhaps the person who benefitted most from Varnhagen’s counsel and was most willing to listen to her honest appraisal of his soul was her husband, Karl Varnhagen. He did not allow

⁵⁶³ Ibid., p. 74-75.

⁵⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 75.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 101.

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 103.

his vanity to interfere with her efforts to assist his *Bildung* education. He readily accepted her guidance, for he truly wanted to become cultivated in the deepest sense, and she delighted in seeing him grow. During the first year of their engagement she remarked:

Ah how I rejoice over your development! Dear chalice, what wilt though not contain, warmed at my breast, by my love! I am so happy and so proud and so uneasy. My spirit and my heart have a hold! This child is my beloved!⁵⁶⁷

From these accounts we can see that Varnhagen clearly took her role as a *Bildung* educator seriously and those whom she educated accepted her authority in directing their moral-aesthetic education.

Varnhagen invested endless hours in personal relationships, to understand and recognize the inherent qualities of her lovers and her friends while also attempting to identify their frailties, not out of a sense of moral superiority, but out of a sincere desire to see them improve. Her talent was to cultivate souls, and she performed it as a duty. As Karl Varnhagen said:

As far as it was possible, possible to your nature, to understand a nature such as mine, you have understood me: through the noblest and most soulful recognition: with an insight that I do not understand, since it is not due to resemblances in our natures.⁵⁶⁸

Being understood with such lucid perception was a rare gift, and Rahel Varnhagen was placed on a pedestal as a muse by those whose lives she touched. Karl Varnhagen declared: “I love you so boundlessly and intensely, as neither lovers nor friends are loved: as your disciple and prophet.”⁵⁶⁹ For those such as her husband who were strong enough to accept her constructive critique, she was indispensable to their development as moral beings.

Furthermore, to self-cultivate as salon friends was a mutual relationship, one in which both parties benefited. The *salonnières* were able to develop *Bildung*'s theoretical framework with those who were receptive to it. An instance of this reciprocity was Varnhagen's lifelong friendship with Pauline Wiesel with whom she maintained a written correspondence for over three decades. These women were primarily concerned with discussing the philosophy of *Bildung*, debating what its most celebrated writers propounded, but equally developing its principles for themselves. The *salonnières* contributed to this philosophy through these

⁵⁶⁷ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 161.

⁵⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.163.

intellectual friendships, in part because the definition of *Bildung* had become more supple and inclusive:

Yet since the Enlightenment of the mid-eighteenth century, the definition of *Bildung* in German society had become fluid, connoting more than a set of values imposed on an individual from the outside. As opposed to more narrowly defined formal education or career training, *Bildung* encompassed a developing identity that learners cultivated by means of the intellectual experiences they encountered through their lives. This broader, humanistic definition suggests that, although they were denied access to formal university education, women of the Romantic period, at least in theory, could be active producers and developers of *Bildung*.⁵⁷⁰

By embracing this open interpretation of *Bildung*, the *salonnières* and their friends enacted a process of *Bildung* that was unique to them.⁵⁷¹ "...they were not merely striving for "die Männer *Bildung*" but were creating what they themselves defined as *Bildung*."⁵⁷² The relationship between Varnhagen and Wiesel represents how the *salonnières* became "knowledge creators in their own right."⁵⁷³ By actively contributing to this narrative, the *salonnières* took a definite position in the evolution of the theory; friendship was the means by which they did so.

The relationship is also significant because it demonstrates the changing nature of friendship that the *salonnières* represented; one that attempted to solidify a common identity in *Bildung*, not by superficial social similarities but by a true understanding of souls.⁵⁷⁴ Resemblances in personality, background, and ways of life became less important. The *salonnières* sought to cultivate social bonds with those different from themselves, but who shared a belief in *Bildung*.⁵⁷⁵ A common set of values established formidable bonds and the arbitrary differences that once dictated social dynamics were challenged.

The Berlin *salonnières* were distinct from other European *salonnières* in their desire to cultivate the *Seelensfreund*, a soulmate. No longer were trivial engagements or idle pleasantries enough to sustain interactions: a more profound union was to define human relationships. A friend of the soul was a person who comprehended the essence of another human being. The

⁵⁷⁰ Deiulio 'The Voice of the schöne Seele', in *Challenging Separate Spheres*, p. 94.

⁵⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 106-107.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

desire to cultivate these types of friendships were particularly prevalent in the Berlin salons.⁵⁷⁶ Finding a person who sensed the intricacies of one's being, who could inspire moral development and act as a sympathetic, objective advisor along the way, was imperative for the experiential success of *Bildung*.

Salon participants were given the environment in which to establish these life-long friendships. Loyalty to one another was enhanced by virtue of the depth and intimacy of their conversations. Arendt captures this sentiment in her biography of Varnhagen:

The salons are social gatherings in which the "joy of conversation," the joy of communication, and understanding as well as misunderstandings and lack of communication are discovered. This is indeed Rahel Varnhagen's strength to which her admirers testify 'the magic of her language, her capacity to express herself, her witticisms, her judgments. Rahel opens a world for those with whom she is communicating through her speech. The joy of speech culminates in friendship, in that meeting of hearts, minds, and tastes between two individuals. Particularly in the case of the German salons, the search for a "*Seelensfreund*," a friend of one's soul, one who understands oneself perhaps better than oneself, is predominant.⁵⁷⁷

Friendships of the soul superseded the limitations of individual relationships and encompassed a concern for humanity as a whole.

Egalitarianism: Educating Poets and Princes

The Berlin *salonnières* understood that the harmonious society towards which they strove must include all people. Exclusivity, rigid hierarchies and class division would only lead to social discord. Advancing egalitarian principles, while helping every individual self-cultivate, proved instrumental in demonstrating the validity and universality of *Bildung* and the possibilities associated with encouraging disparate people to pursue common ends. The Berlin *salonnières* took inspiration from the egalitarian dimensions of *Bildung's* philosophy, especially in its later incarnation, that allowed for a freer flowing, inclusive interpretation of its tenets. They also contributed to the very construction of this egalitarian structure and articulated progressive views on equality in their literary works.

⁵⁷⁶ Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), p. 17.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

In *Florentin*, for example, Dorothea Schlegel imagines a society in which traditional class hierarchies are overcome, the poor have better conditions, including increased access to health care and education, statute labour is abolished, and work hours are reduced so that every person has the time to self-cultivate. In the story, the character of the Chief Cavalry Sergeant, depicts a man of antiquated ways who shows a lack of concern for the welfare of the villagers who work his land. He assumes that he has greater knowledge than them and the humiliation he causes fuels social tensions:

The Chief Cavalry Sergeant's improvements were usually aimed at making him richer, rather than, as he alleged, making his property truly conducive to the common welfare. And with all the precautions he took to educate his farmers, he never imagined that they were bright enough to understand his actual intention and for this very reason not only did they not promote it but worked against it in all imaginable ways. For these reasons he lived with eternal vexations and quarrels.⁵⁷⁸

By contrast, the characters of the count and countess embody the new spirit of equality. The countess asks the farmers who work her land what improvements are needed, because she understands that they know the land better than she ever could. She then finances their ideas and gives them their fair share of the profit. She also expresses concern for the villagers' welfare and takes measures to improve their conditions, including instituting a system of universal health care. What is more important than the ideas on labor, education, and health care is the emphasis on treating the lower classes with dignity and appreciating their contributions to society. The countess is acutely aware that the flourishing of her entire estate is dependent on those who work the land and her respect is reflected in her attitudes and actions.⁵⁷⁹

This *Bildungsroman* describes the ideal society that the *salonnières* envisioned because it clearly stipulates their views on equality and elucidates the egalitarian structures upon which their salons were founded. The salon was the realization of this progressive value system. By unifying the disparate strands of German society through *Bildung*, the *salonnières* challenged existing social positions and promoted a culture in which worth was determined by intellectual merit and moral decency. "In the vague, idyllic chaos which the Jewish salon of those days represented, there could not exist any principle of social selectivity."⁵⁸⁰ Members of different

⁵⁷⁸ Schlegel, *Florentin*, p. 97.

⁵⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 99-100.

⁵⁸⁰ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 58.

social classes took part in the salons, seeking meaningful friendships in a socially diverse milieu.

⁵⁸¹ Although it is true that those who were illiterate could not take part in salon culture, nor did the most disenfranchised members of society such as beggars and the homeless, this does not negate the fact that the salon operated on a principle of equality. Everyone from those members of the lower classes who were educated, to the middle class and the aristocracy, were welcomed into the home of the *salonnière* in a spirit of respect and impartiality. Guests ranged in social standing and profession from impoverished tutors, unknown actors, and struggling writers, to princes, professors, and influential politicians.⁵⁸²

The *salonnières* were famous for disregarding their participants' social position, favoring the desirable character traits that they exhibited over wealth or family standing. "It was as the saying went 'a case not of who one was, but what one was, in order to gain admission.'"⁵⁸³ As Deborah Hertz suggests in her statistical analysis of the salons economic and social foundations, to foster an egalitarian environment, the *salonnières* had to overcome multiple barriers:

The Jewish *salonnières* in Berlin presided over a socially, religiously, and gender-mixed coterie distinctive in Germany both at the time and across time. The stories about these salons suggested that these women had accomplished a triple feat by emancipating themselves from their traditional patriarchal families, helping to create high culture in a crucially creative era, and, in the process, forging bonds across classes, religious groups and the two sexes.⁵⁸⁴

The *salonnières* remarkable feat contributed to a wider shift in German public discourse and by the late eighteenth century merit and talent were often privileged over circumstances of birth.⁵⁸⁵

Primary accounts illuminate the nature of this mixed society and how this aspect of the salon was received. Brinckmann said of Varnhagen's salon that it was:

[A] circle, to be admitted to which royal princes, foreign diplomats, artists, scholars, and business men of the first rank, countesses and actresses were all equally eager, and where each was worth no more, but at the same time no less, than the impression he himself produced by his cultured personality.⁵⁸⁶

⁵⁸¹ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 7.

⁵⁸² Burwick, 'From Aesthetic Teas to the World of Noble Reformers', p. 129.

⁵⁸³ Spiel, 'Fanny von Arnstein', p. 51.

⁵⁸⁴ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 13.

⁵⁸⁵ Anthony J. La Vopa, 'The Politics of Enlightenment: Friedrich Gedike and German Professional Ideology', *The Journal of Modern History*, vol. 62, no. 1 (1990) 34-56 (p.44).

⁵⁸⁶ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 220.

The writer Bettina von Arnim (1785-1859) described the wonderfully heterogeneous mix of people that Varnhagen gathered in her salon when she wrote: “All sorts of passers-through, strangers the Countess Henchel and daughter and sister. The Barnekows, Count Yorck, the Willisens, Hegel, Humboldt, Ranke. Why mention another forty names! Each contradicts the other.”⁵⁸⁷ Of all the personalities present, Varnhagen never granted preferential treatment to one. Whether it was a poor writer or a prince, she committed herself equally to them. As the poet Clemens Brentano (1778-1842) remarked:

... That Prince Louis Ferdinand and Prince Radziwill visit her causes much envy, but she doesn't care anymore than if they were lieutenants or students, if these had as much spirit and talent as those, they would be equally welcome to her.⁵⁸⁸

Varnhagen herself rejoiced at the diversity of her salon when she said “All classes, all kinds of people talk to me.”⁵⁸⁹ She commented that ““Noblemen I am often fond of, the nobility never.”⁵⁹⁰

As we can infer from these accounts, the egalitarianism that the salon espoused is perhaps not how we understand egalitarianism today. It is true that salons were mostly a place for the middle class and bourgeoisie to mingle with the aristocracy, and participants still came from the relatively limited circles of an intellectual elite. Furthermore, simply because people of different social statuses congregated in the same space did not mean that there was total equality in their interactions. But the fact that openness and egalitarianism were even aspirational principles was, in itself, revolutionary. That men submitted to the intellectual leadership of female *salonnières* and were willing to be associated with a space of (relative) diversity is extraordinary for the time. Furthermore, there are countless examples to demonstrate that a spirit of equality was indeed accomplished in fundamental ways, more than any other institution in this context.⁵⁹¹ The heterogeneity of the salon is one of its most widely discussed attributes in the primary and secondary literature, making it impossible to facilely dismiss it as elitist. The *salonnières'* great achievement was their ability to bring people together who would never normally meet and change the ways they chose to associate with each other and the values to which they aspired.

⁵⁸⁷ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p.184.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵⁸⁹ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 234.

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁵⁹¹ Herz, *Ihr Leben und ihre Erinnerungen*, p.81.

For the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the salon was radical in the degree of egalitarianism that it attained and contributed to the development of a more equal society.

The social fluidity that occurred within the salons required that the hostesses establish the proper environment for respectful exchange. “Conversations inside the salon reflected a reciprocal, egalitarian model of communicative exchange that assumed a willingness to suspend whatever criteria of social distinction may have existed outside it.”⁵⁹² Salons represented an unprecedented ideal of social interaction in which one was supposed to be judged, not by one’s social standing, religion, or gender, but by the quality of one’s character and the substance of one’s ideas. The *salonnières* monitored class integration in their salons by establishing reciprocal relationships between herself and her salon participants. They united different people through the exercise of interpersonal skill and tact in conversation developed through training.⁵⁹³

The *salonnières* took pride in facilitating the integration of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, along with distinct social classes, by gracefully facilitating these new encounters. One *salonnière*, for example, “...delighted in seating her Jewish and commoner guests next to prominent nobles at the tiny tables she preferred over the usual long ones.”⁵⁹⁴ The *salonnières* often reflected on the egalitarian dimensions of their work. Herz’s autobiography emphasizes that within her salon behaviors changed and the mind became a tremendous leveler and a powerful equalizer unifying different people through love, humility, and courtesy.⁵⁹⁵ She considered the larger consequences of the egalitarianism which was practiced in her space commenting on the fact that “this spirit of equality penetrated the highest circles of Berlin society.”⁵⁹⁶

The elite who chose to partake in these salons understood that they could no longer depend on the prerogatives of their position when the social values of the salon increasingly favored the cultivation of latent potential not manifest privilege. The *salonnières* encouraged their participants to act as individuals, not as members of a social class or religion.⁵⁹⁷

Varnhagen’s salon was described as “a socially neutral place where all classes met and where it

⁵⁹² Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe*, p. 197.

⁵⁹³ Wilhelmy Dollinger, *Berlin Salons*, p. 157.

⁵⁹⁴ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 106.

⁵⁹⁵ Herz, *Ihr Leben und ihre Erinnerungen*, p. 80.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁵⁹⁷ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 38.

was taken for granted that each person would be an individual.”⁵⁹⁸ This principle of conscious inclusiveness both advanced the social integration that was occurring in their salons and facilitated the process of self-cultivation by stripping the individual of a pre-determined identity that he or she had not worked to shape.

One could pose the question why the aristocratic elite chose to take part in a space that did not give deference to their social standing. Apart from the pragmatic theory proposing that the elites attended the salons motivated by a desire to borrow money from wealthy Jews, which cannot stand on its own given the precarious financial situation of some of the most prominent *salonnières* themselves, no other major hypotheses exist on what the literature unanimously agrees was a radical departure from the social hierarchies of the time. I argue, however, that *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*'s status as the philosophy upon which the Berlin salons were based offers an explanation. The salons' adoption of concepts widely accepted by aristocratic intellectuals because of its strong identification with German values made the changes in social practice not only palatable but relevant and desirable. Apart from the salon, no other private institution was able to enact *Bildung*'s popular philosophy. Aristocrats could secure their position among a new cultural elite emerging in the salons who were transforming the intellectual landscape of their time. Nobles entered salons because they wished to be among the vanguard of German intellectualism. Their fondness for the *salonnières* and the depth of friendship that they received within their salons makes sense of the evident willingness to submit to their leadership.

Scholars such as Schleiermacher used the *salonnières*' example in their own work further proliferating ideas on egalitarianism. His Essay “On a Theory of Social Behaviour” (1799) captured what he found compelling about the social interactions, freed from a concern for rank or position, that he experienced in the salons of Herz and Varnhagen.⁵⁹⁹ It is especially significant that Schleiermacher was so influenced by Varnhagen's model for equality given his initial qualms about the mixed company that she kept. Varnhagen once reprimanded Schleiermacher for not visiting her salon often enough to which he jokingly said. “If only you did not keep such bad company.” She, in turn, lightheartedly responded:

⁵⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁵⁹⁹ See Peter Foley, *Friedrich Schleiermacher's Essay on a Theory of Social Behavior (1799): A Contextual Interpretation* (New York: E. Mellen Press, 2006).

But that is precisely your mistake. A thinker must be able to make something of everything in his own way. Would you yourself, with your powerful mind and all your excellent talents, have become such a greater scholar and erudite man, if you had not read very many bad books. Not through these books, but by considering and working through their stupid and dull contents have you developed your specific genius... Why don't you judge my bad company in the same way? Just ask Brinckmann, I have finally taught him to read and leaf through all kinds of people.⁶⁰⁰

Her response suggests that it was the friendship with the *salonnière* and participation in a space comprised of heterogeneous people that changed assumptions and biases. Developing personal relationships was, from this perspective, the simplest way to overcome deeply engrained prejudices.

Although some influential elite's classist conceptions were changed in their interactions with the *salonnières* and they adhered to a principle of egalitarianism within the salons, this did not mean that these pioneering women did not encounter profound difficulties in their efforts at social integration. Their role required great strength of character and the active exercise of a tolerant and virtuous soul. Fichte, for example, notoriously held anti-Semitic views, which he directed toward the Jewish *salonnières*. Yet Varnhagen, who admired his work on *Bildung*, welcomed him into her salons in which he rose from poverty, and from which he benefited both socially and professionally.⁶⁰¹ The self-sacrifice that the *salonnières* willingly endured to advance their meritocratic philosophy illustrates their profound commitment to their beliefs and the remarkable courage required to establish a space that rejected entrenched social divisions. Ultimately their almost preternatural endurance ensured their success. "The Berlin salons were the fulfillment of the assimilationist dream in miniature."⁶⁰² They offered a radical opportunity to everyone involved to redefine their identity and to transgress rigid social norms that had effectively fragmented society. Although Jewish *salonnières* were accused of abandoning their culture by associating with Christian aristocrats, they undeniably advanced the position of Jews in Germany with their "nearly unlimited domination in the cultural arena."⁶⁰³ It is widely

⁶⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 29.

⁶⁰¹ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 145.

⁶⁰² Ibid., p. 13.

⁶⁰³ Ibid., p. 10.

considered the case that “Jewish cultural influence in Germany has its beginnings in these salons.”⁶⁰⁴

Another dimension of the egalitarianism fostered in the salon was the changing nature of gender dynamics. Although approximately two thirds of salon participants were men, it was the female *salonnières* who hosted the events, chose the topics, invited the speakers, and moderated the conversations.⁶⁰⁵ The gender of the *salonnières* played an important, yet complicated role. Since it was common at this time to see women as “civilizing” agents who were emotionally sensitive and whose responsibility it was to tame the unsavory impulses of men, we can understand why it would be socially acceptable for the *salonnières* to cater to “polite society” in this way.⁶⁰⁶ However, while their salons were stereotypically feminine in this sense, they were also stereotypically masculine in their intellectual rigor and the significant power and social influence that they exerted.

The salons represented an age of transition in the early nineteenth century in which masculine and feminine qualities were no longer distinctly separated but merged in new ways.⁶⁰⁷ Strict gender expectations could be challenged through experimentation and the boundaries of social behavior tested within a space that assigned value according to the characteristics of *Bildung*, which the *salonnières* understood as including both men and women while amalgamating traditionally female and masculine qualities. A universal conception of *Bildung* allowed for salon participants to explore aspects of themselves that had before been socially unavailable to them as males or females but were now integrated into this non-gendered conception of a cultivated person whose qualities transcended such essentialized partitions. This particular conception of *Bildung* was specific to the salon. Outside of its perimeters during this period, *Bildung* was mostly directed at men and thus a consideration of the concept in relation to gender norms was less pronounced.

Indeed, the *salonnières* were seen as androgynous creatures, equally male as they were female. Friedrich von Gentz, for example, perceived himself and Varnhagen as exchanging gender roles. He stated “You are an infinitely productive creature, I am an infinitely receptive

⁶⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁰⁵ Hertz, ‘Salonnières and Literary Women’, p. 99.

⁶⁰⁶ Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*, p. 16.

⁶⁰⁷ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, pp. 72-73.

one: you are a great man, I am the first among women.”⁶⁰⁸ He compared her erudition and lucidity to male capabilities and his own sensitivity and the authority that she held over him to female properties in a way that was extraordinarily unusual for the time. Varnhagen’s brother Ludwig Robert (1778-1832) also saw her masculine nature and coined the term “Schwester-Freund” (sister-(male) friend) and later Vater Freund und Schwester (father (male) friend and sister).⁶⁰⁹ Even with her husband Karl Varnhagen, the masculine and the feminine were blurred. Rahel called Karl the diminutive “Varnhägken” “Gustchen” and even the feminine form “Guste.” She compared herself to a sturdy tree able to endure anything and him to a dainty bird or a flower.⁶¹⁰

In part, these unusual changes in gender roles were a reflection of the figure of the Beautiful Soul that the *salonnières* sought to emulate. In the literature, beautiful souls were feminine characters who were sensitive and empathetic, but also strong and independent, and frequently never married or became mothers, like Goethe’s Iphigenia.⁶¹¹ The *salonnières*, who were often childless, unmarried, or married for love only at a late age, identified with these characters who desired freedom and social influence. Above all they did not want to fall into domestic roles that inhibited intellectual activity. They were eager to create careers for themselves and become intellectuals in their own right. Some, such as Varnhagen and Schlegel were adamant defenders of women’s rights and saw their salons as an act of emancipation, freeing participants from the limitations of their gender.⁶¹² Of course they could never truly liberate themselves; there was always a concern that they would become “unfeminine” or that they would make men too feminine, but the androgyny with which they experimented, and that others were eager to perceive in them, was remarkable.⁶¹³ Furthermore, the gender fluidity that took place in the salon was conducive to enacting new, more expansive forms of *Bildung*. The positive qualities associated with each gender were integrated to create a more perfect model of personhood. A male in the salon no longer was expected to be brutish and insensitive, but could adopt the social refinement previously identified with the feminine. Likewise, a woman was not

⁶⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 72-73.

⁶⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 88.

⁶¹⁰ Ibid., p. 124.

⁶¹¹ Ibid., p. 73.

⁶¹² Ibid., p. 4

⁶¹³ Ibid., p. 73.

only lauded for her social sensitivity but was admired and praised for her intellectual brilliance, typically considered a quality that only a male could possess.

Thus from class, racial, religious, and gender perspectives, the *salonnières* reconceived social norms, creating an institution of their own design with an ideological concern for inclusiveness.⁶¹⁴ They recognized that a fully integrated society would not immediately come into being. The changes they made in the ways that the middle class and the aristocracy interacted with each other were already radical for their time. They experienced an unforeseen degree of success in demonstrating the power of social contact to foster friendships that transformed deeply engrained biases. Egalitarianism in a more expansive sense was a long journey that began with the cultivation of the individual in a group and would eventually extend to wider circles of society. Across generations, they envisioned that their model for respectful exchange, mutual understanding, and a consideration of the condition of others could change realities for the greater whole.

The Bildungsreise: A Journey into the World

Despite the fact that the larger ambitions of their project would require generations to accomplish, the *salonnières* could still witness the initial fruits of their labor by tracing the *Bildung* journey of their participants in the world of their salons. As Schleiermacher noted, again in reference to the salons of Varnhagen and Herz, to engage in such social relations:

Provided the individual with opportunities to go beyond his own limits to become acquainted with other and foreign worlds, so that by and by no human manifestation would remain unknown to him and even the strangest characters and circumstances would become familiar ('friendly and, as it were, neighborly') to him. This task was accomplished by means of freely associating rational people engaged in mutual education or *Bildung*⁶¹⁵

Schleiermacher understood that the salon initiated a *Bildung* journey, introducing individuals to new worlds and ways of being.

The *salonnières* agreed that their salons represented a journey, a stage of transition from childhood to enlightened adulthood, and they had strong views on what such a journey should entail. Schlegel, for example, concurred with her husband that a man's journey involved three

⁶¹⁴ Ibid., p. 44.

⁶¹⁵ Ibid., p. 42.

stages of boyhood, cultivated young adulthood, and maturity in love. But she believed that women should go through the same three stages, the second of which they were usually excluded from. Enriching one's mind in early youth proved critical to the later stage of *Bildung*.⁶¹⁶ Only when an individual had the opportunity to explore their interior world could they become a more loving partner and successfully integrate themselves into their social environment. Schlegel's character Florentin depicted this "inner pilgrimage" traveling widely and discovering important lessons along the way.⁶¹⁷

Salon participants often embarked upon this journey in the salon in the second stage at a critical moment in their lives when they were young, impressionable and open to change, like the protagonist of a *Bildungsroman*, who begins his journey of self-formation in the early blossom of his youth:

Since most of the noble intellectuals were quite young when in salons (their average age in 1800 was seventeen) they were in salons at a time in their life when they could act on these rational principles in their choice of career, friends, and lovers.⁶¹⁸

The salon afforded these young participants the opportunity to venture into new dimensions of self-understanding through forays into culture, philosophy, and the arts that the fictitious journey of the *Bildungsroman* could only represent. In this space individuals shaped their identity, matured their intellectual faculties, and developed a concrete belief system, while maintaining continuous contact with other peoples and cultures.

The metaphor of the journey within the salon underscored the fact that a beautiful soul was a pursuit which required no material resources. Humboldt's revelatory *Bildung* journey, for example, occurred, not through physical travel but within the intellectual landscape of Herz and Varnhagen's homes. He attributed much of his professional success and the social relationships which most influenced him at a formative time of his life to their salons.⁶¹⁹ The journey was therefore not necessarily one of physical movement, although it was sometimes portrayed as such in the literature for clarity, but rather intellectual movement across the psycho-social terrains of the urban salons. As long as new ideas were explored, assumptions questioned, and other cultural traditions discovered, it could occur within these local spaces as it had for

⁶¹⁶ Lawler and Richardson 'Introduction' in *Florentin*, p. lv.

⁶¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. xxxiii.

⁶¹⁸ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 138.

⁶¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

Humboldt. Only the individual who was able to enliven his surroundings with his intellect would be able to gain from the revelations that were to come in his subsequent literal travels; he would have the internal resources to make educated decisions and find greater fulfillment in his relationship to the wider world.

The Real and the Ideal

The *salonnières* maintained a Platonic ideal throughout their *Bildung* journey. To pursue Platonic perfectibility was to enact the metaphysical forms in the physical world through ennobled thoughts and actions. The three transcendental pillars of Beauty, Goodness and Truth, encapsulated everything that the *salonnières* sought to represent in their salons. The beautiful environments that they created through culture and the arts were a physical representation of the abstract form of Beauty in whose grace they found inspiration. Since Beauty and Truth, according to this philosophy, were inextricably intertwined, a beautiful atmosphere was conducive to the pursuit of Truth. Within the salons, truths took the form of conversations that generated knowledge overcoming unsubstantiated opinions to arrive at greater clarity. While specific debates could perhaps never reach an absolute Truth, a spirit of universality existed in the openness to new perspectives that participants were required to maintain. Furthermore, conversations were undertaken upon the basic assumption that through a shared intellectual practice, an absolute Truth could be found. It was therefore not futile to engage in discourse because the possibilities associated with the advancement of knowledge remained. With the manifestation of this Truth in conversation came Goodness by making oneself receptive to other people and ideas and in the willingness to remain curious and empathetic. Thus, the ideal of *Bildung* was both embedded in the very structure of the salons and was the goal towards which the salons were ultimately directed. Structure and process aligned in the pursuit of Platonic perfection.

The *salonnières* knew that they must have the courage to pursue the ideal for, if they did not or if they allowed pessimism to impede moral growth, then their lack of conviction would demonstrate shortsightedness and frailty. As Varnhagen commented: “My whole belief is in the conviction of progress, of the perfectibility and development of the universe to even better

understanding and welfare in the highest sense.”⁶²⁰ This was as much a statement of what she believed to be true as a declaration of the way she had decided to live, which, in its affirmative style, demonstrated her attainment of *Bildung*. To pursue the ideal, however, did not mean that the *salonnières* held others accountable to a specific definition of it. Rather, they developed each individual’s specific relationship to the Platonic Triad while also interrogating the possibilities of objective knowledge. The *salonnières* encouraged experimentation in the evolution of the self and appreciated the inevitability of human failings along the way. To participate in a salon meant to implicitly acknowledge one’s own limitations and the inevitable uncertainties and fallacies of the reality in which one existed, while at the same time moving beyond these imperfections towards a shared, mutually articulated end.

In the case of Varnhagen, her view of society “included both the idealism which creates the future, and the realism which forms the present.”⁶²¹ She often vocalized her desire to overcome the imperfections that she identified in the world with her forward looking vision. “Rahel escaped from a present in which she believed there was not yet any place for her, and her refuge was not the past but a better future. That was why she pleaded: ‘When I am dead, rescue the image of my soul.’”⁶²² Varnhagen’s concern for the future represented a shared characteristic, a rare attribute that the most prominent *salonnières* exhibited, which was a precondition for the establishment of their salons. Varnhagen never assumed or unquestioningly accepted a single, static reality. She understood that as many distinct realities could manifest as latent potentials could be cultivated within the soul. She acknowledged that social realities are constructs shaped by human thought and activity and that the individual can transform them. She had the foresight and vision to see beyond what was and imagine what could be, the idealism to believe in the development of a new, more perfect world, and the audacity to deploy her innate agency to bring that ideal into existence.

The *salonnières* adopted the ideals specific to *Bildung* because they represented an alternative to the present reality and an elegant theory of what could be. Grounded in a German philosophical tradition that granted them the freedom to contribute to its development, both from within themselves and in their relationship to the world, *Bildung* affirmed an ideal that was far

⁶²⁰ Spiel, ‘Rahel Varnhagen’, p. 20.

⁶²¹ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 195.

⁶²² Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 171.

removed from their existing reality.⁶²³ And yet it still seemed feasible to implement within the cultural context of Germany at the time. Contrary to widespread perceptions of idealism, theirs was not unfounded or naïve. The manner in which they systematically implemented their ideals suggests that the *salonnières* considered them to be as pragmatic and achievable as they were aspirational. Instead of containing them within an abstract realm of philosophical discourse, they demonstrated the viability of their idealism through practice.

But, despite the objective attractiveness and feasibility of the ideal that they espoused, changing social reality proved difficult and opposition against emancipation remained intense. For the aristocrats and elite, the present reality benefited their social and economic status and so it was easy to assume it to be “natural” and necessary. Likewise, the lack of economic resources, social standing and political imagination of a large percentage of the population inhibited their capacity to envisage reality as having the potential to be different than it was. These conditions, in effect, ratified and naturalized the status quo. However, even when it seemed futile to maintain such a utopic ideal and progress was thwarted by apathy or ignorance, the *salonnières*, preserved their faith in “the world’s eternal perfectibility.”⁶²⁴

During the time of riots against Jews around 1819, for example, Varnhagen and her brother, Ludwig Robert, concurred that despite these momentary relapses, the world still moved forward and progress was possible if they maintained constancy.⁶²⁵ “It’s moving, the world” Varnhagen observed.⁶²⁶ Even though she knew that she almost certainly would not see the developments that she hoped to witness in her own lifetime, the possibility that they would happen for future generations was enough for her to contribute to them and to keep her optimism alive. “This old earth must be made brighter and future men must be better and happier.”⁶²⁷ Varnhagen was convinced that knowledge of what should be would triumph even if it required waiting “a thousand years for the sunshine that is to make the plant grow!”⁶²⁸ Such a long term, selfless perspective was precisely what made her vision feasible, for she was not blinded by the prospect of immediate success.

⁶²³ Goozé, ‘Introduction’ in *Challenging Separate Spheres*, p. 24.

⁶²⁴ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 162.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 162.

⁶²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 224.

⁶²⁸ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 208.

Despite tragic ends to love affairs, financial troubles, the instabilities of war, and the humiliation she endured from never being fully accepted in society, Varnhagen remained hopeful throughout her life, echoing statements in her youth as an older woman: “I believe completely in the progression, the perfectibility, the continued improvement of the universe, toward ever greater understanding and wealth in the highest sense; happiness and the giving of happiness.”⁶²⁹ With regards to the challenges of her time, such as the French occupation and the Wars of Liberation, she was one of the few members of her social circles who continued to have faith that the fundamental principles of the French Revolution could still be achieved. She maintained her youthful ideals throughout her life and did not allow cynicism to corrupt what she believed was politically possible.⁶³⁰

Although the constant hope that the *salonnières* possessed sustained their activities, the beautiful world that they envisioned required more than their personal conviction. Like any democratic undertaking, the challenge of inclusivity was that action depended on the cooperation of others, from all sides of the social spectrum. The only way that they could reach consensus in overcoming a flawed social order was if another, more perfect reality physically manifested, not simply in philosophical essays, but in its real-world enactment. A discursive space was necessary to facilitate this shift in perception and reality. The *salonnières* understood that they would first have to make their vision tangible before its ideas could be accepted.

Their salons became the physical representation of the ideals of *Bildung*, a controlled environment in which they were in charge of the rules and the structures that governed the small worlds that they created.⁶³¹ By enacting the ideal through the systematic implementation of the principles of *Bildung*, by empirically demonstrating that new forms of social order were indeed possible, desirable, and ultimately necessary, the *salonnières* made psychologically tenable alternative realities. In blurring the apparently intractable divide between the real and ideal, by showing that elements of the ideal could emerge within present, imperfect circumstances, the dominant critique of *Bildung* as a misbegotten and unfeasible goal was demonstrated to be nothing more than a deficient understanding of what was possible.

⁶²⁹ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 224.

⁶³⁰ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 206.

⁶³¹ Michael Goldfarb, *Emancipation: How Liberating Europe's Jews from the Ghetto Led to Revolution and Renaissance* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009), pp. 111-112.

The salon as an intimate, semi-private institution that flourished in the domestic setting of the home, detached from the decision making powers of a monarchy or state, was uniquely suited to serve the *salonnières* utopic ends. It allowed them to freely examine the merits and problems associated with their ideology and to control the social structures required to achieve the ideals they promulgated. They no longer had to accept imperfect preliminary conditions but could, instead, reinvent the basic principles that regulated ideas and actions, establishing stronger moral foundations upon which to elaborate. By bringing *Bildung's* philosophy to life in their salons, by making the ideal the very structure upon which social interactions were based, they demonstrated that the Platonic Triad was not a nebulous concept detached from human activity, but a viable principle for governing society as the ancient Greeks had professed.

On Beauty and its Significance for the Soul

The *salonnières* attempted to integrate the real and ideal, harmonize the subjective and collective features of a Beautiful Soul and represent the pursuit of perfectibility through aestheticized practice within their salons. Unsurprisingly, Beauty was the cornerstone of a Beautiful Soul, the feature that coalesced the disparate parts of cultivated personhood, the distinctive quality which set this philosophy's conceptual approach to addressing social issues apart from other rational-analytical perspectives. Beauty governed the *salonnières* inner lives, shaped their character, and informed their actions in the world; a world which Varnhagen often referred to, like Goethe and Schiller, as "The Beautiful World."⁶³²

The *salonnières* understood beauty as the guiding force of their salons. Life without beauty had no purpose, no direction forward, no pathway to knowledge. In its absence there was little impetus to cultivate the innumerable latent selves or to aspire towards a more perfect reality. The *salonnières* were aware of the humanizing quality of beauty, which could teach morality, turn selfishness into a concern for the collective will, tame brutish impulses and ennoble life. They explored the utopian potential of the arts, interrogating the influences that the experience of the beautiful might have in forming a more enlightened humanity. "How to beautify the earth" was the enduring theme towards which Varnhagen's life was directed.⁶³³

The beauty that the *salonnières* nurtured in their salons began with the poetic atmosphere

⁶³² Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 77.

⁶³³ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 203.

that they created. Beauty was as important to discourse as active moderation of conversations for it influenced the psychological state of those present to one conducive to intellectual suppleness and social receptivity. If the space was shorn of beauty, if it did not excite the imagination or evoke a sense of poetry, then it would fail to induce an animated engagement with the ideas presented. And so, the salon was a place one came to be transported to another, more beautiful world where social interactions were precipitated by the *salonnières* heightened aesthetic sensibility.

From the primary literature we have a vivid picture of what this intensely aesthetic atmosphere would have been like, captivating the senses from beginning to end, offering each participant a wealth of impressions in which to delight and learn from. On a typical day in the first salon of Varnhagen, which lasted from 1790 to 1806, guests would climb the stairs to the attic room in her family home on Jägerstraße where her salon took place. The atmosphere was not grand like her later salon (1821-1832), in the elegant and spacious blue rooms of the house on Mauerstraße, where she lived with her husband. Nor, at this time, could she provide the lavish dinners that she did subsequently. However, the atmosphere was cozy and inviting, the perfect place for intimate and unpretentious conversations. Upon entering the space, the guests might find her deep in conversation with Friedrich Schlegel, the poet Johann Ludwig Tieck (1773-1853), or his brother the sculptor, Christian Friedrich Tieck (1776-1851). With her characteristic gaiety she would greet them, offering a poetic aphorism or idea communicated with the wit and imaginativeness for which she was so admired by her friends. The newcomers might contemplate the ideas she had portrayed with the aesthetic sensitivity one gives to a painting, for she had turned the spoken word into a work of art and the mind was awakened to new possibilities by this verbal aestheticism.

Within the space of the salon, Varnhagen's inner psychological state would be revealed through her aesthetic choices. The room was elegantly furnished with a piano and flowers as the focal point. Select books were displayed to reflect the ideas discussed in the salon. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's bust was prominently featured to represent the ideals of the Enlightenment; next to this icon, the bust of Schleiermacher symbolized the rules of sociability that governed the salon; and the bust of Prince Louis Ferdinand indexed an individual whose soul Varnhagen had

sculpted.⁶³⁴ This triptych of the salon's influences, values, and aspirations, respectively, was emblematic of the *salonnières* desire to embody ideas in the physical world. As those present subconsciously processed the illustrious intellectual figures of the salon rendered in stone, tea and cake might be served as the Romantic poets discussed the literary works of Jean Paul or Friedrich de la Motte Fouqué (1777-1843) placed on the table by the authors themselves for salon guests to read and discuss.

Once the guests had absorbed the inspired aesthetic of their surroundings and the initial conversations had come to a close, those present would be seated. The salon almost always began with the contemplation of an aesthetic form; a reading from a passage of a play by Goethe, letters by Schiller, or a book by Schlegel. After listening to the literary work, a vibrant conversation would ensue. The author would often be present to convey the essential aspects of their art and to hear the perspectives that emerged. Both giving and receiving constructive criticism was itself a work of art within the salon, for the discussion that emerged was exquisitely communicated by these poets of conversation, who captured all the beauty of the spoken word. Ideas were expressed with elegantly formulated sentence compositions and poetically rendered concepts. Varnhagen understood conversations to be highly aesthetic, a living art form, and this appreciation was apparent in the way that she facilitated the salon.⁶³⁵ Discourse was directed by Varnhagen with the subtlety of a musical conductor, bringing the various voices into a consonance that was both intellectually rigorous and pleasurable to the ear.

After hours of conversation in which the improvisational linguistic genius of the learned guests left a lyrical impression in the minds of participants, the salon would transition to yet another aesthetic form: music. The conversation had been pushed to new intellectual terrains and when the limits of current knowledge were reached, music provided a sense of unity and completion. In the intimate setting of the home, with the immediacy of sensory impressions, the power of music was more intensely felt.⁶³⁶ Once the formal salon had concluded, the arts of conversation and music would continue informally, spontaneously generated by the salon participants with the creative impulse of an artist. Bach, Schubert, Mozart, and Beethoven, were

⁶³⁴ Bilski and Braun, *Jewish Women and their Salons*, p. 28.

⁶³⁵ Renata Fuchs, "Dann ist und Bleibt eine Korrespondenz Lebendig": Romantic Dialogue in the Letters and Works of Rahel Levin Varnhagen, Bettina Brentano von Arnim, and Karoline von Günderrode' (Doctoral Thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2015), p. 56.

⁶³⁶ Wilhelmy Dollinger, *Die Berliner Salons*, p. 154.

some of the composers that were most loved in the salons at this time. Prince Louis could be found at the piano playing a mélange of classical pieces as he sought Varnhagen's counsel on the questions raised in the salon. The conclusions drawn in conversation might be examined further by a diplomat and a rising poet as they drank tea on a chaise lounge and listened to Prince Louis play. The salon would slowly fade only after hours of conversation and a full engagement with the spectrum of aesthetic forms upon which salon sociability was structured.

The decision to have the salon take place in the home, where objects and artifacts were displayed, rendered material the inner workings of the *salonnières* mind and represented the ideals she hoped would be reached through conversation. This proffered intimacy of exposing her own intellectual state through aesthetic arrangement opened guests to the possibility of representing themselves with equal depth, which, in turn, contributed to the clarity and meaning of the conversations that took place. The familiarity of this environment was one more conducive to free flowing conversation than a sterile institutional building devoid of inspiration or a public setting which lacked intimacy. The aesthetic of the physical space emphasized the welcoming, non-utilitarian spirit of the salon, one that encouraged the expression of spontaneous thought unhindered by the fear of public scrutiny. A strong ethos of reciprocity was reinforced by the *salonnières* preliminary act of generosity in opening her home to others. Guests felt comfortable speaking openly in this welcoming, personal environment that she had tastefully created and, as a consequence, they were moved by the desire and responsibility to contribute to the beauty in this space. The domestic setting of the salon symbolized the public-private dimensions of self-cultivation. *Bildung* was a highly personal activity, and therefore it took place in the private setting of the home. However, now the home was opened to an educated public.⁶³⁷

The *salonnières* contributed to the symbolically rich environment by offering their participants material for the creative imagination to flourish. The visual arts, music, poetry and literature were all essential elements of this space: fruit bowls on tables carefully composed as a mimetic representation of a still life; chamber music that filled the air perfumed by elaborate floral arrangements; paintings strategically hung on the walls to evoke admiration and contemplation; and verses of poetry elegantly spoken were just a few of the aesthetic details that

⁶³⁷ Despina Stratigakos, 'Women and the Modern Metropolis', in *Think Space: Approaches to Metropolitanism*, ed. by Dorothee Brantz, Sasha Disko, Georg Wagner-Kyora (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012), pp. 279-307 (pp. 297-298).

composed this world, delighted guests and served as a respite from stark reality. Within the context of these aesthetic influences a new reality emerged. The particular composition of this reality varied among salons in the cultural contents and the emphasis given to certain art forms or intellectual traditions. In some salons “rough drafts were read aloud for criticism, new books evaluated, (while) others were known mainly for sparkling conversation, elegant dinners, and musical performances.”⁶³⁸ Almost all of the Berlin salons had a musical component, and certain salons such as that of Amalie Beer and the Mendelssohn family were specifically dedicated to music. Music was considered the most important of the salon’s arts because it most closely related to *Bildung*.

Struck by both the depth of the conversations and the pleasure found in this unique form of aestheticized communion, participants were often left feeling deeply inspired. As one exclaimed: “How greatly that circle inspired and spurred me on cannot be put into words.”⁶³⁹ The atmosphere of the salon, distinguished by the experience of beauty that pervaded the golden hours in which it took place, imparted a special spirit, one that was widely felt, yet remained elusive. Varnhagen attempted to put it into words in a fragment from her letters when she said that it was “a capable good will...not visible.”⁶⁴⁰ Here, the connection between beauty and goodness became apparent, for goodness seemed to flow naturally from the beauty that was created in the salon. It is no surprise that many participants became obsessed with this space and the *salonnière* was so revered, for she had accomplished what no one else had: artfully reproducing a metaphysical form in the physical world. The distinct spirit that emerged within the salon proved critical to its success. The aesthetic of the space and the myriad artistic influences that were integrated into its discursive content all had profound effects on the social interactions and ideas that were produced. This is made apparent by the pronounced emphasis that beauty was given in the salon’s evolution. With experience and age, as their ability to harness the salon to advance the ends of *Bildung* became more developed, the *salonnières* better understood the fertile possibilities of aesthetics to unite people and improve the condition of the soul. With greater nuance and methodological rigor, the *salonnières* artfully employed beauty within their salons. The consequences of their reflections are elucidated here to demonstrate both

⁶³⁸ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 18.

⁶³⁹ Tornius, *Salons*, p. 251.

⁶⁴⁰ Thomann Tewartson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 34.

the content of their theorizing and the nature of their practical accomplishments.

The *salonnières* emphasized beauty found in artistic forms because its appreciation did not require extensive background knowledge in a specific intellectual tradition. Beauty provided a shared lexicon that facilitated communication and catalyzed meaningful conversation amongst a diverse public. It undergirded the salon insofar as it inspired the cultivation of common faculties. Intellectual exploration was enhanced by aesthetic sensibility; social interactions were stimulated by the equalizing encounter with the beautiful. After listening to a piece of music together, for example, mutual understanding could be achieved in the commonality of an emotional response. The immediacy and inclusiveness of the experience, in other words, was positively disarming and encouraged intense discussion and collaboration. Varnhagen expanded the musical offerings in her second salon because she saw the moral value in the bond that her participants experienced in the face of music.⁶⁴¹ Beauty, then, was the basis of language and sociability, the most primal example of human connectivity, the foundation of a common system of knowledge. By refining the ability to differentiate color or composition in a painting, for example, a person exercised the acute perception necessary to interpret facial expressions or to consider the significance of word choice. Sensory receptiveness meant a more cultivated ability to comprehend social interactions and the intricate elements that composed personhood.

Reading aloud, a widespread practice of the Enlightenment era, contributed to the aesthetic communication of ideas and was an important element of the salon.⁶⁴² Herz, for example, described her salon as comprised of a heterogeneous group of individuals who shared the desire and ability to read well.⁶⁴³ Reading was an incarnation of Enlightenment principles, a way of both effectively communicating ideas while evoking the poetry of the written word.⁶⁴⁴ Aphorisms, anecdotes, novellas, travel writing, poems and memoirs, all provided lyrical content for salon conversation.⁶⁴⁵ Written works were an important part of the art of communication because they were complete. This completeness gave a definitiveness to ideas left unfinished in conversation that was instructive. As Varnhagen said “a drama, a novel... must be a complete

⁶⁴¹ Ibid., p. 181.

⁶⁴² Curran, ‘Oral Reading, Print Culture, and the German Enlightenment’, p. 698.

⁶⁴³ Ibid., p. 699.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 707.

⁶⁴⁵ Peter Seibert, *Der literarische Salon. Literatur und Geselligkeit zwischen Aufklärung und Vormärz* (Stuttgart: J.B.Metzler, 1993), p. 170.

expression of the world; everything that appears there will be beautiful.”⁶⁴⁶

Reading played an important role in the salon because the *salonnières* believed that understanding the subtleties of another person’s worldview was the basis for social cohesion. Hearing passages from a book that presented the compelling story of a protagonist induced empathy for the character and the author in a way that a non-aesthetic form could not. Suddenly, the position of a person from a very different social background or circumstance was not so easily categorized as otherness, nor did it elicit feelings of distrust and misunderstanding. By placing the reader into the psyche of the other as if it were their own, works of literature inspired a sense of togetherness that might otherwise be inconceivable. Aesthetic activity eschewed hierarchy, for everyone shared equally in its educating powers. Cultivation of taste and sensibilities meant cultivation of social perception and processes of communication which led to the prospect of mutual understanding.

The *salonnières* employed beauty to induce states of empathy and social receptivity, acting as the basis for constructive exchanges. Artistic forms were designed to humanize salon participants so that they would have the cognitive capacity and emotional depth to truly listen to others and grasp their circumstance in the world. By creating opportunities for the appreciation of beauty through art displayed or performed in the space of the salon, and in an emphasis on aesthetics in lectures, the *salonnières* governed their spaces with the sensitivity found in the act of aesthetic contemplation.⁶⁴⁷ The decision to share a beautiful experience created a foundational atmosphere of conviviality and collaboration.

Discourse itself proved to be the most influential art form of *Bildung* and the one that most defined the spirit of the salon. The ability of conversation to elevate the human spirit through the aesthetic pleasure derived from the spoken word merged with the functional aspects of conversations to convey knowledge. This felicitous marriage turned the laborious process of self-improvement into a gratifying undertaking, one in which the joys of communication and the pleasure in practicing virtue were pronounced.⁶⁴⁸ Like the contemplation of a beautiful landscape whose aesthetic value stimulates a vibrant affirmation of being that excites a desire to be shared, the contemplation of ideas rendered beautiful in salon discourse awakened a search

⁶⁴⁶ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 273.

⁶⁴⁷ Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 63.

⁶⁴⁸ Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt*, p. 17.

for meaning in communion with others.

The philosophical perspective of the time that the moral function of aesthetics lay in its communicability was pronounced in the art of conversation which necessitated reciprocity. When communication became art, it fulfilled beauty's natural ends of mutuality more obviously than other art forms in which the shared dimension was present, but not as immediately apparent. Music could excite a desire to be shared that might lead to empathy and understanding. Inter-subjectivity, however, was the very foundation of conversation and, as such, when beautified, its moral effects were all the more perceptible. Those who spoke beautifully were recognized for their ability to raise conversation to a work of art. With their artistry, no longer did communication serve merely to transfer knowledge, but rather to poetically derive and creatively express knowledge.

Beauty could be found everywhere within the communicative acts that took place in the salon. There was beauty in hand gestures and pauses, in silences and proclamations, in the repositioning of two words. It was detected in the increased decibels of a voice which gave away the passion of their speaker or in the gentlest pause taken to gracefully allow another person to enter the conversation. Beauty was found in the moment when two perspectives merged in harmonious accord while retaining their individual integrity, or the triumphant times when the argument deemed closest to the Good was won without self-righteousness or flattery. Goethe and Schiller's ideas on the sociable nature of beauty seemed destined to be proven in the setting of the salon. No longer was beauty imprisoned within the perimeters of a frame or a stage, now it permeated every dimension of life, informing the nuances of social existence in a communicative form in which the benefits of aestheticized human interactions were palpable. Within every discursive act there existed the possibility of a reawakening to one's senses, to one's being, and to other people in the world.

The particular brilliance of the *salonnières* adoption of *Bildung* was in the extensiveness and meticulousness of this aesthetic-communicative application. Salon participants readily embraced the virtues of this aestheticized communication, extolling the *salonnières* for treating all of life poetically. Jean Paul exclaimed of Varnhagen: "Winged one!- in every sense.. you treat life poetically and consequently life treats you in the same way. You bring the lofty freedom of

poetry into the sphere of reality, and expect to find again the same beauties here as there...”⁶⁴⁹

The Art of Living: Forming a Beautiful Humanity

The effect of the myriad aesthetic influences in the salon was that salon life itself became the ultimate work of art. Like an artist whose visceral impulse to create resolves itself with the rigorous logic of aesthetic principles, the *salonnières* established their salons with a similar sensibility, combining the originality of their guests’ personalities with the aestheticized structures of sociability, giving form to content. In doing so, they mediated the aestheticization of their own lives and the lives of others, composing the life forces present into a total work of art in which all the other art forms were represented. Their poetic endeavors were founded upon Goethe’s idea that humanity might become morally and intellectually beautiful. They were perhaps the only people who concretely attempted to actualize this vision by systematically working to beautify the souls of those in their circles and beyond.

To live beautifully within the salon and to transform one’s being into part of a more beautiful humanity entailed embodying the relationship between Beauty and the Good in every thought and action. A beautiful life could not be taken up occasionally, it necessitated entering a sustained aesthetic state. As Varnhagen remarked “One cannot become an artist at six o’clock in the evening.”⁶⁵⁰ She was certain that the true artists, both of a particular form and of living, were those who perennially lived as such. With its continuity and immediacy, the salon made entrance into this aesthetic state viable. Varnhagen believed that:

The positive of life consists in living out what is immediately before us... To feel the present moment, to be able to deal with it, that is the art of living; the more we have of this in us, the more positive we shall be, and the more positive will be our experiences.⁶⁵¹

Like any performative art form, the salon’s creativity came from its temporal constraints of having to actualize ideas and aspirations in the present. Gentz, who affectionately described Varnhagen’s methods of communication as “fresh aromatic strawberries, to which however, mold and roots are still hanging” captured the sweetness in the raw immediacy of her lived,

⁶⁴⁹ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 57.

⁶⁵⁰ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 279.

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

communicative style.⁶⁵²

The salon represented the art of living beautifully insofar as the immediate and un-replicable relationships of the mind were of an indispensably creative nature. As Varnhagen remarked:

In all of life as in art, its practice and contemplation, ever more relations must be set forth (this alone means living), not because we live more this way: no repetition could achieve that. But with each particular relationship something new is created; and for this reason alone its increase is desirable, invigorating, joyful, noble, real.⁶⁵³

Living beautifully found expression in the salon through the multitudinous relationships that the *salonnières* provided among people, art, and ideas. Varnhagen, in particular, believed that life should be a work of art and that her salon was a representation of this art of living.⁶⁵⁴ She wanted to transform the entirety of existence into an art form, not just existence juxtaposed with forms of art.⁶⁵⁵ Varnhagen spoke to an inclination shared by many of the other *salonnières* when she said that “Man is a work of art...given to himself as a task. Material, artist, and workshop (are contained) within ourselves.”⁶⁵⁶ With this statement she not only affirmed the aesthetic nature of being, she also alluded to the innate potential of *Bildung* suggesting that life can become art, but only if the materials invested in Man are put to use. Just like any other creative act, a beautiful life was not given, it was formed.

The *salonnières*' vision, however, required legitimation, for, despite their belief that conversation (and the art of beautiful living that it epitomized) was of equal or greater value than the art forms of painting, literature, or music, unsurprisingly the dominant ideological perspective did not concur.⁶⁵⁷ This was, perhaps, not simply because the idea was radical but rather that sociability was not typically implemented in such a philosophical way. The domain of conversation, consumed normally by idleness and pleasantries, had been transformed into something entirely different. Thus what the *salonnières* sought to legitimize was, in fact, an entirely new art form. The *salonnières* understanding of their art, and the barriers to its realization, is reflected in a reoccurring dream recounted by Varnhagen which represented “her

⁶⁵² Ibid., p. 296.

⁶⁵³ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 43.

⁶⁵⁴ Benhabib, ‘The Pariah and her Shadow’, p. 11.

⁶⁵⁵ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 283.

⁶⁵⁶ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 44.

⁶⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 134.

most comprehensive attempt at an aesthetic self-definition.”⁶⁵⁸ Varnhagen writes:

I saw men of every...age, from about 17 years on...facial expressions (and color) from all nations which art the power of imagination, and reality had ever shown me; whole worlds of the imagination streamed from my brain which I never thought were contained therein. All the national dress which I ever saw in such books where they are collected, in the theaters, or in the world, were there in actuality. Men with helmets, without helmets, with curly hair; with caps, and turbans of every kind; with coats, with jackets, with tight, with very flowing clothes...The most beautiful little boots, sandals, and strange shoes they wore...they often also went barefoot...The sculptors, however, had bear arms, as the women now have; that's how you recognized them. Many of the men carried their tools in their hands. The noise was almost supernatural, because they all spoke and judged their works. The crowd prevented them and me from coming close to the works of art, and most remained quite far. For me, however, the artists were the works of art, and I was busy observing them with infinite care, and my dream lasted a very long time.⁶⁵⁹

In this vivid description she explains that no matter how absorbing the art on display may have been to the crowd, the art form that interested her most was observing the artists themselves. In juxtaposing the lives of others with the visual arts, she makes their aestheticized existence of greater significance as more established art forms, a powerful testament to the importance that she perceived in the institution of the salon. She imagines a utopia in which a heterogeneous group of people join to live harmoniously according to aesthetic principles. But her dream also suggests that she felt alone in her perception, inhibited by the mob of people preoccupied with aesthetic forms that were already valued. Their obliviousness to the beauty that she perceived posed a threat to the utopic potential of her vision.

There is great significance in the fact that this vision came to her in a dream. The *salonnières* feared that their ideals would remain in the dream world and were constantly cognizant of the need to apply the material of the imagination to physical reality. Despite the frustrations that Varnhagen faced from her pioneering efforts, many salon participants did recognize that life in the salon became a work of art and saw Varnhagen as an artist of living beautifully. Jean Paul, for example, said of Varnhagen “She is an artist, she begins an entirely new sphere, she is an exceptional being, in conflict with ordinary life and raised high above

⁶⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 135.

⁶⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 135.

it...⁶⁶⁰ Bettina von Arnim described Varnhagen as a person whose most beautiful feature was her “penetration of the individual” which she described as a divine work of art.⁶⁶¹ Karl Varnhagen believed that Rahel Varnhagen had a “talent for life” which made everything she did beautiful.⁶⁶² Schlegel was also considered an artist by her contemporaries. In his novel *Lucinde* (1799), Friedrich Schlegel said of his wife that she “was an artist, and passionately worshiped beauty.”⁶⁶³ His understanding of an artist was one “who possessed a certain approach to life characterized by poetry a certain kind of feeling or intuition manifest in creative imagination.”⁶⁶⁴ Salon participants agreed that an artist was a person who could “transform situations and people into the beautiful.”⁶⁶⁵

The patrons of the salons viewed the *salonnières* as artists because they did not separate life from art and saw beauty everywhere.⁶⁶⁶ From salon sociability and human interactions, to nature, music and literature, the world was an endless source of aesthetic inspiration. Primary accounts reveal the breadth and extent to which Varnhagen perceived of the world in this way. One anonymous visitor recalled how moved she was by the music played in her salon:

The conversation first touched upon a question of religious orthodoxy and then passed to music, one of the foreign visitors taking up the cudgels on behalf of Rossini; a celebrated singer went to the piano and gave songs by Schubert and Beethoven, to which Rahel listened with tears in her eyes and a happy smile.⁶⁶⁷

When traveling, Varnhagen went to great lengths to discover new aesthetic experiences. In one instance, she visited every convent and monastery in a region, not for their religious significance but for their sensory qualities. In particular, she was delighted by a Mozart mass organized in her honour.⁶⁶⁸ Her appreciation of beauty encompassed nature as well. So overwhelmed and moved was she by the landscapes that she discovered in Silesia, that she could not put her experience of them into words.⁶⁶⁹ Flowers, she believed, were her medicine and when human art forms

⁶⁶⁰ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 174.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 219.

⁶⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 238.

⁶⁶³ Lawler and Richardson ‘Introduction’ in *Florentin*, p. xiii.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

⁶⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁶⁶⁶ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 49.

⁶⁶⁷ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 238.

⁶⁶⁸ Thomann Tewardson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, pp. 85-86.

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

disappointed her, she found solace in the purity of natural scenery.⁶⁷⁰ Even in her old age she proclaimed that she found beauty in the same wide variety of things that she had always loved, among them “air, flowers, fields, music, the theatre, discussion, that is, sociality, order, cleanliness, elegance, wit, consistency of thought.”⁶⁷¹ With her intense sensitivity and imaginative perception of the world, she had mastered the art of living beautifully.

Varnhagen believed that the artist of a form and of living must be sincere if they were to become “one of the elect of mankind” who could take part in forming a more beautiful humanity.⁶⁷² Her perspective reflects the tenet of *Bildung* that a creation of the highest value, that would form a beautified humanity, was one that originated from a person who was morally cultivated. For if a person’s intentions were not beautiful, then the creation itself, as perfect as it may seem, would be wrought with contradictions and tensions. Art, and artful living, that was both beautiful and came from a person who had a Beautiful Soul, however, had a purity that was aesthetically pleasing and morally sound.

By aestheticizing the everyday in conversation and making life within the salon beautiful, the *salonnières* provided a degree of detachment from an unmediated reality that served to bring humanity closer to the Platonic ideal. The relationship between the real and ideal was ultimately reconciled through an aesthetic state that lifted reality closer to perfection. In this intermediate state, the lines between reality and imagination were blurred. Like an actor whose experimentation with different characters reveals the wider scope of lived experience, salon participants contemplated their innumerable, more perfect selves within this imaginative space. The *salonnières* facilitated the process of aesthetic development by assembling the sets in which to play out different ideas and ways of being. The space of the salon was constantly evolving to reflect this practice. The art that was displayed, the books that were read, the musical compositions that were performed, and the objects presented for study became the material props that were used to develop the art of living beautifully. The ideas that were discussed in the salons were perpetually in flux so that, like the actor or musician who changes repertoire, the subject matter of this aesthetic practice developed with time and new experiences.

⁶⁷⁰ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 289.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁶⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 272.

The performativity of speaking in the salon enabled those in pursuit of a beautiful soul to express themselves in a manner that allowed for public critique. Self-cultivation transformed from an inward, contemplative process to a performative art form subject to the scrutiny of others. Publicizing the intimate concerns of one's soul within the salon was perhaps the only way in which individuals could be held accountable to the moral demands of an otherwise opaque and inward process. Since there was no science to the study of the soul, nor a quantifiable metric for its assessment, aesthetic interpretations of one's own development through the performative expression of ideas became the means by which to encourage this process. Moreover, the performativity of self-cultivation, which demanded an interactive audience, harnessed collective wisdom and support of a receptive community dedicated to mutual enlightenment. The intense, shared engagement in matters so personal could endure precisely because of this aesthetic state. The soul was afforded a place to be sculpted before its final reveal.

In this respect, we can understand the salon as a rehearsal for reality, a space in which participants had the performative freedom to test the possibilities of what they could be through an aesthetic performance of the ideal. The salon became the theatre of *Bildung* whose curtains could eventually open to a new, more beautiful world. Indeed, the salon is often analogized to the theatre in the literature, "the meeting places of those who had learned how to represent themselves through conversation."⁶⁷³ Goethe's Wilhelm Meister, who becomes an actor in the theatre is often compared to a cultivated participant in salon conversation.⁶⁷⁴ The *salonnières* would most likely have welcomed this analogy since they saw the theatre as having a similar function and significance as their salons. As Varnhagen remarked "A city without a theatre...is like a person with his eyes shut: a place without a breadth of fresh air...In our time and our cities (the theatre) is the one general (institution), where the circle of joy, of intellect, of participation and the gathering...of all classes is drawn together."⁶⁷⁵ Varnhagen shared Schiller's conception of the theatre as a critical space to witness moral development and social change.⁶⁷⁶ Her views on theatre inevitably informed the performative dimensions of her salon.

⁶⁷³ Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 38.

⁶⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁶⁷⁵ Thomann Tewarson, *Rahel Levin Varnhagen*, p. 173.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 173.

The purpose of this *Bildung* theatre was threefold. First, its ambiguous status between reality and imagination made more believable the possibilities of change. The very act of exercising different realities, such as new norms of social status and value, rendered these norms tangible even when they had not yet permeated society. Individuals could witness the developments that they wanted to see in themselves and in their society, allowing them to determine what they wanted to bring to the world outside of the salon. Since the salon was still a part of the world, not the imagination, those ideas were closer to being realized. Thus, change could be accelerated because the great barrier between what was and what could be was rendered permeable. The second purpose of the theatre of *Bildung* was to examine the content of this rehearsed material, questioning developments within the self and the community to avoid irrational individual or mass action through considered reflection before salon life translated to life in the world at large. Third, debate over social problems, political and philosophical ideas and alternative realities were made appealing and less potentially divisive through their aesthetic enactment.

Thus, the process of envisioning new ideals and rationally questioning their validity, according to Mendelssohn's understanding of both *Bildung* and Enlightenment, was one that the *salonnières* actualized.⁶⁷⁷ The aspirational end of this new performative art form in which the inner dimensions of one's personhood were made transparent in the world of the salon was to achieve the transcendent state of a Beautiful Soul. If each person worked towards this end, a more beautiful humanity would eventually emerge. The *salonnières* were the "explorer of souls" and the "leader of souls."⁶⁷⁸ Their role was to bring this beautiful humanity into being.

Conclusion

This book has examined the distinctive features of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* and investigated their practical application in the Berlin salons. My exploration of the *salonnières* and the salons they organized was structured to mirror the discussion of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*. It demonstrated that they aspired to be and enacted the figure of the Beautiful Soul, and that their

⁶⁷⁷ See Altmann, 'Das Menschenbild und die Bildung des Menschen nach Moses Mendelssohn' pp.11-28.

⁶⁷⁸ Key, *Rahel Varnhagen*, p. 214.

salons were a place in which other individuals could join in this pursuit. My aim was to throw into relief the union of the philosophy of *Bildung* and the institution of the salon at a particular moment in German history.

What happened to *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* after the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries? The concepts retained some salience throughout the nineteenth century, but attempts at contributing to this philosophical tradition were less original and rigorous than in the so called Age of Goethe. Some ventures could not truly claim to be a part of this tradition and others appropriated the phrase “Beautiful Soul” in diametric opposition to its principles.⁶⁷⁹ In certain circles of the *Bildungsbürgertum*, the concepts were adopted as a passing fashion, a badge that could be worn, a term that could be employed cavalierly without underlying knowledge of their philosophical aims. In many instances *Bildung* became little more than a sign of approval for a bourgeois career in the civil service. It was associated primarily with training in the ancient languages and a high school or university degree. The deeper ideals of self-cultivation envisioned by Goethe and Schiller were all but lost.⁶⁸⁰

The major development that occurred was that *Bildung* became disconnected from its end of a beautiful soul and the nature of its former meaning changed as a consequence. I choose not to explore the evolution of *Bildung* after the time period that this book has covered because, from my perspective, to do so would be to inaccurately conflate topics. Just as it would be unfair to equate *Bildung* in its sixteenth century religious sense with *Bildung* in its eighteenth century humanistic definition, any appropriations of the terms following this period ultimately constitute a fundamentally separate tradition.

Indeed, the reduction of the concept’s former meaning was met with contempt by later philosophers such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) who, in a mocking passage referring to the latter-day advocates of the Beautiful Soul, remarked that:

They despised the body, they left it out of account; even more, they treated it like an enemy. They were insane enough to believe that one could carry around a ‘beautiful soul’ in some cadaverous miscarriage...And to make it comprehensible to others, they had to employ the concept of ‘beautiful soul’ differently, to revalue its natural value, until finally a pale, sickly, idiotically enthusiastic creature was

⁶⁷⁹ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, pp. 283-298.

⁶⁸⁰ For an overview of the *Bildungsbürgertum* in the nineteenth century see Werner Conze, Jürgen Kocka (eds.), *Bildungsbürgertum im 19. Jahrhundert: Bildungssystem und Professionalisierung in internationalen Vergleichen* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1985).

perceived as ‘perfection,’ as ‘angelic,’ as transfigured, as a higher form of human being.⁶⁸¹

The figure of the Beautiful Soul was debased in her rationalization and “Christianization” in Nietzsche’s eyes.

Part of the reason this was the case was that any attempt to implement an idea intended to radically redesign the philosophical and structural constitution of politics and society requires visionaries who can translate complex principles into pragmatic action and intervene when the concepts are misrepresented. Before people liberated themselves through self-cultivation, they needed guidance from mentors cognizant of and expert in these principles and practices. Varnhagen, in particular, was this kind of visionary. People willingly followed her because of her exceptional personality and ability to imagine the world in a different way. With her demise, a poetic philosophy in pursuit of higher ideals became reduced to an institutionalized educational model.

However, a strong philosophy should, in theory, survive beyond the death of its creators and greatest proponents. Therefore, this explanation is only a partial one. The principal reason for the superficial appropriation and diminishment of *Bildung* was the accelerating influences of industrialization and the market economy. In a capitalist society progressively more preoccupied with individual status and wealth, collective concerns of the soul became secondary, if not irrelevant. The dramatic changes that occurred in the economic sphere seeped into the philosophical sphere, and, as a consequence, the underlying value system decayed. Perceptions of human worth and success hinged on material acquisition, not on a rigorous process of moral and intellectual cultivation. Monetary gain took precedence over human dignity; it became easier to buy one’s social value in the marketplace than to consider the state of one’s soul and work towards its improvement.

As for the salons, some positive social outcomes were achieved. The 1812 edict of Jewish emancipation, for instance, gave Jews the right to become citizens of Berlin and ended the heavy taxes placed upon them. Deborah Hertz has argued that this policy came into being in large part because the *salonnières* demonstrated that the Jews were an essential part of German culture and society.⁶⁸² However, a rise in antisemitism which began during the Pamphlet War of 1803 and

⁶⁸¹ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 284.

⁶⁸² Hertz, *Jewish High Society in Old Regime Berlin*, p. 279.

continued throughout the early nineteenth century, eroded many salon friendships.⁶⁸³ This antisemitism not only had negative implications for the Jewish *salonnières*, it also undermined the tolerance and egalitarianism that salon culture encouraged. With the rise of these exclusionary sentiments, a fundamentally progressive institution lost its salience and social influence.

In addition to the death of the most brilliant *salonnières* and the dawn of a new era of religious intolerance, industrialization contributed to the demise of salon culture. As Marie von Bunsen (1860-1941) a chronicler of salon culture said “aside from the catastrophes of war and inflation” the salon’s disappearance was due to “the acceleration, the Americanization of our existence, the restless need for travel and variety, the increase in hotel hospitality, the clubs, the passion for sports.”⁶⁸⁴ In a society that increasingly prioritized economic growth above all else, the desire to engage the intellect and cultivate moral faculties became less urgent. With a shift in values from collective pursuits of the mind to self-interested material pleasures came a shift in the ways one chose to associate with others and spend one’s time. Individual salons continued but a thriving salon culture comprised of *salonnières* who collaborated with one another did not survive. Those individual salons that did exist mirrored the changing times, taking on more of a club atmosphere by prioritizing special interests and political affiliations which contradicted their former non-utilitarian spirit. Economic changes in the value system, therefore, meant a loss of public interest in *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele*. The critical ideological foundations of salon culture began to dissolve.

The theorists of *Bildung* anticipated that an ethic of unbridled capitalism would imperil the ideal of a Beautiful Soul and the kind of community structures from which she was born. In a final letter to Humboldt, just prior to his death, on March 17, 1832, having observed a time of transition following the July Revolution in 1830, Goethe speculated that his ideas would not find favor in the modern age. Like Schiller, he saw technological change, industrial activity, mechanical developments and an ideology of economic growth to be in contradiction with the ideals of the past.⁶⁸⁵ However, he also believed that the Beautiful Soul’s story was far from over.

⁶⁸³ Ibid., p. 284.

⁶⁸⁴ Emily Bilski, *Berlin Metropolis: Jews and the New Culture 1890-1918* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), p. 202.

⁶⁸⁵ Safranski, *Goethe*, p. 565.

Like the centuries between ancient Greece and Weimar Classicism, fallow periods might exist, but the legacy would continue. Paired with the dynamism of modern times, *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* would eventually flourish once more.

However, as capitalism intensified into a hegemonic socioeconomic system in the twentieth century, there were no substantive attempts to revive this philosophy or salon culture. Any such efforts were isolated, underdeveloped, misrepresented or did not reach the original spirit of the concepts or institution. Adam Smith (1723-1790) replaced Wilhelm von Humboldt as one of the most influential scholars of the eighteenth century. Changes in the activities that people pursued and the priorities that they chose may be understood as a reflection of the divergent understandings of liberalism and social values that these theorists professed.⁶⁸⁶ Furthermore, on a larger political scale, Germany embarked upon an antithetical course with the rise of fascism and its corresponding racial theories that were in direct conflict with the principles of *Bildung* and *die schöne Seele* and the ideological foundation of the Jewish salons. As society suffered the tragedies of the modern age, this utopic model for community life, and most especially, this idealistic philosophy, were all but forgotten amidst the chaos and destruction of industrial change and the aftermath of war.

In the twenty-first century, the original concepts and institution of the salon have all but receded from our memory and collective consciousness. The philosophy of the Beautiful Soul has been lost in the popular vernacular; it is also a relatively obscure domain of scholarship with only one book published on the subject in the English language this century, that of Norton. Meanwhile, salons have come to be associated with initiatives that are in stark contradiction to their original values. Lectures and speaker events are often considered a “salon” in the contemporary context. However, this is a misrepresentation of the term, at least in its traditional sense. Implicit to the definition of a salon is the *collective* exchange of ideas through the art of conversation and a lack of distinction between those who present and those who participate. There is, by contrast, no participation in a speaker event except, perhaps, through a few questions posed by a passive audience which only reinforces a hierarchy of knowledge that was eschewed in the salons. Second, the sterile, hotel conference room-like setting of such events, devoid of beauty, is in patent contradiction to the intimate, aesthetically curated atmosphere of the salon so

⁶⁸⁶ See Ursula Vogel, ‘Liberty is Beautiful: Von Humboldt’s Gift to Liberalism’, *History of Political Thought*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1982), pp. 77-101.

crucial to its success. Social interactions are rendered superficial by the uninspired arena setting in which ideas cannot be collectively interrogated and critiqued. Third, these types of talks are often seen as “networking opportunities,” the instrumental jargon of the modern age. To network is to implicitly expect something out of someone else, to see them as a tool of one’s own material advancement. How contrary this is to the non-utilitarian, idealistic spirit of the salon.

Similarly, internet forums are at times referred to colloquially as the public sphere and online salons.⁶⁸⁷ Yet this, too, fundamentally misses the original intention of the salon. The internet can in theory foster the kind of egalitarian, communicative exchanges that the salon sought to create by bringing people who might not otherwise meet in contact with one another. However, the *type* of interactions that emerge often undermines egalitarianism itself. Unlike the highly personal space of the salon with its culture of politeness and civility, the anonymity of the internet, lacking structures or rules of etiquette, can induce cruelty, bigotry, and deep misunderstandings that fester without accountability. Habitues of online forums may never witness or fully appreciate the negative implications of their online words and actions. Furthermore, internet exchanges can theoretically be insightful, continuous, and knowledge producing, but they very often are just the opposite. The sustained contact of the salon, so critical to the formation of soul-changing relationships, has been replaced by endless streams of one hundred and eighty character tweets and quickly changing newsfeeds with thousands of strangers. As a consequence, online exchanges often suffer from a lack of intellectual rigor and sustained interrogation of critical concepts.

Although there have been no attempts to revitalize the Beautiful Soul or the institution of the salon and that communicative exchanges have, in many respects, taken a turn for the worse, does not mean that this is an impossibility. Indeed, it is precisely these negative developments that heighten the need for a restoration of *Bildung*, *die schöne Seele*, and salon culture. This philosophy may appear naïve and outdated in the context of an increasingly cynical and disenchanted modernity. But extreme pragmatism and the universal embrace of instrumental economic principles in philosophical and social domains has exhausted itself and, arguably, proven profoundly ineffective in advancing human happiness, dignity, and equality.

⁶⁸⁷ See Terje Rasmussen, ‘Internet and the Political Public Sphere’, *Sociology Compass*, vol.8, no.12 (2014), 1315-1329

Among the modern ills we face that could be addressed by this philosophy and the institution of the salon is the deterioration of standards of human decency and the change in our relationship to beauty. It could be argued that cross-culturally universal values of kindness, humility, and compassion have been replaced by subjective aims of material gain, vanity, and self-aggrandizement. Ideals that would maintain human dignity have been deconstructed by a cynicism that evades moral responsibility. It is easier to assume that the world is cruel and contribute to its cruelty than to maintain the will towards idealism and positively shape society's course. It is easier to inure one's emotions to experience, to exist as a half-dead being, and to be selfish, than to see beauty, to feel deeply, and to retain a belief in something greater than oneself. Moral cowardliness and sensory apathy are symptoms of our current age as we suffer through a global crisis of values which leaves us feeling purposeless, degraded, and alone.

The word beauty, once connected to a transcendental ideal and an immaterial state of the soul, has been reduced to surface appearances. The *salonnières* who perceived the world in a beautiful way have been replaced by pop icons who unashamedly extol wealth, power, and personal display at the expense of deeper inquiry into the values that make life worth living. All too often politicians and institutional leaders appear to lack integrity and humanitarian sentiments that would command respect. Disillusioned by the moral turpitude and sorry displays of unbeautiful character traits that we see all around us, it becomes easier to succumb to these commonplace vices: they have become the norm. The values that gain traction are those bound to the desires of specific interest groups that divide the social world into increasingly unequal factions. No longer is our concern for humanity as a whole but rather for the limited circles of people with whom we associate. Cosmopolitan ideals have been replaced by a surge of tribalist sentiments and sectarian populism. Nationalism and rising inequalities threaten peace, security, and social cohesion.

This crisis of values is accompanied by a profound lack of meaning and a distinct loss of purpose. Schiller and Goethe's discussion of the fragmentation of modern society was a prescient harbinger of the contemporary state of the world. The individual has arguably become more fragmented and instrumentalized than ever before, disconnected from his labor and enslaved to structures beyond his control or comprehension. So often professions are pursued entirely for profit while promising a happiness that never materializes. In such cases it is easy to forget what meaning there is in life or what reason there is in continuing to exist when the majority of one's

waking hours are spent on activities divorced of a higher purpose or greater contribution to society.

Having lost a sense of communal life and the importance of belonging to a greater social whole, an epidemic of loneliness and extreme anomie threatens society. Where there were once “Friends of the Soul” and “Societies of Virtue,” there are now people extracting practical benefit from each other and exerting control. Meanwhile, mass hysteria, gratuitous cruelty, and witch hunts without trial fueled by online exchanges can be likened to the Terror and the mob mentalities that Goethe and Schiller warned against. History repeats itself in the mania caused by the irrational actions of a mob. So often lives are destroyed in the lies that dominate click bait titles and social media channels. The more incendiary and mendacious online articles and forums become, the more traction they seem to gain. Admirable ends are obstructed by those who preach under the guise of justice through unjust means. The ills that one group faced are used against others, perpetuating the same issues in different circles rather than learning from past mistakes. As people become resentful and divided, as views become provocative and extreme, as valuable ends and just means become thwarted by ignorance, irrationality, and willful misunderstanding, it appears that somewhere along the path towards progress humanity has lost its way.

In keeping with the cynicism which appears to define our times, Norton ends by suggesting that we should bid this ideal “a final and clear-eyed farewell.”⁶⁸⁸ His conclusion relegates the historical legacy of these ideals to the realm of irrelevance, as evanescent concepts that have outlived their day. By contrast, I have argued that they were in fundamental respects reached during the productive, albeit brief, period when philosophy and institution came together as one, and that there are no compelling reasons why this cannot be achieved once more. Indeed, their renaissance represents a beacon of hope for restoring a deeply fractured society.

The theorists of the Beautiful Soul and the German-Jewish *salonnières* taught us important lessons: to expand our mind, refine our faculties, increase our empathy, and hone our ability to perceive the beauty in this world. They remind us to maintain faith in the Good, to act with a nobility of spirit, to find humane forms of shared existence, and to improve the lives of others. If we still believe in these ideals, then it is not only possible, but also in our best interest to revive them once more. For, as the philosophers in the eighteenth century circles of noble

⁶⁸⁸ Norton, *The Beautiful Soul*, p. 289.

souls maintained, we have the capacity to form a more virtuous humanity. To create the most beautiful of worlds is the duty we owe to ourselves and to posterity.

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