What may character education learn from critique of the *Bildung* tradition?

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1. Introduction

Character education and *Bildung* are both 'hot' in educational theory and practice, albeit in different countries. This paper examines what, if anything, Aristotelian character education may learn from the critique that was formulated towards the implementation of *Bildung* in the German public education system in the 19th century. The issue is, simply put, how Weimar, the German epicentre of *Bildung*, could figuratively speaking be so close to concentration camp Buchenwald, which was at a stone's throw. Section 2 of the paper addresses the meaning and history of *Bildung*, after which Section 3 examines the critique that proponents of *Bildung* treated life too much as an aesthetical and too little as a political project. The second half of the paper examines whether this critique also applies to neo-Aristotelian approaches to character education. In sections 4 and 5, this question is answered via a discussion of John Kekes' approach to the 'art of living' developed in *The Art of Life* (2002). While this approach is not strictly Aristotelian, it has strong affinities with it, and has, like *Bildung*, a strong aesthetical dimension, which makes it ideal for comparison. The conclusion offers a reflection on what Aristotelian character education may learn from the ways in which Kekes understands good lives as combined aesthetical and moral projects, situated within societies that respect rules without with lives cannot be good.

2. A short history of *Bildung*

In this section, will discuss the concept of *Bildung* briefly, just enough to make sense of the critique of *Bildung* (Section 3) and its implications for character education (Section 4).

The concept of *Bildung* has a long history that is often traced to the Middle Ages, when it was used by mystic and theologian Meister Eckhart (1260-1327) in the context of the *Imago Dei* doctrine (Lichtenstein, 1971). *Bildung* was understood as the formation of the human soul by

God, in the image of God, a process on which people had little influence, because they depended for it on God's grace. Through the Enlightenment, German Romanticism and Idealism, *Bildung* underwent a process of secularisation (Johansson et al., 2014). However, *Bildung* always referred to a process of self-formation through which people try to develop from what they are now to an ideal 'image' (*Bild*) of what it means to be human. *Bildung* flourished between 1770 and 1830, when it became a guiding principle in the neo-humanism of Wilhelm von Humboldt, a German minister of education who made *Bildung* the foundation of a new national education system. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (2004, p. 8) calls *Bildung* "perhaps the greatest idea of the eighteenth century" because of its constitutive role in the development of the humanities. He starts his brief history of the concept with Kant, who did not yet use the word *Bildung*, but wrote about the 'cultivation' of our natural capacities as an imperfect duty to ourselves. Between Kant and Hegel, *Bildung* gradually came to refer to what used to be called *Kultur*, a properly human way of developing one's natural talents and capacities. Herder, a student of Kant, had an important role in this change. However, he did not just introduce a new word to describe an old idea. In Herder's view, *Bildung* referred specifically to the *subjective* aspect of culture, i.e. the inner process of using (objective) culture to turn one's life into a harmoniously organised whole (Sørensen, 2015). We could say that *Bildung* is not just cultural 'material', but an ideal to live by.

This process has been described later, by Hegel, as involving a twofold movement; first, becoming home in the world, and then returning from the world to oneself. In other words, *Bildung* is a 'return to oneself' through what is different (Gadamer, 2004, p. 13). This relationship between 'I and the world' is easily misunderstood. First, *Bildung* does not consist in empirically knowing the natural world, but in gaining insight in a *Geist* (world spirit) that unfolds itself through reality, nature, culture and history. *Bildung* is a process of understanding this spiritual totality, and one's own place within in. Second, *Bildung* is not just an initiation into existing knowledge or societal norms as they are. It refers more to a process of becoming consciousness about the ways in which people collectively create relatively enduring cultural products such as stories, that can "hold up a mirror to society" within which society as it exists can critically regard itself (Redding, 2015). Third, while *Bildung* is an *inner* process, schools can nevertheless stimulate this process. Neo-humanists such as Von Humboldt did not want *Bildung* to be the privilege of elites who could afford private education. He established a public system of

education in Germany, which would enable everyone to develop himself freely, deeply and broadly, before entering a profession or participating in society.

Finally, *Bildung* has a semantically closely related shadow term in German, *Erziehung* (Geuss, 1996). While both can be translated as 'training' or 'education', there are at least two linguistic differences. One is that *Erziehung* is now generally used to describe a process that one person has inflicted on another. For example, children receive *Erziehung* through the ways in which parents and schools have trained them to conform to certain social expectations. *Bildung*, on the other hand, is (increasingly) understood as a process of self-cultivation. Another difference is that *Erziehung* refers more to the process (*Wirkung*) of education or training, while Bildung can also refer to a goal (*Zweck*), a "form that is imparted in such a process" (Geuss, 1996, p. 154; Meyer, 2011, p. 4). So, Bildung has a double meaning, referring to both an educational result and a process (Gadamer, 2004, p. 10; Rittermeyer, 2012, p. 20).

Since the 1990s, the notion of *Bildung* hasattracted renewed attention in philosophy of education debates in Germany, the Netherlands and Nordic countries (see e.g. Moos, 2003; Varkøy, 2010). There, *Bildung* experienced a "renewed boom", as a reaction to widespread feelings of a malaise or even a crisis in education, caused by extending an instrumental rationality into the educational domain (Reichenbach, 2014, p. 89). Traditionally, the ideal of a 'liberal education' has had a similar (critical) function in the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of education (Reichenbach, 2014, p. 86). In my home country, the Netherlands, the concept of *Bildung* is appealed to by the minister of education and universities (of applied sciences) in order to help them rethink what education is for in a time when measurable impact, accountability and government control dominate (Biesta & Miedema, 2002; Exley & Ball, 2008). Despite being critical of *Bildung*, Gert Biesta (2002a, p. 344) acknowledged fifteen years ago that "…we need to continue to speak about *Bildung* because the very concept allows us to say something different about education". With its emphasis on the subject as a self-cultivating individual, *Bildung* functions as some kind of regulative ideal in education, even though its meaning and power are far from uncontroversial.

Despite the fact that *Bildung* is a popular notion in educational theory and practice in an number of countries, it is also a contested notion. For example, Løvlie (2002, p. 485) argues that the classical idea of Bildung has "lost its authority". Drawing on Adorno and Baudrillard, Løvlie and Standish (2002, p. 318), conclude that there is a "bleak future for Bildung as self-education

and culture as edifying". Invoking Foucault, Masschelein and Ricken (2003) even argue that the concept of *Bildung* would better be abandoned altogether, because our subjectivity is not something to be governed through public education, which would make it simply "another version of normalising education", as Gur Ze-ev (2002, p. 408) puts it. While many of these contemporary critics leave open the possibility that the classical notion of *Bildung* may be radically transformed into something that is desirable for people today, it is criticised as being 'totalising' (Løvlie & Standish, 2002, p. 339). *Bildung* would be too substantial, leaving little room for considering other world views, which limits its usefulness in a multicultural (Biesta, 2002b), globalised (Masschelein & Ricken, 2003), post-modern and post-humanist society (Taylor, 2016).

3. The critique of *Bildung*

To what extent does the critique on *Bildung* also apply to Aristotelian character (education)? In this section, we will focus on one specific line of critique that was formulated in the 1950s and 60s. Last summer, my family and I spent our holidays in the Czech Republic, and because we found the way back (with two toddlers in the backseat) too long, we decided to make a stop in Germany. We fancied Weimar, known for its cultural heritage and we looked forward to exploring the city in which Goethe and Schiller had lived. When figuring out what else there was to see in the surroundings, I found out that Buchenwald, the former concentration camp in which an estimated 56,545 people died, was only 8 kilometres from the city centre. For reasons unrelated to this fact, we chose another city, but a question had been planted in my mind: are Buchenwald and Weimar really so close? Is there a history of ideas that runs from Goethe, Schiller and Von Humboldt to Hitler? And if there is, what may character education possible learn from it?

It turned out that I was not the first to have asked this question, and in this section, I will summarize some of the intellectual history that links the metaphorical 'Weimar' to 'Buchenwald'. Beforehand, we should note that there are many different political, social and economic factors that explain why Nazism emerged in the 1930s, such as the political instability of the Weimar Republic, the reparations that Germany had to pay following World War I, and the Great Depression that hit the country. At the same time, several authors have focused on the intellectual history of Nazism, trying to understand its ideas by placing them in their (historical)

context. For example, right after World War II, McGovern (1946) attributed an authoritarian attitude to the Germans and then traced it via Nietzsche to Luther. Twenty years after the war, Isaiah Berlin (2001[1965]) argued in a series of lectures that romantics had practised and fostered an aesthetic approach to politics, which turned out to be an ideal breeding ground for fascism. Such attempts to explain fascism are not uncontroversial. Arendt (1989[1945], p. 25) was one of the first to warn that making such historical constructions made Hitler's ideas needlessly more respectable.

Although the suggested historical links cannot account for the "patchwork of Nazi ideology", it seems reasonable to assume there are continuities that extend to the 1930s (Bollenbeck, 2000, p. 68). So, what is the suggested link between Romanticism, politics and fascism? Near the end of his study of Romanticism and its influence on German culture, Safranski (2009, pp. 358-359) reminds his readers that Germany as such did not exist as a political nation until 1871. Before that, it was a collection of small and middle-sized states ruled in more or less authoritarian ways. The French revolution did not have a similar political and societal shift in Germany as in France, and took instead an 'inward' turn. As the context of people's lives was rather small, people freely discovered and developed a world *within themselves*. Subjective imagination, a key ingredient of Romanticism, took over people's mental lives and encouraged them to treat their lives as an aesthetical project. 'Live aesthetically!', was Schiller's moral imperative (cited in Gadamer, 2004, p. 71).

This could mean being exalted, idyllic or in love, making bold plans, giving daring political interpretations, contemplating the universe or digging one's soul. But what these exercises had in common is that they were done with what Safranski (2009, p. 359) calls 'world devotion'. *Bildung* and culture got a kind or religious depth to it, and were expected to provide answers to ultimate questions about life's meaning. This provided a fertile ground for small existential questions on the one hand and for big metaphysical ones on the other. However, the imperative to live aesthetically did not provide for a pragmatic middle ground, a political sphere in which people tried to create a common world. People looked at politicians as being motivated by egoism and occupied with disputes among themselves, and they longed for a kind of apolitical politics, a rule of the people without parties. Safranski (2009, p. 359) concludes that Germany lacked a political culture that other Western countries did develop, one that is based on a

realistic, practically wise kind of humanism, in which Romanticism and realism, extremes and compromises could somehow go together.

We have an idea how Romanticism may have influenced German culture and politics, but we do not know yet what happened to Von Humboldt's heritage. We will briefly describe two developments here. First, while Von Humboldt had wanted Bildung to be accessible to everyone, the ideal of *Bildung* was "watered down by the German middle classes to a mere means of social distinction" (Johansson et al., 2014). Through the establishment of universities, such as the Frederick William University in Berlin, Humboldt had created the possibility for people to be educated in the humanities and sciences. But certainly not all Germans were *gebilded*. In 1914, the educated middle class accounted for about one percent of the German population (Bollenbeck, 2000, p. 69). The education system that Von Humboldt established unintendedly created a small educated middle class, later called the *Bildungsbürgertum*, a label to describe a social class including civil servants, teachers, ministers, lawyers and doctors that shared a 'good taste'. In his study of German citizenship, Kocka (1987, p. 53) notes that, compared to Western Europe, civil service played an important role in the German educated middle class, which made it "*obrigkeitsstaatlich durchsetzt*" (permeated by state authority) and had a "*bürokratischen Beigeschmack*" (bureaucratic connotation). Kocka also notes that while the *Bildungsbürgertum* was defined primarily culturally, and not politically or economically (like the bourgeoisie), they did gain good social positions, political power and material wealth in comparison to France, England and the Netherlands (Kocka, 1987, pp. 35, 52). So, while Von Humboldt had wanted his education system to be accessible to all, it created in fact a small yet powerful group distinguished by its (self-declared) taste and rather obedience attitudes.

Second, Von Humboldt's cosmopolitan intentions with the education system gave way to more nationalistic aims. In a comparison of different educational ideals, Dewey (2007[1916]) notes that Kant believed that children must be educated by enlightened men, be it parents or private teachers, but certainly not by public, state funded schools. Dewey (2007, p. 74) cites Kant as saying: "Rulers are simply interested in such training as will make their subjects better tools for their own intentions." So, Kant seemed to worry that the interests of states were so strong that state-regulated education would hamper the Enlightenment. To some extent, he seems right. Dewey (2007, p. 74) explains that just two decades later, Kant's predecessors Fichte and Hegel argued that the chief function of the state is educational, and that its goal would be to

"regenerate" Germany. Dewey notes that Germany was the first country to establish a public, universal and compulsory system of education, which would have to bring this goal about. The idea of "the importance of education for human welfare and progress was captured by national interests", Dewey (2007, p.75) concludes. In a similar vein, Geuss (1996, p. 163) writes that *Bildung* was 'taken over' into a nationalist programme that developed after the birth of the Second Empire in 1871, although he notes that the take-over was not complete, because of the strong individualistic connotation that *Bildung* retained.

In remarks that Nietzsche makes about German universities near the end of the nineteenth century, education in the grip of nationalism and dutiful teachers are central themes. In a chapter in *Twilight of the Idols* (1911 [1888], p. 52) called 'Things the Germans lack', he describes the atmosphere at universities as 'barren, 'self-satisfied' and 'lukewarm'. Germans were once known for their thinkers and poets, but are now "…bored by intellect, they mistrust intellect; politics have swallowed up all earnestness for really intellectual things—'Germany, Germany above all'" (p. 51). Nietzsche contrasts philosophy and spiritual matters with politics, and states explicitly that 'culture' and 'state' are in an antagonistic relationship. For Nietzsche, this implies that "All great periods of culture have been periods of political decline; that which is great from the standpoint of culture, was always unpolitical—even anti-political." (p. 54). In Nietzsche's view, the whole system of public education had forgotten the importance of *Bildung* for its own sake and replaced it with the German nation state. Spiritless teachers and professors that populate schools and universities were unsuited to engage students' in their *Bildung,* and it would need 'real' educators like Goethe, who were *gebilded* themselves, to do this job.

I draw two conclusions from this short history. One is that *Bildung*, as the aesthetical project to cultivate one's subjectivity, largely ignored the development of what we could call with Safranski 'political wisdom' or 'pragmatic humanism'. The other is that politics, in this case German nationalism, had *not* ignored education and *Bildung,* but reinterpreted it in a way that suited their nationalistic ends. My hypothesis is that these two conclusions are connected in the following way: precisely because *Bildung* emerged outside the national state had no interest in people's political education, the state could use this ideal to advance its own national interest.

4. Virtue ethics and the art of life

The main question that we derive from the previous sections on *Bildung* is: what may character education learn from this critique? Does character education also see life as an aesthetical and apolitical project, and what consequences may this have? While there has been a German interest in the virtues (e.g. Bollnow, 1958; Guardini, 1963; Pieper, 1990), and an Anglo-Saxon interest in *Bildung* (see Section 2), there have to my knowledge hardly been any systematic attempts to explore the relationship between *Bildung* and Aristotelian character education.

Before I will turn to character education, however, I will say something about what I mean by 'political'. What I have in mind is that people are concerned with the 'political' if they raise questions about whether existing laws are just, what rights should be protected, and when a government is legitimate. People may individually aim at living good lives, but that does not necessarily make them good citizens in the sense that they think about the conditions that have to be met to enable everyone to lead good lives. If Ricoeur (1992, p. 172) describes the ethical intention as "aiming at a good life lived with and for others in just institutions", the political has, in my view, to do with these 'just institutions', which regulate just relations between oneself and more distant others. Character education is an apolitical notion when it has no interest or involvement in questions about whether people's lives are governed by just institutions.

I am not the first to enquire whether character education is apolitical. Recently, Ecclestone (2012) concluded that character education (and emotional and psychological wellbeing) is a "social project that aims to engineer them [students] through state-sponsored behaviour training" (p. 465). Building on Ecclestone's work, Suissa (2015) admits that proponents of contemporary character education initiatives, such as the work of the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, make explicit links with citizenship and civic virtues, but also notes that the language of politics and 'the political' is largely absent. Suissa's (2015, p. 113) worry is that character education does not engage students in "meaningful thought and discussion about just what such a system is, what it should be, what participation in it consists in or why it may be valuable." Moreover, Suissa argues that character education's emphasis on the development of an individual's virtues is not politically neutral. By emphasising the importance of an individual developing his/her virtues, it reflects and reinforces "the dominant policy discourse that views the system as here to stay and individuals as to blame for social problems" (Suissa, 2015, p. 113). She suggests that character education should not only cultivate (say)

resilience in students, but also make room for questions such as 'Are there some things you shouldn't be resilient to?'.

In what follows, I will discuss John Kekes' book *The Art of Life* (2002), which is described as the "virtue ethical version" of what is known as the 'philosophy of the art-of-living,' a relatively new branch of normative ethics including Hadot, Nehemas, Shusterman and Schmid (Dohmen, 2003). I focus on Kekes' ideas because his approach has 'virtues' and 'character' as central concepts, but also treats life as an 'art', comparable to the way in which proponents of *Bildung* treat life as an aesthetical project. This choice, however, raises the question whether Kekes' work can be described as neo-Aristotelian, and therefore whether our discussion of his ideas have consequences for neo-Aristotelian approaches to virtue and character education.

The ancient Greek ethical question how to live a good life is a central topic of Kekes' book and Aristotle would probable approve of his definition of a good life as one that is both morally acceptable and personally satisfying. For Aristotle, personal satisfaction automatically comes with leading a moral (i.e. virtuous) life. Kekes sees the relationship differently. On the one hand, he uses 'morally acceptable' to refer to requirements of morality (expressed in rules) that any good life must meet. On the other hand, a good life depends on "engagement in personally satisfying projects in a manner that exemplify one's idea of personal excellence" (p. 4), whatever these projects may be. So, instead of identifying a satisfying life with a moral life, Kekes separates the two in principle, believing that we should take seriously a kind of satisfaction that does not come from being virtuous. Kekes is well-aware of the dangers involved in stressing either one of these components of good lives too much. In his view, Kant emphasises moral acceptability to an extent that personal satisfaction is in danger, while Nietzsche interprets self-creation in such a way that moral lives do not longer count as good. In his book, Kekes discusses how people with different ideas about the good life may deal with conflicts between its aesthetical and moral dimension.

Kekes discusses the Aristotelian notion of virtue and specifically discusses civic friendship, but this is not enough to qualify it as a neo-Aristotelian approach to virtue ethics or character education. Kekes understands 'morality' as having to do with universal, social and individual *rules*, so virtues do not seem to fit in that category. And because the realisation of personal excellences is an aesthetical project, virtues do not fit in there either. In his discussion of virtues, Kekes (2002, pp. 170-171) argues that personal excellence are not, like virtues,

ascribed to people on the basis of *what* people do and feel (with regard to a specific sphere of human experience), but on the basis of *how* they do it, i.e. whether they do it with style. One's 'style' is the way in which someone expresses his or her particular and significant character traits, or put differently, one's individuality. For example, he acknowledges that "[t]horoughly deplorable people, such as Göring and Napoleon, can have a style" (p. 173). So, Kekes uses 'character' and 'style' basically in an amoral way. His view on moral education is that it is to "acquaint […] people with the individual ideals to which people commit themselves", in particular through classic literary, philosophical, religious and historical works of the Western tradition (Kekes, 2002, p. 174). Kekes does not think that there is one blueprint for a good life, but believes that different traditions illuminate something about central aspects of good lives that can serve people as permanent ideals (and dangers) when developing their own personal excellences.

This means that, first, Kekes' thinks good lives consists in a combination of satisfaction and morality, instead of in *eudaimonia*, and he believes there many different ways to live a good life. Second, Kekes treats personal excellences as constitutive of good lives instead of virtues. And third, if we understand character education as an umbrella term for approaches that "foreground the cultivation of moral character" (Walker, Roberts & Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 3), Kekes' approach to moral education does not fit in this category since it primarily wants to familiarise people primarily with available individual *ideals* – and not virtues – to live by. Nevertheless, we should not forget that in ancient Greece, doing philosophy was (also for Aristotle) primarily a 'way of living', a combined ethical-aesthetic endeavour that aimed the cultivation of one's self (Hadot, 1995). This raises the question whether modern Aristotelians do not understand character education too much as an exclusively ethical project, ignoring the extent to which a good life is also good-looking, must be perceived as beautiful and fine (Gadamer, 2004, pp. 472-473).

5. Conditions for good lives

In this section, we will examine whether the critique on *Bildung* also apply to Kekes' philosophy of art-of-living. Has his approach not only a moral and aesthetical but also a political dimension? I believe this is an interesting exercise for Aristotelians, as Kekes addresses the ancient Greek question of how to live one's life, but answers it in a way that may be more attractive to people

living today, for example by separating ethical and aesthetical, virtue and personal excellence, manner and style. One problem that Aristotelians have and Kekes has not is that Aristotle's notions such as *eudaimonia* and *arête* are not self-evident when placed outside a premodern network of moral meaning available to Aristotle. Kekes' work is important to Aristotelians who wish to accommodate modern notions in their ethical or educational theories, such as the way individuality, style, personal projects and excellences matter for good lives.

In addition, Kekes makes an interesting conversation partner, because he explicitly discusses both Romanticism and *Bildung*. Kekes (2002, chapter 9.4) treats Romanticism, understood as an ideal that the *will* should be the overriding element in one's life, as one of the 'aberrations' of an art of life. Romanticism values the creation of a genius, a heroic identity who forces one's will on the world in such a way that there is no room for distinguishing between good and bad ways to do this. From a discussion of Harry Frankfurt, who is criticised for calling a violation of deep commitments irrational, Kekes concludes that Romanticism may just as well foster irrationality, immoralism and self-destruction. Kekes believes that the will has a place in a good life, but does not think it should get priority. Instead, Kekes (2002, p. 232) thinks that good lives require that "the will is open to the possibility of control" by reason, emotions, and other motives, including political considerations. Interestingly, Kekes also discusses *Bildung*, which he sees as the German version of the ideal of 'self-realisation'. Citing Thomas Mann at length, Kekes describes *Bildung* as an ideal promoting "inwardness", "introspectiveness" and "subjectivism", and indifference toward the "world of the objective, the political world" (Mann, in Kekes, 2002, p. 33). In Kekes' view, one 'great danger' of *Bildung* is that people are so much concerned with fine-tuning their own soul that they become detached from the political context, leading to indifference about the common good.

In one of his profiles of good lives, Kekes (2002) gives centre stage to *self-direction*, which he describes as the achievement of "reaching a balance between public and private life", and in particular between the cultivation of one's individuality and participation in traditions (p. 31). Self-direction is developing one's individuality by drawing on possibilities that are available through traditions, which function as repositories of examples of good and bad lives. Self-direction involves an outward movement to learn from the accumulated knowledge of traditions and an inward movement to understand one's individuality. One pitfall to be avoided is 'primitivism', the idea that people can direct themselves without being educated through

“history, literature, morality and politics” (p. 26). The other is ‘conformism’, assuming that everything that traditions have in stock is by definition good. Kekes sees *Bildung* as a kind of primitivism, as it makes people fight against traditions, which it treats as “obstacles to becoming oneself”. So, what distinguishes *Bildung* from self-direction is the assumption that traditions “carry a great deal of authority about reason per se” (p. 29) and are therefore “constitutive of good lives” (p. 35).

There are two questions here. The first is whether Kekes does justice to the notion of *Bildung*. This does not seem to be case if we, as we did in Section 2, describe *Bildung* as a process of “becoming home in the world, and then returning from the world to oneself”. While *Bildung* describes the relation someone has to him or herself, the ‘world’ does have a central place in this process. It does not refer to society-as-it-is, but to enduring cultural products that embody society-as-it-is-at-its-best, something which we could also call a critical tradition. So, it seems to me that Kekes is both wrong and right about *Bildung*. He is wrong in concluding (with Mann) that *Bildung* promotes indifference toward the “world of the objective”. However, if we remember Safranki’s argument in Section 3, I think Kekes is right in concluding that *Bildung* supports indifference toward ‘the political’, understood as a pragmatic middle ground, in which people try to realise a just society in the rough-and-tumble of everyday life. So, neglecting the political is not the same as neglecting culture.

The second question is whether Kekes’ ideal of the good life is really that different from *Bildung*. Does his own approach include the development of what Safranski called ‘political wisdom’, which we may describe with Aristotle as a kind of practical deliberation about what is good for everyone? While *The Art of Life* is primarily about the relationship between the moral and aesthetical dimensions of good lives, Kekes (2002, p. 3) also discusses the importance of rules that protect the conditions in which basic needs, such as nutrition, shelter, rest, security, companionship and order, can be satisfied. Societies must, in his view, have and enforce rules that aid the satisfaction of these needs. Such rules are universal, because human beings have certain physiological, psychological and social needs in common. Furthermore, Kekes believes that on the social level, universal rules have to be applied to local circumstances. So while all societies much have a rule prohibiting murder, this leaves open “whether murder can ever be justified and how far its prohibitions extends”, e.g. whether the prohibition on murder includes ‘outsiders’ (Kekes, 2002, p. 150). Ideally, the way in which an individual lives strengthens the

possibilities of others to live good lives, but if an individual encounters a conflict with universal rules, the protection of basic human needs must take precedence.

What distinguishes Kekes' art of living from the German notion of *Bildung* is not the way individuals can draw on history and culture for their self-direction or self-realisation, but the way in which individuals relate to society and its (universal) moral rules. Kekes does not only describe moral and aesthetical ingredients of individual good lives, but he also underlines the importance of political conditions that have to be met before everyone in a society can lead good lives. If Kekes' ideal society would be realised, it seems to me that it would run less of a risk than *Bildung* of being used by political agendas. Having said that, Kekes grants social groups considerable freedom to interpret universal rules, and it is unclear under what conditions social groups are justified to kill people. In addition, Kekes writes more about the ways in which universal or social rules restrict individual lives than about what individuals can do as citizens to sustain societies in which certain moral rules are respected. For example, he encourages individuals to evaluate various ideas about the good life in the light of such rules, but does not discuss what individuals would have to do in a society that flagrantly violates universal human needs.

6. Conclusion

This paper addressed the meaning, history and critique of the neo-humanistic concept of *Bildung*, and focused specifically on the critique that proponents of *Bildung* saw life primarily as an aesthetical and apolitical project, which did not stimulate the development a humanistic but realistic political wisdom. The question was then raised whether a critique along these lines also applies to neo-Aristotelian approaches to character education. This question was not answered directly, but by a detour through Kekes' (virtue-ethical) approach to the 'art of living'. Like *Bildung*, this approach assumes that life is (partly) an aesthetical project that requires individuality, style and creativity. We found out that Kekes sees the art of life as including both an aesthetical and a moral dimension, and requires socially supported (universal) rules that guarantee that basic needs of all people in society are met. Recalling Ricoeur's definition of the ethical as "a good life lived with and for others in just institutions", and labelling the 'just institutions' as the political aspect, we can conclude that Kekes' art of life is also political, because it is concerned with whether people's lives are governed by just institutions. Strictly

speaking, Kekes' approach is not neo-Aristotelian, but we assumed that testing how it deals with the critique on *Bildung*, could still be instructive for (neo-Aristotelian) virtue ethicists and advocates of character education who also care about (the guided development of) individuality and personal excellence.

So, what may character education learn from the critique on the German *Bildung* tradition and the way in which Kekes gave the political a place in his approach to the art-of-living? The first lesson we can draw from the history of *Bildung* is that character education runs the risk of being used by national governments if character education has too much an inward gaze without a strong political dimension. Kristjánsson (2013) has argued that 'social change' and the 'creation of positive institutions' are goals of US-style character education and positive psychology. However, for developmental and pragmatic reasons, "it is more feasible to start with the individual child, student or classroom than the whole school system or society at large" (p. 279). I think that Suissa (2015) has rightly pointed out that character education should not add a political dimension only after children have been made virtuous, so to speak, but that raising questions about the (un)justice of the framework within which people try to live good lives, matter from the start. The somewhat surprising second lesson, which we draw from the discussion of Kekes' work, is that Aristotelians today would be well-advised to take the aesthetical dimensions of character education just as seriously. In my view, Kekes has argued convincingly that good lives should not only be virtuous, but include personally satisfying projects that illustrate people's individual ideals of personal excellence. These considerations do not seem to be addressed sufficiently by Aristotelians.

When we combine these two lessons, we get a slightly different picture of character education; one that broadens its focus on its moral content to include broader aesthetical and political considerations. This would make a good life not just a matter of moral virtue but also of individuality, realised in a society in which all people have the same possibilities.

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