

Transcultural Freedom and Fulfillment of Life: The Impact of ‘Japanese Culture’ in Otto Friedrich Bollnow’s Theory of *Übung*

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Abstract. In his theory of *Übung* the German philosopher of education Otto Friedrich Bollnow integrates ideas of traditional Japanese arts into a ‘Western’ framework of thought. This paper considers this integration of different educational traditions from the perspective of transculturality. It looks at the ways how Bollnow refers to what he calls ‘Japanese culture’ and points out that in his theory of *Übung* Bollnow develops a transcultural concept of freedom and fulfillment of life. In this sense, the paper makes clear that Bollnow’s ‘Western’ thinking undergoes creative changes through the integration of ‘Japanese culture’. However, it will also be shown that the ‘Japanese culture’ that Bollnow refers to is unwillingly changed through being interpreted in German language. The paper thus contributes to the study of the emergence of new thoughts in transcultural processes.

Keywords: Transculturality, Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Übung*, education, anthropology

1. Introduction

This paper deals with the influence of Japanese cultural traditions in the theory of *Übung* laid out by the German philosopher of education Otto Friedrich Bollnow (1903-1991). The word *Übung* is difficult to translate into English. In a first sketch, *Übung* means that through repeating a certain activity in a focused way, a person will develop a certain skill or certain skills. English words coming close to the meaning of *Übung* are ‘exercise’, ‘practice’, ‘drill’, or ‘training’. However, Bollnow considers *Übung* etymologically and phenomenologically in such subtle ways that each of these translations would hardly denote and connote the range of meanings of *Übung*. Moreover, Bollnow explicitly distinguishes *Übung* from concepts like ‘training’ [*Training*] or ‘drill’ [*Drill*].¹ The concept ‘practice’ may come closest to this concept of *Übung* and shall be used in this paper as translation;

¹ Throughout this paper English translations of Bollnow’s quotes are made by the author.

however, this use of the concept 'practice' should not be confused with sociological theories of practice that have been developed in the past decades by scholars like Pierre Bourdieu (see, for example, Hörning, 2004).

Bollnow was a proponent of the so called 'Humanist Pedagogics' [*Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*], an approach to educational issues in Germany that mainly relies on methods like hermeneutics and phenomenology (see Wulf, 2003, p. 13-41; for Bollnow see Koerrenz, 2004). In many papers and books he considered topics like space, language, crisis, experience, mood, and respect in regard to their significance for education. He develops his considerations from the standpoint of a philosophical anthropology. This means that he looks at the mentioned topics not only in regard to their significance for children, but also in regard to their significance for human beings in general (see Wulf & Zirfas 1994).

In the 1970s, Bollnow published some papers and a book on the topic of *Übung*. While in a general sense this book complies with Bollnow's usual way of dealing with pedagogical issues, and while the topic itself had already been discussed in German educational discourse, the book nevertheless is remarkable because Bollnow refers to what he calls the 'Japanese culture' of *Übung*. He explicitly states that 'European' educational thinking can learn from the way that *Übung* is seen in traditional Japanese arts like archery or *ikebana* (see Bollnow, 1991, p. 67). German discourse on educational issues is traditionally not very open to the inclusion of foreign ideas. Many famous educational ideas come from Germany, like, for example, Friedrich Fröbel's (1782–1852) concept of *Kindergarten*, or Wilhelm von Humboldt's (1767-1835) idea of free academic research at universities. German educational discourse, therefore, can refer to a rich tradition of thinking. However, Bollnow concedes that in regard to *Übung* German—or, as he also sometimes says, 'occidental'—educational thinking was erroneous; and he states that through referring to Japanese cultural traditions the shortcomings of this concept of *Übung* could be overcome.

This paper looks at Bollnow's theory of *Übung* from the viewpoint of transculturality. Following the German philosopher Wolfgang Welsch, transculturality means that in processes of cultural contact and cultural exchange innovative cultural ideas, products, and practices eventually emerge. These do not stand in specific cultural traditions but are the outcome of the merging of different cultures. It will be shown that through integrating 'Japanese culture' into his theory of *Übung*, Bollnow develops a particular understanding of freedom and fulfillment of life. Insofar as this understanding emerges in the merging of different cultural traditions it can be called a transcultural understanding of freedom and fulfillment of life. Taking up the point of research on transcultural phenomena that in transcultural processes creative shifts, misunderstandings etc. may be involved, the paper considers the way 'Japanese culture' enters into Bollnow's thinking. It will become clear that Bollnow understands 'Japanese culture' through the mediation of German language and that it is especially the interpretation of 'traditional Japanese arts' in terms of *Übung* that Bollnow's specific concept of freedom and fulfillment of life comes to the fore. Insofar as the Japanese language does not suggest such a concept, Bollnow's work on *Übung* can be considered a creative transcultural interpretation.

2. Transculturality

Although others have used the term 'transcultural' before him, Welsch laid out a distinctive view on transcultural processes by discussing the term in the framework of culture theories.² In order to develop his concept of transculturality, Welsch firstly elaborates upon what he calls the traditional view of culture. According to this view, Welsch claims, different cultures are being seen as distinctive entities with clear-cut borders. In terms of the traditional culture concept, it would thus be possible to analyze, for example, the Japanese culture or the German culture. Welsch traces this culture concept

² Welsch elaborates his concept of transculturality in several papers. In the following I refer to the English-written paper 'Transculturality – the Puzzling Form of Cultures Today' (Welsch, 1999).

back to the considerations of the 18th century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803). Herder had opposed the enlightenment view that all peoples should develop in a universal way towards a state of rationality. Instead, Herder held that the various peoples of the world differ in such a way that pushing them to a universal state of rationality would erase their distinct 'national characters'. Therefore, each nation should develop its traits according to its inherent individual potential.

While Herder's contribution was doubtless necessary for the overcoming of a universalistic view on humankind and the establishing of a relativistic view, Welsch states that Herder's conceptualization of 'cultures' as distinct wholes has some problems. One is that it is 'unificatory' regarding the people of one culture, another is that it is 'separatory' regarding people from other cultures. Herder's culture concept does not capture the fact that different cultures are in contact with one another and that cultures do in fact change in the course of such contacts. It is here that Welsch discusses several recently developed concepts: interculturality, multiculturalism, and transculturality.

The term interculturality is usually used to describe the interaction between different cultures. If, for example, a Japanese scholar comes to Germany and interacts with German scholars this situation could be described in terms of interculturality. However, although this view is important, according to Welsch it still thinks of cultures as distinct entities. The Japanese scholar would still be Japanese, interacting with Germans. After returning to his homeland, he would still be Japanese, now interacting with people of his kind again.

Multiculturalism thinks of various cultures that exist together. For example, in many cities and regions in Germany, there live people with Turkish roots. There are Turkish restaurants and markets in Germany. Also, there are Chinese and Italian restaurants run by Chinese and Italian immigrants. The term multiculturalism can be used for describing the situation in many places of the world, but it still inherits the problem of conceptualizing cultures as distinct wholes: the Chinese restaurant is Chinese, the Italian restaurant, Italian etc.

In order to overcome the problems of the terms interculturality and multiculturalism, Welsch suggests using the term transculturality. This term explicitly refers to the change of cultures in processes of culture contact, taking into account the merging of different cultural bits and pieces. This term is much better suited for describing the actual reality of a globalizing world. In today's world it is likely that although you can usually eat pizza in a so-called 'Italian' restaurant, the cook could nevertheless be from India, the waiter from Germany, and the rock music from the USA.

'Cultures today are extremely interconnected and entangled with each other. Lifestyles no longer end at the borders of national cultures, but go beyond these, are found in the same way in other cultures. The way of life for an economist, an academic or a journalist is no longer German or French, but rather European or global in tone. The new forms of entanglement are a consequence of migratory processes, as well as of worldwide material and immaterial communications systems and economic interdependencies and dependencies' (Welsch, 1999).

Welsch points out that transcultural processes often lead to the emergence of something new. Transculturality entails a creative potential since the merging of different cultural traditions inevitably yields new identities, meanings, and products: '[T]ransculturality [...] contains the potential to transcend our received and supposedly determining monocultural standpoints, and we should make increasing use of these potentials' (Welsch, 1999). Transculturality, therefore, implies unforeseen and diverse learning processes (cf. Mattig, 2017).

A famous example for transculturality is the so-called Japonism, the artwork of (mainly) French painters (like Édouard Manet, Claude Monet, Camille Pissarro, Edgar Degas, Paul Gauguin, and Vincent van Gogh) influenced by Japanese arts (see Mae, 2014). In Japonism, French painters integrated some aspects of the arts of Japanese artists like Utagawa Hiroshige or Katsushika Hokusai and created artworks that combine 'European' and 'Japanese' art styles (like, for example, 'The Sower with Setting Sun' (1888) by Vincent van Gogh).

Another example is translation. Translation is a fundamental transcultural process because different languages never coincide in terms of semantics, grammar, and phonetics (see Trabandt 2012). By translating a text or a word from one language into another not only the text or the words change in

regard to semantics, grammar, and phonetics but also the 'culture' of the target language changes in the sense that it incorporates a text or words that have another cultural origin. *Haiku*, for example, is a form of Japanese poetry; through the translation of *haikus* into other languages, the word *haiku* as well as this form of poetry also entered into these languages.

The term 'emergence' points towards the fact that it is not predictable what kinds of identities, meanings or products will be created in transcultural processes. Such processes have a dynamic character and lead to unexpected results. In addition, it is sometimes difficult to trace the origin of the new products that emerge in transcultural processes.

Summarizing, the concept of transculturality for one part accepts the notion of culture in the sense that there are traditions with certain cultural patterns. For another part, it draws the attention towards the dynamic processes, the new cultural products, and the creation of new meanings that occur in the interchanges of cultures.

Looking at Bollnow's theory of *Übung* from the perspective of transculturality thus means looking at the way Bollnow interweaves ideas from 'Japanese culture' into his thinking. But what is *his* thinking in this context? Here we already touch upon the question of culture, because Bollnow himself constructs a kind of dichotomy between two different cultural traditions of thinking. He sees himself and his thinking in a tradition that he calls 'European', or 'Western' (Bollnow, 1991: 70), or 'occidental' (81) as in contrast to the 'old Japanese culture' [*alte japanische Kultur*] (Bollnow, 1991: 59), which he sometimes posits in the 'Eastern' tradition of thinking (70). However, a closer look at his writings about *Übung* reveals that for delineating the 'Western' tradition he only refers to sources written in German.³ His thinking is thus basically German. Therefore, one could say for now that in his theory of *Übung* he interweaves Japanese into German ideas.

3. Bollnow's theory of *Übung* considered in its own terms

First, Bollnow's theory of *Übung* shall be considered in its own terms, without scrutinizing which ideas are 'Japanese' and which are 'German'. Following the idea of transculturality, this theory is a transcultural product that brings out something new through the merging of distinct cultural traditions; however, this product stands on its own and shall therefore first be analyzed as such. The combining of different cultural traditions will be considered in the following steps.

A main concept in Bollnow's theory of *Übung* is freedom. Seemingly paradoxically, for him, freedom is at the same time a condition of human beings and a task that human beings need to accomplish. Freedom as an anthropological condition basically means that humans have no or at least only little instinctual schemes of behavior. Human beings must *learn* most of the behavior that is appropriate in the world they live in. They need to learn to develop skills for their survival; however, they also have the freedom to learn skills and behavior that are not directly necessary for surviving (like singing, painting etc.). Humans, thus, are for a great part not bound to instincts; they have the freedom to learn a wide variety of behaviors, or, to put it another way, humans are forced to learn, but through learning they gain autonomy. In this sense, freedom also means the freedom of (social) coercion. With reference to Hegel and Nietzsche Bollnow says: 'Freedom is [...], to put it positively, the possibility to determine oneself as desired' (Bollnow, 1976: 109).⁴ In line with Hegel, Bollnow sees freedom as a societal process that is not yet fulfilled and that is characterized by many 'fights' of different social groups. These considerations show that according to Bollnow human freedom and learning are fundamentally related to each other.

It is in this relationship of freedom and learning that Bollnow places the concept *Übung*. He points out that proper learning of solid skills requires practice. Without practice, skills will not be acquired;

3 Bollnow (1991) refers, to name but a few names, to Herbart (14), Kerschensteiner (15), Odenbach (16), Kant (29), König (32), Kroug (33), Heidegger (36), and Rilke (45 ff.). All of these authors write in German.

4 'Freiheit ist, [...] positiv formuliert, die Möglichkeit, nach eigenem Gutdünken über sich selbst zu bestimmen.'

moreover, once acquired, skills need practice to be kept alive; without practice, they will eventually vanish. *Übung*, thus, is a life-long-learning process. In this sense, conquering freedom is a constant challenge for human beings.

Bollnow goes on considering two aspects of learning in *Übung*. First, the practicing person acquires certain skills through practice (for example working with wood as a carpenter or playing an instrument as a musician) (see Bollnow, 1991: 31ff.). Second, to be able to practice, the practicing person needs concentration and discipline. Concentration and discipline can thus be considered a precondition for *Übung*. However, according to Bollnow, concentration and discipline are both the precondition for practice as well as one of its results (see Bollnow, 1991: 55ff.). A child that learns to play an instrument, for example, will eventually be able to prolong the periods of practice with the time. Practice, thus, stimulates two learning processes: first concerning a specific skill, second concerning concentration and discipline in a broader sense. Regarding the second learning process Bollnow speaks of a ‘change of the inner posture’ [*Verwandlung der inneren Haltung*] that the practicing person undergoes (Bollnow, 1991, p. 63). In regard to these considerations, Bollnow concludes that there are two different types of *Übung*, one type is related to perfecting a certain skill, the other, and for him more important one to the inner change of the practicing person.

Bollnow continues his considerations focusing on this inner change. He states that *Übung* can ultimately lead to an inner change that he calls ‘inner freedom’ [*innere Freiheit*]. With this term he refers to a psychological state that he characterizes as a balance between the inner drives of a person (the wishes, the will etc.), and the possibilities that the ‘outside world’ provides to this person.

‘Inner freedom [...] is the feeling of harmony of man with the conditionalities of his situation, whereby situation as outer and inner situation means the totality of circumstances to which man can react in each case. These are the outer living conditions of man as well as his dependence on political and societal conditions, as well as his dependence on nature, in the regular laws of which he is embedded through his body, through the inherited and also the denied talents and abilities, a dependence as it is painfully brought into his consciousness through sickness, age, and the approaching death. However, it is also his own soul that coerces him with its drives and passions. Freedom cannot mean to get rid of all these coercions. This is impossible [...]. Freedom as inner freedom rather means living in harmony with one’s conditions’⁵ (Bollnow, 1976, p. 111).

This does not mean to become passive; rather, it means to engage in changing circumstances to the better as best as possible while at the same time having a sense for circumstances that cannot be changed and that instead call for a change of the person.

However, Bollnow states that very often, maybe even most of the time, people do not feel this kind of balance. Life is full of anxieties, angers, frustrations, unfulfilled hopes, and the dispersion in various tasks and activities; all of this prevents us from feeling a balance between the inner and outer world. It is then as if we would not be in contact with our ‘true essence’ [*wahres Wesen*] (Bollnow, 1991, p. 65). In other words, we often do not feel a ‘fulfillment of life’ [*Erfüllung des Lebens*] (Bollnow, 1991, p. 81). With reference to Heidegger he states that daily life is usually in a state of carelessness, absent-mindedness, and inauthenticity (Bollnow, 1991, p. 57). Therefore, according to Bollnow, inner freedom is a state that man is—often only subconsciously—longing for but that usually does not come on its own.

5 ‘Innere Freiheit [...] ist das Gefühl des Einklangs des Menschen mit den Bedingtheiten seiner Situation, wobei Situation als äußere und innere Situation die Gesamtheit der Gegebenheiten bedeutet, zu denen sich der Mensch jeweils verhalten kann. Das sind ebensowohl die äußeren Lebensumstände des Menschen, seine Abhängigkeit von den politischen und gesellschaftlichen Verhältnissen, wie auch seine Abhängigkeit von der Natur, in deren gesetzmäßigen Zusammenhang er durch seinen Leib eingebettet ist, durch die mitgebrachten wie auch durch die ihm versagten Anlagen und Fähigkeiten, eine Abhängigkeit, wie sie ihm durch Krankheit, Alter und bevorstehenden Tod schmerzhaft in Erinnerung gebracht wird. Es ist aber ebensowohl auch seine eigene Seele, die, wie schon gesagt, mit ihren Trieben und Leidenschaften einen Zwang auf ihn ausübt. Freiheit kann nicht bedeuten, daß der Mensch sich von all diesen Zwängen gänzlich befreit. Das ist unmöglich [...]. Freiheit als innere Freiheit bedeutet vielmehr, im Einklang mit seinen Verhältnissen zu leben.’

It is here that Bollnow identifies the major anthropological significance of *Übung*. *Übung*, Bollnow states, is a path that can lead to the cultivation of the 'true essence', to the feeling of a fulfilled life. While fully engaging in a practice like playing piano, translating a text, or calligraphy, the practicing person distances herself from daily routine. At the same time, body and mind focus on a common task. Thus, *Übung* balances body and mind.

Moreover, according to Bollnow, *Übung* has a paradoxical characteristic: The practicing person can only succeed if he or she does not focus on succeeding. This is like the situation when a person is trying hard to fall asleep, sleep will not come; sleep will only come if this person forgoes the intent of falling asleep. In this sense, according to Bollnow, we can only learn to play an instrument or to exert a handicraft to the point of mastership if we let the intent of becoming a master go and just let us fall into the practice itself. Bollnow speaks of the 'egolessness' [*Ichlosigkeit*] (Bollnow, 1991, p. 70) that needs to be accomplished in proper practice.

'Man ceases to seek, self-forgetful he merges into his activity and becomes one with what he is doing. In short: In the self-forgetful practice that is indulged in the activity itself man reaches the state which we [...] have called inner freedom'⁶ (Bollnow, 1976, p. 115).

Bollnow thus considers *Übung* a fundamental way to actively realize human nature. Moreover, Bollnow envisions the life of individuals as a kind of rhythmic change between times in which the individual engages in daily routine and times in which the individual engages in *Übung*. Both forms of activity are dialectically related to each other:

'After man has found the appropriate inner condition in practice, he can in a new way—and now we can say: in the state of inner freedom—get back into his daily life and fulfill his duties there. They are the same duties as they were before, but now he can fulfill them in a new way, internally free and relaxed, and he therefore fulfills them better as it was possible before'⁷ (Bollnow, 1976, p. 119).

It becomes clear that Bollnow's theory of *Übung* goes far beyond 'pure' pedagogical considerations and reaches deeply into philosophical and anthropological issues. 'Man' is born with the potential and the quest for freedom. For Bollnow, *Übung* is an indispensable way that leads to the fulfillment of this potential human freedom.

For pedagogy the task is to find forms of *Übung* that may realize this potential. Bollnow points out that some Pedagogues like Maria Montessori and Friedrich Fröbel came close to this understanding; however, he says, their works are not complete in this regard. In the end of his contemplations on *Übung* Bollnow thus finally considers some basic principles that need to be thought of for developing a didactic that takes his ideas of *Übung* and inner freedom into classroom (see Bollnow, 1991, p. 102ff.).

4. The Japanese influence in Bollnow's theory of *Übung*

'Japanese culture' plays a major role in Bollnow's theory of *Übung*. In this section I suggest that ideas taken out of the 'Japanese' context serve as a 'missing link' regarding the German discourse that to

6 'Der Mensch will nichts mehr, er geht selbstvergessen in seinem Tun auf und wird eins mit dem, was er treibt. Kurz: Im selbstvergessenen, an das Tun hingegebenen Üben erreicht der Mensch den Zustand, den wir zuvor als den der inneren Freiheit bezeichnet haben.'

7 'Nachdem der Mensch in der Übung die angemessene innere Verfassung gefunden hat, kann er in einer neuen Weise – und jetzt können wir sagen: im Zustand der inneren Freiheit – in sein alltägliches Leben zurückkehren und dort seine Aufgaben erfüllen. Es sind dieselben Aufgaben geblieben, wie sie es vorher waren, aber er kann sie jetzt in einer neuen, innerlich freien und gelassenen Weise erfüllen, und erfüllt sie eben darum besser, als es zuvor möglich war.'

which Bollnow refers. Moreover, the section points out that through reference to ‘Japanese culture’ Bollnow changes the ‘occidental’ concept of freedom and fulfillment of life.

In his theory of *Übung*, Bollnow takes up two theoretical approaches from the German discourse and tries to link them. One is pedagogical considerations on *Übung* itself. From the very beginning of his argument, Bollnow points out that ‘Western’ tradition has an ambivalent position towards *Übung*. For one part, *Übung* is considered necessary for profound learning processes. For example, to learn a foreign language it is necessary to practice the vocabulary. However, at the same time, ‘Western’ pedagogical tradition devalues *Übung* as a rather mechanical and boring activity. Learning should be exciting, stimulating and thought provoking, and it should stimulate the students’ creativity. Bollnow quotes the pedagogical classical author Herbart (1776-1841) saying: ‘Being boring is the worst sin of instruction’⁸ (Bollnow, 1991, p. 14). Against this backdrop of thought, *Übung* is seen as a necessary evil.

Bollnow points out that many efforts have been undertaken to downplay the dull and boring aspect of *Übung*. One of the main ideas in this regard is to link *Übung* with play. Pedagogues have invented games that exercise certain skills while being played, often even without the pupils noticing it. This means that pupils can participate in funny and exciting activities and at the same time practice certain skills. As soon as a certain skill seems to be acquired, curriculum will move on to the next step of instruction. However, although he emphasizes the positive side of this pedagogical strategy, Bollnow also offers criticism against it, mainly against the inherent tendency of pedagogical games to downplay the importance of accuracy. If a certain skill is to be learnt properly, play might lack the need to concentrate and act precisely. In short, Bollnow claims that the concept of *Übung* is not yet well understood in ‘Western’ pedagogical thought. Only some pedagogues, like Maria Montessori, occasionally have highlighted *Übung* in Bollnow’s sense (see Bollnow, 1991, p. 102f.).

Coming from the other side of his argument, Bollnow takes up philosophical considerations saying that freedom is a fundamental idea in Western thought. However, he says that the realization of freedom remains an unsolved problem. He considers several approaches that have been proposed in ‘Western’ thinking to unfold human freedom. In the Age of enlightenment, rationality was seen as the royal road to freedom and the realization of human potential. However, enlightenment theories are based on a problematic dualistic concept of man (body versus rationality); moreover, psychoanalysts suggested that there are far greater—and even unconscious—forces in the human psyche than rationality (cf. Bollnow, 1976, p. 110.). Rationality, thus, can no longer be accepted as *the* way to human freedom.

Bollnow also points towards two approaches offered by the ‘newer philosophy’ [*neuere Philosophie*], one being existential philosophy, the other the ‘way of happiness’ [*Weg des Glücks*] as it is contained in life philosophy. According to existential philosophy, freedom may eventually emerge in the experience of a deep crisis. A person experiencing existential fear in crisis can eventually concentrate all his powers and escape the dull shackles of daily life. On the contrary, the way of happiness—that Bollnow associates with Nietzsche—refers to the rare moments of ecstatic peak experiences.

Bollnow claims: ‘Both possibilities, that of the existential determination and that of the big happiness then describe climaxes in which man experiences a last fulfillment of his life’⁹ (Bollnow, 1991, p. 81). However, although Bollnow concedes that both of these ways to freedom still hold true, their inherent problem is that the subject cannot do anything to actively conquer freedom. No one would actively induce a crisis to experience freedom. Similarly, the moment of happiness that Nietzsche talks about cannot be actively brought about; it just happens. ‘In both cases, however, there is the difficulty that man cannot induce these states of a fulfilled life deliberately on his own’

8 ‘Langweilig zu sein ist die ärgste Sünde des Unterrichts.’

9 ‘Beide Möglichkeiten, die der existentiellen Entschlossenheit wie die des großen Glücks, bezeichnen dann Höhepunkte, in denen der Mensch eine letzte Erfüllung seines Lebens erfährt.’

(Bollnow, 1991, p. 81). In short, the 'occidental' tradition of thinking values freedom very highly but comes short in thinking of a way to realize it.

Therefore, the situation in which Bollnow finds the 'occidental' tradition can be characterized as such: For one part, he deals with a devalued idea of *Übung* that is directed only towards the acquisition of skills; for another part, he finds a highly-valued idea of freedom that lacks knowledge about its realization. It is in this situation that Bollnow refers to the 'old Japanese traditions' of practice like archery or *ikebana*. He claims that in Japan *Übung* is traditionally highly valued and that it does not mainly focus on learning certain skills but on cultivating the practice itself for the sake of inner freedom. Traditional Japanese arts aim at stimulating an inner change in the practicing subject, Bollnow says:

'*Übung* is not the only way to reach the pursued fulfillment of life, but it is the only means to induce this transformation intentionally and with deliberate effort. The Occident did not yet understand this connection sufficiently and therefore it did not develop techniques that lead to it. This is the reason why here the *Übungen* kept having such a subaltern character. In this difficulty the model of the Japanese *Übungen* becomes important for us because in them a form of *Übung* has developed that has detached itself from the ends of practical life and gained a significance that is independent from it. You do not learn the respective arts because of the practical skill that can be gained, but because of the purification and the inner change that can be gained'¹⁰ (Bollnow, 1991, p. 81f.).

This inner change, Bollnow claims, can be considered as a path to inner freedom. This means that through referring to Japanese arts Bollnow is able to link the two Western lines of thinking—the pedagogical one of *Übung* and the philosophical one of freedom—in such a way that he can solve the problems both inherit. While Western pedagogical tradition has devalued *Übung* and thus (still) tries to avoid *Übung* as best as possible, in Japan *Übung* has been traditionally highly valued and thus many refined forms of *Übung* have been developed in Japanese culture. Western culture, in contrast, Bollnow claims, has only poor understanding and poor cultural forms of *Übung* (see Bollnow, 1976, p. 119f.).

The Japanese understanding suggests that it is possible to actively engage in a way to inner freedom. Man does not have to wait until freedom enters into life in moments of crisis or happiness. One of the keys is the aforementioned paradoxical structure of *Übung* that Bollnow attributes to Japanese traditional arts. When the practitioner actively strives for a result of his practice—for example, being 'the best', being admired by others for his performance etc.—, he will not succeed; however, when he ceases to strive and just concentrates on *Übung* itself, the result—inner freedom—will appear. The paradox is that the practicing person strives actively while at the same time he or she does not focus on the result of the activity, but just gets immersed in the activity itself. Being immersed is already inner freedom, because the person drops the 'little ego' that eagerly looks at results and achievements and become one with the activity itself.

In binding together the mentioned two traditions of 'occidental' thinking the reference to traditional Japanese arts can be considered a missing link in Bollnow's theory of *Übung*.

More than that, the reference to traditional Japanese arts is not only a missing link, it also changes the 'Western' concept of freedom itself. Taking up considerations about Japanese traditional arts, Bollnow points out that freedom is an 'inner freedom' that can be described as a state of 'egolessness'

10 'Die Übung ist nicht die einzige Weise, zu der erstrebten Erfüllung des Lebens zu gelangen, aber sie ist das einzige Mittel, diese Wandlung vorsätzlich und in bewußter Anstrengung herbeizuführen. Im Abendland hat man diesen Zusammenhang bisher nicht hinreichend begriffen und darum keine dahin führenden Verfahren ausgebildet. Das ist der Grund, warum hier die Übungen einen so subalternen Charakter behalten haben. In dieser Schwierigkeit wird uns das Vorbild der japanischen Übungen wichtig, weil sich in ihnen eine Übungsform entwickelt hat, die sich von der Gebundenheit an die Zwecke des praktischen Lebens gelöst und eine davon unabhängige Bedeutung gewonnen hat. Man lernt die entsprechenden Künste nicht um des darin zu erwerbenden praktischen Könnens willen, sondern um der darin zu erreichenden Reinigung und inneren Wandlung des Menschen willen.'

[*Ichlosigkeit*] (Bollnow, 1991, p. 70), as a state in which there is harmony of inner drives and outer possibilities. This notion of freedom encompasses the freedom from inner drives, wishes, etc. It is a notion of freedom that is different from the traditional 'Western' notion which traditionally understands freedom in a social way in terms of self-realization against outer constraints. In this sense, Bollnow says that the idea of freedom in terms of egolessness '[...] sounds for European ears at first startling, and it can easily give rise to misunderstandings'¹¹ (Bollnow, 1991, p. 70).

Seen from the perspective of transculturality, therefore, it should be noted that Bollnow changed the understanding of one of the core concepts of 'European' philosophy, freedom, through referring to Japanese traditional arts. Therefore, Bollnow's understanding of 'inner freedom' can be considered a transcultural idea of freedom and fulfillment of life.

5. Bollnow's way of referring to Japanese traditional arts

In terms of transculturality it is interesting to trace the ways how the ideas of 'Japanese traditional arts' entered into Bollnow's thinking. Naturally, a wide variety of ways of transmitting cultural ideas from one culture to another is possible. For example, it would be possible to gain knowledge of Japanese traditions by studying Japanese writings, or by personal experience. How does Bollnow gain knowledge of what he calls Japanese forms of *Übung*?

I think two main sources that Bollnow refers to need to be taken into account. One of them is that in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s Bollnow travelled to Japan several times and had personal contact with Japanese people (see Schwill, 2001). While traveling through Japan he not only presented papers about his philosophical and educational considerations at Japanese universities, but also talked with Japanese people about culture. Moreover, through occasionally participating in meditation practice, he gained personal experience of *Übung* in Japanese traditions. However, Bollnow admits that it was difficult for him to get a thorough understanding of Japanese culture: First, there was a language barrier; since he was not proficient in Japanese language, he could not understand the Japanese teachings in their original language (see Schwill, 2001, p. 43f.). In addition, he had difficulties in the practice of meditation. In his writings about *Übung*, he does not refer to his personal experiences, and so it seems that these experiences give a rather implicit background to his explicit statements about *Übung* in traditional Japanese arts.

The other, far more important source is Bollnow's reading of literature about *Übung* in Japan. Interestingly, in his writings about *Übung*, Bollnow mainly refers to two *German* authors when it comes to traditional Japanese arts. One of them is Eugen Herrigel (1884-1955), a German philosopher who had been to Japan between 1924 and 1929. Besides giving lectures on philosophy at Tohoku University in Sendai, Herrigel practiced Archery with an alleged Zen master. In 1948 he published a book in German about his Japanese experiences. This book is a main source for Bollnow's understanding of traditional Japanese arts; it was translated into English and as such published in 1953 as 'Zen in the Art of Archery'. The other author that Bollnow refers to is Karlfried Graf Dürkheim (1896-1988), a German diplomat and psychotherapist. Similar to Herrigel, Dürkheim had been to Japan for some years (1938-39; 1940-45) as a diplomat where he made personal experiences with practices of Zen Buddhism. Later, he wrote several books in German about these experiences. Bollnow mainly refers to his books '*Japan und die Kultur der Stille*' [translated into English as 'The Japanese cult of tranquility'], '*Vom doppelten Ursprung des Menschen*' [translated into English as 'Our Two-Fold Origin'], and '*Zen und wir*' [translated into English as 'Zen and Us'].

At some points of his writings on *Übung*, Bollnow additionally cites Japanese writers. For example, he refers to Daisetsu Suzuki's work '*Zen und die Kultur Japans*' [English: 'Zen and Japanese Culture'], or to a paper by Sueo Takeda, '*Selbstkraft und Fremdkraft*' (see, for example, Bollnow,

¹¹'[...] klingt für europäische Ohren zunächst überraschend und kann leicht Anlaß zu Mißverständnissen geben.'

1991, p. 63; Bollnow, 1976, p. 112). However, it seems that these references only add to the knowledge that Bollnow gains from the reading of Herrigel and Dürkheim.

It should be stated that Herrigel and Dürkheim (as well as Bollnow), had positive attitudes towards the national socialist regime in Germany when it was in power. However, their books about Japan and Japanese traditions became quite popular in the latter half of the 20th century in Germany. In regard to transculturality it is noteworthy that Bollnow does mainly rely on writings of compatriots, whereby these writings are not of an academic nature, but rather give an account of their personal experiences in Japan.

The view on Japan that Bollnow presents, is, therefore, transformed twice. The first transformation is the one that Herrigel and Dürkheim produce. Both interpret their personal experiences against their own cultural background. This background is, in a general sense, the one that the German language provides (since they write their books in German; this issue will be taken up in the next section in more detail); it is also, in a more specific sense, the mindsets against which they interpret Japanese traditions. In regard to Herrigel, this may be said to be a philosophical background, in regard to Dürkheim a psychoanalytical one. Interestingly, however, both of them were interested in the writings of the German medieval mystic Meister Eckhart (about 1260-1328) even before they came to Japan, and it seems that their fascination with Zen had to do with this interest in mysticism.

Noteworthy, there is dispute about the question whether Herrigel had a proper understanding of the Japanese tradition. Yamada (2001) points out that Herrigel claims to write about Zen, but that in fact Herrigel's Japanese teacher was not a Zen master. From the viewpoint of transculturality this is interesting, because it shows that transcultural products—such as Herrigel's book—may eventually incorporate misunderstandings when one culture is being 'translated' into the other.

The second transformation is the one that Bollnow himself produces through his reference to Herrigel, Dürkheim, and the mentioned Japanese writers. He interprets these transcultural products against the background of his pedagogical, anthropological, and philosophical mindset and fits it into his pedagogical theory of *Übung*. This chain of interpretations seems like 'Chinese whispers', and one may be inclined to ask how much of 'Japan' remains in what Bollnow calls 'Japanese tradition'. This question will be elaborated upon in the next section.

6. Looking at language: *Übung* as a creative shift of categories in the interpretation of experience

Although Bollnow puts a lot of emphasis on analyzing the meaning of *Übung* in German language in detail, he does not consider his reference to *Übung* in traditional Japanese arts in terms of Japanese language. Throughout his considerations, he uses the word *Übung*, be it for learning of vocabularies, for practicing sports, for playing an instrument, or arranging flowers in the Japanese arts *ikebana*. In fact, the German word *Übung* does have such a wide range of meanings; Herrigel and Dürkheim also used *Übung* for describing Zen practices without hesitation. It seems that Bollnow just took over the word *Übung* from the writings of these two authors. For example, Dürkheim says:

'For the Japanese "Üben" always means a path to inner maturity, even when a specific performance is to be achieved. This goes so far as that when he meets a man of maturity, he immediately asks what his *Übung* was or still is. For us, the significance of all *Sich-Üben* [practicing oneself, R.M.] lies primarily on 'performance', for the Japanese on 'maturity'¹² (Dürkheim, 1954, p. 27).

12 ‚Für den Japaner bedeutet 'Üben', auch wo es um das Erzielen einer bestimmten Leistung erfolgt, immer auch Weg des inneren Reifens. Das geht so weit, daß, wo ihm ein Mensch von Reife begegnet, er sogleich fragt, was wohl seine Übung gewesen sein möge oder auch noch sei. Der Sinn alles Sich-Übens liegt für uns vorwiegend auf ‚Leistung‘, für den Japaner auf ‚Reife‘.‘ Regarding the difference between Dürkheim's and Bollnow's theory of *Übung* see Baier (2013).

Interestingly, the Japanese language is more differentiated in this regard. There are at least two words that translate as *Übung*: 練習 (*renshuu*) and 稽古 (*keiko*).¹³ Both have a rather specific meaning. While *renshuu* is usually used to denote the development of skills through practice regarding modern sports or classroom learning, *keiko* refers to the practice of the old Japanese arts like calligraphy or archery. Moreover, *keiko* does not only denote the development of skills, but, in the sense that Bollnow is talking about, the change of the innermost person through practicing the respective arts. The two words, therefore, divide the field of practice into two distinct categories, with one referring to the acquisition of skills in the area of activities in the modern world, the other to the change of the person in the area of traditional Japanese arts. Besides, *keiko* may sound a little bit old-fashioned compared to *renshuu*; and *renshuu* is a rather didactic concept in modern pedagogy. There is thus a ‘gap’ between the concepts in terms of the time frame to which they refer, one being applied to the ‘old times’, the other to modernity. Japanese language, therefore, is not inclined to link the two concepts in the way that Bollnow does through using the word *Übung* with reference to both, traditional Japanese arts and modern pedagogy.

It is obvious, however, that in referring to the practice of traditional arts in Japan, Bollnow thinks not in terms of the meaning of *renshuu* but of *keiko*. Still, with the concept of *Übung* he also denotes practices that in Japanese language would be associated with the word *renshuu*. After all, he is concerned with the didactics of *Übung*. The subtitle of his book ‘*Vom Geist des Übens*’ [The spirit of practice] clearly indicates this, as it reads ‘*Eine Rückbesinnung auf elementare didaktische Erfahrungen*’ [A reflection upon elementary didactic experiences]. Therefore, the concept *Übung* is rather broad and encompasses the meaning of both Japanese concepts, *renshuu* and *keiko* which, in a sense, bridges the gap between them.

Bollnow’s book has been translated into Japanese with the title 練習の精神 (*renshuu no seishin*). The translation thus weighs the didactic aspect (as it is stressed in the concept *renshuu*) of Bollnow’s work higher than the aspect of the development of the ‘true essence’ (as it is stressed in the concept *keiko*). This is surprising, because Bollnow’s main idea is to move from a rather didactic understanding of *Übung* to a more anthropological and humanistic one through incorporating Herrigel’s and Dürkheim’s reflections about traditional Japanese arts. However, the translator needed to decide which word to use for the translation, and he chose *renshuu*. This problem makes clear that in applying the word *Übung* regarding traditional Japanese arts, Herrigel and Dürkheim took traditional Japanese arts out of the hereditary Japanese cultural pattern of meaning and incorporated it into another, that is the German pattern of meaning. They paved the way for Bollnow to change the position of Japanese traditional arts in relation to other, especially modern, forms of practice. In terms of transculturality this is a creative change of categories through the interpretation of transcultural experiences.

It is rather unlikely that Herrigel, Dürkheim or Bollnow did this change of categories on purpose. More than that, it is likely that they were not aware of the re-categorizing of traditional Japanese arts that they accomplished through applying the word *Übung* to them. All of them had only little understanding of Japanese language, and they were more interested in the experiences that Japanese traditional arts provide than in linguistic details. And from a German point of view, it is rather natural to use the word *Übung* regarding practices like traditional Japanese arts.

Therefore, it may be justified to describe this categorical change as a creative misunderstanding, as a transcultural interpretation that unwillingly changed the original meaning of Japanese traditional arts and *keiko* through incorporating it into the German language.

13 In what follows in this section I refer to personal communication with Prof. Tadashi Nishihira in April 2017. I am grateful for his comments. However, any flaws in this section are mine alone.

7. Transculturality and Bollnow's culture theory

This section shall discuss some aspects of Bollnow's theory of culture. The above analysis made clear that in his work on *Übung* he develops a transcultural theory. Yet, it has not been analyzed how Bollnow thinks about culture.

In his theory of *Übung*, as in his other works, Bollnow argues from the viewpoint of a philosophical anthropology. In doing so, he looks for anthropological universals. He looks at humans as beings that everywhere in the world have the same basic characteristics. Therefore, for him, *Übung* is an issue that is important for human beings in a general sense. But how does he think about cultural differences?

For Bollnow, cultures seem to be one-sided developments of universal traits of human beings (see Schwill, 2001, p. 43). He thinks that the 'European' tradition has highly developed thoughts about freedom but lacks of development in the understanding of *Übung*. In contrast, he finds this development of *Übung* in what he calls the 'Japanese culture'. Therefore, for him, 'Japanese' culture can serve as a complement to 'European' culture since it balances a shortcoming of the 'European' pedagogical tradition. Bollnow explicitly states how important it is for German pedagogues and philosophers to learn from Japan; in this regard Bollnow criticizes his German colleagues for not being interested in what Japanese scholars could teach them (Schwill, 2001, p. 32). A true encounter of cultures, Bollnow holds, is characterized through mutual understanding. Such an understanding, he posits, is important for a real 'world history' and a 'world philosophy' (see Schwill, 2001, p. 29ff.).

However, Bollnow notably sees this complementary function of the reference to another culture only regarding *theoretical* reflections. He explicitly states that it makes no sense to import 'Japanese' traditions of practice to Germany. Here, again, he refers to culture:

'Needless to say, that we cannot simply adopt the Japanese forms of *Übung* into our world. They are embedded in the context of the Japanese culture and cannot be dissolved out of it. Therefore, it would be preposterous if we would want to practice archery or calligraphy in our world'¹⁴ (Bollnow, 1976, p. 119).

It seems that for him the practice itself is situated in a complex cultural context that cannot be taken to pieces and brought in another cultural context. From today's perspective, Bollnow's claim that Japanese traditional arts cannot be integrated into German or European life has been overhauled by reality. Nowadays there are many possibilities to take part in Japanese traditional arts, like karate, judo, or calligraphy in Germany and other countries outside of Japan. Regarding the practice of Japanese forms of *Übung*, therefore, Bollnow does *not* think transculturally.

In his thinking, Bollnow seems to be still tied to what Welsch calls the traditional culture concept. It is remarkable that Bollnow repeatedly uses words like 'Japan', 'Japanese culture', 'Japanese traditions' etc., as distinct to the 'Occidental' tradition. Also, he uses words like 'we' and 'them' (although without devaluing the other). This language is situated within a background of the traditional culture concept. It is a language that suggests that there are in fact distinct and rather closed cultures. It seems that what Bollnow in fact *does* (developing a transcultural theory) is different from what he is *saying* about cultures.

However, Bollnow proposes that instead of importing Japanese traditional arts to 'our world,' new ways of *Übung* need to be created and cultivated. This, he thinks, is an individual task: 'As long as cultivated forms of practice with distinct traditions do not exist over here, everybody needs to find forms of practice out of his life circle that are appropriate for him'¹⁵ (Bollnow, 1976, p. 120). It seems

14 'Daß wir die japanischen Übungsformen nicht einfach in unsere Welt übernehmen können, ist selbstverständlich. Sie sind in den Zusammenhang der japanischen Kultur eingebettet und können nicht aus ihm herausgelöst werden. So wäre es ein Unding, uns in unserer Welt im Bogenschießen oder im kalligraphischen Schreiben üben zu wollen.'

15 'Solange ausgebildete Formen des Übens mit eigener Tradition bei uns nicht vorliegen, muß jeder aus seinem Lebenskreis die ihm gemäßen Formen des Übens zu finden suchen.'

that he considers it possible that ‘European’ culture could cultivate (collective) forms of practice. However, he rather integrates his ideas into the individualistic mindset of ‘European’ culture. In this sense, again, the ‘Japanese’ traditions undergo a transcultural change in Bollnow’s theory of *Übung*.

Therefore, Bollnow’s reference to culture seems to be ambivalent. For one part, his intellectual practice itself is transcultural in importing ‘Japanese’ ideas into the ‘European’ context of thinking. For another part, his thinking is still bound to the framework of the traditional culture concept. This observation about Bollnow’s thinking is not meant in a pejorative way; in contrast, I think that with his reference to ‘Japan’ Bollnow made a remarkable achievement for pedagogy. We need to keep in mind that Bollnow wrote about *Übung* in the 1970s, when transculturality was not yet discussed like today.

8. Summary

All in all, Bollnow’s transcultural concept of inner freedom did not gain much ground in German educational discourse.¹⁶ In the 1970s Bollnow was already a rather old-fashioned scholar of education. The approach of the Humanist Pedagogics [*Geisteswissenschaftliche Pädagogik*] that Bollnow followed had been dismissed by many scholars in the end of the 1960s when empirical and critical thinking entered the stage of educational thought. At this time ‘emancipation’ was the key concept that was discussed by educators and pedagogues; although ‘emancipation’ is very close to ‘freedom’, however, ‘emancipation’ was thought of in a rather political and societal framework; it meant, for example, the emancipation of the younger generation against the older one, or the emancipation of women against (structural) male oppression. Here, freedom was not thought of as a balancing of inner drives and outer possibilities, but rather as a fight for the possibility to realize inner drives against outer constraints. Reference to ‘inner freedom’ would seem rather unpolitical and could not gain popularity. Maybe it is because of this *Zeitgeist* that Bollnow’s theory of *Übung* did not get the recognition at the time as it would have deserved.

However, seen from today’s perspective, Bollnow’s thoughts may still lead the way to conscious efforts for transcultural understanding. In a world that risks to become ever more homogenous in the process of globalization, it is important to appreciate different cultural traditions and to seek for mutual learning of these traditions in transcultural learning processes. Moreover, in a world that in no way is more peaceful than in the 1970s, Bollnow’s transcultural concept of inner freedom could lead the way to more ‘serenity’ [*Gelassenheit*] (Bollnow, 1991, p. 77f.) as opposed to the widespread aggression. Today, we should still hope with Bollnow for a ‘world history’ and a ‘world philosophy’ in which people from all over the world are willing to act together and to learn from each other.

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¹⁶ Bollnow’s concept of *Übung* is discussed in Brinkmann (2012). There is a recent publication by Nishihira (2017) that draws on Bollnow’s theory of *Übung*.

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