

Wilhelm von Humboldt

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# THE LIMITS OF STATE ACTION

Edited by J.W. Burrow



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INDIANAPOLIS

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Frontispiece from Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin. Drawing by Johann Joseph Schmeller.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Humboldt, Wilhelm, Freiherr von, 1767–1835.
[Ideen zu einem Versuch die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen. English]
The limits of state action/Wilhelm von Humboldt; edited by J. W. Burrow.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-86597-108-0. ISBN 0-86597-109-9 (pbk.)
1. State, The. 2. Political science. I. Burrow, J. W. (John Wyon), 1935– . II. Title.
JC501.H8131993
320.1—dc20 92-33512
CIP

C 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
P 10 9 8 7 6 5 4

Le difficile est de ne promulguer que des lois nécessaires, de rester à jamais fidèle à ce principe vraiment constitutionnel de la société, de se mettre en garde contre la fureur de gouverner, la plus funeste maladie des gouvernements modernes.

Mirabeau l'aîné, *Sur l'Éducation publique*, p. 69.

The difficult task is to enact only laws that are needed, to remain ever faithful to that truly basic principle of society, to be on guard against the passion for ruling, the most fatal disorder of modern states.

Mirabeau the elder, *On Public Education*, p. 69.

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# *Editor's Introduction*

Wilhelm von Humboldt is widely remembered as the architect of the Prussian educational system and the founder of the University of Berlin. To the student of the history of political ideas, however, he is probably most familiar as the author of a single sentence, taken by John Stuart Mill as the epigraph for his essay *On Liberty:* 'The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity.' Humboldt also, incidentally, a decade later, provided another eminent Victorian, Matthew Arnold, with the epigraph for his *Schools and Universities on the Continent*. The book from which Mill's quotation was drawn was published in 1854, five years before the publication of *On Liberty* and about the time that, as we know, Mill began to consider writing such an essay.[1] It was a translation of Humboldt's *Ideen zu einem Versuch die Grenzen der Wirkamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*—a title which the English translator, Joseph Coulthard, sacrificing modesty to concision, rendered as *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. Humboldt himself had died in 1835 and the work itself, written when he was a young man in 1791–2, might have been regarded in the 1850s as a museum piece. It had not, however, been published when it was first written, Humboldt anticipating trouble with the Prussian censorship, though sections of it had appeared in Schiller's journal *Neue Thalia* and in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.[2]

The revival of interest in it was due chiefly to the subsequent public career and scholarly distinction of its author and to the fact that the post-

[1] J. S. Mill, *Autobiography* (London, 1954), p. 212.

[2] Chapters V, VI, and VIII appeared in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in the autumn of 1792. *Neue Thalia* published ch. II, and the first part of ch. III.

humous German edition of Humboldt's works, edited by his brother Alexander, published the complete, or almost complete, text for the first time in 1852.[3] It aroused immediate interest, inspiring a French work on the same lines—Edouard Laboulaye's *L'état et ses limites*—as well as an English translation of Humboldt's essay. Coulthard's belief that the subject was of 'peculiar interest' for his own time was a reasonable one, for it was also the theme of such classics of Victorian political thought as Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics* (1851) and *The Man versus The State* (1884) as well as Mill's *On Liberty*.

Whether the belated publication of Humboldt's essay actually provided the springboard for Mill's we cannot be sure, though the dates, and Mill's frequent references to Humboldt in his text, inevitably suggest a connection.[4] Mill's own account of the matter, apart from the celebrated tribute to his wife, is somewhat vague, no doubt reflecting fairly accurately the way in which free-floating ideas, impressions and half-conscious impulses coalesce in the conception of a book. 'As regards originality, it [*On Liberty*] has of course no other than that which every thoughtful mind gives to its own mode of conceiving and expressing truths which are common property.' Mill goes on to mention Pestalozzi and Goethe among others, but adds 'the only author who has preceded me . . . of whom I thought it appropriate to say anything was Humboldt'.[5]

Humboldt had become, of course, by the time his collected works were published, far more to his contemporaries and successors than simply the author of a resurrected treatise on the individual and the State. His career as statesman, philologist, and educationalist, as an assiduous cultivator of personal relations who was rewarded with the friendship of Goethe and Schiller, and as the man who taught Mme de Staël German, was an appropriate image of the deliberate human polymorphism which was his professed ideal. One only of his many roles was to be the lost leader of the Prussian liberal constitutionalists. One commentator has suggested

[3] This is a hiatus in ch. III, which subsequent editors have been unable to fill.

[4] J. S. Mill, *On Liberty: With The Subjection of Women and Chapters on Socialism*, ed. Stefan Collini, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 3, 58, 72, 103, 108; and *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson, 33 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–91), vol. 18, *Essays on Politics and Society*, pp. 215, 261, 262, 274, 300, 304. [The editor's original references to the 1968 Everyman's Library edition of *On Liberty* have been changed to refer to the Cambridge and Toronto editions cited above.]

[5] Mill, *Autobiography*, pp. 216–17.

that had there been a revolution in Germany in 1790 he might have become 'the German Mirabeau'.[6] Friedrich von Genz, a friend of Humboldt's early years—the essay *On the Limits of State Action* began as a letter from Humboldt to Genz—said that he was the cleverest man he had ever met. Mme de Staël, obviously assuming, reasonably enough, that she had met them all, called him simply 'la plus grande capacité de l'Europe'. Arndt said of him that he could lead the great Stein about like a lamb, while Schiller found in him the ideal balance of reason and emotion—a compliment which Humboldt returned.[7] Although it is not surprising that a number of people seem to have been rather afraid of Humboldt.

He was born at Potsdam in 1767, of a Pomeranian noble and official family,[8] and when he wrote the essay which we shall henceforth refer to for convenenience as *The Limits of State Action* at the age of 24 he had just resigned his first minor post in the Prussian administration, having found administration, as he said, '*geistlos*', and resolved to devote himself entirely to the cultivation of his friends, his newly married wife, and himself.[9] In 1802 he made a somewhat tentative return to government service as a Prussian envoy to the Papal court, thus beginning a distinguished scholarly line, for he was followed successively in that post by Niebuhr and Bunsen. In 1808 he returned to Berlin, to become Minister of Public Instruction in Stein's reforming ministry; as masterly, as Seeley said, in the organization of education as Scharnhorst in that of war. Indeed, one might add that if it was really the Prussian schoolmaster who defeated the French in 1870, it was Humboldt who had licensed the schoolmaster.

[6] R. Aris, *History of Political Thought in Germany, 1789–1815* (London, 1936), p. 137.

[7] Ernst Howald, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Zurich, 1944), pp. 20–1. J. R. Seeley, *Life of Stein* (3 vols. Cambridge, 1898), III, 153. For Humboldt and Schiller see Howald, p. 84, and D. Regin, *Freedom and Dignity. The Historical and Philosophical Thought of Schiller* (The Hague, 1965), p. 107. Humboldt wrote of Schiller: 'Gedanke und Bild, Idee und Empfindung treten immer in ihm in Wechselwirkung' *Über Schiller und den Gang seiner Geistesentwicklung* (Insel-Bücherei, nr. 38, Leipzig, n.d.), p. 45.

[8] But the Prussian official class was decidedly liberal at this time. Genz considered it tainted with Jacobinism. J. Droz, *L'Allemagne et la Revolution Française* (Paris, 1949), p. 380.

[9] The studies of Humboldt's life on which this biographical account is chiefly based are: Howald, *Wilhelm von Humboldt;* R. Haym, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* (Berlin, 1856); R. Leroux, *Guillaume de Humboldt; la formation de sa pensée jusqu'en 1794* (Paris 1932); Friedrich Schaffenstein, *Wilhelm von Humboldt. Ein Lebensbild* (Frankfurt a.M., 1952).

As a member of Stein's ministry, Humboldt founded the University of Berlin and reorganized the Prussian Gymnasium, stamping its syllabus with his own linguistic and Hellenist leanings and his concern for all-round cultural development. That there was a contradiction between Humboldt's role during this period and the letter, if not the underlying spirit, of some of the doctrines of the *Limits* has often been noted, and explained by the patriotic enthusiasm of the year of Prussia's national awakening.[10] Humboldt subsequently attended the Congress of Vienna as Prussian plenipotentiary and served in several diplomatic posts. In 1818 he became for a brief period Minister of the Interior, leading the opposition to Hardenberg by urging less subservience to Austria and a greater measure of constitutional responsibility. The actual occasion of his final retirement was Prussia's acceptance of the Karlsbad decrees.[11]

Humboldt's devotion to his public career was never entirely wholehearted, however, and the real timbre of his life is more accurately suggested by his changing intellectual preoccupations and his various published and unpublished writing than by an outline of his official career. Even had he written nothing but personal letters to his friends, he would still have achieved a footnote to German literary history as the correspondent of Goethe and Schiller. In fact, he wrote copiously if spasmodically, and achieved reputations of varying distinction as political theorist, philosopher of history, Hellenist, literary critic, aesthetician, and one of the pioneers of comparative philology. He also, almost inevitably, wrote some rather indifferent poetry. This polymathy of Humboldt is not simply a matter for gratified wonder. It is, as we shall see, crucial to an understanding of his political theory, not only because such polymorphism is a personal expression of his humanist ideal, but because he draws for his basic ideas on a cultural context in which a number of different intellectual activities run along converging or parallel lines.

[10] But Humboldt's *volte face* was never absolute; many men have looked forward to the withering away of the State but few ministers have looked forward as Humboldt did to the withering away of their own department. See E. Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Reform des Bildungswesens* (new ed. Tübingen, 1960), p. 104.

On the question of Humboldt's inconsistency see also Howald, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, pp. 131–3; Schaffenstein, *Wilhelm von Humboldt. Ein Lebensbild*, pp. 180–3, 225; Seeley, *Life of Stein*, II, 424, 428.

[11] G. S. Ford, *Stein and the Era of Reform in Prussia, 1807–1815* (Princeton, 1922, repr. 1965), pp. 197–205. Also B. Gebhardt, *Wilhelm von Humboldt als Staatsmann* (2 vols. Stuttgart, 1896).

For this reason it would be superficial to approach Humboldt's essay on the limits of the State in what may seem the most obvious way, as an attempt by a young German intellectual to define his attitude, as so many of his compatriots were trying to do, to the revolutionary events in France. Humboldt had, it is true, already written earlier in the same year an essay entitled *Thoughts on Constitutions, suggested by the New French Constitution,* in which he had taken a decidedly Burkean line. There is no evidence, though, that he knew anything of Burke's *Reflections*—later translated by his friend Genz—in 1791. Some of the ideas of Humboldt's earlier essay were incorporated in the *Limits of State Action.* The latter, however, is not very Burkean in tone, except in a few passages, and its central thesis—the attempt rigidly to circumscribe the activities of the State—though it is introduced with a quotation from Mirabeau, is just as applicable to Frederician Prussia or Josephinian Austria as it is to the National Assembly, and in some respects more so.

Humboldt's *Limits of State Action* is by no means solely explicable in terms of current events. It is in fact a singularly rich document, containing a number of different intellectual and cultural seams and moulding them into an intellectual landscape with its own distinctively Humboldtian feel and atmosphere. There was, firstly, Humboldt's ambiguous attitude to the *Aufklärung,* his inheritance of the physiocrat and rationalist doctrines of his boyhood tutors. There were the theories of human perfectibility of Leibniz and Lessing. There was the Kantian assertion of the absolute claims of the moral law, and the Kantian insistence that each individual must be treated as an end and never simply as a means, and that the end of life was essentially an internal matter, an inner freedom of the soul, not simply a condition of external well-being. There was the Rousseauist and *Sturm und Drang* cult of feeling as the source of human vitality. There was the characteristic philhellenism of German neo-classicism, of which Humboldt was a leading figure, which saw in an idealized picture of the ancient Greeks the model of the fully rounded and harmonious human character. There was even a dose of Platonism, which led Humboldt to see the visible world as a kind of cryptogram of the eternal ideas which lie behind it—a doctrine which bobs disconcertingly to the surface of the essay (chapter VIII) though it is not really worked into its theoretical economy.[12]

[12] For the fullest account of Humboldt's intellectual development see Leroux, *Guillaume de Humboldt.*

It is necessary to risk some ungainliness and possible bewilderment by dwelling on this heterogeneity, in order to indicate the richness of Humboldt's essay, to emphasize that it was far more than simply a *pièce d'occasion,* and that the fact that it is at least as coherent as most essays in political theorizing represents a considerable synthetic achievement. This may seem at first sight not merely bewildering but implausible. Or it may suggest that Humboldt's essay is simply the product of a well-meaning but over-tolerant eclecticism. It begins to seem less implausible when one remembers that most of these intellectual currents were also present in the work of a German contemporary of Humboldt more familiar to English students of political theory: Hegel. Whatever the objections to Hegel's political theory, and they have been many and violent, he is not generally regarded (though it is a possible line of attack) as a well-meaning eclectic, or simply as as repository of undigested, heterogeneous intellectual impulses. To invoke Hegel in order to dispel suspicions of confusion may seem like raising the devil to exorcise a bump in the night. Yet if it can be allowed that Hegel was able to make something of his intellectual heritage that was undeniably distinctive and coherent, whatever else may be wrong with it, it may seem justified to ask at least for a temporary suspension of disbelief on behalf of Humboldt. In fact one could try to sum up by saying simply that Humboldt, like Hegel, though the results show marked differences, is trying to derive a coherent intellectual position from an inheritance and *milieu* which contain heavy doses both of the Enlightenment and of the Romanticism which is generally set in opposition to it.

In the English intellectual history of the early nineteenth century there was far less of this articulate groping for a synthesis, which is perhaps why English readers are still apt to find the results obscure and unsympathetic. J. S. Mill, who did feel the need, was able, with admittedly a certain amount of simplification, to present his two archetypal figures, Bentham and Coleridge, representing the characteristic intellectual virtues of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries respectively, as two sides of a dialectic, needing, in fact, to be *aufgehoben* in the Hegelian sense, taken up and synthesized at a higher level. It is such a synthesis that Mill is asking for when, in conclusion, he recommends his readers and by implication himself, to try to fuse the intellectual lessons of Bentham and Coleridge. It is not surprising that he found a congenial spirit in Hum-

boldt, or that he should have taken a sentence written by Humboldt nearly 70 years earlier as the motto for one of his major works.

Humboldt's own emergence from the intellectual world of the German *Aufklärung,* into which he had been initiated by his tutors as Mill had learnt his utilitarianism from his father, was, like Mill's own emancipation, a process partly of emotional crisis and self-discovery, partly of exposure to the literary and philosophical tendencies of the period, and to the influence of friends, especially Georg Forster and Friedrich Jacobi,[13] touched like himself by the late eighteenth-century cult of feeling and the revolt against the drier abstractions of the *Aufklärung* in its most undiluted form. Humboldt found himself, like other youths of cerebral and emotionally unexpansive upbringing and disposition—even in later years acquaintances commented on Humboldt's essential coldness[14]—confronted in his first steps in adult personal relations by the usual elementary and shattering discovery that other people, and particularly women, mattered to him, not merely as an audience for his ideas or as objects of his disinterested benevolence but as influences capable of enriching his life, influencing his ideas and, temporarily at least, destroying his happiness. This sense, which Humboldt never lost, of the fruitful interpenetration of personalities, the sense that others could become, emotionally and intellectually, flesh of his flesh, and he of theirs, prevented his liberalism from ever assuming that characteristic liberal form in which individuals in society confront each other as external objects and obstacles, as rival, independent, and potentially hostile sovereign states. One cannot say of Humboldt's liberalism, as Lionel Trilling remarks of liberalism in general, that 'in the interests of its vision of a general enlargement and freedom and rational direction of human life—it drifts towards a denial of the emotions and the imagination'.[15]

Contemporary events, the French Revolution, Frederick William II's law proclaiming Lutheranism as the State religion, played a part in the formation of Humboldt's fundamental principles, but neither appear to

[13] Leroux, *Guillaume de Humboldt,* pp. 205–9, 244 n. 5, 355–7. For studies of Forster, see Droz, *L'Allemagne;* G. P. Gooch, *Germany and the French Revolution* (London, new impr. 1965), ch. XIII; Henry Hatfield, *Aesthetic Paganism in German Literature. Winckelmann to Goethe* (Harvard, 1954).

[14] Howald, *Wilhelm von Humboldt,* p. 13.

[15] Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (Mercury Books, 1964), pp. xiii–xiv.

have been nearly so important as his discovery of girls.[16] In the ensuing struggle to remain open to the new emotional and intellectual possibilities revealed by his discovery of other people, without losing poise and dignity and the sense of his own independent identity, to accept experience and ingest it without being overwhelmed, Humboldt, more fortunate in this respect than Mill, found in his immediate cultural environment in late eighteenth-century Germany a rich assortment of images and concepts and even a myth—the myth of noble Hellas—for interpreting his discovery.

Humboldt's dilemma was essentially, stated in its most abstract terms, that of achieving unity in diversity, of retaining coherence without sacrificing variety, richness, diversity: of giving the various aspects of one's nature their due, and retaining one's sensitivity to experience, even painful experience, while remaining essentially in control of one's cultural metabolism, moulding and shaping its results into a coherent if necessarily unstable whole (see especially chapters II, III, VIII). It is a dilemma which can be formulated in a number of different vocabularies and can be made to sound outlandish or banal depending on how attuned we are to the vocabulary that is chosen. One can express it in a traditional metaphysical vocabulary, as the relation of form to substance or matter, or as the tension between reason and feeling, rules and spontaneity, Classicism and Romanticism, Kantian universal moral imperatives and the vitality and variety of historically nurtured folk-customs and traditions.

These dichotomies are not identical, of course, nor exhaustive. They involve different levels of abstraction and they imply attention to different kinds of illustrative examples, and because the examples are different, the dilemmas themselves will be different. The reason for pointing to their affinities, however, is to suggest that it is not fortuitous that a number of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century German authors are equally, or almost equally, aestheticians, moralists, political theorists, and, of course, metaphysicians: Herder, Schiller, Hegel, Schelling, and a number of others, among whom we may include Humboldt. The immediate impulse to such many-sided activity was surely in most cases a sense that a relatively coherent and stable view of the world, that of the *Aufklärung*, was in a number of contexts unacceptably inhibited, uniform

[16] 'Il y a là une conception dont l'origine doit être recherchée . . . dans les expériences amoureuses de Humboldt' (Leroux, *Guillaume de Humboldt*, p. 252).