Wilhelm von Humboldt

THE LIMITS OF STATE ACTION

Edited by J.W. Burrow

Liberty Fund
INDIANAPOLIS
This book is published by Liberty Fund, Inc., a foundation established to encourage study of the ideal of a society of free and responsible individuals.

The cuneiform inscription that serves as our logo and as the design motif for our endpapers is the earliest-known written appearance of the word “freedom” (amagi) or “liberty.” It is taken from a clay document written about 2300 B.C. in the Sumerian city-state of Lagash.

*The Limits of State Action* © 1969, Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission. Comparative Table of Subjects © 1993 by Liberty Fund, Inc. All rights reserved. All inquiries should be addressed to Liberty Fund, Inc., 8335 Allison Pointe Trail, Suite 300, Indianapolis, IN 46250-1684. This book was manufactured in the United States of America.


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.
   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.


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.

Contents

Editor’s Introduction xvii
EDITOR’S NOTE lix
NOTE ON THE PRESENT EDITION lix
OTHER WORKS BY WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT lx
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY lx

CHAPTER I

Introduction 3

Object of the inquiry defined—an inquiry seldom prosecuted, though of the highest importance • Historical view of the limits which States have practically assigned to their sphere of action • Difference between ancient and modern States • On the aim of the State organization in general—Should the solicitude of the State be confined to the preservation of SECURITY, or should it attempt to provide for the POSITIVE WELFARE of the nation? • Legislators and authors in favour of the latter opinion—Notwithstanding their conclusions, this question seems to require a profounder investigation • This investigation can proceed only from a consideration of human nature and its highest aims.

CHAPTER II

Of the individual man, and the highest ends of his existence 10

Man’s highest end is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers in their perfect individuality • Conditions necessary for the attainment of this end: freedom of action and a variety of situations • Closer application of these positions to the inner life of man • Historical confirmation • Highest principle of the whole inquiry derived from these considerations.
CONTENTS

Chapter III
On the solicitude of the State for the positive welfare of the citizen

Scope of this chapter - A solicitude of the State for the positive welfare of the citizen is harmful - For it creates uniformity; weakens the power and resources of the nation; confuses and impedes the reaction even of mere corporeal pursuits, and of external relations in general, on the human mind and character; must operate upon a promiscuous mass of individuals, and therefore does harm to these by measures which cannot meet individual cases; it hinders the development of individuality in human nature; it increases the difficulty of administration, multiplies the means necessary for it, and so becomes a source of manifold evils; lastly, it tends to confound the just and natural points of view from which men are accustomed to regard the most important objects - Vindication from the charge of having overdrawn these evils - Advantages of an opposite system - General principle - Means of a State solicitude directed to the positive welfare of the citizen - Their pernicious character - Difference between the accomplishment of any object by the State in its capacity of State, and the same effected by the efforts of the citizens - Examination of the objection that a solicitude of the State for the positive welfare of the citizen is necessary, because it might not be possible without it to obtain the same external ends, and realize the same essential results - This shown to be possible, especially in the common associations of the citizens under their voluntary management - This voluntary management superior to State arrangements.

Chapter IV
Of the solicitude of the State for the negative welfare of the citizen - For his security

This solicitude is necessary: it constitutes the real end of the State - General principle: confirmed by history.

Chapter V
On the solicitude of the State for security against foreign enemies

Point of view selected for this consideration - Influence of war in general on national spirit and character - Comparison instituted between this and its condition with us, and the institutions connected with it - Manifold
CONTENTS

evils flowing from this condition as regards man’s internal development • General principle.

CHAPTER V I

On the solicitude of the State for the mutual security of the citizens • Means for attaining this end • Institutions for reforming the mind and character of the citizen • National education

Possible extent of the means for promoting mutual security • Moral means • National education—Is harmful, especially in that it hinders variety of development; useless, since there will be no lack of good private education in a nation which enjoys due freedom; effects too much, seeing that the solicitude for security does not necessitate an entire reformation of morals; it therefore lies beyond the sphere of political agency.

CHAPTER V I I

Religion

Historical view of the methods in which States have employed the agency of religion • All State interference in religious affairs produces the encouragement of certain opinions to the exclusion of others, and gives a certain direction to the citizen • General considerations on the influence of religion upon the human mind and character • Religion and morality are not inseparably connected • For the origin of all religions is entirely subjective; religiousness, and the utter absence of it, may give rise to equally beneficial results for morality; the principles of morality are wholly independent of religion, and the efficiency of all religion rests entirely on the peculiar disposition of the individual; so that what operates on morality is not the sum of the dogmas of religious systems, but the form of their internal acception • Application of these considerations to the present inquiry, and examination of the question of whether the State should make use of religion as instrumental to its ends. All furtherance of religion by the State produces, in the best of cases, legal actions only • But this result is not enough, seeing that the State must bring the citizens to acquiesce in the requirements of the law, and not only conform their actions to these • Moreover, this result is uncertain, or even improbable, and, at least, is better attainable by other methods • Further, this method is attended with such preponderating disadvantages that these alone absolutely forbid the State to make use of it • Refutation of an objection likely to be advanced here, founded on the want of culture in several classes of the people. Lastly, the following consideration decides the question on the
highest and most general grounds, that the State has no access to the real channels of influence on morality, viz. the form of the internal acception of religious conceptions. Hence, everything pertaining to religion is wholly beyond the sphere of the State’s activity.

CHAPTER VIII

Amelioration of morals

Means possible for this end • Principally reducible to the restraining of sensualism • General considerations on the influence of the sensuous in man • Influence of sensuous impressions considered in the abstract • Difference of this influence according to their own different nature: chiefly the difference between the influence of the energizing and other sensuous impressions • Union of the sensuous and the spiritual in the sense of the beautiful and the sublime • Influence of the sensuous element in human nature on the inquiring and intellectual—on the creative, moral powers of man • Evils and dangers of sensualism • Application of these considerations to the present inquiry, and examination of the question of whether the State should attempt to act positively on morals • Every such attempt is confined in its influence to external actions, and produces numerous and serious evils • Even the very immorality which it is designed to prevent is not wholly devoid of beneficial results—and, at least, does not necessitate a means for the reformation of morals in general • Hence such a means lies beyond the sphere of the State’s activity • General principle derived from this and the two preceding chapters.

CHAPTER IX

The solicitude of the State for security more accurately and positively defined • Further development of the idea of security

The course of the whole inquiry reviewed • Enumeration of what still remains to be examined • Determination of the idea of security • Definition • Rights for the security of which provision must be made • Rights of the citizens • Rights of the State • Actions which disturb security • Distribution of the remaining parts of the inquiry.

CHAPTER X

On the solicitude of the State for security with respect to actions which directly relate to the agent only (Police laws)
CONTENTS

On the expression, police laws • The only ground on which restrictions in this respect can be justified is the infringement of others’ rights, proceeding from the consequences of certain actions • Nature of the consequences which imply such infringement • Illustration in the example of actions creating offence • Precautionary measures to be adopted by the State in the case of actions which (inasmuch as a rare degree of knowledge is required to avoid the danger) endanger the rights of others in their consequences • What degree of consequence between those results and the actions is necessary to justify limitation • General principle • Exceptions • Advantages resulting from the performance of anything by the citizens through means of contracts, which otherwise the State must enforce by law • Examination of the question of whether the State may enforce positive actions • This position disproved, seeing that such coercion is harmful, while it is unnecessary for the maintenance of security • Exception in the case of necessary self-protection • Actions affecting common property.

C H A P T E R  X I

On the solicitude of the State for security with respect to such of the citizens’ actions as relate directly to others (Civil laws)

Actions infringing on the rights of others • Duty of the State to obtain redress for him who is wronged, and to protect him who has done the wrong from the revenge of him who has sustained it • Actions performed by mutual consent • Promises and engagements • Twofold duty of the State with regard to these: first, to enforce them when valid; second, to refuse the support of the law to those which are contrary to right, and, even in the case of legal engagements, to prevent men binding themselves by too oppressive restrictions • Validity of engagements • Extension of facilities for dissolving legal contracts, as a consequence of the second duty of the State above-mentioned; only allowable in the case of such contracts as concern the person; and with various modifications according to the particular nature of the contracts • Testamentary dispositions—Are they valid according to the general principles of right? • Their injurious consequences • Dangers of a merely hereditary succession ab intestato, and the advantages of private disposition of property • Middle course, by which the latter advantages may be secured, while the former disadvantages may be avoided • Succession ab intestato—Determination of the portions due to the testator’s family • How far contracts entered into by the living must be binding on their heirs—only in so far as the means bequeathed have assumed another form • Precautionary measures to be adopted by the State in order to prevent, in this case, relations which are restrictive of freedom • Corporations • Their disadvantages • The cause
CONTENTS

of these • They are obviated when every aggregate corporation is regarded only as a union of the actual members • General principle.

CHAPTER XI

On the solicitude of the State for security as manifested in the juridical decision of disputes among the citizens

The State, here, simply takes the place of the parties • First principle of every judicial proceeding hence arising • The State must protect the right on both sides • Hence flows the second principle of every judicial proceeding • Evils arising from the neglect of these principles • Necessity for another class of laws to render juridical decisions possible • The degree in which this necessity exists is a standard by which we may determine the excellence of the juridical constitution • Advantages and disadvantages of such laws • Rules of legislation suggested by these general principles.

CHAPTER XII

On the solicitude for security as manifested in the punishment of transgressions of the State’s laws (Criminal laws)

Actions which the State must punish • Punishments • Their measure, absolutely: the greatest moderation compatible with due efficiency • Harmfulness of punishing by degradation and disgrace • Injustice of punishments which extend beyond the criminal to others • The measure of punishment, relatively: degree of disregard for others’ rights • Refutation of the principle which apportions this scale according to the frequency of the crime, and the number of incentives to its commission • Its injustice • Its harmfulness • General gradation of crimes with regard to the severity of their punishment • Application of the criminal laws to actual crimes • Manner of proceeding adopted towards the criminal during the course of the inquiry • Examination of the question as to how far the State is to prevent crimes • Difference between the answer to this question and the limitations derived in a former chapter, in the case of actions which refer only to the agent • Review of the different possible plans for preventing crime according to its general causes • The first of these, or that which attempts to remedy the indigence which commonly leads to crime, is harmful and useless • Still more harmful, and hence unadvisable, is the second method, or that which aims at removing the causes of crime in the character • Application of this method to actual criminals • Their moral improvement • How to proceed with those who are absolved ab instanza • Last method of preventing crimes; the removal of opportunities for com-
mitting them • Limitation of this method to the preventing crimes from being actually committed, which are already resolved on. What means are we to supply for those disapproved of as preventive of crime? • The closest vigilance with regard to crimes committed, and the consequent rareness of impenity • Harmfulness of the right of granting reprieve and mitigation • Arrangements for detecting crime • Necessity for the perfect publicity of all criminal laws • General principles.

C H A P T E R X I V

On the solicitude of the State for the welfare of minors, lunatics, and idiots

Difference between the persons here referred to and the other citizens • Necessity of a solicitude for their positive welfare • Minors • Mutual duties of parent and child • Duty of the State • To determine the period of minority • To see to the fulfilment of those duties • Guardianship, after the death of the parents • Duty of the State with respect to guardians • The advantage of transferring the special exercise of this duty, when possible, to the municipality • Arrangements for protecting minors against attacks upon their rights • Persons deprived of reason • Difference between these and minors • General principle • Plan of this and the four preceding chapters • General relation of the present work to the theory of legislation • Highest points of view of all legislation • Preliminary essentials for every legislative system hence derived.

C H A P T E R X V

Measures for the maintenance of the State • Completion of the theory

Financial arrangements • Internal political union • The proposed theory considered in its relation to justice • Highest point of view of the whole theory • How far history and statistics may support and confirm it • Distinction drawn between the relation of the citizens to the State, and their mutual relation towards each other • Necessity for this distinction.

C H A P T E R X V i

Practical application of the theory proposed

General relation of theoretical truths to their application in practice • The necessity for prudence • In every reform the new condition of things must be interwoven with that which precedes it • This is most successfully
CONTENTS

effect when the reform proceeds from men’s minds and thoughts • General principles of all reform flowing from these positions • Application of these principles to the present inquiry • Principal peculiarity of the system laid down • Dangers to be apprehended in its applications • Necessity for gradual steps in the attempt to realize it • General principle • Connection of this principle with the fundamental principles of the proposed theory • Principle of necessity suggested by this connection • It is superior to that of utility • Conclusion.

COMPARATIVE TABLE OF SUBJECTS IN WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT’S The Limits of State Action AND JOHN STUART MILL’S On Liberty 148

Index 153
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 Wirksamkeit 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-

---

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.

xvii
humorous German edition of Humboldt’s works, edited by his brother Alexander, published the complete, or almost complete, text for the first time in 1852. 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. 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’.

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.
that had there been a revolution in Germany in 1790 he might have become 'the German Mirabeau'. 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. 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, and when he wrote the essay which we shall henceforth refer to for conveniencie 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. 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.

8 But the Prussian official class was decidedly liberal at this time. Genz considered it tainted with Jacobism. J. Droz, L’Allemagne et la Revolution Francaise (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 Humbold: 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. 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.

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.


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 For the fullest account of Humboldt’s intellectual development see Leroux, Guillaume de Humboldt.
It is necessary to risk some angainliness and possible bewilderment by
dwelling on this heterogeneity, in order to indicate the richness of Hum-
boldt'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-mean-
ing 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-mean-
ing eclectic, or simply as a 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, what-
ever 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 intel-
lectual 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 unsympa-
thetic. 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 vir-
tues 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, 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—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’.

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


have been nearly so important as his discovery of girls.\textsuperscript{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 \textit{Aufklärung}, was in a number of contexts unacceptably inhibited, uniform

\textsuperscript{16} 'Il y a là une conception dont l’origine doit être recherchée . . . dans les expériences amoureuses de Humboldt' (Leroux, \textit{Guillaume de Humboldt}, p. 252).