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Individualism Within a Society: Wilhelm von Humboldt

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Abstract

Wilhelm von Humboldt was a classical liberal theorist who advocated for the minimization of the state. He has many arguments for such a position and has a distinct view of human nature outlined in his works. His work centralized around language and education and he was greatly captivated by those subjects. His theories elevated the individual to the highest importance, and emphasized the freedom and participation of the citizens. This paper asserts the usefulness and validity of Humboldt's ideas—even in current times—and urges people to more closely examine his work.

Individualism Within a Society: Wilhelm von Humboldt

The aim of this research paper is to deepen our understanding of the works of Wilhelm von Humboldt that focus on the development of the individual. Of particular significance are the writings that appertain to the balance between the individual and the state, and these will be analyzed and discussed in order to emphasize their importance and display their validity, even in modern times.

Humboldt, born in 1767 in Potsdam, Prussia, was a very active mind in his time and held many vocations throughout his life. He was particularly attracted to the field of education and was especially drawn to the ancient Greeks for inspiration. His reasoning for the study of the ancient cultures was that “He wanted to see a new society of better men come into existence, and he knew of no better way to achieve this than to acquire knowledge of what men in antiquity had really been like” (Sweet, 1980, p. 126).

Human Nature

It is already apparent that Humboldt was a firm believer in the progress and improvement of humankind over time. One of the concepts he drew from Greek philosophies was *Bildung*, which has a multitude of convoluted meanings. To the Greeks, it mainly referred to the “cultivation of man according to his own definition” (Norbendo, 2002, p. 346). With the importance Humboldt gave to individual freedom and participation, it is no wonder that he believed in it so strongly.

Humboldt understands the change in human nature as follows:

The true end of man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and

immutable dictates of reason, and not suggested by vague and transient desires, is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. (Humboldt, 1792, p. 11)

This is not an idealized fantasy that he wishes for, but rather a vision of human nature that he truly believes in. This obviously leads to a theory of education, as man pursues the “highest and most harmonious development of his powers,” and it is apparent why Humboldt was drawn to that field throughout his life. Some organization is required from the state to achieve this ultimate end, which Humboldt obviously came to accept in his years of work spent reorganizing the Prussian education service.

Wilhelm von Humboldt was one of the first to lay down the foundation for what is now regarded as classical liberalism. He advocated the minimization of the state, to allow for the most unfettered development of the individual: “Freedom is but the possibility of a various and indefinite activity, while government, or the exercise of dominion, is a single, yet real activity” (Humboldt, 1792, p. 4). By minimizing the power and reach of the state we allow for maximum variety within society. One of the people to take notice and inspiration from Humboldt’s philosophies on individualism was John Stuart Mill, who claimed that Humboldt was a profound influence on him when he wrote *On Liberty* (Valls, 1999, p. 251).

Education

Humboldt felt that for a person’s education to be legitimately effective, it must be carried out with an emphasis on individual freedom as well as this diversity of

opportunities. But, he argues, these two factors do support each other: “Now the possibility of any higher degree of freedom presupposes a proportionate advance in cultivation—a decreasing need to act in large, compact masses—a richer variety of resources in the individual agents” (Humboldt, 1792, p. 5).

Humboldt had a fairly radical vision of education compared with others in that time. When he worked directly with the Prussian education service, he “redesigned the entire Prussian system of education and scholarship” (Grafton, 1981, p. 377). “The aim is general education with no thought for practical usefulness” (Norbendo, 2002, p. 347). This is done with a very delicate balance between private and public life. In this neo-humanist approach, if it is contained solely in the private realm, the subject loses all relation to objectivity. However, “A person who subjects himself to the world’s demands for usefulness loses his individuality” (Norbendo, 2002, p. 351). This neo-humanist view sees *Bildung* as comprising both the public and the private, and bringing them together in harmony.

Bildung, Mimesis and Comparative Anthropology

Christoph Wulf gets deeper into these concepts as he writes about *Bildung*, mimesis and Humboldt’s theory of comparative anthropology. These are complex intellections and I will take a moment to define them further. The concept of *Bildung* means more than simply education. It is a form of social education that necessitates a certain level of participation. Humboldt highlights this as extremely important to his theory of *Bildung*. Freedom is the “indispensable condition” that the growth of character

relies upon. It does not merely mean the availability of free activity, but the practice of free will. Humboldt writes:

Whatever does not spring from a man's free choice, or is only the result of instruction and guidance, does not enter into his very being, but still remains alien to his true nature; he does not perform it with truly human energies, but merely with mechanical exactness. (Humboldt, 1792, p. 23)

This illustrates the significance of participating in one's own education, and the need for internal motivation.

Mimesis has a broadened definition here as well, going beyond 'imitation' to mean, "also, 'simulation', 'representation' and 'expression'" (Wulf, 2003, p. 246). This is to be contrasted sharply with mimicry. Mimesis is not a process of assimilation, but rather one of inspiration and imagination. This is our ultimate tool in the operation of considering our external environment—through our senses—and projecting it into our consciousness. Through the proper model of *Bildung*, the sensory-driven processes of mimesis can be directed to the ingenuity of the individual. Others have taken a like-minded view of mimesis and described it as "the power to represent social reality, and thus to control it" (Argenti, 1998, p. 115).

One facet that characterizes Humboldt's comparative anthropology is the sense in which he regards humankind. It can be hard to follow at times, as he will seem to contradict himself when talking about human nature. This comes out of this comparative anthropological approach, which views "the actual condition of humankind from the point of view of its possible development" (Wulf, 2003, p. 241).

Language

These concepts are all connected very delicately with another of von Humboldt's passions: language. He was interested by many aspects of language, but most especially for the insight it gave into the learning tendencies people displayed. This showed him a quality and character unique to every language and culture. "Every speaker, every language, every nation approaches knowledge in a different perspective embodying a specific manner of feeling and perceiving" (Reill, 1994, p. 360). This is another example of the mimetic process of taking an object or action—in this case spoken or written language—and having it represent something external, though the meaning will vary between different individuals and cultures. When people re-present something, it is not exactly replicated, but rather is unique to them.

He examines the functions of language with that of a historian. They are seen as recorders of history, but they cannot record events independently of themselves, and whatever is done, must be done within their means and knowledge. There is still another aspect that figures into the task of a historian, and Humboldt equates it to a poet, or someone using "creative imagination, intuition, and divination" (Reill, 1994, p. 361).

Humboldt himself studied many languages throughout his lifetime and was especially interested in native island languages. When it came to education regarding languages Humboldt was different than most. He saw similarities in the structure of language and believed there to be a strong connection between language and mental development. "Properly conducted, the study of the form of language as form—rather

than mere grammatical drill—would develop all the students faculties” (Grafton, 1981, p. 378).

Humboldt argues that language shares a special relationship with humankind. It is only through the development of such a faculty that man can develop a worldview and “bring his thinking to clarity and precision through communal thinking with others.” However, to set language apart from other abilities, it is not something that arises only from necessity of external communication, but that “the bringing-forth of language is an inner need of human beings” (Humboldt, 1836, p. 27).

At the time he was writing, Humboldt’s views on language were near revolutionary, when examined over a century later by the caliber of people like Noam Chomsky. Chomsky’s rules of generative grammar looked at language in a complex way that drew from many sources. None of the sources has his view exactly right, but he claims that Humboldt came closest of all with his unique views on grammar and language (Chomsky, 1966, p. 2). Many still comment on Humboldt’s attitude towards language, and his devotion to it despite difficulties. In his early time Humboldt often had to “grope about, sometimes painfully, for terms and concepts we now take for granted” (Newman, 1974, p. 116).

State Action

I mentioned above that Humboldt was a large influence on Mill when writing *On Liberty*, and it is explored in depth by Andrew Valls. He compares the theories of the two in great detail, and there are far too many small differences for me to feature them here.

However, his analysis does offer more insight into Humboldt's hypotheses on individualism.

“Humboldt understood himself to be writing about the highest aspirations of human nature, but he believed that existing humans often failed to meet this ideal” (Valls, 1999, p. 273). This underscores the difficulty in understanding Humboldt's ‘comparative anthropology’ that was mentioned earlier. He tries to describe Humboldt's vision of diversity within society, and said that by allowing each person to explore their “inmost nature” while keeping an overlying sense of cooperation and community, enables each to “participate in the rich collective resources of all the others” (Valls, 1999, p. 254).

Humboldt was a fervent advocate for the limitations of state interference. One of the arguments that specifically stands out is his opposition to action by the government for what he called “positive welfare of the citizen.” In his romantic vision of humanity he saw this as an interference and hindrance to development. Through this kind of state action people were hindered in their development in that they would naturally become accustomed and dependant on such intervention. It would ultimately weaken man's empathy for his fellow man, and “that it has to operate upon a promiscuous mass of individualities, and therefore does harm to these by measures which cannot meet individual cases” (Humboldt, 1792, p. 27).

The only state action that Humboldt saw as actually necessary was providing security to its citizens. One factor in this view is that he views human nature as “such that people can take whatever situation confronts them and use it to develop themselves” (Valls, 1999, p. 260). He was a firm believer that the way man developed himself

depended more on how he confronted the situations of his life, than on the situations themselves.

Another reason for this was the unique way in which he envisioned the idea of security. This is an incredibly broad definition of security that seems to waver in its denotation and expand in its reach. That he basically defines security, as the only protection man needs to use his powers of self-development “compels him to redescribe in terms of security, any policy of which he approves” (Valls, 1999, p. 267). For instance he does not limit this to security from foreign enemies. He also describes protection from fraud and other attempts to exploit someone’s ignorance to your own advantage.

This definition is broadened even more when we get back to the policies of national education. Humboldt did not look upon national education as positive in his early writings. However, his participation in the state education apparatus and his central role in the founding of the University of Berlin call this into question. Valls notes how this “shows how difficult Humboldt found it to maintain his libertarianism consistently” (1999, p. 269). It is possible to look at this as “how far he had gone from the position on state education that he articulated there” (Valls, 1999, p. 271).

I think it can be looked at in another way, by giving an even more extensive meaning to security. It is possible that he is looking on the concept of security not as we might think about it today, but in greater connection to the actual act of securing. It is in this somewhat murky definition of security that much of Humboldt’s intentions were lost or misunderstood.

Humboldt stresses that freedom and equality of the citizens can only be developed through the limitation of state power. He sees the state as ultimately necessary at some level, but emphasizes that too powerful a state results in “communal aims imposed on society as a whole. Rather, individuals have to set their own aims and realize them” (Wulf, 2003, p. 244). This nicely summarizes Humboldt’s view of the state as a profoundly anti-human institution.

Conclusion

These ideas on individuality have been shared by many people in the past centuries, with many of them looking directly to Wilhelm von Humboldt for guiding principles. His views of language were in a sense before their time, though in the way they were strongly influenced by ancient cultures, it is almost as if they are also a mysterious wave of knowledge from the distant past. The way in which he arrives at the conclusion of limited state interference is incredibly useful for those who mistake modern-day conservatism with classical liberalism. The result might seem similar—and in many ways it is—but the reasoning that they use to arrive at such a conclusion sets them apart.

Education is a progression that Humboldt believed humankind endeavors for. It was something central to our desire for self-cultivation. His unique view of *Bildung* was valid on a personal as well as social level, and built around the traditional Greek denotation. In studying human nature over time, and in understanding our current balance of powers, I think that the works of Humboldt should never be far from our consideration.

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