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THE LIMITS OF STATE ACTION

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THE LIMITS OF STATE ACTION

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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 English 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, 5 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 posthumous 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)

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.

³ There is an hiatus in ch. iii, which subsequent editors have been unable to fill.

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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.¹ 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'.²

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 that had there been a revolution in Germany in 1790 he might have become 'the German Mirabeau'.³ 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.⁴ Altogether it is not surprising that a number of people seem to have been rather afraid of Humboldt.

¹ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (London, Everyman's Library ed., latest impr. 1968), pp. 62, 115–16, 130, 158–9, 163.

² Mill, *Autobiography*, pp. 216–17.

³ R. Aris, *History of Political Thought in Germany, 1789–1815* (London, 1936), p. 137.

⁴ 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 Geistes Entwicklung* (Insel-Bücherei, nr. 38, Leipzig, n.d.), p. 45.

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He was born at Potsdam—which is rather as though Bismarck had been born in Weimar—in 1767, of a Pomeranian noble and official family,¹ and when he wrote the essay which we shall henceforth refer to for convenience 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.² In 1802 he made a somewhat tentative return to government service as 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. 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.³ 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

¹ 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.

² 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).

³ 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.

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measure of constitutional responsibility; the actual occasion of his final retirement was Prussia's acceptance of the Karlsbad decrees.¹

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 writings 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, aesthete 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.

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, though there is no evidence 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

¹ 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).

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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.¹

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 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, 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

¹ For the fullest account of Humboldt's intellectual development see Leroux, *Guillaume de Humboldt*.

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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 Humboldt, 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,¹ 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 coldness²—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

¹ 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).

² Howald, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, p. 13.

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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'.¹ 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.² 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

¹ Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (Mercury Books, 1964), pp. xiii–xiv.

² 'Il y a là une conception dont l'origine doit être recherchée . . . dans les expériences amoureuses de Humboldt' (Leroux, *Guillaume de Humboldt*, p. 252).

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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 and dominated by concepts too mechanistic and limited in scope to accommodate the full richness of the concrete world and the full range of human potentialities. Such was certainly the inspiration of Goethe's *Naturphilosophie*, to which Humboldt refers (below, p. 19)—perhaps the most notorious example of the doctrinaire many-sidedness of the period.

Because of the nature of these criticisms, the problems of constructing a new conceptual framework would arise in the form of certain fundamental dilemmas. How, in particular, to mediate between what Schiller, in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind* (1794) called *Stofftrieb* and *Formtrieb*, the urge towards the sensuous and concrete and the urge towards rational control and the formulation of rules; how to accommodate a sense of the importance of vitality, concreteness and diversity without fragmentation and anarchy, without falling into the raw emotionalism and destructive rebelliousness of the *Sturm und Drang*, or, on the other hand, into a total and indiscriminating acceptance, pantheist or historicist, of everything that is the case, from toothache to tyranny, as just part of life's rich tapestry—the latter a tendency already implicit in the Leibnizian optimism of the *Aufklärung*? (For this tendency in Humboldt see below, p. 133.) The journey from one set of metaphors to another is a perilous business.

In political thought, the tendency of German writers during this period to swing violently between these poles is notorious, most notably in the case of Fichte's pendulum-like political career, at different times almost insanely individualist and ruthlessly authoritarian; characteristic, too, are attempted syntheses which later generations have generally agreed to be merely verbal and spurious: Hegel in particular and the concept of 'positive freedom' in general. This is a political and historical fact whose explanation goes far deeper than the incidents—the execution of Louis XVI or the battle of Jena—which are usually invoked, though no doubt they were the immediate occasion of some of the more dramatic conversions. The tension they sometimes caused to snap was, however, already implicit in the intellectual context of the late eighteenth century; we may point, for example, to the same tension in Rousseau, crudely

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expressed by the alleged contradiction between the individualism and primitivism of the *Discourses* and *Emile* and the 'totalitarianism' of the *Contrat Social*.

At this point there may be some temptation to simplify: to decide that we are simply confronted by the necessary and perennial tension between 'freedom' and 'order'. There is more to it than this, however, quite apart from the fact that 'order' for Rousseau or Fichte was something very different from what it meant to Hobbes or Frederick the Great. During the period with which we are concerned, discussions of the relation between the individual, society and the state can generally best be understood in a context which includes metaphysics, morals, psychology, aesthetics and educational theory—Rousseau, Herder, Schiller and Humboldt all wrote on education—in which one finds analogues to the political dilemmas, suitably translated into the language of the appropriate genre. Of course, such connections are likely to hold in any period, and it is well recognized that there is a useful suggestiveness for the history of political ideas in such phrases as 'Political Romanticism' and 'The revolt against reason'. The latter are far too crude to accommodate Humboldt (or Schiller, or Hegel, for that matter) but it is true that his manner of recognizing certain tensions in social, political and personal life was conditioned by the rising intellectual status of such concepts as feeling, spontaneity, variety and concreteness and that certain characteristically Romantic metaphors are central to his attempts to deal with them.

In the various attempts to welcome and control the newly esteemed Romantic virtues, and to find some resolution of the resulting dilemmas, two metaphors were, in late eighteenth-century Germany—not only there, of course, but there more insistently than elsewhere—found particularly useful. They were derived respectively from the concept of a work of art and the concept of a biological organism, and the reasons for their usefulness were basically the same. They both proved immensely suggestive, though both possessed drawbacks. Both are extensively used by Humboldt (chapters II, VIII). A work of art was, in some respects, an admirable image for a reconciliation of living, multifarious, concrete but earthy substance with elevated, coherent, ethereal form, of unity in diversity—Shaftesbury's conception of a work of art as having an 'inner form' was immensely influential in eighteenth-century Germany—of crude energy or intolerable suffering transmuted, as in Winckelmann's famous description of the Laocoon, into a serene harmony and unity (*stille Grösse und edele Einfalt*). Its disadvantage as a source of metaphors for social relations was that a work of art is something deliberately made.

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Solon rather than the *Volksgeist* seems to offer the paradigm of art in politics. True there were ways around this, either by maintaining the thesis that a work of art was not so much the work of the artist's constructive deliberation as of his creative daemon, the sacred wind that blew through him, or by devoting particular attention to works which could plausibly be represented as the spontaneous representation of the folk-spirit: folk-poetry or, as Humboldt's friend F. A. Wolf was to assert, Homer. All the same, the connotations of the work of art as an artifact were sufficiently strong to inhibit its use as a direct analogue for society or the state; the concept of the State as a work of art was precisely what was *not* wanted; it smelt too strongly of Cameralism and benevolent despotism, and of the mechanistic conceptions of the State as an artificially created structure of checks and balances or a bureaucratic hierarchy imposed from above on an inert social mass. 'A properly constituted state must be exactly analogous to a machine, in which all the wheels and gears are precisely adjusted to one another; and the ruler must be the foreman, the mainspring, or the soul—if one may use the expression—which sets everything in motion.'¹ This typical statement by a leading Cameralist thinker, Justi, represents the exact antithesis of Humboldt's belief that the vitality of a nation derives solely from the spontaneous activities and diverse creative energies of the individuals who composed it. Thus, the concept of a work of art tended to enter the political thought of Humboldt, Schiller and the Romantics not as a direct analogue for the state or society, but indirectly, through its influence on their ethical ideas, notably in Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* and in Humboldt's conception of personal culture.

Similarly, the concept of an organism was immensely useful in suggesting a combination of inner coherence and self-determination (*Selbstverwaltung*) with a spontaneous vitality fed by the vital juices of material, sensuous existence; an organism has a creative, reciprocal relation to its environment; it is not simply the passive recipient of stimuli (see below, pp. 18–19). But this image also had its disadvantages. Organisms appeared, it was true, to exhibit purposes; they were self-determining, but not *consciously* self-determining. Moreover, if society as a whole were to be regarded as an organism, what would become of the autonomy of the individuals who composed it? One reason, in fact, why Humboldt has to deny so emphatically that the *State* is an organism, and is forced to regard it simply as a kind of public convenience with strictly limited functions, a mere piece of machinery, is that otherwise, in a political

¹ Geraint Parry, 'Enlightened Government and its Critics in Eighteenth Century Germany', *Historical Journal*, vi (1963), 182.

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theory so enamoured of the 'organic' virtues, the State, if conceded organic characteristics, would become all in all. The 'organic' political theorist is virtually forced, since he must decide whether the State is like an organism or not, to choose between endowing it with omnicompetence or restricting its functions to a bare minimum. Hence it is as common to find a cult of the 'organic' virtues among populists, anarchists and political pluralists of all shades as among State-worshippers. There has, however, been one very notable bridge across which many an organically minded anarchist or semi-anarchist has crossed over into the other camp: the concept of the organic national community, and its political expression, the nation-state. It is therefore not surprising and may seem rather sinister to find that Humboldt as he grew older—there are premonitions of it even in the *Limits* (below, p. 131)—began to make increasing use of this bridge, though his intellectual home, it is fair to say, remained well on the liberal side of it.¹

The drawbacks to the concepts of the work of art and of the organism as analogues, their implicit denial of spontaneity in the first case and of individual autonomy and self-consciousness in the latter, exacted a certain complexity in their application to the State or society. These particular implications ran directly counter to the exaltation of the free, self-determining, self-conscious moral agent which was an intrinsic part of the ideals of late eighteenth-century German humanism, which received its definitive formulation by Kant, and which had deep roots in the *Aufklärung* and in the religious tradition of German Pietism, with its insistence on the inner light. It had also deep social roots in the search for dignity and self-esteem by educated middle-class Germans whose paternalistic governments seemed to treat them like children, while aristocratic exclusiveness and arrogance seemed to deny them their full status as human beings. It is true that some German political theorists did not escape the full implications of the organic analogy and handed their supposedly unhappy, fragmented modern citizens, willy nilly, into the arms of the *Volk*-soul or the bosom of the stream of history in which everything that happened happened necessarily. But for Humboldt at least, any metaphor claiming admission to his political thinking had first to make its peace with the free, self-conscious, self-determining individual.

Humboldt in fact makes considerable use both of aesthetic and organic metaphors, but there is a third concept which is also relevant to a full

¹ For Humboldt's conception of the nation, see Ernst Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form. Studien zur deutschen Geistesgeschichte* (Berlin, 1922), pp. 518–25; F. Meinecke, *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat, Werke*, v (Munich, 1962), bk. I, chs. III, VIII; also S. A. Kaehler, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und der Staat* (Munich and Berlin, 1927).

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understanding of Humboldt's ethics and political theory, though it is not made properly explicit in *The Limits of State Action* and for fuller references to it one has to turn to some of his other works, also unpublished during his lifetime: to his early essay on the laws of human development (*Über die Gesetze der Entwicklung der menschlichen Kräfte*, 1791) to his *Plan for a Comparative Anthropology* (*Plan einer vergleichenden Anthropologie*, 1795) and to his *Reflections on World History* (*Betrachtungen über die Weltgeschichte*, 1814). This is the concept, which Lessing stamped with his name though it was by no means solely his property, of history as the self-education of mankind. This concept too contained, or could be invested with, the required ingredients: the presupposition of an inner, spontaneous vitality, and of an underlying coherence or pattern working itself out through an immense diversity and gaining nourishment from it, and of a creative, reciprocal relation to experience, in which even error and suffering were made meaningful through the concept of education.

Self-education through a creative acceptance of experience is in fact the master-concept of Humboldt's political theory at both its poles, in his conception of individual morality and in his tentative hints of a possible historical progress. His social and political precepts are grounded on the notion of the supreme importance of *Bildung*, by which he meant the fullest, richest and most harmonious development of the potentialities of the individual, the community or the human race (*Limits of State Action*, chapter II).¹ Life lived as it should be, according to Humboldt, consists of an endless endeavour to reconcile a coherent individuality with the utmost receptivity to the most diverse experience, an acceptance of an eternal tension between the need to be uniquely and harmoniously oneself and the duty to assimilate as much as possible of life's emotional and intellectual possibilities. As he puts it in *The Limits of State Action*, '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' (below, p. 16). The Kantian echo of 'eternal and immutable dictates of reason', contrasted with 'vague and transient desires', is clear, and we shall have to return to the implications of this for Humboldt's theory later. The more distinctive features of Humboldt's ideal are suggested a few lines later, when he stresses the need of human

¹ The chief accounts of Humboldt's theory of *Bildung* are: E. Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Humanitätsidee* (Berlin, 1909); Leroux, *Guillaume de Humboldt*; and in English, W. Bruford, 'The Idea of "Bildung" in Wilhelm von Humboldt's Letters', in *The Era of Goethe. Essays presented to James Boyd* (Oxford, 1959).

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beings for 'variety of situation' if they are to develop their powers to their fullest extent. The duty, which Humboldt stresses, to maintain one's own personality as a 'complete and consistent' whole, moreover, is not merely the counterweight but the corollary to this insistence on variety, for it is only by retaining and developing one's individuality, one's *Eigentümlichkeit*, that one can contribute to others' 'variety of situation', just as they, in their *Eigentümlichkeiten*, contribute to one's own (below, pp. 17, 32).

This concept of *Bildung* as the achievement of a harmonious individuality nourished by diversity of experience, was formulated by Humboldt very early in his life, as can be seen from his letters and his early essays, but it was not achieved without a struggle. As a boy he had admired the Stoics, and throughout his life, even during the most active part of his public career, the impulse to regard life as a play seen from the vantage point of a detached spectator, and to cultivate an inner untouchability, was strong. His cult of accepted experience was in part a deliberate rejection of emotional sterility, an acceptance of the chances of getting hurt. On the other hand, he had obviously an innate, restless, Faustian or collector's streak,¹ independently of the intellectual influences which encouraged it and in terms of which he justified it. His youthful travels were relentless exercises in self-improvement; even his marriage had to be sanctified as the highest of all opportunities for *Bildung*, a sublime paradox in which two unique individuals became triumphantly one while remaining triumphantly themselves (cf. below, p. 29ff.).

The concept of *Bildung* was not, of course, peculiar to Humboldt either in German literature or social philosophy. The *Bildungsroman* is a literary genre sufficiently distinct to have earned a name.² Herder had used the concept of *Bildung* in expounding his own humanist ideal, with an emphasis similar to Humboldt's on the need for diversity. The preoccupation with *Bildung* was in some respects a secular version of German Pietism, itself a variety of Protestantism both strenuous and resolutely spiritual and other-worldly. It also—though this does not apply directly to Humboldt—provided an ideal, practical in its impracticality, to those late eighteenth-century German intellectuals—teachers, pastors, women, newly emancipated Jews—who had been educated beyond the requirements or opportunities of their immediate social circumstances. Humboldt himself, as a young man, belonged to a small *Veredlungsbund*, a high-

¹ Werner Schultz, 'Wilhelm von Humboldt und der Faustische Mensch', *Jahrbuch der Goethe-Gesellschaft*, xvi (1930).

² See E. L. Stahl, *Die religiöse und die humanitätsphilosophische Bildungsidee und die Entstehung des deutschen Bildungsromans im 18 Jahrhundert* (Berne, 1934).

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minded society for mutual improvement of character. Freemasonry, of course, provided another, more institutionalized, outlet of essentially the same kind.

A subtler attraction of the idea of *Bildung* was that it was much better able than the Enlightenment's guiding light of reason to accommodate the newly fashionable virtues of sentiment, sensuousness, enthusiasm and originality. For *Bildung* could be represented as a quasi-organic and a dialectical process, consisting of an endless acceptance and innumerable provisional reconciliations of the creative tension between the individual and his environment and between the various contending aspects of his own nature. Both organic and aesthetic metaphors could contribute to an understanding of this process. Humboldt himself was convinced that a life successfully dedicated to *Bildung* was itself a work of art. It satisfied the requirements of being both an end in itself, not to be judged by utilitarian or commercial criteria, and of moulding raw experience and natural, spontaneous vitality into a satisfying, harmonious coherence. Moreover, in the school of aesthetics to which Humboldt belonged, the concept of a work of art itself tended to be expounded in organic terms. '[This] concept of poetic creativity—that self-organising process, assimilating disparate materials by an inherent lawfulness into an integral whole—borrows many of its characteristic features from the conceptual model of organic growth'¹ (cf. below, p. 77). The organic metaphor was apt for the exposition of *Bildung*, not simply because an organism develops in time, but because its form is not imposed on it from without; it is self-determining; it is neither passive in relation to its environment nor disconnected from it; it assimilates what it needs, converting it into its own tissues, imposing form upon heterogeneous brute matter in a miracle of transmutation, but above all, though it is part of nature and cannot exist without its environment, it makes itself, developing as it does out of an inner necessity. Similarly, for Herder, perhaps the greatest of all propagandists of the organic analogy, *Bildung* was, as F. M. Barnard puts it, 'a process of interaction, an "organic" process of "formation", in which men influence each other within a specific social setting'.² Exactly the same words can be used of Humboldt.

The concept of *Bildung* also had convenient results when applied, as both Herder and Humboldt applied it, to history considered as the self-education of mankind as a whole, enabling its exponents to find a re-

¹ M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp. Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1958), p. 124, on Coleridge's poetic theory.

² F. M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought* (London, 1965), p. 93. For the question of Herder's influence on Humboldt, *ibid.* p. 168 n. 50.

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spectable and even glorious historical role for the primitive and poetic virtues of earlier civilizations, which the Enlightenment was thought to have undervalued, while still leaving a possible place for the still attractive idea of progress. History, as Humboldt saw it,¹ and as he presented it in his *Thoughts on Constitutions* and later in his *Plan of a Comparative Anthropology* (1795) consisted not of progress in a simple, cumulative sense but of a kind of dialectic, as mankind explored first one range of human potentialities and then another, lurching from one kind of one-sidedness (*Einseitigkeit*—which Humboldt contrasts with *Eigentümlichkeit*) to another (*Limits*, below, p. 134). But there are hints of progress of a kind, because the richer the human experience becomes, by every exploration, every 'one-sided' development, so the *potential* cultural experience of the individual is enriched, though the extent to which his potentialities are realized for each individual depends on his opportunities and his capacity for assimilating the cultural experience of mankind, preserved by history, and making of it a coherent and balanced whole. 'In the highest ideal of human nature which the most glowing fantasy can conceive', Humboldt wrote in *Thoughts on Constitutions*, 'each actual moment is a beautiful flower, but nevertheless only *one*. Only memory can wreath the garland which binds together past and future'² (cf. below, p. 16). This sounds rather like a tentative and microcosmic version of the Hegelian Absolute Consciousness, in which all contradictions are resolved, just as Hegel's notion of the task of the philosopher as a retrospective one, and his presentation of philosophy as the *history* of philosophy, reminds one of Humboldt's conception of *Bildung*. The most cultivated individual, the most complete philosophy, are the ones which can most successfully assimilate and most fully contain the various cultural and moral commitments—obviously in many cases contradictory—entered into by mankind in the course of history. This is a notion which, more modestly phrased than in Hegel's version of it perhaps, is by no means dead. In a more limited context, T. S. Eliot's discussion of tradition and the individual talent looks like a version of it. Walter Pater's *Gioconda*, most Hegelian of women, was an image of it. It still provides an arguable test of the difference between more and less civilized individuals, and it continues to offer a role to academic historians who may no longer believe—to resort, as has become customary among historians when explaining what they no longer believe, to the words of Lord Acton—that 'The science of

¹ R. Leroux, *L'Anthropologie Comparée de Guillaume de Humboldt* (Paris, 1958), pp. 14 ff. and *Guillaume de Humboldt*, pp. 215 ff.

² 'Ideen über Staatsverfassung', *Gesammelte Schriften* ed. F. Leitzmann (Berlin, 1903), I, 80–1.

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politics is deposited by the stream of history, like grains of gold in the sands of a river.'

Humboldt's apparent presentation of the cultivated man as a connoisseur in the moral museum of the world's history may strike some as an attenuated and unreal affair compared with the full-blooded if narrowly circumscribed social life of a static society devoid of a sense of history, in which moral imperatives are simply given in education for membership of the tribe, and the question of experimentation does not arise; others will stress the limited horizons of the latter, their narrow range of choices and their probable incapacity to cope with unprecedented situations without disorientation and loss of self-control or self-respect. This is rather like the dispute whether education should teach one a lot about a little or *vice versa*, and there is no answer. All the same, if Humboldt's ideal is evidently accessible only to a cultivated élite it is one which does try to make moral and cultural sense of a situation in which intellectuals are frequently likely to feel themselves. And if Humboldt's remedy smells of pedantry, the most common alternative, a deliberate self-surrender, of a Humean or Hegelian kind, to the customs of the tribe, to making a morality of my station and its duties—assuming I am lucky enough to feel sure what they are—may not be entirely odourless either: some tribes have odd customs, and some stations may properly be closed.

Whether the results of Humboldt's suggested cultural connoisseurship could ever be as poised, natural and controlled as he implies is another matter. It would be very easy to make it sound ludicrously stilted, artificial and inconsistent as a way of life. There does indeed seem to have been a certain sense of artifice, if not of artificiality, about his own life,¹ but no one found it ludicrous. We are not, if we are to be fair to Humboldt, to envisage the kind of cold-blooded dilettantism that the act of describing his ideal necessarily evokes. It is in the describing rather than in the living that the cold-bloodedness necessarily arises. Dilettantism is certainly a possible parody of *Bildung*, but another way of seeing it is as a fierce, sustained protest against the limitations of living only one life. It is in a sense unavailing, but Humboldt's answer to the inevitability of ultimate defeat is not a Stoic refusal to desire but an acceptance of every opportunity and every possibility of relative success. It is a mistake to think of Humboldt's ideal as a tepid and lofty picking about among the bibelots of life and history; on the contrary, he advocated enthusiastic commitment and acceptance of risks. He had, unfortunately, little literary gift; he could not give fire and colour to his ideal in words; he could only

¹ Howald, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, p. 8.

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prescribe it didactically, and didacticism that does not reach the level of literature is apt to sound like priggishness. For us he suffers, of course, from the additional disadvantage of an idiom that is not ours either by language or period. A major part of Humboldt's nineteenth-century reputation, it is sobering to recall, was as a writer of the kind of letter which leaves the recipient a nobler and finer person than it found him or her—not just now a very fashionable mode of self-expression. Humboldt should, one feels, have written a *Bildungsroman*; he did not, though it could be said that he tried to live one.

None of the words we have used so far to characterize Humboldt's attitude—connoisseurship, experimentation and so on—seems adequate; they suggest too much calm deliberation. Undoubtedly there was a strong vein of narcissism in Humboldt, but the collective sense of his many references to *Bildung* suggests that it is the sheer attractiveness, the emotional pull, of different styles of life that draws him on. The motive of greed is as strong as curiosity or self-esteem, though the three are intermingled. As Humboldt once wrote, 'one must, before one leaves this life, know and absorb as many inner manifestations of humanity as possible. To me an important new book, a new course of study, a new language, seem things that I have torn from the long night of death.'¹ 'More life and fuller, that I want' is not exactly a motto for an experiment, nor is Faust precisely a dilettante. Nor, of course, need we think of the effect upon us of our historical knowledge of different styles of life (another artificial-sounding concept, but it cannot be helped) as anything so crude as a deliberate sampling of the modes of experience characteristic of different historical periods. It seems doubtful whether Huysmans's Des Esseintes, the hero of *A Rebours*, that historically minded aesthete who tried to do just that, would really have appealed to Humboldt. Humboldt was not simply a sensation seeker; he remained sufficiently a man of the eighteenth century to wish to retain the notion of an ideal humanity, and he regarded every extension of one's cultural experience as an enlargement of one's concept of such an ideal. 'From the whole history of mankind', he wrote to Schiller, 'a picture of the human mind and character can be drawn which resembles no single century, and no single nation completely, to which however, all have contributed.'² Humboldt's *Plan for a Comparative*

¹ 'Ich habe einmal die bestimmte Idee, dass man, ehe man dies Leben verlässt, so viel von innern, menschlichen Erscheinungen . . . kennen und in sich aufnehmen muss als nur immer möglich ist. Ein mir neues wichtiges Buch; eine neue Lehre, eine neue Sprache scheinen mir etwas, das ich der Nacht des Todes entrisen muss' (Letter of 1825, quoted in Howald, *Wilhelm von Humboldt* pp. 31–2).

² Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Briefwechsel mit Schiller* (Stuttgart, 1900), p. 277, quoted in Aris, *History of Political Thought in Germany*, p. 144.

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Anthropology which he wrote 3 years after the essay on the limits of state action, and which was also never published during his lifetime, was intended as an attempt to show how this ideal of humanity might be depicted, not *a priori*, with all the limitations of the ethics of a particular time, but empirically, encompassing the whole richness of human culture, to which history was constantly adding.

In any case, in the notion of *Bildung* informed and enriched by a sense of history and of cultural diversity, Humboldt intended to depict not something we could only do with an embarrassed or perverse self-consciousness, but something we can already hardly help doing, whether we are aware of it or not. Men are to a considerable extent, as Humboldt recognized, conditioned by the traditions they inherit and the collective culture they inhabit. If this were not so, a proposal for a comparative anthropology would be absurd (cf. the remarks in the *Limits*, below, pp. 17, 132–3). But we cannot now help belonging to a culture rich in historical reminiscences. Hence we can and occasionally do use references to historical stereotypes as part of our language of personal descriptions—usually, admittedly, without much historical or psychological finesse: ‘Renaissance man’, ‘puritan’, ‘Mid-Victorian’, ‘*fin de siècle*’ and so on; but that is by the way.¹ In other words, past cultural stereotypes have left living traces, claiming our attention and even allegiance. We can understand and characterize this situation to the extent that we have a sense of the past, and if we also welcome it, rather than wishing to extirpate all modes but one in the name of enlightenment, progress, efficiency, common sense or what not, then we have made Humboldt’s connection between a sense of the past and its variety and a sense of the opportunities of the present.

If this is true, if a sense of history is an aspect of possible emancipation from the given standards of one’s immediate situation, the relation between historiography and discrimination is, or has been, a reciprocal one. For the growing sensitivity, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, to the nuances of distinct historical periods and the possible value of the values they embodied, was intimately connected with the criticism of contemporary society, and it is in relation to these criticisms, and to the social situation which gave them plausibility, that one has to see what may otherwise seem Humboldt’s somewhat picaresque approach to questions of morals and culture. The sense of the relevance of the past

¹ We can also, of course, do the same with fictional characters. ‘Literature offers us the raw material for moral judgement and it offers us *far more* material than any one individual life can do.’ Graham Hough, *An Essay on Criticism* (London, 1966), p. 28.

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and its record, not merely of the crimes and follies of mankind but of its experiments in various styles of life and social organization, involved a re-appraisal and a criticism of a particular image of contemporary society and of the notion of what constituted modernity. It was, no doubt, vastly oversimplified as a picture of what late eighteenth-century societies and 'enlightened' attitudes were actually like, but it was a caricature which was largely drawn by the victims themselves—the cheer-leaders for progress and the publicists of Enlightenment—and as such it could properly be criticized as an aspiration if not as a fact.

The crux of the criticism was that progress was not a simple cumulative process; there was also a debit column, and hence, past states of mankind might suggest not only self-congratulation at having surpassed them but also materials for self-criticism. Of these critiques Rousseau's, invoking, admittedly, a merely hypothetical past, was the most notorious, and most subsequent ones, including Humboldt's critique of the paternalist state, owed something to it, but there were other sources. Meinecke, for example, found one of the chief impulses in the development of *Historismus* as a critique of the idea of progress in *Kleinstaateri*,¹ the stubborn defence of the local, traditional and customary elements in the small German kingdoms and principalities against the levelling, rationalizing bureaucracy of the modern state. This was obviously a resistance with which the renegade bureaucrat Humboldt, though the French menace taught him that Germans might need power as well as picturesque diversity, might well sympathize.

But there were other critiques of progress, more directly relevant to Humboldt's humanist ideal, than those of traditionalists looking to their defences. Schiller, for example, was after Rousseau one of the first to make a criticism which has become a platitude, and to link it specifically to a re-appraisal of one particular past civilization—that of ancient Greece. As he wrote in the *Aesthetic Letters*:

The Greeks put us to shame not only by their simplicity, which is alien to our age: they are at the same time our rivals, often indeed our models, in those very excellences with which we are wont to console ourselves for the unnaturalness of our manners. Combining fullness of form with fullness of content, at once philosophic and creative, at the same time tender and energetic, we see them uniting the youthfulness of fantasy with the manliness of reason in a splendid humanity, [while] With us, one might almost be tempted to assert, the mental faculties show themselves detached in operation as psychology separates them in idea, and we see not merely individual persons but whole classes of human beings developing only part of their capacities, while the rest of them, like a stunted plant, shew only a feeble vestige of their nature.

¹ F. Meinecke, *Zur Geschichte des Historismus*, *Werke*, iv (Stuttgart, 1959), 218.

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The harm is self-induced; the loss of individual totality is the price we pay for our collective achievements:

It was culture itself that inflicted this wound upon modern humanity. As soon as enlarged experience and more precise speculation made necessary a sharper division of the sciences on the one hand, and on the other, the more intricate machinery of States made necessary a more rigorous dissociation of ranks and occupations; the essential bond of human nature was torn apart, and a ruinous conflict set its harmonious powers at variance. The intuitive and the speculative understanding took up hostile attitudes upon their respective fields, whose boundaries they now began to guard with jealousy and distrust, and by confining our activity to a single sphere we have handed ourselves over to a master who is not infrequently inclined to end up by surpressing the rest of our capacities. While in one place a luxuriant imagination ravages the hard-earned fruits of the intellect, in another the spirit of abstraction stifles the fire at which the heart might have warmed itself and the fancy been enkindled.¹

There is no diagnosis in Humboldt as articulate and emphatic as this; by comparison his remarks on the subject in the *Limits* (below, pp. 13, 19, 47) are fragmentary. Elsewhere he attributed much of the blame, as also did Schiller in *Die Götter Griechenlands*, to Christianity, to the baleful victory of the pale Galilean.² Nevertheless, he fully shares Goethe's and Schiller's adulation of the Greeks as models of a harmonious human totality, and he presented them as such in the work he wrote immediately after completing *The Limits of State Action*, his essay *On the Study of Antiquity and especially the Greeks* (1793). Schiller's *Aesthetic Letters* is, as one might expect from the close intellectual kinship and mutual admiration of the two men, closer in spirit to Humboldt than any other work of the period. The complaint of fragmentation, however, as a result of specialization of functions or of undervaluing some elements in human personality, was a fairly common one. One finds it, for example, as part of a critique of civilization and of the division of labour, in Adam Ferguson, whose moral philosophy Humboldt had studied as a boy. Even among figures whose cast of mind remained more emphatically that of the Enlightenment, like Turgot, Mme de Staël and Benjamin Constant,³ it was accepted that progress and the use of reason were inherently desiccating. What this added up to was the sense of an ambiguous, divided cultural inheritance, not a simple legacy of

¹ F. Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, trans. R. Snell (London, 1954), pp. 37–9.

² Bruford, in *The Era of Goethe*, p. 37; Hatfield, *Aesthetic Paganism in German Literature*, pp. 201–2.

³ Benjamin Constant, 'On the Spirit of Conquest', in *Readings from Liberal Writers, English and French*, ed. J. Plamenatz (London, 1965), p. 26.

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accumulated knowledge and power. To see Humboldt's pluralistic ideal of culture in this context is to go a long way towards acquitting it of wantonness.

One easy way out of the dilemma, of course, is to adopt one particular idealized past period as a standard, like Winckelmann's Greece or the Schlegels' Middle Ages. Humboldt, in his admiration for the Greeks, came near to doing this in his essay *On the Study of Antiquity*. Essentially, however, his doctrine that every period was a development of one particular human *Einseitigkeit*, his dialectical approach to history, precluded it. Like Schiller in the *Aesthetic Letters* and in his essay *On Naive and Sentimental Poetry*, Humboldt needed a philosophy of history which would allow the Greeks to serve as a model without being the last word, which would marry Helen to Faust and let them breed. Before considering, however, the extent to which Humboldt succeeded in this, we have to notice another, closely allied, theme in Humboldt's work: his interest in national character and languages. For it was not only past civilizations which seemed to speak with a Babel of voices, each demanding its due. If history could seem a museum of styles and moralities, to the cosmopolitan intellectual contemporary Europe could seem like a market place for them; Italy and even Germany, in their vastly different ways, seemed to offer valid alternatives to the French accented canons of reason and classical form—those canons whose supposed unchallengeability had given such confidence to the historical judgements of a Voltaire. Hence, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century the extraordinary prevalence of sweeping generalizations about 'Southern joyousness', 'Latin clarity', 'German spirituality' and so on, and the widespread fascination with national varieties of culture which captivated a number of intellectuals as diverse as Mme de Staël and Stendhal, and, one must add, Humboldt. The interest in these competing siren voices, fiery, passionate Spain, sensuous Italy, wistfully mystical Germany, and the rest, and the belief in possibilities of synthesis, like that long cherished yearning for a fusion of the Greek and German souls as the basis of a new civilization, arose from essentially the same source as that which made philosophies of history such a popular and deadly nineteenth-century game: the sense of an ambiguous inheritance and of contradictory cultural claims and opportunities, needing to be synthesized, transcended or dialectically comprehended.

It would have been strange if Humboldt, who possessed this sense so strongly, had made no contribution to the similarly absorbing game of national characterization, and in fact he did, first in his *Plan of a Comparative Anthropology* and later, in more detail, in his work on comparative

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philology. The former is a bold attempt to outline the methods by which what Mme de Staël was later to attempt for Germany could be achieved: the delineation of the *Gestalt* of a people and its culture, and an analysis of the contribution such characterizations might make to *Bildung*. Humboldt himself provided merely a programme in this essay. His own contribution to its accomplishment was his work in comparative philology. The *Gestalt* of a people, the mature Humboldt was to agree with Herder, was to be seen most clearly in its language. Without the study of language, he was to write in *Latium and Hellas* (1806) 'every attempt to understand distinctive national character (*Nationaleigentümlichkeit*) would be fruitless, for only in its language is its whole character expressed'.¹ Every language was valuable: 'no language should be condemned or depreciated, not even that of the most savage tribe, for each language is a picture of the original aptitude for language'.²

This notion of the unique value of every language as part of the world's richness and variety is an aspect of a similar declaration on behalf of different cultures and historical periods. It was congenial to Germans struggling to raise the status of their native language—though this seems to have played no significant part in Humboldt's endorsement of it—and to escape from French cultural domination. It also had respectable antecedents in the old Chain of Being theory, with its doctrine of the *plenum*; the variety of the world's organic inhabitants was ordained by God for its own sake, because otherwise the creation would have been less complete and perfect than it is. This doctrine, running counter to the Hebrew utilitarianism which saw the creation simply as something given by God to be used and manipulated for the benefit of man, passed into eighteenth-century German thought through Leibniz's metaphysics³ and was influential in shaping the ideas both of Herder and of Goethe's *Naturphilosophie*, with both of which Humboldt has strong affinities. As Goethe put it, each class of creature is an end in itself ('Zweck sein selbst ist jegliches Tier').⁴ This endorsement of every variety simply for being what it is had an obvious application to the existence and the different kinds of appeal of various cultural models. Such universal tolerance, however, left unsolved the problems of the individual, who might feel

¹ ... wäre jeder Versuch über Nationaleigentümlichkeit vergeblich, da nur in der Sprache sind der ganze Charakter ausprägt' (quoted by Howald, *Wilhelm von Humboldt*, p. 115).

² Quoted by Otto Jespersen, *Language, Its Nature, Development and Origin* (London, 1922), p. 57.

³ See Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought*, ch. 1; Leroux, *Guillaume de Humboldt*, p. 148.

⁴ A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard, 1936), p. 189.

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himself both embarrassed by the riches displayed for him and harassed as a member of a fragmented, discordant or over-specialized culture. Reflection could not be banished, nor could naive totality be re-assumed by an act of will. Precisely the underlying reason for so much interest in and speculation about a multiplicity of cultural norms was that cultural homogeneity, or the belief in it, had been breached by knowledge and by many diverse disruptions of traditional patterns of life. My culture and its intimations might easily seem as imprecise and unsatisfactory a guide as my station and its duties.

Confronted by such a situation there appear to be essentially three possible answers (apart, of course, from the heroic despair of an existentialist assertion that men simply create their values by adopting them); they are not *prima facie* incompatible, and it is a peculiarity of Humboldt to have attempted all three. The first involves an attitude to history as the *sequence* of cultural changes. The sequence can then be regarded as itself meaningful, justified and authoritative; this is the moral core of historicism in the sense to which Sir Karl Popper has given currency. This justification can in turn be accepted either because the process is seen as cumulative (the positivist version), or multiple, all the parts being justified as and when they occur, for the sake of the variety they create (Herder) or apocalyptic—a justification in terms of some consummation both inevitable and highly desirable (Marxism, for example). These versions are not absolutely mutually exclusive; they may be combined in various ways, though no theory can emphasize all of them to an equal extent. Thus the positivist theory may contain a dialectical element, while the apocalyptic or the multiple may also include an element of accumulation, as Marx regards technological progress as cumulative and Humboldt, who inclines to the multiple justification, seems to hint at an element of accumulation in the growing richness of cultural alternatives which history keeps churning out (cf. below, p. 20).

The second possible answer does not normally involve any reference to history at all, though in Humboldt's version of it it does. It consists essentially of making a Romantic virtue out of what may well be a social and cultural necessity. Spiritual rootlessness and social dislocation can be christened '*Sehnsucht*', symbolized in various ways as a yearning for the infinite and the unattainable, and converted into the cardinal virtue, in conscious defiance of the limited and relatively precise virtues grounded in a recognized and accepted social situation, which are stigmatized as philistine complacency, rather as though Philip Stanhope had started to write back admonishing letters to Lord Chesterfield. Such a response is normally confined to a literary mode of expression; political and moral

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philosophers—the latter habitually absorbed in their curious passion for discussing only the most uninteresting virtues—have given it little hospitality. Humboldt, however, shows that Romanticism—it seems fair to use the word—*could* take another political form than the apocalyptic delusions, crude rebelliousness or abject surrender to the mystique of blood and soil in which we are accustomed to finding it. Humboldt takes up, that is, the Faustian theme of a never satisfied aspiration, an endless spiritual wanderlust, and asks what are its *political* implications. He cannot, however, leave the matter there, for he is not only or even primarily a Romantic. Restlessness and variety are components of *Bildung*; they are not the whole of it. They provide its content but not its form. Like a good German Hellenist, Humboldt also insists on harmony, and like a good Kantian, on obedience to reason and the moral law.

This last requirement brings us to the third possible answer to the sort of moral dislocation we considered earlier: a fervent acceptance of an absolute moral imperative which, however, being concerned with the motives for which an action is done rather than the content of that action, is nevertheless neutral as between the moral claims of different cultural styles, different vocations. Hence one could have all the security and sense of endeavour given by the most rigorous ethical standards, while apparently not being required, in formulating those standards, naively to limit goodness to the norms of any particular period or society. This is the role that Kantian ethics, the definition of a good motive as one which desires to perform good actions for their own sake, plays for Humboldt. This still leaves the content of the actions so performed an open question, however. The most familiar attempts to complete Kant's ethics of motive, his formal characterization of good actions, by supplying a *content* of actions of guaranteed goodness, which can *then* be performed from the right Kantian motives, have taken the form of appeals to the actual, accepted norms of their agent's own society: this is what, with varying degrees of completeness, is advocated by Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right* and in England by T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley. For Humboldt, on the other hand, the content is supplied by the individual's experiences and his assimilation of them into an ever greater richness of being, while Kantian ethics plays the part of a limiting condition, ruling out of court *some* experiences: those which would conflict with the Kantian categorical imperative¹ (chapter viii).

At this point, however, we can no longer escape confronting the questions we have been skirting for some time: does Humboldt actually

¹ So act that your action may become a universal law. For Humboldt's Kantianism see Leroux, *Guillaume de Humboldt*, pp. 180 ff.

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manage to reconcile his Faustianism and his Hellenism, his ethics of restlessness and his ethics of immutable Kantian imperatives? Does the concept of *Bildung*, in fact, do for Humboldt all that he tries to make it do? The question of content is clear enough: it just *is* the greatest possible variety of opportunity and richness of assimilation. It is the question of the relation of form to content that raises difficulties. What are the limits to the acceptability of experience and how is it to be controlled? What is meant by successful assimilation? What is meant by 'harmony'? Is the requirement to strive for a *harmonious* realization of potentialities the same as the Kantian requirement that acceptable actions must fall within certain moral limits, and be conducted in a certain spirit, which confers inner freedom on the agent, or are these two different requirements, aesthetic in the first case, moral in the second?

Certainly Kantian ethics and Humboldt's humanist ideal of the fully rounded, harmonious personality have something in common; they are both, for example, in contrast to utilitarianism, concerned with persons considered as moral wholes, not simply as the recipients of discrete pleasures or satisfactions. But harmony is an aesthetic, rather than a moral criterion; it is not achieved by submission to any particular ethical imperative, but is *seen* to be achieved, as a certain kind of personal poise and balance, as in the coherence of a work of art—an artistic success for which, despite the efforts of neo-classical, formalist critics, there is no guaranteed formula (below, pp. 78–9). It is significant that Humboldt, like Herder, Schiller and Hegel, objected to Kant's assertion that inclination and duty were necessarily opposed.¹ In the fully harmonious personality there would be no such rift; the belief in such a necessary antithesis was an aspect of the unhappy, fragmented consciousness of modern man, torn between his sensuous and spiritual natures; given an achieved psychic totality, like that of the Greeks, such a belief would be untenable. At this point the aesthetics of personality has the balance of advantage, in Humboldt, over the Kantian conscience. In fact, a religion of culture can hardly be expected to coexist without tension with the claims of an allegedly absolute moral law.

There is, however, one suggestion which, if we could adopt it, would make Humboldt's requirement of harmony into a criterion of a more traditionally ethical—though not Kantian—kind; the suggestion, that is, that it refers ultimately to *quantity*. It is possible, that is to say, to make the requirement to seek the maximum quantity of fulfilled potentialities the

¹ Leroux, *Guillaume de Humboldt*, p. 277. Cf. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought*, p. 98 n. 56; Schiller, *Über Anmut und Würde* (1793), *Werke*, xx (Weimar, 1962), pp. 251 ff.; Walter Kaufman, *Hegel* (London 1966), p. 43.