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Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Of the Individual Man" (1792)
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“The true end of Man, or that which is prescribed by the eternal and immutable dictates of reason ... is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the grand and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presupposes.”



Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835)

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Editor's Introduction

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) was a Prussian political theorist, educational reformer, diplomat, and linguist. When a young man he wrote one of the best works defending individual liberty and the limited state ever written, *The Limits of State Action* (1791-2), but which was never published in its entirety in his lifetime. As Director of the Section for Public Worship and Education in the Prussian Ministry of Interior he oversaw a complete reform of the Prussian education system including the founding of the University of Berlin. He worked as a diplomat between 1802 to 1819, serving in Rome, Vienna, Prague, and Frankfurt. Humboldt gave up his political career in 1819 when the Prussian government became increasingly autocratic in order to devote his time to the study of linguistics.

His book *The Limits of State Action* might also be regarded as the first book-length survey of classical liberal political theory ever written. Only a few extracts appeared in journals during his life. The entire work was not published until after his death and an English translation appeared in 1854 just in time to influence J.S. Mill when he was writing *On Liberty* (1859).

Humboldt summed up his philosophy as follows: he wanted to encourage “the highest and most harmonious development of (every individual’s) powers to a complete and consistent whole” and that “freedom (was) the grand and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presuppose(d).” In order to achieve this end the proper role for the state was to protect individual liberty and property from transgression by others and to leave individuals alone so they could flourish according to their own vision of how they wished to lead their lives.

In these two extracts Humboldt notes that too often philosophers ignore what he thinks is the most important political question, not who should rule whom, but what should be the limit placed upon the power of whoever does the ruling. His “more radical investigation” of the question leads him to call for radical limits on the power of the state in order to allow the maximum of individual “flourishing” (he uses many botanical similes). Freedom and “diversity of situation” benefit not only individuals in his view, but allow harmonious, spontaneous, and mutual cooperation of all members of society.

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CHAPTER I. Introduction.¹

To discover the legitimate objects to which the energies of State organizations should be directed, and define the limits within which those energies should be exercised, is the design of the following pages. That the solution of this prime question of political philosophy must be pregnant with interest and high practical importance is sufficiently evident; and if we compare the most remarkable political constitutions with each other, and with the opinions of the most eminent philosophers, we shall, with reason, be surprised to find it so insufficiently discussed and vaguely answered; and agree, that any attempt to prosecute the inquiry with more success, is far from being a vain and superfluous labour.

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Those who have either themselves remodelled the framework of State constitutions, or proposed schemes of political reform, seem mostly to have studied how to apportion the respective provinces which the nation, and any of its separate elements, should justly share in the administration,—to assign the due functions of

each in the governmental plan,—and to adopt the precautions necessary for preserving the integrity of the several interests at stake. But in every attempt to frame or reorganize a political constitution, there are two grand objects, it seems to me, to be distinctly kept in view, neither of which can be overlooked or made subordinate without serious injury to the common design; these are—first, to determine, as regards the nation in question, who shall govern, who shall be governed, and to arrange the actual working of the constituted power; and secondly, to prescribe the exact sphere to which the government, once constructed, should extend or confine its operations. The latter object, which more immediately embraces the private life of the citizen, and more especially determines the limits of his free, spontaneous activity, is, strictly speaking, the true ultimate purpose; the former is only a necessary means for arriving at this important end. And yet, however strange it may appear, it is to the attainment of the first of these ends that man directs his most earnest attention; and, as it becomes us to show, this exclusive pursuit of one definite purpose only coincides with the usual manifestation of human activity. It is in the prosecution of some single object, and in striving to reach its accomplishment by the combined application of his moral and physical energies, that the true happiness of man, in his full vigour and development, consists. Possession, it is true, crowns exertion with repose; but it is only in the illusions of fancy that it has power to charm our eyes. If we consider the position of man in the universe,—if we remember the constant tendency of his energies towards some definite activity, and recognize the influence of surrounding nature, which is ever provoking him to exertion, we shall be ready to acknowledge that repose and possession do not indeed exist but in imagination. Now the partial or one-sided man finds repose in the discontinuance of one line of action; and in him whose powers are wholly undeveloped, one single object only serves to elicit a few manifestations of energy. It may be well to observe, before deriving inferences from these general considerations on the usual tendency of man’s activity, that the dissatisfaction we notice as attendant on possession, does not at all apply to that ideal of human

¹ CHAPTER I "Introduction" of Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. Translated from the German of Baron Wilhelm von Humboldt, by Joseph Coulthard, Jun. (London: John Chapman, 1854). <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/589/45488>>.

perfection which is conceivable by imagination; but it is true, in the fullest sense, of the wholly uncultured man, and proportionately true of every intermediate gradation between this utter want of culture and that ideal standard above mentioned. It would appear then, from these general characteristics of human nature, that to the conqueror his triumph affords a more exquisite sense of enjoyment than the actual occupation of the territory he has won, and that the perilous commotion of reformation itself is dearer to the reformer than the calm enjoyment of the fruits which crown its successful issue. And thus it is true, in general, that the exercise of dominion has something in it more immediately agreeable to human nature than the mere reposeful sense of freedom; or, at least, that the solicitude to secure freedom is a dearer satisfaction than that which is afforded by its actual possession. Freedom is but the *possibility* of a various and indefinite activity; while government, or the exercise of dominion, is a single, but yet *real* activity. The ardent desire for freedom, therefore, is at first only too frequently suggested by the deep-felt consciousness of its absence.

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But whatever the natural course of political development may be, and whatever the relation between the desire for freedom and the excessive tendency to governmental activity, it is still evident that the inquiry into the proper aims and limits of State agency must be of the highest importance—nay, that it is perhaps more vitally momentous than any other political question. That such an investigation comprises the ultimate object of all political science, has been already pointed out; but it is a truth that admits also of extensive practical application. Real State revolutions,

or fresh organizations of the governing power, are always attended in their progress with many concurrent and fortuitous circumstances, and necessarily entail more or less injury to different interests; whereas a sovereign power that is actually existing—whether it be democratic, aristocratic, or monarchical—can extend or restrict its sphere of action in silence and secrecy, and, in general, attains its ends more surely, in proportion as it avoids startling innovations. Those processes of human agency advance most happily to their consummation, which most faithfully resemble the operations of the natural world. The tiny seed, for example, which drops into the awaiting soil, unseen and unheeded, brings forth a far richer and more genial blessing in its growth and germination than the violent eruption of a volcano, which, however necessary, is always attended with destruction; and, if we justly pride ourselves on our superior culture and enlightenment, there is no other system of reform so happily adapted, by its spirit of calm and consistent progression, to the capacities and requirements of our own times.

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It may easily be foreseen, therefore, that the important inquiry into the due limits of State agency must conduct us to an ampler range of freedom for human forces, and a richer diversity of circumstances and situations. Now the possibility of any higher degree of freedom presupposes a proportionate advancement in civilization,—a decreasing necessity of acting in large, compacted masses,—a richer variety of resources in the individual agents. If, then, the present age in reality possesses this increased culture and this power and diversity of resources, the freedom of which these are the precious conditions should unquestionably be accorded it. And so its methods of reform would be happily correspondent with a progressive civilization—if we do not err in supposing

this to be its favourable characteristic. Generally speaking, it is the drawn sword of the nation which checks and overawes the physical strength of its rulers; but in our case, culture and enlightenment serve no less effectually to sway their thoughts and subdue their will, so that the actual concessions of reform seem rather ascribable to them than to the nation. If even to behold a people breaking their fetters asunder, in the full consciousness of their rights as men and citizens, is a beautiful and ennobling spectacle: it must be still more fair, and full of uplifting hope, to witness a prince himself unloosing the bonds of thralldom and granting freedom to his people,—nor this as the mere bounty of his gracious condescension, but as the discharge of his first and most *indispensable* duty; for it is nobler to see an object effected through a reverent regard for law and order, than conceded to the imperious demands of absolute necessity; and the more so, when we consider that the freedom which a nation strives to attain through the overthrow of existing institutions, is but as hope to enjoyment, as preparation to perfection, when compared with that which a State, once constituted, can bestow.

If we cast a glance at the history of political organizations, we shall find it difficult to decide, in the case of any one of them, the exact limits to which its activity was conformed, because we discover in none the systematic working out of any deliberate scheme, grounded on a certain basis of principle. We shall observe, that the freedom of the citizen has been limited from two points of view; that is, either from the necessity of organizing or securing the constitution, or from the expediency of providing for the moral and physical condition of the nation. These considerations have prevailed alternately, according as the constitution, in itself powerful, has required additional support, or as the views of the legislators have been more or less expanded. Often indeed both of these causes may be found operating conjointly. In the ancient States, almost all the institutions relating to the private life of the citizens were of a strictly political character. Possessed, as it was, of but little absolute authority, the constitution was mainly dependent for its duration on the will of the nation, and hence it was necessary to discover or propose means by which due harmony might be preserved between the character of established institutions and this tendency of national feeling. The same policy is still observable in small republican States; and if we were to regard it in the

light of these circumstances alone, we might accept it as true, that the freedom of private life always increases in exact proportion as public freedom declines; whereas security always keeps pace with the latter. It is true the ancient legislators very often, and the ancient philosophers invariably, directed their attention to the inner life of the individual; and, in their eyes, the moral worth of human nature seemed to deserve the highest regard: of this we have an illustration in Plato's Republic, of which Rousseau has very truly observed that it has more the character of an educational than a political treatise. Now if we compare the example of the most modern States, with regard to this tendency, we shall find the design of acting for the individual citizen, and of providing for his welfare, to be clear and unmistakable from the number of laws and institutions directed to this end, and which often give a very determinate form to private life. The superior internal consistency of our constitutions,—their greater independence of national character and feeling,—the deeper influence of mere thinkers, who are naturally disposed to more expanded views,—the multitude of inventions which teach us to follow out and improve the common objects of national activity; and lastly, and before all, certain ideas of religion which represent the governing power as responsible, to a certain extent, for the moral and future welfare of the citizens, have all contributed to introduce this change and develop this positive solicitude. But if we examine into the origin of particular institutions and police-laws, we find that they frequently originate in the real or pretended necessity of imposing taxes on the subject, and in this we may trace the example, it is true, to the political characteristics of the ancient States, inasmuch as such institutions grow out of the same desire of securing the constitution which we noticed in them. With respect to those limitations of freedom, however, which do not so much affect the State as the individuals who compose it, we are led to notice a vast difference between ancient and modern governments. The ancients devoted their attention more exclusively to the harmonious development of the individual man, as man; the moderns are chiefly solicitous about his comfort, his prosperity, his productiveness. The former looked to virtue; the latter seek for happiness. And hence it follows, that the restrictions imposed on freedom in the ancient States were, in some important respects, more oppressive and dangerous than those which characterize our times. For they directly attacked

that inner life of the soul, in which the individuality of human being essentially consists; and hence all the ancient nations betray a character of uniformity, which is not so much to be attributed to their want of higher refinement and more limited intercommunication, as to the systematic education of their youth in common (almost universal among them), and the designedly collective life of the citizens. But, in another point of view, it will be allowed that these ancient institutions contributed especially to preserve and elevate the vigorous activity of the individual man. The very desire which still animated all their political efforts, to train up temperate and noble-minded citizens, imparted a higher impulse to their whole spirit and character. With us, it is true, man is individually less restricted; but the influence of surrounding circumstances only the more operates to produce and continue a limiting agency,—a position, however, which does not preclude the possibility of beginning a conflict against these external hindrances, with our own internal antagonistic strength. And yet the peculiar nature of the limitations imposed on freedom in our States; the fact that they regard rather what man possesses than what he really is, and that with respect to the latter they do not cultivate, even to uniformity, the physical, intellectual, and moral faculties; and lastly and especially, the prevalence of certain determining ideas, more binding than laws, suppress those energies which are the source of every active virtue, and the *indispensable* condition of any higher and more various culture. With the ancients, moreover, the increase of force served to compensate for their uniformity; but with the moderns uniformity is aggravated by the evil of diminished energy. This difference between the States of antiquity and those of our own times, is in general thoroughly evident. Whilst in these later centuries, the rapid strides of progress, the number and dissemination of artistic inventions, and the enduring grandeur of establishments, especially attract our attention; antiquity captivates us above all by that inherent greatness which is comprised in the life of the individual, and perishes along with him,—the bloom of fancy, the depth of thought, the strength of will, the perfect oneness of the entire being, which alone confer true worth on human nature. Their strong consciousness of this essential worth of human nature, of its powers and their consistent development, was to them the quick impulse to every manifestation of activity; but these seem to us but as abstractions, in

which the sense of the individual is lost, or at least in which his inner life is not so much regarded as his ease, his material comfort, his happiness. The ancients sought for happiness in virtue; the moderns have too long been endeavouring to develop the latter from the former;[1] and even he[2] who could conceive and portray morality in its purest form, thinks himself bound to supply happiness to his ideal of human nature through the medium of a highly artificial machinery, and this rather as a reward from without, than as a boon obtained by man's own exertions. I need not trace any further the features of this striking difference, but will draw these hints to a conclusion with an illustrative passage from Aristotle's Ethics:—"For that which peculiarly belongs to each by nature, is best and most pleasant to every one; and consequently, to man, the life according to intellect (is most pleasant), if intellect especially constitutes Man. This life therefore is the most happy.[3]

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proposition; while the idea that the State can bestow something more than mere security, and that the injurious limitation of liberty, although a possible, is not an essential, consequence of such a policy, has disposed many to the latter opinion. And this belief has undoubtedly prevailed, not only in political theory, but in actual practice. Ample evidence of this is to be found in most of the systems of political jurisprudence, in the more recent philosophical codes, and in the history of Constitutions generally. The introduction of these principles has given a new form to the study of politics (as is shown for instance by so many recent financial and legislative theories), and has produced many new departments of administration, as boards of trade, finance, and national economy. But, however generally these principles may be accepted, they still appear to me to require a more radical investigation; and this can only proceed from a view of human nature in the abstract, and of the highest ends of human existence.

Notes

[1] This difference is never so strikingly evident as when we make the comparison between the ancient and modern philosophers. In place of other illustration, I quote some remarks of Tiedemann on one of the finest passages in Plato's Republic:—"Quamquam autem per se sit justitia grata nobis; tamen si exercitium ejus nullam omnino afferret utilitatem, si justo ea omnia essent patienda, quæ fratres commemorant; injustitia justitiæ foret præferenda; quæ enim ad felicitatem maxime faciunt nostram, sunt absque dubio aliis præponenda. Jam corporis cruciatus, omnium rerum inopia, fames, infamia, quæque alia evenire justo fratres dixerunt, animi illam e justitia manantem voluptatem dubio procul longe superant, essetque adeo injustitia justitiæ antehabenda et in virtutum numero collocanda." (Tiedemann in argumentis dialogorum Platonis. Ad l. 2, de Republica.)—"Now although justice is pleasing to us in its own nature, still if the practice of it did not confer any advantage whatever, if the just man had to endure all that the brothers relate, injustice would be preferable to justice; for the things which especially contribute to our happiness, are unquestionably to be preferred to others. Now bodily torture, utter indigence, hunger, infamy, and whatever

else the brothers observed to befall the just man, far outweigh, doubtless, that spiritual pleasure which flows from justice; and so injustice would have to be preferred to justice, and ranked in the number of virtues."

[2] Kant, on the *Summum Bonum*, in his Elements of Moral Metaphysics (Riga, 1785), and in the Critique of Practical Reason.

[3] Τὸ γὰρ οἰκέλον ἑκάστῳ

CHAPTER II. Of the individual man, and the highest ends of his existence.²

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. Freedom is the grand and indispensable condition which the possibility of such a development presupposes; but there is besides another essential,—intimately connected with freedom, it is true,—a variety of situations. Even the most free and self-reliant of men is thwarted and hindered in his development by uniformity of position. But as it is evident, on the one hand, that such a diversity is a constant result of freedom, and on the other, that there is a species of oppression which, without imposing restrictions on man himself, gives a peculiar impress of its own to surrounding circumstances; these two conditions, of freedom and variety of situation, may be regarded, in a certain sense, as one and the same. Still, it may contribute to perspicuity to point out the distinction between them.

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Every human being, then, can act with but one force at the same time: or rather, our whole nature disposes us at any given time to some single form of spontaneous activity. It would therefore seem to follow from this, that man is inevitably destined to a partial cultivation, since he only enfeebles his energies by directing them to a multiplicity of objects. But we see the fallacy of such a conclusion when we reflect, that man has it in his power to avoid this one-sidedness, by striving to unite the separate faculties of his nature, often singly exercised; by bringing into spontaneous co-operation, at each period of his life, the gleams of activity about to expire, and those which the future alone will kindle into living effulgence; and endeavouring to increase and diversify the powers with which he works, by harmoniously combining them, instead of looking for a mere variety of objects for their separate exercise. That which is effected, in the case of the individual, by the union of the past and future with the present, is produced in society by the mutual co-operation of its different single members; for, in all the stages of his existence, each individual can exhibit but one of those perfections only, which represent the possible features of human character. It is through such social union, therefore, as is based on the internal wants and capacities of its members, that each is enabled to participate in the rich collective resources of all the others. The experience of all, even the rudest, nations, furnishes us an example of a union thus formative of individual character; in the union of the sexes. And, although in this case the expression, as well of the difference as of the longing for union, appears more marked and striking, it is still no less active in other kinds of association where there is actually no difference of sex; it is only more difficult to discover in these, and may perhaps be more powerful for that very reason. If we were to follow out this idea, it might perhaps conduct us to a clearer insight into the phenomena of those unions so much in vogue among the ancients, and more especially the Greeks, among whom we find them countenanced even by the legislators themselves: I mean those so frequently, but unworthily, classed under the general appellation of ordinary love, and sometimes, but always erroneously, designated as mere friendship. The efficiency of all

² CHAPTER II. "Of the Individual Man, and the highest ends of his existence" in Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. Translated from the German of Baron Wilhelm von Humboldt, by Joseph Coulthard, Jun. (London: John Chapman, 1854). <<http://oll.libertyfund.org/title/589/45490>>.

such unions as instruments of cultivation, wholly depends on the degree in which the component members can succeed in combining their personal independence with the intimacy of the common bond; for whilst, without this intimacy, one individual cannot sufficiently possess himself, as it were, of the nature of the others, independence is no less essential, in order that the perceived be assimilated into the being of the perceiver. Now, it is clear (to apply these conclusions to the respective conditions for culture,—freedom, and a variety of situations), that, on the one hand, individual energy is essential to the perceived and perceiver, into which social unions may be resolved; and, on the other, a difference between them, neither so great as to prevent the one from comprehending the other, nor so inconsiderable as to exclude admiration for that which the other possesses, and the desire of assimilating it into the perceiver's character.

This individual vigour, then, and manifold diversity, combine themselves in *originality*; and hence, that on which the consummate grandeur of our nature ultimately depends,—that towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts, and on which especially those who design to influence their fellow men must ever keep their eyes, is the *Individuality of Power and Development*. Just as this individuality springs naturally from the perfect freedom of action, and the greatest diversity in the agents, it tends immediately to produce them in turn. Even inanimate nature, which, proceeding in accordance with unchangeable laws, advances by regular grades of progression, appears more individual to the man who has been developed in his individuality. He transports himself, as it were, into the very centre of nature; and it is true, in the highest sense, that each still perceives the beauty and rich abundance of the outer world, in the exact measure in which he is conscious of their existence in his own soul. How much sweeter and closer must this correspondence become between effect and cause,—this reaction between internal feeling and outward perception,—when man is not only passively open to external sensations and impressions, but is himself also an agent!

If we attempt to confirm these principles by a closer application of them to the nature of the individual man, we find that everything which enters into the latter, reduces itself to the two elements of Form and Substance. The purest form, beneath the most delicate veil, we call Idea; the crudest substance,

with the most imperfect form, we call sensuous Perception. Form springs from the union of substance. The richer and more various the substance that is united, the more sublime is the resulting form. A child of the gods is the offspring only of immortal parents: and as the blossom swells and ripens into fruit, and from the tiny germ imbedded in its soft pulp the new stalk shoots forth, laden with newly-clustering buds; so does the Form become in turn the substance of a still more exquisite Form. The intensity of power, moreover, increases in proportion to the greater variety and delicacy of the substance; since the internal cohesion increases with these. The substance seems as if blended in the form, and the form merged in the substance. Or, to speak without metaphor, the richer a man's feelings become in ideas, and his ideas in feelings, the more lofty and transcendent his sublimity; for upon this constant intermingling of form and substance, or of diversity with the individual unity, depends the perfect interfusion of the two natures which co-exist in man, and upon this, his greatness. But the force of the generation depends upon the energy of the generating forces. The consummating point of human existence is the flowering of these forces.[1] In the vegetable world, the simple and less graceful form of the fruit seems to prefigure the more perfect bloom and symmetry of the flower which it precedes, and which it is destined gradually to unfold. Everything conspires to the beautiful consummation of the blossom. That which first shoots forth from the little germ is not nearly so exquisite and fascinating. The full thick trunk, the broad leaves rapidly detaching themselves from each other, seem to require some fuller and fairer development; as the eye glances up the ascending stem, it marks the spiring grades of this development; more tender leaflets seem longing to unite themselves, and draw closer and closer together, until the central calyx of the crowning flower seems to give the sweet satisfaction to this growing desire.[2] But destiny has not blessed the tribe of plants in this the law and process of their growth. The flower fades and dies, and the germ of the fruit reproduces the stem, as rude and unfinished as the former, to ascend slowly through the same stages of development as before. But when, in man, the blossom fades away, it is only to give place to another still more exquisitely beautiful; and the charm of the last and loveliest is only hidden from our view in the endlessly receding vistas of an inscrutable eternity. Now, whatever man receives externally, is only

as the grain of seed. It is his own active energy alone that can convert the germ of the fairest growth, into a full and precious blessing for himself. It leads to beneficial issues only when it is full of vital power and essentially individual. The highest ideal, therefore, of the co-existence of human beings, seems to me to consist in a union in which each strives to develop himself from his own inmost nature, and for his own sake. The requirements of our physical and moral being would, doubtless, bring men together into communities; and even as the conflicts of warfare are more honourable than the fights of the arena, and the struggles of exasperated citizens more glorious than the hired and unsympathizing efforts of mere mercenaries, so would the exerted powers of such spontaneous agents succeed in eliciting the highest and noblest energies.

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And is it not exactly this which so unspeakably captivates us in contemplating the life of Greece and Rome, and which in general captivates any age whatever in the contemplation of a remoter one? Is it not that these men had harder struggles to endure with the ruthless force of destiny, and harder struggles with their fellow men? that greater and more original energy and individuality constantly encountered each other, and gave rise in the encounter to ever new and beautiful forms? Every later epoch,—and in what a rapid course of declension must this now proceed!—is

necessarily inferior in variety to that which it succeeded: in variety of nature,—the boundless forests have been cleared, the vast morasses dried up; in variety of human life, by the ever-increasing intercommunication and union of all human establishments.[3] It is in this we find one of the chief causes which render the idea of the new, the uncommon, the marvellous, so much more rare,—which make affright or astonishment almost a disgrace,—and not only render the discovery of fresh and, till now, unknown expedients, far less necessary, but also all sudden, unpremeditated and urgent decisions. For, partly, the pressure of outward circumstances is less violent, while man is provided with more ample means for opposing them; partly, this resistance is no longer possible with the simple forces which nature bestows on all alike, fit for immediate application; and, in fine, partly a higher and more extended knowledge renders inventions less necessary, and the very increase of learning serves to blunt the edge of discovery. It is, on the other hand, undeniable that, whereas physical variety has so vastly declined, it has been succeeded by an infinitely richer and more satisfying intellectual and moral variety, and that our superior refinement can recognize more delicate differences and gradations, and our disciplined and susceptible character, if not so firmly consolidated as that of the ancients, can transfer them into the practical conduct of life,—differences and gradations which might have wholly escaped the notice of the sages of antiquity, or at least would have been discernible by them alone. To the human family at large, the same has happened as to the individual: the ruder features have faded away, the finer only have remained. And in view of this sacrifice of energy from generation to generation, we might regard it as a blessed dispensation if the whole human species were as one man; or the living force of one age could be transmitted to the succeeding one, along with its books and inventions. But this is far from being the case. It is true that our refinement possesses a peculiar force of its own, perhaps even surpassing the former in strength, just in proportion to the measure of its refinement; but it is a question whether the prior development, through the more robust and vigorous stages, must not always be the antecedent transition. Still, it is certain that the sensuous element in our nature, as it is the earliest germ, is also the most vivid expression of the spiritual.

Whilst this is not the place, however, to enter on the discussion of this point, we are justified in

concluding, from the other considerations we have urged, that we must at least preserve, with the most eager solicitude, all the force and individuality we may yet possess, and cherish aught that can tend in any way to promote them.

I therefore deduce, as the natural inference from what has been argued, that reason cannot desire for man any other condition than that in which each individual not only enjoys the most absolute freedom of developing himself by his own energies, in his perfect individuality, but in which external nature even is left unfashioned by any human agency, but only receives the impress given to it by each individual of himself and his own free will, according to the measure of his wants and instincts, and restricted only by the limits of his powers and his rights.

From this principle it seems to me, that Reason must never yield aught save what is absolutely required to preserve it. It must therefore be the basis of every political system, and must especially constitute the starting-point of the inquiry which at present claims our attention.

“I therefore deduce, as the natural inference from what has been argued, that reason cannot desire for man any other condition than that in which each individual not only enjoys the most absolute freedom of developing himself by his own energies, in his perfect individuality, but in which external nature even is left unfashioned by any human agency, but only receives the impress given to it by each individual of himself and his own free will, according to the measure of his wants and instincts, and restricted only by the limits of his powers and his rights.”

Notes

[1] *Blüthe, Reife*. Neues deutsches Museum, 1791. Junius 22, 3.

[2] Goethe, über die Metamorphose der Pflanzen.

[3] Rousseau has also noticed this in his ‘Emile.’

Further Information

SOURCE

The edition used for this extract: Wilhelm von Humboldt, *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. Translated from the German of Baron Wilhelm von Humboldt, by Joseph Coulthard, Jun. (London: John Chapman, 1854). CHAPTER I "Introduction" <oll.libertyfund.org/title/589/45488>. CHAPTER II. "Of the Individual Man, and the highest ends of his existence" <oll.libertyfund.org/title/589/45490>.

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FURTHER READING

Other works by Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) <oll.libertyfund.org/person/3789>.

School of Thought: German Liberalism <oll.libertyfund.org/collection/32>.

Liberty Fund publishes a translation of Humboldt's book under the title *The Limits of State Action* edited by J. W. Burrow (1993). It is not available online for copyright reasons.

“The distinctive principle of Western social philosophy is individualism. It aims at the creation of a sphere in which the individual is free to think, to choose, and to act without being restrained by the interference of the social apparatus of coercion and oppression, the State.”
[Ludwig von Mises, “Liberty and Property” (1958)]



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Another useful sampling of the contents of the OLL website is the collection of weekly *Quotations about Liberty and Power* which are organized by themes such as Free Trade, Money and Banking, Natural Rights, and so on. See for example, Richard Cobden's "I have a dream" speech <oll.libertyfund.org/quote/326>.

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