

Liberal Read

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The Limits of the State for a Vision of Self- Development

BOOK REVIEW

Wilhelm von Humboldt

The Limits of State Action

Cambridge University Press, 1969

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A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

The Limits of the State for a Vision of Self-Development



Introduction

Here is a book with which not many liberals may be familiar. It is a work that articulates a distinct shift in the history of liberalism and merits revival. When we consider liberalism as a political philosophy that theorises about the ends of the state and the nature of political society, proto-liberal philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Charles de Montesquieu, and Jean Jacques Rousseau¹ are brought to mind. These thinkers mark an early liberalism that focused on the rights that men in a state of nature would choose as a result of their decision to live in a political society. These thinkers are from whom we have borrowed fundamental ideas for liberal societies such as free will, the government's protection of individual freedom, the right to personal property, and political rule by consent of the governed. Wilhelm von Humboldt's *The Limits of State Action* imparts a different central human value to the ones mentioned above—we may call it *self-development*.

Background, title, subject matter

Written in 1791, *The Limits of State Action* was published by the author's younger brother, Alexander von Humboldt, the famous naturalist, in 1852. Wilhelm wrote and lived among great intellectual company, earning the praise of Friedrich Schiller, Germaine de Stael, Friedrich von Gentz, and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. After his death, the contents of *The Limits of State Action* were exalted by F.A. Hayek, and John Stuart Mill solidified Humboldt's role by quoting him in the epigraph of *On Liberty*. *The Limits of State Action* is an emblematic piece of the German Enlightenment, taking its rightful place within the wider Aufklärung of the eighteenth century. At the same time, it is also a work that conveys central ideas about human potential and the limits of state efficiency which has influenced future liberal thinkers.

A brief remark on the title is in order. *The Spheres and Duties of Government*, also called *The Limits of State Action*, are the English titles of *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*. All these titles indicate the idea of "limits" of the state and imply that governments should be restricted in their scope, but what is unique about this book in particular? Both English titles admittedly fall short of providing us with a good explanation. The German title, however, gets us closer to understanding what

1 *Proto-* because they certainly never called themselves liberal, though we generally tend to ascribe these thinkers with certain features of liberal thought following their important contributions.

What subject matter determines the limits of the state's effectiveness? Human nature itself would be Humboldt's response.

Humboldt means by the word "limit". Humboldt sets out to determine "the limits of the *effectiveness* (*Wirksamkeit*) of the state", not the limits of the state for its own sake. The difference is significant: limits on the state are the conclusion after inquiry. Once something has led a thinker to conclude that the state should be limited in its scope, the question arises: what *subject matter* determines the limits of the state's effectiveness?

Human nature itself would be Humboldt's response. His inquiry, moreover, is as much about the limits of the state as it is about human nature and its place within

individual development. Indeed, much of the book constantly reaffirms Humboldt's view of human nature as one of unlimited capability that needs only self-will and dedication to be maximised through action. Humboldt's idea of personal growth stems from a view of human nature that takes action, the need for didactic learning, and the importance of personal choice as the necessary means through which the individual obtains the ideal of self-development. Action, Humboldt affirms, is more valuable to the individual than possessions. For this reason, the state should be less concerned with providing material goods to people and more concerned with granting them the space necessary for individual action. Here is where the importance of liberty comes in—for Humboldt, it is the necessary condition that facilitates man's autonomous action and direction towards self-development.

Humboldt's work in its contemporary context

The Limits of State Action is a departure from the natural rights and social contract tradition. It turns our attention away from what governments ought or ought not to do based on the rights—natural or otherwise—which individuals possess within a political society. Instead, it considers what a government can and cannot do in its capacity to help individuals reach their full potential as individual persons. As Humboldt shows us, there is little that the state can do to help everyone accomplish a task that is personal and therefore different for every individual. For Humboldt, understanding what it means to be a person and what nature people possess are two components that reveal the fundamental un-political ends of human action. Because human action is inherently apolitical, the state must ensure that its role in political society remain as minimal as possible.

Three general criticisms against the state throughout this work stand out. The first is that the state's inclination towards ensuring the positive welfare of citizens denies individuals essential features of their humanity, including the possibility to develop oneself by choosing freely, experiencing the surrounding environment, cultivating relationships, and learning from the consequences of one's actions. The second is that the state diminishes the individual's ability to self-develop because it has a tendency to impose uniformity on its citizens rather than welcome diversity; and the third is that state interference can debilitate the individual's initiative for self-development. Together, these criticisms indicate to Humboldt that the state's scope of interference must be limited from its inception.

Structure and contents of the book

With these criticisms in mind, we can begin to unpack the contents of this work. *The Limits of State Action* is divided into sixteen chapters. It will be more helpful to highlight some of the most important ones that demonstrate the ordering of Humboldt's thoughts and the principles underlying his view on the limits of the state. For starters, it is important to bear in mind that the sequence of the book follows the lead of the opening two chapters, both of which establish the primacy of the person as the source for the type of self-development that eventually allows each and every individual to lead a virtuous and fulfilling life. The introduction, Chapter I, captures Humboldt's view on the problem of contemporary political philosophy. Humboldt writes that the political theorists of his age ceased asking about the scope of government as it affects the private spheres of citizens and focused, instead, on the question of who shall govern and who shall be governed. Answering who governs over whom is an incomplete assessment of the ends of the state, however. In Humboldt's view, knowing who governs whom only establishes the "necessary means" through which to answer the more important question that is the state's limits.

Chapter I goes further still. Humboldt's statement that self-development comes from the "self" may sound obvious, but it is a view that carries not just individual autonomy but also a moral weight and responsibility which no government can assume for a person. Otherwise, to assume responsibility for the moral development of another person is to remove an integral feature from all individuals, which is their own capacity to develop themselves to the best of their abilities. Indeed, Humboldt affirms this centrality of human development by mentioning its former status in "the states of antiquity" which, in contrast to modern ones, raised it to the highest level:

...antiquity captivates us above all by that inherent greatness which is comprised in the life of the individual, and perishes with him—the bloom of fancy, the depth of spirit, the strength of will, the perfect oneness of the entire being, which alone confer true worth on human nature.²

Humboldt's use of the Ancients is meant to remind readers that the purpose of man is to find "happiness in virtue" as opposed to inverting the process and finding virtue in happiness, which he accuses his contemporaries of doing. Part of what Humboldt sets out to do in *The Limits of State Action* is to correct the prevalent vision that liberty is mere license to do whatever one wants. Self-development is a journey that can allow individuals to achieve the highest ends of their own particular faculties, but doing so requires the acknowledgment of two things: that this task is wholly individual ;and that the state, therefore, can take no part in its facilitation.

The need for state limits, after all, stems from a philosophical foundation regarding the nature of man, which Humboldt offers in Chapter II. Its title, emphasising the "highest ends" of man's existence, indicates that Humboldt's concern with human nature is connected to a vision of the individual that is set on a path of self-discovery and self-development. As noted by the editor of *The Limits of State Action*, J.W. Burrow, Humboldt is focused on the centrality of human needs—as opposed to free will and consent—as the means to propel human progress forward. For this reason, Humboldt aims to demonstrate, in Burrow's words, "the prerequisites of a process, which he regards as desirable" for the German concept of *Bildung*.

² Humboldt and Burrow, 13.

Some intellectual background is necessary here to clarify the importance of the concept of *Bildung*. Humboldt's conception of *Bildung* guides his view of self-development and underpins many of the theories presented in his work. Historian David Sorkin writes that Humboldt "made a crucial contribution to the development and canonisation of the German conception of self-formation or self-cultivation" (*Bildung*).³ *Bildung* is a vision of self-development in which individuals, through their own faculties and the help of their natural surroundings, set out to actualise themselves.

Thus, we can view Humboldt as a political theorist whose views on the ends of the state stem from the primacy of self-development and are, thus, wholly aimed towards achieving this vision of *Bildung*. For this reason, Chapter III, which enquires about the "solicitude of the state for the positive welfare of the citizen", concludes that the state should not be

Within the book's sixteen chapters, Humboldt not only gives ample reasons corroborating his belief that negative state intervention provides the necessary environment for self-development, but he also describes the various ways in which self-development takes place.

involved with the citizen's positive welfare. Chapter IV, instead, highlights Humboldt's view that the state should only be involved with the "negative welfare of the citizen", meaning the citizen's security from threat. These can be outside threats, such as foreign invasions (Chapter V), or internal threats, such as violence or harm to another citizen. We must understand Humboldt's vision of the state, therefore, as a largely negative enterprise in which the state simply ensures that citizens have basic security.

The four opening chapters provide us with the most important sequence of Humboldt's thought: the inadequacies of current understandings of human nature and its effects on contemporary political theory; his correction by way of another view of human nature and its highest ends; the subsequent need for state limits on the *positive* welfare of citizens; and the concluding point that the state need only make negative interventions to preserve its citizens' security. The outline of these initial four chapters of the book should not imply that Humboldt leaves self-development solely to the individual's discretion, however. Within the book's sixteen chapters, Humboldt not only gives ample reasons corroborating his belief that negative

state intervention provides the necessary environment for self-development, but he also describes the various ways in which self-development takes place.

The gist of Humboldt's view on the matter of negative state intervention is that every individual has different needs and ways to meet their different ends. Self-development, to be sure, is such a formidable task that it is naturally susceptible to collective organisation. One final chapter to highlight is Chapter VI, which discusses the question of national education and answers directly to this point about different human needs. Humboldt explains how education was traditionally understood as a collective enterprise in classical antiquity. The moment in history in which Humboldt found himself—at the height of the Enlight-

³ David Sorkin, "Wilhelm Von Humboldt: The Theory and Practice of Self-Formation (*Bildung*), 1791-1810," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 1 (1983): 55, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2709304>.



WILHELM VON HUMBOLDT

“Every limitation of personal freedom is to be condemned, as wholly foreign to the sphere of the State’s activity.”

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) was a German philosopher, statesman and founder of Berlin’s Humboldt University. After completing his studies in classical languages, law and philosophy, he moved to Paris, where he experienced the French Revolution at first hand. Humboldt was friends with Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. By 1792 he had already written his *Limits of State Action*, in which he defines freedom as the highest ‘human good’ and expresses his aversion to excessive state interference. He went on to work for the Education Department of the Prussian Ministry of the Interior and reformed the entire education system. He co-founded the University of Berlin (which would later take his name), where academic freedom, critical thinking and scientific research were central. As a minister he developed the text for a constitution featuring numerous liberal principles, such as representation of the people, but this was met with reactionary resistance. Humboldt attached great importance to the self-development of the individual, i.e. the development of one’s moral and critical faculties through upbringing and education.

enment—signalled to him, however, that mankind had reached a “pitch of civilisation” in which people’s collective efforts could no longer advance the individual’s moral and intellectual growth. People “cannot ascend except through the development of individuals”,⁴ he argues, and national education has a tendency towards “artificial equilibrium” that “leads to sterility or lack of energy”.⁵ It is for this reason that education ought to be primarily a private endeavour, which is not to say that national education should not exist in some capacity, but rather that it can never take the place of real, personal education.

On this point of education, it is necessary to emphasise the philosophical tradition within which Humboldt is writing. Norberto Bobbio mentions that Humboldt was influenced by Immanuel Kant, who also focused on the importance of the individual’s moral development as a necessary next step from his liberty. Man’s liberty, Kant believed, is a source of power that aids self-development. This view consequently led German idealists like Kant to reject governmental paternalism for its antagonistic effects on man’s moral development.

Humboldt aimed to present a vision in which people could develop their moral faculties to the maximum, requiring as little outside interference as possible. Humboldt’s view of the state is therefore circumscribed; he sees the state for its bureaucratic tendencies, which—if unchecked—would interfere with *Bildung*.

The problem of national education for Humboldt, then, is its tendency to homogenise an otherwise heterogenous society. This chapter is important, moreover, because it includes the following line, quoted by John Stuart Mill in the epigraph for *On Liberty*:

The grand, leading principle towards which every argument hitherto unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity.⁶

The text surrounding this statement reveals that Humboldt is not only interested in arguing that the state should have a limited scope because self-development is a personal task. While this is surely a pithy summary of the book’s argument, there is a lot more going on in the book. One topic entails his criticism of the predominant view of man as a political animal whose ends are naturally aimed at contributing and fully developing within political society. Such a claim was problematic for Humboldt because it necessarily implied that, if man was naturally political, then the state itself was a natural organism. Humboldt felt the need, instead, to “deny so emphatically that the state is an organism” and view it as “a mere piece of machinery”, “a kind of public convenience with strictly limited functions”.⁷

This question of whether or not the state is organic comes up again in Chapter VI, regarding the relationship between the citizen and the individual. Humboldt tells us that education is a personal task because self-development is a process that cannot be reversed by the state in its aim to produce citizens. Humboldt, then, marks an essential distinction between what it means to be a human being and what it means to be a citizen. We should remember, furthermore, how Humboldt’s focus from the outset of his work is to explain the nature of man, not the nature of the state. Throughout this book we must notice, moreover, the distinctions that Humboldt makes between one’s *inward* (personal) sphere

4 Ibid., 51.

5 Ibid., 52.

6 Ibid., 51.

7 Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, xvi-xvii.

and one's *outward* (public) sphere. The state belongs to the latter, and Humboldt regards this distinction as a rigid line that protects the individual's private sphere.

The "political sovereignty" of inward development does not detract from the importance of political society, however. As members of a state, humans serve as citizens in a meaningful capacity, and, as such, there is a "fruitful relationship" between man and citizen, according to Humboldt. Still, our calling to be fully developed persons precedes our duty to be citizens. This relationship, moreover, would "wholly cease if the man were sacrificed to the citizen", Humboldt avers. To conclude Humboldt's thought, we might say that he believes there is a logical sequence, or hierarchy to human development, and man's role as a citizen cannot come before his role as a full person.

Humboldt's conclusion is that true self-development can lie only in the private sphere. The vision of the state offered in *The Limits of State Action* is one of limited scope that creates an environment in which men can live "reflectively and sensitively", thereby increasing their "moral and intellectual powers".⁸ Indeed, the two chapters that follow Humboldt's treatment of national education are dedicated to this question of morality from two facets: religion (Chapter VII) and moral development (Chapter VIII). The second half of the book takes a more practical turn; there, Humboldt describes how his theory extends to different aspects of security (Chapter IX), such as police laws (Chapter X), civil laws (Chapter XI), judicial proceedings (XII), criminal laws (XIII), and the treatment of people with disabilities (Chapter XIV), before concluding his work with a wider analysis of justice (Chapter XV) and more practical applications for his theory (XVI).

Conclusion

In closing, *The Limits of State Action* is an integral work on holistic liberalism that places questions about government and politics around the centrality of the human person. Although liberal theorists differ over how far liberalism is fundamentally a social theory or a substantive ethical and political philosophy, both positions acknowledge that it raises

self-development is by no means in competition with improving society. To develop society as a whole, Humboldt believes, people must first develop themselves without state interference.

the individual as the central figure of concern. Liberalism, after all, regards individuals as real, having fundamental value, and, consequently, having a claim to moral and political self-determination. Humboldt ascribes to all of these values with his vision of self-development presented in *The Limits of State Action*. On this point, he can be viewed as a turning-point figure who marked the shift that would take place in 19th-century liberal thought from a political philosophy that considered the rights of men in political societies to a philosophy that raised as its highest priority the personal development of each individual.

One element, however, has been peculiarly omitted from this work that might strike liberal thinkers as incomplete: commentary on economic affairs. To be sure, Humboldt takes no official position with regards

⁸ Humboldt, *The Limits of State Action*, 27.

to *laissez faire* or interventionist economic policies, nor should he be read with the aim of deducing his economic views. That is not to say that Humboldt is not interested in economic affairs; rather, economic affairs are themselves indicative of something more primary for Humboldt, which is personal development. So long as the basis of understanding of human nature sees mankind in all its inherent diversity, then everything else must follow in accordance with this assumption. Liberty and self-development in *The Limits of State Action* uphold this view of human nature.

As a final point of conclusion, it cannot be emphasised enough that Humboldt's view of *Bildung* and self-development as presented in *The Limits of State Action* is not a philosophy of self-interest. While he argues that self-development is a task best left up to each individual to accomplish for him or herself, this task is by no means in competition with the more altruistic aim of improving society. To develop society as a whole, Humboldt believes, people must first develop themselves without state interference. Because human individuality and diversity is an immutable feature of existence, development is a *personal* task that, once achieved, renders the individual a better member of society.

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