

On the study of antiquity, particularly of Greece (selections)

By Wilhelm von Humboldt

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Introduction and preface to translation

Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) was a member of the Prussian aristocracy and an important political and educational reformer in early 19th Century Germany. He witnessed the French revolution as an observer in 1789. After various travels and studies, he became the representative of the Prussian King at the Holy See in 1801. In the following years, Napoleon would conquer many European nations, including Prussia; Humboldt returned to his native Berlin in 1808 following the sacking of the city by French troops. He was immediately put to work by the new Prussian minister of state, who needed to rebuild a humiliated and bankrupt country, the citizens of which were inspired by the French Revolution. Politically Humboldt can be said to have been very much influenced by the Revolution, and he is one of the classic modern theorists of liberalism: the view that freedom is the first and most important condition for the development of both individuals and peoples. (Notice that this means something different from “liberalism” in the sense current in contemporary American English.)

Humboldt was entrusted in 1809 with the reform of the entire Prussian system of education, which included everything from primary schools to university. In these reforms Humboldt was particularly inspired by inculcating universal human virtues in people. When confronted with objections that the type of education he envisioned was “too aristocratic” and not appropriate for the economic necessities of life, he answered that the educational system should first form virtuous individuals, and that only then would they also become useful and productive individuals in their fields. With the founding of the Friedrich-Wilhelm’s University (today: Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin), Humboldt created one of the most productive universities in history. In the 20th Century, Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and Werner Heisenberg would study and teach there; in the 19th Century, Karl Marx and Soren Kierkegaard studied philosophy there with Georg Friedrich Hegel.

Humboldt would eventually be dismissed from his various, and continually changing, duties in the Prussian state on account of his unbending advocacy for academic freedom and civil liberties. This gave him an opportunity to return to his studies. His brother Alexander von Humboldt, a famous natural scientist, had collected material concerning the languages of Mesoamerica, the Caribbean and Indonesia during several long voyages, and Wilhelm von Humboldt himself had collected materials concerning the Basque language during a trip to Spain. He now used these materials in comparative investigations of the structure and grammar of many different languages, and in so doing contributed to the foundations of modern linguistics. Though one might think from the following essay that Humboldt only cared for Greece, he in fact was one of very few early scholars to emphasize the value of studying non-European languages. For these accomplishments he would be nominated to the American Academy of Sciences in 1822.

The title of this essay in the original version is “Über das Studium des Alterthums, und des griechischen insbesondre”; it may be found in: Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Gesammelte Schriften*,

Vol. 1, herausgegeben von Albert Lietzmann, Berlin 1903. The text was written in 1793 but never published until after Humboldt's death (first publication in 1896). The numbers of the paragraphs are derived from this version. Wherever emphasis is expressed by Italics, this is due to the formatting in the German edition of Humboldt's essay.

The essay concerns the particular advantages of “studying” (not e.g. “knowing all about”) antiquity, and focuses in particular on Greece. But the focus on Greece is in a way accidental: Humboldt is justifying the use of studying other cultures in their time and place quite generally. Of course Humboldt was writing at a time (end of the 18th, beginning of the 19th Century) when prominent thinkers in Western culture raised ancient Greece and its cultural heritage to a model of Western civilization. (This tendency, by the way, is called “Philhellenism”, and it was very wide-spread. It took various forms in e.g. Germany, England, France, Italy, and the US, but also – though somewhat later – in modern non-Western countries such as Japan.) The object of study which Humboldt is concerned with is humanity, quite generally. The means of studying it are what we would call today the “humanities”: history, philosophy, art, literature, and (at least to a certain degree) theology. On Humboldt's view, the humanities are supposed to teach people about humanity, quite generally. His essay is on the benefits of studying humanity and thus humanities. But he imagines that in studying a particular kind of humanity, like ancient Greece, one is really studying something which is both organic (“whole”) and individual, like a friend.

Some questions to consider for your reading:

1. What does the distinction between the formal and material uses of the study of antiquity mean? Try to reformulate this distinction clearly in your own words. Is Humboldt concerned with the formal or the material use of the study of antiquity?
2. Humboldt justifies the worthiness of Greek culture as an object of study with reference to several aspects of ancient Greek society (paragraphs 26–30). What do you think of his justification? Might it be used to justify the study of other societies?
3. Humboldt repeatedly makes remarks concerning the ‘character’ of the ancient Greeks. What does it mean for a group of people to have a ‘character’? Nowadays, we tend to use this word when speaking about individuals, sometimes when speaking about small groups (e.g. “the Debate Club of Providence College has great *character* and is fun”), but not so much when speaking about peoples or nations. What does Humboldt's use of this word say about his thinking and his time?
4. In paragraph 36, Humboldt confronts the question as to whether another nation might provide a cultural model as good as, or better than, Greece. Analyze this paragraph in order to bring out Humboldt's argument for studying Greece and the assumptions his argument is based on. Do you find these assumptions and the argument they are supposed to support convincing? Why (not)?
5. For Humboldt, a central aspect of education is the formation of character through study of a worthy object. Do you think that education works this way? And if you do, what sort of objects do you think particularly worthy of study?

On the study of antiquity, particularly of Greece

1

The study of the remains of antiquity – its literature and art works – provides a two-fold use, one material and one formal. It has material use in that it provides other disciplines with the *material* they treat. In this way the study of antiquity and the study which is these disciplines is the same, even if the humanistic disciplines come to their aid.¹ Though this use of the study of antiquity is great, it is still foreign to the sciences which derive their material from antiquity.

2

The *formal* use of the study of antiquity is two-fold: on the one hand one can consider the remains of antiquity by themselves and as works of the genre to which they belong, by looking only to the works themselves; on the other hand we can regard them as works of the period from which they originate, and with a view to those who created them.² The first use is an *aesthetic* one; it is very important, but not the only formal use of the study of antiquity. The belief that this is the only such use is the source of several erroneous judgments about the ancients.

3

From the study of the remains of antiquity with a view to their originators, there comes knowledge of the ancients themselves, or of the humanity of antiquity.³ This is the only point of interest in what follows, in part because of its intrinsic importance, in part because it is taken up less often.

4

The study of a nation provides virtually all of the advantages which history offers. The study of history expands our knowledge of man and humanity by means of examples of actions and events, it sharpens our judgment, it elevates and betters our character; but the study of a nation does this and more. This study does not so much follow the thread of successive events, but attempts to understand the entire state of a nation and, in so doing, provides a *biography* of it at the same time.

5

The mark of such a biography is primarily that, in it, the entire political, religious and domestic condition of a nation is portrayed. *Its character is developed in every respect and in its whole context, not just the relations between certain of its traits, but each trait is studied individually in relation to*

¹ Humboldt is talking about a case in which the study of ancient literature is the same as the study of a certain other subject. Such was the case, for example, in the fields of logic and geometry during his lifetime: the logical theory of Aristotle and the geometry of Euclid still were major parts of the knowledge of logic and mathematics at the beginning of the 19th Century. In this way, the study of antiquity would be materially useful for a logician or a mathematician, because ancient authors and their works would be part of the actual study of logic and mathematics – which was in fact the case up until quite recently.

² Humboldt inserted the only note appearing in this text here: “I will distinguish this”. He distinguishes two specific uses of studying the remains of antiquity with a view to its authors and creators in paragraph 4.

³ Note that this is the second part of the formal use of the study of antiquity.

outside circumstances as its causes or consequences. I am concerned here only with the advantages of this characteristic mark of the study of antiquity, and will pass over all others, which have often been touched upon.

6

We think that knowledge of humanity is only needed for interacting with people, and we tend to assume that knowledge of humanity consists in knowing a number individuals and having acquired the ability to guess their motives based on their actions, and inversely in causing people to do certain things by artfully giving them certain reasons to act. In a certain political sense, both of this may well be true. But in a philosophical sense, knowledge of humanity – that is, knowledge of humanity as a whole, as well as knowledge of certain particular individuals – can be nothing but the *knowledge of the diverse intellectual, sensitive, and moral human powers and the modifications which they take on through each other, the possible forms of their proper and improper proportion, the relation of outward circumstances to them.* It is knowledge of what these powers must accomplish when they reach a certain state, and what they could never accomplish. In a word, it is knowledge of the *laws of necessity of the inner transformations of human powers, as well as the knowledge of the laws of possibility of the transformations effected upon them from without.* It is this knowledge, or rather the striving for it – since here only striving is possible – which leads to true knowledge of humanity, and it is necessary for every human being *qua* human being, even for those who live in isolation from others; and its necessity varies only in grades of intension and extension.

7

First – to begin with the most obvious – I will contrast the person of action with those who are only engaged in ideas, and with both the one who is merely engaged in sensual enjoyment. All practical life is more or less related to human beings, from association in the most casual company to the government of the greatest state. Whoever is conscious of his moral dignity will not forget in any of these relations the highest purpose of morality, namely the refinement and progressive cultivation of man. Knowledge of humanity is indispensable for the person of action, partly in order to advance the aforementioned purpose of morality, partly – though there can be very honorable people of action – in order that it might provide the boundaries within which his heterogenous business be bound, that it might always preserve the greatest minimum of these boundaries. In this way knowledge of humanity teaches him what he may do morally, and can do with success in politics, and thereby guides his senses and sensibility. – But knowledge of humanity also guides his will, in that it alone creates true regard for human beings. All imperfections can be traced back to an imbalance of human powers. By knowing humanity, one comes to know a Whole which removes all lack of balance. At the same time such knowledge causes the necessity of our human powers' creation to appear, and the possibility of their balance. This brings it about that the individual object of our study, once seen from only one perspective, is raised into a higher class through an all-encompassing view from all around.

13

The effect of this knowledge [of antiquity], when it is obtained, is similar to the material of what is known; but *its form, the way of obtaining it,* is just as beneficial and perhaps even more so. In order to grasp the character of a person in his or her unity, and of an even more intricate thing such as a nation, it is necessary that one set all of one's powers in motion. The person who wishes to understand must, in a certain way, make himself similar to that which

he seeks to understand. That is why this study results in a greater exercise, to strain all of one's powers alike, an exercise which educates us as humans so exceptionally. – Whoever continually pursues this study absorbs an infinite variety of forms, and thus the edges of his own are as it were planed down, and from his own form, combined with those which are taken up, other, new forms perpetually emerge. – Thus knowledge of antiquity is healthy because any other kind of knowledge would be deficient in comparison, and because, in being unattainable, it compels us to undertake never-ending study. Thus the highest form of humanity is brought about by the most profound study of man.

26

Certain circumstances in the external condition of the Greeks contributed to this care for education and this kind of human training. Among these I would count the following: 1. *Slavery*. This institution elevated the free man above the greater part of labors which for their success depended upon a one-sided exercise of the body and the mind – mechanical abilities. The free man had the leisure to improve his body through gymnastics, improve his mind through the arts and sciences, and to wholly educate his character through active participation in the affairs of government, company and his own reflection. – The free man was also elevated by the idea of his own advantages over the slave, which he thought was due not just to luck, but which he thought he could justly claim due to his superiority and the inferiority of the slave – though this was due to the slave's station. The free man's claim to superiority was based in part on the fact that he underwent dangers and had obligations which the slave did not have to share with him, as in the defense of his fatherland. – From all of this together a liberality was formed which was never to be found in greater degree in another people, i.e. the rule of dispositions of the soul which are noble, great, and truly worthy of a free man, and the living expression of this in a culture of education and grace of bodily movement.

27

2., *the constitution of their government and, in general, their political institutions*. The only really legal constitution in Greece was a republican one in which every citizen could participate, to a greater or lesser degree. Whoever wanted to accomplish something had to use persuasion, as he lacked supreme power. Thus he could not do without the study of man, the ability to adapt to others, and flexibility of character. But the often over-sophisticated people demanded even more. It yielded to reasons not just upon the basis of their strength and nature, but also attended to their form, to eloquence, to the instrument (of speech, i.e. the voice, CGK), and to physical dignity. There remained nearly no side which the statesman could neglect with impunity. Moreover, the administration of government did not require particular, wide-ranging fields of knowledge, nor talents of this kind. The individual parts of administration were not so separated that the citizen would have to devote his life to merely one of them. The same characteristics which made the Greek a great human being also made him a great statesman. And so he continued to educate himself in an ever higher and broader way by participating in the affairs of state.

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3., *religion*. Religion was completely sensual, it supported all the arts and lifted them through a precise connection with the constitution of state to a much higher dignity and greater necessity. With that religion fostered not only a sense of beauty, but made such a sense more universal, since the entire population always participated in religious ceremonies, which were

always accompanied by the arts. Insofar as this sense of beauty fostered the right and balanced cultivation of man, religion too contributed to this, indirectly but exceptionally.

29

4., *national pride*. The Greek possessed a high degree of liveliness and sensitivity, and these were expressed particularly in a feeling for honor and reputation and, in the close connection between the citizen and the state, in a feeling for the honor of the nation. Since the value of the nation rested upon the value of its citizens, and since victory in war and prosperity in peace depended in turn upon the value of the citizens, this national pride doubled the attention to the cultivation of personal value. – The repute of the nation staked a claim to every merit or talent of one of its citizens. The nation thus stood guard over every talent, and from this arose another basis for the respect attributed to the arts and sciences.

30.

5., *the separation of Greece into several small states*. If a state exists for itself, alone, then the development of its powers progresses in the way a single power would. It develops in itself, and when it has reached a certain measure it becomes something else. These changes are motivated solely by the power itself, and this also accounts (more or less) for its one-sidedness. But in Greece the mutual community of different nations, which almost all possessed different degrees of culture and very different types of cultivation, brought it about that some part of one nation would be transferred to another. Even if, in the arrangements of the older nations, foreign things found acceptance only with difficulty, nevertheless more of the foreign was accepted than if every nation existed alone and separated. And this happened all the more in Greece, since all the nations were always Greek and thus similar in the original make-up of their character, so that the transfer of culture and custom from one nation to another was facilitated. – Even when such transfer did not occur, the bare fact of existing next to one another and mutual envy brought it about that one nation could not neglect the advantages by which another might become superior, and at the very least their mutual envy set the powers of each nation into more active motion.

33

A particular and defining trait of the Greek character is an unusual degree of development of feeling and phantasy in a very early period of culture still, and a more faithful preservation of a child-like simplicity and naivety in a relatively late period. *In the Greek character we find, then, the original character of humanity in general*, but compounded with perhaps the highest degree of cultivation possible. And the human being whom the Greek writers represent is excellent: composed of very simple, great, and – from a certain perspective at least – always beautiful traits. The study of such a character must have a healthy effect on human education in every condition and age, since this same character is the basis of the human character in its entirety. Such study is particularly healthy in an age in which, through the combination of countless different conditions, more attention is given to things than to human beings, and to masses of people rather than to individuals, and more value is placed on external worth and use than on inner beauty and joy, and where a high and complex culture has come very far from its first simplicity. In conditions such as these it is healthy to look back upon nations in which everything was nearly opposite.

34

A second and especially characteristic trait of the Greeks is the high cultivation of a sense of beauty, a high cultivation of taste, and particularly the universal proliferation of this feeling in the whole nation, for which many examples can be enumerated. Now, in all times and parts of the earth, there is no type of education as indispensable as the one which unites the essence of man as it is in itself into a whole and gives this essence a true polishing and its true nobility. And so there is no type of education more indispensable than this one, now and among us, where there are a great deal of tendencies that have the very effect of removing us from all taste and sense of beauty.

35

And thus the disposition of the character of the Greeks is, because of all of the factors mentioned above, exceptionally advantageous for the study of man and humanity in them as in a single example. This study is, in the case of the Greeks, also *possible* on account of the following two reasons: 1. There is a significant amount of monuments from the Greek world which have been preserved, above all monuments of literature which, for the present purpose, are the most important. 2. The study of a nation – particularly study based on monuments and without living inspection – requires, if it is to succeed, both a resolute national character as well as distinct traits which contrast with those of the thing studied. Now, education in masses is always preceded by the education of individuals, and for this reason and others all beginning nations have decided and distinct national characters. But in the case of the Greeks other and particular causes combined to support this.

36

If one admits that one needs a nation for the purpose of study illuminated here, then we can more easily answer the question: *is there another nation which could take the place of the Greeks?* It would have to prevail in all of the points mentioned, taken together, as we should point out, or, failing this, it would have to have other factors in its favor, ones at least as weighty as those it might otherwise lack. But the strongest factors of all rested directly or indirectly on the circumstance that the Greeks, at least for us, are a nascent, early nation (see paragraphs 33 and 35, CGK). This requirement will be necessary and indispensable. Whether there might be such a nation in a part of the earth that has not yet been discovered, a nation which, besides being unknown, also has other qualities than the Greeks, or ones similar, or perhaps even higher ones? Or might better knowledge of the Chinese or the Indians (i.e. Native Americans, CGK) reveal that these are such nations? It is impossible to decide this in advance. That however neither the Roman nation nor any other, younger one could replace the Greeks, this is accounted for by the sole circumstance that they all draw on the Greeks through direct or indirect contact. And from the other nations which are as old as the Greeks we have too few monuments. In my view, the Greeks will always remain the only ones for our study; but this is not a quality which they have in themselves, it is rather an accident of the relative situation between them and us.

37

If the study of the Greeks is undertaken in the way I have described it here, then of course it requires some general and also specific guidelines. The most general and important ones may be something like the following: 1. The use of such a study can never be accomplished through a single portrayal of the Greeks, and be that person the greatest scholar and mind. For, firstly, if such a study is to be fully accurate, it will not be individual enough, and if it is

completely individual it will lack in accuracy and fidelity. Secondly, the greatest use and service of such a study does not lie in the contemplation of such a character as that of the Greeks, but in looking for it oneself. For in this way the seeker is tuned to the thing he seeks; Greek spirit descends upon him and creates beautiful shapes through the way that it mixes with his own. There remains therefore only individual study, pursued in unceasing reflection on this purpose.