

Bildung and the Limits of the State in the Life and Works of Wilhelm von Humboldt: A Historical and Critical Assessment

MASTER THESIS

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1. Introduction and some methodological remarks

There exists a vast body of literature about nearly every aspect of the work of the Prussian philosopher and statesman Friedrich Wilhelm Christian Karl Ferdinand von Humboldt. The name of Von Humboldt has mainly been associated with the notion of Bildung, the foundation of the university in Berlin that now bears his name and the fundamental restructuring of the Prussian educational landscape in the beginning of the 19th century. This thesis aims to analyze Von Humboldt's notion of Bildung, how the author used this central concept in the development of his theory about the state and how this theoretical outlook is related to Von Humboldt's concrete proposals for the reform of the educational sphere. The research question of this thesis can be formulated as follows:

How did Wilhelm von Humboldt use the notion of Bildung to limit the workings of the State and how can this theoretical program be related to his attempts to rethink and reform the workings of Prussia's educational institutions?

I will attempt to answer this question by first engaging in an interpretive enquiry into the notion of Bildung, in order to gain an understanding of Von Humboldt's broader philosophical and anthropological aims and premises, as expressed in his earlier work. After this I will interpret Von Humboldt's political theory through the lens of Bildung and argue that Von Humboldt mainly uses Bildung to justify his conception of freedom, his stances on the proper use of state powers and his attempts to articulate the juridical confines in which the state should operate. Moving on, I will analyze the relations between this general outlook on the powers of the state and the specific ways in which he tried to use this framework to justify his proposals for educational reforms. In the last section I will critically examine Von Humboldt's attempts to limit state action through the deployment of Bildung and argue that this notion contains key elements that can be used not only to justify the position that state involvement should be kept to an absolute minimum, but this notion could be deployed as well in an argument for a more active state that should act in line with the core responsibility to ameliorate the conditions that enable individuals to lead fulfilling and flourishing lives.

This research question is of relevance, because although there are some fairly sophisticated philosophical and more systematic attempts to elucidate the notion of Bildung and some interpretive and historical attempts to give an outline of Humboldt's conception of the state and his work as a Prussian state official, there are very few critical assessments of the tenability of the

central conclusions Von Humboldt draws from the commitment to Bildung.¹ Since the concept of Bildung is still being deployed in many contemporary discussions about the relations between the individual, society, politics and education, this approach can add a historical and critical dimension to these present-day discourses. Recent events have shown that Bildung, as a concept, never really disappeared from the public scene. When Martin Schulz, the leader of the German social-

¹ Rather sophisticated theoretical exposés of the notion of Bildung can be found in the following works: Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790-1800* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 111-137; Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003), 88-105; Eduard Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Humanitätsidee* (Berlin: Verlag Von Reuther & Reichard, 1909), 1-38. Both authors have a slight tendency to place more weight on the concept of Bildung as an ideal that refers directly back to the Platonic tradition. While there certainly can be found many elements in Von Humboldt's concept of Bildung that can be dubbed 'Platonic', like the veneration of the "power of contemplation or intellectual intuition" (Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative*, 102-103.) – e.g.: the ability to synthesize disparate experiences through the deployment of the highest human faculty –, the similarities and intellectual affinities should not be overstated. I will not elaborate further upon the affinities between Plato and Von Humboldt here, but for now it suffices to say that Von Humboldt called for a certain degree of *distance between* and *diversity of individuals*, something that would undermine an overtly monistic-idealistic interpretation of Von Humboldt. One example of a developed critique of Bildung can be found in the last chapter of: Wilhelm Richter, *Der Wandel des Bildungsgedankens: Die Brüder Von Humboldt, das Zeitalter der Bildung und die Gegenwart* (Berlin: Colloquium, 1971). This critique is directed towards the historical appropriations and modifications of the concept of Bildung; in other words: Richter diverted his attention towards the outward development of Bildung as a social phenomenon. He thus was able to ask questions about the tenability of the generalist worldview that seems to undergird the notion of Bildung in light of the increasingly massive dissemination of opportunities to gain new knowledge, social differentiation and scientific specialization. (Ibid., 73-76.) The approach developed in this thesis differs from Richter's approach in the sense that I will develop a more 'internalistic' approach to Bildung as a normative and political ideal, that is: I will limit myself to the analysis and evaluation of the concept, on the basis of endemic criteria and principles; presuppositions that are either present in the life or in the works of Von Humboldt. There are several other articles whose authors purport to offer criticism of the notion of Bildung from a more theoretical perspective, such as: John F. Michael, "Man's Potential: Views of J. F. Lincoln and Wilhelm von Humboldt," *Theoretical & Philosophical Psychology* 8, no. 2 (1988): 23-26. This short article, however, departs from the misleading notion that Von Humboldt introduced the notion of Bildung as a way to conceptualize *economic productivity* and *instrumental success*. Von Humboldt was primarily concerned with freedom in a much broader sense and criticized overtly narrow attempts to define the human in purely economic and instrumental terms.

democratic party (SPD), announced his plans to create a “Nationale Bildungsallianz” and when he proclaimed that he wanted to make Germany “Bildungs- und Qualifizierungsland Nummer eins in Europa”, he evoked, knowingly or unknowingly, a rich tradition of writing and thinking about the relation between politics and Bildung.² An analysis of Von Humboldt’s conception of Bildung, could very well serve as a critical mirror that can aid contemporary interlocutors to figure out the strengths and the weaknesses of their own conception of Bildung.

In this thesis I will reconstruct Von Humboldt arguments concerning Bildung and the state and give critical commentary along the way. Furthermore, debates surrounding Von Humboldt’s views on education have mainly been guided by interpretations of the short essay that bears the title *Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin*.³ In this thesis I want to show that the main concerns of Von Humboldt, as expressed in this *Denkschrift*, were not mere whims, but rather stand in thematic relations to his earlier work on the limits of the state. If this seminal essay is read through the lens of his more extensive work on government – the seminal essay consists of about ten pages, yet it is “perhaps the most discussed document in the modern history of universities”⁴ –, then the legacy of Von Humboldt can be reassessed in a more integrative way and on its own terms. The aims of this thesis are therefore not only historical, but critical and evaluative as well.

Reading a historical author can pose some problems, because it is not always clear whether the analytical frameworks that are used are indeed suitable to the idioms of the sources at hand. In this thesis I will favor a contextual and historically informed reading strategy. This strategy is modeled on the notion of Bildung itself. The concept of the harmonious development of all human faculties can be, as I will explain later, used to emphasize the need for a relational approach to the formation of subjectivity; to prevent one facet from overtaking, one has to balance the scales. This inherently

² Jakob Schulz, “Schulz: Deutschland muss Bildungsland Nummer eins werden,” August 28, 2017, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/spd-kanzlerkandidat-schulz-deutschland-muss-bildungsland-nummer-eins-werden-1.3644106> (accessed on August 29, 2017).

³ See for instance the following passages: José Carlos Souza Araújo, “O projeto de Humboldt (1767-1835) como fundamento da pedagogia universitária,” *Aprender - Caderno de Filosofia e Psicologia da Educação* 7, no. 12 (2009): 65-81; Thorsten Nybom, “The Humboldt Legacy: Reflections on the Past, Present, and Future of the European University,” *Higher Education Policy* 16 (2003): 141-159.

⁴ Björn Wittrock cited in: Sylvia Palatschek, “Die Erfindung der Humboldtschen Universität: Die Konstruktion der deutschen Universitätsidee in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts,” *Historische Anthropologie* 10, no. 2 (2002): 187.

relational aspect of the imperative to harmonize subjectivity can be translated into a recursive methodological approach to Von Humboldt's works, in which the texts are not immune to the course of history, but stand in rhetorical and critical relationships to the historical context. A merit of this interpretative technique in the context of this thesis is that Von Humboldt's works can be relatively easily translated into general thematic concerns and intellectual dispositions, instead of taking his words at face value. It has to be noted that although this approach is *relational*, it is not *radically relativistic*. One of the key assumptions behind this approach is that although meanings can shift and even do so in unexpected ways, the possibilities of semantic extensions are far from infinite. I make this key assumption, because this is a safeguard against arbitrary and ad hoc interpretations. Thus, when Von Humboldt labels the care for the physical well-being of citizens by the state "the worst kind of despotism [my translation]", we can read this remark as a rhetorical critique of a one-sided political articulation of human nature.⁵ Within this 'vulgar' utilitarian

⁵ In the essay that bears the title *Ideen über Staatsverfassung, durch die neue Französische Constitution veranlasst* Von Humboldt even states that the principle that states ought to concern themselves with the care for the physical well-being of its citizens leads to the "ärgste und drückendste Despotismus" (worst and most pressing despotism), because people would *deem* themselves to be free, without actually being it. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, first volume (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1960), 39-40. This is rather remarkable, because only two years before the publication of this essay Von Humboldt wrote in a diary entry for the 11th of August, under the influence of Campe, that the *most important* activity of the state is the care for the "physischen Bedürfnisse der Untertanen". He hinted at a utilitarian justification for this focus on physical well-being; in countries with "ein allgemeiner Wohlstand", there would be less crime. (Wilhelm von Humboldt, cited in: Dietrich Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, Schriften zur Rechtsgeschichte, Heft 114 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2004), 38.) In August 1791, Von Humboldt wrote, in a letter to Gentz, that the state should *only* be concerned with the "Sicherheit" of its citizens. What could explain such a sudden shift in focus and perspective? Spitta seems to suggest that a conversation about the kinds of actions for which individuals deserve some form of punishment with a professor called Ith and Von Humboldt's encounter with his ex-teacher Dohm earlier that year contributed to this change of mind. Ibid., 35-39. Whatever the reason behind this change might have been, it has to be remarked here that both before and after the change in perspective, Von Humboldt justified his conception of the role of the state through the deployment of the concept of freedom. In his encounter with Dohm, he suggested that the limitation of state activity to the safeguarding of Sicherheit would be unnecessary, because the state would have other means to protect "uneingeschränkte Freiheit". Wilhelm von Humboldt, cited in: *ibid.*, 35. This passage shows that Humboldt might have changed his mind about the *means* that are necessary to achieve a certain goal, freedom in the truest sense of the word, and not about this underlying goal itself. If this is true and if it makes sense to say that Von Humboldt's notion of Bildung was designed

framework, supported by the French *philosophes* and the enlightened despot Frederic II, the main responsibility is to provide for the physical well-being of its citizens. The citizens who live under a regime that adopts such a crude strand of utilitarianism, are addressed as material beings, whose well-being solely relies on the possession of material means. Von Humboldt thought that human beings partly transcend and *ought* to supersede the material side of existence, through a spiritual integration of diverse inclinations and experiences. According to Von Humboldt, the “one-sided” utilitarian focus on the advancement of the physical well-being of individuals created an imbalance in the process of self-development. His insistence on spiritual development can be read against this background and as a corrective to the utilitarian approaches of some of his contemporaries.

2. How is the notion of *Bildung* characterized in the works of Von Humboldt?

A recurring difficulty in the history of ideas is that it is not always clear which specific positions are held by the author(s) and thinker(s) under discussion. In the case of Von Humboldt, a very prolific author and a renowned politician, it seems particularly important to ask oneself which aspect of his legacy one should highlight, depending on the question one wants to see answered and the themes one wants to discuss. In this thesis I mainly want to focus on his writings about politics and about *Bildung*. I chose to primarily draw on the short text *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen* and a work that has been published early in the life of Von Humboldt: the relatively short treatise *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu Bestimmen*.⁶ I will discuss examples from the *Ideen* and make an occasional detour through other texts. Especially the short text *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen* seems like a promising place to find auxiliary passages that can be utilized to augment our understanding of Von Humboldt’s main concerns, as expressed in the *Ideen*. In both these texts we can find very concise practical and theoretical formulations of Von Humboldt’s conception of *Bildung*. These two texts have been produced in the same period and the meaning of the concept of *Bildung* remained roughly the same.⁷ When these texts are read together, a fairly extensive and multi-faceted picture of *Bildung* emerges.

to conceptualize freedom in the most fundamental way, it can be argued that his earlier works already contained the seeds of his later work on *Bildung*.

⁶ When referring to the *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*, I will use the abbreviation ‘*Ideen*’.

⁷ The publication date of the ‘Bruchstück’ *Theorie der Bildung des Menschen* is not entirely certain, but good estimations can be found in these two texts: Clemens Menze, *Die Bildungsreform Wilhelm von Humboldts* (Hannover: Schroedel, 1975), 22; Dietrich Benner, *Wilhelm von Humboldts Bildungstheorie: Eine*

This thesis will mainly look at the political implications of Von Humboldt's conception of Bildung, yet it has to be realized that Von Humboldt attributed much broader anthropological and metaphysical significations to the notion of Bildung. The second chapter of the *Ideen* starts with a very clear and concise definition of Bildung that captures this wide scope. It is worth it to look at it in some detail: "Der wahre Zweck des Menschen, nicht der, welchen die wechselnde Neigung, sondern welchen die ewig unveränderliche Vernunft ihm vorschreibt – ist die höchste und proportionirlichste Bildung seiner Kräfte zu einem Ganzen. Zu dieser Bildung ist Freiheit die erste, und unerlässliche Bedingung. Allein ausser der Freiheit, erfordert die Entwicklung der menschlichen Kräfte noch etwas anderes, obgleich mit der Freiheit eng verbundenes, Mannigfaltigkeit der Situationen. Auch der freieste und unabhängigste Mensch in einförmige Lagen versetzt, bildet sich minder aus."⁸ The passage starts with describing Bildung as the true goal of humans, which is dictated by "eternally unchanging reason [my translation]", that stands opposed to changing inclinations. So what *is* Bildung, according to Von Humboldt? It is the free and harmonious development of human powers in the context of a multiplicity of situations. A multiplicity of situations is a prerequisite for Bildung, since, and this is a hidden premise behind Von Humboldt's definition, situations which are very much alike do not incite a very proportional cultivation of human powers and, by nature, favor some traits above others. It is important to note that Von Humboldt did not intend to create a simple recipe for self-development that holds for everyone and everywhere in the same way. The development of powers is always the development of *specific* powers that actually belong to specific human beings, e.g. individuals.⁹ Eduard Spranger underscores this when he notes that for Von Humboldt Bildung manifested itself in his marital relationship with Carolina von Dacheröden.¹⁰ Von Humboldt spent ample attention to the concept

problemgeschichtliche Studie zum Begründungszusammenhang neuzeitlicher Bildungsreform (München: Weinheim, 1990), 79. Menze asserts that the piece was published in the period between the years 1793-1795 and Benner dates the publication back to 1794-1795. The works were produced just before their publication. Von Humboldt finished his *Ideen* in 1792, see: Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 42. I am not aware of any textual evidence of fundamental changes in Von Humboldt's theoretical outlook on Bildung in the period between the estimated dates of publication, so I will assume that there is a lot of continuity between these pieces and that the meaning of Bildung remained roughly the same.

⁸ Von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, first volume, 64.

⁹ Von Humboldt deployed the notion of Bildung both when he was writing about individuals and when he was writing about "Kultur".

¹⁰ Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Humanitätsidee*, 44-48. It becomes clear from the passages that Spranger quotes that Von Humboldt thought that Bildung is attained through nurturing personal relations

of marriage as an institution and as a means for moral development, seeing it as a potential vehicle of Bildung.¹¹ Von Humboldt further joined a so-called 'Tugendbund', a rather intimate society for mutual support and encouragement, in which the members stimulated each other to reach their true potential.¹² A quite clear and definite picture arises from these biographical facts: for Von Humboldt, Bildung was a highly personal affair and not a merely theoretical desideratum. Bildung can thus be defined as the free integration of the human powers, forming the specific character of the individual in the context of a multiplicity of situations and thereby confirming one's membership in larger communal bonds. This might seem paradoxical, since this would require individuals to cultivate and foster what makes them into the finite beings that they are and, at the same time, to affirm their commonly shared humanity. However, for Von Humboldt both poles, individuality and commonly shared humanity, were not mutually exclusive, but rather necessary developmental correlates of each other. On the one hand, Von Humboldt was wary of something we could call 'false and external universality'; the negation of individual existence through the affirmation of an abstract form that is not inherent to the spontaneously organizing human constitution.¹³ More generally, the general and abstract form as such is to be taken as a mere enabling and facilitating correlate to the necessarily open-ended process of development of the individual and not as the ultimate goal of human existence. On the other hand, individuals should look for ways to incorporate their individuality within larger communal bonds and affirm their humanity.

These dualisms express a conceptual problem: how can the individual retain its uniqueness in a world that is much larger than itself, consisting of a diverse array of possible circumstances one

with others. The realm of intimacy is a discriminatory one, however, since the idea of an intimate relation would become rather vacuous if intimacy becomes a function of adaptability to random external circumstances. Or in the words of Von Humboldt: there exists a difference between the act of keeping 'uninteresting' personalities company and reciprocally stimulating and enhancing each other's "innere Freiheit". See: *ibid.*, 48.

¹¹ For Von Humboldt's view on marriage, see: Von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, first volume, 78; Spranger, *Wilhelm von Humboldt und die Humanitätsidee*, 84.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³ Von Humboldt even goes so far that he relates the outward imposition of an abstract form over the human realm to the vindication of *nothing* over *something*, implicating that his concern is one that bears metaphysical overtones; the negation of the concrete is the negation of the principle of ontological individuation as such: "Denn das Nichts unterdrückt da das Etwas." Von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, first volume, 72.

can be confronted with and of widely differing experiences? The articulation of the tension between *Mannichfaltigkeit* and *Eigenthümlichkeit* seems to do justice to the intuition that it is quite a complex task to maintain a coherent concept of the self in the context of the ever-changing, fast-paced and fleeting world of (social and cultural) experience and inclinations. The tension becomes more comprehensible if one realizes that *Eigenthümlichkeit* is not a static and unchangeable given and that it is distinct from being isolated (“Isolirtsein”) and living separated from other individuals.¹⁴ Von Humboldt focus on the individual does not mean that we have to regard him as a proponent of a radical *individualism*.¹⁵ The full and substantive engagement with practical life is a prerequisite of *Bildung* and it presupposes that not only one’s own faculties need to be cultivated and developed, but that people also have to act with the cultivation of other people’s faculties in mind. *Bildung* can be described as a process that is intersubjective to its very foundations, in which the individual strives for excellence *through* a kind-hearted and moral encounter with the other. In this encounter with the other, the goal is neither to become more like the other, nor to lose oneself in the negation of oneself, but instead to open oneself up to the other, to facilitate comparison of character traits and, whenever it is needed, to modify oneself according to newly-gained insights into the human condition. In this reciprocal process of self-disclosure and reciprocal modification, the concept of humanity is given flesh and bone and individuals somewhat transgress their transient existence.¹⁶ The basic formula that can be drawn from this fundamentally intersubjective and contextual understanding of the development of the self is that *Bildung* *requires* a certain amount of alienation and distance from oneself *and* that *Bildung* is related to the process of becoming an integrated person on a higher and more enduring plane of existence.¹⁷ This process unfolds itself *gradually* and manifests itself in degrees, rather than in a binary fashion.¹⁸

¹⁴ Ibid., 82.

¹⁵ I will probe deeper into this distinction at the beginning of the critical discussion in the fifth section of this thesis.

¹⁶ Ibid., 236. It becomes clear that Von Humboldt sets apart humans from the rest of nature, yet wants to re-establish the connections between humans and humans and nature. Von Humboldt described cultivated individuals, for instance, as *less* “vergänglich” (transient) than plants, but at the same time warned *against* a too starkly accentuated opposition against nature and argued *for* unity with one’s surroundings (“Die Verknüpfung unsres Ichs mit der Welt”) (idem).

¹⁷ Ibid., 236-238.

¹⁸ Von Humboldt acknowledges that *Bildung* is not something that is simply present or not and that it is possible to speak of different gradations of *Bildung* – in his *Ideen* he writes about “immer höhere Bildung”

Von Humboldt showed that he was heavily indebted to his teachers that stood under the influence of the Enlightenment when he stated that humans, aided by reason, have the ability to critically examine and question the world. One has to make use of reason, for instance by comparing phenomena and critiquing oneself, if one is to attain freedom. Von Humboldt already clarifies the relation between freedom and reason in his early essay *Über Religion*.¹⁹ He contrasts the machine-like state of existence (“bloss maschinenmässiges Wirken”) with the free and bold individual who embodies “der Untersuchung, der Thätigkeit, der Stärke seiner Seele” and who is more than the circumstances that surround him or her. He associates the former type of activity with weakness and the oppression of all independent activity of reason and he typifies the free individual as somebody who takes decisions that are grounded in reason. The individual who is guided by reason discovers new truths and falsities about the world and takes delight in the newly gained insights. Von Humboldt thus links the exercise of one’s reason with the attainment of autonomy and with the intrinsic, non-machinelike worth of the individual. However, humans are not mere rational beings; they are subject to a wide variety of emotional experiences as well.²⁰ Von Humboldt’s stance on these inclinations is double-sided. On the one hand he stated in the *Ideen*, in line with Kant’s categorical imperative, that if one gives free rein to one’s senses and inclinations, one might fail to live up to the standard of intellectual and moral perfection.²¹ Since natural urges can be strong and

(ibid., 57), “einen gleich hohen Grad der Bildung” (ibid., 58) and “einer fortschreitenden Bildung” (ibid., 59), but falls short of giving a classification of different stages of Bildung.

¹⁹ Ibid., 30. One could argue that where the earlier Von Humboldt stood under the influence of the Aufklärer, the later Von Humboldt departed from that tradition, thus shifting the philosophical attention on the reason of the individual towards the emotional spheres of human existence. While it is true that Von Humboldt later on critiqued the utilitarian and rationalistic framework of the Aufklärer, he merely did this to develop a fuller and less one-sided conception of character-formation.

²⁰ Von Humboldt recognized that humans are not passionless and lifeless machines, but at the same time he put forward an ideal of “impassioned self-control”. Numerous passages can be found in which he propagated this “moderate” ideal of emotional ennoblement. He stated, for example, that the only truly beautiful religious feeling is equally far removed from “Kälte” as from “Schwärmerei”. Ibid., 116. In the final chapter he writes that both the cold and generalizing application of theory to practice and the hot-headed disregard for practice, born out of the reverence for the pure and unapplied idea, can have very harmful consequences. Ibid., 212-213.

²¹ Von Humboldt wrote on several occasions that he thought that humans should strive for “geistige Kultur”, in opposition to striving to satisfy *merely* sensual needs. Ibid., 112-113. However, this should not be read as a deprecation of “Sinnlichkeit” per se. On the contrary, Von Humboldt wrote that “Sinnlichkeit” is a necessary condition for aesthetic experience and that the development of a harmonious character

difficult to resist, Von Humboldt's optimism – as expressed in his thesis that, in principle, everyone has the capacity to ascend the cultural ladder – could seem a bit perplexing.²² Furthermore, Von Humboldt wrote that he believed that human beings, on the whole, are more inclined to do good than to act egoistically.²³ It is possible to argue that this optimism about the ability to climb the cultural ladder that is possessed by even the “smallest individual” is completely incompatible with the non-trivial imperative to act autonomously, but this conclusion would be too hasty. The individual has to supersede natural inclinations and act reasonably, but the task is not one of ascetically *negating* all the passions, but one of *integrating* them into a larger whole. The formation of a well-rounded character rests upon the possibility of the power of the individual to synthesize the diverse strands of his existence into a harmonious whole; in other words: there is no absolute opposition between freedom and Mannichfaltigkeit. Whereas the ascetic negation of every impulse and desire would require giving up one's concrete existence, Bildung only requires an ability to integrate experiences. It is clear that this ability requires a certain level of autonomy as well, but it seems to be true that this task is less strenuous than the task of ascetically denying *every* natural inclination. Bildung is not a trivial pursuit and requires a great deal of autonomy, but it is not a

requires “Geschmak”, a notion that can be interpreted as “ennobled sensuality”. Ibid., 136-137. There seems to be a tension between Von Humboldt's appraisal and critique of Sinnlichkeit, but this tension is merely an apparent one, because this position is perfectly compatible with the idea that one should strive for the harmonious development of all faculties, instead of narrowly focusing and excessively cultivating just one side of one's existence.

²² “Keiner steht auf einer so niedrigen Stufe der Kultur, dass er zu Erreichung einer höheren unfähig wäre; [...] so verbreitet sich doch die Erweiterung, welche alle wissenschaftliche Erkenntniss durch Freiheit und Aufklärung erhält, auch bis auf sie herunter, so dehnen sich doch die wohlthätigen Folgen der freien, uneingeschränkten Untersuchung auf den Geist und den Charakter der ganzen Nation bis in ihre geringsten Individua hin aus.“ Ibid., 128. It has to be noted that Von Humboldt was far from arguing that every individual has equally developed capabilities, or that there do not exist stark differences between individuals. On the contrary; Von Humboldt reinforces a certain cultural hierarchy, in which “higher forms” or “steps” of culture can be clearly distinguished from the lower ones. The thesis that every individual has a basic set of capabilities that allows him or her to ascend the cultural ladder is not disputed, however. Von Humboldt took this belief in the possibility human progress over from Enlightenment thinkers, such as Ernst Ferdinand Klein and Christian Wilhelm Dohm. See: Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 14-17.

²³ Von Humboldt argues for this thesis by stating that even ‘savages’ (“Wilden”) cannot resist the ‘domestic virtues’. Von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, first volume, 143. This argument is not very convincing, since the category “Wilden” is left unspecified and Von Humboldt vaguely refers to the “Geschichte der Wilden”, without further elucidating this concept.

prima facie truth that it would be, from the outset, impossible to weave diverse experiences into a coherent whole, because that would require a completely ascetic stance.

3. Bildung and the limits of the state: Von Humboldt's theoretical points of departure

Considering the quite substantial coloration of the notion of Bildung in Von Humboldt's works, it might seem bewildering that he did not explicitly call for an all-encompassing state that could care for its citizens in every regard, independent of the circumstances. Instead, Von Humboldt utilized his definition of Bildung to justify his modest conception of the state. What are Von Humboldt's main arguments for using the concept of Bildung to *limit* the influence of the state, instead of *enhancing* it? The clearest systematic exposition of Von Humboldt's ideas about the limitation of state action can be found in the *Ideen*.²⁴ In the following section I will seek to connect Von Humboldt's notion of Bildung to the attempts to determine the limits and the precise role of the state in the *Ideen*.

Von Humboldt developed, partly as a response to the utilitarian approach to governance, an account of the state in which the individual was a point of reference that sometimes had to be protected against the unwanted intrusion of other individuals, larger communal wholes and the state. As he wrote in the very beginning of the *Ideen*: "Nun aber erfordert die Möglichkeit eines höheren Grades der Freiheit immer einen gleich hohen Grad der Bildung und das geringere Bedürfniss, gleichsam in einförmigen, verbundenen Massen zu handeln, eine grössere Stärke und einen mannigfaltigeren Reichthum der handelnden Individuen."²⁵ If this passage at the beginning of the work is to be taken as a passage that adequately represents Von Humboldt's views about the relation between the individual and larger societal wholes, one can conclude that *although* it is true that humans are social beings and that in order to attain freedom one needs to have a desire to cooperate with fellow humans in connected masses, the demands of society are, per definition, not

²⁴ The central importance of this 'mission' becomes clear in the very first sentence of the *Ideen*: "Wenn man die merkwürdigsten Staatsverfassungen mit einander, und mit ihnen die Meinungen der bewährtesten Philosophen und Politiker vergleicht; so wundert man sich vielleicht nicht mit Unrecht, eine Frage so wenig vollständig behandelt, und so wenig genau beantwortet zu finden, welche doch zuerst die Aufmerksamkeit an sich zu ziehen scheint, die Frage nämlich: zu welchem Zweck die ganze Staatseinrichtung hinarbeiten und welche Schranken sie ihrer Wirksamkeit setzen soll?" Ibid., 56. The question of the limits of the state and its true aim was so central to the intellectual endeavors of Von Humboldt that he even proposed that it might be *the* most important question of all politics. Ibid., 58.

²⁵ Ibid., 58.

more fundamental than the plights of the individual. At the other hand, Von Humboldt recognizes the fact that individuals cooperate in “connected masses”, stressing the sociability of human existence. Another thing that can be learned from this passage is that sociability stands not opposed to *Mannichfaltigkeit*, e.g.: diversity. Von Humboldt was simply not an individualistic or egoistic libertarian. Von Humboldt only asserted that the state is not the sole platform people should use to manage their collective affairs and their common concerns. He fully supported the idea of mutual cooperation in so-called “Nationalanstalten”, that would secure “Einheit der Anordnung” and that would eventually lead to a plan-based and well-ordered structuring of the economic sphere.²⁶ These organizations would be wholly independent from any state structure. The “Nationalanstalten” would not depend on brute force or a monopoly on violence, but on the free choice of the individuals that would partake in them.²⁷ The membership of these larger communities would be wholly optional and these structures are not coercive, in contrast to the workings of the state. Only the individuals that decide that they want to partake in these larger communities are subject to its norms. In short, Von Humboldt acknowledged both the need to shield the individual *against* society and to provide at least a rudimentary sketch of the institutions that would take over some of the core functions of government, such as facilitating the encounters between different individuals in the name of a common good.

This protection of the individual against society can be found along the acknowledgement of the necessity of the intersubjective realm for Bildung. In other words, we can find a qualified appraisal of both positive and negative freedom in Von Humboldt’s work.²⁸ Roughly speaking, negative freedom can be understood as the kind of freedom that allows individuals to pursue their freely

²⁶ Ibid., 92.

²⁷ Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 83-84. Von Humboldt stated that there exists an important distinction between institutions of the state and institutions of the nation: institutions of the nation are more dynamic and imply a greater amount of freedom to alter and revise the relations and contracts between its members. Von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, first volume, 92.

²⁸ Isaiah Berlin, whose name has been inextricably linked with this distinction, strongly favored negative liberty and repeatedly warned against the excessive intrusion on the freedom of individuals that comes, according to him, with positive liberty: Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Liberty: Incorporating Four Essays on Liberty*, edited by H. Hardy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 169-181. Von Humboldt’s focus in the *Ideen* lies on stipulating the limits of the state, thus creating the *impression* that he was solely concerned with negative liberty, yet, as we have seen, he attempted to create a theoretical framework that allowed for the reconciliation of individuals and their surroundings, thus making room for freedom *within* collectives.

chosen set of goals without being hindered by external constraints. Positive freedom, on the other hand, can be understood as a (possible) state of affairs that allows a person or a collectivity to try to realize life goals and to act in a purposeful way. Although the kind of positive freedom that Von Humboldt espouses is a modest one, since Von Humboldt strictly separates the realm in which positive freedom is to be achieved from the machinery of the state, it is clear that he did not define *Bildung* as a purely negative exercise in abolishing structures that are deemed to be not conducive to the full development of the individual and that he attached a positive meaning to this concept. The limitations on state activity that Von Humboldt proposed should be interpreted as a means to make room for free cooperation.

The state has a duty to protect its individual members by securing the rights that shield them from any illegitimate activities of their fellow citizens.²⁹ It has to be noted that it is not the case that every form of activity that impedes people to freely develop their powers is deemed to be unlawful by Von Humboldt; only the actions that limit the individual *unrightfully* are to be prohibited.³⁰ From this principle it can be deduced that the state is only allowed to prohibit an action if the law expressly forbids it. This is a formulation of the *nulla poena sine lege praevia*-principle that prescribes that the state only can act upon a previously established legal provision. Apart from the laws whose purpose it is to safeguard the rights of individuals from infringements, Von Humboldt acknowledges the existence of the “Gemeinschaftliche Recht” (communal law [my translation] as well).³¹ This field of law safeguards the right to have a say about property that belongs to the community, such as public infrastructure and non-proprietary natural objects.³² Von Humboldt’s

²⁹ Von Humboldt defined *Sicherheit* as the “Gewissheit der gesetzmässigen Freiheit”, which can be understood as a state of affairs in which people can fully enjoy the rights that should be guaranteed by the state. Von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, first volume, 147.

³⁰ *Idem*.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 159.

³² The relation between the idea of individual and communal rights and the concept of property in the *Ideen* is a complicated one. Von Humboldt includes these actions that bar others from the “enjoyment of their property [my translation]” in the category of unlawful actions. *Ibid.*, 146. One reason for the strong connection between property and rights in the *Ideen* is that Von Humboldt seems to have thought that property and the idea of freedom are closely connected; freedom is conceptualized as a necessary condition for property and property can unite the energies of the individual in order to achieve ultimate ends. *Ibid.*, 92. However, Von Humboldt also held the view that mere possessions are derivative of and secondary to the “Selbstthätigkeit” of human beings, since he thought that it is enshrined in human nature to engage in activities for the sake of themselves, rather than for the sake of the results of these actions. *Idem*. If the law

insistence upon individual rights is not a repudiation of communal property. Intervention of the state is justified, as long as it would facilitate the development of the individual and helps to safeguard individual rights. Maintaining a country's infrastructure is a prime example of state action that is allowed under this framework. If the state would not be allowed to repair bridges and roads, these properties could very rapidly deteriorate and this would lead to hindrances for individuals.

According to Von Humboldt, the state should be able to intervene if and only if a right is actually violated (e.g.: the illegal encroachment upon the rights of others), or to *prevent* such a violation. The corresponding set of laws that regulate state intervention in the realm of prevention are called "Polizeigesetze".³³ The state cannot use its powers in an arbitrary way to prevent possible infractions of rights, because there exists a class of actions that do not necessarily lead to the violation of rights. Von Humboldt distinguishes actions that lead to results that are *likely* to infringe on the rights of others from those which usually lead to an infraction of the law and from those that endanger the monopoly of violence that belongs to the state.³⁴ He readily acknowledged, however, that preventive laws bring a conundrum with them, if freedom is to be preserved; to what extent should the state prohibit these actions that do not *necessarily* lead to a breach of the law? If the state could prohibit acts if and only if they would *certainly* lead to an encroachment upon the rights of others, the security of all individuals could not be guaranteed. If all the acts that *possibly* will lead to a violation of rights should be prohibited, the scope would be too large and this would possibly cause tensions with the *nulla poena*-principle and would be downright incompatible with the aim to use the state as a means to *enable and enhance* freedom.³⁵ Von Humboldt gave the advice to steer a middle course in practice and that these questions about the precise application of the preventive laws cannot be answered by any general rule. In deliberations about the desirability of preventive action on behalf of the state not only the damages and the probability of a direct infraction should be taken into account, but the limitations on freedom that would be a result of the enforcement of the law as well.³⁶ This provision creates a big interpretive space for the judicial branch of government and introduces the variables of time and location. This points to a recurring theme in

is understood as a means to stimulate the self-cultivation of individuals, it makes sense to protect property, without making the protection of property the *ultimate aim* of the law.

³³ More precisely: the "Polizeigesetze" deal with these occasions in which humans remain within their personal sphere and do nothing that *directly* violates the rights of others. The purpose of these laws are to prevent such infractions from happening. Ibid., 150.

³⁴ Idem.

³⁵ Ibid., 155.

³⁶ Idem.

Von Humboldt's political writings: the general principles that are introduced are meant to be guidelines that steer practical action and they are not clear-cut recipes for success. The application of these principles ought to be informed by knowledge of relevant circumstances; theory and practice are closely intertwined. This raises the question about the degree of flexibility that should be provided for. If one could discard the guidelines and do whatever one would please, the rule of law and the domain of the state would disintegrate.

One example of a case in which it is not only laudable or commendable to enforce police laws but, according to Von Humboldt, *necessary* as well, is the case in which anyone could take advantage of the ignorance of fellow citizens.³⁷ As we have seen, Von Humboldt departs from the notion that individuals are in no way entirely isolated from others and that *Bildung* *requires* codependency. The corruption of fiduciary relationships that takes place when somebody exploits the trust of others undermines the very fabric of not only societal institutions, but of individual self-cultivation as well. Considering this, Von Humboldt proposed that the state should assess the qualifications of the people who intend to exercise professions that, by nature, presuppose trust in the expertise of the practitioner, such as medical and juridical professions.³⁸ However, Von Humboldt, always concerned with finding the proper limits of state action, also thought that people who did not agree to subject themselves to such a test should not be barred from taking up these special professions.³⁹ The persons who would agree to take such a test and who would pass it, should get a 'mark of aptness' ("Zeichen der Geschiklichkeit"), so that it could be publicly ascertained that these people successfully underwent state examination.⁴⁰ The main reason why Von Humboldt envisioned such a minimalistic protection was that he thought that a too paternalistic safeguarding of the well-being of the citizens of a state would lead to the inactiveness of the nation, through an artificial overreliance on the knowledge and volitions of others.⁴¹ Von Humboldt went even further when he wrote that this preventive action on behalf of the state should only be allowed if the nation, consisting of all the free individuals that *have chosen* to be a part of it, *explicitly* expresses its consent. In the cases in which the nation would not consent or would even object to such a form of positive action, the state should refrain itself (and if that would fail: be prevented) from taking action, even

³⁷ Ibid., 152.

³⁸ Idem.

³⁹ Idem.

⁴⁰ Idem.

⁴¹ Ibid., 153.

in the cases that would not raise any *prima facie* objections.⁴² One justification of the large role for the consent of the nation Von Humboldt gave was that rules are more likely to be observed if they would stem from the spontaneous activity within the nation and that the negative consequences on the character of its respective members would be limited to the necessary minimum.⁴³ Moreover, Von Humboldt thought that people would be more inclined to render mutual assistance if their ‘love for the self and the sense for freedom’ (“Eigenliebe und ihr Freiheitssinn”) would remain intact.⁴⁴ Reliance on their respective consent is a sound way to make sure that people act upon freely chosen ends and not upon the dictates of the state, thereby reducing the risk of dehumanization and ‘mechanical’ action.

According to Von Humboldt, interference of the state can lead to passivity and attitudes that would result in mediocrity. Those individuals that rely on the supporting and paternalistic structures of the state and not on their own abilities, fail to live autonomous lives.⁴⁵ It would be misleading, however, to assume that Von Humboldt envisioned society to be a loose and chaotic patchwork of egoistical individuals that mainly act out of their self-interests, in which every individual would need to act as a discrete entity without any help from the outside. On the contrary, one of the most salient arguments against excessive state interference of Von Humboldt is that help from the state leads to a diminishment of the capacity of society to help and support one another.⁴⁶ Von Humboldt thus reverses one common argument *for* the existence of a duty for the state to provide its citizens with material aid; the argument that it would be somehow inhumane or selfish to refrain from the use of the state as a (re)distribution mechanism.⁴⁷ Von Humboldt’s claim that a state’s

⁴² Idem. Somewhere later in the chapter it is proclaimed that if and only if all the inhabitants of the communities that are directly subjected to the preventive laws would express their objection to them in a unanimous and explicit way, there would be a valid reason to suspend the police laws. So both the *creation* and the *withdrawal* of police laws require the consent of the nation.

⁴³ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 158.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 74-75.

⁴⁶ Idem.

⁴⁷ This ‘argument from compassion’ has strong roots in the Christian tradition and has been reiterated by many authors. One of the clearest and most heartfelt expositions of this argument can be found in the essay *On Assistance of the Poor*, written by the medieval humanist Juan Luis Vives: "Tell me, who act more humanly—those who leave the poor to rot in their filth, squalor, vice, crime, shamelessness, immodesty, ignorance, madness, misfortune, and misery?—or those who devise a way by which they may rescue them from that life and lead them into a mode of living, more social, cleaner, and wiser, clearly salvaging so many men who

concern for the physical well-being of its citizens will lead to the weakening or the disappearance of the ability and willingness of citizens to help each other and form organic bonds of mutual support seems to imply that people would be able to achieve a higher level of development if they would support each other of their own accord. Von Humboldt argument only seems to work if it is indeed the case that people who are able to rely on state support will put less effort into attempts to realize one's full potential by themselves. The key assumption that Von Humboldt made is that individuals lose the incentives to supersede themselves and to strive for excellence if the state would come to the rescue too easily. Since he characterized Bildung as the highest goal that a human could ever strive for, he was more than willing to bite the bullet and to adopt a minimalist conception of the state.

4. The practical implications of the general notion of Bildung in relation to Von Humboldt's activities as a statesman and a reformer

Von Humboldt was not only a political theoretician, but was also involved and heavily engaged with the political currents of his own time. There exists a debate about whether he actually followed up unto his core theoretical commitments during his service, or whether he veered away from them on occasion.⁴⁸ It is worthwhile to consider the possibility that the adherence to this dichotomy might be misguided, because Von Humboldt allowed for a pragmatic and practice-oriented way of doing politics in his *Ideen*.⁴⁹ In these passages, Von Humboldt points out that the principles he stipulated in earlier chapters cannot be directly translated into specific political decisions, because history is in constant motion and asks for an adaptive mindset. A large place for *concrete* individual political judgment is intentionally left open in his theoretical framework. Political rulers have to decide, almost on a case by case basis, which societal changes are laudable and to be facilitated or sustained and which ones are not.

were formerly lost and useless?" Juan Luis Vives, *On Assistance to the Poor*, translated with an introduction and commentary by A. Tobriner (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 51.

⁴⁸ Spitta is a proponent of the view that Von Humboldt remained very consistent and true to his principles. See: Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 9-13. Others have argued that especially his reform of the educational system in Germany at the time stood opposed to his calls for a very minimal state, see for example: Joachim Siegfried August Kaehler, *Wilhelm v. Humboldt und der Staat: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte deutscher Lebensgestaltung um 1800* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1963), 228.

⁴⁹ Von Humboldt tackled the question about the relationship between theory and practice most poignantly in the very last chapter of his early tractate on the limitations of state powers.

This does not mean that Von Humboldt advocated a radically relativistic approach to politics. Von Humboldt opposed the censorship laws of his time on principle and argued on multiple occasions for religious tolerance and supported his views with essentially moral and principled arguments.⁵⁰ His policy proposals and his views on the political events of the day were very much indebted to his philosophical thought. Although the principles of balance and perfectibility played very important roles in his works and private life, he did not shy away from critiquing the powers-that-be, if he thought it was necessary. His dedication to the advancement of freedom led him to a condemnation of the so-called ‘Zensuredikten’ and the ‘Karlsbader Beschlüsse’ – a set of decrees that severely limited the freedom of speech of citizens – and espoused a more liberal conception of the relation of religion and the state that put him at odds with the ultraconservative forces within the administrations lead by, respectively, Heinrich Friedrich Karl vom und zum Stein and Karl August von Hardenberg.⁵¹ There are many other occasions in which Von Humboldt stood up for his principles. He gave impassioned pleas for the freedom of thought and the freedom of expression. Even more relevant for the main issue at hand is that Von Humboldt seemed to be willing to restructure institutions according to his insights into what he perceived to be the necessary conditions for *Bildung*. For example, his thesis that human beings are not isolated individuals and come into fruition within layers of sociability comes to the fore in his proposals for the reform of the Prussian education system and for the restructuring of the governing structure of Prussia as a whole. In his *Denkschrift Über die innere und äussere Organisation der höheren wissenschaftlichen Anstalten in Berlin* he famously argued for the creation of a research community in which both students and professors reap the benefits of the free exchange of ideas and insights and in which research and education are closely intertwined.⁵² Students were not only to be passive spectators that would passively acquiesce ‘true knowledge’ from their superiors, they should actively participate in academic endeavors, within the context of the larger scientific community.⁵³ Von Humboldt tried to incorporate the principles of amicability and collegiality into the Prussian government by the founding a special administrative council (*Staatsrat*) that would need to have

⁵⁰ He cited freedom and the principle of toleration in the field of religion as reasons to oppose the reactionary edict of Wöllner. See: Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 30-31.

⁵¹ Ibid., 60 and ibid., 137.

⁵² Gerd Hohendorf, "Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835)," *Prospects* 23, no. 3 (1993): 665-673.

⁵³ Ibid., 675.

some very strictly defined juridical standing within the general administration.⁵⁴ Given Von Humboldt's involvement in the educational reforms of the time, it would not be an exaggeration to assert that Von Humboldt, despite his insistence on his idea of the 'limited state', intended to create the conditions under which the nation could blossom *with the help of the state*.

Von Humboldt's views on the possibility of reforms through political means was very much shaped by the historical context of his day. Although Von Humboldt was a critical observer of the events that took place during the French revolution, he subscribed to a lot of the ideals and values that were put forward by its principal intellectual standard-bearers. His support for the idea that every citizen ought to be free, his criticism of absolute monarchy and his adherence to the idea that it is possible to reform society through appropriate political action, remained consistently strong in his works and during his service as a Prussian state official. Both Von Humboldt concrete proposals for reform and his more theoretical and systematic work can be, in a very general way, be understood as an attempt to come to a reckoning between the positive legacy of the Enlightenment and its excesses and develop the result into both theory and practice.⁵⁵ Concretely, Von Humboldt tried to reform Prussian society, not through a subversive restructuring of the state, but through a *Reform von oben*, in which the society of estates (the *Ständegesellschaft*) would not be completely overturned. Von Humboldt lived in a time in which big and fast-paced societal changes took place. The transition from a feudal society to a bourgeois society led to a new meritocratic class, consisting of *Bildungsbürger* who were able to climb the social ladder through education and their unleashing of the entrepreneurial spirit.⁵⁶ Governmental functions were no longer only available for a select class of individuals who were born into certain privileged segments of society. Von Humboldt's focus on individual freedoms and rights can be understood in the light of this fast-paced transition. On the one hand, he was an *organicist* who thought that the development of society needed to take place by an incremental change of pre-existing structures and hierarchies; Von Humboldt did not

⁵⁴ Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 187-198.

⁵⁵ Von Humboldt wept at the grave of Rousseau during his trip to Paris, another thinker whose relation to the Enlightenment can only be described as ambivalent. See: Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, 115.

⁵⁶ The change from a stationary society in which every member played the role that was 'appropriate' given the socio-economic class one was born in to a more dynamic society, in other words: the change from *ascription* to criteria of achievement, can be seen as a crucial feature of the process of modernization. The sweeping educational reforms at the beginning of the 19th century were, in this sense, truly modern. See: Karl A. Schleunes, "Enlightenment, Reform, Reaction: The Schooling Revolution in Prussia," *Central European History* 12, no. 4 (1979): 337.

seek to radically overthrow the status quo. However, it would be a bit misleading to state that his organicist framework puts Von Humboldt in the reactionary camp, since he combines this with a strong focus on individual liberties and a highly critical approach to the absolutistic state.

The defeat of the troops in Jena-Auerstad by the army of Napoleon and the subsequent existential crisis of the Prussian state has been connected to Von Humboldt's decision to join the ranks of Stein and his cabinet of reformers.⁵⁷ The regeneration and the redirection of the Prussian state was of utmost importance to the reformers and it was Von Humboldt's task, as the newly appointed head of the *Sektion für Kultus und Unterricht im Ministerium des Inneren*, to facilitate the agendas of the reformers through the professionalization of the educational field and through shaping the relations between the state and religious groups. For Von Humboldt, *Bildung* was a concept that had very broad connotations and that could not be limited to its educational meaning alone. That being said, Von Humboldt's attempts to reform the educational sphere echoed the theoretical framework that he articulated in the *Ideen*.

As we have seen, Von Humboldt had a chance to turn his ideas into practice during a tumultuous historical period, which turned out to be very significant for the later development of Prussia. In the following paragraphs I will synthesize the diverse strands of the previous enquiry into the philosophical roots of Von Humboldt's theory of the state into a description and analysis of Von Humboldt's ideas about education and his practical activities in this area. Von Humboldt's call for more *Bildung*, which has richer semantic overtones than the thinner concept of the 'simple' and mechanical transference of skills or knowledge, in the field of education and science has to be primarily understood as a reaction against disciplinary fragmentation and as a way to rethink the value of science and education in relation to society. The meaning of *Bildung* in this scientific and pedagogical sense has shifted a lot over time.⁵⁸ Von Humboldt was mainly concerned with the *value*

⁵⁷ Hohendorf, "Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835)," 670.

⁵⁸ For an overview of the use of *Bildung* in political discourse in post-war Germany, see for example: P.U. Hohendahl, "Humboldt Revisited: Liberal Education, University Reform, and the Opposition to the Neoliberal University," *New German Critique* 113, 38, no. 2 (2011): 159-196. Hohendahl shows convincingly that the notion of *Bildung* has been used by both proponents and detractors of the status quo. The former group argued that the existing educational and scientific institutions already embodied the core values and principles of *Bildung* and needed to be defended against hasty reforms that could endanger the ideal of the autonomous university. The latter group, aided by the student movements in the sixties, argued that *Bildung* is compatible with radical and emancipatory calls for democratization. Hohendahl described the conflicting discourses about *Bildung* with great attention for historical details and contexts. However, his work tends

of academic pursuits; how can science help aid humans to lead lives that are worthwhile?⁵⁹ Von Humboldt had already defined Bildung as the harmonious development of all faculties. The fact that there are many academic disciplines and branches of knowledge seems to be a challenge to the individuals who take this task seriously. How could one ever achieve the desired harmony of the faculties, if scientifically gained knowledge of the world is disparate and fragmented? Von Humboldt proposed to streamline the curriculum of the Gymnasia (the breeding grounds for the future generation of academics) *without* making special provisions or exemptions for different classes or estates, making the curriculum more unified.⁶⁰ This was an ingenious stroke; the reform of the curriculum along neohumanistic lines could not only help to present the field of knowledge as a unified whole, but also advance broader societal reforms. Von Humboldt was walking a fine line between ensuring the continuity of Prussia's educational system and making education available to the lower classes as well, at least in principle.⁶¹ Von Humboldt did not only focus on the differences and inequalities between individuals and stated that the human worth of both “[d]er gemeine Tagelöhner” and “der am feinsten Ausgebildete” should be reaffirmed, by treating their

to conflate the notion of Bildung with the ideal of the university in which research and education are closely intertwined. This is just *one* aspect of the notion of Bildung and this makes that his account is a bit one-sided; the ideas about individual self-development and freedom that the main actors in his historical narrative put forward, disappear in the background. This thesis does not focus on the promises of Bildung under conditions of “neoliberalism”, but it might be interesting to try to flesh out whether neoliberalism and Bildung are *necessarily* incompatible, or whether some common denominators can be found.

⁵⁹ Von Humboldt's attempt to conceptualize the unity of the sciences was not an attempt that he undertook for its own sake, but rather to advance and facilitate the “Ausbildung der Menschlichkeit, als ein Ganzes”, in another word: Bildung. Von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, first volume, 234.

⁶⁰ Eric Ashmore, “Wilhelm von Humboldt's Ideas on the Formation of Character Through Education,” *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education* 3, no. 1 (1963): 15.

⁶¹ Von Humboldt apparently disliked the term ‘Volksschule’, because this term had proletarian connotations. (Idem.) However, the idea that Von Humboldt intended to make education into an elitist and wholly private affair is somewhat misleading and a tad anachronistic, because of Von Humboldt's insistence on the universal possibility of Bildung in a time in which this was not a commonly held opinion. For a dissenting view, see: Mitchell G. Ash, “Bachelor of What, Master of Whom? The Humboldt Myth and Historical Transformations of Higher Education in German-Speaking Europe and the US,” *Central European History* 41, no. 2 (2006): 251.

sentimental development equally.⁶² One of Von Humboldt's most lasting and important decisions regarding the field of education was to make university entrance contingent upon the attainment of the *Abitur*, thereby reinforcing the importance of general and, in principle, universal secondary education.

This desire for intellectual unity was not only reflected in Von Humboldt's attempts to reform curricula and to secure the integrity of science, but in his preoccupation with the integrity and wholeness of the university *as an institutional reality* as well. Quite some authors have recently argued against what they have called the "Humboldt myth"; the thesis that Von Humboldt almost singlehandedly sketched the confines of the institutions of higher education and that the university of Berlin was founded upon his writings.⁶³ One of the arguments that has been used against the Humboldt Myth is that the humanist conception of the university was developed by many authors, such as Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Daniel Schleiermacher, Johann Gottlob Fichte and others and that Von Humboldt only played a small part in creation of it.⁶⁴ However, it is a very risky enterprise to lump these names together, as if there are no significant theoretical differences between the conceptions of education and the university each author espoused. Fichte had no problem at all with the involvement and the strict control of the state in educational affairs and exhibited authoritarian tendencies in his writings on politics.⁶⁵ This could not be further removed from the modest conception of the state that was endorsed by Von Humboldt. Furthermore, Von Humboldt and Schleiermacher differed on a topic that is usually considered to be *the* hallmark of the Humboldtian conception of the university: the unification of research and teaching. Schleiermacher proposed that research ought to be the responsibility of independent research institutions, without

⁶² Wilhelm von Humboldt, cited in: Ute Frevert, "Export/Import: Bildung in der neuen Welt," in *Vom Wandel eines Ideals: Bildung, Universität und Gesellschaft in Deutschland*, edited by Nikolaus Buschmann and Ute Planert (Bonn: Dietz, 2010), 70.

⁶³ Ash, "Bachelor of What, Master of Whom?," 245-253; Sylvia Palatschek, "Die Erfindung der Humboldtschen Universität," 183-205; Sylvia Palatschek, "The Invention of Humboldt and the Impact of National Socialism: The German University Idea in the First Half of the Twentieth Century," in *Science in the Third Reich*, edited by Margit Szöllösi-Janze (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 37-58.

⁶⁴ Ash, "Bachelor of What, Master of Whom?," 246-247.

⁶⁵ For a more detailed exposition of the differences between the political theories of Von Humboldt and Fichte, see the following passages: Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 157-166; Nybom, "The Humboldt Legacy," 154 (n. 8).

ties to the university.⁶⁶ So even if it is true that the conception of the university ought to be seen as the product of intellectual collaboration, this is no reason to assume that there were no disparities between the authors who helped to create it.

Other attempts to dismantle the ‘Humboldt myth’, for example by insisting on the fact that much of the educational infrastructure and practices were already in place *before* Von Humboldt came along and highlighting the fact that much of Von Humboldt’s work on education was entirely unknown in the heydays of educational reform in the 19th century, have to be qualified as well.⁶⁷ Although it is true that the *Ideen* were only published long after Von Humboldt’s death, the paragraphs that dealt with education were already published in an issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in 1792, long before the educational reforms took place.⁶⁸ It is a truism that Von Humboldt had to work within the context of an institutional structure that already was in place and that much that helped to shape the modern German university happened outside of the field of influence of Von Humboldt, but that is no reason to entirely dismiss the influence of Von Humboldt’s work and the reception of it. As Mitchell G. Ash, a critic of the Humboldt myth, admitted: “‘Humboldt’ is symbolic of ideals in which many teachers (and even some students) sincerely believe, and try, despite enormous obstacles, to achieve. This is true in particular of the unity of teaching and research. Myths need not be lies, but can instead constitute ‘corporate identity’, albeit in the form of a ‘counter-utopia’.”⁶⁹ If it is true that Von Humboldt has become a symbolic point of reference for scholars and students who sincerely believed in the commendable nature of Von Humboldt’s ideals and if it is furthermore true that these representations constitute “corporate identity”, it is safe to conclude that Von Humboldt, albeit indirectly, helped to shape the academic self-understanding of students and professors alike and the formation of the present-day educational infrastructure in developed nations.

As to the question about the exact nature of the contribution of Von Humboldt opinions are divided as well. Whereas Dietrich Spitta tends to stress the consistency within Von Humboldt’s oeuvre and his ideological purity as a statesman, other authors have argued that Von Humboldt

⁶⁶ Joaquín Abellán, “La idea de Universidad de Wilhelm von Humboldt,” in *Filosofía para la Universidad, Filosofía contra la Universidad (de Kant a Nietzsche)*, edited by Faustino Oncina Coves (Madrid: Dykinson/Universidad Carlos III, 2009), 258.

⁶⁷ For the principal and most frequently used arguments against the “Humboldt myth”, see: Ash, “Bachelor of What, Master of Whom?,” 246-249.

⁶⁸ Hohendorf, “Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835),” 668.

⁶⁹ Ash, “Bachelor of What, Master of Whom?,” 249.

did not act in line with the ideas that he himself put forward in the *Ideen*.⁷⁰ The main difficulty here is to ascertain whether Von Humboldt stayed true to his rather thin conception of the state, or whether he departed from it. When it came to educational policy Von Humboldt argued that although national education had its proper role and function in ancient Greece and Rome, the historical and political contexts had changed and education as whole needed to be rethought.⁷¹ Von Humboldt saw national education as a way to instill order and stability through “moral means” and thought it was, for this very reason, quite questionable.⁷² It is important to note that Von Humboldt objected most strongly to a *specific type* of national education; the type that would stifle the free activity of the individual by one-sidedly promoting a definite course of development, instead of letting the delicate interplay between the multiplicity of environments and the individual character come into fruition.⁷³ When it is furthermore realized that Prussian education was heavily underperforming at the time, it might be plausible to assert that Von Humboldt was overstating his opposition to national education to voice his dissent and his discontent with the current state of affairs. At the end of the 18th century a high amount of the teachers was found to be “incompetent” by officials, the facilities were in a poor state and the curriculum was “extremely narrow” and heavily focused on religion.⁷⁴ Furthermore, after the initial efforts by Friedrich Wilhelm I and the enlightened despot Friedrich II to modernize the educational system, an ultraconservative minister called Johann Christoph von Wöllner tried to reestablish the power of the church as a reaction to the growing secularization.⁷⁵ Von Humboldt’s skepticism about national education might partly be explained by his distaste for the reactionary policies of his contemporaries that went against his love for individual freedom.

However true these remarks may be, they do not make for a complete account of the conceptual argument Von Humboldt laid down in the *Ideen*. Von Humboldt’s thesis was not just that the *present* state of affairs concerning national education was deficient, he stated that national education *as such* was, in many ways, incompatible with the limits of the state that he devised. He seemed to think

⁷⁰ Especially see: Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 9-14. Spitta gives a general defense of the “consistency hypothesis”. See this article for a defense of the position that Von Humboldt shifted gears later in his career: Clara R. Thomas, “Philosophical Anthropology and Educational Change: Wilhelm Von Humboldt and the Russian *[sic]* Reforms,” *History of Education Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1973): 219-229.

⁷¹ Von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, first volume, 104-105.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 104.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 105-106.

⁷⁴ W.H. Bruford, cited in: Thomas, “Philosophical Anthropology and Educational Change,” 220.

⁷⁵ Schleunes, “Enlightenment, Reform, Reaction,” 320.

that human beings should in the first place be treated as human beings and only in a secondary and derivative sense as citizens.⁷⁶ The key assumption behind Von Humboldt's arguments in these lines is that state-led education would impose a stifling uniformity upon students, which would lead to the waning of the fruitful tension between the human as such and the human as a member of the state. In other words: only one side of human existence would be emphasized, leading to one-sidedness and a reductive conception of the individual. Individuals should, in principle, be free to participate in the affairs of the state, but only after they would have developed themselves in a broader sense and after they would have attained a higher level of freedom. Von Humboldt remarked that the "bürgerliche Einrichtung" could have a detrimental effect on the free unfolding of human capacities and that individuals should not be addressed as mere passive subjects of the state, but as free agents.⁷⁷ In a time in which the Prussian government was very concerned with maintaining social and cultural order in the wake of the revolutionary happenings in its backyard, Von Humboldt was principally concerned, as already pointed out in the previous sections of this thesis, with the protection of the individual against the aspirations and the activities of the state. Furthermore, Von Humboldt asserted that the development of the nation should be allowed to take its course and that the direction of the nation could not be precisely calculated beforehand.⁷⁸ This seems to be at odds with his own involvement in the administration that, according to some, implemented educational reforms that led to the *increase* of regulation by the state, by replacing private and religious educational institutions with publicly sponsored ones.⁷⁹ The government further increased the reach of the state by making state examinations obligatory, in order to test the competence of teachers of the Gymnasia, covering philology, history and mathematics.⁸⁰

What to make of this tension? One way in which the state can intervene in public affairs, is through materially supporting institutions that are a necessary requirement for Bildung. Dietrich Spitta observed that although Von Humboldt tried to determine the proper role the state should play, he did not write explicitly about the financial aspects of education in the *Ideen*.⁸¹ If we look at Von Humboldt's proposals in 1809/1810, we see that he consistently argued for the transfer of the

⁷⁶ Von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden*, first volume, 106.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 105-106.

⁷⁸ Thomas, "Philosophical Anthropology and Educational Change," 224.

⁷⁹ Friedrich Paulsen, cited in: *ibid.*, 226.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 224.

⁸¹ Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 97.

powers of spending and organization to the nation.⁸² The improvement of the *Landschulen* could largely be attained through the involvement of the local municipalities and urban communities, which were not unlike the *Nationalanstalten* Von Humboldt already mentioned in the *Ideen*. The financial means for these reforms would be secured by establishing funds that would be maintained by these same communities and not by the state. In support of these proposals, Von Humboldt used the same argumentation as he used in the *Ideen*; if education would primarily be an issue of local communities – dynamic webs of individuals that are based on free consent and not on the monopoly of violence – individuals would be more inclined to take responsibility for their own actions and for taking care of collective goods. However, this does not mean that Von Humboldt thought that educational institutions should yield to the demands of the ‘free market’. Although Von Humboldt wanted to make educational institutions financially independent from the state, he did not want to make education overtly dependent on economic interests either.⁸³ One of the key characteristics of the *idea* of ‘Humboldtian education’, putting the questions about the veracity of the ‘Humboldt myth’ aside, has always been that the focus should not lie on vocational training, which can be understood as a preparation for a determined position in society. In his proposals for the reform of the Prussian educational system, he rigorously excluded vocational training from the core responsibilities of the schools and the university.⁸⁴ Underlying this choice was Von Humboldt’s belief that it would be easier to acquire specific skills if one would already have a well-rounded character than the other way around.⁸⁵ He readily acknowledged that society needed craftsmen, but he objected to the dominance of vocational training in a curriculum that should be based on broader humanistic ideals.

At a first glance it seems to be the case that the objection against exclusively vocational training was more of a loose theoretical guideline than an absolute imperative. Von Humboldt was often quite lenient: some schools could continue providing vocational training, such as the *Ritterakademie* in Liegnitz. Von Humboldt apparently made this exception to secure the support of the local gentry.⁸⁶ However, interpreting these exceptions as evidence for the thesis that Von Humboldt did

⁸² For a very detailed exposition of Von Humboldt’s proposals in this area, see: *ibid.*, 97-101. Also see: Hohendorf, "Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835)," 671.

⁸³ Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 61. Furthermore, this false dichotomy presupposes that the state is necessarily vertical and centralized and this is not necessarily true; decentralized government is a concept that resists classification through this binary obfuscation.

⁸⁴ Ashmore, "Wilhelm von Humboldt’s Ideas on the Formation of Character Through Education," 7.

⁸⁵ Thomas, "Philosophical Anthropology and Educational Change," 226.

⁸⁶ Ashmore, "Wilhelm von Humboldt’s Ideas on the Formation of Character Through Education," 24-25.

not act upon his own ideals is unwarranted. One could argue that Von Humboldt's willingness to compromise on certain points was only indicative of an acquired sensibility for finding a balance between implementing reforms and respect for the status quo. In the case of the Liegnitz academy, for example, Von Humboldt introduced mathematics, physics, chemistry, natural history and, of course, Greek to the curriculum in order to consolidate the status of this particular Gymnasium as a transitional institution that would prepare students for the entry into university.⁸⁷ One could wonder whether these changes would have been possible if Von Humboldt would have enforced his own ideals on the school in Liegnitz without considering the local sensitivities, the pre-existing privileges and the peculiar history of the formation of the institution. Furthermore, it would be a mistake to overlook the tensions within the Prussian cabinet and assume that Von Humboldt's rule was a pure expression of his individual will. The administration was divided over a couple of issues and it is possible that some of these divisions expressed themselves as ambivalence in the actions of its members. Von Humboldt and Hardenberg, the Prussian state chancellor, were political rivals and Friedrich Ferdinand Alexander zu Dohna-Schlobitten criticized Von Humboldt because of his perceived "lack of religious understanding".⁸⁸ Furthermore, Von Humboldt might have been willing to compromise to not upset his more conservative colleagues. If it is true that Von Humboldt changed his course due to tactical maneuvering within a political playing field that was marred by conflicting demands, some voices calling for a return to orthodoxy and other voices calling for modernization and reforms, Von Humboldt's 'failure' to directly translate his theoretical principles into practice might be reframed as a conscious and strategical decision. It need not be true that Von Humboldt's failure was a "tragedy" or that it ought to be viewed as a manifestation of the "irony of destiny".⁸⁹

The case of the school in Liegnitz highlights a curious continuity between the ideal of the individual appropriation of the ideal of *Bildung* and the way in which Von Humboldt envisioned the proper limits of the state. Not only should one act free and autonomously in the personal sphere, the values that are enshrined in the notion of *Bildung* should be incorporated into the *public sphere* too. The main thing Von Humboldt tried to establish was the autonomy and the free development of the *Bildungswesen*, so that individuals and the nation as a whole could reap the benefits. Von Humboldt did not only articulate the ideal of *Bildung* in his proposals for curricula and in his reflections on the relation between teacher and student; *Bildung* became a model for the

⁸⁷ Ibid., 25.

⁸⁸ Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 52; Hohendorf, "Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835)," 672.

⁸⁹ My translation. See: Spitta, *Die Staatsidee Wilhelm von Humboldts*, 61.

institutional and legal standing of primary schooling, the Gymnasias and the university. The parallels between Von Humboldt's early writings on the limits of the state and his theoretical and practical preoccupations with educational reform are salient. The state should function as a bulwark of autonomy and should create the conditions under which free development could be realized. In a strict sense, the creation of a public university stands in tension with the commitment to a limited state, but the question here is one of focus and priorities, rather than one of ideological purity. Compared to the state of affairs in which religious institutions had a monopoly on educational matters, the creation of public institutions does not seem to tread back on the promise of autonomy. Besides that, public funding could, from the viewpoint of Von Humboldt, eventually be phased out and material assistance could finally become a responsibility of the nation.

5. A critical assessment of the idea that *Bildung* as a 'limiting factor'

In order to be able to critically assess Von Humboldt's conception of the relationship between *Bildung* and the state, it is necessary to note that he based his views on politics upon his broader conception of human beings and especially upon his account of the ways in which individuals participate in the intersubjective realm. Therefore, I will begin this section with a critical appraisal of the general outlines of Von Humboldt's thoughts on (the formation of) subjectivity as such. To do this, I will test Von Humboldt's key assumptions against a few counterarguments. Further on in this section, I will move on to a criticism of Von Humboldt's conception of the relation between *Bildung* and the state more properly.

Von Humboldt's concept of *Bildung* is very rich and can help to conceptualize the development of the *individual*, without resorting to *individualism*.⁹⁰ Individuals are not isolated and static beings, but are embedded within larger cultural and political structures, such as the state and, more importantly, the nation. Von Humboldt pictured the nation to be a dynamic whole, in which the independent 'parts' (e.g.: the individuals) voluntarily support each other. This organicist metaphor of society is modeled upon the organicist conception of the individual; the individual is conceptualized as a being that is confronted with a bewildering array of external circumstances, which need to be appropriated and are to be seen under the light of one's character. Lewis P. Hinchman states that the organic conception of the self should be revised, in order to make room for a more "dynamic" view of individuality. He states that the organic conception of individuality presupposes that there is a unique and natural core of the self. The key assumption behind this

⁹⁰ For more on this distinction, see: Lewis P. Hinchman, "The Idea of Individuality: Origins, Meaning, and Political Significance," *The Journal of Politics* 52, no. 3 (1990): 761.

view is that the organic conception of the self presupposes a more or less static biological baseline that resists change; a biological *whatness*. According to Hinchman, this conception suffers from a serious flaw, since it is incompatible with the view that the self is always something that is constituted by a complex series of mediations through cultural conventions and contexts. Hinchman's project can be seen as an attempt to develop an ontological framework in which the intersubjectively shared symbolical realm is prior to individuated human existence. Hinchman's conceptualization of the development of individuality departs from the key assumption that persons are not born with a fixed set of preferences and wishes. Hinchman states, in effect, that there is no such thing as a "natural self" and that the static conception of subjectivity that this notion implies hampers a more dynamic understanding of self-cultivation, in which change is not conceptualized as a smooth transition between two states, but as something that is fraught with discontinuity and disruption.⁹¹ By contrast, Von Humboldt placed the notion of *Eigenthümlichkeit* at the center of his theory of Bildung. However, this proprietary aspect of individual existence is in no way completely immune to change and is not the same as a naturalistic essence. Von Humboldt conceded that acculturation plays a constitutive role in every form of human development and avoided, as we have seen, the traps of a one-sided individualistic framework, in which the individual would be conceptualized as an isolated entity. However, the freedom to develop through cultural exchanges needed, according to Von Humboldt, to be complemented by the removal of external constraints that could fetter human flourishing. The culturalistic theory of human development that Hinchman supports needs to be complemented with a theory of negative freedom, since it is not the case that cultures are necessarily conducive to the growth of the individual. Besides being able to develop oneself *through* culture, one needs to be able to free oneself of extraneous forces, such as narrow cultural conventions or omnipresent state apparatuses, that stand in the way of a free development of human faculties and the blossoming of one's specific character.

The fundamental conception of human development that lies at the core of Von Humboldt's conception of society, can be easily seen as an anthropological justification of Von Humboldt's insistence upon a minimal involvement of the state. The state ought to facilitate the development of individuals to the fullest extent. Individuals cannot achieve their personal goals if they lack the means to do so and if there would not be a legal framework in place. Furthermore, in order to figure out who one really is and who one should be, persons need to temporarily overcome the world of strict necessity – in which they would only be concerned with their bare survival and the

⁹¹ Ibid., 766.

satisfaction of physical needs – and form a conception of themselves, as situated beings, embedded within larger cultural structures, capable of purposeful action. In this light, the tensions within Von Humboldt's work come to the fore. Von Humboldt was very reluctant to assign a large role to the state, yet he readily acknowledges the fact that in order to purposefully act and pursue life goals, individuals need the means that enable them to do so. If the estates and class divisions are not allowed to form obstacles to the growth of the individual, the question arises which measures should be taken to restructure society, so that the socio-economic background will not unequivocally determine the life path of the individual. On some level he realized that governmental provision of material assistance to aspiring students would not be *necessarily* incompatible with the principle that every human being should acknowledge the existence of individual responsibility. It is possible that some individuals take their responsibilities seriously, while being thwarted by overpowering external circumstances which lie beyond the field of influence of the individual. In these cases, governmental aid seems to be in line with the core responsibility of the state to secure and facilitate Bildung. Thus we can conclude that Von Humboldt's claim only survives in a more modest form: the state has to provide material assistance to its citizens, as long as this does not lead to the disappearance of responsibility and initiative on the level of the individual.

This raises the following question: at which point does the material support of the state become problematic from the viewpoint of responsible agency and what are the criteria that can be developed to establish the minimum amount of aid that is necessary to foster individual development? At this stage of the argument, one could either negate the premises of the question and depart from Von Humboldt's works entirely, or adopt either a relatively *thin* or a relatively *thick* conception of the role of the state. Such conceptions of the state are quite permeable, since these positions differ (primarily) in degree. A proponent of the *thin* conception could argue that the state is responsible for the material well-being of its citizens, but that this duty is limited, because too much material support would not be conducive to the wider aim of nurturing the development of individuals, since it could make citizens too dependent on the help of others and form an incentive to abstain from cultivating one's own abilities and faculties. A proponent of the *thick* conception could place the focus on the idea that humans are highly complex beings that can have a plethora of needs and desires and that they possibly will need some extra help from institutions to be able to realize their full potential. The underlying disagreement between these two virtual proponents of these two positions does not depend on a further disagreement about the *possibility* of agency, but could be related to questions about the *efficacy* of governmental aid and the exact role that the state plays as a facilitator of Bildung. The question about lies beyond the scope of this thesis. In

that what follows, I will focus my efforts on the questions about the necessary conditions for Bildung and about whether a limited state can perform the tasks that Von Humboldt prescribed for it.

Von Humboldt's insistence on both the possibility of actual Bildung and the procedural and legalistic restraints on the activity of the state causes some tensions. As we have seen, Von Humboldt thought that the state should act within the confines that are set out by the nation and that individuals should be fully free to leave the nation if they would wish to do so. The key principles and criteria that are to be considered when questions about the activities of the state arise are societal consent and individual freedom, if we want to stay true to Von Humboldt's core values and if we want to secure the autonomy of individuals and larger cultural wholes. However, there are cases in which the protection of these key principles seems to undermine itself. For example, Von Humboldt thought that individuals who would want to exercise a certain profession are free to decline the state-sanctioned test that publicly determines whether they would be qualified to do so, without any consequence for the possibility to exercise special professions. In Von Humboldt's defense an argument can be made that the responsibilities of the state end when the state showed which individuals are *certainly* qualified. It is up to individuals to decide whether they want to take the risk to enjoy the services of somebody that did not undergo the state examinations. This option is compatible with both freedom of choice and the principle of individual responsibility and could help the state to avoid sustaining and enabling a potentially idle citizenry. However, if one agrees to a *thin* positive duty for the state to protect its citizens from charlatans who could take advantage of their unknowingness by providing optional testing, one does not oppose the protection by the state as such, but rather the excesses of these protective measures. The main difference between *thin* and *thick positive duties to protect* seems to be a difference in degree and emphasis and not one in kind. In other words; the principle that was espoused by Von Humboldt could turn out to be a very lenient one; the practical realization and the precise determination of the involvement of the state could turn out to be more or less paternalistic, without violating the requirement of limiting the activities of the state as much *as possible*.

The underlying conundrum is related to utopian strands in the work of Von Humboldt. Von Humboldt's proposals to reform the educational sphere were largely shaped by a much broader worldview and although Von Humboldt was a pragmatic statesman that was more inclined to compromise than to fiery polemics, the sketches and designs for the future reorganization of society were quite far-reaching. Von Humboldt's repeated focus on the autonomy of the individual and the nation and his distrust of governmental aid lead to a conceptual dependency on the notion of a societal capacity to autonomously regulate and maintain public institutions, such as the

university and the Gymnasien. Nowadays it would be preposterous to believe that mass-education could be entirely funded by well-intentioned philanthropists and exemplary individuals who would be willing to set their private interests aside in order to advance the cause of other, less fortunate individuals and the nation as a whole. It is possible that the minimalistic approach to the state could lead to the disintegration of societal ties and not to the desired strengthening of bonds, based on voluntary association. The necessity of the safeguarding of the rights of the individual notwithstanding; the requirement that every individual should give consent to every affair that concerns the nation is too strict to guarantee the smooth and swift exercise of collective power. In order to guarantee this, collective power should be more or less coordinated, within the confines of the constitutional limitation of the possibility to coerce or steer individuals. In this area, the state could assume its responsibilities to create the conditions for Bildung.

If we transpose this concern to a consideration of Von Humboldt's proposals for the reform of educational institutions, we could conclude that the state is not given enough means to guarantee the implementation of its core mission. If Bildung should be, in principle, 'attainable' by everyone and not merely by self-serving elites, the state cannot stand by idly and hope for a smooth distribution of opportunities. These opportunities for Bildung are not entirely determined by material circumstances and the realization of one's full potential requires an active disposition to supersede oneself on the part of the individual. If, however, it is impossible to realize oneself to the fullest extent due to external circumstances, it is necessary that the state provides assistance, although it of course remains an open question to what degree. Thus, the leveling of curricula might not be sufficient. Some individuals from the lower classes could fall behind. Not because they would be bad students or incapable of self-development, but because of the absence of the conditions that are required for Bildung. It is difficult to strive for spiritual perfection when one is struggling to put food on the table to survive. A vague hope in the ability of individuals to support each other without the involvement of the state can lead to a blindness to the necessity of the fulfilment of the basic material conditions of autonomous subsistence, both in a spiritual and a material sense.

Freedom is, according to Von Humboldt, the bedrock of Bildung. As we have seen, freedom is only possible if individuals are able to lead autonomous lives and if external circumstances do not dictate their life paths entirely. A state that would retain an anti-interventionist stance at all costs, runs the risk of preserving the conditions that unduly hamper individuals that sincerely wish to achieve excellence. As late as 1990, only 5% of the people who received their Abitur, still a prerequisite for university-entry in Germany, were raised in traditional working class

environments.⁹² One of the reasons that the researchers gave for this low percentage was that the cultural environments these people were born into did not favor, let alone incentivize, personal decisions to continue with higher forms of education. This example concentrates upon the situation within a developed and affluent nation like Germany. In conditions of extreme poverty it seems even more likely that external cultural environments exert a great deal of pressure upon individuals to refrain from developing academic careers, at best favoring ‘more practical’ vocational training instead, or no form of education at all. This form of pressure would not be a problem, were it not that these pressures potentially disregard the wishes of the individual. Within more authoritarian environments, these pressures could even amount to a variance of coercion. In these cases the wishes of the community could be unilaterally imposed upon the individual, through cultural means, or otherwise; it could even be possible that cultural surroundings could, quite literally, starve individuals of higher aspirations. In these more extreme cases, the freedom *from* culture that is a condition for Bildung would be lacking or even wholly non-existent. Material assistance to at least some of those who are lesser off, can aid them to escape their immediate surroundings and to realize the promise of self-cultivation. Thus, it would be conceptually sound to state that Bildung just might require a relatively *bigger* state that has a positive duty to ameliorate the lives of individuals, without resorting to authoritarian paternalism.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis I have shown that it is possible to discern a continuity between Von Humboldt’s earlier work and his activities during his political career, especially concerning educational reform. Von Humboldt placed the concept of Bildung at the core of his theory of the state, as expressed in the *Ideen*. According to him, the sole purpose of the limited state should be the provision of a basic level of security, in order to facilitate individuals in their search of Bildung, thereby avoiding the pitfalls of anarchic individualism. Von Humboldt did not retort to a facile individualism, yet he devised a carefully designed corpus of constitutional principles to protect individuals against the possibly arbitrary coercion from the state. At first sight, this apparent wariness of what could be called ‘big government’ seems incompatible with the reforms of Prussia’s educational system that took place under his supervision, only years after the revolutionary events in Prussia’s neighbor country began to unfold. Given the state of education at the time and the lack of clear educational

⁹² Klaus Schönhoven, “Chancengleichheit für Arbeiterkinder? Zur Bedeutung des zweiten Bildungsweges für den sozialen Aufstieg in der Bundesrepublik,” in *Vom Wandel eines Ideals: Bildung, Universität und Gesellschaft in Deutschland*, edited by Nikolaus Buschmann and Ute Planert (Bonn: Dietz, 2010), 70.

policy and standards, it was deemed necessary by Von Humboldt to streamline the curriculum of the Gymnasia, to make this curriculum more conducive to individual development – departing from the notion that education is nothing more or less than the transferal of practical skills or the passive acquiescence of knowledge – and to implement new measures that were devised to increase the accessibility of education. Under his supervision, a new requirement was introduced: only people that attained their Abitur would be allowed university-entry. However, these alleged inconsistencies between the ideas that Von Humboldt put forward in the *Ideen* and his practical activities as a statesman should not be exaggerated or overemphasized, since his fundamental commitment to his substantive conception of Bildung remained untouched. In his institutional proposals, he made room for extensive and autonomous cooperation between students and teacher and for an intimate intertwinement of research and education, further institutionalizing the open-ended search for knowledge and self-development that takes place in quotidian life as well. Von Humboldt never regarded the limitation of state powers as a goal in itself. Rather, the state should be limited in order to secure Bildung. If Von Humboldt changed his mind in this area, he principally changed his mind about his methods and certainly not about the ultimate goals. This shows how fundamental Bildung was for Von Humboldt.

In the second part of this thesis, I critically analyzed Von Humboldt's conception of the limited state, in relation to Bildung. It remains an open question to which extent the state should intervene to facilitate Bildung, precisely because it is a very difficult task to balance the need for individual responsibility and social security. The main difficulty here is whether one should adopt a thin or a thick conception of the responsibilities of the state. However, it seems very plausible that Bildung requires a material substrate and if it is the role of the state to advance Bildung, the state should provide at least a basic amount of material assistance. Material support can pave the way to a protection of the individual against forces that are outside of the direct sphere of influence. Individuals should strive to take matters into their own hands, but if external circumstances limit individuals in their quest for Bildung to a very large extent, state intervention might be warranted. From the perspective of Von Humboldt's conception Bildung, it is not desirable to enforce equality in *every regard*, since this could possibly spell trouble for individual development, but this is not to state that the state should turn a blind eye to potentially stifling sources of inequality altogether, because this could lead to a severe limitation of individual freedom by keeping systemic unfairness in place and by exacerbating the privileges of certain social groups. In conclusion: from the perspective of Von Humboldt's conception of Bildung, one should opt for a critical acceptance of state powers and material assistance. The case of (extreme) poverty is an example that could warrant state intervention from the perspective of Bildung.

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