

# The Transformative Role of Ethics in Education: The Humboldtian Philosophy

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Ethics, Wilhelm von Humboldt, education, moral values, social transformation, freedom, progress through education.

## Abstract

The German philosopher, writer, and statesman Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) has played a key role in the transformation and development of education in Prussia and beyond its borders. If time is change and can be measured as progress towards social transformation, then time serves some concrete utility transposed in the field of education. For the purpose of social transformation and development of education, Humboldt has used various strategies, among which ethics or morals had a certain impact on education. Despite the importance of this aspect, the ethical understanding of the philosopher has not been researched deeply yet. The following paper analyses this question according to Humboldt's writings and shows its relevance for education. The aim of this research is to reveal insights that have the potential to serve the development of education even now.

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# 1. Introduction

From 1809 to 1810, the head of the Section for Culture and Education in the Ministry of the Interior in Prussia, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835), initiated educational reforms in his country. The reforms were so successful that they had a lasting impact on the educational sector in Prussia and beyond its borders. What was the key to this success?

Humboldt's reforms transformed the structure of schools and universities. The school programmes were renewed. The clear definition of various fields of study helped to relate the sciences and arts to education. Because of the educational and networking properties of the languages, linguistics received particular importance in education. Similarly, several other study subjects were maintained and further developed (Sösemann 1993). Ethics played a key role in Humboldt's reforms and pursued the goal of improving human skills and competencies through better educational institutions for their further development and optimisation.

Being not only a statesman but also a prominent scholar and writer, Humboldt aimed to promote the ideas and ethical values of the Enlightenment and New Humanism through his reforms. It was clear that Humboldt did not separate politics, education and ethics from each other. On the contrary, he strived for an education that contained ethical values and would serve freedom, social emancipation, and a liberal conception of the bourgeoisie. Further, the educational reforms should contribute to the emergence of a stronger society through new knowledge and new ethical values, which in turn would strengthen and consolidate the state.

Humboldt's understanding of ethics and its significance for education are the subject of the following paper. The educational reformer has left many writings which help understand his conception of ethics. Based on these sources, first, it will be analysed how Humboldt expressed ethics in his writings, which tasks he aimed to solve through his position, and how his views are related to the ethical understanding of other prominent philosophers. Second, it will be shown which core values Humboldt highlighted and supported through his theories on ethics. Third, it will be

explained what transformative potential Humboldt’s theories on ethics had for making a better education and a better society in Prussia possible.

## 2. The importance of learning ethics for solving social and political tasks

In his writings, Humboldt mentions the importance of morality and moral values. According to him, the term “morality” is indefinable due to the restrictive character that the definition entails (Humboldt 1969: 376–505, here 458). As a result, there is no polarisation of moral and non-moral actions because Humboldt recognises the complexity of their meaning, depending on the context, the mental state, or the physical condition of the humans (Humboldt 1969: 16f). For Humboldt, moral values are qualities that were more common in antiquity and had individual character. However, they had developed over the centuries and changed. It is noticeable that Humboldt admires the individual values of ancient times:

“ [...] so, in antiquity, what captivates us above all is greatness, which is always linked to the life of a person, to the blossom of the imagination, to the depth of the spirit, to the strength of the will, to the unity of the whole being, which alone gives true value to the human being. It was the human being, namely his strength and his education, that stimulated every action [...] (Humboldt, 1851: 7).<sup>1</sup>

With this statement, Humboldt shows influence from ancient Greece. He explains his perception further as he highlights that values in ancient times were judged based on experience and closer observation, whereby it was assumed that no action in itself was clearly good or evil.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from German by M. Kartashyan.

<sup>2</sup> For Aristotle himself, there was only a difference of degree between virtues and vices, such as “excessive thrift” instead of “stinginess” or “poor thrift” instead of “wastefulness” (Frederichs 1875: 14).

Despite the lack of a definition of the term, Humboldt analyses morality from several perspectives. On one hand, he shows that human morality cannot be controlled by reason (Humboldt, 1969: 15), and in this sense, he agrees with the German philosopher and economic reformer Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), for whom morality is not a theory consisting of rational principles (Humboldt, 1969: 241–267, here 257f). In addition, Humboldt deviates from the position of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who represents morality as a critical test of practical reason (Höffe 2011: 4).

Despite its sublimity, morality is something necessary and one of the most important human characteristics for Humboldt. With its help, people could rise and gain both strength and dignity. Therefore, human morality should be promoted by the state (Humboldt 1851: 75). This is possible with hard work in the process of educating the people through moral values. However, this should happen without coercion or direct influence, but rather in freedom and love. Freedom increases people's motivation in their actions, while coercion stifles it (Humboldt, 1851: 98–100).

Freedom and emancipation of the individual are important values for Humboldt because he expects respectful treatment of the individual and social diversity. Only through an open attitude of the state towards the freedom of the individual could the citizens achieve a complete education, which would create a stronger society. The latter could help the state consolidate itself, free itself from French supremacy<sup>3</sup> and restore its power. The state should therefore free its citizens so that it can become free itself (Humboldt 1851: 75).

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<sup>3</sup> In this period, Prussia was in a difficult political situation. During the War of the Third Coalition, the French Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte (1769–1821) began to establish vassal states to secure his power through the Confederation of the Rhine. Afterwards, the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation dissolved, and the emperor resigned his crown. Prussia was isolated and attacked (Fehrenbach 2008: 71–135).

In order to contribute to the freedom of individuals or to free them from restrictions, Humboldt promotes the process of secularisation that began since the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.<sup>4</sup> In this way, he shows that religion and morality are independent of each other:

“ So, it seems to me undeniable that morality and religion are not necessarily connected with each other at all and that they both can exist equally pure, loud, strong and fruitful without each other (Humboldt 1851: 69).

Meanwhile, Humboldt does not see any conflict between religion and morals. Religion is not only the strongest means of conveying morality, but religion and morality, religious and moral education, are one and the same. Hence, according to Humboldt, a truly religious person is also a moral one (Humboldt 1969: 562–566, here 563).

It is obvious that Humboldt shows some similarities with Kant, according to whom morality is generated by practical reason and does not depend on any other authority (Kant 1838/39: vol. 6, 161). In a similar way, according to the Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), moral values are independent of religion; they are consequences of a human’s individual spiritual development (Spinoza 1790–1796: vol. a, 22). Humboldt’s position also harmonises with the position of the Enlightenment, following which the state should not strengthen its power through religious and moral beliefs. The position of the Enlightenment was based primarily on the separation of morality and politics, while the latter used religion for its goals (Patt 2002: 129). Therefore, according to Humboldt, the state is unable to change the moral values of its citizens. Instead, the state’s task is to ensure that people invest their skills and resources in a goal-oriented and orderly manner (Humboldt 1851: 62f, here 63).

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<sup>4</sup> Humboldt’s attitude was apparently linked to the meaning of religion in Prussia. The Wöllner’s religious edict of 9 July 1788, and the one that followed on 19 December, occupied Humboldt because of their censorship orders. He saw human values and freedom threatened by these measures (Spranger 1909: 49f).

### 3. The transformative character of ethics in education

Despite the fact that Humboldt relates moral values rather to antiquity, he states that they have strongly changed over the centuries. It is striking that Humboldt admires the individual values that were typical of ancient people. However, he has doubts regarding the possibility of their practice in the present (Humboldt 1851: 62).

Ancient Greeks and Aristotle emphasised the importance of the correct development of intellectual abilities and character qualities and saw them as the source of happiness. For Aristotle, the state is ultimately the highest realisation of reason and the highest purpose of human existence (Patt 2002: 22). This is not enough for Humboldt, who seeks a transformation and revival of Prussia from below through a new bourgeoisie educated in ethical values.

From Humboldt's writings, it can be concluded that education can, firstly, help people achieve better self-knowledge and individual self-determination. In addition, people can expand their own horizons of vision (Humboldt 1969: 257f). In agreement with Aristotle, Humboldt states that each individual is an independent bearer of ideas who has his own values, even if he is influenced. Therefore, the individual should be given the opportunity to develop himself. However, this does not intend to isolate the individual; on the contrary, globalisation is promoted alongside individualisation (Anter 2017: 11 / Humboldt 1851: 56). Humboldt advocates an exchange between the individual and the world because, as a result, people experience enrichment through new values. In this respect, Humboldt bears a certain similarity to Aristotle, for whom human's relationship to the world also has an active form. Aristotle sees the human being as a carrier of worldly relationships, not as a person who strives for a relationship that goes beyond the world (Luthardt 1876: 37).

Secondly, education is a source of humanity and better social ethics. According to Humboldt, education has aesthetic power because it refines people's taste and thereby has a positive influence on human inclinations and

feelings while choosing what is beautiful and good and deciding what is its opposite. Without taste, human morals would be weakened (Humboldt 1851: 94f). Here Humboldt was obviously influenced by Kant, who sees taste as the ability to judge what is beautiful (Kant 1922: 87). Furthermore, everything that is intellectual and good, judged aesthetically, does not have to be beautiful but rather sublime from the point of view of morals, so that it has more of a feeling of respect than of love and confidential affection (Kant 1922: 119).

Thirdly, Humboldt places particular emphasis on the sciences and arts. In contrast to Aristotle, for whom scientific knowledge has the necessary character of actual provability, for Humboldt it belongs to a freer dimension. It is welcome everywhere as long as it does not go against the knowledge (Humboldt 1851: 50). Like the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814)<sup>5</sup>, Humboldt advocates for freedom in the sciences because it gives strength and skill and contributes to education. Art is also necessary for the development of human education and morals. In the context of art, the human character receives sensual feelings through the aesthetic, through which it is refined (Humboldt 1907: 55f). Here we notice certain differences from Kant’s understanding, who only finds art beautiful when it also appears to be nature (Kant 1922: 159).

In his teachings on ethics and education, Humboldt also promotes the integrity of women. For this purpose, he presents women as important bearers of moral values. Due to the great importance of women in further strengthening of morals, Humboldt is committed to ensuring that women are given better training opportunities (Humboldt 1851: 28). Humboldt is therefore one of the pioneers of the social movement who spoke out for women’s rights and education. In this way, Humboldt also remains loyal to the humanists who supported the education of women and spoke out against the idea that education should be reserved for one section of society or for men.

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<sup>5</sup> Färber highlights Fichte’s position (Färber 1891: 73 / 179).

## 4. Power, energy and freedom for better self-development and education

According to Humboldt, power is also linked to education and is crucial for people's self-development. Power is discussed in both Aristotle's and Kant's writings, indicating possible influences on Humboldt. For Aristotle, power or ability (*dynamis*) has an active and dynamic character (Th. S. 2008: 118). Kant connects power with education and gives it a regulative meaning (Lange 2018: 1503–1510). Humboldt takes these ideas further. According to him, inner power helps the individual combat aspects that limit his education. In this way, Humboldt finds it possible to use his inner strength to begin a fight against the restrictive elements and to free himself from them (Humboldt 1851: 6f). Humboldt explains why this is important:

“ The true purpose of the human, not that which the changing inclinations prescribe but which the eternally unchanging reason prescribes to him, is the highest and most proportional formation of his powers as a whole (Humboldt 1851: 9).<sup>6</sup>

In addition, power itself is the result of a good education. Humboldt calls for a paradigm shift from human's passive state to increasing his power through knowledge and moral values. Humboldt often sees human power and education as two values on the same level. What the entire greatness of the human being is based on, what the latter must eternally strive for, and what can have an effect on people represent the peculiarities of power and education (Humboldt 1851: 11).

Like Aristotle, Humboldt also emphasises the role of energy in education. While Aristotle's *energeia* represents reality in an ontological relation to possibility (Welbers 2001: 35f), for Humboldt, energy means observing and collecting, deriving ideas from what is observed and collected, and

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<sup>6</sup> Translated from German by M. Kartashyan.



assimilating ideas.<sup>7</sup> For Humboldt, energy is the first and only human virtue (Humboldt 1851: 87). Therefore, he criticises the opposite of energy, inertia, because it corrupts the good qualities of the humans, as well as any restrictions that prevent the emergence of energy in education (Humboldt 1969: 486). In his theories about energy and inertia, Humboldt shows a certain connection with Fichte, who interprets energy as the source of morality and inertia as the cause of evil (Fichte 1835: 60).

Similar to Kant and Fichte, Humboldt also attributes great importance to freedom in developing power and energy. While the purpose of a human is to develop his power, freedom is the most important condition for this. As Humboldt shows, for human development, it is important to decide independently how to change one's own character. The individual should therefore in no way allow the training of his intellectual abilities to be restricted by the general demands of humanity, by the state, or by a religion (Humboldt 1969: 340). For Humboldt, freedom has a transformative effect on the individual because his energy, invested freely and without obstacles, can be significantly increased. Freedom makes it possible to determine one's own customs and character (Vorländer 1851: 60). The importance of freedom in education is also emphasised by the German philosopher and theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), who shares the opinion with Humboldt that freedom in education is highly valuable so that people can gain access to the world and exchange ideas with each other. This is why Ernst Müller describes the concept of freedom taught by both philosophers as follows:

“ Education through science (and this is understood as a philosophically based unity of knowledge) and academic freedom meant neither for Schleiermacher nor for Humboldt aesthetic educational individualism or retreat into an ivory tower, but rather openness to the world and to society (Schneider et al. 2009: 34).

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<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt to Karl Gustav Brinckmann, Rome, 22 October 1803, <https://wvh-briefe.bbaw.de/625>.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper shows that the ethics or morality presented by Wilhelm von Humboldt in his writings is his scientific preoccupation with moral norms that are educational, strengthening, and necessary for solving social and political tasks. Hence, he highlights the importance of transferring moral values to society through education. He also makes it clear, that this process should take place freely, without pressure from the state or from religions.

The understanding of ethics that Humboldt develops in the context of education is related to our perception of time and has a transformative character. It helps the individual achieve better self-knowledge and self-determination. Enriching the individual with new values, ethics also makes a relationship between the individual and the world possible. Education is the place where individuals can learn humanity and better social ethics because of its immense ability to transfer aesthetic power. In order to increase this power, as active and affirmative creation of forms, Humboldt pleads for the freedom of the sciences and arts as well as the integrity of women in education as bearers of wonderful moral values.

Further, Humboldt relates power, energy, and freedom to self-development and education as their important sources. In addition to this, good education can, in turn, strengthen these values for the individual. It is obvious that Humboldt strives for a paradigm shift from a passive individual to a powerful, energetic, and free individual. Educating the Prussians to a stronger society he makes an important contribution to the process of overcoming the social and political challenges facing Prussia.

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## 7. Short Biography

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