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Animals and The Humboldtian University, or Why The Research University Needs Epistemic Habitat Restoration

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Abstract

The research university has had a contentious relationship with animal activists. That is well known. The rise of humanism and the resultant obsession with medical science created a culture in the research university that overtly pits progress against empathy for animals. Moreover, the call for “objectivity” has devalued the role that virtues and emotions play in the search for knowledge. Mistakenly, the attitude of many researchers is that kindness, care, and empathy are incompatible with rigor, considered treatment, and education. While we remain comfortable giving our children “character” education at the lower ranks, the idea that humane education in the academy, in a rich way that extends beyond teaching people how to be humane educators, remains out of bounds.

Though bound to the history of the institution in real and material ways, the university offers the keys to unlock the chains of our past. Though the university claims that it is always in crisis or under attack, new buildings continue to rise, states continue to open new campuses, and the volume of academic scholarship has grown so large that dissemination, even in the Internet age, is less an issue than any one scholar’s ability to consume the available information. The university remains a vibrant, creative fixture in our lives; and one that can effect real change. This change can include how the university thinks about itself, and especially its historical and epistemological structure, in relation to animals. By examining the philosophical roots of the research university in German Idealism, this paper suggests that the course of the institution actually intended a deep-seated anthropomorphism. In recognizing this, it is the responsibility of a critical institution like the university to reexamine its own epistemic biases and blind spots, and in doing so open up a space for new lines of questions, knowledges, and aims.

Keywords: higher education, research university, anthropomorphism, Humboldt

**Animals and The Humboldtian University,
or Why The Research University Need Epistemic Habitat Restoration**

The contemporary Western model of the university follows what has become known as the Berlin model, a model that champions research-based discovery above scholastic imposition. This model was first implemented by the Prussian philosopher and minister of education, Wilhelm von Humboldt. Several of its most staunch supporters were the academic superstars of the early 19th century, Fichte, Shelling, and Hegel. These German Idealists gave legs to Immanuel Kant's famous Copernican Revolution and they were all heavily influenced by the Romantic theory of education, *Bildung*. Today, the Berlin model competes with other models: The New York model, which privileges an education consistent with neo-liberal economic policies and a market economy, and the Calcutta model, which demands that intellectual efforts respond to the pressing social needs of human kind. Notably, the New York and Calcutta models are named consistently with their German predecessor. They are each named after urban spaces, territories radically transformed by human industry. Part of my thesis is that this is not accidental. The philosophical roots of the Berlin model radically foreshadow a world in which all space is human space, where all knowledge is knowledge that reveals the only human to itself. All of this to detriment of other inhabitants of the planet.

In 1809 Wilhelm von Humboldt was appointed the Prussian Minister for Ecclesiastical Affairs and Public Education. In that role, he established a university that would become the model for the contemporary institution, the University of Berlin. Berlin was founded to foster free academic inquiry and to offer increased access to higher education. Today, Berlin's mission still closely reflects Humboldt's theory of education. The university espouses "the conviction

that the pursuit of knowledge engages and forms all human faculties and so contributes greatly to the humanization of society” (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, n.d.). The “humanization of society;” this is heralded as a great and harmless aspiration. But is this the case?

To examine this claim, I’d like to focus on a word in this mission statement, “faculties.” Today, “faculty” is an appellation that refers to the teaching staff of a university. However, to Humboldt, the word had a technical sense. Humboldt’s “faculties” were derived from the philosophy of Immanuel Kant and referred to reason, the imagination, the understanding, and so forth. They were both the reason why the human sought knowledge and the ways that the human had for coming to know. As I will discuss below, that they were the faculties of Kant is no small matter when considering animals.

Prior to Kant, faculties were tools that the human had for figuring out its place in a reality that stood independently against it. When David Hume claimed that our faculties were so ill equipped to understand the world that we could never claim certainty, even that striking a billiard ball would not result in the explosion of a star, this interpretation of the human faculties came under siege. Famously, Hume’s skeptical conclusions awoke Kant from his “dogmatic slumber” and led him to a solution to Hume’s problem that required reconstructing the role of human faculties.

Kant solved Hume’s problem with a radical discovery, that knowledge claims are possible not in spite of the human faculties, but because of them. He postulated that “reality,” or all that is in space and time, is knowable precisely because human cognition posits space and time. In short, space and time are products of human cognition. This spatial-temporal milieu is simultaneously organized by other human faculties, most notably reason and the understanding, in a multitude of ways: our concepts distinguish one being from another, they allow us to

perform complex mathematics, and they interpret mechanical movements causally. Because the faculties are what order the field of space and time for us, or synthesize the world, and do such with regularity, patterns emerge, patterns that can be recognized as laws given by the structure of human rationality. This allows Kant to turn physics on its head, as the “laws of nature” now become the “laws of human cognition.” For followers of Kant, the days of looking for the “secret springs” by which nature operates were over. In their place, students of German idealism sought to discover the ways human cognition organized the world. This results in placing the human in a rather privileged role. The human is now both the giver of the law, insofar as even such hard and fast laws as those of physics are posited by humans, and the follower of laws, as the human cannot imagine a world in which it is free from them. Whether nature really operates by these laws is inconsequential and even unknowable, what can be known is that whenever the human has perception, it will be ordered by the faculties. These are the ultimate lawgivers. In the moral realm, that we both give and freely follow such laws, even when we might not desire to, offers the human a dignified status. We follow the law not as a means to an end, but because the law is the reason by which we participate in humanity. Humanity is thus an end-in-itself as are the humans who embody it. To study, embody, and reveal the law becomes that which makes humans dignified beings.

Since no one human can have all sensory experience and therefore the experience of all of the laws of human reason, humanity itself must *be*, must exist, beyond any one human. This is why there is such a massive difference between humans, or those beings ruled by the lawgiving nature of humanity, and the human animal that is merely a sensory machine. Humanity becomes a social project, a project both devoted to and revealed as *Wissenschaft*, or knowledge-ship/science-craft. The individual human knowers, then, in a Kantian university, the teachers and

students, display humanity in the work that reveals the marvels of the human faculties. The objects of this work make up the human world, the only true world, the very concept of “world” in German philosophy.

Both before and certainly during his time in Jena, Humboldt was deeply influenced by Kantian Idealism. “Theory of Human Bildung des Menschen,” begins,

A great and excellent work would have to be delivered if somebody would undertake to describe the specific capabilities (faculties) which are the conditions of the different areas of human cognition for their successful expansion; the real spirit by which each of them has to be dealt with, and the relationship into which all of them have to be set with each other in order to accomplish the formation of humanity as a whole (Humbolt, 1994, p. 9).

While no one person can complete this project, he believes that the institution that shelters a multitude of individual, rigorous, and methodological exercises of a specific faculty was the place for the “great and excellent work” to happen. This was the goal of the University of Berlin: to house the manifold of disciplines that would each dedicate themselves to revealing the glory of a human faculty. So what is at stake in this university model is not economic progress, nor is it solving social problems. Instead it is humans exploring the manifold objective possibility of humanity.

He continues:

[I]n the centre of all specific kinds of activity is the human being who without any intention which is directed to anything specific only wants to strengthen and to raise the abilities of his nature and to obtain value and duration for his essence.

However, as the pure ability needs an object with which it can be in practice and as the pure form, the pure thought needs a subject in which it can continue by showing itself within it, also the human being is in need of a world beyond himself.

From this derives his strive to expand his cognition and his efficacy, and without being clearly aware of it he is not really concerned about that what he acquires from the world or what he produces due to it outside himself but only about his internal improvement and refinement or at least about the satisfaction of his internal unrest which is eating him up.

Under pure consideration and aiming at the final intention, his thinking is always only a trial of his mind (Humboldt, 1994, p. 10).

Here, Humboldt posits a human who is eaten up by unrest, who is anxious. This anxiety is the result of the individual researcher's need to see the faculties not merely as organizers of space and time, but in space and time. Thus "the human being is in need of a world beyond himself." This statement should not be misconstrued to mean that the human needs objects in some concrete, objective reality opposed to an interior self. Instead, the human being is, exists, find its essence in this state of needing world, where "world" represents the spacio-temporal manifestation of the work of the faculties. This is a world where the human finds *human objects*, where the human being is surrounded by culture, or *Bildung*. So in the Berlin model, the work of the university faculty member is merely about satisfying "an internal unrest," and thereby allowing the human to express the need for world through the work of the faculties. Humboldt calls this movement "tying our I and world together" (Humboldt, 1994, p. 11) The process is what opens the idea of a world, a universe. All other matter, all non-world, will be described as lifeless matter.

Humboldt again:

However, although all these demands are restricted to the internal essence of the human being his nature constantly urges him by itself to go beyond to the external objects, and now it is crucial that in this alienation he would not lose himself but that instead of this the illuminating light and the comforting warmth of everything what he intends to do externally would always radiate back into his internal being.

For this purpose, however, he has to bring the mass of the objects closer to himself, to imprint the form of his mind onto this material and to make both more similar to each other. Perfect unity and general alternating effect are within himself, therefore, he has to transfer both also to nature; several abilities are within himself to bring the same object to his consideration in different forms once as notion of his understanding, once as picture of his power of imagination, once as perception of his senses. With all these as well as many different tools he has to try to comprehend nature not only to come to know it from all sides but even more in order to strengthen his own internal power by confronts the willfulness of our will with the laws of nature and with the decisions of fate. But it is this unity and universality which defines the notion of world (Humboldt, 1994, p.12).

World, then, appears through the unity that consciousness demands of the manifold of the faculties' perspectives. The work of the faculties creates a world of culture, and the faculties demand unification of this world.

This unity of the manifold is world, universe, university; and the differently formed effects produced as the researcher strengthens his own internal powers represent *Bildung*, culture, or proof of higher education. The unity of the manifoldness, world, is the expression of self beyond the self. It is the *projection*, or *project* of the laws of consciousness reflected back

upon the individual human. World is the human externalizing the laws of humanity outside any human. It is our production of nature. The need for world, as one intends to satisfy it, thus imposes an order back upon the human in a very similar way that Kant's moral law, a product of the human lawgiver, imposes itself as an objective arbiter opposed to the will of the very creator of law. Where Kant's law is what makes the human both dignified and an end-in-itself, for Humboldt it is the production of *Bildung* that fulfills this function for humanity. Humboldt writes:

For, only the world comprises all imaginable manifoldness and it is only the world which owns such an independent self existence that it confronts the willfulness of our will with the laws of nature and with the decisions of fate (Humboldt, 1994, p. 13).

This leaves the faculty researcher always left to study the laws of nature/human cognition as the only external objects, and morality and choice as prescribed decisions of fate.

So whither animals? For both Kant and Humboldt, the world, nature, law, are mere encounters *with* the lawgiving nature of humankind. The human is clear-cutting the Earth in favor of the world. World is the ideal toward which the manifoldness of human science-craft directs itself, and this ideal is guarded by the institution that bears Humboldt's name, The University of Berlin, the university that provided the model for the Western research/teaching university. *Bildung*, the achievement of this university, is an anthropocentrism far beyond any conceivable anthropocentrism. In educational literature, this is often referred to as the "anthropocentric thesis" (Luth, 2010. 49). It is important to note that even this phrase, is generally juxtaposed to a theo- or geo- centric thesis. The Enlightenment had utterly discredited the former, and Hume, by demonstrating that we could not know the secret springs of nature, made it impossible to accept the later. What are the other possibilities?

Several of the English translators of Humboldt's seminal piece on education have chosen to call it "A Theory of *Bildung*" or "A Theory of Education" in spite of the fact that the German title, "*Theorie der Bildung des Menschen*," is more literally translated as "A Theory of Human *Bildung*." Given this thoroughgoing anthropocentrism of this position, one could ask why Humboldt even bothered to add *des Menschen* to his title. He would no doubt disavow any form of non-human *Bildung*, so he is not attempting to distinguish human culture/education from mouse or monkey education. So perhaps it is because this theory of education belongs exclusively to, is owned by, is ruled by a concept of humanity. To avow a Humboldtian education is to sell one's soul to humanity. But while Humboldt would have dismissed feline culture or education without consideration, German Idealists regularly felt the need to construct the origin of humanity with overt and unconsidered statements about animals. Allow me to offer two examples from Kant. In his *Conjectural Beginnings of Human History*, he writes:

The first time that he [man] said to the sheep, "the coat that you wear was given to you by nature not for you, but for me," and stripped it of this coat and put it on himself, he became aware of a privilege that he, by virtue of his nature, had over all animals. He now no longer viewed them as his fellows in creation, but rather as means at his will's disposal and as tools for attaining any chosen ends (Kant, 2006, p. 28)

In the first sentence of his introduction to the *Lecture Notes on Pedagogy*, Kant writes,

Man is the only creature that must be educated, by education we mean care, discipline, and instruction, including culture...

Animals employ their powers as soon as they have any, properly; that is to say, in a manner in which they do not injure themselves. It is indeed, wonderful to see young swallows, although hardly out of the eggs, and still blind, knowing how to arrange to let

their excrement fall outside the nest. Animals need, therefore, no care; at most only food, warmth, and oversight, or a certain protection. Most animals need nourishment, but no care. By *care* it is understood to be that foresight on the part of parents which sees that children make no harmful use of their powers. Should, for example, an animal cry at its birth, as children do, it would certainly become the prey of wolves or of other wild animals, lured to the spot of its cry (Kant, 1994, pp. 101-102)

For German Idealism, the animal remained the only viable opponent to the *anthropocentric thesis*. Note the violence in the above remarks. At the origin of “human” history, there is the skinning of the sheep. At the birth of a sparrow, there is blindness and defecation. At the birth of the human, the parents must be prepared against the wolves and wild animals. German idealism silenced the possibility of a shared world or the existence of multiple spatio-temporalities, if we assume animals have cognitive abilities that can translate toward our own, and it did so unphilosophically, unscientifically. What type of science-craft kept Kant from examining alternative forms of vocalization, learning, and uses for fleece?

So we dwell in an institution whose founding intent is to transform the “mere” objects of “lifeless matter” into world. Insofar as all non-world is lifeless, human transformation of this domain is of no moral concern, provided it is accomplished in human/humane ways. Such a thought is what allows someone like Kant to at once claim that we need to be kind to animals and that we owe no moral obligations to them. The world, which is always already only in the space/time of humans, denies all other spatio-temporal understandings. Is that significant? Think of the Caribbean Monk Seal who could not compete with the human manifestations of spatial temporal mastery in the gun and the ship. Think of the animals who cannot cross the road because of the assumption that all spaces and times that are not the time of humanity’s world are

always already lifeless. Where “savage” man lived and died immersed in the space and time of animals, hunted and fished according to migrations and animal habits, “cultured” humans have restructured the animal within the human world. A gorilla can be seen on every continent, cows consumed at every meal, and big cats enjoyed on NatGeo from the comfort of our living rooms.

What the university may still need to think is how it might begin to coexist with, learn about, and learn from the space of animals, or perhaps, develop a *Bildung der Tiere*, a culture that belongs to animals. To prevent confusion, allow me to elaborate. I am not suggesting something as simple as preserving a space for animals within world. While the creation of national parks and preserves are important, they are not incompatible with the philosophical understanding of the Berlin model. Consider statements like Theodor Roosevelt’s:

Above all, the extermination of the buffalo was the only way of solving the Indian question. As long as this large animal of the chase existed, the Indians simply could not be kept on reservations, and always had an ample supply of meat on hand to support them in the event of a war; and its disappearance was the only method of forcing them to at least partially abandon their savage mode of life. From the standpoint of humanity at large, the extermination of the buffalo has been a blessing. (Roosevelt, 1933, p. 229)

Roosevelt, a graduate in Natural Science from one of the United States’ first Humboldtian universities, Harvard, provides a fine example of an individual who fully understood the destructive ability of the *Bildung* devoted to the human. His writings abound with references to extinctions, or as he called them “exterminations,” created by the human’s ravenous attempts to satisfy its need for world. His efforts to conserve a space/time for animals, moreover, were motivated by little more than the desire to preserve animals for hunting and research. Instead, I would suggest we begin our research at the limits of animals’, in their pluralities, times and

spaces. We might construct a new model, one that researches the times and places where the human world actively interacts with and destroys cognitions that might promise us a world with a manifold of spaces and times. I would call this the Everglades model. This would be a model that worked acknowledged and actively promoted research those sites where human worlds interface with the spatial, temporal, and conceptual domains different than that of the human. Such research would, by necessity, first need to acknowledge the validity and dignity of the differences encountered. It would not merely ask, “do animals think?” Instead, it would start from recognizing that human thinking blinds itself, becomes ignorant, by not letting encounters with the other shine lights on its own blind spots. Studying the times that, for example, dogs chew, the places where raccoons are struck by vehicles, can teach us much about our own concepts about the appropriate time and place of the workday or need for traveling at “human” speeds. In the case of the dog, should we find that puppies that exercise and relieve themselves every four hours are less likely to end up in shelters, perhaps more employers would embrace telecommuting or dog-friendly workplaces, thus radically altering our notion of work. In the humanities, we might call attention to the fact that though his expedition killed over 11,000 animals, the literature devoted to the Roosevelt’s Africa Expedition continually masks the enormity of that figure that by providing alibis or downright omitting discussion of it. How might the Smithsonian be reimagined if it displayed these historical silences? Of course, if we focused our thought on these luminal spaces, this would mean that we might allow these species to challenge the concepts driving our behavior, to contribute to our philosophical culture. In short, this is one of the most significant ways that we can allow animals to contribute to a *Bildung* beyond that merely enslaved to a concept of humankind.

For this to happen, we need to make sure that our institution, the university, is willing to provide a space and times, classes and curriculums, for the thinking necessary to move us toward the value of considering other worlds, worlds that Humboldt would never consider part of world. These spaces need to be articulated in coordinated, systematic ways. A class here or there can have impact, but producing multiple spaces wherein students might persistently reflect upon how our ignorance of other worlds is what is required for true epistemic habitat restoration. When we begin to think ourselves toward this point, only then will diplomas become more than sheepskins.

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