

An Exploration on Humboldt's Philosophy of University

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Abstract

Wilhelm Von Humboldt is the most influential educational theorist and practitioner in the German educational history, which attributes to the university philosophy proposed by him to establish University of Berlin: university is the best place for self-improvement; the internal organizational principle of university is a combination of teaching and research; in order to ensure university's academic freedom the relationship between university and state is both independent and dependent; autonomy and intervention should balance with each other; teachers and students in university are no longer the relationship between teaching and learning, but discuss academics together. Therefore, universities become academic community in order to increase knowledge. Even far from era of Humboldt, his philosophy of university still has a profound impact on the higher educational reforms in Germany, the world as well as China.

Key words: University philosophy; Self-education; Teaching combined with research; Knowledge community; Academic community

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INTRODUCTION

Hegel says: Without Humboldt University there will not be the brilliant German civilization. Humboldt University which has been founded by the Germany educator Wilhelm Von Humboldt is known as the mother of modern universities. Humboldt's philosophy of the university not only has a profound impact on German higher education, but also lays the foundation for the modern university system in the world, and also has a great inspiration to the reform and development of higher education in China. Today, when all countries attach great importance to the reform of higher education, can we still learn something from Humboldt's philosophy of university? This paper will analyze the core idea of Humboldt's philosophy of the university on the basis of the original German literatures to find out the answer.

1. UNIVERSITY'S MISSION: ACHIEVE SELF-IMPROVEMENT THROUGH ACADEMICS

In the establishment of University of Berlin, Humboldt insists to use the name of university. He thinks that university "should not exclude any subject" (Flitner, 1984, p.31), and only in university, "studying the true spirit of each subject and studying the relationship of combining all subjects is in order to improve human's education as a whole." (Hu & Cui, trans., 2013, p.24) Therefore, in *On the Internal and External Organizations of Berlin's Higher Academic Institutions* he comes straight to the essence of university (university's missions): As the peak of an academic career, higher academic institution is the land of national morality and culture collection, based on which is the philosophy: Higher academic institution should study science from breadth and depth, offer not deliberate but natural and

reasonable materials for spiritual and moral education. Its essence is that:

Integrate objective academics with subjective education from the inside, integrate complete high school education with the beginning of self-directed research from the outside, or have an impact on the process from high school to research. The key is academics. As long as academic exists, even though there will be some deviations we can still naturally and fully understand it. (Ibid., p.90)

By further interpreting the definition of university's mission, we can classify it into three levels:

1.1 University Is the Place to Improve Self-Education

The definition of university's mission shows that Humboldt's philosophy of university opposes the old and traditional universities and clearly shows the budding of new universities. People are in the center of all activities, and people only want to enhance and improve the strength of talents without considering the purpose of a particular aspect, thus university cannot be equated to vocational school which imparts vocational introductory knowledge, and cannot engage in utilitarian education, but is such an institution: It liberates people from the traditional bondage, makes people have independent and self-reliant capabilities, thus people are no longer be useful for this or that purpose but take self-improvement as the ultimate goal. Self-education becomes a master throughout Humboldt's philosophy of the university. His vision for the university suggests that people have a new experience of life, people see the world from a new perspective, and people have a new value judgment on things: As human being, people should be free. People should eventually understand as his own purposes. The purpose of a university is to make people noble and moral. Morality means being independent of the external conditions and internal instincts, and moral progress has a very close relationship with self-improvement. Self-improvement is a necessary condition for the social behavior of people. Individual self-improvement function is to obtain humanity to impress all people, and this humanity can only be created by individuals from themselves. Therefore, self-improvement and moral progress should also have interactions with people. For Humboldt, education is something which people obtain from the outside feedbacks onto people themselves, and is also a continuing abandoning in the alienation process of a part of people. Such an abandoning is a progressive process, therefore external standards can be used to evaluate the university which is the most advanced educational stage. People should be given freedom in university, whose purpose is for people's own development. People are no longer the object of education, but the subject to conduct self-education. In short, a university which can best represent a nation's educational institutions should make people's rational, free and autonomous moral behaviors

become possible, and is the best place to cultivate perfect humanity through people's self-education.

1.2 Academics Is a Prerequisite to Improve Self-Education

Why it is exactly university rather than other organizations to make young people conduct self-improvement and strive for a perfect humanity? Humboldt's answer is: Because the university pursues pure academics. "Because only the academics from the heart and which is implanted in the heart can transform characteristics." (Ibid., p.91) Pure academics come from people's pure initiatives. Because pure academics neither collects existing things nor uses some methods to sort empirical knowledge, but is a rational philosophical ideology. As a pure academic place, university should be a creative organization, and cannot be a training place to impart all kinds of special vocational introductory knowledge. Therefore, Humboldt considers the courses of medicine department in a university should also "firstly be theoretical and take academics' universality as the criterion, and is not allowed to be fragmented and isolated from the common association of the relevant subjects." (von der Kön, 1903, p.132) Pure academics are constant innovations and attempts to grasp the reality as a whole of the concept. "Academics should be regarded as a thing which has not yet been fully discovered and will never be completely discovered, and should always be regarded as an unfinished discovery to study." (Hu & Cui, trans., 2013, p.91) This is because academics are not only unfinished, but also is a persistent activity, or a product constantly being innovated. Academics do not record or evaluate the world, but design and create the world. By the way of academic research we can not only promote student and the whole nation's spirits and morality, but also because academics has an independent value, pure academic activities will feed back onto people themselves, and then guide people through self-discovery to be independent, and finally to be able to create true things. Therefore, the research process of academics has the greatest educational significance, and during the explorative process people are the most likely to be able to achieve the ultimate goal of self-education. To Humboldt, the subjects concerning the educational significance of people have a priority over other subjects, because they study people's activities, expressions, their objectification and concretion, and have a special educational significance to the feedback onto people themselves (Clemens, 1965, p.317).

1.3 Universality Is the Purpose of Improving Self-Education

What in the purpose to improve self-education through academics in university? Humboldt believes that the significance of pursuit of pure academics lies in people's capabilities to adapt to a wide variety of conditions. As he says in the *Report of the Ministry of Culture and Education*,

There is also an education which is indispensable to everyone and which specifically cultivate ideology and characteristics. Obviously, only when everyone does not look into his own particular occupation, but strives to become a good and noble person and citizen who receive education in accordance with his status, then he can be a good artisan, merchant, soldier or broker. If we teach him the required courses for this, he will be able to easily get the special skills of his occupation and always have the freedom to engage in this occupation or another. (Hu & Cui, trans., 2012, p.137)

To Humboldt, the cultivation of this universal ability can guide people into specific and real life, because compared to academy of sciences, “university has a closer relationship with real life and the demands of governments, because university undertakes the state’s real-life activities and the work to instruct young people, while academy of sciences only concerns the academics itself.” (Ibid., p.969) This practical function can only be met by university, because it inspires young people to educate themselves through academic activities. Therefore, university has a greater and more important practical significance: University cannot lift social shackles and obligations. As an academic and educational institution, university is also a part of the national political community. In this sense, Humboldt does not oppose the original goal of founding university – to cultivate talents, but opposes the tendency which emerged at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries: University neglected to conduct general education by regarding people as individuals, but focused on the real life-oriented, one-sided and specialized education. Therefore, Humboldt requests the specialized education which is needed by actual life or in a particular industry to be distinguished from general education, and students can only accept this specialized education after the end of general education (Ibid., p.82). Secondly, Humboldt expects the university to cultivate people with accomplishment, rationality, harmonious personality and all-round development through academics. He believes that only such kind of people could get rid of the one-sidedness of development and could really meet the needs of a country.

2. ORGANIZATIONAL PRINCIPLE OF UNIVERSITY: TEACHING COMBINED WITH RESEARCH

How should we organize a university in order to achieve the purpose of improving self-education in university? Because academics are established based on pure autonomy, education can only be self-education. Therefore Humboldt especially emphasizes that “the State can neither deem university as a high school nor view it as a training school”, “University is not a supplement to similar high schools, and not a class in higher grades of a middle school.” (Ibid., p.93) The features of a university should be the same with a research institute. “It should

always regard academics as a problem which has not yet been fully solved, and therefore is always in the study status.” (Ibid., p.90)

On the issue of the internal organization of higher academic institutions, everything should be based on this principle... Once people stop the original academic researches, or imagine, academics is no longer created from the depths of spirits, but can be lined up through extensive information collection, then everything is irretrievably lost forever. (Ibid., p.91)

Humboldt takes this to emphasize academic researches’ position in university: University undertakes the missions of both personnel cultivation and scientific research, which are interrelated with each other. However, academic development takes the first place, and personnel cultivation can be naturally realized in the process of academic development.

Because a university can only create conditions and provide opportunities and a suitable environment for the self-education of young people, the internal organization of university can only come from this objective: To conduct free and pure academic discussions in a community with a common thought. Therefore, Humboldt not only holds that “during a few years after graduating from high school and before entering the society, young people should stay in a place where many people, namely teachers and learners get together, to devote themselves to academic thinking.” (Ibid., p.75) He also believes that

because of the function of human thought is to develop collectively, not to replace one thing with another, but to make a person’s activity stimulate the others’ activities and let everyone know the general, original and sporadic power of individuals, so the internal organization of higher academic institution should create and maintain the continuous, active, unconstrained and not deliberate interactions. (Ibid., p.90)

Thus, young people should be through “in an intimate community with the same temperament and similar ages, with a few outstanding scholars who are committed to improving and disseminating academics, consciously live for themselves and academic for a few years.” (Ibid., p.85) Only in this way students in a university can achieve the purpose of self-improvement.

The pure academic point of view requires that university’s most important task is research, thus Humboldt’s philosophy of university is completely different from the previous philosophies, especially his definition on the relationship between university and academy of sciences. Humboldt says:

Academy of sciences firstly became prosperous in foreign countries... while in the new era, none of academy of sciences (in the field of academic development) has achieved outstanding performance. Academy of sciences has done a little or made no contribution to the development of German sciences and arts. (Ibid., p.95)

In addition,

if people let university to teach classes and disseminate academics, and let academy of sciences expand academics,

it's clear that it's unfair to university. In Germany, academics are certainly expanded likewise or more by university teachers rather than members of academy of sciences. (Ibid., p.94)

The reasons are: Firstly, "academic is normally not easy to speak out. If the researchers do not take their own initiatives to absorb and understand it, academics will be difficult to understand, if people are not in university or don't often have new discoveries." (Ibid., p.95) Secondly, best papers can be nurtured through lectures. Finally, the key is that relevant academic reports given at university lecture "will certainly inspire those who are used to this study method" (Ibid., p.94), because "university collects a lot of intelligent, energetic and young scholars. Academics in university will obviously develop more quickly and dynamically." (Ibid.) Humboldt thus concludes, "If university is properly classified, people can certainly believe in university on academic expansion and the abandon academy of sciences for this ultimate goal." (Ibid., p.95) In order to highlight that university can accomplish the task of academic research, Humboldt even holds that "in fact there's no need to set up a special academy of sciences, whose task can be accomplished by university teachers." (Ibid.)

In order to ensure the forefront position of university on academic research, Humboldt proposes to take full advantage of the resources of academy of sciences, and recommends that

in order to make the two (university and academy of sciences) remain vibrant, it is necessary to combine the two although their work is to maintain their independence. Individual member no longer just belongs to a university or an academy of sciences, and in this combination the two can exist independently but also be used in a new proper way. (Ibid.)

Academy of sciences should also serve for the academic work of the university. "Each academician has the right to give lectures before obtaining a university teaching qualification, without a necessity to become a member of the university. Some scholars have the right to become both a university teacher and an academician." (Ibid., p.95) Academy of sciences decides the employment of its staff on its own, and university gets staff by appointment from national government, thus university and academy of sciences will "compete" as the arena of academic experience, and they need to "find a balance by the interactions with each other." (Ibid., p.96) So far, Humboldt completely gets rid of Schleiermacher's view which holds that university teaches and disseminates academics, academy of sciences expands academics, but considered that university not only conducts academic research, but also better develops and promotes academics through teaching. In his opinion, lectures for students are optional, but for teachers and researchers are more significant: "Academics make professional progress by performing the duty as a university teacher." (Ibid., p.94) Thus, a combination of teaching and research at the university is the best way to explore academics.

3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITY AND GOVERNMENT: BOTH INDEPENDENT AND DEPENDENT, AUTONOMY AND INTERVENTION BALANCE WITH EACH OTHER

Because academics and education of university does not have any external purpose, "government cannot ask university to give him any directly related stuff, but believes that, in order to achieve the ultimate goal, the government's goal will be achieved from a higher perspective." (Ibid., p.93) The university autonomy of Humboldt firstly is an autonomy based on a clear academic and educational definition. Without this prerequisite university autonomy cannot be realized: University "should get rid of all forms of government, and can only be people's spiritual life. Lead extrinsic leisure and intrinsic pursuit to academics and studies." (Ibid., p.90) Thus, Humboldt's view on the role of government is divided into two aspects. On the one hand, he believes that each kind of government's involvement in university is harmful, "Without him (the government), academics will develop better in its original way." (Ibid., p.91) On the other hand, "the government has an obligation to provide external forms and means for academic research." (Ibid.) Therefore, how can government ensure the normal operation of the university without unduly interfering in the internal affairs of the university?

3.1 Government Is Responsible for the Appointment of University Staff

Humboldt thinks that the role of government is not only to provide proper material or external form of help to university, more importantly, government should appoint appropriate staff who are capable to achieve the internal target of university, and "by choosing researchers to care about their spiritual richness (strength and diversity) as well as their freedom from the effects." (Ibid., p.92) The reason of university's existence is because of freedom. To Humboldt, it's impossible for the government to hurt the free atmosphere of the university, but Humboldt also recognizes that "freedom is threatened not only by government, but also by the university itself. University usually uses a particular ideological spirit to strangle other ideas as it did at the beginning, so government must prevent the possible occurrence of these defects." (Ibid.) If ideological tyranny occurs in the university, government must act as a freedom defender to force the university to open academic discussions to safeguard its freedom. In the process, government does not act as a referee to determine who is the winner and who is the loser. What he can do to be to try to keep these ongoing discussions among different views and prevent dogmatism and teaching institutionalization. In short, government's task is to keep the academic-oriented basic

principle of university and ensure the space of academic discussions and academic development. In this sense, government's intervention in the university is to prevent the rigidification of academic thoughts inside university and prevent the dreary atmosphere, so university's reliance on government is in order to better ensure its freedom and independence.

3.2 Government Is Only Responsible for a Part of Finance of University

In order to remain the independence and autonomy of university, in addition to suggesting that Government cannot interfere with university's academics, but should be responsible for the appointment of staff to prevent rigidification of academic ideologies, Humboldt also insists that university's finance should be partially borne by the nation as primary and secondary schools: Firstly, according to the political and economic situation at that time this can reduce the financial burden of the government. Secondly, Humboldt holds that it is more conducive to the promotion of the nation's independence. He thinks that such measures enable the nation to have such a consciousness: Not only government can act as a reflection of knowledge and morality to exemplarily own education and trainings, people have a greater responsibility and obligation to participate in educational activities. The mission and purpose of education are to make people free, make people become independent and autonomous. Therefore, education should not be a superficial external agency serving for government's demands, purposes and benefits, instead government's own interest lies in cultivating self-conscious, moral, and civilized citizens. A moral and civilized person is not a groveling servant of government, but are a nation's representative who requests the government's assurance to obtain his humanity, so as to promote the development of the entire nation. Therefore, Humboldt insists that government is only responsible for a part of the finance of university, and proposes in *The Application to establish University of Berlin*, "The new university will obtain the annual income by renting territories and properties." (Flitner, 1984, p.33)

4. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHERS AND STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY: AN ACADEMIC COMMUNITY IN THE PURPOSE OF INCREASING KNOWLEDGE

Because the task and internal organization of university change, the evaluation on professors in university is no longer to see whether he masters a wealth of knowledge, but to see his creativity in academics, to see whether he has the ability to integrate his subject into the overall

association with academics and life, whether he can estimate the significance of the subject on academic and educational progress and whether he has the ability to use it effectively. Before making the plan of establishing the new university Humboldt wrote to Doner,

University and education of the whole nation does not depend on the pure collection of a lot of knowledge which may be dead, but depends on an ideological spirit, by which we overview a complete subject and guide the research of this subject, then combine it with general education and enlightenment. This will be quite effective for intelligence and personality. (von der Kön, 1903, p.17)

To Humboldt, "university teachers are no longer teachers, and students are no longer learners. Students conduct research by themselves, and professors guide students' researches and support them." (Hu & Cui, trans., 2013, p.75) This new relationship between teachers and students in university-independent researchers and researchers receiving instructions, is completely different from the relationship between high school teachers and high school students. Humboldt further elaborates on this relationship: "The relationship between teachers and students is absolutely different from the previous relationships. Teachers do not exist for students, but they both exist for academics. Teachers' work is closely related to students' status, and without students teachers cannot make progress in other respects. If students do not take initiatives to gather around the teacher, the teacher should go to the students. In order to get close to his goal, the teacher should integrate the matured, but also a little one-sided and less active power with the weaker but bold power which is committed to unbiased researches." (Ibid., p.90) This new relationship between teachers and students in university also make the educational and discussional conversations become the center of university life, and be the typical characteristics of university community life. It is during such frequent exchanges thoughts are amended and pure academics can be produced. These discussions are not completed and inconclusive, so it's worthy of constant discussions and researches. As Humboldt says, "University courses have no end. To students, strictly speaking, there is not a sign of maturity. A student has learned some knowledge in high school. Whether he needs any verbal instruction or not, for how long and in what manner, depends entirely on the student himself." (Ibid., p.75) Because university does not teach a completed knowledge which is directly useful to life and practices, teachers and students should be more committed to exploring academics and increasing knowledge by interactions, and this purely academics-dedicated activity plays a pivotal role to the growth of teachers and students. The university is just a "community constituted by teachers and students which are only responsible for academics" (Horst, 1967, p.42). And provides appropriate conditions for the complementary growth and self-improvement of teachers and students.

CONCLUSION

Through the above analysis, we can conclude that: the ideal university of Humboldt is oriented by pure academics, which should improve students' capabilities of comprehensive development while trying to keep their individual differences, so as to enable them to adapt to the changing world. His envisioned ideal person, on the one hand, needs to learn knowledge of new subjects to adapt to the development of society, on the other hand, needs to use humanistic tradition for self-education, and is a model of traditional and modern combination. His philosophy of university absorbs the tradition of European liberal education and is innovated in combining classical German philosophy. These idealized characteristics lay the foundation for the four characteristics of modern university, and make an outstanding contribution for the transition of German universities from traditional to modern. Humboldt is not only a good educational practitioner, but also an excellent educational theorist. *China's Middle and Long-term Educational Reform and Developmental Plan (2010-2020)* stresses: In order to improve the international competitiveness of higher education, we should focus on improving the quality of personnel training, promoting scientific researches, enhancing the abilities of social services and other aspects,

because education, especially university education not only makes people have the ability to adapt to the changes of society and the times, but also makes them have the abilities to conduct continuous self-education. In this regard, Humboldt's philosophy of the university is still enlightening to the higher educational reform in China.

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