

Wilhelm von Humboldt, “Comparative Anthropology” (1795)

Abstract

A leading German scholar and statesman at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767–1835) campaigned for a linguistically united “German nation.” His 1795 “Comparative Anthropology” numbers among the classic works of pedagogy. In this attempt to explain the scientific foundations of mankind, Humboldt considers the anthropological basis of mankind and works out commonalities and differences within the “species.” He perceives the central differences as being those between the sexes and between “peoples” or nations. In the process, he emphasizes differences in physical constitution and anatomy as well as character. For Humboldt, the German language and German national character were central to German identity (“Germanness”).

Source

12. Plan for a Comparative Anthropology

1.

Just as in comparative anatomy the constitution of the human body is elucidated by examining the animal body; in comparative anthropology the characteristics of the moral character of the various human categories can be placed next to one another and evaluated comparatively.

Historians, biographers, travel writers, poets, and authors of all kinds, not even excluding speculative philosophers, collect data pertinent to this science. On journeys as well as at home, in a busy life as well as in an idle one, the opportunity presents itself to enhance and use that data; among all studies, no other is our constant companion to such a high degree as the study of human beings. It is only a matter of collecting, sifting through, ordering, and processing the rich material that all of life provides.

Comparative anthropology is dedicated to doing that. Based on general anthropology, and assuming that the species-specific character of human beings is known, comparative anthropology only looks for humans' individual differences, separates the merely random and transitory from the fundamental and permanent, investigates the nature of those differences, looks into their causes, judges their worth, determines the way to treat them, and predicts the course of their development.

[...]

3. The Direct Influence of an Individual's Knowledge of Human Nature on Character.

[...]

In general, differences in character types, even if they are very detrimental, are nevertheless absolutely inevitable, and the question is only whether they should be blindly left to fate or converted by sensible guidance into idiosyncrasies. However, there can be but one answer to this question.

Comparative anthropology looks at the character of entire classes of people, preferably the character of nations and eras. Those characters are often random: Should they be retained as well? In the end, should the philosopher,

the historian, the poet, the individual carry his name, his nation, his era, his individual being visibly on his person? — Certainly, [but] only [if] correctly understood. The human being should allow all the circumstances in which he finds himself to affect him, not turn away the influence of anyone, but process the influences of everyone on his own terms and according to objective principles. [...]

Character only develops by the constant effects of mental activity and feelings. Because the latter employ certain capabilities unceasingly and others seldom or never, some capabilities are developed and others suppressed, and as a result the particular character type gradually emerges. Because of this consistent correspondence between our way of being and our way of judging, between our practical and our theoretical natures, it becomes possible for us to affect ourselves actively and practically just through the idea, using our mind. Nothing can be understood with intellect that is not suggested in some way in the realm of the senses and feelings; but neither can a person absorb anything into his being that has not been prepared for to some extent by concepts. A person cannot understand something of which he has no sense, for which the material is lacking, nor can he be something of which he has no concept, for which the form is missing.

[...]

But above all, character develops socially towards purity and consistency if it comes in contact with pure and consistent characters. It is not the similarity alone which draws one character by its inborn nature to another; it is also the contrast that sets them apart from one another. For both moral and physical organization have an inherent drive to develop, which, as soon as one's own character has achieved some consistency, is drawn not just to similarity but to a comparative state of individuality on both sides with relation to one another. Thus, the male character becomes pure and manly when the female character is placed opposite him, and vice versa. However, this peculiarity is of course more apparent in individual cases than in entire species. It is most decidedly missing in the characters of nations, which in interaction with each other increasingly either exaggerate their originality, or give it up, or determine it to be proper and cultivate it. Even external facial appearance is subject to this influence to some extent, as, for example, the certainly not chimeric similarity of married persons to one another proves.

[...]

4. Purpose and Procedures of a Comparative Anthropology in General. – Danger of Possible Misuse.

[...]

The human being only develops in accordance with the physical things that surround him. Circumstances and events that at first glance are completely alike to him internally, climate, soil, livelihood, external facilities, and so forth, bring out in him new, and often the finest and highest-level moral manifestations. Through physical means, procreation and lineage, the moral nature, once gained, is carried forward and propagated, and in this way, the intellectual and moral progress that otherwise would perhaps be transitory and variable, takes part to a certain extent in the stability and permanence of nature. The physical nature of the human being thus plays in every regard a significant role in the formation of his character.

This is even clearer in observing the entire human race than in individuals. Large groups, tribes, and nations retain a common character for centuries, and even when it suffers great changes, the traces of its origins are evident. The same causes produce the same effects throughout all the ages, and overall about the same results will therefore be found from similar forces, the same influence from external circumstances, the same play of emotions, the same power of the good and true, with which influence it [the good] emerges from the most tangled fabric of

occurrences in the most various forms. The actions of the individual betray a random arbitrariness of inclination, while the fates of the multitude bear the imprint of nature.

[...]

5. Methods, Expansion, and Limits. Classification

According to the foregoing, comparative anthropology is a branch of philosophical and practical knowledge relating to human nature. Like anthropology, it therefore avoids empiricism and pure speculation and is based exclusively and completely on experience. It will also acknowledge and follow the main rules that experience establishes. It will accordingly:

1. take the data for its character portraits from the statements of the whole person, at the same time from his physical, intellectual, and moral nature, to ensure the most complete material.
2. among these data, pay attention primarily to those characteristics that actually define the character, namely, to the characteristics at places where the character is individually different—[that is,] to the relationship and the movement of forces.
3. always look only at the inner state and perfection, never only or even just mainly look at the suitability for outside purposes.
4. describe the character genetically as much as possible.
5. proceed from the facts and statements to the general characteristics, and from there to the actual inner being.
6. precisely separate the random characteristics from the significant ones, and order them according to the different degrees of their randomness.
7. pull together the character, until now viewed more often from single sides, into the most complete unit, and extract the concept from the complete image drawn—which is best accomplished by attempting to state all at once the way in which it achieves the highest, most shared purposes of the human being.

[...]

The human being needs a certain amount of culture, and not a small one, to achieve an individual form. His first education is definitely only in large groups, only in rough forms defined by few characteristics. This degree of culture must already have risen to quite a high level, if the character is to be so refined and its form so precise that it only exhibits individual characteristics which can be expected to expand the concept of humanity in its perfection. But even more, the character must appear to be a path on which the human being can come close to this perfection in a practical manner. For the first unique characteristics of still coarse peoples are in most cases either only external or random and insignificant, or even erroneous differences; these are followed by more or less promising individual characteristics; and it is only the last stage when the uniqueness spreads across all the energies and begins to form an entirely individual character.

Even in our cultivated Europe, we still find all these stages side-by-side. At the highest stage are incontestably the French, the English, and so forth; Poles, Spaniards, and the Portuguese are probably only at the middle stage; and the Russians and the Turks are certainly at the lowest stage. Who would want to try to postulate an ideal individual character for the latter, even only generally after removal of the external or random differences, an

individual character that differs from the general human character in any way worth considering?

[...]

6. Sources and Remedies. Required State of Mind.

[...]

The human being, also viewed as a species, is clearly a link in the chain of physical nature. He deviates from the original to form races, like the other animals; these races propagate their unique characteristics and produce with each other indeterminate blended beings. Here and in other similar cases, there are effects of nature that cannot be denied, must just be used and guided. In this regard, the human being absolutely belongs to nature. He can, like nature, be observed, and the truly characteristic indicator of that is that it is possible to experiment with him.

[...]

Any theoretical processing of any material assumes evaluation according to laws, and to the extent that the human character is capable of such, it admits of scientific treatment.

Of course, the organic nature of the human being makes evident laws that apply regularly and unfailingly. Thus, it is a general law of nature that part of the individuality of the parents passes to the children. But the complicated organization of the human body, the body's still incomprehensible connection to moral character, and the great difficulty of experimenting with the human being result in those laws still being imperfectly understood and difficult to ever discern completely at all. Thus, it is in the previous example not possible to determine what exactly is more or less inherited through procreation, to what degree and under what circumstances. In fact, there is not yet even a general formula or method to know the physical and physiological uniqueness of an individual as a whole, which is much simpler by far. Only individual differences are observed and recognized, and little or nothing can be concluded from them.

[...]

Material handled only historically exhibits the least conformity to laws. In the case of such material, everything taken individually appears just as random as chance and the arbitrariness that brings it about. Nevertheless, even here, if only large quantities are considered at the same time, similar events reoccur with a certain regularity, although it is less strict and more difficult to observe.

[...]

Indeed, we see that on one hand the human being is able to acquire characteristics in such a manner that they connect to everything in him, even become part of his physical nature and are passed on by him to others through procreation, and that on the other hand he can, as soon as his spirit takes another turn, step out of his previous form and exchange it with another one. The latter power is sometimes apparent to an amazing degree in the struggle of individual characteristics with the character of the family or the nation. [...]

Source: *Wilhelm von Humboldts Werke* (= *Wilhelm von Humboldts Gesammelte Schriften*, published by the Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften. 1. Abteilung), edited by Albert Leitzmann, Behr, Berlin

1903 (Volume 1 = Writings, Volume 1: 1785–1795), pp. 377, 384–398. Available online at:
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Translation: Kathleen Dell'Orto

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