

Greeting Johann Christian Senckenberg (Dr. Helmut Wicht)

Geobiodiversity – An Integrative Approach Expanding Humboldt's Vision
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Good evening!

Please allow me to introduce myself,
I'm a man of wealth and taste.
I've been 'round for long, long years,
my name is Senckenberg
and I'm the patron of this place.

I understand you are the crème de la crème of researchers on global Geobiodiversity. I'm just a local hero, a medical doctor. I have erected a still-existing charitable foundation in my days, but I was long dead before the Senckenbergische Naturforschende Gesellschaft was founded. I have left many traces in this city, and whenever something "Senckenbergian" is to be celebrated here – which happens quite often – they fetch me from my grave. Sometimes just as a decorative element. Sometimes they let me say something, but they worry about what I will say.

Because I'm a grumpy old man. My name is "Senckenberg". "Der sengende Berg". That means: "burning mountain". I am a volcano. I am a geological event. A nasty one. And please forgive my nasty English. It's not my native tongue.

So they asked me to praise Humboldt.
I said. "Which one?"
They said: "The younger."
I said: "What the heck? They are both darn Prussians anyway..."

You know, there were two of them. Alexander, the younger brother, is **your** Humboldt. He conceived the scientific field you work in: Geobiodiversity. The other Humboldt, Wilhelm, conceived the institutions most of you work in: the modern universities.

And they were both Prussians. Knaves to their king. "Knappen ihres Königs." We Frankfurters did not like the Prussians. In my days. Stubborn republicans we were.

Anyway.

For me, praising Humboldt the Younger is a somewhat difficult task, because he was born in 1769, and I was dead only three years later. Yet we, the dead, we have ways and means ... allright:

The praise of Humboldt... there was one thing he sure did: Think big. Very big. You praise him as the inventor of inter- and transdisciplinarity: but he thought even bigger. He aimed at the whole. Let me cite from the preface of his "Cosmos":

"... my enterprises inspired me to develop very general ideas, they strengthened my courage to deal with our knowledge of the interconnections of earthly and heavenly

phenomena in a single, unified opus. The hitherto indistinct idea of a physical description of the earth thus transformed into a greater vision – perhaps according to a plan that was too bold – the consideration to grasp **all** of creation in the spaces of earth **and** heavens in a physical description on the **whole** world.”

Ambitious plans, indeed. Grasping the whole. Mensch, Erde, Kosmos. He did not succeed, he did not finish that project. Mensch. Erde. Kosmos. You will not succeed. No one will. Because we are a part of the whole, and no part can be the whole. The whole may not even exist. It's Bertrand Russel's Paradox: the set of all sets is a set that cannot be imagined.

Even worse: one cannot do science in a system without disturbing it. The external observer is a chimera. Any observation is an interference, not only in quantum mechanics. Even a pure description of a system alters the system: Humboldt's description of the New World altered the way we thought about it and thus also changed the ways we dealt with this world and therefore also changed it.

And there are other problems, because the following is true:

“In endless space countless luminous spheres, round each of which some dozen smaller illuminated ones revolve, hot at the core and covered over with a hard cold crust; on this crust a mouldy film has produced living and knowing beings: this is empirical truth, the real, the world. Yet for a being who thinks, it is a precarious position to stand on one of those numberless spheres freely floating in boundless space, without knowing whence or whither, and to be only one of innumerable similar beings that throng, press, and toil, restlessly and rapidly arising and passing away in beginningless and endless time.”

That's a quote from Arthur Schopenhauer. A Frankfurter, by the way, a contemporary of Humboldt. And even though time and space may not be endless, it is nevertheless true: no one gives a shit. **We** are the greasy mold, and, on a cosmic scale, it does not matter at all what will happen to us and other fungi and slimes, that grow and crawl and creep on any of these crusty globes. Life is like a plague that has come upon matter, an infectious disease, variable like a virus, and even if we run it down to near nil, it will resume the most diverse bio-multiformity again and has done so in the past.

It does not matter.

Per se – all this [reference to the wall] is entirely meaningless. None of these stuffed beasts or beings pickled in formalin not so long ago had any more or less right to exist than an early cyanobacterium that intoxicated the earth's atmosphere with oxygen billions of years ago. It must have been a devastating event.

It does not matter. Unless it matters to **us**. Which it does.

It makes no sense, unless **we** make it. “Anthropos metron hapanton”, “man is the measure of all things”. A word from Protagoras, from old Athens down south. And no, this is not just hubris. We **are** part of the system, we **do** relate to the system and the things that surround us, but not just in any meaningless, mechanical way: we measure. We measure the way it pleases and displeases us, we estimate the comfort

and the pain, we fear and hope – in short: the world affects our **will**, which is the measure.

And we can do – we **must** do – whatever we want. In fact, we do the strangest things. We – that means: **you** – have just declared the present geological epoch as the “Anthropocene”. The age of man. Yet, over there in the Silicon Valley, they are working hard on getting over man. Transhumanism is the parole. The new mankind, which is supposed to be closer to god than us, shall be made from silicon and not from carbon. We have barely entered the anthropocene and are already on our way out of it. If one just exchanges the positions of the two letters “p” and “o” in “Anthropocene”, it becomes “anthro obscene” – which it is.

Obscene.

If we – or better: the beings that the transhumanists want to make out of us – if we were made of silicon, if we lived forever, all this [reference to the wall] would not matter. Or it would matter in a way, that we, the old carbon copies of other carbon copies, will not understand. And, as mentioned earlier, we cannot even understand it now. We cannot grasp the whole. Yet we are in it, we know that we depend on it, we cannot live without affecting it, we do know that our actions will have effects, but – let's be honest – owing to the nature of the deterministic chaos that we are in, we cannot really predict the consequences of our actions. Besides – there is contingency. Any volcano may erupt anytime anywhere. Or not.

So what?

Let us be modest, and let us be honest. Let us – with Humboldt – admit that we cannot oversee the whole, but let's keep trying. Let us admit that we cannot foresee all consequences of our actions, but let us nevertheless make reasonable predictions.

Let us admit, that **we** are the measure. All these beings and things are **for** us – or against us, in case they eat us. They are there on purpose. On our purpose. Or against it. We are in the anthropocene, so let's be anthropocentric. Let's be human, before transhumanism transcends it.

And let us, at the same time, understand that there are ways out of the anthropocentric jail of purpose and use, out of the evolutionary tragicomedy of survival, descend with modification and extinction, out of the geological dungeon of sedimentation, metamorphosis and erosion.

Beauty is the key. These things are beautiful. And beauty is something that **may** have a use and purpose, that **may** have a history and time, but it does not **require** either a use and purpose to be what it is: beautiful. Beauty needs no justification. It just **is**. Self-contained, so to say, beyond the realm of cause and effect. Freedom and beauty are the same thing.

This is a thought from Friedrich Schiller. Not from Frankfurt, but from Marbach in Suebia, down south. At least not a Prussian.

Thank you for your attention to these matters, enjoy the evening!