

# Alexander von Humboldt, Excerpts from *Cosmos* (1845-58)

## Abstract

---

Toward the end of his life, the geographer, naturalist, and explorer [Alexander von Humboldt](#) (1769–1859) authored *Cosmos* (1845–58), an ambitious multi-volume work. *Cosmos* was one of the last manifestations of the classicistic/idealistic quest to articulate the unity of all scholarly and scientific knowledge. Humboldt's study was subsequently superseded by works that took a more pluralistic approach to epistemology.

## Source

---

[...]

In considering the study of physical phenomena, not merely in its bearings on the material wants of life, but in its general influence on the intellectual advancement of mankind, we find its noblest and most important result to be a knowledge of the chain of connection, by which all natural forces are linked together, and made mutually dependent upon each other; and it is the perception of these relations that exalts our views and ennobles our enjoyments. Such a result can, however, only be reaped as the fruit of observation and intellect, combined with the spirit of the age, in which are reflected all the varied phases of thought. He who can trace, through by-gone times, the stream of our knowledge to its primitive source, will learn from history how, for thousands of years, man has labored, amid the ever-recurring changes of form, to recognize the invariability of natural laws, and has thus, by the force of mind, gradually subdued a great portion of the physical world to his dominion. In interrogating the history of the past, we trace the mysterious course of ideas yielding the first glimmering perception of the same image of a Cosmos, or harmoniously ordered whole, which, dimly shadowed forth to the human mind in the primitive ages of the world, is now fully revealed to the maturer intellect of man kind as the result of long and laborious observation.

Each of these epochs of the contemplation of the external world—the earliest dawn of thought and the advanced stage of civilization—has its own source of enjoyment. In the former, this enjoyment, in accordance with the simplicity of the primitive ages, flowed from an intuitive feeling of the order that was proclaimed by the invariable and successive reappearance of the heavenly bodies, and by the progressive development of organized beings; while in the latter, this sense of enjoyment springs from a definite knowledge of the phenomena of nature. When man began to interrogate nature, and, not content with observing, learned to evoke phenomena under definite conditions; when once he sought to collect and record facts, in order that the fruit of his labors might aid investigation after his own brief existence had passed away, the *philosophy of Nature* cast aside the vague and poetic garb in which she had been enveloped from her origin, and, having assumed a severer aspect, she now weighs the value of observations, and substitutes induction and reasoning for conjecture and assumption. The dogmas of former ages survive now only in the superstitions of the people and the prejudices of the ignorant, or are perpetuated in a few systems, which, conscious of their weakness, shroud themselves in a veil of mystery. We may also trace the same primitive intuitions in languages exuberant in figurative expressions; and a few of the best chosen symbols engendered by the happy inspiration of the earliest ages, having by degrees lost their vagueness through a better mode of interpretation, are still preserved among our scientific terms.

---

Nature considered *rationally*, that is to say, submitted to the process of thought, is a unity in diversity of phenomena; a harmony, blending together all created things, however dissimilar in form and attributes; one great whole animated by the breath of life. The most important result of a rational inquiry into nature is, therefore, to establish the unity and harmony of this stupendous mass of force and matter, to determine with impartial justice what is due to the discoveries of the past and to those of the present, and to analyze the individual parts of natural phenomena without succumbing beneath the weight of the whole. Thus, and thus alone, is it permitted to man, while mindful of the high destiny of his race, to comprehend nature, to lift the veil that shrouds her phenomena, and, as it were, submit the results of observation to the test of reason and of intellect.

In reflecting upon the different degrees of enjoyment presented to us in the contemplation of nature, we find that the first place must be assigned to a sensation, which is wholly independent of an intimate acquaintance with the physical phenomena presented to our view, or of the peculiar character of the region surrounding us. In the uniform plain bounded only by a distant horizon, where the lowly heather, the cistus, or waving grasses, deck the soil; on the ocean shore, where the waves, softly rippling over the beach, leave a track, green with the weeds of the sea; every where, the mind is penetrated by the same sense of the grandeur and vast expanse of nature, revealing to the soul, by a mysterious inspiration, the existence of laws that regulate the forces of the universe. Mere communion with nature, mere contact with the free air, exercise a soothing yet strengthening influence on the wearied spirit, calm the storm of passion, and soften the heart when shaken by sorrow to its inmost depths. Every where, in every region of the globe, in every stage of intellectual culture, the same sources of enjoyment are alike vouchsafed to man. The earnest and solemn thoughts awakened by a communion with nature intuitively arise from a presentiment of the order and harmony pervading the whole universe, and from the contrast we draw between the narrow limits of our own existence and the image of infinity revealed on every side, whether we look upward to the starry vault of heaven, scan the far-stretching plain before us, or seek to trace the dim horizon across the vast expanse of ocean.

The contemplation of the individual characteristics of the landscape, and of the conformation of the land in any definite region of the earth, gives rise to a different source of enjoyment, awakening impressions that are more vivid, better defined, and more congenial to certain phases of the mind, than those of which we have already spoken. At one time the heart is stirred by a sense of the grandeur of the face of nature, by the strife of the elements, or, as in Northern Asia, by the aspect of the dreary barrenness of the far-stretching steppes; at another time, softer emotions are excited by the contemplation of rich harvests wrested by the hand of man from the wild fertility of nature, or by the sight of human habitations raised beside some wild and foaming torrent.

[...]

We find even among the most savage nations (as my own travels enable me to attest) a certain vague, terror-stricken sense of the all-powerful unity of natural forces, and of the existence of an invisible, spiritual essence manifested in these forces, whether in unfolding the flower and maturing the fruit of the nutrient tree, in upheaving the soil of the forest, or in rending the clouds with the might of the storm. We may here trace the revelation of a bond of union, linking together the visible world and that higher spiritual world which escapes the grasp of the senses. The two become unconsciously blended together, developing in the mind of man, as a simple product of ideal conception, and independently of the aid of observation, the first germ of a *Philosophy of Nature*.

Among nations least advanced in civilization, the imagination revels in strange and fantastic creations, and, by its predilection for symbols, alike influences ideas and language. Instead of examining, men are led to conjecture, dogmatize, and interpret supposed facts that have never been observed. The inner world of thought and of feeling does not reflect the image of the external world in its primitive purity. That which in some regions of the earth manifested itself as the rudiments of natural philosophy, only to

---

a small number of persons endowed with superior intelligence, appears in other regions, and among entire races of men, to be the result of mystic tendencies and instinctive intuitions. An intimate communion with nature, and the vivid and deep emotions thus awakened, are likewise the source from which have sprung the first impulses toward the worship and deification of the destroying and preserving forces of the universe. But by degrees, as man, after having passed through the different gradations of intellectual development, arrives at the free enjoyment of the regulating power of reflection, and learns by gradual progress, as it were, to separate the world of ideas from that of sensations, he no longer rests satisfied merely with a vague presentiment of the harmonious unity of natural forces; thought begins to fulfill its noble mission; and observation, aided by reason, endeavors to trace phenomena to the causes from which they spring.

The history of science teaches us the difficulties that have opposed the progress of this active spirit of inquiry. Inaccurate and imperfect observations have led, by false inductions, to the great number of physical views that have been perpetuated as popular prejudices among all classes of society. Thus by the side of a solid and scientific knowledge of natural phenomena there has been preserved a system of the pretended results of observation, which is so much the more difficult to shake, as it denies the validity of the facts by which it may be refuted. This empiricism, the melancholy heritage transmitted to us from former times, invariably contends for the truth of its axioms with the arrogance of a narrow-minded spirit. Physical philosophy, on the other hand, when based upon science, doubts because it seeks to investigate, distinguishes between that which is certain and that which is merely probable, and strives incessantly to perfect theory by extending the circle of observation.

This assemblage of imperfect dogmas, bequeathed by one age to another—this physical philosophy, which is composed of popular prejudices—is not only injurious because it perpetuates error with the obstinacy engendered by the evidence of ill-observed facts, but also because it hinders the mind from attaining to higher views of nature. Instead of seeking to discover the *mean* or *medium* point, around which oscillate, in apparent independence of forces, all the phenomena of the external world, this system delights in multiplying exceptions to the law, and seeks, amid phenomena and in organic forms, for something beyond the marvel of a regular succession, and an internal and progressive development. Ever inclined to believe that the order of nature is disturbed, it refuses to recognize in the present any analogy with the past, and, guided by its own varying hypotheses, seeks at hazard, either in the interior of the globe or in the regions of space, for the cause of these pretended perturbations.

It is the special object of the present work to combat those errors which derive their source from a vicious empiricism and from imperfect inductions. The higher enjoyments yielded by the study of nature depend upon the correctness and the depth of our views, and upon the extent of the subjects that may be comprehended in a single glance. Increased mental cultivation has given rise, in all classes of society, to an increased desire of embellishing life by augmenting the mass of ideas, and by multiplying means for their generalization; and this sentiment fully refutes the vague accusations advanced against the age in which we live, showing that other interests, besides the material wants of life, occupy the minds of men.

It is almost with reluctance that I am about to speak of a sentiment, which appears to arise from narrow-minded views, or from a certain weak and morbid sentimentality—I allude to the fear entertained by some persons, that nature may by degrees lose a portion of the charm and magic of her power, as we learn more and more how to unvail her secrets, comprehend the mechanism of the movements of the heavenly bodies, and estimate numerically the intensity of natural forces. It is true that, properly speaking, the forces of nature can only exercise a magical power over us as long as their action is shrouded in mystery and darkness, and does not admit of being classed among the conditions with which experience has made us acquainted. The effect of such a power is, therefore, to excite the imagination, but that, assuredly, is not the faculty of mind we would evoke to preside over the laborious and elaborate observations by which we strive to attain to a knowledge of the greatness and excellence

---

of the laws of the universe.

The astronomer who, by the aid of the heliometer or a double refracting prism<sup>[1]</sup>, determines the diameter of planetary bodies; who measures patiently, year after year, the meridian altitude and the relative distances of stars, or who seeks a telescopic comet in a group of nebulae, does not feel his imagination more excited—and this is the very guarantee of the precision of his labors—than the botanist who counts the divisions of the calyx, or the number of stamens in a flower, or examines the connected or the separate teeth of the peristoma surrounding the capsule of a moss. Yet the multiplied angular measurements on the one hand, and the detail of organic relations on the other, alike aid in preparing the way for the attainment of higher views of the laws of the universe.

We must not confound the disposition of mind in the observer at the time he is pursuing his labors, with the ulterior greatness of the views resulting from investigation and the exercise of thought. The physical philosopher measures with admirable sagacity the waves of light of unequal length which by interference mutually strengthen or destroy each other, even with respect to their chemical actions; the astronomer, armed with powerful telescopes, penetrates the regions of space, contemplates, on the extremest confines of our solar system, the satellites of Uranus, or decomposes faintly sparkling points into double stars differing in color. The botanist discovers the constancy of the gyratory motion of the chara in the greater number of vegetable cells, and recognizes in the genera and natural families of plants the intimate relations of organic forms. The vault of heaven, studded with nebulæ and stars, and the rich vegetable mantle that covers the soil in the climate of palms, can not surely fail to produce on the minds of these laborious observers of nature an impression more imposing and more worthy of the majesty of creation than on those who are unaccustomed to investigate the great mutual relations of phenomena. I can not, therefore, agree with Burke when he says, “it is our ignorance of natural things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions.”

While the illusion of the senses would make the stars stationary in the vault of heaven, Astronomy, by her aspiring labors, has assigned indefinite bounds to space; and if she have set limits to the great nebula to which our solar system belongs, it has only been to show us in those remote regions of space, which appear to expand in proportion to the increase of our optic powers, islet on islet of scattered nebulae. The feeling of the sublime, so far as it arises from a contemplation of the distance of the stars, of their greatness and physical extent, reflects itself in the feeling of the infinite, which belongs to another sphere of ideas included in the domain of mind. The solemn and imposing impressions excited by this sentiment are owing to the combination of which we have spoken, and to the analogous character of the enjoyment and emotions awakened in us, whether we float on the surface of the great deep, stand on some lonely mountain summit enveloped in the half-transparent vapory vail of the atmosphere, or by the aid of powerful optical instruments scan the regions of space, and see the remote nebulous mass resolve itself into worlds of stars.

The mere accumulation of unconnected observations of details, devoid of generalization of ideas, may doubtlessly have tended to create and foster the deeply-rooted prejudice, that the study of the exact sciences must necessarily chill the feelings, and diminish the nobler enjoyments attendant upon a contemplation of nature. Those who still cherish such erroneous views in the present age, and amid the progress of public opinion, and the advancement of all branches of knowledge, fail in duly appreciating the value of every enlargement of the sphere of intellect, and the importance of the detail of isolated facts in leading us on to general results. The fear of sacrificing the free enjoyment of nature, under the influence of scientific reasoning, is often associated with an apprehension that every mind may not be capable of grasping the truths of the philosophy of nature. It is certainly true that in the midst of the universal fluctuation of phenomena and vital forces—that inextricable net-work of organisms by turns developed and destroyed—each step that we make in the more intimate knowledge of nature leads us to the entrance of new labyrinths; but the excitement produced by a presentiment of discovery, the vague intuition of the mysteries to be unfolded, and the multiplicity of the paths before us, all tend to stimulate

---

the exercise of thought in every stage of knowledge.

[...]

Man can not act upon nature, or appropriate her forces to his own use, without comprehending their full extent, and having an intimate acquaintance with the laws of the physical world. Bacon has said that, in human societies, knowledge is power. Both must rise and sink together. But the knowledge that results from the free action of thought is at once the delight and the indestructible prerogative of man; and in forming part of the wealth of mankind, it not unfrequently serves as a substitute for the natural riches, which are but sparingly scattered over the earth. Those states which take no active part in the general industrial movement, in the choice and preparation of natural substances, or in the application of mechanics and chemistry, and among whom this activity is not appreciated by all classes of society, will infallibly see their prosperity diminish in proportion as neighboring countries become strengthened and invigorated under the genial influence of arts and sciences.

As in nobler spheres of thought and sentiment, in philosophy, poetry, and the fine arts, the object at which we aim ought to be an inward one—an ennoblement of the intellect—so ought we likewise, in our pursuit of science, to strive after a knowledge of the laws and the principles of unity that pervade the vital forces of the universe; and it is by such a course that physical studies may be made subservient to the progress of industry, which is a conquest of mind over matter. By a happy connection of causes and effects, we often see the useful linked to the beautiful and the exalted. The improvement of agriculture in the hands of freemen, and on properties of a moderate extent—the flourishing state of the mechanical arts freed from the trammels of municipal restrictions—the increased impetus imparted to commerce by the multiplied means of contact of nations with each other, are all brilliant results of the intellectual progress of mankind, and of the amelioration of political institutions, in which this progress is reflected. The picture presented by modern history ought to convince those who are tardy in awakening to the truth of the lesson it teaches.

Nor let it be feared that the marked predilection for the study of nature, and for industrial progress, which is so characteristic of the present age, should necessarily have a tendency to retard the noble exertions of the intellect in the domains of philosophy, classical history, and antiquity, or to deprive the arts by which life is embellished of the vivifying breath of imagination. Where all the germs of civilization are developed beneath the aegis of free institutions and wise legislation, there is no cause for apprehending that any one branch of knowledge should be cultivated to the prejudice of others. All afford the state precious fruits, whether they yield nourishment to man and constitute his physical wealth, or whether, more permanent in their nature, they transmit in the works of mind the glory of nations to remotest posterity. The Spartans, notwithstanding their Doric austerity, prayed the gods to grant them “the beautiful with the good.”<sup>[2]</sup>

I will no longer dwell upon the considerations of the influence exercised by the mathematical and physical sciences on all that appertains to the material wants of social life, for the vast extent of the course on which I am entering forbids me to insist further upon the utility of these applications. Accustomed to distant excursions, I may, perhaps, have erred in describing the path before us as more smooth and pleasant than it really is, for such is wont to be the practice of those who delight in guiding others to the summits of lofty mountains: they praise the view even when great part of the distant plains lie hidden by clouds, knowing that this half-transparent vapory veil imparts to the scene a certain charm from the power exercised by the imagination over the domain of the senses. In like manner, from the height occupied by the physical history of the world, all parts of the horizon will not appear equally clear and well defined. This indistinctness will not, however, be wholly owing to the present imperfect state of some of the sciences, but in part, likewise, to the unskillfulness of the guide who has imprudently ventured to ascend these lofty summits.

---

The object of this introductory notice is not, however, solely to draw attention to the importance and greatness of the physical history of the universe, for in the present day these are too well understood to be contested, but likewise to prove how, without detriment to the stability of special studies, we may be enabled to generalize our ideas by concentrating them in one common focus, and thus arrive at a point of view from which all the organisms and forces of nature may be seen as one living, active whole, animated by one sole impulse. "Nature," as Schelling remarks in his poetic discourse on art, "is not an inert mass; and to him who can comprehend her vast sublimity, she reveals herself as the creative force of the universe—before all time, eternal, ever active, she calls to life all things, whether perishable or imperishable."

By uniting, under one point of view, both the phenomena of our own globe and those presented in the regions of space, we embrace the limits of the science of the *Cosmos*, and convert the physical history of the globe into the physical history of the universe, the one term being modeled upon that of the other. This science of the *Cosmos* is not, however, to be regarded as a mere encyclopedic aggregation of the most important and general results that have been collected together from special branches of knowledge. These results are nothing more than the materials for a vast edifice, and their combination can not constitute the physical history of the world, whose exalted part it is to show the simultaneous action and the connecting links of the forces which pervade the universe. The distribution of organic types in different climates and at different elevations—that is to say, the geography of plants and animals—differs as widely from botany and descriptive zoology as geology does from mineralogy, properly so called. The physical history of the universe must not, therefore, be confounded with the *Encyclopedias of the Natural Sciences*, as they have hitherto been compiled, and whose title is as vague as their limits are ill defined. In the work before us, partial facts will be considered only in relation to the whole. The higher the point of view, the greater is the necessity for a systematic mode of treating the subject in language at once animated and picturesque.

But thought and language have ever been most intimately allied. If language, by its originality of structure and its native richness, can, in its delineations, interpret thought with grace and clearness, and if, by its happy flexibility, it can paint with vivid truthfulness the objects of the external world, it reacts at the same time upon thought, and animates it, as it were, with the breath of life. It is this mutual reaction which makes words more than mere signs and forms of thought; and the beneficent influence of a language is most strikingly manifested on its native soil, where it has sprung spontaneously from the minds of the people, whose character it embodies. Proud of a country that seeks to concentrate her strength in intellectual unity, the writer recalls with delight the advantages he has enjoyed in being permitted to express his thoughts in his native language; and truly happy is he who, in attempting to give a lucid exposition of the great phenomena of the universe, is able to draw from the depths of a language, which, through the free exercise of thought, and by the effusions of creative fancy, has for centuries past exercised so powerful an influence over the destinies of man.

## NOTES

[1] Arago's ocular micrometer, a happy improvement upon Rochon's prismatic or double-refraction micrometer. See M. Mathieu's note in Delambre's *Histoire de l'Astronomie au dix-huitième Siècle*, 1827.

[2] Pseudo-Plato. — *Alcib.*, xi., p. 184, ed. Steph.; Plut., *Instituta Laconica*, p. 253, ed. Hutten.

Source of English translation: Alexander von Humboldt, *Cosmos: A Sketch of the Physical Description of the Universe*, translated by E. C. Otté, introduction by Michael Dettelbach. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997, pp. 23–25, 36–41, 53–56. © 1997 [The Johns Hopkins University

---

Press]. Reproduced with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Source of original German text: Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*. Stuttgart and Augsburg: J.G. Cotta, 1845–58, vol. 1, pp. 4–7, 16–21, 36–40.

Recommended Citation: Alexander von Humboldt, Excerpts from Cosmos (1845-58), published in: German History in Documents and Images, <<https://germanhistorydocs.org/en/from-vormaerz-to-prussian-dominance-1815-1866/ghdi:document-355>> [May 17, 2025].