



# **PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY. PART 3: WHY HERDER MATTERS**

*Posted on April 1, 2021 by Wayne Cristaudo*



## **Part 1 and Part 2**

### **1. Herder And Philosophical Anthropology**

Like Hamann, Johann Gottfried von Herder has remained a peripheral figure in the history of philosophy, often (and irrespective of the mounting number of books and articles demonstrating the folly of this oversimplification) wrongly caricatured as an irrationalist, nationalist and relativist. As with [Hamann](#) he does not fit the more common arc of the history of philosophy that moves from Descartes, Spinoza, Locke and Leibniz to Hume and Kant, through Fichte, Schelling and Hegel.

Although, due to Herder's Spinozian organicism (and its fusion with Leibniz and Shaftesbury), and his metaphysical arguments for the centrality of attractive and repellent forces, the claim that there is a point of "indifference," that nature is an organic whole of gradations, along with his preoccupation with the spirit of peoples, many of his ideas (though to be sure thrown-off and applied rather than systematically developed) are firmly imprinted in Schelling and Hegel.

Nevertheless, Herder's approach is so contrary to systemic closure that his absence in Hegel's [Lectures on the History of Philosophy](#) should not be surprising: for ultimately philosophy in Herder is so closely allied with the vast expanse of human sensibility and knowledge more generally that it makes it difficult for philosophers to know exactly what to do with him. Thus, it was that Kant, Herder's former teacher, in his first review of Herder's [Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind](#), chastised him like a schoolboy for his lack of philosophical rigour: *"Our resourceful author should curb his lively genius somewhat, and that philosophy, which is more concerned with pruning luxuriant growths than with propagating them, should guide him towards the completion of his enterprise."*

For his part, when Herder was his student he had been deeply impressed by Kant, and had even read a poem of his in class lauding his teaching. But, Kant's critical philosophy was symptomatic of the depth of division between their respective philosophies. Whether in the analytic or the continental and poststructuralist tradition, Herder has remained largely out of sight and mind. It is true that Heidegger did give a graduate seminar on Herder's work, [On the Origin of Language](#), in 1939 which has now been published and translated as, [On the Essence of Language: Concerning Herder's Treatise On the Origin of Language](#)—but this treatise is not only a mere slither of Herder's corpus, it represents a position Herder later came to see (largely due to Hamann giving him a blast) as mistaken.

If it is Kant and his successors rather than Herder that has been incorporated into the larger body of philosophy, Herder was, nevertheless not only a decisive figure in the formation of the golden age of German letters, commencing but moving far beyond [Sturm und Drang](#), but also a major influence in nineteenth century movements outside of Germany such as Emerson's [Transcendentalism](#), English [romanticism](#), the [Oxford movement](#), the [pre-Raphaelites](#), and figures, such as, [Ruskin](#) and [Carlyle](#).

Within Germany, there was hardly any contemporary cultural figure Herder did not engage with personally—[Lessing](#), [Klopstock](#), [Winckelmann](#), [Jacobi](#), [Lavater](#), [Mendelssohn](#), [von Haller](#), [Schiller](#), [Abbt](#), [Nicolai](#), [Lenz](#), [Wieland](#), [Merck](#), [Gleim](#)—a “who’s who” of German letters of the time. He was [Goethe's](#) greatest educator. And after Goethe had broken with him—due to Herder’s intolerable rudeness toward him—[Jean Paul](#) would make himself his “student.”

Likewise, there is no subject that did not interest him. In every way, he defied conforming to a type. He was an inspiring pastor, rather than a university professor; an inspirer of poets, translator and literary critic, rather than a poet (he wrote many poems, but they are not what make him important); a philosopher generally unacceptable to other philosophers; the author of a philosophical anthropological history, rather than a historian as such; a Christian and a Spinozist (and hence too a major figure, along with Goethe, in the Romantic rendering of Spinoza); a disciple of Hamann who, nevertheless, does not share Hamann’s hostility to metaphysics; a lover not only of Hebrews and Winckelmann’s Greece, but of all human cultural achievement. Few had read so widely and deeply about the various “spirits” of the ages and across the globe, or indeed, as his [Adrastea](#) illustrates, European political history and genres of expression of the eighteenth century.

I should also mention that there has always been a current of interest in Herder in the English speaking world, beginning in 1800 with what remains the only complete translation of Herder’s *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* by T. Churchill (translated as [Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man](#)).

By far the most comprehensive and detailed examination of Herder’s life and thought in English is Robert Clark Jr’s extremely thorough [Herder: His Life and Thought](#). It is also the case that work on Herder is now more intense than ever, and with such landmark studies as the recent edited collections by Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke, [Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder](#), and, Anik Waldow and Nigel De Souza’s [Herder: Philosophy and Anthropology](#) (also an edited collection); as well as a number of quality works by [F. M. Barnard](#), [Michael Forster](#), [John Zammito](#), [Sonia Sikka](#), [Vicki Spencer](#) and others,

Herder's intellectual importance no longer need be a forgotten secret.

Yet the fact remains that Herder is still something of a minor philosophical figure in a time when the appetite for German eighteenth and nineteenth century philosophy has never been greater. Perhaps nothing is more indicative of this state of affairs than the fact that while there is now a reasonable selection of his works available in English, such major works as his [\*Letters on the Advancement of Humanity\*](#) (with the exception of some letters), his two large and important critiques of Kant: [\*Understanding and Experience: A Metacritique of the Critique of Pure Reason\*](#), and [\*Kalligone\*](#), his critique of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*, as well as his encyclopedic [\*Adrastea\*](#) have not been translated. Though there is a reasonable amount of German secondary literature on Herder's writings on Kant, his critique of Kant remains largely ignored in the English-speaking world, and most of the German material tends to side with Kant. More's the pity, for Herder rightly saw that the Kantian legacy is one in which people who do not know or feel enough (aesthetics) are all ready to pass judgment as if they were reason incarnate.

If, we are looking for the key to what holds Herder's work together, there is much merit in Nigel DeSouza's claim that *"Herder's thought as a whole is best seen through the lens of the term 'anthropology:' all his writings on literature, the arts, history, language, religion and education have at their center the aim of understanding human beings."* Herder himself writes that: *"Philosophy is drawn back to Anthropology."* Nevinson's observation, which defines Herder via negation, is no less astute: *"Herder was neither a priest, nor a poet, nor a philosopher."*

Herder's genius is the genius of intellectual openness, and insatiable interest. He has the same spirit of endless humane curiosity that makes Herodotus the world's first historian and anthropologist—though Herder took inspiration from almost everyone and everything he read, even if he could be a savage polemicist. Indeed, when it came to philosophical inspiration for his ideas, he was an enormous sponge soaking up—and refashioning for his own purposes—all manner of contradictory intellectual influences, which he combined into a philosophy which was uniquely his. Thus, along with Hamann, Spinoza, Leibniz, and [\*Shaftesbury\*](#), he incorporates the pre-critical Kant, Rousseau, Bacon, Vico, Montesquieu, Thomas Abbt, Locke, Newton, [\*Baumgarten\*](#), Plato, and pretty much everything else he could get his hands on.

Ultimately it is the integration of philosophy, anthropology, literature, history, religion, natural science and the recognition of humanity as culturally constituted, and culture itself as temporal (cultures are

born, live and die) as well as spatial habitats that makes Herder our contemporary. Paradoxically, in spite of falling far behind Kant or Hegel in terms of direct philosophical influence, he is more our contemporary than either of them. For while their genius is indisputable, each come to grief through the limits of making what they know dominate their respective systems.

While Kant has the advantage over Hegel of making systemicity a heuristic rather than Absolute, in the overall scheme this matters little—for Kant's philosophical inquiry is based upon the fabrications that have already been philosophically prepared for it, i.e. the transcendental conditions, and accompanying cognitive sources Kant believes he has been the first to successfully isolate within the greater orb of reason, while Herder consistently held that the mind and soul cannot be divorced from the gamut of physiological forces which provide its great *"sea of inflowing sensuality which stirs the soul, which supplies it with material."* Hence contra the lineage that links Descartes with Kant: *"One will never get deeply to the bottom of these forces if one merely treats them superficially as ideas that dwell in the soul, or, worse still, separates them from one another as walled compartments and considers them individually in independence."*

The Newtonian base-line of the first *Critique*, when taken in conjunction with the account Kant provides, and the orientation required to build up our concepts so that they match our intuitions, serves for what is ultimately a very narrow funnel for a more enlightened understanding of the world, and the kind of knowledge we have of it. The epistemological foundation, and underlying ontology, of theoretical knowledge is theoretical physics, hence the touchstone of human knowledge is supplied by the disposition of the inquirer, whose own participation in reality, is also "theoretically" limited to that of observer and crafter of models for testing and confirming the laws of nature.

Of course, this is then subordinated to the moral aspirations and ideas of the rationally moral "free" subject. *The Critique of Judgment* belatedly comes to rescue the subject from the isolation of moral freedom, by conceding that the sensory side of the subject may be awakened to what is beautiful and sublime, and be permitted to deploy a heuristic for the purposes of identifying ends within natural processes, and a moral purpose within history. Hamann, Herder, Schelling, Hegel all react to Kant's compartmentalizations and the transcendental "funnels" of the self's mental activities as simultaneously failing to provide anything more than a mental spectre of the unity we experience in action, as well as the vast body of knowledge—including the scientific knowledge of nature that falls outside Newtonianism or biology—that refuses to be funneled into Kant's compartments.

Hegel is closer to both Hamann and Herder in simultaneously valorising the underlying unity we provide for our imaginings, knowledge and experiences whilst rejecting the fissures Kant requires to ensure claims be allocated to the compartments philosophy has created. Nevertheless, whereas Hegel's Absolute requires perfect knowledge at every movement of its dialectical development (even if, to save him from himself, Hegelians avoid this or purport, in spite of all Hegel's claims to the contrary, that this is not the case), Herder's philosophy is developmental and dialogical, provisional rather than complete, an aspiration for further conversableness.

Schelling's anti-Hegelian combination of the contingency of being, and the irruptiveness of freedom is closer to Herder, but, unlike Herder, his philosophical labour is so tightly aligned with his metaphysical conundrums and explorations that one is interminably drawn back into the cosmic inwards of his system. That is, whether Schelling is exploring nature, the arts, mythology or revelation, the demonstration of his system with its key principles shapes the directions and developments of his corpus.

Again, Herder is not sufficiently beholden to philosophy for such a conceit: although there are recurrent philosophical decisions and metaphysical ideas that drive his work—such as organic relationships, providence, force, sensation, physiology, language—he assembles philosophical positions to enhance the “understanding” of the material under observation so that the different groupings best be compared and learnt from. The primary purpose is always to make our inquiries contribute to a better understanding of the world and the cultures and peoples who constitute it.

Far from being inconsistent with his opposition to system-building, this is all part of a programmatic undertaking for philosophy, rather than the marshalling of evidence to confirm the principles of exploration as such. That Hamann could respect and intellectually support Herder in spite of sharing none of his metaphysical speculations is indicative of the intellectual openness of his philosophical deployments. (Hamann commented that Herder's *God, Some Conversations* was a “*Schuhu, a great horned owl that had better creep away and hide itself in the dark.*”

While Nietzsche emphasises that truth is grounded in perspectivism, Herder can be seen as something (but only something) of a kindred spirit in opposition to abstractions that simply ride over the social, historical and cultural (“spirited”) habitats which supply people with their understanding and ideas about life and what has value.

But Herder wants to take to the open seas to “gather” as many perspectives as humanly possible.

Nietzsche also uses the metaphor of open seas—but outside of his beloved Greeks, and the rather slim pickings he takes from European history and elsewhere, as in his appeal to the Book of Manu, Nietzsche's dreams of supermen and higher men, alongside his divide between master and slave morality leaves him little need to leave his (and Zarathustra's) mountains.

Nietzsche, in spite of his opposition to Platonisms of all sorts represents the terrible tendency of idealism—which, connects him with Marx, and the 68 generation, viz., intellectual self-satisfaction with the very little knowledge one actually has, and complete self-assurance that this knowledge of the world and people suffices for dictating a future that the people of the world need to make a better world. For his part, Herder could never know enough. The ambition and the urge, confirmed by the sheer depth and breadth of the subject matters of his corpus, is expressed with youthful exuberance in his [\*Travel Diary of 1769\*](#) where he writes of the thrill of travelling (in mind as well as body), whilst contrasting the world and all its inexhaustible richness with the situation of the everyday life of the scholar.

*On land one is chained to a fixed spot, and restricted to the narrow limit of a situation. Often the point is the student's chair in a musty study, a place at a monotonous boarding-house table, a pulpit, a lectern. And the situation is often a small town, where one is an idol of an audience of three, to whom alone one pays attention, and a monotony of occupation in which one is jostled alike by conventionality and presumption. How petty and restricted do life, honor, esteem, desire, fears, hate, aversion, love, friendship, delight in learning, professional duties and inclination become in such circumstances; how narrow and cramped the whole spirit in the end!*

The *Diary* itself is a great sea of ambition and enthusiasm, a life-long project requiring him to know all he can, to answer the countless questions he raises about—pretty-well everything. At one point he exclaims:

*What a work on the human species! The human spirit! The culture of the earth! Of all spaces! times! Peoples (Völker)! forces! mixtures! forms! Asiatic religion! And chronology and policing (Polizei) and philosophy! Egyptian art and Philosophy and policing! Phoenician arithmetic and languages and luxury! Everything Greek! Everything Roman! Nordic religion, law, customs, war. Honour! Papal time, monks, learning, North-Nordic-Asiatic crusaders, pilgrims, knights! Christian heathen awakening of learning! France! English, Dutch, German form! -Chinese, Japanese politics! Natural science of a new world! American customs etc.—Great theme: the human race will not pass until it is all done! Until the genius of luminosity is traversed! Universal*



*history of the world!*

A no less ambitious account appears in the same work:

*Let my first prospect be the study of the human soul, in itself and in its manifestations on this earth; its strains and stresses, its hopes and satisfactions, its influence on a man's character and on his conception of duties; in short let me discover the springs of human happiness. Everything else is to be set aside whilst I am engaged in gathering materials for this task and in learning to know, arouse, control and use every motive force in the human heart, from fear and wonder to quiet meditation and gentle day dreaming. For this purpose, I will collect data from the history of all ages: each shall yield to me the pictures of its own customs. Usages, virtues and vices, and its own conception of happiness; and I will trace them all down to the present and so learn to use them rightly. In every age—though each in a different way—the human race has happiness as its objective; we in our own times are misled if, like Rousseau, we extol ages which no longer exist and never did exist, if we make ourselves miserable by painting romantic pictures of these ages to the disparagement of our own instead of finding enjoyment in the present.*

The critical reference to Rousseau, the warning against extolling ages “*which no longer exist and never did exist*,” and the dangers of idealizing other peoples and ages for the purpose of criticising one's own nation and age is indicative of Herder's desire for a well-informed understanding of what humanity has actually achieved in its diverse ways of world-making, in the context of its material, physical, social, and historical conditions. Herder realized that he was laying out a research project rather than providing anything like a final reckoning. Thus, in the Preface to what (among many contenders) is probably his magnum opus, [\*Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man\*](#) he writes:

*He who wrote it, was a man, and thou who reads it, art a man also. He was liable to error, and has probably erred: thou hast acquired knowledge, which he did not and could not possess; use, therefore, what thou canst, accept his good will, and throw it not aside with reproach, but improve it, and carry it higher. With feeble hand he has laid a few foundation stones of a building which will require ages to finish: happy, if when these stones may be covered with earth, and he who laid them forgotten, the more beautiful edifice be but erected over them, or on some other spot!* He who wrote it, was a man, and thou who reads it, art a man also. He was liable to error, and has probably erred: thou hast acquired knowledge, which he did not and



*could not possess; use, therefore, what thou canst, accept his good will, and throw it not aside with reproach, but improve it, and carry it higher. With feeble hand he has laid a few foundation stones of a building which will require ages to finish: happy, if when these stones may be covered with earth, and he who laid them forgotten, the more beautiful edifice be but erected over them, or on some other spot!*

In the penultimate paragraph of the Preface, he will even refer to the book as his *"infantile attempt."* To be sure, his hope that such a building might be completed *"before the end of the chiliad, if not in the present century"* reflects a providential view where our participations might somehow form a whole to be completed, thus underestimating the importance of the ever-changing temporalities intrinsic to the dialectical relationship between who is exploring and what is being explored. But ultimately, it is Herder's opening of the vista of ideas, and his provision of an opening for doing philosophy, rather than the prospect of any closure that makes him so important. Although he displays little interest in the technological side of Bacon's programme), he esteems Bacon for his emphasis upon the empirical study of the natural world around him.

Thus, the opening chapters of *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, commencing with the chapter *"Our Earth is a Star among Stars,"* are intended to supply the most up to date relevant scientific details of what we know about the natural conditions which give rise to life, and its organic forms, on earth before he focuses more upon "man" and his powers and habitat. Like Vico, Herder's project requires listening to peoples of the past, to learn from them how they have gone about their "business." And like Hamann he appreciates the centrality of language, and tradition. But it also requires a conversation between traditions in the context of them becoming contemporaries in a new world.

Further, Herder is driven both by a desire to understand as well as educate so that we may better appreciate the vastness of human experience, especially human achievements across ages, peoples and "nations" and cultures. In this respect he is dedicated to the project of moral and political advancement for the purpose of creating more peaceful conditions, and a richer deployment of the powers of the human spirit. But he is ever cautious of the dangers of adopting the higher moral ground for instructing those whose material and spiritual habitats have thrown up very different circumstances, problems, as well spiritual resources for dealing with their situations. Different habitats have required, and frequently still require very different responses from those appropriate for our "life-world." The danger with abstraction, in part at least, lies in the failure to adequately appreciate the different constituent conditions which need to be understood if we are to understand what we are talking about,

or what is a requisite of any "talking with."

While empirical material is of the essence, Herder does see philosophy as an important means for improving our judgment in order to have a better (a clearer and more distinct) comprehension of what we are dealing with. Philosophy's role is largely to assist in the organising of the material. Thus, in the Fourth Grove of his *Critical Forests*, he says:

*The essence of philosophy is to entice forth, so to speak, ideas that lie within us, to illuminate into distinctness the truths that we knew only obscurely, to develop proofs that we did not grasp clearly in all their intermediary steps. All this requires judgments and inferences, judgments that start from the comparison of two ideas and are developed through a series of inferences until the relation of these ideas to each other becomes evident. Herein lies the essence and formative power of all philosophy: that through it I can see manifestly, certainly truths I did not see before at all, or at least not as clearly, not as distinctly; that through it I can form judgments of taste with a certainty and distinguish beauties in a light in which they had not appeared to me before; that through it I can view the origin, form, and consequences of the essence of good and evil in a manner that I simply had not glimpsed before. Such is the plastic power of philosophy.*

Closely related to this role for philosophy is a view of ideas that is very close to Leibniz's emphasis upon perception being a continuum in which clearer ideas are rooted in more obscure ideas and perceptions which are, nevertheless, in spite of their obscurity formative of the mind. In the Fifth Collection of his *Letters on the Advancement of Humanity*, number 61, what he writes of Leibniz well applies to himself: "There is nothing I admire more in this great, impartial soul, who his whole life joyfully adopted everything which served any part of science." For all of his deep debt to Leibniz, though, which includes him not depriving sensation of intellection at its elemental levels, and his appreciation of Leibniz's ability to always look for the best in a position, there is none of Leibniz's logicism. Likewise, he refrains from accepting the idea that monads are completely self-contained and windowless.

But, as in Leibniz, the sharpness of distinction between reason and feeling is blurred for Herder. For a feeling has its reasons. This does not mean that Herder makes feeling everything, but it is allied with the importance he ascribes to aesthetics in intellectual development, and also it is indicative of an important difference between him and Kant on the matter of representations. Kant's critical philosophy works in close conjunction with the problem of the fit between a "model" of the sort that is required for investigations in physics and brings together mathematics and the isolation of variables. From Herder's

perspective such a belated process of intellection cannot be taken as providing a clue to the ground of experience. Thus, in the same work, Herder writes:

*The whole ground of our soul consists of obscure ideas, the most vivid and most numerous ideas, the throng from which the soul prepares its more refined ones; these obscure ideas are the most powerful mainsprings of our life, make the greatest contribution to our happiness and unhappiness. If we imagine the integral parts of the human soul in physical terms, it possesses, if I may be permitted to express myself in this way, a greater mass of powers specific to a sensuous being than to a pure spirit: the soul has therefore been endowed with a human body; it is a human being. As a human being it has developed, in accordance with its mass of internal powers and within the bounds of its existence, a number of organs with which to perceive surrounding objects and, as it were, to intromit (sic) them for its own enjoyment. Even the number of these organs and the vast wealth of impressions flowing into them demonstrate, as it were, how great the mass of the sensuous is within the human soul.*

Philosophy, then serves, primarily as a means of sifting and clarifying for better comparison the material contingencies and hence also values that accompany the different experiences that form different persons and peoples. Different regions, and this is true for different ages, are enmeshed in different sensoria:

*The sensibility of human nature is not exactly identical in every region of the earth. A different tissue into which the strings of sensation are woven; a different world of objects and sounds that initially rouse one dormant string or another by setting it in motion; different powers that tune one string or another to a different pitch, thereby setting its tone forever, so to speak—in short, there is a quite different arrangement of our faculty of perception, and yet it still lies in the hands of Nature.*

The temptation of philosophy is to take short-cuts by laying down principles or finding general concepts—against which Herder says, “I cannot lay down rules; my aim is to present a history of individual experiences”—into which to pour what Kant calls a “manifold.” But, for Herder, by this very act philosophy ceases to be an assistant in the great labour of better understanding. Thus, he urges:

*Let the man, who is proud of his reason, contemplate the theatre of his fellow beings throughout the wide world, or listen to their many-toned dissonant history the way of man resembles a*

*labyrinth, abounding on all sides with divergent passages, while but few footsteps lead to the innermost chamber.*

Concomitantly, just as Vico had criticized the tendency for philosophers to read history as if early peoples were opaquely expressing the ideas of later-day philosophers, Herder requires of philosophers that they go beyond their own systems and principles in order to recover what they have yet to learn. Although Herder played an important role in reviving Spinoza on account of his provision of an organic and dynamic view of life's intrinsic unity, he also criticises the fact Spinoza has *"only a metaphysical sense of the poetry of the Prophets; and in the whole composition of his works, he is a solitary thinker, to whom the graces of the social world and an ingratiating manner are entirely unknown."*

The problem of Spinoza and enlightened philosophers, including Kant, who undertake to identify and lay down general ethical or moral ideas in detail is their mistaken belief that the more abstract and general ideas are sufficient for providing guidance to the living. Thus, the philosopher is in danger of becoming a "know-all" about the good, true and the beautiful, instead of a contributor to a deeper fathoming of what they actually entail. And, as we have said repeatedly, what they entail must not be closed off by a decision that delimits them from the outset. Their content can only be discovered by the undertaking a "journey" of the human spirits and the multitude of achievements of those spirits.

## **2. The Importance Of Herder's Metacritique Of Kant**

Herder's two critiques of Kant are his two most detailed cases pitting the idea of philosophy as a "journey" in opposition to the kind of philosophy that is "fixed and restricted to the narrow limit of a situation."

Since the deafening silence that greeted the publication of the *Metacritique* (there was support from others on the philosophical margins such as Wieland, Gleim, and [Knebel](#)), and Goethe's expression that he wished Herder had never published his [Metacritique](#) (Clark even makes the ridiculous suggestion, given its length and elaborate details, that he probably did not even read it), there has been no shortage of commentators lining up to "tut-tut" over Herder's critiques of Kant, including, a Herder scholar of great merit, Michael Foster, who calls them, *"an angry and irresponsible attack on Kant."* Such a dismissal does no justice to the character, nature, depth, or significance of Herder's criticisms of Kant. Even more silly is the claim, made when it first appeared, that the two volume *Metacritique* merely plagiarises Hamann's [Metacritique](#) (a work, though delivering a surgical strike, runs to less than twenty

pages).

Herder wrestles seriously and at length with both the first and third *Critiques*, and he does so because he detects that Kantianism has been as influential as it has been damaging to philosophy, and not only to philosophy, but to the culture, particularly the younger generation. In the Preface to the *Metacritique* he writes:

*The critical philosophy has played its role for twelve years, and we see its fruits. Which father (they all ask themselves) wishes that his son would become an autonomous critical type, a metaphysicus of nature and virtue, a dialectical or even a revolution rabble rouser, in accordance with a critical blow? Now look around and read. Which recent book, which science is not more or less covered with the stains of this sort, and how many noble talents (we hope, only for a while) destroyed?...  
A person who would deform a nation's language through artifice (verkünstelt), (how cleverly it is done) has corrupted and spoiled the tool of its reason; a great many young people have had their noblest organ mutilated, and the understanding itself, whose field can never close out speculative inquiry, misled. Could we have a greater duty and gift, than the free heartfelt use of our understanding?*

The same concerns are also a primary motivation for writing the *Kalligone* where he speaks of how he has seen “so many, many youth corrupted by the Critique,” and he criticizes “the ignorant, arrogant, and insolent,” who take on academic positions, while they “should still be learning.” They pontificate upon what they neither have “the concepts,” nor “knowledge,” to understand. “The time will come,” he warns, “when the nation itself is ashamed of every ignorant, indecent, random criticism of a shame inflicted on her.”

If the *Kalligone* is often polemical, that is largely because Herder had spent a lifetime thinking about art and its social and historical significance, and hence the work is replete with examples from different genres, while Kant's aesthetics proceeds with little attention to actual aesthetic works. What Herder finds particularly galling is that Kant treats human creativity as if it were of far less consequence than the philosophical dictates concerning aesthetic value and meaning. Indeed, Herder is repulsed by Kant laying down an aesthetic without thinking he needs to explore the vast array of aesthetic creations which have played such an important part in the cultural formations of peoples.

Further, whereas Herder attempts to think how all kinds of knowledge are gathered and connected through the physiological apertures of our being, and the capacities of expression available to us, and thus how aesthetics is an essential part of what defines us as human, Kant's third *Critique* was an "after-thought," predicated upon the belated recognition of a gap in the critical system.

Thus, in the first *Critique* there was not a hint that art was even on Kant's "radar" as important for answering what he referred to as "*all the interests of my reason, speculative as practical*," which he says, "*combine in the three following questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What ought I to do? What may I hope?*" Kant continues by "flattering" himself that he has "*exhausted all the possible answers*" to the first question, "which is merely speculative." It was only belatedly that Kant realized that there needed to be some bridge between freedom (practical reason) and necessity ("experience"), which sent him back into the cognitive sources and kinds of judgments—in this case, aesthetic and teleological judgments—which provide clues to claims about beauty, sublimity, self-regulatory systems (biology), and a sense of historical moral improvement.

A core component of Herder's critique of Kant, in both the *Kalligone* and *Metacritique*, is his frustration at Kant's philosophy failing to adequately incorporate the developmental and conditional—specifically social, historical and cultural—of science, morals and aesthetics because of the apparatus it sets to work with.

In the *Metacritique*, Herder also does not accept, for a moment, the very restricted view of the sciences that comes from the net Kant weaves with Euclid, Aristotle and Newton. Although Kant "experts" tend to spend their labours nuancing the intricacies of Kant's moves and choices, the most egregious error of the first *Critique* emerges from the very thing that makes it such a water-tight accomplishment; the alignment of what Kant sees as the three foundational sciences of space and time (Euclid, and the foundations of mathematics in the number line), of rational thought (Aristotle), and of the physical world (Newton).

But no matter how great a philosophical attempt one may think the critical philosophy was, it was an all-or-nothing philosophy. For if these foundational sciences are just further steps along the way to a greater understanding, how can they then serve as foundations robust enough to provide the clues to the elements of cognition for the framing of nature's law-governed structure?

Developments in spatial/geometric understanding, logic itself, and eventually even within physics

were the developments that were far more destructive to the critical philosophy than any of the idealist critiques that were made by Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. For while the post-Kantian idealist philosophers, whether fairly or not, could all be accused of metaphysical regression, once the bulwarks of the transcendental philosophy were shown to be less than implacable, the very basis of the problem as well as the clues to the solution had also collapsed.

Now, while Herder does not put the case as bluntly as I have just done, this needs to be born in mind when assessing Herder's *Metacritique*, which is, as we shall see below, very much driven by a much more developmental understanding of knowledge so that he finds the very idea of "pure reason" to be a mistaken enterprise, and the mistakes of that enterprise lie at the very foundations of Kant's problem and ricochet through the answers it provides, which in turn generate in Kant further problems and answers.

Just as in the *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein breaks open the kind of logical atomism which he once "perfected" by tackling the most basic assumptions which allow it to take off, Herder's *Metacritique* refuses to concede the adequacy of the nomenclature for a philosophical enterprise as all-encompassing as Kant proposes his to be. That challenge stands in the closest relationship to his emphasis upon what he sees—and what Hamann also sees—as a false dualism between thought and language, a dualism which is ensconced by Kant's dividing representations (*Vorstellungen*) into intuitions and concepts, with intuitions being mute, as they await to be "understood" by means of our concepts. By his invocation of *Vorstellungen* as the primary genus which then requires further subdivision, Kant has already mentalized, and thereby invoked a kind of understanding of experience that simply confirms the dualism that he commences with.

By contrast, Herder finds it meaningless to talk in this way about experience as such—what does it mean, he asks, to "intuit" "*a tone, a smell, taste, feeling?*" Instead of the term *Anschauung* (which Kant deploys in a manner that draws upon an incipient dualist metaphysics), Herder argues that we would do better to use the more accurate, and less metaphysically and "mentalized" weighted term, *Inne-werden* ("an awareness" of something). Mentalization without regard to how language dictates our organizations is for Herder an error—one he believes (with more than a little generosity) neither Leibniz, nor Locke committed, both of whom he cites on language.

For Herder, when we are talking of ideas, we are always referring to names of things, names come from the fact that objects are intrinsically meaningful because of the capacity of people to recognize



common generalities within differences. In his *Ideas of a Philosophy of Mankind*, he makes the point in such a way that we can see immediately how his argument also differs so fundamentally from Kant's asocial atomistic approach and the metaphysical quandaries that are generated out of the approach. Likewise, we see how Herder has pitched the nature of knowledge in such a way that it bypasses the kind of metaphysics that Kant grapples with:

*No language expresses things, but names: accordingly, no human reason perceives things, but only marks of them, which it depicts by words. This is an humiliating observation, which gives the whole history of our intellect (sic) narrow limits, and a very insubstantial form. All our science of metaphysics is properly metaphysics, that is an abstracted systematic index of names following observations of experience. As a method, and an index, it may be very useful, and must guide our artificial understanding to a certain degree in all other sciences: but considered in itself, and according to the nature of things, it affords not a single perfect and essential idea, not a single intrinsic truth. All our science reckons with abstracted, individual, extrinsic characters, which reach not the interior of the existence of any one thing, as we have no organ to perceive or express it. We know not, and can never learn to know, any power in its essence: for even that, which animates us, and thinks in us, we feel and enjoy it is true, but we do not know. Thus, we understand no connexion between cause and effect, because we can see into the interior neither of what acts, nor of what is produced, and have absolutely no idea of the entity of a thing. Thus, our poor reason is nothing more than a figuring arithmetician, as its name in many languages implies.*

As we can see, then, for Herder, to commence with metaphysics, as if it were the condition of the sciences, rather than a concatenation of ideas and names that has emerged in conjunction with experience and with the sciences, is to proceed in a fundamentally wrong-headed manner. A point which, for Herder, is confirmed by the fact that knowledge is built out of historical experience. Closely related to this is Herder's fundamental disagreement with the way questions of the soul in Kant are transported beyond any social, historical or anthropological content onto the plane of pure reason.

In Kant, we recall, the ideas of God, and the soul are the products of a transcendental dialectic, reason taking categories, whose sole legitimate function is for the understanding of experience, and treating them as substances. That is, Kant's treatment of God and the soul is a purely rational one, which is why his transcendental critique is *ipso facto* a critique of rationalist metaphysics. Nevertheless, for all its elaborateness, Kant's critique of rationalist metaphysics is simply a reformulation of the enlightenment

critique of the feverish imagination, except now it is reason that has literally taken leave of its senses—or more precisely taken the understanding's categories out of their legitimate deployment.

Herder, although open enough to seek common ground with deism—as he does in his defense of Spinoza in *God, Some Conversations*—ultimately does not see God as a rational answer to a rational problem, but as an anthropologically invoked power, a power which is part of a community's sense of itself and its world. If we want to understand God or the soul in the sense that Herder does, we need to understand the meanings that people have ascribed over time and in their respective locations to these names. God and soul are not metaphysical objects—at least in the sense Kant uses the term—but words that circulate in a community's doings.

From Herder's perspective, then, we can understand why different peoples have different gods, and we can then track how the different communal commitments to the powers they serve help form a collective history and identity (a culture) over time; with Kant all we can say is that people have been deluded by a transcendental dialectic, and their different delusions (cultures) count for little in the greater scheme of achieving knowledge and freedom.

All of the above is closely related to another feature that Herder's *Metacritique* shares with Hamann, viz., opposition to the compartmentalisation of the *pure forms* and *functions* of reason by reason. In this respect he sees the critical philosophy as resting on a phantasmic starting point. Kant has made himself both party and judge, law and witness in reason's "trial." But for Herder, we are not capable of overseeing what we are within; we use our "reason" to identify and demonstrate what our reason does, which is also why it is wrongheaded to identify "transcendental elements" divorced from reason's ongoing discoveries. And those discoveries cannot be separated from the names that have accrued over time to identify experience. Closely related to this is Herder's emphasis upon the capacity of the soul to "recognize" unity in its diversity.

By claiming that the cognitive elements are pure, i.e. transcendental, means they are neither physiological, nor psychological. But the fact that the very names of the components which Kant draws upon are also often psychological and physiological, lends support to Herder's refusal to accept what he ultimately sees as an attempt to surpass the reason—which Herder tabulates late in the *Metacritique*—of the wisdom of life, culture, and the supra-cultural in a wisdom of life that is "transcendental hot air." For Herder the truer formulation for any "Critique" of reason would be: "the [physiology of human knowledge," something he sees Bacon as already having made a major

contribution to.

Given these broader metacritical points, it is perfectly understandable why Herder takes issue with the key terms that gets the *Critique* off the ground, viz., the “*a priori*,” and “pure.” Thus, he writes:

*In order to avoid misunderstandings, we want to leave aside completely the words a priori, and pure, i.e., pure concepts, calling general concepts general, necessary [concepts] necessary, without bringing into play the strange convoluted concept of a priority preceding all experience, because generality and necessity cannot be ascribed to any knowledge, if it is not necessary and general in its nature.*

And as with Hegel later, Herder is just as unwilling to concede the very starting point of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*—the distinction between analytic and synthetic judgments. For Kant, an analytic judgment logically contains the predicate in the subject—while a synthetic judgment is formed by adding knowledge that goes beyond mere logical unfolding.

As readers of Kant know, the example he gives of an analytic judgment is that bodies are extended substances. As readers of Leibniz know that is what Descartes thought, but Descartes got it wrong. I just raise this so the reader may see that while some analytic judgments may be straightforwardly analytic in Kant's sense—e.g., a bachelor is unmarried—the distinction is very unhelpful when we are speaking about subjects where knowledge is involved. And this was Herder's point where he notes that:

*The determination, that the predicate contains in the concept of the subject and is part of the same, which would have to be brought out analytically through division, is far too narrowly conceived: because in naming the subject not everything, which lays in it or belongs to it is revealed immediately; judgments are made, if we do not want to eternally rattle-off one and the same A+A, or wish to dissolve 4 into 2 + 2, which expand our knowledge, i.e. that say something in the predicate that is not instantly apparent in the subject.*

Kant's theory of mathematics depends upon mathematical judgments not being analytic, but synthetic (they cannot be empirical because numbers and geometry are not contingent entities, but he argues they are not merely logical either; rather, they are constructed by the mind; more specifically the faculty of “inner intuition”). This is laid out in the earliest section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “The

Transcendental Aesthetic," and it was an essential element in his grand design of laying down once and for all the foundations of a metaphysics that he thought could lay claim to be complete and implacable. It was also intended as the coup de grâce against Leibniz's Platonism—Leibniz is the real *bête noir* of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and the entire strategy of the Critique is to discredit what he saw as Leibniz's rationalism.

But Kant's theory of mathematics, and the argument that mathematical judgments are synthetic, has frequently met with bewilderment, and is one major reason Kant's theory of mathematics has found no strong philosophical support (the other problem is that the "architecture" of Kant's solution does not help once we get beyond the number-line and operate with irrational numbers, and take note especially of non-Euclidean geometries).

Herder's response to Kant's primary claim about mathematics, which is the key to providing Kant's "solution" to the problem of how the apodictic knowledge and axiomatic system of mathematics is applicable to phenomena, i.e., physical structure and laws of the natural world is this: *"Thousands and ten thousand mathematical judgments are analytic; the 'synthetic method' cannot help but proceed analytically in mathematics until they reach an identical concept."* Likewise, he also takes issue with the primary reason that Kant has for arguing that mathematical (which includes geometrical) judgments are synthetic, i.e. (and as I have just said) because mathematics involves construction. Herder responds that *"there are definitely cases in mathematics, where I recognize the truth of apodictic sentences, although I cannot construct them identically; and opposite cases, which are nevertheless apodictically certain, but the construction seems to contradict the concept."*

More generally, whereas Kant's *Critique* proceeds by way of piling dualisms upon dualisms, dualisms, which Herder says involve "artificial hair-splitting" which extends to *"syllables and spelling, such as deist and theist, transcendent and transcendental and so many other spider-webs."* Herder emphasises how our ideas are dependent upon integration, and that integration reaches from the most elemental of physiological processes to the greater social and cultural processes in which we are incorporated.

Thus, whereas Kant had argued that Hume had opened up the way for him by positing the problem of causation as an illustration of a synthetic *a priori* judgment, Herder argues that the sentence *"what happens must have a cause"* is an identical sentence: *"because in the occurrence we postulate the cause of becoming."* Likewise, for Herder, if we deploy concepts such as force, effect, countereffect we are committed to conceptual associations, which are intrinsic to their very meaning. Thus, when we say *"the*

*effect and countereffect is the same*" we are simply using the ideas in a manner that makes them meaningful.

Of course, this is another example of Leibniz' enormous influence upon Herder. But whereas Kant had insisted upon the synthetic *a priori* safeguarding us from metaphysics spawning a rationalist substitution for experience, Herder is not at all convinced that this is the case. The question remains one of integrating material, and for Herder the "integration" is done "all the way along the line:" this is what reasoning does: it associates by bringing parts together in so far as they conform to some underlying "identity." The strict division between purely rational or "pure experience" requires that our abstraction denies the integral unity that is involved in perception.

Our knowledge is initially dependent on an infinitude of micro-cognitive sensory processes, so that "*every sense has its sphere; every object its meaning.*" It is true that once we "model" experiences to espy sharper differentiations, our testing of natural phenomena can be enhanced. But to take a late stage in a process of understanding, as if that requires completely refabricating the development of the process is, for Herder, only to create an entirely new fleet of problems that are not only unnecessary, but catch us in the kind of spider webs of reason which, in spite of its intention, occlude our lived experience of ourselves as social and historical creatures.

Herder's refusal to accept the *a priori/a posteriori* disjuncture is also evident in his critique of Kant's discussion of space in the transcendental aesthetic. While Kant acknowledges that mathematics begins through practice (he speaks in the first *Critique* of mathematics having "*long remained, especially among the Egyptians, in its groping stage*") he stresses that it only really became a science once someone brought out "*what was necessarily implied in the concepts that he had himself formed a priori, and had put into the figures in the construction by which he presented it to himself.*"

That there is a tipping point in which practical know-how is transformed into a "science" is not to be disputed, and that the development is irrelevant once a foundation has evolved (leaving aside here the development of foundations themselves) is also not a problem, especially for those doing the science. But the issue dividing Kant and Herder is whether the science is really explicable in Kantian terms, and whether his explanation actually adds anything at all to the science, which of course it doesn't and wasn't actually designed to do; Kant's "*theoretical reason i.e., understanding of phenomena*" only has a purpose in so far as there is also its other—"*practical or moral reason.*"

To reformulate this somewhat: Kant is a Euclidean and Newtonian, but neither Euclid nor Newton are Kantian. Kant is not tackling the problems that lead to a metaphysics of experience in order to advance either mathematics or physics (and ironically as those disciplines advanced, Kant's philosophy looked ever more arcane and unhelpful), but to circumscribe the bounds of the metaphysics of experience—that is, in order to create a rational faith in our moral freedom.

But here we just need to say that there is nothing philosophically wrong-headed in Herder pitting the importance of our lived-experience within spaces and times (in a move that anticipates phenomenology) against Kant's transcendental aesthetic. For Herder's counter argument to Kant is undertaken to demonstrate that Kant's philosophical terminology is dubious, and that becomes even more apparent when one tries to address other questions about the nature of knowledge that Kant had not considered.

The accusation, then, that Herder fails to understand Kant's problem I find completely unconvincing; he is considering (unsurprisingly given his own philosophical holism) where the bits and pieces of the system that Kant builds with his answers lead. Stated otherwise, it is not the case that Herder fails to understand that Kant's view of space and time is developed around the primacy Kant allots to kinematics—this strikes me as so obvious to anyone who reads the first *Critique* with any care, that it is not really plausible that Herder missed this. Rather, Herder refuses to sever a theory of knowledge from our own being in the world, and he refuses to accept an ontology that does not register with the kind of being we are as well as the way our existence develops.

Thus Herder's "discussion of the word space" commences with the fact that "*we are with others*"—space is originally a location, a "where" of our existence—it thus has to do with places. Space, he says, is a "*concept of experience caused by the sensation or impression that I am neither the All (das All), nor everywhere, that I occupy only one place in the universe.*" But our experience is such that "*we encounter some occurrence which makes space for itself with its powers.*" We learn that there are limits that surround what we encounter but that may be overcome.

Movement, change, velocity, location are all part of the experience, as are our being action and suffering: "Our language," Herder reminds his readers, "*is full of expressions of space in every being, act and suffering.*" Herder's approach to time is similar, starting with our noticing natural changes and dividing them—they are grounded in "practical purposes." He continues that "*time has nevertheless become a discursive, i.e. general concept of measurement of all transformations.*" And time is intrinsic to

ordering our concepts in a series, just as space for our situating things.

On the surface this may seem to confirm Kant's view of time and space as *a priori* forms of experience, but whereas Kant is focusing solely on time and space as kinematic "backdrops" for an experience that applies more to projectiles than to people if we conceive them as more than mere mechanical composites, Herder is interested in space and time as lived, and how, in the living, times and spaces are discursively developed. And this extends to the sciences as well as the most basic aspects of human orientation and participation. That is, living in space and time will indeed be essential to developing such a science as physics (not that it is inevitable, for all knowledge is contingent), but it is not confined to that.

In so far as we are ever something of a mystery to ourselves, and that our knowledge of ourselves is revealed through our doings over time, any epistemology or ontology we invoke has to be open enough to the variety of vistas that we may consider and engage with as well as the variety of actions that we engage in. The "knot" of human physiology and aesthesis (which is closely connected to how nature operates within and through us), language, and historical being, for Herder, cannot be severed by an appeal to ideas which are taken to be formal conditions (calling them transcendental does not help one iota).

To be sure, one might well find fault with the metaphysical arguments Herder deploys against Kant. Nevertheless, Herder's own metaphysical arguments are predicated upon them being able to link up with the fundamentals of experience grounded in physiological (aesthetic) impressions, and linguistic and historical contextualizations. Were this not the case, Newtonianism would not need to have been the result of a vast array of social and historical contingencies (predecessors, pedagogical spaces, literacy, mathematical knowledge etc.) that prepared Newton himself for the experimental and mathematical approach to nature he excelled in. (And Herder is neither ignorant of, nor positioning himself against Newton's work—as *far as it goes*).

That Kant can narrow his focus in such a way that he sloughs off developmental matters into the domain of irrelevance suggests that the human mind, in spite of all Kant's safeguards and deference to the phenomenal world we are implicated in, really is, for Kant, "God-like" (in the Greek rather than biblical sense). This is, in spite of Kant thinking that by arguing against the idea of "intellectual intuition" he has emphasised the finitude of human intellect. But what Kant gives with one hand, he takes away with the other; for he has dispensed with all manner of finitudes to prioritise the philosophical



disposition itself above the contingencies which are fundamental to its precondition, but which fall outside the problem he has cordoned off.

Were the problem as Kant depicts it, why would we need to be "schooled" in its nature? Why would the sciences need to evolve—and I do not mean (as Kant emphasizes) the specific laws observed, but the sciences which study the laws? Hegel tackles this problem by tracking reason's dialectical development and the emergent spheres of conceptual schema taking definitive ideational shape. But while Hegel is resolutely anti-dualist, the logicism of his philosophy enmeshes History in a philosophical logic and thereby creates an irreconcilable difference between his approach and that of Herder's. Thus, for all his differences with Kant, Hegel's philosophy, as with Fichte and Schelling, takes off from Kant's problematic in which reason is substantialised, rather than, as in Herder, an operational development of our historical and language-dependent nature.

In sum, Herder is absolutely right to challenge Kant on the very ground where the problematic is laid down and the cognitive sources and elements are identified, for the mind not only cannot be purely extracted, but its nature is revealed by its doings. Isolating a particular "doing," and then making that particular doing the basis for all our other knowledge is precisely what Herder contests. To be sure, Herder is willing to concede that there might be fundamentals akin to categories that we might identify as more elementary for understanding how we process information, and he provides a number of different tables throughout the *Metacritique*, commencing with his initial categories of understanding: "1) *Being*; 2) *Existence*; 3) *Duration*; and 4) *Force*." Further, as force is construed "*through number and measure*," and as our understanding also draws upon "*contiguity, sequence and emergence*," for Herder, space and time are indeed the "mediums" in which force operates.

We will not reproduce how Herder develops the conceptual associations that he builds up throughout the *Metacritique*, we will just underscore, and repeat, the point that Herder recognizes that the sciences work in close association with "how" we go about knowing—principles and "laws" are closely connected, but knowledge is essentially developmental. And, for Herder, it is inconceivable that one can meaningfully do this without considering the labours of the species over time, and in the context of its habitat. That Kant is too indifferent to the importance of this habitat is stressed by Herder near the conclusion of the *Metacritique* where he criticizes Kant's *Conflict of the Faculties* for how narrowly Kant construes philosophy, all the better to make the case for his own critical philosophy being the great arbitrator.

The ploy is, for Herder, a symptom of the narrowness of Kant's vision of philosophy and the sciences, and is closely associated with a strong institutional dependency on Kant's part. For Herder, Kant's philosophical cleavages, with their respective foundations, is really just supplying the conditions for institutional specialization—which would then be carried out along Kantian lines. It is thus also the privileging of the academic “guilds” as much as Kant's philosophy. For his part, Herder opposes the guilds, and ultimately anything which would close off knowledge for a more “holistic,” yet developmental, and hence pedagogically dynamic curricula. Likewise, he also emphasizes the importance of outsiders (a class to which he belongs):

*Erasmus and Grotius were not faculty theologians, and took upon themselves the freedom, to clean up much in Theology. The monk Roger Bacon, and his name's sake Francis Bacon, Descartes, Leibniz, Tschirnhaus, and how many others, who expanded the sciences not with words but with concepts, were lovers of the sciences, although no Faculty-trustees. As the faculties slept or became barbarised, a free society of lovers, the academy of Florence, arose, others followed, for whom we have to thank for the greatest developments in the sciences.*

As mentioned above, behind Kant's transcendental critique of “experience,” and Herder's *Metacritique*, there is another set of questions and answers that sharply divides the two. From the outset of the critical philosophy, Kant had claimed that by identifying the source and scope of (judgments or knowledge of) experience by recourse to their “cognitive source” and “elements” and “rules,” he had hoped to secure what he sees as most important about human beings and rationality—moral freedom understood as the categorical imperative—from the mechanistic “reductions,” which would make any appeals to virtue and dignity irrelevant. Thus, it is that Kant locates freedom and dignity in pure reason itself, rather than any experience.

For his part, Herder is as little attracted to Kant's view of freedom as he is to Kant's ideas of reason and aesthetics, and the two metaphysical pillars (of nature and right) that the transcendental philosophy grounds and (in the third *Critique*) “bridges.” Herder remarks on Kant's formulation of the moral law well bring out what he thinks of Kant's view of freedom: *“The general will of the legislator is just as incompetent-presumptuous as it is powerless: because the general, in this case the will, only becomes actual in deed through the particular and most particular... And what if persons, means and ends collide? Thus, the most vain egotism, which submits to the great purpose of the “judgment of all,” under the name of ‘self-esteem, self-respect,’ pervades everything and furtively engages in an eternal war between ‘self-purposes and self-legislators.’”*

Although Kant is not mentioned by name in Herder's work, *Of Religion, Doctrines and Customs*, Herder makes the decisively anti-Kantian observation that the egoistic usurpation of moral law-making, in its "empty legislative form" finds:

*...neither power, salvation, spirit, nor life... Nothing tires more than commanding; even the pride that one has in being able to command soon becomes tiresome; and how? and would not a pure "un-will" to obey step into the position of the pure will to command? Mighty autonomist, your monarchy ends. Instead, anarchy, an impotent-wild word stand-off, would take over: "Compel yourself!"—"I cannot." "You can, because you should."—"I do not want to, because I cannot," etc.*

Herder can see no point in taking the essential social dilemma of moral choice and making it akin to a private matter to be subject to a formal law, as if the labour of socialization and instinctual cultivation were largely unimportant. We are, emphasizes Herder, mimetic creatures, and that mimesis extends even to how we use our limbs. We do not instruct ourselves out of nothing, but are socially saturated, as we are exposed to "an ocean of ideas, habits and actions" which we absorb and then use as though they were our property. "Spirit receives from spirits." While "our entire lives are led by drives," Kant's moral thought treats drives as impediments to the purity of our reason and pure will, thereby relying upon a drive of his own fabrication—it is but "the personification of pride in its deepest powerlessness."

Against such abstract egoic and formalistic ethics, Herder anticipates Nietzsche (albeit devoid of the latter's pagan call for a revival of master morality, and the cruelty such a revival would require). For Herder, Kant's grounding of morality in the form of reason is one more example of what he sees as the narrowness of a philosophy which fails to adequately embrace the idea that it is only through learning about the vastly different goods, truth and beautiful creations of the species that we can better form our world. The fact that the philosopher deals in ideas does not give him or her any special purchase on what we can know, or even what is worth knowing:

*Really, ideas yield nothing but ideas, greater clarity, correctness, and order in thinking—but that is all one can count on with certainty. As for how everything will mix within the soul; or what will be encountered and what will have to be changed; how powerful and enduring this change will be; or, finally, how it might combine and clash with the myriad incidents and contingencies of human life, let alone of an age or of an entire people, of all Europe, of all the universe (as our humility imagines)—you gods, what an altogether different world of questions!*

It is the different world of questions that ultimately require, for Herder, a turning not only from the known into the unknown, but from the living to the living. We have to put ourselves aside, and not just look for what catches our own light. At the same time, Herder sees difference and connection, and it is the appreciation of both that he sees as essential for human growth:

*As the philosopher is much in the dark respecting the origin of human history, and singularities occur in its remotest periods, which will not accord with this system or with that, men have fallen on the desperate mode of cutting the knot, and have not only considered the Earth as the ruins of a former habitation, but have supposed the human species to be a remnant of the former inhabitants of this planet, who escaped perhaps in caves or mountains, from the revolution of its Last day. Thus, its reason, arts, and traditions, are treasures saved from the wrecks of the primitive World; whence on the one hand, they appear from the beginning with a splendour derived from the experience of thousands of years; and on the other, never can be clearly traced, while the remnant of the human species has served like an isthmus, at once to unite and to confound the cultivation of two worlds. If this opinion were true, there could be no such thing as a pure philosophy of the history of man; for the human species itself, and all its arts, would be nothing more than the recrement arising from the destruction of a former world.*

### **3. "Humanity:" Encountering, Culture, And Dialogue**

While Herder eschews any philosophy "according to which the whole human species possesses one mind; and that indeed of a very low order, distributed to individuals only piecemeal" (which is again indicative of a major difference between Herder and Hegel—and indicative of the difference between emphasising reason in language or reason as mind or spirit), he sees that while we can only understand humanity via the history of its traditions, we need to investigate what it was that those tradition and the organic powers of the species enabled and hence what made them sustainable for any length of time.

Such an understanding necessarily has a philosophical dimension, and thus he writes: "*The philosophy of history, therefore, which follows the chain of tradition, is, to speak properly, the true history of mankind, without which all the outward occurrences of this World are but clouds, or revolting deformities.*" Note that this openness which requires of us that we take history seriously avoids the seminal pitfall of historicism, whose founder he is sometimes said to be, viz., the task for a philosopher of humankind is not to become so locked in the history of the world of a people that it is an exercise in monadic identification.

Rather, the point is to search for the *"Glorious names, that shine in the history of cultivation as genii of the human species, as brilliant stars in the night of time!"* If the past leaves us with nothing but dead facts we have to ask what we are doing with it. Rather a philosophical study of history is undertaken to appreciate a living connection between times and regions—for once we enter a past world, we may be changed for the better by the experience of feeling, seeing, and knowing more about humanity and its powers.

In so far as the very enterprise is one which requires inquiring into times and habitats, there is the danger that one is so ensconced in one's own tradition and experiences that one is incapable of really seeing the other. Thus, Herder insists, in letter 116 of the Tenth Collection of his *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*: *"The original form, the prototype of humanity hence lies not in a single nation of a single region of the earth; it is the abstracted concept from all exemplars of human nature in both hemispheres."* Concomitantly he stipulates: *"Let one be unbiased like the genius of humanity itself; let one have no pet tribe, no favorite people on the earth...let none put into the hands of any people on earth on grounds of 'innate superiority' the sceptre over other peoples—much less the sword and enslave the whip."* He adds a couple of pages later: *"Least of all, therefore, can our European culture be the measure of universal human goodness and human value; it is no yardstick or a false one. European culture is an abstracted concept, a name. Where does it exist entirely? With which people? In which times?"*

To be sure there is a certain pedagogical and moral idealism in the project, but the idealism requires that we learn from each other, rather than push people into the prefabricated idea requiring common conformity to values and expectations which are laid down by those whose philosophical lights make them the leaders of humanity. Thus, he emphasizes again:

*There must gradually awaken a common feeling so that every nation feels itself into the position of every other one. People will hate the impudent transgressor of foreign rights, the destroyer of foreign welfare, the brazen abuser of foreign ethics and opinions, the boastful imposer of his own advantages on peoples who do not want them.*

If we compare this with Rousseau, who would force people to be free, with Kant, whose moral republicanism sloughs off anthropological, historical and social experience, with Nietzsche, who divides the world into masters and slaves and calls for philosophers of the future to create the conditions for the coming of the superman, with Marx, who would extinguish all classes save the proletariat, with the anti-domination philosophers, whose focus on domination largely bypasses non-Western brutalities,

and who see nothing but an unjust world in need of their moral leadership, we can readily see how Herder's position is essentially a prototype of dialogical encountering between diverse hermeneutical communities.

The point is to learn from each other. The idea that is sometimes expressed by people who know a little bit about Herder is that he can be adequately classified as a relativist. But this can only be held if one not only fails to take seriously what Herder is trying to do and how he goes about it. His great work, *Adrastea*, is "devoted to truth and justice." And the statement made almost immediately after the "Dedication" of the *Adrastea* is as succinct an account of how Herder considers the truth as any he provides:

*The ray of light refracts itself in a thousand colours and swathes itself differently to each object. But all colors belong to one light, the truth. In many melodic courses, the sound changes up and down; and yet only one harmony is possible on a gamut of world events and the relationship between things. What now fails, dissolves itself into another age.*

Although [Franz Rosenzweig](#) shows no signs of any in-depth reading of Herder, his proclamation to Rosenstock-Huessy that the dialogical method he favoured involved shoving "the whole of history between myself and the problem, and so think with the heads of all the participants in the discussion" is essentially a restatement of Herder's understanding of truth.

The importance of the many-sided character of truth and the dialogical dimension is also well brought out by Herder's treatment of the importance of error in *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*:

*Free investigation of truth from all sides is the only antidote to delusion and error of whatever nature they may be. Let the deluded defend his delusions, and defend his opinion against those who think differently; that's their business. Even if neither were to be improved, for the unprejudiced person a new reason, a new insight into truth, would surely emanate from every disputed error.*

Herder is not, then, arguing that there are no truths, but as in one's dealings with the deluded person, just having the truth does not suffice. It is our engagements with each other that matter—for every errancy can be important for gaining greater insights about each other, and our world, every encounter

an opportunity for generating new forms or deeds of conviviality, love and solidarity (or their opposite), and hence for helping create a more "truthful" and valuable world.

The historical context of Herder's work is one in which different "peoples" have become increasingly conscious of each other's presence. How, then, do we deal with this? That is a serious and real, and not just "ideal" question. Having ideas about better and worse ways to be in the world, having principles that facilitate action is not the same as the idea-ism of paradigmatical imposition of a sovereign principle that is indifferent to what is occluded by the principle.

This is also why, as we mentioned earlier, Herder is happy to accept the traditional philosophical appeals to the good, true, and beautiful, provided that their content is open to the creative explorations of the human species. To be sure, he extends this way of thinking into the political and does side with republican politics. At the same time, he is conscious that this ideal itself can be phantasmic and even disastrous. Thus, he writes, in the same Letter, of the potential danger of pursuing "*the best form of the state, indeed of all states:*"

*This phantom is uncommonly deceptive in virtue of the fact that it obviously introduces into history a nobler yardstick of merit than the one that those arbitrary reasons of state contained—indeed even blinds with the names of "freedom," "enlightenment," "highest happiness of the peoples." Would God that it never deceived! The happiness of one single people cannot be imposed onto, talked onto, loaded onto the other and every other. The roses for the wreath of freedom must be picked by a people's own hands and grow up happily out of its own needs, out of its own desire and love. The so-called best form of government, which has unfortunately not yet been discovered, certainly does not suit all peoples, at once, in the same way; with the yoke of badly imported freedom from abroad a foreign people would be incommoded in the worst possible way. Hence a history that calculates everything in the case of every land with a view to this utopian plan in accordance with unproved first principles is the most dazzling deceptive history.*

And, in keeping with this, he emphasises:

*All excessive subtle taxonomies of human beings according to principles from which we are supposed to act exclusively are quite foreign to the spirit of history. It knows that in human nature the principles of sensuality, of imagination, of selfishness, of honor, of sympathy with*



*others, of godliness, of the moral sense, of faith, etc. do not dwell in separated compartments, but that in a living organization that gets stimulated from several sides many of them, often all, cooperate in a living manner. It allows each of them its value, its rank, its place, its time of development—convinced that all of them, even unconsciously, are operating towards a single purpose, the great principle of humaneness [Menschlichkeit]. Hence it lets all of them bloom in their time right where they are: sensuality and the arts of the imagination, intellect and sympathy, honor, moral sense and holy worship.*

In sum, then, Herder's desire for cultures and communities learning what each has been able to create, and hence to cultivate over time is predicated on the fact that the world is "a world," albeit a world constituted by different habitats, sentiments, ideas etc. The faith he has is that this world can be one in which peace ultimately reigns. And he requires that we all explore and bring to the human banquet what is the best of our creations—it also requires identifying each other's delusions and pathologies.

Herder is not so starry eyed about other people and cultures that he does not criticize them. But he is also very critical of his own culture. Only through our inquiries into our respective histories and behaviours can we all learn from each other. We will all inevitably be enmeshed in our prejudices and have our myopia—Herder himself is not completely free from this, but who is? We have to be able to put aside "one-sided," "fixed" and "rigid" ideas—(and one of the great virtues of poetry for Herder is that it helps us overcome separation and one-sidedness).

In this sense, there is indeed a biblical, messianic component to Herder's thinking. He was a Christian thinker, but a Christian who was frequently critical of how Christians have acted. Although, an exploration of Herder's Christianity would be a huge topic in itself, it is not exaggerating to say that the central tenet of the Christian faith, for Herder, is the advancement of humanity itself.

Thus, in the second Collection of the *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, he writes that "*The religion of Christ, which he himself taught and practised, was humanity itself. Nothing but that... Christ knew no more noble name for himself, than that he named himself the Son of Man, a man.*" And in *Adrastea*, he asks: "*Does Christianity teach anything other than pure humanity?*" But this is not the Godless humanity of Voltaire, or the Enlightened who think they know what humanity is without it having to be revealed through its deeds and dreams. This idea of a humanity bonding through its conversableness also stands in the closest relationship to his view of providence. Thus too, in *Adrastea*, he writes:

*Now you know... what my religion of all religions is. It's an Adrastea, but in a much higher equation than the Greeks ever gave it. She was first a jealous, then a warning or punitive goddess; her highest maxim was, "Not beyond measure!" The nemesis of Christianity postulates balance and retribution in everything, in the moral as well as in the physical world, the least and the greatest, as the law of nature, but the determination of human beings elevates them in the overcoming of evil through good, with the charitable persistence of magnanimity. Humanity finally makes it the tipping of the scale, as a compensation of Providence, as it were, the decisive voice of the judge of the world, the judge, who always comes and is there, who receives and recompenses everything.*

Herder's contribution to philosophy is ultimately a "programmatic" contribution, a contribution which requires that philosophy develops in keeping with all the available knowledge it can draw upon. The development, itself, though is for the greater purpose of advancing our common humanity.

But this can only be done if we do not take humanity as an abstraction, but as the plethora of powers that have accrued over time and across the spaces. Those powers are themselves tested and judged in the course of the times. Thus too, Herder states that revolution *"is as necessary to our species, as the waves to the dream, that it become not a stagnant pool. The genius of humanity blooms in continually renovated youth, and is regenerated as it proceeds, in nations, generations, and families."*

Herder's deference to errancy and providence also places his thought at odds with that most modern kind of idea-ism which, for all its other differences, is as common to Kant and Robespierre, as to Marx and the anti-domination thinkers, as it is to even more garden variety ethics: the ethico-political idea-ism which emphasizes volition and principles. There is, of course, much that Herder does not really explore, but it does provide a kind of orientation and spirit that opens up the philosophical enterprise to a more expansive vista and quest so that it can be attentive to its own paradigmatical and sovereign entrapment.

## **Part 1 and Part 2**

---

Wayne Cristaudo is a philosopher, author, and educator, who has published over a [dozen books](#).

---

The featured image shows a portrait of Johann Gottfried von Herder, by Gerhard von Kügelgen, painted in 1809.

