May 2015

Perfection, History, and Harmonious Individuality: Herder's Ethical Thought, 1765-1791

Charles Richard Booher
Syracuse University

Abstract

This work is a study of the ethical thought of Johann Gottfried Herder. I examine the development of his ethics from 1765 through 1791. I contend that the earliest texts express a set of ideas that Herder modified and developed throughout the rest of his work. These are a perfectionist conception of the end of human life, a belief in the centrality of history for ethics, a form of naturalism, and a commitment to the idea that every individual ought to blend their characteristic powers into a harmonious whole.

The study considers a set of texts in chronological order. I begin with an examination of the ideals espoused by Herder in two texts from the 1760s, "Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks Allgemeiner und Nützlicher Werden Kann" and *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769*. I then look at an exchange of letters between Herder and Moses Mendelssohn concerning the highest good, or vocation of man. I then look at how the ideas sketched in these earlier works were filled out in *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772), *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1774), *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele* (1774-8), and *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784-91).

Perfection, History, and Harmonious Individuality: Herder's Ethical Thought, 1765-1791

by

C. Richard Booher

B.A., California State University Fullerton, 2003
M.A., The University of Chicago, 2004

Dissertation
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in *Philosophy*

Syracuse University
May 2015

Acknowledgements

Fred Beiser provided me with judicious advice and criticism from the beginning of this project up to its completion. He was also encouraging at several crucial junctures when I needed it. This work would not have many of its better qualities, and would have taken much longer to bring to an end, had I not been fortunate to have such an excellent advisor.

I also owe a debt to other members of the faculty at Syracuse University. Michael Stocker was a kind and wise guide. Traces of his influence have left their mark on my work, and the shape of my own philosophical views, even if they are not always immediately apparent. I also owe thanks to Ken Baynes, who has always been supportive, in addition to being a pleasure to converse with.

I am thankful the members of my examination committee for their time, energy, and willingness to read my work: Nigel DeSouza, Michael Forster, Kristin Gjesdal, and Ahmed Abdel Meguid.

Among my graduate student peers at Syracuse, I am thankful to Andrew Corsa, Jon Delmendo, Kienhow Goh, Aaron Koller, and John Monteleone for their camaraderie and intellectual support.

I am also thankful for the love and encouragement of my family. My daughters, Caroline and Myra, are about as old as this project. Many challenging moments were allayed by their free and uplifting spirits. I also thank my parents, Chuck and Pam Booher, for their support.

In working on the final stages of this project, I was carried on by the loving support of Erin Evans, for whose presence in my life I am enormously grateful.

Table of Contents

Introduction

I

T. Churchill, in the translator's preface to the 1800 English language translation of Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, writes of his experience translating Herder:

> …many moments of bodily pain and mental anxiety has it sweetly beguiled; and while it has made my breast glow with the fervor of virtuous sentiment, I have almost felt myself the inhabitant of another world. May others feel from the perusal what I have done from the performance; and then no one, I hope, will lay down the book, without being able to say, that he is a happier and better man.[1]

This is not the only reference to the effect of reading Herder that strikes such a tone. Herder receives a significant mention in one of the greatest novels of the nineteenth-century, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. In a central moment of the novel, Pierre Bezukhov counsels the despondent Prince Andrei Bolkhonski:

> "You say you can't see the kingdom of the good and the true on earth. I didn't see it either; and it can't be seen if you look at our life as the end of everything. On earth, I mean this earth" (Pierre pointed to the fields), "there is no truth – but in the universe, in the whole universe, there is the kingdom of the true, and we are now children of the earth, but eternally – children of the whole universe. Don't I feel in my soul that I make up a part of that huge, harmonious whole? Don't I feel that, among the countless number of beings in which the divinity – the higher power – whatever you like – is manifest, I make up one link, one step from lower beings to higher? If I see, see clearly, this ladder that leads from plant to man, then why should I suppose that this ladder, the lower end of which I do not see, is lost in the plants? Why should I suppose that this ladder stops with me and does not lead further and further to higher beings? I feel not only that I cannot

[1] Translator's preface to Johann Gottfried Herder, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, trans. T. Churchill (London: Luke Hansard, 1800), p. iv.

> disappear, as nothing disappears in the world, but that I will always be and have always been. I feel that, besides me, above me, spirits live, and that in this world there is truth."
>
> "Yes, that's Herder's teaching," said Prince Andrei, "but that, dear heart, does not convince me; life and death are what convince me."[2]

For the present moment, I wish to set aside the issue of the accuracy of these portrayals.[3] What I want to draw attention to is that in both passages we can see that Herder was regarded as a thinker who had something to offer us in our ethical reflections, even for our improvement. This facet of his thought is foregrounded, and both writers suggest that Herder is a philosopher to be read for moral edification.[4]

This stands in stark contrast to the majority of Herder scholarship, which has not frequently made his ethical thought an object of detailed study. Admittedly, there are frequent passing references to Herder's ethical views by scholars. However, these are almost always interjected as a background consideration in the midst of an account of his philosophy of history, language, social theory, or aesthetics.[5] This is understandable, as

---

[2] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Knopf, 2007), p. 389. It is worth noting that Pierre achieves this transformation, in part, through an involvement in freemasonry, and that Herder was also a freemason from early in his adulthood. Tolstoy may have been aware of this.

[3] The passage from Tolstoy comes closest to offering an actual interpretation of Herder, and I think that there are elements of it that are correct, but others that are wrong or misleading. Where I think it seems to go wrong, in brief, is that it intonates that the meaning of a human life is something transcendent and has to do with the existence of spirits or "higher beings". As I will try to show in the present work, I think that Herder's account of the highest good does not at all rely on such notions.

[4] Throughout the rest of this text, I do not distinguish between the 'ethical', as an account of how one should live, and the 'moral', as concerned with duties and obligations. I admit the fruitfulness that such a distinction can have, as has been argued in Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), chapter 10. I believe nonetheless that imposing a distinction of this kind onto Herder, or forcing an inquiry into his works to conform to such a distinction, would be arduous and distortive.

[5] The most noteworthy exceptions to this are Benjamin D. Crowe, "Herder's Moral Philosophy: Perfectionism, Sentimentalism, and Theism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 6 (2012); Heiko Joosten, *Selbst, Substanz und Subjekt: Die ethische und politische Relevanz der personalen Identität bei Descartes, Herder und Hegel* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2005); Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Herder never published a text that presents a moral or ethical theory in the traditional form.[6] Nonetheless, Herder's works are filled with rich and intriguing discussions of virtue, happiness, the relationship between history and morality, and the aim of human lives. With the increasing philosophical attention being paid to Herder, it would be unfortunate for these issues to be left in the margins.

The present study, I hope, will contribute to filling in this gap in the scholarship. It will not necessarily undermine or contradict the interpretations of Herder's other views that have been developed by others. Rather, I believe that much of what is presented in the present work complements the best scholarship, even if that work has focused on other aspects of his thought.

II

The present study aims to offer an account of the central ideas of Herder's ethical thought. I believe that there are four fundamental ideas of Herder's ethics that run through the works that will be considered. These ideas are developed in different ways over the course of Herder's career, and are drawn together into a coherent whole in his later works. The four central notions are a perfectionist account of the telos of human life, an insistence on the centrality of history for understanding human activity, a commitment to a form of naturalism, and a defense of the importance of a harmoniously

---

Works devoted to systematic issues in moral philosophy that draw on Herder are rare, but the important exception are Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); *The Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[6] In fact, there is a general challenge for finding a text that offers new readers a way entry into Herder's thought as a whole. There is no central text that serves for him as as the *Treatise of Human Nature* does for Hume or the *Ethics* for Spinoza. For more on this, see Michael Morton, *Herder and the Poetics of Thought* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), pp. 1-4.

developed individuality. My reasons for attributing these ideas to Herder will emerge most fully in the following chapters. However, it will be useful to say something briefly about each of them so that the reader has a set of guiding threads for working through the chapters that follow.

Herder adheres to a form of perfectionism. As a general form of ethical theory, perfectionism is the view that the aim or end of human life is for an agent to make herself as perfect as possible through the development of her powers.[7] In modern German philosophy, perfectionism is most closely associated with Leibnizian-Wolffian rationalism. Herder has often been regarded as one of the fiercest critics of that school, and been cast by some scholars as an enemy of everything that it stands for.[8] I think that such a characterization of Herder's relation to German rationalism is inaccurate. In the present study, I hope to show that with regard to his ethical thought Herder draws as much from the German rationalists as he rejects. Herder accepts the idea that the highest good, or what in the time was called the vocation of man, is the perfecting and developing of one's powers. Herder transforms this idea in important ways, to be sure, and those transformations are of momentous importance. However, he still remains a perfectionist at root.

A second central idea that we will see defended by Herder is the importance of history. Herder argues that it is essential to understand a society or person's historical situation in order to make fitting judgments about perfection and happiness. This

---

[7] Variations of perfectionism have been advanced by recent philosophers, especially those attempting to articulate a contemporary Aristotelianism. For a thorough recent defense of a perfectionism, see Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[8] This characterization of Herder's relationship to the Leibniz-Wolff school is defended in different ways in Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (London: Pimlico, 2000); John Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

provides an important counterpoint to Herder's perfectionism. Perfections and excellences cannot, on his view, be understood in abstraction from the conditions of lived human experience. He contends that in order to know what should count as a perfection or virtue, as opposed to a fault or vice, one must understand the context in which a person lives. Herder's conception of history is broader than the contemporary sense of the term. The general set of factors – historical, cultural, and biological – that shape the context in which human beings live are all folded by Herder into the concept of history. In brief, this aspect of Herder's ethics is a belief that that to know what kinds of talents or abilities an individual (or society) can or should develop, one must understand the history that shapes the context of that individual (or society).

A third idea integral to Herder's ethics is a form of naturalism. According to Herder, human beings are a part of nature and must be understood as natural beings. There are unique qualities that human beings possess vis-à-vis other organisms, but human beings are nonetheless embodied natural beings who must be understood according to the natural laws that shape them. There are ambiguities and vagaries involved in the concept of naturalism as the term is used by philosophers.[9] In saying that Herder's views are naturalistic, I intend two things. First, he does not appeal to supernatural explanations to account for human life, including those aspects of our life that fall within the domain of the ethical. Second, Herder grounds his account of human beings, our practices, and values not only in ordinary observation, but he strives to make his account accord with the latest scientific developments of his age. It is important to

[9] For a valuable account of the wide and confusing variety of senses that are given to this term, see Owen Flanagan, "Varieties of Naturalism," in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. Philip Clayton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

emphasize these aspects of Herder's views because there has been a strand of commentary on Herder that has cast him as a counter-Enlightenment figure with a penchant for irrationality and mysticism.[10] The general trend of recent Herder scholarship has not corroborated such an interpretation, but has instead emphasized both Herder's continuity with the Enlightenment and his engagement with the natural sciences.[11] Nonetheless, counter-Enlightenment interpretations of Herder still have an afterlife in the works of those who have not engaged with Herder directly, but have instead picked up snippets about him through either the work of Isaiah Berlin or the passing remarks of Kantians.[12] This is unfortunate, and I hope that the present study can serve as an additional corrective to such tendencies.

---

[10] See, for example, Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*; Alexanger Gillies, *Herder* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1945); Frank McEachran, *The Life and Philosophy of Johann Gottfried Herder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939); Rudolf Unger, *Herder, Novalis und Kleist: Studien über die Entwicklung des Todesproblems in Denken und Dichten vom Sturm und Drang zur Romantik* (Frankfurt: Moritz Diesterweg, 1922); Benno von Wiese, *Herder: Grundzüge seines Weltbildes* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1939).

Berlin's account of Herder's relationship to science and the Enlightenment is more complicated than the other thinkers listed here. However, his description of Herder as a counter-Enlightenment figure has been immensely influential.

[11] An especially important criticism of the counter-Enlightenment interpretation of Herder is Emil Adler, *Herder und die deutsche Aufklärung* (Vienna: Europa, 1968). For recent work that emphasizes Herder's naturalism or his continuity with the Enlightenment, see Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992); Robert E. Norton, *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Wolfgang Pross, "Herder und die Anthropologie der Aufklärung," in *Johann Gottfried Herder, Werke*, ed. Wolfgang Pross (München: Hanser, 1987); Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*; "Epigenesis: Concept and Metaphor in J.G. Herder's *Ideen*," in *Vom Selbstdenken: Aufklärung und Aufklärungskritik in Johann Gottfried Herders Ideen zur Philosophieder Geschichte der Menschheit*, ed. Regine Otto and John Zammito (Heidelberg: Synchron Wissenschaftsverlag, 2001).

For a valuable, though not uncontestable, survey of the trends and shifts in Herder scholarship, see John Zammito, Karl Menges, and Ernest A. Menze, "Johann Gottfried Herder Revisited: The Revolution in Scholarship in the Last Quarter Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no. 4 (2010).

[12] An example of the kind of passing remark that I have in mind can be seen in Allen Wood's uncharitable and misleading account of Herder's interpretation of *Genesis* in Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 226-33. Wood's more recent work on Herder is more accurate and doesn't suffer from these faults. See "Herder and Kant on History: Their Enlightenment Faith," in *Metaphysics and the Good: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Merrihew Adams*, ed. L. Jorgensen and S. Newlands (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

A fourth component of Herder's ethics is something that I will call the principle of harmonious development. This is a complex notion, one underlying what is often referred to as the ethics of individuality. The principle of harmonious development is the notion that each person ought to strive to make herself a unique individual whose talents and powers are blended into a harmonious whole. It often is expressed by a claim that human beings ought to make themselves and their lives into works of art. The idea is commonly associated with the German Romantics, Friedrich Schiller, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and Friedrich Nietzsche. The present study will show that this principle is developed by Herder over the course of his life, as well as how he unites this idea with those mentioned above.

III

The present study proceeds chronologically. By approaching the material in this way, I hope to make some beginning moves towards tracing the development of Herder's ethical views. Seeing a philosopher's views as static and fixed is a danger to the historian. As human beings facing different predicaments over time, and whose thought struggles towards greater adequacy, philosophers' ideas are always developing. Herder was himself keenly aware of this, and I have attempted in the present study to depict the movement of his views in their liveliness and development. I do not pretend that the story I have

---

Robert Norton has spent a great deal of energy attacking the counter-Enlightenment interpretation of Herder. See Robert E. Norton, "The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68 (2007); "Isaiah Berlin's 'Expressionism,' or: 'Ha! Du bist das Blökende!'," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 (2008). I am sympathetic with the general direction of Norton's interpretation, though his attacks on Isaiah Berlin are often unnecessarily vituperative, and sometimes inaccurate and unfair.

presented is complete, but I do think that the general arc of Herder's thought that it presents is accurate.

I confine my attention to works authored between 1765 and 1791. I begin with some of Herder's earliest works and end with a consideration of one of his greatest mature pieces, the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, the final installment of which was published in 1791. I am not able to consider all of the works authored by Herder within this frame of time. Herder was a prolific author. A discussion of all of his published and significant unpublished works would be a mammoth enterprise. In order to avoid producing such a monstrosity, I have elected to focus on a set of works that are both well-known and contain significant discussions of ethical issues. Attention to more texts from the period covered in the present study would fill in more detail, but I do not believe that it would undermine my account of Herder's ideas and their development.

Herder lived until 1803 and the last twelve years of his life were incredibly productive. It was during those years that he engaged in his battle against Kant's critical philosophy (in the *Metakritik* and *Kalligone*), and wrote the extensive and rich *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*. Herder's collections of essays, *Zerstreute Blätter* are also significant, and have been seriously neglected in the scholarship. The present study does not take account of these later works, unfortunately. The developments that take place during those years deserve to be studied, and I hope to take them up in a future project.

In addition to developing a chronological story, I also aim to offer a contextual account of Herder's views. In unpacking the ethical ideas in each of his texts, I work to show how Herder's arguments fit into a dialogical context, and how his arguments were

directed against the other views in that context. Most significant, I believe, is the dispute that Herder engaged in with Moses Mendelssohn in 1769, discussed in the second chapter. I believe that the ethical views contained in the later works, considered in chapters three through six, are best understood against the background of this earlier dispute. Not only the topics that Herder addresses and the views that he develops, but even his vocabulary, should be considered in that light.

My aim is first and foremost to characterize Herder's views accurately. While I engage in some criticism and assessment of the adequacy of Herder's theories and arguments, my primary end is interpretive. A further work, or set of works, that makes criticism and evaluation central would be of great worth. However, at the present time Herder's ethical thought has hardly been explored. Before engaging in the critical task, it is thus imperative to successfully develop an accurate interpretation of Herder's ethics.

The method that I have chosen is not that of translating Herder's arguments into the language and methods of contemporary analytic (or even Continental) philosophy. I do not take such an approach for two primary reasons. First, to force an historical thinker's views into a different mold tends to distort the meaning of their claims. If ideas and meanings were ahistorical platonic essences capable of receiving a plenitude of different realizations, then such historical work would not always run the risk of distortion. However, such a view about meaning is philosophically dubious. Work in the history of philosophy ought to be grounded in a recognition of the ways that the meanings of texts are shaped by their contexts.[13] This is not to deny that reconstructive studies are at times valuable. But in order for them to be worthwhile engagements with

[13] I thus agree with most of the argument in Quentin Skinner, "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas," *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969).

the past, an accurate understanding of the past is an indispensable prerequisite. Such an understanding requires attention to context and history.

Further, I am simply not convinced that contemporary philosophy is an improvement on the past in any straightforward sense. The kind of Whig history that treats the thinkers of the past as valuable only because they affirm our sense of superiority is something that I find to be both distasteful and unjustified. I do not believe the obverse of the Whig claim, however, in holding that we are the last products of a cultural decline and need to go back to the mythologized ideal way of being of our ancestors.[14] Instead, I think that that each age has both advantages and disadvantages. We do better in thinking of history as a series of ebbs and flows, growths and declines, rather than a straight line upwards or downwards. This is, I am sure, a part of why I was initially attracted to Herder. His account of history, especially in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, rejects both the idealization and demonization of the past.

IV

The present work, as noted above, proceeds chronologically. I will here enumerate the contents of each chapter in brief, in order to orient the reader to the rest of the work. While the chapters are connected and there is a general development from beginning to end, I also believe that each can be read fruitfully on its own.

[14] Something like this idea can be seen in many of the works of Leo Strauss. See, for example Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965).

In the first two chapters, I begin by looking at several works that Herder composed in the 1760s. These all belong to what can be designated his early period. None of the texts that I examine in the first two chapters were published by Herder in his lifetime.[15] Herder was an advanced thinker even at that time, but these works wear their youthful character on their sleeve. Despite this, they offer valuable insight into the direction that his thought was taking.

In chapter 1, I draw out and explicate some of the ethical ideas contained in two of Herder's works from the 1760s. These are an important sketch of 1765, "Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks Allgemeiner und Nützlicher Werden Kann", and a travel journal, standardly referred to as *Journal meiner Reise im Jahre 1769*. Both of these works are concerned with education or *Bildung*, an issue especially important to Herder at that time because part of his occupation involved managing a school in Riga. In these texts, Herder offers a sketch, both of his educational ideals and his conception of philosophy. As such, they allow us to see how the young Herder conceived of the aims of his philosophical work and the goals of a proper education. These goals and aims have an important ethical dimension, and the account of them that I offer focuses on that. Both texts reject one-sided emphases on human rationality, emphasizing instead the importance of human emotions, passions, and sensibility. The travel journal also argues that the development of a harmonious individuality is the goal of a complete education.

---

[15] Herder did publish several important larger works during this period. The first is the three collections of fragments, *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur. Eine Beilage zu den Briefen, die neueste Literatur betreffend*, included in DKV 1. The second major work is the *Kritische Wälder,* included in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Kritische Wälder: Erstes bis Drittes Wäldchen; Viertes Wäldchen; Paralipomena*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Aufbau, 1990). Herder published the first three volumes of the *Kritische Wälder*, but the fourth was published only posthumously. These works primarily deal with issues in aesthetics, though I make reference to them when they contain material relevant to Herder's ethical thought.

In chapter 2, I examine an exchange of letters between Herder and Moses Mendelssohn concerning the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, or vocation of man. This exchange took place in 1769, and provides what may be the most important material for understanding the ethics of the young Herder. Herder's contribution to this dispute allows us to see some of the ethical ideas that he was working out at the time. The letters show that he rejects the rationalist version of perfectionism as both too narrow in its understanding of perfection and as grounded in a wrong conception of the human soul. But, these letters also also make it apparent that Herder adheres to a species of perfectionism himself. I discuss the intellectual context of the controversy, including Johann Joachim Spalding's initiation of the controversy with his text, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. I look at the arguments made by Thomas Abbt and Mendelssohn about the issue, as that exchange set the scene for Herder's own intervention. This is followed by an examination of Herder's letters to Mendelssohn concerning this crucial ethical issue.

In the following chapters, I turn to an examination of several of Herder's more developed works. Each of these was prepared for publication, and they contain fuller expositions of his ideas than his earliest texts. Chapter 3 focuses on the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, a work that is as important for understanding Herder's philosophical anthropology and the development of his ethical views, as it is for understanding his philosophy of language. I attempt to show that the text contains a development of the perfectionist ethics presented in Herder's letters to Mendelssohn. Herder's account of language also involves an argument for conceiving of human beings as thoroughly social and dependent on others. As social beings, always immersed in a

culture, human beings refine and perfect their skills over time – over the course of individual lives and from one generation to the next.

The argument of the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* leads to a consideration of the importance of history for Herder, the central theme of *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, taken up in chapter 4. In my reading of this text, I focus on Herder's argument that ethical life emerges from the needs and desires of each historical age. According to Herder, this means that the ethical practices of any age must be understood genealogically. The text as a whole offers a genealogy of modern European morality, and should be read in this way. It thus presents a way of doing philosophical work on ethics that resembles what Friedrich Nietzsche later developed in *Genealogie zur Moral*, but with some important differences that I discuss.

Chapter 5 turns to Herder's *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*. Scholarship on this text has focused on what it shows about his general philosophy of mind, but I focus on the aspects of it that bear directly on his ethics. This text contains an account not only of Herder's moral psychology and theory of motivation, but his views about freedom, the nature of the emotions, and the place of love in human life. It also lays out in greater detail the principle of harmonious development.

The final chapter examines one argument from Herder's *magnum opus*, the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. I emphasize the way that Herder's account of the social nature of humanity is connected with his naturalism – his emphasis on both accurate scientific accounts of humanity, and his refusal to appeal to miraculous forms of explanation. This draws together some of the work discussed in the earlier chapters on Herder's perfectionism and the social character of man, but reveals how

these are blended with his naturalism in this mature work. I also contend that Herder's account of the possibility of history rests on his ethical ideas. While my account of the *Ideen* is not comprehensive (a full commentary or analysis of that work would have to itself be grand in size), I believe that it serves well as a capstone to an account of Herder's thought up through 1791.

Chapter 1: Herder's Early Ideals

Introduction

Herder's early texts are a trove of philosophical experiments. While often fragmentary and undeveloped, they are fascinating attempts to give form to the chaotic and conflicting forces at work in his mind. Goethe, in his autobiography, recalled that in his first weeks of acquaintance with Herder in Strasbourg, "As to the abundance that these few weeks that we lived together contained, I can well say that everything that Herder gradually carried out was depicted in a germinal form."[1] This personal reminiscence appears all the more apt as one reads through Herder's early sketches and fragments.

To understand the direction of Herder's ethical thought, it will be useful to begin with an account the ethics contained in his early works. These early texts contain expressions of ideals more than complete arguments, but they are not less valuable for that reason. Two of the texts that are most revealing of Herder's early ideals are the short sketch of 1775, "Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks Allgemeiner und Nützlicher Werden Kann", and the *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769*. In what follows, I will attempt to offer an exposition of some of the major ethical themes that occupied Herder during the earliest part of his career in order to understand how Herder conceived of the problems at this period in time. These texts will be used both to give focus to the

[1] Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Aus meinem Leben: Wahrheit und Dichtung* (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1866), p. 494.

interpretation of Herder's later texts, and also to lay the ground for an inquiry into the continuities, ruptures, and developments in Herder's thought over time.

I – "Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks Allgemeiner und Nützlicher Werden Kann"

Herder's sketch, "Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks Allgemeiner und Nützlicher Werden Kann" was prompted by an essay contest held by the Bern Patriotic Society. The question posed by the society was: "How can the truths of philosophy become more universal and useful for the people?"[2] Herder drafted, but neither submitted nor completed his entry to the contest. The text is markedly incomplete and, in many places, extremely unclear. Despite this, the draft is a valuable document for understanding the young Herder. The text contains intriguing, if rough, sketches of views that Herder will develop throughout the course of his intellectual career.[3]

---

[2] This text has received a great deal of attention in recent scholarship. See Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 196-7.; Michael N. Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 13-5.; Kristin Gjesdal, "'A Not Yet Invented Logic': Herder on Bildung, Anthropology, and the Future of Philosophy," in *Die Bildung der Moderne*, ed. Michael Dreyer and Michael Forster (Tübingen: Francke, 2013).; John Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 172-7.

[3] Michael Forster includes this text under a section entitled "General Philosophical Program" in his translation of Herder's *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Michael Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). While I believe that much can be learned from this text, I am not confident that it represents anything as solid as a *program* to which Herder adheres in his mature works.

Others have claimed that Herder's advocacy of philosophy becoming anthropology in this text should be read as a "programmatic call" which guides his entire intellectual output. John Zammito, Karl Menges, and Ernest A. Menze, "Johann Gottfried Herder Revisited: The Revolution in Scholarship in the Last Quarter Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no. 4 (2010): p. 664.

More cautiously, Rudolf Haym claims that the essay is the program of Herder's activity – both intellectual and practical – during his time in Riga (from 1765-9). He does not claim that it is a more extensive program which should be used as a guide to Herder's later work. Rudolf Haym, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Rudolf Gaertner, 1877-85), I, p. 95.

The essay is driven by Herder's attempt to resolve a dispute concerning the value and usefulness of philosophy. In attempting to negotiate this dispute, Herder offers reflections on the nature and value of philosophy, and an account of its proper aims.[4] He categorizes the critics of philosophy into four groups: mathematicians, physicists, theologians and statesmen. Philosophy has at different times attempted to adapt itself to the manner of thinking of each of these various critics. Because philosophy has adapted itself to their demands in various ways, the four forms of criticism have also become four tendencies of philosophy.[5]

Most important for understanding Herder's ethical thought is his account of the shortcomings of German rationalism, as exemplified in the works of Christian Wolff and Alexander Baumgarten. Though his critical remarks on this intellectual movement are central, they should not be exaggerated. Herder does not express an out-and-out rejection of the ideas of these thinkers. This can be observed from Herder's later adherence to certain Leibnizian doctrines, as well as his own defense of a species of moral perfectionism, as I intend to show in the subsequent chapters.

One of Herder's criticisms of rationalism concerns philosophical form. He accuses the rationalist tradition of being too imitative of mathematics, through an overemphasis on rigorous demonstrations and the use of principles, as opposed to experience and intuition.[6] Wolff, for example, authored his works in a mathematical or geometric form,

[4] A valuable discussion of the text as an account of the proper aims of philosophy is Gjesdal, "'A Not Yet Invented Logic': Herder on Bildung, Anthropology, and the Future of Philosophy."
[5] DKV 1: 105-110.
[6] DKV 1: 106.

much like Spinoza.[7] Alexander Baumgarten likewise models his philosophical works on mathematics. Even Baumgarten's work in aesthetics proceeds in the form of demonstrations from axiomatic first principles.[8]

According to Herder, presenting philosophy in this way is not merely distasteful or tedious, but morally deleterious. He contends that works composed in this manner are powerless to help people actually improve themselves because they are abstract and do not address the emotional and sensible character of the agent.[9] To be morally upbuilding, a work would need to speak to the passions as well as to the intellect. Human action is driven not by principles but by the moving power of sensation or emotion. Principles and demonstrations, according to Herder, are not merely different from the true sources of moral action, but are even opposed to them. For this reason, the excessive emphasis on abstract principles by philosophy can make people morally worse.[10] This highlights an important aspect of Herder's conception of the aim of moral philosophy. It should not be pursued merely to increase our understanding or knowledge, but it ought also to attempt to improve our character.[11] A philosophy that

---

[7] See, for example, Christian Wolff, *Vernünftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit* (Frankfurt and Lepzig1733).

[8] Alexander Baumgarten, *Ästhetik*, trans. Dagmar Mirbach, 2 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2009). For a discussion of Baumgarten's mathematical method, see Frederick C. Beiser, *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism From Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.124

[9] DKV 1: 115ff.

[10] "So bald Empfindungen Grundsatz wird, so bald hört er auf Empfindung zu sein – ich denke, ich betrachte ich ergreife moralische Pflicht: - mein Gesichtspunkt ist ganz anders, ich verlerne sein Gegenteil, zu handeln, ihn anzuwenden – Jede Fertigkeit ist der andern entgegengesetzt." DKV 1: 116. See also Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition*, pp. 14-5.

[11] Hence, Herder would reject the manner in which much early twentieth-century philosophy was also pursued; he would have more in common with G.E.M. Anscombe and Iris Murdoch than, say, J.L. Mackie and his sharp distinction between first-order and second-order moral views. See G.E.M. Anscombe, "Modern Moral Philosophy," *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958); Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Shocken Books, 1970); J.L. Mackie, *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* (New York: Penguin, 1977).

was actually productive of moral improvement, by contrast, would aid people in developing their sentiments, which are the source of our motivation and understanding.

Herder also finds fault with another component of rationalist ethical theory. The ethical theory advanced by all of the German rationalists is a form of perfectionism.[12] Wolff presents a representative version of this position in his ethical works. Wolff holds that the highest good, the fundamental aim, of a human life is to perfect oneself and others.[13] However, the central form of perfection that matters, according to Wolff is the perfection of the higher human faculties, especially our reason. Accordingly, this theory treats rationality and the development of human rational capacities as being of the highest value, and makes acting according to principles the basis of its theory of moral action.[14] It further connects makes development of philosophical reason through logical study a central and indispensable part of the ethical imperative to perfect oneself.

Herder contends that this ethical theory utilizes an abstract ideal of perfection that should be rejected:

> If there existed a logic which was arrayed in the *ideal perfections [Idealvollkommenheiten] of our idol*, which banished errors, etc., should it for the use of the people become more universal? As long as one makes judgments about the perfection or imperfection of an ideal science of thought, without showing this goddess in the clothing of humanity: for that time much will be identified [*erkennt*] as good, which in its application [*Anwendung*] shows itself to be bare [*Blöße*]. Indeed, philosophical thinking is a perfection. But if it is for human beings such as we are, whose watchword is spoken by nature: "live, procreate, and die"; and if thinking philosophically would be for citizens, for whom the state's watchword is: "act!" is a question that is very relevant for our problem.[15]

---

[12] This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.
[13] Wolff, *Vernünftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit*, sections 12 and 44.
[14] Ibid., section 24.
[15] DKV 1: 112-3. My translation of this passage was considerably aided by consulting that of Forster.

Herder's move here is not to reject the idea that human beings ought to aim to perfect themselves, or even that philosophical thinking in particular is a perfection. Rather, he attacks the specific account of perfection contained in the rationalist tradition, the perfection of the so-called 'higher' faculties of the soul, as empty and useless. The Wolffian ideal is so far removed from human life that, though is appears to be true in the abstract, the attempt to apply it to human life reveals the ideal to be without clothes.[16] This "*Idealvollkommenheit"* is, hence, an idol that prevents us from pursuing the genuine article – a more human form of perfection.

On two counts, then, moral philosophy in the key of mathematics is flawed: first, it is mistaken about moral psychology because it assumes that people act according to principle and that bad actions are the result of bad principles. Because of this, it fails to address the sentiments. Those who imbibe its works and ideas are likely to have their own sentimental nature weakened, thus becoming morally worse. Second, the ideal it prescribes for moral development is empty or, worse, harmful because it prevents people from recognizing the plurality of more attainable forms of perfection that might be pursued.

The critique of these aspects of the form and content of rationalist ethics is the negative side of Herder's position. Herder's own positive views can be roughly pieced together as the inverse of these positions. To begin with, he can be understood to hold that the spurs to action are not purely rational principles, but must involve some other

[16] This is the most important modification of Forster's translation that I have attempted to make – to retain the contrast between '*Tracht'* and '*Blöße'* which figures in the passage.

source of motivation. This on its own is a very thin idea, and Herder does little in this essay to flesh it out. Herder suggests that the "healthy understanding" is capable of this, but the concept of a healthy understanding is not adequately explained. Herder does frequently invoke sentiments in his sketch, and he seems to oppose them to reason. We might then think of Herder's position as crudely Humean, committed to binary distinction between beliefs and desires, and the view that it is desires rather than cognition that leads people to act as they do. Michael Forster seems to endorse such a reading of this text when he characterizes Herder's view as a form of noncognitivism.[17] There is no evidence contrary to this in this text, and Herder's claim that principles and sentiments/feeling are opposed to one another would seem to bolster such an interpretation of this text.[18] If Herder's account here is a form of noncognitivism this extreme, this placing of reason and sentiment into radical opposition with one another would make his account philosophically problematic. Such views run into the problem of accounting for the means by which cognizing certain features of the world can motivate one to act. Further, the emotions themselves seem to require cognition of the object of one's feeling to be the emotion that it is. Being angry is distinguished from sadness because the former emotion involved the belief that a *wrong* has been done, even though both involve the notion that a *harm* has occurred.[19]

---

[17] Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition*, p. 15.
[18] DKV 1: 116.
[19] On this issue generally, see Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), especially chapter 1; Ronald De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); Jerome Neu, *A Tear is an Intellectual Thing: The Meanings of Emotions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). The *locus classicii* of this account of anger are the works of Aristotle and Seneca. For Aristotle, Rhetoric, Book II, chapter 2, included in Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). Seneca's *On Anger* is included in *Moral and Political Essays*, trans. John M. Cooper and J.F. Procopé (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Even if Herder adheres to this conception of the relationship between emotion and reason in this sketch, it is not his final position. In his later work, Herder will develop a more complex moral psychology - one which does not calve reason and emotion in just this way. Especially in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*, Herder will attempt to develop a more nuanced view in which sentiments and reason are not "opposed to one another." Instead, he will argue that these aspects of the human being originate in a common source, and are capable of being harmoniously integrated with one another.[20]

This change in Herder's view is one reason why I think it is not entirely correct to see this essay as a general "program" guiding all of Herder's philosophical work. Rather, it is one of Herder's first attempts to come to terms with a set of issues and, as such, is rougher and more simplistic than the accounts found in Herder's later texts. Philosophically, Herder's work in the 1770s is more original and compelling. This early account, with its binary picture of reason and sentiment, seems to offer a standard version of sentimentalist moral psychology, such as one finds in Francis Hutcheson or David Hume.[21] Herder's later work offers a much more nuanced and sophisticated account of the relationship between sentiment and reason.

An additional concern that Herder raises about the wrong form of philosophy is that it cultivates a dangerous and unnatural kind of curiosity. This is an issue that arises

---

[20] To see just how different Herder's view becomes, consider the following passage from the 1775 draft of *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*: "Empfindung, Reiz, Leidenschaft ist der Vernunft so wenig entgegen, daß ja die wahre, einzige Vernunft und Tugend allein aus und mit aller wahren Empfindung, Reiz, Leidenschaft handelt." SWS 8: 310.

[21] Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (London: J. Darby, 1725); David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888), Book III. Herder was probably more directly influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose first discourse argued reason and the advancement of the sciences posed a danger to virtue, whereas natural sentiments offered a direct routs to goodness. *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, included in *The Discourses and Other Early Political writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

for most of the historical forms of philosophy, and not only that of the German rationalists. The praise of curiosity by philosophers can be seen in Aristotle's claim that philosophy begins in wonder.[22] This fondness for curiosity was especially prominent among philosophers in Herder's own time. During the high period of the enlightenment, the acquisition (and propagation) of any kind of knowledge was thought by many to be intrinsically, even superlatively, valuable.[23] Herder dissents from this epistemic optimism.

He acknowledges that there is a healthy and natural form of curiosity, but he also avers that there is an adventitious drive for knowledge inimical to our well-being. Herder describes the former as "a drive composed of self-preservation and protection."[24] It is a disposition to gather information about the world that assists the human being in living safely and happily. The artificial form of curiosity, by contrast, is not confined to matters that contribute to the self-preservation or well-being of the agent, but is "insatiable" and "infinite". It tends to make human beings discontent and unhappy because under its influence one forms ideals and aims that cannot possibly be satisfied within context of a human life.[25]

Herder's description of the natural and healthy form of curiosity is very similar to Rousseau's account of *amour de soi meme,* and the account of the artificial form of

---

[22] *Metaphysics*, 982b12.
[23] Most characteristic of this outlook is that of the *philosophes*, which drove the encyclopedia project. See, for example,
[24] DKV 1: 119. Just after this, Herder describes the kind of curiosity found in the lives of the Hottentots as "tot für jede feinere Neubegierde." This is contrasted with the insatiable curiosity of the Europeans, which drives them to both explore and exploit the earth. This passage seems to foreshadow Herder's later dispute with Kant concerning the value of the kind of life lived by the Tahitians.
[25] DKV 1: 119.

curiosity is likewise similar to Rousseau's characterization of *amour propre*.[26] It is known that Herder was heavily influenced by Rousseau, especially in his youth. As such, Herder may have been influenced directly by Rousseau's own conclusions about curiosity and vanity. If so, he might follow Rousseau in asserting that the source of the artificial and harmful form of curiosity is an excessive concern with how one appears before others (what Rousseau calls *amour propre*). This form of self-love, which finds its satisfaction through outdoing others, according to Rousseau makes possible, and stimulates, the vice of vanity, which was an especially salient problem in modern societies.[27] This gives us reason to think that Herder considered there to be a connection between curiosity and viciousness. Consequently, the purpose of a philosophy that improves human life will not be to encourage inquiry and curiosity as such. Rather, it will be grounded in the needs and concerns of human life and will only facilitate our desire for knowledge within a limited domain.

To be properly useful, "our philosophy must descend from the stars to human beings."[28] Herder pleas here for what Haym has called a "*menschliche Philosophie*."[29] This call for philosophy to descend from the stars is a deliberate echo of Cicero's characterization of Socrates as the first thinker who drew philosophy away from a study of that which is in the heavens and instead made human life, happiness, and virtue its

---

[26] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on the Origins and Foundations of Inequality*, included in *The Discourses and Other Early Political writings*. Herder's debt to Rousseau is also noted by Ulrich Gaier in his commentary on "Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks", DKV 1: 977. Rousseau's account was influenced by Montaigne, a thinker also admired by Herder.

[27] Rudolf Haym shows that was a concern of Herder's, stimulated by his engagement with the civic life of Riga, which was dominated by commercial concerns. See Haym, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*, I, p. 95.

[28] DKV 1: 122.

[29] Haym, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*, I, p. 94. This characterization of Herder's philosophy is followed by a number of others. See, for example, Emil Adler, *Herder und die deutsche Aufklärung* (Vienna: Europa, 1968), pp. 72-6.

central focus.[30] The ideal of philosophy depicted by Herder is not that of a recondite or purely theoretical discipline, but rather a form of thought that is capable of improving human life. It ought to be beneficial to all human beings, and not only intellectuals. This human philosophy requires a revaluation of activities and forms of living that have often been regarded by intellectuals as lowly or inferior.[31] Herder's rejection of a conception of human life that privileges the activities of intellectuals will be dear to him for the remainder of his life. Philosophy must take account of how a wider range of human activities are good and conducive to happiness, and not focus exclusively on the sharpening of the abstract intellect.

Herder suggests that this human philosophy ought to follow a very different method than the rationalists. He states, "In physics, the Cartesian hypotheses were followed by a Newton. In philosophy, may the mathematical aeons be followed by the physical ones."[32] Herder does not mean by this that he wants philosophy to be reduced to experimental physics. He is not an untimely logical positivist. Rather, he means that philosophy ought to be grounded in a close acquaintance with object examined, the human being, and not to force humanity into *a priori* models that are not themselves

---

[30] Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, V.4. This characterization fits well with the depiction of Socrates in *Apology*, 19b-c and 30a-b.

Beiser claims that Herder's ideal goes back to the humanism of the Renaissance at *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 102. This is true, but it has a more ancient origin.

There is also a similar description of Socrates by Montaigne in "Of Physiognomy". Included in Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Works*, trans. Donald Frame (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003).

[31] Herder specifically calls for the philosopher to "gehe auf das Land, und lerne die Weise der Ackerleute." DKV 1: 127.

[32] DKV 1: 107.

derived from a close attention to experience.[33] It ought to be grounded in the facts, and not the product of fanciful speculation.

The subject-matter of a reformed philosophy ought to be the human being: "If philosophy is to become useful for human beings, then let it make the human being its center."[34] Herder states the general point alternately as: "what new fruitful developments must not occur here, if our whole philosophy becomes anthropology."[35] Herder is not arguing that philosophy should be absorbed by a competing academic discipline.[36] No discipline with that name existed at the time. Herder intends rather that philosophy should be grounded in, and proceed from, the study (*logos*) of the human being (*Anthropos*). It would aim to develop a sound view of what human beings are actually like, and make human concerns its central topic. It considers human beings as they are, based on observation; and not as abstruse systems of metaphysics presume them to be. As Herder develops his ideas in later texts, we will see that this includes attending

---

[33] Herder is clearly hearkening back to Newton's own rejection of the use of hypotheses. Consider, for example, the following from the *Principia*, "Those who take the foundation of their speculations from hypotheses, even if they then proceed most rigorously according to mechanical laws, are merely putting together a romance, elegant perhaps and charming, but nevertheless a romance." Isaac Newton, *Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 43.

[34] DKV 1: 125. Forster's translation.

[35] DKV 1: 134. Forster's translation.

[36] Zammito sometimes writes as if this is the case. See, for example, Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, pp. 3 and 176. For a more accurate account of what Herder means by anthropology, see Hans Dietrich Irmscher, *"Weitstrahlsinniges" Denken. Studien zu Johann Gottfried Herder* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2010), p. 41. Zammito's interpretation of the text is criticized in detail in Gjesdal, "'A Not Yet Invented Logic': Herder on Bildung, Anthropology, and the Future of Philosophy."

Herder did have an important impact on the development of the discipline we now call anthropology, but the story of his influence is much more complicated than his use of the word. See Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition*, chapter 6.

to human beings as embodied, linguistic creatures whose manner of living and thinking is shaped by history.[37]

Improving human beings and human life would be the primary goal of this philosophy. Herder thinks that this should be carried out by providing moral and political education (*Bildung*).[38] According to Herder, moral *Bildung* must be adapted to the circumstances and lives of those who are being taught. The words used to instruct should not be "torn from their context", for such words cannot be understood correctly by those who are being taught. He mentions two specific misuses of terms. The first is the use of the language of the Bible in moral education. The concepts contained in the Bible belong to the "Morgenland", and while suited to their time, are not fitting for the eighteenth-century.[39] The second misuse is the employment of Greek and Roman terms of approval and criticism.[40] Such ages were different from the modern one, in that they were ages of vigor and strength. In the modern world, people lack the vitality for even the errors of that age, and hence should not aim to develop the same traits. The qualities of character that were virtues in those contexts cannot simply be imitated by persons living in modern societies.[41] Doing such would produce only an unconvincing and flat simulacrum of the classical virtues. Instead, it is crucial that one attends to people as

---

[37] The later chapters of the present work will aim to show this. On the soul-body relation in particular, see Nigel DeSouza, "The Soul-Body Relationship and the Foundations of Morality: Herder contra Mendelssohn," *Herder Yearbook* 21 (2014): pp. 149-54.
[38] DKV 1: 127-30. I discuss only the sections on moral *Bildung* here, as the very short section on political *Bildung* is inchoate to the point of being nearly incoherent.
[39] DKV 1: 127.
[40] DKV 1: 129.
[41] Herder makes a similar claim in his early works on aesthetics and language, where he argues that modern Germans should not imitate the works of ancient Latin and Greek authors because their language and social conditions are very different. See, for example, "Von der Ode", DKV 1: 85-8 and *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur. Erste Sammlung von Fragemenen*, DKV 1: 222-32.

they are, and draw on the strengths and virtues that people in one's own age are most disposed to.[42]

There are two ideas here that are developed more thoroughly in later texts. The first is a point about the meaning of terms. Herder is holist about meaning who also thinks that the meaning of a term is determined by its use. The use is itself shaped by the context in which a speaker intends to use a term in a particular way. Hence, to know fully what a word means one must understand the context in which a term is used, and the purposes for which it is used.[43] To tear a word from its context is to thus deprive it of the background against which it can have meaning. If ethical terms are deprived of the context that makes them meaningful, then they will not be any longer capable of offering moral guidance or contributing to moral improvement.

A second important idea is that human perfections and virtues are anchored in their historical period. Each age is suited for the cultivation of some virtues and not others. The Romans lived in a society where the martial virtues, such as courage, were well-suited. This is not the case for citizens of modern European societies. Likewise, different virtues are needed by those who live in different ages. This issue is not pursued in detail in the sketch, but it will be a central theme in Herder's 1774 *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*.

---

[42] "O lasset uns die Moral aus dem Herzen des Menschen nicht aus fremden Zeiten lernen, um nützlich zu werden…" DKV 1: 129.

[43] There is a similarity here to Wittgenstein. For further discussion of Herder's philosophy of language in general, and his theory of meaning in particular, see Forster, *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition*, chapter 2.

There is also a richly illuminating discussion of this issue in Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chapter 5. See especially her fascinating account of the difficulty of translating a poem containing the Hindi word, '*dhūp*', on pp. 171-2.

These points in "Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks Allgemeiner und Nützlicher Werden Kann" can serve as a useful initial orientation to some of Herder's basic ideas about ethics and moral philosophy. Its value lies not in offering us a full picture of Herder's views, but in the image it provides of the aspirations that led him to work out his more refined and nuanced positions in later texts. Another early text, written four years after the short sketch, will fill out these aspirations in a bit more detail.

II – *Journal Meiner Reise im Jahr 1769*

In June of 1769, feeling weary of his obligations as a teacher and minister in Riga, Herder embarked on a voyage that would take him across northern Europe, and into France. Herder left for the journey full of angst and yearning for a new perspective on his life and the world. The travels were both stimulating and chastening. Chastening, in that the French intellectuals he had admired struck him as arrogant and shallow when he chanced to meet them in person. This left Herder with a bitter taste for the approach to philosophy taken by the *philosophes*. The journey was also stimulating, in that during his travels Herder began to formulate some of his major ideals in the form of a travel journal. Rudolf Haym describes this text as "the most meaningful, illuminating document for the inner history of the Herderian spirit."[44] The journal offers a vivid and fascinating portrait of a great mind in ferment, striving to develop a mass of ideas into an articulable form. The tone of the journal is fitting of the *Sturm und Drang* years, which it prefigures.

[44] Haym, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*, I, p. 317.

There are a number of important issues discussed in the journal that are of interest for understanding Herder's ethics. Three of these are especially important, and the following account will focus on them. In the journal, Herder develops a set of ideas about education and development which are relevant to his conception of moral character and the methods which should be employed by moral philosophy. A second set of issues concerns the relationship between history and ethics. Finally, Herder depicts the moral ideals which ought to be the goal of moral philosophy and of an individual's own *Bildung*.

The initial publication of Herder's travel journal presented it as a work on education.[45] While the journal addresses a wide range of issues, the concept of education plays a central role in the journal. Most concretely, in the journal Herder expresses his intention to reform the educational system in Riga, upon his return.[46] He lays out an extremely detailed account of the structure that the schooling in Riga ought to take. These include such specific and practical matters as the subjects to be taught, the order in which they are to be taught, and the duration of the school day. Of importance for understanding Herder's ethics are the general ideals that guide his account of the proper format of educational institutions. The interest in education, or *Bildung*, brings the *Journal meiner Reise* into close connection with the 1775 sketch discussed above.

In the *Journal*, he contends that education should address the whole character of the person. In a child this can only be achieved by making the education exciting and enjoyable. [47] The teacher should not compel or force the student to memorize formulas,

[45] See Rainer Wisbert's commentary at DKV 9/2: 889. The first publication included only a portion of the work, and appeared posthumously in 1810 with the title *Ideal einer Schule*.
[46] DKV 9/2: 35-40.
[47] DKV 9/2: 51.

but should rather stimulate the child's intellectual powers by giving the student an opportunity to experience strong sensible impressions in her own way.[48] Education should focus on providing the student with deep and emotionally laden impressions, rather than conveying facts in a dry and formulaic manner. Such *Empfindungen*, he claims, will serve the child in his future development and refinement.

The fundamental idea is that instruction of the young ought to be based on experience and nature, rather than on abstract principles: "Philosopher of nature! That should be your standpoint with the youth whom you instruct!"[49] Being inattentive to the nature of the students being formed by the process of education yields a one-sided and inadequate form of education – one that does not produce well-rounded human beings capable of living full lives. Working contrary to nature and attempting to force human beings into artificial molds that correspond to the teacher's favored set of abstract principles will be damaging to the student.[50]

Nature is, on this account, the ground of the norms that we should draw on to assess human activities in general, and education or the facilitation of human development in particular.[51] Understanding which kinds of development are beneficial for the individual and society will, consequently, require a careful study of the natural world. This is why ethics requires knowledge of the mind and human nature.[52] Scientific inquiry is thus an important prerequisite for, and part of, the instruction of the young. In the *Journal*, this call for an empirically grounded form of education (that includes the formation of ethical and moral character) remains just that – a plea or

[48] DKV 9/2: 119-20.
[49] DKV 9/2: 16.
[50] DKV 9/2: 77.
[51] "Wer kann wider die Natur der Dinge?" DKV 9/2: 77.
[52] DKV 9/2: 50.

expression of hope. This *cri de coeur*, however, shows us that Herder's later attempt to provide a scientifically grounded account of the human being as a historical creature, an account which is also intended to improve humanity, is not simply the patching together of two entirely distinct interests.[53] Rather, from early on Herder was of the view that any account of human development, individual or social, had to take its start from an accurate account of nature.

The *Journal meiner Reise* is also important for the insight it offers into Herder's early interest in history, and how that interest is related to his ethical views. Herder's reputation, for many, derives primarily from his work in the philosophy of history. Friedrich Meinecke, for example, places Herder in a position of central importance in the development of historicism. According to Meinecke, Herder was the first to offer a full account of the historicist concept of individuality, which is the notion that each historical age has its own unique characteristics, and that historical understanding must attempt to grasp each age in its individuality.[54] Meinecke's account of Herder is grounded in a reading of Herder's *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* of 1774, but the 1769 travel journal contains the kernel of this idea. While this concept is of undeniable importance for Herder's historical theory, it also has an important ethical hue.

In the *Journal*, Herder contends that each class of society, and each form of life, has its own characteristic ethics, or "*Sitten*".[55] The term '*Sitten*' has a significant pedigree in the history of German philosophy, most famously in Hegel's distinction

[53] This approach is most obviously apparent in the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte*.
[54] Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1965), pp. 165, 369, 402-3, and 545.
[55] "Jeder Stand, jede Lebensart hat ihre eignen Sitten." DKV 9/2: 27.

between *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*.[56] Herder, in his journal, does not make the post-Kantian distinction between these two concepts, which should not be imputed to him. But we should still not see his use of the term as restricted to a narrow range of issues concerning obligation and punishment, as might be the case if we see it as fitting with later uses of 'morality'. Herder's use of '*Sitten*' should be understood to refer inclusively to the practices and outlook of a people or class – their complete form of life. Herder's examples in the passage make this clear. He credits Hume with depicting many forms of character in his historical and political essays, and sees this as an example of the recognition that different classes have different ethics.[57] Herder also notes that the sailors on the ship he is travelling on have their own characteristic *Sitten*, as can be seen in their combination of superstition, rashness, ways of cooperating and quarrelling with others, and a valuation of the heroic.[58]

In saying that each class and form of life has its own ethics, the point is not merely the triviality that there are differences between the ways different individuals conduct themselves. Rather, Herder's contention is the broader, and theoretically richer claim, that different ways of life conduce to happiness in different ways and that individuals find their own forms of happiness and well-being in one or other of these possible ways of living. Thus, on the one hand individuals have the ethical and moral possibilities open to them that they do because of the culture or class which determines their possible ways of

[56] It is a fundamental distinction in *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*. G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971), volume 7.
[57] Herder's reference is primarily to Hume's *History of England*, though he also seems to have in mind his essays. Relevant here would be especially, "Of National Characters". Included in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987).
[58] DKV 9/2: 27.

living. On the other hand, each of these ways of living makes it possible to be ethically good in unique and distinctive ways.

We can think of this idea as having two complementary sides. The first is a claim about the determining character of social groups for individual identity. The second is a claim about ethical pluralism – that there are distinct and different kinds of *'Sitten'* for different forms of life. Individuals are thus formed by the social groups to which they belong.[59] These groups constitute the identities of individuals, and structure their possibilities of development and happiness.[60]

Because societies shape individuals in this way, the study of history is of paramount ethical significance. Such study, when done properly, should offer an account of the different kinds of moral practices and views that human beings have adopted, and how the historical conditions have shaped the practices and values of these societies. Herder argues that such a study of history is important in order to enable one to better understand how to enhance the happiness and well-being of persons in one's own age:

> The human soul, in itself and in its appearance on this earth, its sensual tools and standards [*Gewichte*] and hopes and pleasures and duties, everything which can make human beings happy here, will be my fundamental perspective. Everything else will be set aside, as long as I collect materials for this purpose. And to learn to know, awaken, direct, and use every impulse [*Triebfeder*] which lies in the human heart, from the frightful and wonderful to the quietly meditative and gently stunning [*Sanftbetäubenden*] – *For this purpose I desire to collect data from the history of all ages*. Each should supply to me the image of its own ethics [*Sitten*], customs [*Gebräuche*], virtues, vices, and happinesses, as I wish to lead all of this

[59] Recent philosophical work has also emphasized this aspect of social groups, and I am here in part influenced by the language of that work. See, especially, Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

[60] This is the aspect of Herder's thought that has been described by Isaiah Berlin as 'pluralism' in Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (London: Pimlico, 2000), pp. 176, 231-9.

Sonia Sikka argues that his position is better described as a form of 'relativism' at Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference*, pp. 33-43. However, she also aptly notes that getting entangled in disputes about which label to apply to Herder is unhelpful, and likely to lead to anachronistic impositions of later views onto Herder.

> back to our time and learn how to justly use these. The human species has in all of its ages, only in one way or another, happiness to the highest degree [*zur Summe*].[61]

This passage makes it clear that Herder's interest in history was from this early period motivated by practical and ethical concerns. He expresses a desire to understand the different ways of living and acting that have been conducive to the happiness of human beings, with the final intent of learning how to apply what has been learned for the improvement and benefit of his own age. A guiding assumption here – one that will be critical later, especially in 1774 – is Herder's belief that "The human species has in all of its ages, only in one way or another, happiness to the highest degree"[62] This provides a reason for aiming to understand each age on its own terms, and to recognize a variety of different ways of living as valuable. Herder's claim further entails that in coming to understand how one should live as an individual human being, one must attend to the character of one's own historical age in order to understand how it has shaped one's own individual needs and possibilities.

The *Journal* thus makes historical inquiry one of the highest tasks of the philosopher. Herder does not think that just any engagement with history will serve these ethical ends, however. One must bring history to life in such a way that one becomes aware of one's own historical position as the product of historical development, and also as opening onto a further set of future possibilities.[63] Any form of thinking about ethics that ignores the constitutive and enabling power of a society's history suffers from a form of agnosia, and will not be able to contribute to the further development of one's own age

[61] DKV 9/1: 30.
[62] Herder makes a notably similar assertion in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*: "jede Nation hat ihrem *Mittelpunkt* der Glückseligkeit *in sich*, wie jede Kugel ihren Schwerpunkt!" DKV 4: 39.
[63] DKV 9/2: 123.

in an optimal way. Further, the individual will not have an accurate estimation of their own possibilities.

Because of the way history shapes each individual's possibilities, every human life has a determinate horizon, which gives it a general structure and direction.[64] In order to be most effective in one's own time and place, it thus becomes imperative to understand how one's own society came to be, as this history is what reveals the possibilities and limitations of each age.[65] Herder advocates what has been called a genetic method for the investigation of human phenomena.[66] This method was first developed for the study of aesthetic objects and genres.[67] Herder's travel journal shows that he also explicitly defends this historical method as necessary for understanding moral outlooks and practices. This is because it is necessary for self-knowledge of both individuals and societies. This reflective awareness is a requirement for understanding how to best improve one's own age, for knowing what will contribute to happiness and virtue of those living in a particular society. This provides one impetus for pursuing a genealogy of the way of life of one's own society, a project that he will pursue in detail in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*.

---

[64] Herder uses the language of a horizon later in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, DKV 4: 39. This term is also used by Gadamer in his account of the way that an individual's interpretive possibilities are shaped by their historical situation. See Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1998), pp. 302-7. Gadamer credits Husserl and Nietzsche with this notion, surprisingly given his own engagement earlier with Herder, and *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* in particular, in his earlier texts *Volk und Geschichte im Denken Herders* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1942); "Herder und die geschichtliche Welt," in *Gesammelte Werke* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967).

[65] The young Herder notes that this is crucial for his own activity as a minister, as he chastens himself to "werde ein Prediger der Tugend *deines Zeitalters*!" DKV 9/2: 30.

[66] DKV 9/2: 123. The notion that everything in the human world has a history, or has emerged as the product of a series of changes, is fundamental to his thought. His views on this issue were stimulated in great part by his encounter with Kant's early work, *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*. See, Adler, *Herder und die deutsche Aufklärung*, pp. 56-9; Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, p. 105.

[67] "Von der Ode", DKV 1: 57-100; "Versuch einer Geschichte der lyrischen Dichtkunst", SWS 32: 85-140; the *Fragmente* cover this in many places, but see especially DKV 1: 190-4.

Herder also contends that the study of distant ages and cultures is beneficial for reasons other than providing a genealogy of one's own form of life. Knowledge of historically and geographically distant cultures is valuable because it provides one with both models of behavior, and stimuli for the development of one's own virtues. In the *Journal*, he expressing a longing for a history more emotionally vivifying and factually comprehensive than that produced by Iselin in the latter's *Geschichte der Menschheit*.[68] Such a history would collect accounts of the social, moral, and aesthetic practices of a variety of ages, and present them to the reader in a way that allows them to see the good in each of the ages, and how one's own could be made better through a selective appropriation of the good qualities of others.[69]

Just as the virtues and characteristics that are appropriate for one historical age may not be the same as that of another, Herder contends that there are different traits that fitting for distinct stages of each individual life. In the *Journal*, he makes this conception of stages central to his account of the individual's life: "The human soul has its life-stages, just as the body does."[70] In youth, there are passions and curiosity that drive a person to develop and act in a way appropriate for youth. Different passions and dispositions come to the fore in the other stages of life.[71] This might appear to be merely an armchair empirical generalization about the ways in which persons of different ages tend to behave. That Herder's account is normative, however, is clear from his claim that in the present age persons are frequently turned into "monsters" due to a poorly

---

[68] Isaak Iselin, *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit* (Zürich: Orell, Gessner, und Comp, 1768).
[69] "Das sind Fragmente über die Moral und Religion aller Völker, Sitten und Zeiten, für unser Zeit…" DKV 9/2: 31.
[70] DKV 9/2: 113.
[71] DKV 9/2: 113-5. Herder notes that Aristotle, Horace, and Hagedorn have each depicted the differences in human character typical of the different stages of life. For Aristotle, he has in mind *Rhetoric*, Bk. II, Ch. 10-2.

structured education that transforms children into codgers, and the elderly into juveniles.[72] Herder clearly condemns such education on the grounds that it is a harmful and unhealthy way to live out one's life. It makes persons unhappy and ill-suited to act in the ways that are appropriate. This conception of the stages of life is thus intended to ground norms about the proper ways of being for each stage.

There are two key ideas here. First, education is crucial because it shapes the character of the young in a way that will affect them for the rest of their life.[73] To form a happy and virtuous person, one must thus attend to the dispositions that a person is wont to have at their age and to take those into consideration. On that basis, traits and powers conducive to well-being should be cultivated. Second, each human life has a structure and a well-lived life proceeds through each stage in the appropriate way.[74] The imposition of the standards appropriate to one age upon a different age must be avoided. When this happens, it creates unhappiness and prevents people from developing their powers and talents in a healthy and lasting way.[75]

This may sound like Herder is laying down a uniform schema of development for all human beings, in which each human being is supposed to develop through the same

---

[72] "…junge Greise, greise Jünglinge." DKV 9/2: 116.

[73] "So ist Erziehung Unterricht, Lebensart: hier eine Stimme der Wahrheit und Menschheit is Wohltat: sie schafft der Genuß der ganzen Lebenszeit: sie ist unschätzbar." DKV 9/2: 116.

[74] "Jeder Mensch muß sie durchgehen: denn sie entwickeln sich aus einander: man kann nie das folgende genießen, wenn man nicht das vorhergehende genossen hat: das erste enthält immer die Data zum Zweiten: sie gehen in Geometrischer, nicht Arithmetischer Progression fort: in ihre ganze Folge genießt man das Leben, und wird auf honette Weise Alt." DKV 9/2: 115.

[75] Here, Herder is spinning a Rousseauean motif, familiar to any reader of *Emile* – it is inappropriate to force a child to act and think as an adult, and education should be tailored to the frame of mind natural for a child of that age. Hence, one should consider the qualities of character to be not simply good or appropriate as such, but good or appropriate for a specific stage of life. Consider, for example, "Childhood has its ways of seeing, thinking, and feeling which are proper to it. Nothing is less sensible than to want to substitute ours for theirs, and I would like as little to insist that a ten-year-old be five feet tall as that he possess judgment." *Emile : or, On education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), p. 90.

A discussion of how Herder was influenced by these ideas of Rousseau's, see Hans Wolff, "Der junge Herder und die Entwicklungsidee Rousseaus," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 57 (1942).

stages. There is some truth to this interpretation, though it might appear to be in tension with some of the other things that Herder says about uniqueness and individuality. However, that which he depicts as common to all persons is a very general schema of development which leaves room for a great deal of variety in detail. It does not require every person to live in an identical way, but rather only acknowledges the very basic natural fact that human beings are born as dependent infants, and mature over time into adults capable of self-determination and reflective thought. Each of these stages has a set of virtues, and some of these virtues are distinct from the virtues appropriate for the other stages of life.

The account of individual development presented so far means that there are a set of virtues and vices which are appropriate for each stage of human life. Such virtues and vices are also historically shaped, and must be understood as fitting to only some historical ages. This interpretation of the text, though, might seem suspicious if we consider one of the most striking passages of the journal:

> All morality is a record of fine abstract concepts. All virtues and vices, the result of close attention to narrow situations, narrow cases [Fälle]! Centuries, societies, covenants, religions have contributed to this! What childish soul can hear and learn all of that which is contained in the word, and decipher it! What philosopher has deciphered this! What living philosopher, even if they had deciphered this, would be able to do this in a lively way, in order to be able to apply it![76]

One might read this as expressing simply an anti-theoretical sentiment that rejects all forms of moral philosophy as mere abstractions or useless fantasies. What has been said thus far about there being virtues and vices appropriate to each age, because of the life-

[76] DKV 9/2: 123. The first sentence cannot be translated in a way that retains some of the suggestive connections between adjectives contained in the German. It reads: "Die ganze Moral ist ein Register feiner Abstrakter Begriffe: alle Tugenden und Laster das Resultat vieler feiner Bemerkungen feiner Situationen, feiner Fälle!" See also DKV 9/2: 117.

stages that each individual must grow through, might seem to run afoul of this restriction. However, if we attend to the whole of the passage, it seems that it should be read instead as a critique in the sense that we are more familiar with from Kant – an attempt to delimit the proper domain and procedures of a faculty or activity. It is true that moral philosophy runs a danger of being merely a repository of historically accumulated ideas, sentiments, and conventions - *if* it were not able to offer an account of the origins of such sentiments. But if one *were* able to offer such an account of the origins of the ideas in question, then one might be able to do something more fruitful. Such a form of ethical thought would then avoid the charge of merely treating the prejudices of one's own age as eternal truths. They would be seen instead as living responses to a particular predicament.

A mere account of the history of our ethical life is not all that Herder thinks one should aim for. He also suggestst that the origin of these ideas and sentiments must be developed in a *living* way in order for them to be put into use. Nothing is said about how this would be done, or what the difference between a living and a dead or mechanical account would be. It may be that a lively account would simply be more emotional and full of feeling, filled with the kind of writing characteristic of the *Sturm und Drang*. It could also be that the work would present a totality of material as developing in an organic way. In either case, Herder's later historical works seem to be attempts to present history in both of these ways – *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* with its charisma and pathos, and the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* with its attempt to present a complete account of humanity as a part of the natural world. Herder may not have a clear idea about the proper execution of the inquiry into virtue

and morality at this early stage, as he dreams about it in the *Journal*. Regardless, we need not conclude that Herder is a complete skeptic about the possibility of moral philosophy, though we can say that he is dubious about some forms of moral philosophy, and how they fail to attend to to the history of ethical practices as they should.

There remains a question about the proper aim of philosophical inquiry into ethics and social life. Two such aims can be discerned in the *Journal*: the cultivation of a harmoniously developed unique individual, and the production of self-determining persons capable of independent thought.

It is in this text that we find one of the earliest formulations of what can be called the principle of harmonious develpment. This is the notion that each individual ought to strive to perfect themself not only by developing one's characteristic powers to their maximum, but that each individual's character ought to be a harmonious and well-proportioned whole.[77] In *Journal meiner Reise*, Herder describes this as the goal of an ideal education: "The powers of the soul [*Seelenkräfte*] in a child of youth will be evenly brought together [*ausgebessert*], and extended in proportion."[78] This idea is not filled out in great detail here, but there are two important elements that deserve to be noted, as they will be explored in later works. The first is that education and human development consists not in the acquisition of information, but rather in the improvement of one's powers or *Kräfte*.[79] The second is that a person's various powers should be developed such that a person's various powers are in harmony with one another, where each power complements and balances the others. This development, as it involves drawing out the

[77] I discuss this at greater length in chapter 5.
[78] DKV 9/2: 51.
[79] This idea is developed in more detail in Herder's letters to Mendelssohn, which are discussed in the next chapter.

innate dispositions of each individual, and bringing them into a complex unity, would result in the production of a unique way of being for that person. This means that it is important and valuable for each person not only to develop their talents to a high degree, but to strive to become a unique individual.

One might think that this emphasis on individuality is to be contrasted with an ethics that focuses on the social character of human life and our connections with others. To encourage the individual to be her unique self might involve the recommendation to cast aside, or even rebel against, all social conventions as hindrances to the individual's pursuit of uniqueness.[80] In Herder's case, this is not so. Herder was certainly aware of possible stultifying effects of social norms on the growth of an individual, if the norms are the wrong kind. But even in his *Sturm und Drang* years, his position was balanced by a recognition of the positive contributions that an individual's culture makes to personal development. In a striking passage about what is required to be an individual, he writes: "The human being is as much a social animal, as he is a human being. The setting of the sun is to the planets just as natural, as society is to bring forth [*fortzueilen*] his powers. But only if the society does not completely kill our particularity [*Eigenheit*]."[81] As is evident, Herder thinks that it is possible for an individual to have their individuality "killed" by social coercion or excessive conformity. Yet an individual can also develop themself in a richer way by drawing on the resources provided by their social context. This social context provides the individual with concepts that would be unavailable in isolation.[82] To be capable of achieving the goal of becoming a fully developed and

[80] In the nineteenth-century, Max Stirner offers an argument for this kind of ethic of individuality. See *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1979).
[81] DKV 9/2: 119.
[82] DKV 9/2: 119.

harmonious personality, the individual needs the conceptual resources provided by a human community.

In addition to his commitment to the principle of harmonious development, Herder holds that another goal of development is that the student become someone who "knows how to be his own master."[83] This characteristic enlightenment sentiment - likely inspired by that prophet of autonomy, Rousseau - is important for Herder. To live as one ought, one should act from one's own nature and not live slavishly according to the dictates of others. The student is not to remain in thrall to his teachers, but to be assisted in becoming a self-determining agent capable of independent thought.[84]

Herder's defense of egalitarianism and his critique of illegitimate forms of power and domination can also be seen as outgrowths of this principle.[85] If each person should be educated in such a way that they can become their own master, then it follows that no one should be the master of others. Herder's advocacy of a form of autonomy is latent, rather than fully developed here, but his later criticism of Kant - that a human being who needs a master is an animal - has its roots here in his conception of a healthy form of development tending towards individual freedom and independence.[86]

It is important to emphasize this side of Herder's thought, as some interpreters have contended that Herder believes that the individual should be completely

---

[83] DKV 9/2: 50.
[84] Gjesdal also sees a defense of independent thinking as the central aim of "Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks Allgemeiner und Nützlicher Werden Kann." See "'A Not Yet Invented Logic': Herder on Bildung, Anthropology, and the Future of Philosophy," pp. 62-6.
[85] For a detailed discussion of Herder's views on equality and unjust forms of power, see Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference*, pp. 18-25.
[86] *See Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, DKV 6: 369.

subordinated to, or absorbed in, their culture.[87] Such a contention is belied by a careful reading of any of Herder's texts. It is even more implausible when we see that from this early stage in Herder's development, the cultivation of independent thought and self-determination were central goals. Herder will never adopt the Kantian conception of autonomy as the ability to act independently of the laws of nature,[88] but he does work to develop and defend a more naturalized form of autonomy.

III

These early and incomplete works of Herder's are inchoate and undeveloped. Even if one is generous in one's conception of an argument, a reader will be unlikely to find arguments that are either complete or compelling. These texts have their value primarily for what they reveal about the projects that Herder began to pursue as a young thinker, and for the basic ideas that he was beginning to formulate.

In the following chapters, we will find many of these ideas being developed and explored. These will include the notion that what makes for a good or happy life is historically constituted, that the aim of an individual's self-development is to become a harmonious whole, and that any ethical reflection on human life should be grounded in a conception of human nature that is realistic and scientifically informed.

There is one idea of great importance for Herder's ethical thought that is developed in this same time period in a more thorough way – that human beings ought to

---

[87] Frank McEachran, *The Life and Philosophy of Johann Gottfried Herder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 65; Robert Reinhold Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), p. 111; Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 95-7.

[88] See Kant, *Grundlagen der Metaphysik der Sitten*, Dritter Abschnitt. In Band IV of Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Wilhelm Dilthey et al., 29 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902-).

work throughout their lives to perfect themselves by developing their powers. In an exchange of letters with Moses Mendelssohn that took place in the same time period (the late 1760s), Herder offers a more detailed articulation of how he conceives this perfectionist idea. This encounter with Mendelssohn will be the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 2: The Vocation of Man Controversy

I

In 1769, Johann Gottfried Herder wrote two important letters to Moses Mendelssohn concerning the latter's recently published Platonic dialogue, *Phädon*. These letters offer important insight into Herder's ethical thought, as in them Herder presents his early views about such important ethical issues as pleasure, perfection, and the highest good. They also show that Herder was sympathetic to many of the major ideas of the German rationalist tradition and not, as some scholars have been wont to claim, a diehard enemy of the enlightenment.[1]

Herder's letters to Mendelssohn are part of an important historical event in the history of German philosophy – the controversy over *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. The controversy's center of gravity was a short book published by Johann Joachim Spalding in 1748 entitled *Die Bestimmung des Menschen,* or *The*

[1] This conception of Herder was prominent in the first half of the twentieth century. See, for example, Rudolf Unger, *Herder, Novalis Und Kleist: Studien Über Die Entwicklung Des Todesproblems in Denken Und Dichten Vom Sturm Und Drang Zur Romantik* (Frankfurt: Moritz Diesterweg, 1922); Alexanger Gillies, *Herder* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1945); Frank McEachran, *The Life and Philosophy of Johann Gottfried Herder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939). The "counter-enlightenment" reading of Herder received its most influential presentation in Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (London: Pimlico, 2000)..

No contemporary Herder scholar maintains this view, at least to my knowledge. This is due, largely, to Emil Adler, *Herder Und Die Deutsche Aufklärung* (Vienna: Europa, 1968). Sadly, however, Herder is still commonly referred to as a member of the "counter-enlightenment" by writers who have not studied his works directly. In perhaps the most bizarre instance of this, Philipp Bobbitt compares Herder's ideas to those of Osama bin Laden. See the discussion in Robert E. Norton, "The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68 (2007).

Vocation of Man.[2] While little known today, the book was one of the most widely discussed in the German-speaking world of the eighteenth century, and played an important role in shaping discussions in ethics and the philosophy of religion. According to Stefan Lorenz:

> Without exaggeration, one can say that Johann Joachim Spalding's *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* was one of the most read books in Germany in the 18th Century. Its first edition of 26 pages appeared in 1748, it was constantly enlarged by various supplements, up until its thirteenth edition in 1794, as well as having received translations into French and Latin.[3]

One of the most important public exchanges inspired by Spalding's text took place between Moses Mendelssohn and Thomas Abbt in pages of the major literary organ of the Berlin *Aufklärung*: the *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*.

The controversy over *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* had a decisive influence on the young Johann Gottfried Herder, who carefully read Spalding's book, as well as the works of Mendelssohn and Abbt. His own intervention in the dispute is one of the most important moments in Herder's intellectual development. Herder's thought was indelibly marked by these events, and he

---

[2] The German word *Bestimmung* is impossible to translate precisely into English. Potential translations are 'destiny', 'vocation' and 'determination' – words that are hardly synonymous in contemporary English. The challenge for the present discussion is that the *Bestimmung* of a thing can be understood either as how it has already been determined to be (its present determination or its nature), or as what it ought to be (what it is determined to be in the future or what it ought to become), much like Aristotle's acorn which will or ought to become a tree in the future because at the present moment it has the nature of an acorn as its potentiality.

I generally translate the noun *Bestimmung* as 'vocation', though I will occasionally opt for 'determination' when the context makes that valence of the German term seem more appropriate to emphasize. I will almost always translate the verb *bestimmen* as 'to determine'. Whenever the term is translated, I will leave the original German in parentheses in order to alert readers that it is this crucial term that is being used.

[3] Stefan Lorenz, "Thomas Abbt Und Moses Mendelssohn in Ihrer Debatte Über Johann Joachim Spaldings *Bestimmung Des Menschen*," in *Moses Mendelssohn Und Die Krise Seiner Wirksamkeit*, ed. Michael Albrecht, Eva J. Engel, and Norbert Hinske (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1994), p. 124.

The various additions brought the length of the thirteenth edition up to 244 pages. The seventh edition of 1763, the appearance of which was the basis of the discussion between Abbt and Mendelssohn, is 132 pages long.

worked throughout his philosophical career to give adequate expression to the position that he began to work out in his letters to Mendelssohn.

In this chapter, I will try to bring out the issues at stake in the controversy over *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* and to interpret Herder's early ethical views in light of them. I will begin with an overview of Spalding's text, and Herder's reaction to it. I will then turn to Abbt and Mendelssohn, offering a brief account of each of their positions in turn. I will then examine Herder's letters to Mendelssohn, with the intent of highlighting what is distinctive in Herder's position vis-à-vis the other figures involved in the discussion of the vocation of man. I will then offer an account of the issues that remain unresolved in Herder's letters. The unresolved problems in Herder's position, I will argue, are taken up by Herder in his later works where he attempts to address the problems either directly or obliquely.

II

Spalding's *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* is concerned with providing an answer to the questions found in Persius' *Satires* and cited on the opening page: "Whence come you? Whither are you going?"[4] Each of these questions sets a task that Spalding takes up. The question "Whence come you?" is understood as meaning roughly "What is your [i.e. human] nature?" Spalding interprets "Whither are you going?" such that it is equivalent to Socrates' basic ethical

[4] "Quid samus? et quidnam victuri gignimur?" Persius, *Satires*, III, 67. The English translation in the paragraph is my translation of Spalding's translation of the Latin.

question, "How should one live?"[5] Spalding intends thus to offer both an account of human nature and of the proper ends of a human life.[6]

Spalding's text follows a narrator reflecting on the purpose of his existence. The path taken by the narrator is supposed to serve as a guide to all who read the text themselves, in the same way that readers of Descartes' *Meditations* are supposed to be led from reposing faith in their senses to a belief in the superior power of their reason. The issues Spalding addresses are ethical and religious, rather than epistemological, but the conclusion is in many ways similar to Descartes'. Spalding seeks to persuade his reader that the best kind of life will not be one lived under the guidance of, or for the satisfaction of, either bodily or intellectual pleasures. Rather, it will be a life devoted to improving and perfecting the immaterial soul.

Spalding begins by considering the value and importance of pleasure (first bodily pleasure,[7] then intellectual pleasure[8]), then virtue,[9] followed by religion[10]. All forms of pleasure, and even virtuous activity, are found incomplete and incapable of allowing a human being to be satisfied and content. The highest

[5] Plato, *Republic* 352d.
[6] Some helpful general discussions of Spalding's text are Clemens Schwaiger, "Zur Frage Nach Den Quellen Von Spaldings Bestimmung Des Menshen. Ein Ungelöstes Rätsel Der Aufklärungsforschung," *Aufklärung* 11, no. 1 (1999); Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University AL: University of Alabama Press, 1973), pp. 131-2; John Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 165-7; Manfred Kuehn, "Reason as a Species Characteristic," in *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide*, ed. Amelie Rorty and James Schmidt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Reinhard Brandt, *Die Bestimmung Des Menschen Bei Kant* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2007), pp. 61-77; Michael Printy, "The Determination of Man: Johann Joachim Spalding and the Protestant Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74, no. 2 (2013).
[7] *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, pp. 39-43. Citations are to the modern edition, Johann Joachim Spalding, *Die Bestimmung Des Menschen,Die Erstausgabe Von 1748 Und Die Letzte Aufklage Von 1794* (Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 1997).
[8] Ibid., pp-44-8.
[9] Ibid., pp. 49-67.
[10] Ibid., pp. 68-79.

good of a human life can be found only in the perfecting of one's rational, spiritual and moral nature. This process of perfecting oneself can only be completed in an afterlife in which one's real self, or pure soul, has an eternity to continue the task of self-perfection without being hindered by a physical body. The narrator concludes by contending that immortality is a necessary condition for the fulfillment of the vocation of man.[11]

Spalding's method of defending this view involves offering an account of the character of human beings, of their desires and ways of thinking, which he believes will lead one to conclude that human beings must have been designed (or *bestimmt)* for immortality. Spalding is a faithful member of the Lebnizian-Wolffian perfectionist school of thought, and his argument is based on the idea that human beings are endowed with a set of powers and abilities which they are determined [*bestimmt*] to perfect. Spalding claims:

> I sense abilities [*Fähigkeiten*] in me, which are capable of an infinite development [*Wachstums*]. Should my capacity to recognize and love the true and the good then cease when it either has merely begun to be developed, or even if it has become skillful through practice, prevented from a swifter ascent to a greater perfection? That would be too much futility in the designs [*Veranstaltungen*] of an infinite wisdom.[12]

Given that human beings have capacities that can be developed more completely than would be possible if the present life were the only one, the wisest way for the world to be constituted would be for human beings to be given the opportunity to develop these capacities to a complete perfection in an afterlife. That the world would not be organized in a wise and excellent way is thought to be either

[11] Ibid., pp. 80-9.
[12] Ibid., p. 82.

impossible or wildly implausible by Spalding. This is because he believes that if we think carefully about how nature is organized, we will see that the world is well-ordered and that this will compel us to belief in divine providence.[13]

Spalding's argument reveals the dual influences of Shaftesbury and Wolff.[14] Spalding's case for the belief in God, or divine providence, on the basis of the apparently harmonious order of nature is remarkably similar to an argument contained in Shaftesbury's *The Moralists*:

> 'Tis this that must render Revelation probable, and secure that first step to it, the Belief of a Deity and Providence. A Providence must be prov'd from what we see of Order in things present. We must contend for Order; and in this part chiefly, where Virtue is concerned. All must not be refer'd to a hereafter. For a disorder'd State, in which all present care of Things is given up, Vice uncontroul'd, and Virtue neglected, represents a very Chaos, and reduces us to the belov'd Atoms, Chance and Confusion of the Atheists.[15]

Spalding accepts Shaftesbury's claim that one must draw attention to the order of the world in order to support a belief in a deity that has created the world. However, whereas for Shaftesbury this meant that a belief in the hereafter was unnecessary, Spalding contends that a belief in a hereafter is warranted by this very belief in a deity concerned with the order of the world it has created. Without an afterlife, there would be "futility in the designs of an infinite wisdom."[16]

---

[13] This is the basic argument of the chapter of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* titled "Religion", ibid., pp. 68-79.
[14] Schwaiger shows that Shaftesbury and Wolff were the two dominant influences on Spalding's thought. See "Zur Frage Nach Den Quellen Von Spaldings Bestimmung Des Menshen. Ein Ungelöstes Rätsel Der Aufklärungsforschung."
[15] Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols. (London: Purser, 1732; repr., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), II, p. 156.
[16] Spalding, *Die Bestimmung Des Menschen*, p. 82.

The other pillar of Spalding's argument - that we have powers and capacities that we ought to perfect, but which cannot be perfectly developed in the present life - finds its precedent in Wolff. Wolff argues that there is a universal rule governing human actions according to which a person is to "do what makes yourself, your condition or the condition of others more perfect."[17] In light of this rule, the highest good for a human being, according to Wolff, is "an unhindered progress [*Fortgang*] toward greater perfections."[18]

Spalding's argument for immortality thus brings together Shaftesbury's argument for religious belief and the basic principles of Wolffian perfectionist ethics in order to develop a case for the vocation of man as an unhindered progress towards perfection which begins in this life and continues in an afterlife. The achievement of the highest good, and the realization of our vocation, is possible only if the pursuit of perfection begun in the present life extends to eternity. If that were not the case it would mean that a vast distance would remain between the optimally possible state of perfection, and the actual state of perfection which a human being achieves by the time of his or her death. This would appear to make the small bit of perfection which even the best human being is capable of achieving appear to be in vain, since even that remains grossly inferior to the complete state of perfection which is possible.

This argument also entails that the self which is immortal is not bodily, but rather is an immaterial soul or mind. It is the rational faculty which is source of all

[17] Christian Wolff, *Vernünftige Gedancken Von Der Menschen Thun Und Lassen, Zu Beförderung Ihrer Glückseligkeit* (Frankfurt and Lepzig1733), section 12.
[18] Ibid., section 44.

thought: "I am actually that in me which has representations, judges, decides..."[19] Spalding holds that the 'I' which is immortal is thus a purely rational or spiritual, not a sensual being, and its being and its activity are not fundamentally dependent on the senses.[20] Hence, the afterlife in which a human being is able to maximally perfect himself is a spiritual afterlife, in which a human being exists free of a physical body.

Spalding's argument is an attempt to address the classical philosophical problem of the highest good. This is a problem concerning the object of greatest value, the pursuit of which gives structure and significance to an agent's life. The highest good is characterized by Aristotle as an end that is desirable for its own sake, and that for the sake of which all goods that are merely desirable as means are sought.[21] In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle canvasses a set of different ends which his contemporaries held to be the highest good – such as pleasure, honor, and happiness. To be the highest good, according to Aristotle, an end or value must be self-sufficient, and a life devoted to it would be the best life for a human being, a life of complete *eudaimonia*.[22] Cicero characterizes the question about the highest good as the inquiry into "the end, the ultimate and final goal, to which all our deliberations on living well and acting rightly should be directed."[23] Augustine goes so far as to say that developing an account of the highest good is

[19] Spalding, *Die Bestimmung Des Menschen*, p. 82.
[20] Ibid., p. 83.
[21] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094a-b. In *Aristotle, The Complete Works of Aristotle, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).*
[22] Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b-1096a and *Eudemian Ethics*, 1214b.
[23] Cicero, *On Moral Ends*, trans. Raphael Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 7.

the central aim of all philosophy, and "a sect which does not have its own view of that Supreme Good is not to be called a sect of philosophy."[24]

In the disputes that developed over the nature and content of the highest good in the ancient world, a major divide opened up between those philosophers who held that the highest good is immanent (i.e. attainable in the present life) or transcendent (i.e. attainable only in an afterlife).[25] The Stoics, for example, defended an immanent account of the highest good, arguing that the highest good is virtue, which produces happiness, and can be attained by living in agreement with nature.[26] Augustine, by contrast, defended a transcendent conception of the highest good, employing arguments that are similar in many ways to Spalding's. Augustine held that anything short of an assurance of an afterlife would make human life meaningless and empty.[27] Augustine argued, against the Stoic and Epicurean accounts of the highest good, that the only way in which a human being can achieve the peace that is constitutive of a good life is on the condition that he knows that he will continue to exist after his death, and that his moral conduct in this life will be rewarded with a good existence in the hereafter.[28] Spalding's

[24] Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. R.W. Dyson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Book XIX, ch. 1, p. 913.
[25] There are many other distinctions to be made between the views of the highest good. The Epicureans and the Stoic were far from being in agreement with each other, even though they both accepted an immanent view of the highest good. My discussion in the present chapter does not pretend to be comprehensive. A fairly comprehensive survey of the arguments about the highest good in the Roman era prior to the rise of Christianity is found in Cicero's *De finibus bonorum et malorum*. An English translation is available in Cicero, *On Moral Ends*.
[26] Stobaeus, *Anthology*, 2.6 and 2.6e, included in *The Stoics Reader*, trans. Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008). See also Seneca's *De Vita Beata*, included as "On the Happy Life" in Lucius Annaeus Seneca, *Hardship and Happiness*, trans. Elaine Fantham, et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).
[27] Augustine, *City of God*, Book XIX, ch. 4.
[28] Augustine's argument for the superiority of the Christian, and transcendent, view of the highest good is given in ibid., Book XIX, ch. 13. However, the entirety of Books XIV and XIX are relevant.

arguments follow in step with this Christian conception of the highest good as something that transcends the earthly life of a human being.

Among the many German intellectuals of the eighteenth-century who read, discussed, and were inspired by *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* were such philosophical luminaries as Kant, Fichte, and Schleiermacher.[29] Fichte went so far as to give one of his own books the same title, in order to indicate the importance that Spalding's text and the discussions surrounding it had for him.

The young Johann Gottfried Herder was also interested in Spalding's tract, and he composed a brief set of notes on it towards the end of 1766. The notes are incomplete, but nonetheless make it clear that Herder was in sharp disagreement with Spalding on at least two issues. First, Herder rejects the idea of an afterlife. He states "I am in the world once, where I must go: here abilities [Fähigkeiten] [text incomplete in original]."[30] While Herder does not complete the second phrase, it is safe to assume that his claim is that the development of one's abilities can only be the purpose of one's life in this world, since a person is only in the world once. Herder thus denies both Spalding's claim that a person is an immortal mind distinct from the body, and that the development of our abilities requires or justifies a belief in an afterlife in which the development of our abilities is brought to completion.

Herder's second disagreement concerns the value of human sensuality or sensibility. Herder asserts that "Senses are primary drives [*Haupttriebe*], primary

[29] For a discussion of the influence of this issue on Kant, see Brandt, *Die Bestimmung Des Menschen Bei Kant*; Kuehn, "Reason as a Species Characteristic."
[30] SWS 32: 160.

purposes [*Hauptzwecke*]: they are in themselves not a restriction".[31] The context in which this passage appears does not make it clear whether Herder in fact endorses the view that the satisfaction of the senses is the main purpose, or the highest good, of a human life. It does, however, make it clear that Herder denies that the senses are a limitation on human beings which ought to be overcome, as Spalding claims. Herder goes so far as to sketch what he calls the "Bestimmung des sinnlichen Menschen":

a. He enjoys: and does not think etc.
b. What he cannot be, he does not wish to be.
c. He does not hope etc.[32]

Herder concludes that he is able to find a "complete vocation [*Bestimmung*]" in such an existence.[33] Given the fragmentary character of the notes, it is unclear what Herder means precisely by a "complete vocation", and how he would elaborate on his differences with Spalding on this basis. What can be safely concluded, however, is that Herder was chagrinned by the negative attitude which Spalding manifests toward the sensual character of human existence. This text allows us to say that by as early as 1764 Herder was beginning to think that the highest good of a human life should be thought of in immanent terms, and that the body and senses should be included as essential and valuable elements of the vocation of a human being.

III

[31] SWS 32: 160.
[32] SWS 32: 161.
[33] SWS 32: 161.

In January of 1764, Thomas Abbt sent a letter to Mendelssohn inviting him to discuss the newest edition of Spalding's *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*,[34] which Abbt was supposed to review for *Briefe, die neueste Literatur betreffend*. Abbt considered the questions raised by the text to be important, but he thought that Spalding's arguments were deeply flawed. Abbt expressed skepticism about both Spalding's arguments for immortality and the notion that immortality was necessary for human beings to fulfill their vocation and have a meaningful life. Mendelssohn, on the other hand, was himself committed to the view that human immortality was both knowable and necessary for the fulfillment of the vocation of man. Each of the friends wrote a letter to the other, under the guise of pseudonyms. Abbt (going by the name of Euphranor) criticized Spalding's conception of immortality and the highest good, and Mendelssohn (going by the name of Theodul) acted as Spalding's defender. The exchange was published in the *Briefe* in July of 1764, under the title *Orakel und Zweifel über die Bestimmung des Menschen*.

In the next two sections, I will discuss the views of Abbt and Mendelssohn in turn.

IV

[34] This was the seventh edition, published in 1763. See Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, p. 130.

Abbt puts forward a series of skeptical challenges to Spalding, calling on the specter of Pierre Bayle to be his muse.[35] Abbt denies that it is reasonable to believe that we are immortal, that the development of reason is the purpose of human life, and that belief in providence and personal immortality are necessary constituents of a meaningful life. Though we can have no certainty about our fate after the present life, Abbt avers that nonetheless we are still capable of living well and can fulfill our vocation.

One of Abbt's complaints about Spalding is that the latter fails to take into account a wide variety of kinds of human lives and occupations. Due to this, his theory of the vocation of man is inadequate. Abbt argues that to assume that the development of reason, as opposed to sensibility, is the purpose of human life, is to characterize what is perhaps the vocation of intellectuals. This does not tell us, however, about the vocation of persons who never develop their intellect by engaging with abstract ideas.

This is deeply troubling as an account of the vocation of man, since most human beings do not develop the capacity for such forms of contemplation.[36] Spalding, Abbt worries, treats the meditative intellectual as the paradigm of humanity, whereas if his reflections took into account the lives of soldiers or Laplanders, he would see that some lives that do not involve refined intellectual

[35] JubA 3.1, p. 10. Abbt's *Zweifel* and Mendelssohn's *Orakel* are included in volume 3.1 of Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. Fritz Bamberger, et al., 39 vols. (Stuttgard-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann Holzboog, 1972). Following standard practice, I cite this edition as JubA.

[36] „Die ganz Schrift ist die Monologe eines unterrichteten und nachdenkenden Mannes. Daher passet sie keineswegs auf die ungeheuere Menge von Menschen, die fast allein durch die äussern Gegenstände zu ihrer Glückseligkeit, oder zu dem Gegentheile bestimmet werden." JubA 3.1, p. 12.

activity can be happy and fulfilling ways of living.[37] Spalding's claim that a human being could not possibly be satisfied by a sensual life is not supported by a survey of the facts. This calls into question Spalding's claim that only a life in which a human being frees him or herself from his or her sensual nature could be experienced as fulfilling. If what is at issue is the vocation of human beings as such, then Spalding's account turns out to be too narrow.

Spalding attempted to identify a single form of highest good for human beings, and Abbt here attempts to open up the logical space for a kind of pluralism which concedes that human beings can fulfill their vocation in a plenitude of ways. The portrait of the vocation of man, hence, must be painted with colors borrowed from the various kinds of lives of that human beings are found to live.[38]

Abbt further parts from Spalding by rejecting the notion that we need to make reference to either providence or God's commands to know how we ought to live. For one, a belief in providence is unjustified. Abbt contends, contrary to Spalding, that the present order of the world gives us no grounds for confidence that it is governed in accordance with moral intentions. History shows us that the evil prosper and the good suffer without respite.[39] Further, a glance at the present reveals that we live in a world where infants die before they can develop their capacities, thus being denied the opportunity to even begin the process of working towards fulfilling their vocation.[40] Consequently, according to Abbt, any belief in

[37] Laplanders were commonly employed as an example of an allegedly uncivilized and unrefined people for many eighteenth century authors. They were used in this manner by Hume, Voltaire, and many others.
[38] JubA 3.1, p. 10.
[39] JubA 3.1, p. 16. John Zammito discusses how Abbt's study of history drove him into the arms of pessimism. See *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, pp. 168-9.
[40] JubA 3.1, p. 17.

providence and an afterlife in which people receive their just deserts can only be a "hope" and never a truth demonstrated by reason.[41]

In order to support the idea that it is possible to understand the vocation of man without a belief in God, Abbt presents an allegorical story worthy of Kafka.[42] Abbt tells of a regiment of troops awaiting orders, but who are not actually sure if orders are on the way. They spend a long time waiting without receiving any word of what their directives are, and this leads to worry and concern on the part of many in the company. Some fear that the prince has forgotten their regiment, others worry that the prince may not even be alive. Even the commanding officers are in the dark about what their task is, or when they will hear from the prince. Abbt holds that even in a condition as uncertain as this, such soldiers would still be able to understand what kinds of actions are worth doing, and which are not. Abbt admits that some soldiers might turn to criminal acts, while others become lazy and sluggish. However, even without orders, it is possible to know that it is wrong to act in certain ways – that it is contrary to one's calling or vocation.[43] A soldier who behaves like a beast towards those whom he is commissioned to protect can be regarded as failing to do what he should, even if he has not received any specific orders from his commander to refrain from such an act or to do something else. Abbt considers all human beings to be in a position much like his

[41] JubA 3.1, p. 16.
[42] JubA 3.1, p. 11. The comparison with Kafka is also made by Altmann, but similarities are so striking that it is almost impossible for a modern reader to avoid them. Abbt's story bears a striking thematic resemblance to Kafka's "Beim Bau der Chinesischen Mauer". This story is included in Franz Kafka, *Die Erzählungen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996).

The main difference is that whereas Kafka seems to despair of the insurmountable sense of meaninglessness of such a condition, Abbt is more optimistic about our prospects for finding some sense of meaning and fulfillment.
[43] JubA 3.1, p. 11.

fictional soldiers. We lack any direct contact with God, and we have not received any specific commands from God informing us about what to do or how to live. Nonetheless, it is possible for us to find ways to live that are fitting of our station.

Abbt refrains from committing himself to the claim that God does not exist. His concern is rather to deny the conditional claim that if God does not exist, then the vocation of man cannot be fulfilled and human life would be empty and meaningless. Human beings may still fulfill their vocation by living virtuously even if they are not assured of immortality or the existence of a creator.[44] Hence, Abbt would also deny Voltaire's claim that if God did not exist then he would have to be invented, as well as Ivan Karamazov's claim that if God does not exist then everything is permitted. Abbt wishes to show that our vocation is something that both must and can be determined without appeal to either providence or an afterlife:

> And it is thus clear that man, before whom the door of his entry into the present life, and the door of the exit from the same, is shrouded by mist, that man, I say, yet has enough light for the path which he shall travel.[45]

Abbt's point here is a skeptical one, which makes his summoning of Bayle's spirit appropriate. Given the failure of Spalding's alleged proof of an afterlife, human beings are in a state of ignorance concerning the hereafter. Abbt does not infer, however, that the highest good is unattainable for a human being, but only that it should be understood as an immanent highest good, attainable within the finite

[44] In *Vom Verdienste*, Abbt relates another story to make a similar point. There he presents the case of a servant whose master has been away for an exceptionally long time without contact. The servant continues to do his work even when others doubt whether the master will ever return. Such a servant, Abbt contends, is a shining example of virtue, specifically of the virtue that Abbt calls "strength of soul". Thomas Abbt, *Vermischte Werke*, 6 vols. (Berlin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1772; repr., Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1978.), I, p. 98.
[45] JubA, 3.1, p. 15.

life of a human being. For this we have "enough light for the path." What happens beyond the boundaries of a finite human life, though, is as irrelevant for a human being, as knowledge of it is unattainable.

Our moral life does not require knowledge of the divine or the hereafter, according to Abbt, and this allows human beings to retain the hope for a meaningful life in which their vocation is fulfilled by living virtuously. Human life itself, thus generates its own standards autonomously.[46] There are two general kinds of virtuous life, according to Abbt. There is the life devoted to serving one's country, and also the life of merit in which a person devotes him or herself to improving the lives of others. Abbt worked to contribute to a better understanding of these kinds of public virtues in his two major works – *Vom Tode fürs Vaterland* and *Vom Verdienste*.[47] It is a life of public service devoted to the advancement of the good one's community which has meaning and value, according to Abbt. Abbt thus argues that our vocation can be fulfilled in the present life, and is something that is within the reach of most human beings.

Abbt's argument thus rejects almost every substantive part of Spalding's conception of the vocation of man. He thus provides an important counterpoint to the transcendent conception of the highest good defended by Spalding.

---

[46] Stefan Lorenz helpfully sum up Abbts view as follows: "Abbts Bedeutung liegt nun darin, dass er solchen Fideismus [i.e. Mendelssohn's and Spalding's] zurückweist. Statt dessen wendet er die Mängelsituation der Unerkennbarkeit von Providenz und Jenseits ins Praktische, und damit werden die Konturen einer autonomen Moral erkennbar." Lorenz, "Thomas Abbt Und Moses Mendelssohn in Ihrer Debatte Über Johann Joachim Spaldings *Bestimmung Des Menschen*," p. 132.

[47] *Vom Verdienste* is included in volume 1 of Abbt's *Vermischte Werke*. *Vom Tode fürs Vaterland* is included in volume 2. There is a helpful discussion of these texts in chapter 3 of Benjamin W. Redekop, *Lessing, Abbt, Herder, and the Quest for a German Public* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000).

V

Moses Mendelssohn was not convinced by Abbt's skeptical critique of Spalding, but he did think that Abbt raised serious challenges that needed to be taken into account. Where Abbt found his muse in Bayle, Mendelssohn by contrast enlists the spirit of Leibniz in his riposte to Abbt.[48] Mendelssohn accepts the standard German rationalist view that the purpose of human life is the pursuit of perfection, but he concedes Abbt's claim that an adequate account of the vocation of man must apply to a broad variety of kinds of lives. He calls for a consideration of "the savage and the cultivated, the king, the beggar, the philosopher, the courtiers, Abauzit, Voltaire, yourself and the Greenlander in his filthy hut," because "all make a claim on the same vocation."[49] This will yield a more accurate account of what all human beings have in common, and thus what all human beings are determined to become according to their nature. It is even important to extend our comparison to nonhuman beings as well, in order to grasp more distinctly what the vocation of man is.

Mendelssohn insists that the vocation of man consists in the ability to perfect oneself through the development of one's powers:

> But you possess something peculiar, which makes you a person. You can and will become more perfect through practice. Your life is a continual

[48] *Orakel, die Bestimmung des Menschen betreffend*, JubA, 3.1, p. 21-3.

Mendelssohn aligns himself with Leibniz not only to signal his general sympathy with Leibniz's metaphysics and philosophy of religion, but also to recall the dispute between Bayle and Leibniz over the possible knowledge of God and the purpose of human life. Leibniz's *Theodicy* and Bayle's article "Rorarius" in his *Historical and Critical Dictionary* thus form the acknowledged background of the dispute. On the dispute between Bayle and Leibniz, see Richard Popkin, *The History of Skepticism: From Savanarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 263-4.

[49] JubA 3.1, p. 19.

> endeavor to unfold the capacities enfolded within you. Your powers work ceaselessly on their own improvement. You may die as an infant or an old man, but at any time you would depart from this life more developed [ausgebildet] than you entered it. The distance from an embryo to a babbling child is perhaps greater than that from a pupil to Newton.[50]
>
> The actual vocation [*Bestimmung*] of man here below, which the foolish and the wise both fulfill, though in unlike measures, is thus the development of our soul's capacities [*Seelenfähigkeiten*] according to divine intentions. All of man's works on earth have this aim [*denn hierauf zielen alle seine Verrichtungen auf Erden*].[51]

According to Mendelssohn, every human being has a set of inherent powers or capacities which they are driven to develop. We are born with them "enfolded" within us, and as we live we "unfold" them through learning, practice, and natural growth. This task of perfecting our powers carried out by each person to a greater or lesser degree, but it is an essential feature of any human life. Mendelssohn marshals this claim in order to show that his own position is not susceptible to Abbt's objection against overly intellectualized conceptions of the vocation of man.

The conception of human perfection employed by Mendelssohn is broader than that of Spalding, as the former accounts even the natural development of capacities in an infant as steps taken towards the fulfillment of a human being's vocation. For Mendelssohn, a person need not devote him or herself to refined intellectual tasks in order to pursue or fulfill their vocation as a human being.[52] Whatever degree of perfection a human being achieves – whether it be the infant's development of the ability to perceive medium-sized physical objects, the farmer's

[50] JubA 3.1, pp. 19-20.
[51] JubA 3.1, p. 20.
[52] JubA 3.1, p. 24.

ability to plant and harvest wheat, or the scientist's ability to grasp the natural laws governing the physical world - Mendelssohn claims that important moves towards the development of human powers and the unfolding of human capacities have always been made. Hence, the vocation of man is fulfilled to some degree in any and every life. Mendelssohn goes so far as to assert that even an infant who dies within its first days has already become more perfected than when it first came into existence, and such cases serve as no objection to his view.[53]

While Mendelssohn agrees with Abbt that Spalding's conception of the capacities whose development is constitutive of the vocation of man is unduly intellectualistic and narrow, Mendelssohn agrees with Spalding that there are grounds for the belief in human immortality. Immortality is a necessary part of an adequate conception of the vocation of man. Solid grounds for the belief in immortality can be established by metaphysical and ethical arguments.

Mendelssohn's basic argument is that "no substance is annihilated [*wird vernichtet*], and as long as it is there it fulfills the intentions of its preserver [*Erhalter*]."[54] Mendelssohn thus justifies his claim that a human soul cannot cease to exist on explicitly Leibnizian grounds. He accepts the view advanced by Leibniz that all substances are indestructible, and once they exist they cannot cease to exist.[55] The human soul is a substance, and hence cannot ever cease to exist.

---

[53] JubA 3.1, p. 24. This was not a merely abstract concern for Mendelssohn, as it was written not long after the death of his infant daughter. Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, p. 137.
[54] JubA 3.1, p. 21.
[55] Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §9 and *Monadology*, §1-6. Both are included in G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989).

Even if Mendelssohn's Leibnizian argument for immortality is granted, an important question remains open concerning the nature of immortality: in what manner does the soul continue to exist after the death of the body? This seems to offer another opening for someone like Abbt to present a skeptical objection. For all we know, the soul might exist without any memory of its time bound to a body, or it might take on a fundamentally different form which we could not possibly imagine.

Mendelssohn attempts to head off such a move by answering this question in good rationalist fashion – by comparing human life to a geometrical demonstration. Since all that occurs in a human life depends on what came before, what happens in the afterlife will likewise depend on what happens in the course of the present life. Our present life is related to our future condition as "the grounds of a long demonstration" are related to a conclusion.[56] Given that we are rational beings, whose purpose is to strive for perfection through the development of our capacities and abilities, we can expect to have the same mode of being in the afterlife. We will continue to have the same nature, and hence will have the same vocation – the continued perfection and development of our capacities and powers. In fact, if we ceased to exist at moment when our body dies, then our vocation could not be fulfilled. We would not be able to complete the development begun during our earthly life. We are destined or determined to perfect ourselves, but this cannot be accomplished in a finite period of time, and hence requires an eternal life of striving to perfect ourselves. Mendelssohn's

[56] JubA 3.1, p. 21.

conclusion, then, is that we must carry our perfected capacities with us from the present life into the next, where we will persist in developing ourselves into ever more perfect beings.

Mendelssohn sums up his account of the vocation of man as follows:

> What is the vocation of man [*Bestimmung des Menschen*]? – Answer: To fulfill the intentions of God in the condition of rational knowledge, to persist [fortzudauern], to become more perfect, and to be happy in this perfection.[57]

The final end of human striving and the purpose of our existence, according to this view, is a state of perfection achieved through an agent's own activity. In this state of perfection, a rational being can also count on being happy. If Mendelssohn follows Wolff here – as is likely - the happiness of the perfected state is not an external consequence of an agent's perfection, but is constituted by the development and perfecting of the agent's powers.[58] Thus, the vocation of man is the perfection off oneself through the perpetual development of one's powers, and also makes for the agent's happiness.

Thomas Abbt died in 1766, shortly after the publication of *Zweifel und Orakel über die Bestimmung des Menschen*.[59] The two friends had not been able to come to an agreement about the issues raised in their exchange, but

[57] JubA 3.1, p. 23.
[58] For Wolff's account of the relationship between perfection, the highest good and happiness, see Wolff, *Vernünftige Gedancken Von Der Menschen Thun Und Lassen, Zu Beförderung Ihrer Glückseligkeit*, sections 51, 53, 57, 68, 70, and 71.
[59] Mendelssohn and Abbt continued their discussion after the publication of *Zweifel und Orakel über die Bestimmung des Menschen* in private letters. There is more of interest in them, but I have focused solely on the published arguments, as my purpose is to trace the influence of these arguments on Herder, who certainly read the published version, but would not have had access to the private correspondence. Helpful accounts of the extended discussion between Mendelssohn and Abbt can be found in Lorenz, "Thomas Abbt Und Moses Mendelssohn in Ihrer Debatte Über Johann Joachim Spaldings *Bestimmung Des Menschen*."; Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, pp. 130-40.

Mendelssohn developed his account of the vocation of man in more detail in his *Phädon*, which Herder, among others, recognized as Mendelssohn's tribute to his departed friend.[60] *Phädon* is a peculiar text. It is part direct translation of Plato's *Phaedo*, part loose adaptations of arguments in Plato's dialogue, all interspersed with Mendelssohn's own original arguments for the immortality of the soul.

In *Phädon*, Mendelssohn repeats, extends, and alters the arguments that he presented for the immortality of the soul in his *Orakel*. His fundamental premise is that human beings exist in order to develop their powers to the highest degree of perfection possible, and paramount among human powers are the powers of reason. That is, it is the perfection of reason and the development of our cognitive faculties that is our *Bestimmung*. The argument of the *Phädon* offers a fuller account of the philosophical anthropology and metaphysics underlying Mendelssohn's arguments for immortality, and it was these arguments which would be challenged in provocative ways by Herder.

In the *Phädon* Mendelssohn distinguishes between two kinds of living beings – sensual and rational.[61] Among living creatures, rational beings have the "noblest place", and have their own particular vocation – they are capable of self-perfection. It is thus by virtue of the rational nature of man that man has the kind of vocation ascribed to him in Mendelssohn's *Orakel*. A human being can learn of his or her vocation by carefully examining human nature:

> If you want to know man's vocation [Bestimmung] here below, simply look at what he performs here below. He brings with him onto this stage

[60] Herder, „Über Thomas Abbts Schriften", DKV 2: 568.
[61] Moses Mendelssohn, *Phädon*, in Moses Mendelssohn, *Schriften Zur Philosophie, Aesthetik Und Apologetik*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: L. Voss, 1880), I, p. 227.

> [Schauplatz] neither skill, nor instinct, nor innate aptitudes; neither defenses nor protection; and appears at the moment of his first scenes [Auftritte] needier and more helpless than any irrational animal. But the striving and the ability to make himself more perfect, these most sublime gifts of which a created being is capable, variously supersede the deprivation of bestial instincts and skills which are capable of assuming no higher degree of perfection.[62]

The characteristic capacity of a human being, according to Mendelssohn, is not a particular talent or instinct with which a human being is innately endowed, but the capacity to develop and perfect an indeterminate set of abilities through one's own striving. Animals are born with instincts that develop quickly and in a uniform way, but human beings come into the world with fewer abilities and are consequently compelled to develop their capacities through their own activity. Human beings are different from sensual beings because they are self-perfecting beings, and this characteristic grants them membership in the kingdom of rational beings. The vocation of man is to actualize this distinctive ability – that is, to strive to become more perfect.

Mendelssohn argues that human beings never exhaust this pursuit of perfection: "The goal of this aspiration [*Bestreben*] consists, as does the essence of time, in progress [*Fortschreitung*]…Accordingly, in a human life the striving for progress [*Fortstreben*] knows no limits."[63] Because this task cannot be completed in the present life, and given that the world is a well-designed one in which

[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., I, p. 229.

nothing happens without purpose, Mendelssohn argues that there must be an afterlife.[64]

An afterlife of just any sort, however, would not be enough, according to Mendelssohn. It would have to be the case that the same being that strives to perfect itself in this life persists with its acquired perfections and cultivated capacities into the next life. If the capacities were lost, as well as the consciousness of what the agent had done, then the mere fact of continued existence would have no bearing on the practical life of the agent. It would be a morally irrelevant form of immortality.[65] Mendelssohn claims that while the human body dies at the end of life, the rational soul exists in the hereafter and is capable of continuing the activity of perfecting its capacities. Hence, all of the perfections developed and acquired are carried forth into the hereafter.

This seems to imply or assume that an individual's body plays no essential part in the process, since the pursuit of perfection can be completed by the mind independently of its sensual capacities. But Mendelssohn is unclear on this point, for he claims that the powers of the human soul are in some way always bound up with a body.[66] When the body dies, it can be observed to cease its activity and decompose. In such a state it is not perfecting itself any longer. Given this condition of the body, Mendelssohn argues that one must believe that the soul, by contrast, persists and endures carrying on the task of self-perfection begun by the

[64] Ibid., I, pp. 230-1. Ibid., pp. 230-1.
[65] Ibid., I, pp. 230 and 39. Leibniz makes a similar argument in *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §34.
[66] See, for example, his reply to Herder from May 2, 1769. The problems that this letter raises for Mendelssohn are discussed in Frederick C. Beiser, "Mendelssohn Versus Herder on the Vocation of Man," in *Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics*, ed. Reinier Munk (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011); Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*, pp. 171-6.

composite human being. The human being's vocation, then, is capable of being carried out independently of the body. Consequently, the essential *Bestimmung* of a human being is the development of rational and spiritual capacities, and the body has only a peripheral, perhaps a dispensable, place in the vocation of man.

VI

In April of 1769, Herder sent a letter to Mendelssohn criticizing the arguments presented in *Phädon*.[67] Mendelssohn read Herder's arguments, and found that they warranted a response, which he sent to Herder in May of 1769. Herder was not satisfied with Mendelssohn's reply, and wrote Mendelssohn a second letter in which he expanded on the major points raised in the first, clarifying the central disagreement.

Herder's letters to Mendelssohn offer important insight into his conception of the vocation of man – including his views of human nature and the highest good. The letters are, for this reason, one of the best expressions of Herder's ethical thought which he authored during his early period of intellectual activity.[68] Some scholars have claimed that Herder's exchange with Mendelssohn is an instance of a deep parting of ways between Herder and the rationalist philosophical tradition.[69] Such an interpretation is far from correct, however, as Herder accepts and retains several of the tenets of the rationalist account of the

[67] Herder, *Briefe*, I, pp. 137-143.
[68] Rudolf Haym discusses the letters, but only emphasizes the way in which they reveal Herder's unorthodox religious views, completely neglecting the ethical side of the issue. Rudolf Haym, *Herder: Nach Seinem Leben Und Seinen Werken*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Rudolf Gaertner, 1877-85), I, pp. 295-8.
[69] See, for example, Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, p. 171.

vocation of man. This is not to deny that Herder differs from Mendelssohn in important respects – namely with regard to the importance of immortality and the relationship between rationality and sensibility – but his position is best understood as an innovative form of perfectionism (*the* ethical theory of the German rationalist tradition), rather than as a radical rejection of it. The critique does not mark a "calving" of the rationalist tradition and a radically opposed anthropological tradition of philosophy inaugurated by Herder.[70]

One gravamen raised by Herder is that Mendelssohn's account of the *Bestimmung* of human beings is "too philosophical [*etwas zu philosophisch*]":

> Even in your *Orakel* the vocation of man [*Bestimmung des Menschen*] appears to me in its entire scope somewhat too philosophical, in that it would be the formation of the capacities of the soul. If this proposition were strictly followed, even with the best proportion of the powers of the soul, but these exclusively – then the greatest barbarian [*Unmensch*] would be created, without purpose and without happiness.[71]

Herder complains that Mendelssohn's conclusion is one that an intellectual might be inclined to draw when considering the issue in abstraction, but only if they ignore the consequences that such a view would have if applied to an actual person. The result of developing the intellectual powers, or any other powers of soul, exclusively would produce something inhuman. Thus, given that only an inhuman being [i.e. an *Unmensch*] would be the result of living according to this idea, this could not be the vocation of a human being. Instead we must acknowledge that "in our nature there is more or less a greater measure of animal nature [*Thiernatur*] than of pure spirit [*Geist*]," and a human being must be

[70] Pace ibid.
[71] *Briefe,* I, p. 138.

regarded as "a compound nature [*vermischte Natur*]."[72] The body is a part of what we are "not merely through an arbitrary association", but we are essentially embodied.[73] Hence, the development and care of the body must be included in any adequate account of the vocation of man.

We can see that, according to Herder, Mendelssohn's conception of the vocation of man is based on an inadequate and one-sided theory of human nature. Human beings have intellectual and spiritual capacities, but these are not the exclusive elements constituting a human being. Consequently, the vocation of an actual human being cannot be determined by appeal to what would only be valid for a pure *Geist*. The positive implication of this is that, according to Herder, a human being must be a well-rounded and properly developed whole.[74] To exclusively develop one characteristic aspect of one's self at the expense of all others would result in a malformed and unhappy human being. To become a well-formed individual whose capacities have a harmonious relationship to one

[72] *Briefe*, I, pp. 138-9.
[73] *Briefe*, I, p. 138.
[74] Mendelssohn also endorses this idea. For example, Mendelssohn writes: "Since nature gave us the the capacity to perfect ourselves, she has at the same time implanted in our essence [the capacity] to raise up all our capabilities in the most perfect harmony… None should be repressed, none should be forgotten, but on the other hand we must not unjustifiably enthrone any of them." JubA 2, p. 89.

Herder may have been influenced by Mendelssohn on this point, though Herder thinks that the physical body must be seen as more important in this harmonious development than Mendelssohn does. I am grateful to Aaron Koller for drawing my attention to this passage.

another is thus taken by Herder to be the proper goal of human life.[75] This is an idea that is persistently advanced by Herder in his philosophical works.[76]

Unlike Abbt, however, Herder does not think that this supports a skepticism concerning the immortality of the soul. In fact, Herder thinks that Menselssohn's proof of immortality is a success.[77] Herder explicitly endorses the Leibnizian argument that no substance can ever be destroyed, and the additional idea that human soul is a substance: "I myself think that your proof is firm, insofar as it concerns the indestructibility of the human soul through death. Only a phenomenon ceases thereupon, and the thinking substance remains."[78] That is, he accedes to the claim that a substance cannot cease to exist and that the soul is a substance with unique powers (*Kräfte*) which persist in the universe after death of what we perceive as its body. But the soul and its powers cannot exist without a body, and the soul must form a new perceptible body. The process by which the soul finds and forms other matter into a new body is, admittedly, obscure and not developed in any detail by Herder. What is clear, however, is that while Herder concedes that the soul may be immortal, he nonetheless denies that the kind of immortality that it has necessitates the other claims that Mendelssohn wishes to draw from it – namely, that the development of the human rational capacities is

[75] In his reply to Herder, Mendelssohn concedes to Herder that a human being is not a pure *Geist*, but is necessarily an embodied being. Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 7 vols. (Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1844), V, pp. 485-6. However, this is hard to square with some of Mendelssohn's arguments. At the very least, Herder would still be justified in his complaint that Mendelssohn doesn't take adequate account of the ways in which the human vocation is shaped and determined by our 'mixed nature'.
[76] I will discuss how this idea is employed and defended in other texts written by Herder in chapters 5 and 6. See also Hans Dietrich Irmscher, "Gegenwartskritik Und Zukunftsbild in Herders *Auch Eine Philosophie Zur Geschichte Der Bildung Der Menschheit*," in *"Weitstrahlsinniges" Denken: Studien Zu Johann Gottfried Herder* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009).
[77] Herder, *Briefe*, I, p. 178.
[78] Herder, *Briefe*, I, pp. 138 and 178. See also *Wahrheiten aus Leibniz*, SWS 32: 215.

the highest good for a human life and that the rational soul can carry its perfections with it into the next life.[79]

Though Herder agrees that the soul is immortal, there is nonetheless a deep disagreement between Herder and Mendelssohn concerning the nature of immortality, and also its ethical significance. For understanding our vocation, Herder claims that the issue is not whether our being is negated at the moment of our bodily death or survives, but rather what can be known of our future state.[80] What is most likely, Herder claims, is that our "human substance again becomes a human phenomenon."[81] That is, a human being that is composed of both a bodily and a spiritual-intellectual element will once again be a composite being if it is to exist again in another life. Herder avers that the most likely form of immortality is palingenesis, rather than the subsistence of a soul transmogrified into an entirely new form.[82] This new human form would not have the developed powers of the prior existence, and there would not be any successive improvement

---

[79] Marion Heinz claims that Herder's argument can be described as a "Radikalisierung der Position Abbts." This is not exactly correct, as on one of the key issues –the demonstrability of immortality on the basis of the alleged simplicity of the soul – Herder is in agreement with Mendelssohn, rather than Abbt. See Marion Heinz, "Die Bestimmung Des Menschen: Herder Contra Mendelssohn," in *Philosophie Der Endlichkeit*, ed. Beate Niemeyer and Dirk Schütze (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1991), p. 272.

[80] *Briefe*, I, p. 139.

[81] *Briefe*, I, p. 139.

[82] *Briefe*, I, pp. 141-3. On Herder's view, palingenesis is a form of reincarnation whereby the same kind of soul forms for itself the same kind of body in the next life. For example, a human soul will constitute a new human body after the death of the present one, and an aardvark soul will constitute a new aardvark body. He contrasts this view with metempsychosis, which is a conception of immortality in which a soul can be born into different kinds of bodies in each life.

Herder remained concerned with palingenesis throughout his life and defended this conception of immortality in several later works. See, for example, "Palingenesie. Vom Wiederkommen menschlicher Seelen", DKV 8: 257-282; "Über die menschliche Unsterblichkeit", DKV 8: 203-219; and "Vom Wissen und Nichtwissesn der Zukunft", DKV 8: 283-296.

While I disagree with Rudolf Unger's general portrayal of Herder as an enemy of reason and the enlightenment, there is a helpful and fascinating discussion of Herder's later conception of palingenesis in Unger, *Herder, Novalis Und Kleist: Studien Über Die Entwicklung Des Todesproblems in Denken Und Dichten Vom Sturm Und Drang Zur Romantik*, pp. 6ff. Unger's understanding of Herder's earlier views, and consequently the relationship between those views and his later thought is seriously distorted, however.

between lives. It would be a new incarnation of the powers in a body, but these powers would be in an undeveloped state.

Herder argues that because all human beings that we have ever been aware of are compound beings (i.e. are an admixture of spiritual-intellectual and physical nature), we have no ground for thinking that a purely spiritual human being is possible. A pure spirit may possibly exist, Herder concedes, but he denies that such a being would be properly called a *human* being:

> I do not want to regress to the conceivability or inconceivability of a soul without a body; only how could we know of an existing *human soul* without a body? We are acquainted with none in such a condition. For us a human soul without a body is inconceivable in its efficacy: could it, will it be so in the future?[83]

Herder's objection to the conception of human nature presented by Mendelssohn and Spalding is that we are unacquainted with any human souls that exist without a body. From this Herder argues that there are no grounds for believing in an afterlife in which a disembodied soul maintains a continuous identity with that of an embodied person.[84] The charge is not that the idea of a disembodied soul or spirit is inconceivable. It is that even if it is conceivable for a soul to exist without a body, we have no grounds for thinking that this is a real possibility for a *human* soul. If we are interested in understanding the vocation of man, or what kind of good is possible for a human being, then we must allow our reasoning to be confined to the framework of what we know is true of human beings. That is, we

[83] *Briefe*, I, p. 138.
[84] While Herder does not mention Spalding's tract in his letter to Mendelssohn, he does refer to a sermon published by Spalding in 1768, „Über den Zustand des zukünftiges Lebens als eine eigentliche Folge des gegenwärtigen." The sermon is the eleventh one included in Johann Joachim Spalding, *Predigten* (Berlin: Gottlieb August Lange, 1775), pp. 331ff.

must consider beings that are physical, and whose rational or spiritual character is not entirely distinct from their sensual or bodily character. The vocation of man cannot be understood if one takes into account only one part of human nature, as the reasoning based on such partial considerations would be dreadfully incomplete.

This argument may appear at first sight to be a simple empirical statement about what is normally observed, but if we look at it in context it is in fact much cleverer than that. Mendelssohn himself had written in his *Orakel* that we can know what the afterlife is like because the present life supplies the premises from which we can draw conclusions about the hereafter.[85] Herder's argument here turns this same claim back against Mendelssohn. Herder makes use of this general principle. Since we only have a basis for believing that human beings are compound sensual-spiritual beings, we cannot validly conclude that a human soul can exist without a body in the afterlife. The premises supplied by our knowledge of the present life do not support the conclusion about the hereafter drawn by Mendelssohn.

Herder insists that even if the vocation of a pure spirit consists in the infinite perfection of spiritual and intellectual capacities, this would not be the *vocation of man*, and is consequently beside the point.[86] The proper vocation of a human being, by contrast, is the development of both its sensual and intellectual capacities in harmony. This is a task which cannot be completed in the next life

[85] JubA, p. 21.
[86] *Briefe*, I, p. 138.

because the body which is an integral part of this process of self-perfection and cultivation perishes and decays.

The consequence of this is that our vocation can only be fulfilled in the present life:

> ...we have in our present existence exactly the periods of life [*Lebensalter*] of the vocation [*Bestimmung*] which plants and animals, and we as animals, so obviously have. This formation and development *in this life*, *it* is the purpose [*Zweck*]; *it* is the vocation [*Bestimmung*]. It is an unjustified standpoint to live, *so that one departs from the world more perfect* than one entered it. We enter the world, in order to become more perfect *here*, to augment and diminish, to learn and to put to use, and always to take pleasure in ourselves and the world – that was the intention of nature. All would be madness [*verrückt*] if I were to acquire for myself an individual perfection which is only a perfection for *abandonment* of the world.[87]

As embodied beings, our physical and natural character is just as significant a part of our being as are our putatively purely rational capacities. Our development is similar to that of other organisms, and hence our nature and vocation [*Bestimmung*] must have something in common. Whereas Spalding had argued that immortality was required in order to vindicate and justify our belief in providence, Herder by contrast argues that the order of nature would be *verrückt* if a human life were spent perfecting all of our faculties only in order that one of them - our reasoning mind - would continue to perfect itself while the others which are an essential part of our present existence were abandoned. For Herder, our highest good consists in the perfecting of all of our characteristic capacities into a complete and well-balanced whole which enables us to have the greatest

[87] *Briefe*, I, p. 140. The emphases in the present paragraph are in the original, though I have de-emphasized some parts of the passage.

enjoyment of the present life, not a one-sided development of a single capacity that endures in an afterlife while the others are left behind as if they were merely contingent appendages to our rational nature.

Herder develops this point further, arguing that we should see our "soul to be our I, and our body to be more or less only the phenomenon of its existence, and the mediate organ of its representations."[88] This places the body in the position of being the source of the representations taken up by the soul. Hence, a soul without a body would be a soul without representations, or at least a soul whose representations were nothing like human representations. Herder here makes use of Leibnizian concepts in order to draw out a deep tension in Mendelssohn's account. Mendelssohn, in his reply to Herder's first letter (as well as in the introduction to *Phädon*), acknowledges that a human soul requires a body in order to form the proper kinds of representations that enable it to become more perfect. But, if this is the case, then the body is more intimately connected to the essential character of the soul than Mendelssohn (and Spalding) had made clear, and thus the belief in an immortal soul that is disembodied and yet capable of having representations (not to mention consciousness and apperception) is undermined.

This argument opens up on another important disagreement between Herder and Mendelssohn concerning the idea of perfection. Herder argues that what counts as a perfection is relative to a situation in which a developed ability is put to use: "Take any small, individual skill. It will have its situation in which it

[88] *Briefe,* I, p. 178.

was formed, and for which it is valid. Situation, application taken away – and the skill vanishes; it is no longer a perfection."[89] What Herder has in mind is something like the following. The perfection of a surgical knife is that it be capable of cutting through the skin. This counts as a perfection for the knife because the purpose of a scalpel is to assist a doctor in performing operations that require cutting through flesh. However, suppose a similar object existed in a social setting with neither knowledge of the practice of surgery nor a single doctor. Deprived of the proper context, the specific qualities that make the knife an excellent instrument for surgical operations would no longer be effectively perfections of that kind. Likewise, if a person with a certain set of military skills and virtues were to live through a radical change in their society's form of life such that there were no longer any battles or wars in which those skills could be put to use, these mere capacities would no longer be excellenced. It would be difficult to see any way in which having had such capacities in the past makes one more perfect in a situation in which they are deprived of all possible contexts of application.[90] This is the meaning of Herder's claim that a perfection is relative to the situation in which an object exists.

There are two significant implications of these considerations for human perfection. First, it means that the perfection of a human being must be understood relative to the general features of humanity shared by all persons. The possession of a body and a soul is constitutive of human identity, according to

[89] *Briefe*, I, p. 179.
[90] Some possible cases of fundamental forms of change in forms of life, and the philosophical import of such changes, have been discussed recently in Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope*, vol. Harvard University Press (Cambridge, Mass., 2006).

Herder, and consequently it would not be a human perfection to develop the rational capacities at the expense of the bodily capacities, or to enjoy intellectual pleasures while denying oneself all bodily pleasures.

The second implication is that perfections are only perfections within a specific context in which a person is situated. The context in which a person lives involves many specific features that are not true of the context of any and every other human being. Thus, understanding what perfection would be for a person will require that one understand the specific features of the situation they are in, and what skills or abilities would contribute to their well-being in such a position. The skills that need to be developed by a hunter living in the sixth century B.C.E. are different from those that need to be developed by an architect in 2015 C.E.[91] This idea will become increasingly important for Herder's inquiries into the historical character of human beings, for he will argue that each *Volk* and each individual has a unique history that shapes who they are, what they might become, and hence that the virtues conducive to the well-being of a Greek many not be salubrious for a Roman, a Laplander, or a modern European.[92]

It is important to recognize how the conception of perfection that Herder develops through his critique of Mendelssohn's depends on not only ethical, but also metaphysical ideas. Herder contends that every human being has a set of

[91] It's also true that the skills needed by an architect in 2015 C.E. are different from those needed by an architect in 1915 C.E. The point I intend to draw out is one about both the character of the institution or practice and the historical period.

[92] This line of argument receives its fullest expression in the 1774 *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*. I discuss this further in chapter 4.

basic *Kräfte*, or powers, which belong to its being essentially.[93] One enters and departs the world with the very same *Kräfte*. However, they subsist in our being only obscurely in an embryonic form until they are developed in particular contexts through education and practice:

> First of all I myself am sure that all of our formation [*Ausbilden*], learning and becoming complete [*Fertigwerden*] are nothing other than the development of the powers [*Kräfte*] which lie in us, which we have brought all together [*ganz*] into this world, and which compose the essence of our soul. Just as little as we are able to give ourselves a new sense, so little are we able to add to ourselves new powers, realities or perfections, which are substantially [*materiell*] new.[94]

All of the basic powers that human beings have compose their essence, according to Herder. Anything that happens during the course of education or learning is only the development of these powers from merely latent capacities into an actualized skill or ability. These powers do not change in their substance or essence, but only in their form. Herder thus accepts the Platonic (and Leibnizian) account of learning, that it is a form of memory, in which the latent abilities of the soul are drawn out and made explicit.[95] Though these powers subsist in our soul

---

[93] For the role of *Kräfte* in Herder's early thought, see his early essay "Versuch über das Sein", DKV 1: 9-21, along with the excellent analysis of the essay by Marion Heinz in chapter 1 of Marion Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1994).

A more general treatment of the concept of *Kräfte* in Herder's thought can be found in Robert Clark, "Herder's Conception of 'Kraft'," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 57 (1942); Hugh Barr Nisbet, *Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science* (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1970), pp. 8-16. Nisbet's account, while generally helpful, suffers from not attending carefully enough to the places where Herder uses '*Kraft'* in a somewhat technical and metaphysical sense, and those passages where Herder employs the term in the way it is ordinarily used by German speakers. For this reason, Nisbet's account makes Herder's conception of *Kraft* appear more confused and problematic than it, in fact, is.

[94] *Briefe*, I, p. 178.

[95] *Briefe*, I, p. 178. The *locus classicus* of Plato's account of learning as recollection is, of course, the *Meno*. This argument also plays a significant role in the *Phaedo*, which makes Herder's reference to Plato's theory of recollection especially significant in the context of his discussion of Mendelssohn's *Phädon*.

essentially and eternally, all learning and development is "in and for [our present] condition."[96] The perfections a person acquires through their lives are relative to their context, but they depend upon the set of powers contained in the soul that do carry on from one life to the next.

Because the perfections we develop in our lives are contextual and relational qualities, rather than substantive ones, these perfections could only be modes or accidents of a substance, not themselves substantial things. This means that any arguments for the continued development of perfections outside of the present life are untenable, as anyone asserting such a view must treat perfections as if they were substances that could be carried into qualitatively different contexts. The powers which are capable of being developed through education, practice and experience, may become perfections in the situations in which they are developed. Once the life that is the context of this development has ended, the perfections persist in the soul no more. Nevertheless, according to Herder, the essential substance of the person remains the same, and it is merely the modal or accidental character which has changed. Even if the human soul is immortal and will thus continue to exist after the present life, this does not entail that the accidental features of its present existence continue to exist along with it. This is

---

Herder was very interested in, and sympathetic to, the theory of recollection, and in either 1766 or 1768 he wrote a text titled "Plato sagte: dass unser Lernen bloss Erinnerung sei". The text was never published by Herder, and is not included in Suphan's edition of Herder's works. It has been published more recently as an appendix in Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, pp. 175-82. Heinz also discusses the text in the third chapter of the same book.

[96] *Briefe*, 1: 178.

the meaning of Herder's insistence that "What is, is; but not 'whatever something with all of its accidents has become must also remain.'"[97]

Herder thus diagnoses the cause of Mendelssohn's error as an unwarranted hypostatization of relative concepts or qualities:

> I believe that nothing in the world has engendered more opinions and also more errors than that one considers and treats abstract concepts as individual existences. So do we treat the words nature, virtue, reality, perfection. Originally these concepts were nothing but abstractions, relations between this and that, more or less shadows and colors of things. We make them into things, and think of them into things. And we likewise think of skills as realities, and attribute these perfections to the soul, which it collects as gold pieces – though they were originally only relations which we have thought of as positions.[98]

Herder does not deny that the human soul is itself a substance, even a substance which is immortal, but only that the perfections and abilities that the soul acquires in the present life are themselves substantial. They are not like pieces of gold that can be gathered and carried with one wherever one may go and whatever one may become. Deprived of their substantial quality, all perfections are only what they are in the context in which they are developed, in an individual human life and in the kinds of social and historical context in which such a life is lived.

Though it is not emphasized explicitly, this argument of Herder's implies that Mendelssohn's concept of a perfection is excessively individualistic, perhaps even solipsistic, as it assumes that perfections or skills are things which a person can possess in isolation from all of the conditions in which the perfections were

[97] *Briefe,* I, p. 180.
[98] *Briefe,* I, pp. 179-80. I have made a number of emendations to the structure of Herder's last sentence in translating this passage in order to make it intelligible in English.

developed or acquired.[99] That is, a human being can develop, apply and retain perfections in isolation from any social or historical setting. By contrast, for Herder any perfection that a person can attain is only possible in a particular social and historical situation. This makes individual human beings much less self-sufficient and autonomous than they are according to the theories of Mendelssohn and Spalding. Herder does not develop this point in detail in his letters, but the historical character of human virtues and capacities will be a theme his *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* of 1774, which will be discussed in chapter 4 below.

Herder's metaphysical argument about the nature of perfection shows that his conception of our vocation, and of the highest good, is an immanent one. Since we are necessarily embodied beings and the perfections we develop are only perfections in the context of the present life, the meaning or vocation of our lives cannot be determined by the continued existence of our spirit after this life. It must be understood in terms of our present existence, to our embodiment and determinate situation. Herder sums up his view by saying: "The five acts are in this life. What use is wanting to look behind the curtain [Decke], which no one can penetrate, in order to find clues about what already must make up a whole in itself."[100]

Our vocation and our highest good, according to Herder, consists in the enjoyment of one's being and the development and use of one's powers in the present life: "encircled, limited enjoyment within the limits of his being, use of all

[99] This may not be true of Mendelssohn's overall views, but I am here only trying to see how Herder responded to these particular arguments. For a passage that seems to show that Mendelssohn was attentive to social context, see JubA 1: 405-8. I am again grateful to Aaron Koller for pushing me to be more cautious with respect to my assertions about Mendelssohn.
[100] *Briefe*, I, p. 142.

his powers and dispositions – that is our vocation and happiness! In that we are all alike!"[101] It should be emphasized that Herder *agrees* with Mendelssohn and the German rationalists that the vocation of a human being consists in the perfecting and development of one's characteristic capacities and powers.[102] The difference concerns what a human being essentially is, and whether the perfections cultivated and developed are circumscribed by the boundaries of the present life or not. Herder's conception of perfection is broader and more contextual than Mendelssohn's. But Herder does not reject the basic contention that it is our ability to become more perfect which determines our vocation, happiness, and highest good. Herder thus retains one aspect of the general rationalist conception of the vocation of man, as he agrees that our vocation consists in the most complete development of a person's powers that is possible. Herder gives this theory an immanent rather than a transcendent interpretation, and therein lies the significant difference. The highest good for a human being - the end toward which human life is directed - is an immanent good. It is the development, use, and enjoyment of all of one's characteristic powers in the present life, and the task is circumscribed by the finite, social and historical character of human beings.

One difficulty that Herder's account of the vocation of man faces is that it threatens to make the achievements of individuals meaningless, given that the task of self-perfection can never be fulfilled. Herder implies at some places that the development of one's capacities results in happiness, but that is an obviously poor

[101] *Briefe*, I, p. 141.
[102] Nigel DeSouza, by contrast, tends to read Herder as opposed to perfectionism as such. See Nigel DeSouza, "The Soul-Body Relationship and the Foundations of Morality: Herder Contra Mendelssohn," *Herder Yearbook* 21 (2014). However, his characterization of perfectionism is, I think narrower than mine.

attempt to answer worries about whether the good what one has achieved endures after one has passed from this life. The worry is most salient in cases where good human beings die unjust deaths prematurely and in miserable circumstances, unjustly deprived of the opportunity to develop their capacities. Mendelssohn or Spalding appealed to the hope of an eternal afterlife in order to allay these very worries, but if Herder is to respond to such concerns he will have to do it in a different way. In the letters to Mendelssohn, Herder does not address this potential problem for his view. An examination of Herder's other works, however, I believe shows that Herder's position developed into an understanding of the vocation of humanity as an ongoing, collective enterprise which all human beings contribute to and benefit from. This is developed in his philosophy of history and his account of the social character of human nature, though he revises his views in important ways. I will try to indicate how this is so in chapters 3 and 4.

Another inadequacy of Herder's account is that it vague about the kinds of capacities whose development contributes to the fulfillment of the vocation of man. Are all capacities capable of development to be counted equally, or do some count for more than others? Further, in the letters to Mendelssohn Herder does not state explicitly just how the powers inherent in every human soul are developed. He claims that they need to be developed in a context, but does not describe in detail just what kind of context he has in mind. The account in the letters is incomplete, but I believe that Herder's later philosophy of history and philosophy of language provide a fuller account of the ways in which human beings are shaped and formed by their history, language and experience, and that

those texts can be fruitfully read as extending the account of the vocation of man initially developed in his letters to Mendelssohn.

VII

There are indications that prior to 1769, Herder's view of the vocation of man was different and more akin to the views of Mendelssohn and Spalding. For example, during his years in Königsberg Herder wrote several introspective poems in which he attempted to come to terms with the direction of his life, and in which he suggests that human beings have an intimation of their immortality and the continuation of their existence in an afterlife.[103]

Additionally, in 1766 or 1768 Herder delivered a sermon in Riga in which he claimed that belief in an afterlife is justified because human beings could not fulfill their obligation to perfect themselves and develop their powers if their lives had merely a finite duration.[104] The difference between the sermon and the views expressed in Herder's letters are striking. The conflict between the two views might be explained by regarding the sermon as a dishonest work, given that Herder might have needed to put forth a more religiously orthodox face to the

[103] See, especially the poems *Selbstgespräch* and *Morgensang*, in SWS 19: 245-6 and 19:242-3. Hans Dietrich Irmscher discusses this aspect of Herder's early poetry in an excellent essay, "Die Bestimmung des Menschen: Ein Blick in Herders frühe Lyrik (1764-1770)". The essay is included in Hans Dietrich Irmscher, *"Weitstrahlsinniges" Denken. Studien Zu Johann Gottfried Herder* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2010). My understanding of the philosophical position inherent in Herder's early poetry is indebted to Irmscher.

[104] SWS 32: 333ff.

public.[105] The sermon might be the exoteric face concealing Herder's esoteric doctrine of an immanent highest good. The date of the sermon is, however uncertain, having been delivered in either 1766 or 1768.[106] If the sermon was delivered in 1768, then I believe prevarication would be the best explanation for the dissonance between it and the letters to Mendelssohn. However, if the sermon was delivered in 1766, then a change of position rather than disingenuity would perhaps best account for inconsistency between Herder's views in the letters and the sermon.

Another consideration also seems to be relevant. As mentioned above, in 1766 Herder composed a set of notes on Spalding's *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* which were critical of the account of the vocation of man offered by Spalding. It may very well be the case that in 1766 Herder was swithering between views about the importance of immortality and the nature of the highest good. His engagement with Spalding's text may, in some way, have been connected to his writing and delivering the sermon when he did, and hence it might offer greater reason for ascribing the earlier year to the sermon rather than the latter. Even if Herder's views on the vocation of man in the sermon were disingenuous and do not give one reason to ascribe a different view of the vocation of man to him at the time of its delivery, the early poetry reveals that Herder subscribed to a transcendent view at one time. The reasons for Herder's change

[105] Haym is surely onto something in noting the close connection between the views that Herder expresses in the letters to Mendelssohn and his growing sense of alienation from his position as a minister in Riga. See Haym, *Herder: Nach Seinem Leben Und Seinen Werken*, I, pp. 295-8.
[106] SWS 32: 333ff. See the editorial notes about the uncertainty of the date of the text.

of position are unclear, but this turn had great importance for the direction of Herder's thought throughout the rest of his life.

Herder's later essays show that Herder maintained an immanent and historical conception of the vocation of man and the highest good.[107] In his collection of essays from the 1780s and 1790s, *Zerstreute Blätter*, Herder returns to the question of the possibility and significance of immortality.[108] In those essays, Herder even draws back a bit from some of the views that he presented in 1769. For example, in his *Vortrag* from 1791, "Über die Menschliche Unsterblichkeit", Herder argues that the immortality of the soul is merely "eine Blüte der Hoffnung" ["a bloom of hope"], which cannot be an object of human knowledge.[109] This suggest that he does not accept the kinds of proofs that he does in his letters to Mendelssohn.

Herder, in the same piece, asserts that there are two kinds of immanent immortality possible, however. First, there is the immortality available to a few great artists and thinkers whose works are recognized as models of excellence for ages after their death. Such immortality is only available to a few, and is

[107] There is, as many scholars note, a somewhat 'mystical' period that Herder passes through that coincides roughly with his time in Bückeburg from 1771 to 1776. This is discussed by Haym, who christened the time the "Bückeburg Exile". See Haym, *Herder: Nach Seinem Leben Und Seinen Werken*, I, pp. 500ff. I am not sure that even during that period, however, that Herder turns to an embrace of a transcendental conception of the highest good, since he appears rather to embrace a position closer to Hamann's, according to which the present world reveals the language of God. Nevertheless, during his Weimar years Herder does not seem to maintain some of the mystical and more traditional religious views that he professes during his time in Bückeburg.

[108] Rudolf Unger offers an interesting discussion of the theme of immorality in Herder's later thought in chapter one of *Herder, Novalis, Kleist*. There are many faults with Unger's interpretation, however, as he often insists that Herder was an enemy of reason and rational argument, basing his views on purely idiosyncratic feelings. Part of Unger's argument is based on an assumption that all readers will see Herder as hostile to every aspect of both the enlightenment and German rationalism, whereas Herder's attitude towards both of these intellectual movements was far more nuanced.

[109] DKV 8: 203.

increasingly difficult to obtain for modern persons, who must compete both with their own contemporaries and with the ancients.[110] However, Herder also attempts to describe an immanent immortality available to all human beings. We all have received the benefits of the cultural and social developments of past generations, and we too contribute to such a historically continuous procession of humanity:

> Divine forms grow from these seeds. Heroes and doers of good deeds [Wohltäter] have sprung up and planted forth. They have also had their affect on us. We have a calling to bring forth more effects from their work, as well as the power [*Macht*] to do so. In doing this we eternalize in our species [Geschlecht] the noblest and most beautiful part of ourselves.[111]

As in the early letters, Herder here states that we have a task to work to improve ourselves. However, in his later thought his conception is shaped by a more precise conception of the terrain on which the pursuit of perfectibility occurs – the field of history. Herder's philosophy of history, which begins to bloom in the 1770s and reaches its full maturity in the 1780s and 1790s, will enable Herder to venture a response to the potential worries that an immanent conception of the highest good might raise, such as the potential meaninglessness of many individual lives.[112] The development of Herder's views will be the subject of the following chapters.

---

[110] DKV 8: 203-6.
[111] DKV 8: 207.
[112] A recent philosophical view similar in many ways to this can be found in Samuel Scheffler's work. Scheffler has argued that it is more important for each individual that the human species endure and progress than that they themselves life for a long time, or have an eternal life. See Samuel Scheffler, *Death & the Afterlife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Chapter 3: *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*

Tod und Leben stehen in der Zunge Gewalt; wer sie liebt, wird ihre Frucht essen.
Sprüche 18:21, Luther Übesetzung

Da er auf keinen Punkt blind fällt und blind liegen bleibt: so wird er freistehend, kann sich eine Sphäre der Bespiegelung suchen, kann sich in sich bespiegeln. Nicht mehr ein unfehlbare Maschine in der Händen der Natur, wird er sich selbst Zweck und Ziel der Bearbeitung.
Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, DKV 1:717

I

Herder's *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* has a broader scope than its title suggests. It deals with issues such as the distinguishing features of human beings, the basis of human sociability, and the grounds of historical change and development. While some scholars have seen that the essay is concerned with more than just the philosophy of language narrowly construed, the ethical dimension of the treatise has not been adequately thematized or understood.[1] In what follows, I will argue that the *Abhandlung* can be fruitfully read as a development of Herder's conception of the vocation of man which he began to sketch in his letters to Mendelssohn in 1769.

[1] For example, Charles Taylor sees Herder's treatise as developing a rich philosophical anthropology grounded in a conception of language that Taylor calls "expressivism". See "The Importance of Herder," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Frederick Beiser argues that one of the deeper issues at stake in the *Abhandlung* is the ability to show that naturalistic explanations are not hopelessly limited. See *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 130.

Language plays an important role in Herder's conception of human nature and morality in both his early and his later thought.[2] The *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* contains several arguments about the relationship between language and morality, human nature and Herder's conception of progress. And while Herder's general conception of linguistic meaning in the *Abhandlung* may be at variance in several respects with his other writings on language, there is continuity between the ethical views articulated in the *Abhandlung* and Herder's earlier and later writings.[3]

There are three ways that the *Abhandlung* extends Herder's account of the vocation of mankind. First, in the *Abhandlung* Herder offers an account of *Besonnenheit*, an intellectual and practical capacity which he argues is the distinguishing feature of mankind. Second, Herder presents an account of progress and historical development in the *Abhandlung*, grounded in a conception of perfectibility made possible by *Besonnenheit*. Third, he attempts to show that our nature reveals that we are naturally disposed to feel sympathy for other beings. Fourth, Herder argues for the essentially social character of human beings, and that this social character is an indispensable condition of the development and perfection of our capacities.

II

[2] This is a theme in "Über den Fleiss in mehreren gelehrten Sprachen", *Journal meiner Reise*, and also in several parts of the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* and *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*. In all of these texts, Herder argues that there is a connection between having a refined language and more precise ethical concepts. This is not necessarily a good thing, according to Herder, because excessive refinement and rationalization can lead to enervation and a lack of emotional and sensual development that also are important for living a full moral life.

[3] Michael Forster, in particular, argues that Herder's conception of language in the *Abhandlung* is not only different from his other work in philosophy of language, but is also inferior. See *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 63-4 and 132-3

The attempt to delineate the distinctive difference between human and nonhuman animals is one of the central aims of Herder's *Abhandlung*, as it forms the pillar of his argument against both the divine-origin theory of language and reductionistic naturalism. As Rudolf Haym insightfully writes: "The major emphasis of the entire *Treatise* is the thorough distinction of kind which lies between humans and animals."[4] Thus, the issue of first importance that Herder discusses in the *Abhandlung* is the difference between human and animal *Bestimmung*. The term '*Bestimmung'* is one of the most commonly used in the *Abhandlung*, and attending to the passages in which the concept is central yields great insight into what Herder understands the vocation of the human being to be.[5]

A key difference between human beings and animals, according to Herder, is that human beings are capable of a variety of *Bestimmungen*, whereas each animal is capable of only one *Bestimmung*. Each animal has a uniform sphere of activity determined by its nature, but "the human being has no such uniform and narrow sphere, where only one work awaits him: - a world of occupations and *Bestimmungen* lies about him."[6] Human beings, on this view, are distinguished from animals by being less narrowly determined to a particular form of life by instinct.

All organic beings, according to Herder, have a "sphere of activity" determined by their physiological structure.[7] For the most part, animals are determined by their natural

---

[4] Rudolf Haym, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Rudolf Gaertner, 1877-85), I, p. 404.
[5] I hope to recall the discussion in the previous chapter of the vocation, or *Bestimmung*, of man. In the present chapter I often leave the term untranslated because it is easier to make sense of Herder's claims in this way.
[6] DKV 1: 713. Translations in the present chapter are my own, but I have frequently consulted Michael Forster's translation for assistance. See Johann Gottfried Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. Michael Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
[7] DKV 1: 712-5.

endowments to live in one particular way. Beavers are capable of building small structures, but only one kind of structure, which is repeatedly built in the same way. This sphere of activity is determined by the beaver's biological structure, and a beaver can never act and live in ways that are unexpected or novel. An animal capable of this kind of building, Herder says, "builds in its childhood just as it builds in its old age, and will build in the same way until the end of the world as in the beginning of creation."[8]

A human being's sphere of activity, by contrast, is less narrowly determined. A human can make a dam, but is also capable of making a house, a boat, or a bowl. Additionally, a human being can design and build a single kind of artifact, such as a dam, in more possible ways than an animal that builds the same kind of artifact. All of this is evident even if we restrict our attention to the production and reproduction of simple crafts. Beyond this, though, we can observe that human beings are capable of perfecting themselves in even more interesting and important ways. They can take a reflective interest in their own moral lives, as well as the social lives of their communities, and attempt to improve their ways of living by means of their own creative activity and effort. This means, according to Herder, that a human being can "himself become the purpose and goal of his working [*Bearbeitung*]."[9]

This ability is intimately connected with a second a second difference between human and animal *Bestimmung* that Herder discusses, *Besonnenheit*. *Besonnenheit* is a capacity for reflective self-awareness that allows human beings greater latitude with respect to the possible activities they can take up, and which also enables human beings

[8] DKV 1: 772. This passage refers specifically to bees, but the point is intended to be more general.
[9] DKV 1: 717.

to perfect and develop a richer variety of powers and abilities than other animals. Herder states:

> If animal sensuousness and limitation to one point were to fall away, then a different creature whose positive force [*Kraft*] expresses itself more clearly in a larger space space, in accordance with a finer organization would come into being. That creature, separated and free would not merely cognize, will and act [würkt], but also know that it cognizes, wills, and acts. This creature is the human being and we wish to call this entire disposition of his nature *Besonnenheit*, in order to escape the confusion of it with the particular forces of reason [*Vernunftkräften*].[10]

Human beings have the capacity to reflect on their own activity, ways of living, and ways of thinking. Because of this, they are not as narrowly bound to particular kind of life and form of thought as other animals are. The objects of their senses have a less immediate effect upon them, as what they perceive is capable of being not only perceptively apprehended, but apperceptively considered and judged. This makes it possible for human beings to alter and improve themselves.

Herder's conception here bears a *prima facie* resemblance to Mendelssohn's account of the character of rational beings. According to Mendelssohn, the distinguishing feature of a rational being is that it is able to perfect itself.[11] However, whereas Mendelssohn thought that the human capacity for perfectibility was grounded in having a nature that was less sensual because it had a distinctive non-sensual faculty of reason, for Herder this ability is grounded in the kind of sensual character that human

---

[10] DKV 1: 719.

'Besonnenheit' was the German term used to translate Locke's 'reflection'. Also important in this context is that Leibniz, in his *New Essays*, claimed that it was the capacity for reflection that made it possible for human beings to change their manner of living over time. This is something that animals cannot do because of their inability to take up a reflective stance towards their own activities and mental states. See G.W. Leibniz, *New Essays on the Human Understanding*, trans. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 50-1.

[11] Moses Mendelssohn, *Schriften zur Philosophie, Aesthetik und Apologetik*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: L. Voss, 1880), I, p. 222-7.

beings have. A human being has *Besonnenheit* not because he is a rational as opposed to a sensual being, but because his sensory capacities are organized differently than nonhuman creatures.[12] Stated generally, this is the result of human beings having a more dispersed sensibility and consciousness. Herder explains his account out in more detail by claiming that the senses which human beings depend on – vision and hearing – are more 'mediate' capacities. Such sensory modalities allow us to perceive an object, but to be aware of the perception itself. We have both physical and psychological distance from what we perceive through vision and hearing. It is the place that these senses have in our physiological organization which gives rise to reflective awareness, or *Besonnenheit*.[13]

Herder further argues that the capacity for *Besonnenheit* endows human beings with a distinctive kind of freedom: "Because he does not fall and remain lying at any one point, he thus becomes free-standing, can seek for himself his own sphere of reflection, can reflect himself to himself. No more an infallible machine in the hands of nature, he becomes his own purpose and goal of refinement [*Bearbeitung*]."[14] As human beings are not immediately determined to live in one way, they have a greater ability to determine for themselves the general shape of their lives – both the ends and the means that they pursue. Beavers and bees must build damns and hives, but human beings can consider whether they want to build cabins or huts or houses, and decide this in light of how living in these ways will affect the kinds of people they become. In reflecting, they can be aware

[12] Herder's account is thus more similar to Aristotle's account of the mind as the form of a living being, whereas Mendelssohn's is more akin to Plato's conception of the mind as a nonphysical entity that is somehow entangled with a physical body. For a more detailed comparison of their views along these lines, see Nigel DeSouza, "The Soul-Body Relationship and the Foundations of Morality: Herder contra Mendelssohn," *Herder Yearbook* 21 (2014).
[13] DKV 1: 712-3. Herder develops his account of each of the senses in greater detail in the aesthetic works he authored before writing the *Abhandlung*. See, especially the discussion in *Viertes Kritische Wäldchen*, DKV 2: 289.
[14] DKV 1: 717.

that it is themselves that they are working on, and the shape of their lives that they are deliberating about.

The range of live options available to a group of people may be more or less narrowly determined by climate and history, but as a species there is no predetermined set of activities which all human beings are determined to perform simply by membership in our species. Since human beings are possessed of this kind of freedom, they are determined by their nature to take an active role in their own development – that is, they are creatures who are perfectible through their own activity. Each person becomes the "purpose and goal of his own refinement." This offers a kind of autonomy in the shaping of one's own life that is unique to terrestrial creatures. For animals, only one vocation is possible, but for human beings there are a variety of shapes that we can give to our lives.[15]

That the capacity for self-consciousness and freedom distinguishes human beings from animals is not a view that is particularly original to Herder. It is worth considering to what degree Herder is merely following suit here and in what way his view is original. The distinctive and original aspect of Herder's position is primarily that he treats the human capacity for freedom as dependent on *Besonnenheit*, which is a part of mankind's natural, sensual endowment. The human capacity for *Besonnenheit* distinguishes human beings from animals and other living beings, but "the difference is not in *levels*, or *addition* of *forces*, but rather in a completly *different kind of direction* and *development*

[15] DKV 1: 713. See also DKV 1: 793-5, where Herder draws attention to the capacity of human beings to inhabit any part of the earth and live in any climate, unlike other animals.

[Auswickelung] of all forces."[16] That is, mankind is a distinct kind of natural being, but not categorically distinct from natural beings as such.

This sounds like it could be merely a reiteration of Leibniz's rejection of leaps in nature.[17] This is correct to an extent, but there is an important difference between Herder and Leibniz concerning the structure of the human soul and its place in nature. Leibniz argues explicitly that rational beings have a unique power or ability which is a faculty added to their sensory capacities – apperception. This apperception is something that is present in a particular kind of being, a soul. Souls are qualitatively distinct from other kinds of substances that populate the word in virtue of being governed by laws that are completely distinct from the laws governing bodies.[18] And, further, it is a crucial part of Leibniz's view that there is no real interaction between substances. Hence, apperceptive souls do not truly affect bodies, nor do bodies affect souls.[19]

While Herder suggests that *Besonnenheit* is a form of apperception, his understanding of the basis and significance of this capacity is significantly different. It is a form of self-conscious awareness, for sure. But it should be understood as the form of self-consciousness taken by human sensory powers, not as a distinct force operating on a different ontological level and governed by different laws. That human beings are apperceptive beings is explained by their physiological character, not by their belonging to a distinct kingdom or order of being. Additionally, the human soul is not separated

---

[16] DKV 1: 717.
[17] Leibniz, *New Essays*, IV.16, p. 473.
[18] *Monadology*, sections 29, 30, 78, and 78.
[19] My account of Leibniz here is admittedly a bit simple, as his views changed a great deal over time. For a more extensive discussion of the relationship between Herder and Leibniz, see Catherine Wilson, "Leibniz's Reputation in the Eighteenth Century: Kant and Herder," in *Insiders and Outsiders in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. G.A.J. Rogers, Tom Sorell, and Jill Kraye (London: Routledge, 2010); Nigel DeSouza, "Leibniz in the Eighteenth Century: Herder's Critical Reflections on the Principles of Nature and Grace," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2012).

from the human body, or other physical entities. There is real interaction between soul and body, according to Herder, and how they interact is part of the explanation of human *Besonnenheit*.[20]

Though Herder regards human freedom as a kind of autonomy or self-direction, he does not allege that this involves being capable of acting contrary to the order of natural causes. Rather, the human capacity for self-determination emerges from the way in which human organisms are naturally constituted. Human beings may act as they do in part because of natural causes, but they are able to direct the forces acting on them by means of the forces that constitute their own being, and hence to shape the direction of their own development. Human freedom and autonomy, on Herder's view, is more analogous to the manner in which a ship moves itself by channeling the forces of the wind and tide than the way in which a prime mover initiates a causal series independent of any antecedent determination.

III

Herder contends that the capacity for *Besonnenheit* in human beings has broad significance for the way we relate to our future and past. This capacity has import for the vocation of human beings, including their ethical and social life. Human beings are "active beings" whose "powers operate forth progressively [*Kräfte in Progression fortwürken*]."[21] Herder argues, with regard to language in particular, that our capacity

[20] For a thorough discussion of Herder's early criticism of Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony, see "Leibniz in the Eighteenth Century: Herder's Critical Reflections on the Principles of Nature and Grace."
[21] DKV 1: 769.

for reflection leads us to be constantly changing and developing our language. Neither the grammatical structure nor the vocabulary of a language is fixed, but both are always being changed through creative human activity.[22] With regard to human life more generally, this means that human beings continually recreate and refine their forms of life, consequently bringing about new ethical and social possibilities. The form of life of any human community is not static, but is always evolving.

It is *Besonnenheit*, according to Herder, that permits human beings to consciously attend to their experiences, and also to refine and improve upon what has been experienced, engendering a progressive series of improvement:

> With the human being evidently a different natural law presides over the succession of his ideas, *Besonnenheit*. This still presides in the most sensuous condition, only less noticeably. The most ignorant creature when he first comes into the world, but immediately he becomes an apprentice of nature in a way that no animal is. One day does not simply instruct another, but every minute of the day instructs the others, every thought instructs the others. Art [*Der Kunstgriff*] is essential to his soul. To learn nothing for this moment, but rather to bring all together, either along with what is already known or for what is intended to be linked with it in the future. The soul reckons its inventory, what it has collected and intends to collect. It thus becomes a force [*Kraft*] of steadily collecting. Such a chain goes forth until death. [He is] in a way of speaking never a complete human being, always in development, progression, process of perfection.[23]

Human beings are progressive creatures, according to Herder because of our *Besonnenheit*. We have the ability to learn from our experiences and to reflectively appropriate what we have experienced. We are in a constant condition of improving or developing ourselves, and the world which we inhabit. Human beings have a nature which is perpetually incomplete and always oriented towards the further development of

---

[22] This is repeated throughout Herder's *Abhandlung*, but his conception of the way in which language develops is especially vivid in his account of the stages by which a more complicated grammar develops on DKV 1: 762-7.
[23] DKV 1: 773.

capacities, abilities, and powers.[24] This is a powerful image of human life that made a strong impression on German philosophy in the nineteenth century (in the work of Hegel and Marx, among others) and received its richest literary expression in Goethe's *Faust*.[25]

Herder's conception of the human being as a progressive self-perfecting being does not commit him to a narrow, unitary theory of progress or perfection.[26] The process of perfecting and developing one's powers may lead to different outcomes in different persons, whose natural constitutions and sets of experiences are different from one another. There is not one way in which human beings perfect themselves, but many. For example, a shepherd may teach his son to herd sheep, but the son may learn how to employ a hound in the task in order to herd more efficiently. A different shepherd's son may have no dog, but might learn more about which fauna are salubrious for the sheep. These two persons may be learning similar trades from their elders, and both perfect them to a degree beyond the manner in which they learned them, but they can do so in different ways according to the situation in which they find themselves, and by employing their different natural capacities and inclinations. The possibility of diverse ways of perfecting oneself is even more apparent when one compares very different skills. For example, a young shepherd's creative activity is very different from that of a young farmer or a child raised in an industrialized city.

---

[24] "Das Wesentliche unsers Lebens ist nie Genuß sondern immer Progression, und wir sind nie Menschen gewesen, bis wir – zu Ende gelebt haben." DKV 1: 773.

[25] Herder was working on the *Abhandlung* when he first met Goethe in Strausburg. Some have argued that Herder was Goethe's model for Faust. See Jacoby Günther, *Herder als Faust* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1911). As literary history, Jacoby's claim is too simplistic in its account of a great artist like Goethe. However, Herderian ideas are certainly a feature of Goethe's masterpiece. For a balanced discussion of this issue, see Robert Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 127ff.

[26] For discussions of Herder's views on progress, see Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 87-106; Allen Wood, "Herder and Kant on History: Their Enlightenment Faith," in *Metaphysics and the Good: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Merrihew Adams*, ed. L. Jorgensen and S. Newlands (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

This activity of perfecting oneself and one's form of life, according to Herder, is not one that comes to a neat and tidy conclusion, but "continues on until death," since we are "always in development, in progression, in process of perfection." This reveals a general form of agreement between Herder and the perfectionist ethics of the German rationalists. Wolff, for example, insists that the process of perfection that human beings are obligated to engage in is a standing obligation that will not terminate in a complete and finished state of perfection.[27] Though in agreement with this central tenet, Herder's conception of perfection is distinct from the Wolffian one. The most significant difference is that Herder extends the concept of perfection by emphasizing a plurality of ways in which any human being can develop and perfect him or herself. Wolff conceived of perfection as having to do with the development of what he called the higher powers of the soul, associated with reason and the cognition of clear and distinct ideas. For Herder, there is not a fundamental distinction to be made between so-called higher and lower forces of the soul. The project to become more perfect is consequently for him something that can be done in a larger variety of ways, and in very different kinds of lives. In his philosophy of history, this will play an important role in his argument against the unitary theory of progress endorsed by several prominent enlightenment thinkers.[28]

IV

[27] See, especially, Christian Wolff, *Vernünftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit* (Frankfurt and Lepzig1733), section 44.
[28] See the discussion in chapter 4.

Herder's *Abhandlung* includes an account of what he calls "natural language", which he distinguishes from fully developed human language. The discussion of natural language reveals important features of Herder's conception of sympathy, and the relationship that human beings stand in to other living beings. Natural language, according to Herder, is the non-linguistic expression of feelings through sounds and gestures that is common to human beings and animals. For example, when a dog whimpers upon being injured or a human being shrieks in terror, the noises can be understood to express pain and fear.[29]

Though Herder denies that natural language explains the essence of human language,[30] his account of it reveals important features of his ethics. He argues that the natural language of beasts is not merely an auditory omission by one creature which disappears into the ether, but an expression that elicits a sympathetic response in other organisms that are properly attuned to such expressions:

> So little has nature created us as isolated stones, as egoistic Monads! Even as the finest strings of animal feeling…even the strings, whose sound and straining does not at all arise from free choice [*Willkür*] and slow deliberation, yes whose nature has still not been able to be investigated by that all-investigating reason, even these strings in their entire play, without the consciousness of foreign sympathy are directed towards an expression to other creatures. The struck spring does its natural duty: it sounds! It calls a like-feeling echo: even when none is there, even when it is not hoped or expected that it will be answered.[31]

Herder takes aim here at Leibniz's view that each being does not interact with others, that all of its activity and development comes entirely from its own nature. Against this, Herder contends that all natural beings are interconnected – they are not windowless

[29] DKV 1: 697.
[30] DKV 1: 701.
[31] DKV 1: 697-8.

monads.[32] Human beings, in particular, are incredibly responsive to the pain and suffering of other creatures and this shows that we have a natural disposition for sympathy.

Acknowledgment of a natural disposition toward sympathy with other creatures in mankind shows that Herder rejects a Hobbesian account of human nature, according to which each individual's actions are all exclusively motivated by his or her own particular self-interest. Human beings are naturally sympathetic not only toward other human beings, but their capacity for sympathy extends more broadly, and all other living beings are potential objects of sympathy.[33] This tendency toward sympathy is shared by other creatures as well, and the mutual sympathy of natural creatures with one another is like a harmonious piece of music in which several instruments are attuned to one another.

Because all living beings have some degree of attunement with each another, Herder further concludes that human beings are naturally directed to express their feelings, especially to other persons:

> Allow it now accept in the whole, as a clear law of nature: "*Here is a sensitive being [empfindsames Wersen], which can enclose none of its living sentiments [Empfindungen] within itself, which in the first surprised moment, even without choice and intention must express each in sound.*" This was so to speal the last, maternal impression of the forming hand of nature, that she gave the law to all in the world: "*do not feel for yourself alon, but sound aloud your feeling!*"[34]

[32] For all of the respect that Herder had for Leibniz, he always found the doctrine of pre-established harmony problematic, as it did not allow for real interaction between things or persons. It is criticized in 1769 in Über Leibnitzens Grundsätze von der Natur und Gnade, SWS 32: 225-7, and in 1775 in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele*, DKV 4:336-8. He also reiterated his criticisms in 1787 in *Gott, einige Gespräche*, DKV 4: 714-7. The first of these texts is discussed in detail in DeSouza, "Leibniz in the Eighteenth Century: Herder's Critical Reflections on the Principles of Nature and Grace."
[33] DKV 1: 698.
[34] DKV 1: 698.

The whole of nature, on this view, is a beautiful and well-proportioned whole. The natural world is composed of beings in accord with one another, and it is man's tendency as a natural being to concern himself with the feelings of other creatures, but especially of the human tendency to move and be moved by the feelings and expressions of other human beings: "Because our sound of nature is determined for the expression of passions, it is thus natural that they also became the element of all emotional stirring [*Rührung*]!"[35] The well-ordered system of the expression of affects and sympathetic reactions to such affects implies, according to Herder, that human nature drives us to be expressive, and not merely sensitive, creatures. Human beings, as well as other organisms, are naturally driven to orient themselves towards and concern themselves with beings other than themselves, not to exist in isolation.

Charles Taylor has argued that Herder's most significant philosophical contribution is that Herder made expression, as opposed to designation, central to the understanding of language. According to Taylor, this means that human language shapes what can be expressed, so that by having the words 'outraged' and 'seething' in addition to the term 'anger' allows for a broader and more complex set of human emotions to be understood and expressed.[36] For Taylor, this expressive potential is a unique feature of human language. Taylor's account of Herder is instructive, but it is important not to be misled by his emphasis on the term 'expression'. The expressive character of language is presented by Herder as a feature of all animal life, and not restricted to human language. In fact, Herder explicitly asserts that these expressive sounds are "not the actual roots,

[35] DKV 1: 705-6.
[36] Charles Taylor, Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," pp. 97-8.

but the juices which enliven the roots of language."[37] That is, though not the basis of our language, they are the basis of our expressive nature, and they are the juices which nourish our language and make it expressive. Our more sophisticated use of language allows us to make finer distinctions, to search for words that fit our feelings, and to create new terms when our language is insufficiently rich for our purposes. But it is important not to overlook Herder's insistence that the drive to express one's feelings is something that humans share with other creatures, and is part of what connects us with the rest of the natural world.[38]

One consequence of Herder's general view of the natural attunement between natural beings is that a person does not require a sophisticated or refined language to sympathize with the feelings and sensibility of one's fellows. Sympathetic understanding arises naturally, and it is only through a process of intellectual refinement that a human being's natural feelings can be weakened enough to not take part in this interplay of expression and feeling:

> The more harmonious the sensitive string-play of the animal is woven with other animals, this more does the one feel with another. Their nerves come into a uniform tension, their souls in a uniform tone, they are caused mechanically to feel with one another. And what a hardening of his fibers! What power [Macht] to stop up all the opening of its sensitivity, is required for a human being to make himself deaf and hard against this![39]

The sympathetic reaction of one person to the cries of other persons, as well as of other animals, is a matter of the natural mechanism governing beings with similar physiological

---

[37] DKV 1: 701.

[38] Taylor himself does not sufficiently emphasize the degree to which Herder sees human beings in a close connection with other beings, especially with regard to our drive to express ourselves. He is correct that Herder argues against deriving human language from natural cries, but he omits to discuss just what Herder believes the importance of natural language has for the proper understanding of human beings.

[39] DKV 1: 706-7. Note the mechanistic language of this passage. As in most places, Herder seeks to ground his in a scientific and naturalistic conception of human life.

structures. Each creature feels what it does as a result of its nerves being in the state that they are, and certain expressions are capable of bringing about the same state in other beings that have similarly constituted systems of nerves. To sympathize with the feelings of other sensitive creatures is the natural disposition of human beings, and the suppression of natural sympathetic reactions to the expressions of other beings is something that is accomplished only either through a great effort to become indifferent, or through excessive intellectual refinement that attenuates the natural passions. Modern European society, especially modern French society, is marked by this kind of excessive refinement. Hence one of the central problems of modern society, according to Herder, is an excessive intellectualism and weakened moral sentiments.[40]

To a contemporary reader, Herder's emphasis on the harmony of nature and a natural disposition toward sympathy is likely to appear a bit jejune. Herder, however, was a thinker for whom nature was not disenchanted and emptied of purpose and value. He assumed that the natural world is an essentially well-ordered and hospitable habitat for the beings residing in it. This is not to say that Herder was anti-naturalistic. Not all naturalists accept what John McDowell calls "bald naturalism."[41] Herder's conception of nature was shaped by the Shaftesbury, whose own work *The Moralists* contains several encomia to the harmony, beauty and goodness of nature.[42]

---

[40] This comes out clearly in "Wie Philosophie zum Besten des Volks allgemeiner und nützlicher werken kann", as well as in the 1774 *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. Rousseau's influence is palpable here.

[41] John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), p. xviii.

[42] See, e.g., Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols. (London: Purser, 1732; repr., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), II, pp. 121-2 and 62.

Herder was not entirely blind to the less pleasant aspects of the natural world – the violence and struggle that so frequently rear their head.[43] Herder's point in the *Treatise* is not quite to argue that all is peaceful and pleasant in nature. The argument is that there is a naturally sympathetic disposition in organic beings, but not that this is the exclusive disposition of such beings. There may be other aspects of the nature of human and other organic beings that can account for their negative and hostile behavior towards one another.[44]

The most important thing to note, for purposes of understanding Herder's ethics, is that Herder's discussion of sympathy in the *Origin of Language* is an attempt to undermine an excessively pessimistic account of human nature, such as is found in the works of thinkers like Hobbes and Mandeville who minimize the place of benevolent and altruistic dispositions in favor of the pursuit of self-interest in their philosophical anthropology.[45] Herder's account of the *Naturtöne* of humans and animals is an attempt to provide a naturalistic account of sympathy in terms of the relationship between expressive cries and the reaction of the nerves. However, just as the discussion of natural language in the early part of the *Abhandlung* is not the complete account of Herder's understanding of human language, so is the discussion of sympathy only a part of Herder's ethical vision. At most, it offers a few arguments against Hobbesian moral psychology, but not a detailed account of Herder's own positive views. The sympathy

---

[43] See, for example, Herder's discussion of how different human languages developed on DKV 1:791-9.
[44] Herder believed, under the influence of Kant's interpretation of Newton in his *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*, that the two fundamental physical forces of nature were attraction and repulsion, and that the actions of all beings, including animals and persons, were fundamentally governed by such laws. See, for example, *Zum Sinn des Gefuhls*, DKV 4: 235-41. Herder also makes reference to this in his later works, such as the *Ideen* and *Liebe und Selbstheit*.
[45] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Inadianapolis: Hackett, 1994), I.xiii; Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University PRess, 1924; repr., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), I, pp. 323-69.

that human beings are naturally endowed with is a passive reaction to stimuli, which is an inadequate basis for an account of the active process of perfecting and developing one's capacities which is the vocation of humankind.

V

As noted above, Herder holds that there is a natural law which leads each human being to employ his or her powers progressively, and that this is grounded in our capacity for reflective self-awareness.[46] This progressive character is not only a characteristic of individual human beings, according to Herder, but is also a property of human communities and humanity as a species.[47] In addition to emphasizing this progressive self-perfecting aspect of humanity, Herder also argues that human beings are inherently social and historical. Human beings are social in that each individual is dependent on other human beings for their identity, the development of their capacities, and even for their very survival. They are historical in that each individual is educated into a society at a particular time and hence receives the imprint of the historical period of his or her society.[48] The progressive, social, and historical character of human beings is a consequence of the intense degree of dependence of all human beings during the earliest period of their development.

---

[46] DKV 1: 769.
[47] DKV 1: 783. See also, *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur: Erste Sammlung von Fragementen*, DKV 1: 181.
[48] This was a view that Herder developed early on, and which is expressed in two fragments of 1766, "Von der Verschiedenheit des Geschmaks und der Denkart unter den Menschen" and "Von der Veränderung des Geschmaks der Nationen durch die Folge der Zeitalter." Both of these fragments are published together as "Von der Veränderung des Geschmacks", in DKV 1: 149-160.

Herder submits that the observation of nature reveals that human beings are born weaker and remain in a dependent condition for longer than other animals.[49] This intensive and protracted dependence might seem to be a lamentable disadvantage for our species at first glance, but Herder argues that this aspect of our nature explains why human beings have the intellectual, social, and moral character that they do:

> The human being comes into the world weaker, needier, more abandoned by nature's instruction, more completely without skills and talents, than any animal, precisely in order that, like no animal, he "may enjoy an *education* [*Erziehung*], and the human species may, like no animal species, become an *affectionately bound whole* [*innigverbundenes Ganze*]!"[50]

Other creatures are able to take care of themselves much earlier than human young are, and are hence in less need of affection and care than human beings are. Human beings do not enter the world self-sufficient, but depend on their caretakers for their development, even for their very survival. Fortunately, nature has provided for this, and has formed human parents with the propensity to naturally care for, and love, their children.[51] Most importantly, human infants do not depend on their parents merely for physical sustenance, but they also require instruction and education from their parents for their psychological, emotional, and moral development. Hence, there is a bond knitting together each generation of human beings, and that bond is one of education and

---

[49] Herder was a close and careful reader of Buffon's *Natural History*, which contains detailed descriptions of the anatomy, ontogeny, and behavior of a large variety of organisms. His comparative claims about the characteristics of different organisms are grounded a study of this work and others.
[50] DKV 1: 785. Michael Forster's translation of this same passage is a bit misleading, as he renders "*innigverbundenes Ganze*" as "inwardly united whole" (Forster trans., p. 141), and thus excludes the sense of 'affectionate' or 'tender' which the German word '*innig*' bears. Yet it is clear that Herder intends this sense to be emphasized as the context in which the phrase appears involves a discussion of the importance of love in binding human beings together into social groups.
[51] DKV 1: 784.

upbringing.[52] As each individual has depended on her elders, so will each person's offspring depend on their parents and community for their upbringing. Herder draws attention to the simple fact that if this upbringing were not provided, then it would be impossible for human infants to develop into well-functioning adults. Mere instinctual feeding is not sufficient for raising a being as needy as a human infant. Rather, each child must be instructed and enculturated in a manner requiring affection and caring attention, and this is well-expressed by the Greek term for parental love, στοργή or *storgê*.[53] The upshot of this is that "no individual human being exists *for himself*, he is *inserted into the whole of the species*, he is *only one for the progressive [fortgehende] series*."[54]

This has at least two implications for the moral and social character of human beings. First, it entails that human beings are not naturally egoistic, but have a natural disposition to love and care for others, especially their own young. Herder's discussion of the caring relationship between parents and children is intended to undermine accounts of human moral psychology that leave room for only self-interested forms of motivation:

> If one wishes to explain everything out of blind lust or immediate self-interest, like our crude Epicureans – who can explain the feeling of parents for their children? And the strong bonds that are effected through such feelings? Look! This poor inhabitant of the earth comes wretched into to the world, without knowing that he is wretched. He needs pity, without in the least being able to make himself worthy of it…Thus here the bonds of nature must break earliest, according to our cold philosophy, where they are most strongly efficacious![55]

Herder's point is that the kind of care demanded of parents could not be expected to be part of the natural course of things if human motivation was constituted solely by the

---

[52] DKV 1: 785-91.
[53] DKV 1: 785.
[54] DKV 1: 785-6. See also "Von der Veränderung des Geschmacks der Nationen durch die Folge der Zeitalter," DKV 1: 157.
[55] DKV 1: 784.

desire for "immediate self-interest." Rather, since the natural order of human life involves parental care for children, this is best explained by a natural disposition of concern toward others – at least towards one's own children. These bonds go further than the natural disposition to sympathy characteristic of all natural beings, and which forms the basis of the "natural language", because parental love is practiced over a long period of time and is not a merely episodic occurrence. All of this entails the rejection of the moral psychology characteristic of Hobbes and Mandeville, as well as of French thinkers such as D'Holbach and La Mettrie.

The second consequence which follows from Herder's account of human dependence is that it entails that human nature is thoroughly social. This contention plys a major role in Herder's critique of Rousseau's individualistic philosophical anthropology, as well as of Condillac's theory of the origin of language.[56] Human beings depend on social relationships even for their own basic development, and by means of the development of an individual's own capacities they contribute to the historical change that takes place in their own family and society:

---

[56] Herder takes aim at the conception of the state of nature depicted by Rousseau in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, included in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch, Cambridge texts in the history of political thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

Condillac's account of two children developing language in isolation from a human community is also an important target of Herder's. That discussion can be found in the second part of Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Essay on the Origin of Knowledge*, trans. Hans Aarsleff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

In recent work, Hans Aarsleff has argued that the view of the origin of language presented by Herder is more individualistic and less social than that presented by Condillac. There are some passages in the *Abhandlung* that offer support for this contention. However, Aarsleff's charge against Herder is more difficult to substantiate when one pays attention to the whole of the *Abhandlung*. See Hans Aarsleff, "Herder's Cartesian *Ursprung* vs. Condillac's Expressivist *Essai*," in *Language Philosophies and the Language Sciences*, ed. Daniele Gambarara, Stefano Gensini, and Antonino Pennisi (Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 1996); "The Tradition of Condillac: The Problem of the Origin of Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy Before Herder," in *From Locke to Saussure* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

> Thus [for animals] everything remains individual [*einzeln*], the immediate work of nature, and so there comes to be "*no progression of the soul of the species*," no *whole*, of the sort that nature wanted in the case of the human being. Nature consequently bound together [humanity] through necessity and a caring [*zuvorkommenden*] parental drive for which the Greeks had the word στοργή, and in this way "a bond of *instruction* [*Unterricht*] and *education* [*Erziehung*]" became essential to him. In this case parents had not collected the circle of ideas *for themselves*; at the same time it was there in order to be *communicated*, and the son has the advantage of already inheriting the wealth of their spirit early, as though in epitome.[57]

Human beings are part of a series of generations, each of which depends on the preceding for its education and *Bildung*, and which itself contributes to the *Bildung* of the succeeding generation. When, for example, one generation invents the art of carpentry, this ability is taught to the next generation. The succeeding generation transforms and refines the arts that it learns and passes on to its posterity a more refined and perfected set of abilities. Each ability that is acquired, or power that is developed, is in this case not lost. It is taken up and further developed by each new generation. Thus, "No individual human being exists *for himself*; '*he is inserted into the whole of the species*, he is *only one for the progressive series*.'"[58]

The social character of humanity is bound up with its historical character. Each individual becomes who he is, and develops the skills and capacities that he does, because of the work accomplished by prior generations. He then refines and develops the abilities further, passing on a different set of perfections to his own children. The manner in which human beings perfect themselves, hence, is not atomistic or individualistic, but is

[57] DKV 1: 785. I have followed Forster's translation very closely here.
[58] DKV 1: 785-6. Emil Adler has noted that in the Abhandlung, "Die Entwickelung der Sprache ist also mit der Entwickelung des Menschengeschlechts verbunden…" Emil Adler, *Herder und die deutsche Aufklärung* (Vienna: Europa, 1968), p. 128.

something that takes place within a specific historical horizon through the socialization of individuals.[59]

It is helpful to understand Herder's arguments here in light of his conception of the vocation of man. In his letters to Mendelssohn, Herder committed himself to the idea that the good of a human life consists in self-perfection. Herder did not there elaborate on process by which human beings perfect themselves, however. In the *Abhandlung*, Herder shows that he is committed to two important theses about the human perfection and perfectibility. First, human beings are social beings who are always related in important ways to the other members of their species. This means that our attempt to perfect ourselves must necessarily have some reference to others, and cannot be a purely individualistic activity. Second, one of the specific ways in which human beings are related to others is by their history. Children are educated into a particular way of life. This way of life, however, is not a fixed and static thing, but itself has developed through the self-perfecting activity of the members of the preceding generations. Children inherit a worldview and a set of abilities from their forbears, and their early formation is shaped by the history of their people. The way in which a child takes up the lessons learned by their parents is not a simple inculcation of ideas, however, because the child develops her capacities in a unique way, herself perfecting and further developing what she inherits from her parents. This is the inevitable outcome of the

[59] On the interpretation I present here, Herder charts a dialectical relationship between individual development and the historical progress in a community in a way similar to that discussed by Robert Brandom. Brandom states: "The self-cultivation of an individual consists in the exercise and expansion of expressive freedom by subjecting oneself to the novel discipline of a set of social practices one could not previously engage in, in order to acquire the capacity to perform in novel ways, express beliefs, desires, and intentions one could not previously even have, whether in arts or in sports. The cultivation of the community consists in the development of new sets of social practiced, at once the result of individual self-cultivation…and the condition of it." Robert Brandom, "Freedom and Constraint by Norms," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1979): p. 195.

Besonnenheit that characterizes all human activity. Nothing remains as it was, but is creatively appropriated, developed, and applied. In the letters to Mendelssohn, Herder argued that every human perfection can only be a perfection in a specific context. In *Ursprung der Sprache*, Herder argues that this context is always historical, a theme which Herder would elaborate upon in more detail in his 1774 *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, which will be discussed in chapter 4.[60]

[60] The present chapter was written before I had acquired and read Nigel DeSouza, "Language, Reason, and Sociability: Herder's Critique of Rousseau," *Intellectual History Review* 22, no. 2 (2012). DeSouza's article also discusses some of the issues taken up in the present chapter and my work here would have been much improved had I been able to take account of it. I hope to do so in a future iteration of this chapter.

Chapter 4: Herder's Genealogy of Morals: *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*

I

Friedrich Nietzsche characterizes his *Zur Genealogie der Moral* as an inquiry into "the conditions and circumstances out of which [moral values] have grown, under which they developed and shifted," and he further claims that this is "knowledge of a kind that has until now neither existed nor even been desired."[1] Johann Gottfried Herder's *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* stands as a refutation of Nietzsche's claim that such knowledge was never desired and such an inquiry never attempted prior to 1887. In *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, Herder examines a set of historical civilizations and argues that the form of life of each civilization, including the moral values and the various institutions expressing and supporting such values, arose in response to the particular historical and natural conditions in which each people lived. A proper reading of Herder's tract thus reveals it to be, in fact, an inquiry into the "conditions and circumstances out of which [moral values] have grown."

The present chapter argues that Herder's 1774 *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* can be read as a genealogy of 18th century European morality. I will offer an argument about the structure of the text aiming to show that Herder sought to offer an account of how the moral values and social practices

[1] *Zur Genealogie der Moral,* Vorrede, §6. Nietzsche's work was first published in 1887, 113 years after Herder's Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte. Citations to Nietzsche's works are to the section numbers of the relevant works. I have used Friedrich Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*, 15 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980). All translations are my own.

of each society are historically determined responses to the conditions in which a people finds themselves. In doing this, I will be focusing on Herder's account of the ethical character of the societies he discusses, thus offering a different focus than much other Herder scholarship.

II

Herder's belief that each culture's moral values arises from the context in which that people lived is clearly illustrated by his discussion of the ancient Middle East, a society he refers to as the '*Morgenland*.'[2] These societies were supposedly organized in a hierarchical manner, dominated by either a patriarch or a religious figure whose authority was absolute. In that time, the authority of the patriarchs and priests was regarded as divinely sanctioned, closely linking the concepts of political obedience and piety.[3] To obey the patriarch or priest was to practice obedience and reverence toward God, since God had appointed such men to rule and govern. This rigid form of authority, Herder contends, was needed to bring about the kind of community cohesion that was required by a pastoral life. Obedience, piety, and devotion to one's family were the dominant values in that society because these supported the institutions and practices that were suited to the historical needs of that age.[4]

In standard Enlightenment works of history, the age of ancient patriarchy was despised as an inferior and oppressive form of civilization. Herder notes that many of his

[2] This term is usually translated as 'Orient'. While literally correct, I avoid translating the term in this way, as Herder uses it to refer to the ancient Middle East and not other parts of Asia that lie further to the east of Europe.
[3] DKV 4: 17.
[4] DKV 4: 11-9.

contemporaries depict this time as one in which a few "cheats" and "villains" manipulated and controlled the majority for their own benefit.[5] Boulanger, for instance, in a representative passage describes this age as one in which persons "bless with a religious imbecility the savage capriciousness that deprives them of life." [6] There are three kinds of criticisms commonly made in these accounts. The first is that the authority of patriarchs and priests in the ancient Orient was arbitrary and total. Second, this absolute power was inevitably experienced as oppressive by those who were subjects of such power. Third, such forms of rule were especially conducive to abusive exercises of that power, such that the violent abuse of the ruled was the normal expression of this kind of authority. Hence, the dominant position of these Enlightenment thinkers was that any society in which there is a patriarchal or absolute form of rule undergirded by a religious conception of political legitimacy is inimical to both virtue and happiness. The specter of Oriental Despotism was the bugbear proffered by such authors to demonstrate the superiority of their own enlightened age, an age that had supposedly shed the superstitions and prejudices that afflicted mankind throughout most of history.

Contrary to these accounts of the ancient Middle East, Herder claims that the very beliefs and practices condemned by eighteenth-century historians were salubrious for those who lived in that age. He argues that just as a child's character must be formed through obedience and habituation, rather than through reasoning, mankind in its earliest stages of development required similar means of education for the formation of its

[5] DKV 4: 17-8.
[6] Boulanger's vitriolic account is similar in tone and outlook to the discussions by Voltaire and Helvetius. See, e.g. Claude Adrien Helvétius, *De L'Esprit, Or, Essays on the Mind, and Its Several Faculties*, trans. W. Mudford (London: M. Jones, 1807), third discourse. and François-Marie d'Arouet Voltaire, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. unknown (London: I. Allcock, 1766; repr., 1965).

character.[7] Submission to authority was consequently not harmful for those living in that age, nor was it experienced as oppressive. It was necessary for the formation of characters and the development of various intellectual and moral capacities that were important for the kind of life such people lived, and this also prepared the way for the development of other, very different, forms of life.[8] The particular inclinations developed by this manner of life, according to Herder, are piety and love of family, and the very happiness of the people in this age consisted in acting according to these feelings.[9] Herder thus argues that what an eighteenth-century *Aufklärer* or *lumiere* thinks of as an impediment to happiness can for a different people in a different age and time be the very substance of happiness.

Herder does not explicitly address the criticism made by Boulanger, Helvetius, and Voltaire that the authority of the patriarchs was arbitrary, capricious, and brutal. Unless there is a response to their charges that can be deciphered in his account of the ancient Middle East, Herder's re-interpretation of that historical age cannot do all of the critical work that he clearly intends it to. In that case, one might at best be persuaded that Herder is correct that people did not experience the rule of the patriarchs as oppressive, but it might nonetheless be true that the ancient Middle East was inferior to the Enlightenment because the patriarchs were in fact abusive and their power was absolute and arbitrary.

---

[7] DKV 4: 15-6.
[8] DKV 4: 18ff. Montesquieu emphasizes something similar with respect to climate in *The Spirit of the Laws*, trans. Basia Carolyn Miller Anne M. Cohler, and Harold Samuel Stone (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Herder goes much further than Montesquieu in both arguing for extreme care in making transcultural comparisons and also in introducing the idea of the historical development of each society into his account.
[9] DKV 4: 19.

Two lines of response to these charges of Enlightenment critics can be discerned in Herder's text. On the one hand, Herder suggests that the abuses of ancient priests and patriarchs have been exaggerated and, even when veridical, depict events which took place only in the later stages of the civilization of the *Morgenland*.[10] At that later stage, as authority eroded, rulers were wont to lash out abusively in order to preserve the last vestiges of their power. Hence, the stories of abusive power relished by Boulanger, Voltaire, and their epigones are not to be taken at face value for they tend not to be supported by the available evidence. Even when roughly accurate, though, Herder counters that the violent abuses of power are not characteristic of this age in its flourishing period, but are rather the death throes of its last moments.[11] It would be mistaken to assess the entire age on the basis of these uncharacteristic final days, as such a period marks a deviation from the norm rather than an instance of it. This line of response, insofar as it is based on a more accurate account of the whole of the age in question, would be adequate as a riposte to the emphasis on the violence and cruelty of ancient patriarchs that were frequently trotted out to denigrate this period of history, but it still does not answer the charge that the authority of the patriarchs was arbitrary and illegitimate.

Herder's second response to such critics goes further and addresses this latter issue. He claims that the kind of character which made possible the virtues of piety, love of family, and obedience could not be instilled through mere discourse or reasoning because the emotional and habitual dispositions necessary for such reasoning to be

[10] DKV 4: 12 and 14.
[11] DKV 4: 12.

effective were not present. [12] The long education through submission to authority thus formed the character of the people of the ancient Middle East, endowing them with their own particular virtues and form of happiness, while also preparing the character of mankind for its next stage of development. According to Herder, different kinds of authority, less arbitrary and total, and different systems of values, ones which tend to elevate the importance of freedom and reason, are apropos for later stages of development.[13] Yet, these later forms of life could not emerge if not for the existence of the earlier stages out of which they developed.[14] This line of argument is more powerful than the former one in that it suggests that the arbitrariness of a power is not relevant to the goods which result from an age spent in obedience to a figure of authority. The positive consequences of such a kind of life are, he suggests, to be found in having a character which is capable of reverence and which is disciplined enough to yield to something other than its own desires.[15] These habits, virtues, and values are instilled through obedience to any power, arbitrary or not. Hence, according to this argument, the form of life of the ancient Middle East could have been good for those living in that age and also for its cultural inheritors even if the power exercised in that age was

---

[12] DKV 4: 15-6.

A similar argument is also made by Hegel in his discussion of lordship and bondage in both the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* and the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, §433 and §435. G.W.F. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel, 20 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1971), Band X. Hegel contends that a relationship of this kind is necessary for the development of more egalitarian and free forms of society, as well as of the psychological character that will flourish in such conditions Herder's influence on Hegel is widely acknowledged, and this may be one more area to which that influence reaches. For a discussion of these issues in Hegel, see Michael N. Forster, *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 247-55..

There is also an echo of this idea in some passages in Nietzsche. See, e.g., *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, §188.

[13] DKV 4: 97ff.

[14] DKV 4: 21 and 84-8.

[15] DKV 4: 18.

arbitrary. Herder's account of the ancient Middle East thus speaks to both of the kinds of criticisms prevalent in Enlightenment histories of that age.

III

In his discussions of succeeding ages, Herder offers a similar account of the way in which the characteristic virtues and values of each age are an outgrowth of the needs of their form of life, appropriate to their stage of development. The diligence and discipline of the Egyptians, the adventurous and commercial spirit of the Phoenicians, the beauty and refinement of the Greeks, and the vigor and martial virtues of the Romans, are all treated as developing out of each peoples' natural and historical conditions.

Both the order in which Herder discusses these societies and his selection of societies is significant. On the one hand, Herder attempts to show how each later society took up and developed the perfections of the societies that preceded it, altering and giving such perfections their own character in the process.[16] On the other hand, Herder also aims to show that the specific societies he treats in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* formed and prepared the conditions out of which the European society of the eighteenth-century had developed. The work as a whole is meant to serve as a genealogy of Herder's own society.

Herder argues that those who live in each historical age have different values and virtues, and that they correspondingly feel differently about the customs and practices of their societies than those whose sensibilities were formed differently. The patriarchal

[16] See especially Herder's characterization of ancient Greece at DKV 4: 29-30.

manner of life, and the values which supported such a lifestyle, were not experienced as oppressive or miserable by those who lived in that age.[17] This is because the values, social forms, and practices, contributed to the good and pleasant aspects of those societies. While these forms of life struck many of Herder's contemporaries as contemptible, Herder avers that this is only because they did not abstract away from their own peculiar historically determined dispositions and preferences.[18] Consequently, they only thought of such a life as one of soul-crushing servitude, not as one of pious devotion and attachment to one's family and tribe. But just as the form of life characteristic of the people of the ancient Middle East is not suited for eighteenth-century Europeans, the form of life of eighteenth-century Europeans is not suited for all human beings at all times in history. Each of these ages has a distinct set of values which determine what is experienced as a good and happy life for those who live in that age. These standards are not trans-historical or timeless, but are individual and particular. Thus, according to Herder, each place and time has its own standard of happiness.[19]

The second idea that Herder advances is that each civilization needed the ages which preceded it, and out of which it developed, in order for it to have the social life,

---

[17] I here differ from Michael Forster's interpretation of Herder's genealogy in that Forster claims that Herder regards the patriarchal society of the ancient Middle East as marked by social oppression. See Michael N. Forster, "Genealogy," *American Dialectic* 1, no. 2 (2011): 246.. Herder's intent is, in fact, to undermine accounts of that age which treat is as oppressive by arguing that such a form of life would not have been experienced as oppressive by those who lived at that time, not to add his voice to the chorus of disapproval.

[18] This is a problem that Herder draws attention to repeatedly in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* and in other texts. See, for example, "Von der Veränderung des Geschmacks", DKV 1: 159, and Herder's critical review of John Millar's *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks,* SWS 4: 455.

[19] DKV 4: 38-9. For further discussion of Herder's notion that the good or happy life varies historically, see Sonia Sikka, "On the Value of Happiness: Herder contra Kant," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (2007); *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 44-84..

virtues, and values that it has.[20] Hence, no person or society is entirely self-made or independent. This is just as true of modern European society as it is of any other. Eighteenth-century European society became what it was only because it was the inheritor of a long series of historical development that began in the ancient Middle East. Thus the patriarchal and theocratic societies so despised by *philosophes* were historically necessary for the development of the values and ideals which the *philosophes* used as ammunition in their salvos. Failure to be aware of this dependence produces a tendency to unfairness and hypocrisy in historical judgments, according to Herder. [21]

Taken together, the claims that the standard of happiness of each society is historically determined, and that each society depends on the inheritance it receives from preceding societies, leads to one of the central conclusions of Herder's argument: one should seek to understand the conditions which made possible the development of particular mores and values before attempting to criticize them in the light of the dominant values of one's own age. [22] Exercising this form of caution is likely to lead one to see that what at first appears reprehensible and arbitrary, such as particular forms of authority and obedience, may in fact be necessary or salutary. As noted above, Herder employs the metaphor of the development and education of a child in order to support this principle. At different periods of life different kinds of motivation and concern are

---

[20] In *Über den Fleiss in Meherern Gelehrten Sprachen*, Herder claims that languages are also subject to the same form of development, and even describes the order of influence in a way that mirrors the historical narrative of *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*. See DKV 1: 25. A helpful discussion of this passage can be found in Michael Morton, *Herder and the Poetics of Thought* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990), 58-64.

[21] See, for example, 4:57-9.

[22] DKV 4: 39. This idea was developed prior to *Auch eine Philosophie der Geshichte* in some of Herder's early works on aesthetics, such as *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur, Erste Sammlung* and "Von der Ode." For discussion of this principle, dubbed by Meinecke the principle of individuality, see Friedrich Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1965), 155, 369, 402-3, and 545.; and Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4, 106-9.

characteristic and appropriate. In order be a fair judge, one must take account of a person's developmental stage. An infant who takes toys from another infant is not necessarily a moral reprobate, but an adult who steals toys from a child would evince a deeply vicious moral character. Or, bouncing a ball against a wall may be entertaining and exciting for a 3-year-old, though the very same activity is more likely to serve as an expression of boredom in a 30-year-old. In making judgments about both the virtues and the happiness of an entire age or people, Herder insists that one should remain cognizant of the context in which each people lives, and the developmental stage that they have reached.[23]

IV

A great part of Herder's argument is premised on the assumption that mankind as a whole develops in the same manner as an individual organism does.[24] The metaphor of organic development does serious work for Herder, and he himself insists that though it is an analogy, it is not merely "play". [25] In the narrative Herder constructs, he states that the people of the ancient Middle East are representative of the infancy of modern European culture, the Egyptians its childhood, and the Greeks its adolescence, and Rome

---

[23] For a helpful discussion of these issues, see Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference*, 32-4.
[24] See Frederick M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought: From Enlightenment to Natonalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), 72-87.
[25] DKV 4: 20. I think that this undermines Tino Markworth's claim that Herder's metaphor of life stages has no argumentative significance for Herder. See Tino Markworth, "Das "Ich"' und die Geschichte. Zum Zusammenhang von Selbstthematisierung und Geschichtsphilosophie bei J.G. Herder," in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Academic Disciplines and the Pursuit of Knowledge*, ed. Wulf Köpke (Columbia: Camden House, 1996), 159. The role that this metaphor plays in Herder's attempt to avoid relativism is discussed in Frederick C. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 208-9.

its manhood.[26] By characterizing the development of modern European culture in this way, Herder is able to argue that each preceding stage of development was both necessary and important, thus undercutting the efforts of those who sought to depict these ages as irredeemably flawed because they lacked a number of the virtues characteristic of the age of the European enlightenment. Seen in another light, though, Herder's metaphor can appear patronizing, condescending, and even guilty of making the kinds of value judgments that he criticizes in the works of others.

Herder criticizes both the historical chauvinism of Enlightenment philosophies of history, as well as imperial and colonial domination of non-Europeans by Europeans, in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* as well as in later texts.[27] However, the idea that human cultures can be in different stages of maturity is problematic because it implies that there is a uniform course of development for all of humanity, and that one culture can be more advanced along that course of development than another.

There are two distinct problems with Herder's metaphor. First, it seems to violate his principle of evaluating each culture only by its own standards and eschewing the imposition of a schema of evaluation expressive of the standards and ideals of another culture.[28] Herder claims not only that the people of the ancient Middle East stand in a relationship to eighteenth-century European civilization analogous to that which childhood stands to being elderly, but also that the majority of non-European cultures are

[26] DKV 4: 15-6, 21, 26, and 29.
[27] DKV 4: 100-1. See also Book 15 of *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte*, and Herder's discussion in *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, tenth collection, letter 114, of the Native American who stated that he did not want to go to a heaven where there are white people. The latter passage is discussed in detail in Robert Bernasconi, ""Ich mag in keinen Himmel, wo Weisse sind": Herder's critique of Eurocentrism," *Acta Institutionis Philosophiae et Aestheticae* 13 (1995). For a thorough discussion of Herder's attitude towards imperialism, see Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), chapter 6.
[28] For more on this point, see also Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 136-7.

in a state of childhood.[29] This implies that there is one form of development that is natural or good for all human civilizations and ignores the possibility of not only divergent, but deeply incommensurable, courses of development for different peoples. Herder encourages charity in the judgment and evaluation of forms of life different from one's own, but the developmental metaphor implies that the differences between the cultures evaluated is akin to evaluating different stages of a linear development.

A second problem is that Herder's account seems to potentially provide a kind of justification of imperialism, despite his intention to condemn it. Sonia Sikka argues persuasively that the developmental metaphor itself is ethnocentric through its depiction of modern European society as an adult in contrast with other purportedly less developed societies. Such a conception can serve to justify of the domination of one society by another.[30] There is nothing objectionable about an adult acting as an authority over a child in her care. If cultures are capable of standing in an analogous relationship to one another, then the control of one by another would appear *prima facie* to be justifiable.[31] Hence, there is both the danger of imposing an inapt schema onto material for which it is not suited, and also the danger of reviving the ethnocentrism that Herder aims to critique by characterizing those unlike modern Europeans as immature creatures in need of guidance.

Though the leading metaphor employed by Herder is problematic in these ways, there is nevertheless an insight contained in Herder's argument that does not depend on

---

[29] DKV 4: 89.

[30] Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference*, pp. 106-16.

[31] A strategy of justification similar to this was, in fact, employed by ideologists of the British Empire, such as Henry Maine. See Mahmood Mamdani, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012). and Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010)..

the problematic features of Herder's metaphor of linear organic development. This is that every culture and age has its own needs and goals, and moreover that the moral values and practices found in these ages tend to be ones that serve these. For example, Herder argues that the Egyptians needed to develop formal systems of law and the virtues of diligence and civic loyalty in order to build an agricultural as opposed to a nomadic civilization.[32] The need for these particular virtues and values arose from living in conditions which required steady labor in the same location over an extended period of time. Herder argues that this explains the differences between the values of the Egyptians and those of the nomadic and shepherding societies of the ancient Middle East who did not have the same challenges to meet. The latter did not need the kinds of diligence and loyalty to a city because their form of life did not require it. For those societies, familial loyalty took precedence over loyalty to any other form of community because the family was the social center of gravity. Herder tells the same kind of story about the values and virtues of the Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and the other societies who contributed to the development of modern European culture. Herder's account of each of the peoples he examines is meant to provide evidence for the general thesis that "all formation [*Bildung*] arose out of the most particular individual needs and returned back to it – genuine experience, action, application of life, in the most determinate circle."[33]

Herder's view, thus, is that it is crucial to see that each civilization has a set of aims and needs which it seeks to realize or satisfy. Any adequate interpretation of the virtues and values of a culture must explain how they developed in response to those aims

[32] DKV 4: 19-24.
[33] DKV 4: 68.

and needs.[34] This is a dynamic and ongoing process of development, as the capacities developed by a civilization also contribute to the development of new needs and purposes, which then bring about important new changes within a culture. Often these developments have an impact on other cultures, which make them their own as they attempt to satisfy new goals and to realize new purposes.

The appropriation of elements of one society or age by another is a creative process, not merely a mimetic one. Herder notes, for example, that Phoenicians developed advanced nautical skills in order to satisfy their desire for wealth. The practice of trading brought them into contact with many other civilizations. This led to a desire for a broader understanding of the world, which in turn laid the groundwork for the development of Greek civilization, which itself valued intellectual understanding and the fine arts.[35] As the Greeks developed these talents, they came to value very different things than the Phoenicians did. As a result of these different needs and interests, the Phoenician virtues and skills appropriated by the Greeks were stamped with a Greek character and transformed into distinctly Greek virtues.

Herder identifies similar transformations and chains of influence throughout his text, all with the purpose of establishing the general point that the needs, capacities and abilities found in any culture are the result of a process of historical development and formation of persons in response to their needs and desires. Each people develops the material prepared for it by prior generations, and this is done in response to the needs

[34] DKV 4: 19-24.
[35] DKV 4: 24-6 and 29-30.

and desires that arise from their own particular circumstances. This means that each culture is both connected to others and is also inimitable, individual, and unique.[36]

V

The interpretation of Herder developed here brings to light several important features of Herder's genealogical method. First, Herder does not deal only with the surface characteristics of the moral values of the groups he studies. He asks about the role that the ways of living and valuing play with regard to supporting the survival and development of each society. The goodness of a particular form of life and the values embedded in it are appraised according to the contribution that those values make to the development of the capacities that each people needed to develop in order to live well. That is, values are not assessed as true or false, but as favorable or unfavorable to a people's attempts to perfect and improve themselves in their historical context. It is also important, within Herder's approach to the historical development of the values of various cultures, to understand why particular values took root in some times and places, and why these same values ceased to be dominant in other times and places. This means that in order to understand the values and virtues of a society, as well as the institutions which support them, one must look at the conditions which led each society to develop in just the way that it did. It would be both unhelpful and uninformative to assess these societies according the values of other, later ages. Practicing the correct form of moral inquiry thus requires paying attention not only to what individuals do and say, but also to

[36] DKV 4: 35. Beiser discusses how this idea has its origin in Herder's early aesthetic works. See Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, pp. 106-9.

the historical background conditions which shapes the characters of individuals, and the role that values play in the development of cultures and societies.

Second, one of the central purposes of Herder's genealogy is to show that the particular values dominant in eighteenth-century Europe are themselves the product of historical development. One of the differences between *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* and the later *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* is that the history narrated in the former text deals exclusively with the civilizations that contributed to the development of modern European culture, whereas in the latter Herder broadens his scope in an attempt to understand the historical development of humanity as a whole.[37] This can be seen by the material that Herder includes in his historical sketch, as well as through what he excludes. This is why there is a discussion of Greece and Rome, but not of China. Herder's aim is to provide an account of the origins of Enlightenment Europe. It is a narrative which is supposed to reveal the dependence of that society on prior cultural forms. This leads to the third purpose of this genealogy.

It is clear throughout *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* that Herder is critiquing a particular strand of Enlightenment thought. His specific target is the kind of Enlightenment history which presents all or most past societies as contemptible for failing to have the values of modern European. Herder's genealogy offers two challenges to such positions. First, he attempts to show that the societies despised by his

[37] That Herder's focus in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* is the Europe of the era of enlightenment is noted, but its significance is not explained, in Benno von Wiese, *Herder: Grundzüge seines Weltbildes* (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1939), 81.

This is also noted in Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, 394. Meinecke claims that this reveals Herder to be the forerunner of the kind of world history practiced by Leopold von Ranke. However, Meinecke seems unaware that there is a tension between claiming that the history one is writing is a world history and the history of one's own culture.

Beiser is thus mistaken in claiming that in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, "all epochs and cultures are linked together in a continuum where earlier stages are the basis for the growth of the later ones" Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 136.

contemporaries possessed many praiseworthy features that eighteenth-century Europe lacks. The Romans possessed the courage and vigor that was necessary for and nurtured by their military pursuits, but the age of the Enlightenment is by comparison enervated through the excessive development of its intellectual capacities.[38] The admirable qualities of many past ages are ignored by the typical *philosophe* to the detriment of his grasp of the true character of those historical ages and, consequently, what is most distinctive of his own age. The second critical aspect of Herder's genealogy is even more important. It involves showing that the forms of life of the past historical periods he examines were necessary for the development of modern European morality. That is, the very same cultures treated with vehement derision in standard Enlightenment histories were necessary for the development of the ages which are admired by the typical *Aufklärer*, including the age of Enlightenment itself. The Greeks, praised as the model of excellence by thinkers such as Shaftesbury and Winckelmann, could not have become what they were if they had not been able to develop upon the accomplishments of their predecessors such as the Egyptians.[39] And closer to home, the very values which a Voltaire or Boulanger thought were evidence of their utter superiority to past ages are actually revealed, when one takes up a proper historical outlook, to be a sign of their dependence on those past ages.

VI

[38] DKV 4: 30-2 and 64.
[39] DKV 4: 22-4.

Herder's genealogy is a precedent of the kind practiced by Nietzsche insofar as it aims to reveal the conditions required for the development of different forms of morality. Some of the distinctive features of Herder's genealogy will be made more apparent, however, by noting explicitly some of the similarities and differences between their respective methods and aims.[40]

A first similarity between Herder and Nietzsche is that they both seek to alter the self-image of their own society by calling into question a dominant narrative about their own age's greatness. Herder challenges the idea that European civilization is a pure and unmitigated improvement upon all societies which preceded it by showing both how those societies were necessary for the development of modern European society and also possessed virtues which modern European society lacks. Nietzsche challenges the idea that the morality of modern European society, especially Christian morality, consists of a pure form of lovingness by tracing its origin to forms of hatred and *ressentiment* that are still embodied, in a sublimated form, in its doctrines and precepts.[41] The history presented in each of these genealogies thus has the intent of changing the self-understanding of the present.

Another point of commonality is that both attempt to show that their contemporaries' objects of condemnation were actually essential to the development of the values appealed to in condemning the practices or actions in question. On Herder's account, a hierarchical society of obedience and authority in the ancient Middle East was needed for the emergence of the beautiful art of Ancient Greece, as well as for the

[40] I am here attempting only to make a few general observations about Nietzsche's methods in *Zur Genealogie der Moral* in particular, not the entirety of his oeuvre.

For another discussion that makes the case for Herder's priority to Nietzsche in this sphere, see Forster, "Genealogy.".

[41] *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Erste Abhandlung, §8.

development of the intellectual sophistication, the increase in individual freedom, and the advancement of the sciences in modern European society. To admire the latter and despise the former without qualification is to be ignorant about the importance of the former for the origin of the latter. Nietzsche's account of the origin of the Christian ideal of the love of one's enemy as a product of the hatred of enemies that could not be realized through action is supposed to reveal a similar ignorance underlying the self-understanding of modern Christians.[42] Both of these accounts are developed in order to give reasons for thinking that a particular moral outlook has its origins in the very things condemned by that outlook. These histories are part of a project of reevaluation of both the present moral outlook and the historical form of morality commonly condemned.

A third common feature of these genealogies is that they both rest on the notion that moral systems are the products of the needs and histories of the societies in which they are found. Understanding morality hence requires both an awareness of this history, as well as of the aspects of human nature that make human beings capable of having a history. The discussion above has shown that this idea is of crucial importance for Herder. Nietzsche is more explicit in claiming that the aim of his genealogy is to discover the conditions of the origin of various forms of moral thinking, this being the preparatory task for a critique and evaluation of the values inherent in them.[43]

The similarities enumerated above show that both Herder and Nietzsche are interested in understanding and explaining what Nietzsche described as the "conditions

---

[42] Though a common theme throughout the *Genealogie*, the most forceful case is made by Nietzsche's quotation of Tertullian in §15 of the first essay. See also *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, §2. This idea is helpfully discussed by Christopher Janaway in his interpretation of the second essay of *Zur Genealogie der Moral* in Christopher Janaway, *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 124-42.

[43] *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Vorrede, §6.

and circumstances out of which [moral values] have grown."[44] Yet, that Herder preceded Nietzsche in doing so, belies Nietzsche's claim to be without precedent on this score and that this was "knowledge of a kind that has until now neither existed nor even been desired." Nietzsche stands as the beneficiary of a tradition of historically-inflected German philosophical thought inaugurated by Herder. This is not to say that Nietzsche's genealogy was simply appropriated from Herder. Nietzsche's adaptation of genealogy was a creative one, even if his claims to originality are overstated. The differences between the genealogies conducted by each of these thinkers are thus instructive for understanding the range of possible manifestations that a form of inquiry such as this can take.

To begin with, Herder makes a greater effort to ground his genealogy in historical facts. While the history narrated in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* is admittedly sketchy, Herder fills out his account in much more detail in his later work, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. And though there are important differences between the *Ideen* and *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, in both texts Herder is committed to explaining the variations between the moral practices and beliefs of various cultures on the basis of their historical context.

Herder makes it clear which ages and cultures he is referring to, whereas some of Nietzsche's historical allusions are far from clear, if they intended to refer to a specific historical age at all. For example, the account of the origin of the concept of guilt out of a combination of the concept of debt and of practices of punishment in the second essay of the *Zur Genealogie der Moral* does not seem to be intended to offer a history of

[44] *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Vorrede, §6.

specific, documentable events.[45] That discussion is especially opaque in that it concerns events alleged to take place at an unspecified period of time in an unspecified place. It seems that in such cases Nietzsche is relying solely on the psychological plausibility of his account, in a manner similar to the pseudo-history Rousseau offers in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*. Being attentive to historical detail is thus integral to Herder's project in a way that it is not for Nietzsche. Herder's form of genealogy thus has a much stronger claim to the attention of those who are genuinely convinced that understanding the moral values of an age requires an understanding of its history. Nietzsche's claim to offer an account of the conditions out of which modern European morality developed rings hollow, if this account is supposed to be grounded in an account of the actual history of those values.

A second difference concerns the kind of lesson that each philosopher believes is to be drawn from the historical and mutable nature of human values. For Herder, history shows that there is progress of a kind, guided by divine foresight. While there is much that he laments about his own age, Herder takes heart from his examination of history, concluding his text with an exhortation to take hope that what comes next will be good in its own way, and also that each age has its place and purpose.[46] In the scholarship, much attention is given to Herder's critical attitude towards the Whig histories of the Enlightenment, but there is also a form of self-criticism and a lesson being

[45] One additional piece of evidence for this is that the majority of Nietzsche scholars do not even bother to consider the actual historicity of Nietzsche's account. For example, in the following recent collections, there is not a single discussion in any of the essays concerning the historical veracity or plausibility of Nietzsche's second essay of *Zur Genealogie der Moral*: Simon May, ed. *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Richard Schacht, ed. *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[46] DKV 4: 107.

taught to critics of the age of enlightenment, such as himself. About his own age, Herder says, "This too is fate."[47] History, according to Herder, shows that values move and change, but not that the changes that take place serve no purpose. The purpose of history is not a human, but a divine one, and all events are meaningful when considered from the proper vantage point. Nietzsche, by contrast, sees history as offering a warning and a danger, but not a providential promise that all will be well in the end. Nietzsche fears that the age he lives in is threatened by nihilism, a sense that all is meaningless, that there is nothing worth affirming, and his own philosophical project is to develop an alternative to nihilism that does not require religious faith.[48] Herder's optimism is plausible only because of his theology, his reliance on a belief that the world is the creation of a God which guarantees that the world is fundamentally good.[49] Hence, to those who are not persuaded by a Christian account of history as governed by a benevolent providence, but are instead inclined to believe that history is a series of naturally determined events without a transcendental purpose, Herder's optimism will

[47] DKV 4: 90. Tino Markworth discusses how Herder's writing of the essay was, in part, a response to a personal existential crisis undergone in the early 1770s. See "Das "Ich"' und die Geschichte. Zum Zusammenhang von Selbstthematisierung und Geschichtsphilosophie bei J.G. Herder.". The discovery of meaning in history was meant to offer a way for a critic of his age, such as himself, to accept and make peace with his own fate. There is a trace of stoicism in this idea, and Herder's selection of a quotation from Epictetus to serve as the epigraph to *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* is significant.

[48] This issue is central to understanding Nietzsche. A valuable recent discussion of this issue can be found in Bernard Reginster, *The Affirmation of Life* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[49] Ernst Cassirer calls *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* "die tiefste Fassung der Theodizeegedankens." Ernst Cassirer, *Freiheit und Form* (Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1922), 185.. For a similar view, see Rudolf Haym, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Rudolf Gaertner, 1877-85), 1: 540.. Rudolf Stadelmann, *Der historische Sinn bei Herder* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1928), 21-2. denies that Herder intends to offer a theodicy, but only by claiming that Herder aims to show how history could be a *Wissenschaft*. Stadelmann does not consider the possibility, however, that these may not have been regarded as mutually exclusive by Herder.

seem nothing more than wishful thinking, as it is only sustainable by his falling back on appeals to a belief that God is at work in the course of nature and history.[50]

A final difference between the genealogies offered by Herder and Nietzsche is that Nietzsche attends more to the different kinds of values in competition with one another within any particular society, and considers these conflicts to be crucial for understanding historical change. This is evident in Nietzsche's account of the inversion of the values of the noble and powerful through the "slave revolt in morality."[51] Such a revolt was the product of social division and conflict between different groups within the same society. Nietzsche's genealogy makes the conflict within a particular society central to his explanation of the conditions out of which moral values grow.

Herder, on the other hand, tends to write as if the societies he discusses are internally more uniform and possess only common, and not conflicting, interests and ways of thinking.[52] This is a weakness affecting Herder's account, for it fails to note the way that internal conflicts operate within societies, often being the engines of historical change, and also how different classes or groups within a society may themselves have very different values and manners of thinking. Nietzsche thus has a richer account of

---

[50] The importance of providence in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geshichte* is also noted by Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition*, 137-40. A helpful general account of the importance of religion for Herder can be found in Benjamin D. Crowe, "Herder's Moral Philosophy: Perfectionism, Sentimentalism, and Theism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 6 (2012): 1155-9. For a thorough discussion of Herder's changing religious and theological attitudes in the time during which he authored *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*, see Haym, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*, 1: 453ff.

[51] *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Erste Abhandlung, §10.

[52] Meinecke and Adler both claim that Herder's history is moved by contradictions in a dialectical manner anticipatory of Hegel (and, for Adler, Marx). See Meinecke, *Die Entstehung des Historismus*, 393; Emil Adler, *Herder und die deutsche Aufklärung* (Vienna: Europa, 1968), 140-3. However, both ignore that the only tensions and contradictions discussed by Herder in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* are *between* different ages and societies, not *within* them.

how these dynamics can operate within a society, being as attentive as he is to the importance of power differences.[53]

VII

In fact, this is one of the weakest aspects of *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*. To see this more clearly, it is worth returning to Herder's account of the role played by the society of the ancient Middle East in his historical narrative. Herder avers that the disciplinary and autocratic character of that period of time was necessary for bringing about the discipline, and ingraining the habits, required for later forms of civilization to emerge. These later stages were not as authoritarian and were able to develop virtues other than obedience, loyalty, and piety, but only because the human character had been shaped as it had by the early forms of discipline. The capacity for freedom, which is one of the admirable elements of later ages, especially the Enlightenment, could thus only emerge because of this earlier disciplinary form of life.

There are several problems that affect the plausibility of this account. In a society such as Herder describes, it is reasonable to think that there will be stark differences between those who command and those who obey. Supposing that the moral education necessary to produce later civilizations occurs in such a society, which class of this society is supposed to have the necessary form of character? Is it those in authority or those

[53] This is why Herder could not have even possibly been as great of an influence on the kind of genealogy practiced by Michel Foucault as Nietzsche was. Foucault attempted to trace historical shifts by examining the nature and effects of power within particular historical epochs, and this required looking at the divisions, differences, and inequalities within the epochs being studied. On Foucault's debt to Nietzsche, see Michel Foucault, "Nietsche, Genealogy, History," in *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice: Selected Interviews and Essays* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

subject to it? Likewise, one could ask which aspect of social life is most significant and influential: the tendency to obey or the tendency to rule? If there is a third option, that these come to be synthesized in some way, how is this done and how can it be recognized? Herder's discussion seems to assume that it is the aspects of human character that are cultivated by obedience that are inherited by later ages, but why these specific traits and capacities are passed on is not explained. Such important questions are left unanswered, as Herder seems to assume that there is a single set of traits that holds for both the patriarchs and their subjects.

The weakness in Herder's account of the patriarchal societies he discusses also affects, I believe, his account of later ages. His account of the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans omit any but the most cursory mentions of slavery or other forms of class differences in those societies. The problems arising from this are twofold. Herder is unable to account for the internal differences within these societies, and it is not unlikely that the intellectual and practical horizon of the members of the slave class will be different from that of the masters. Also, Herder's history in this early phase lacks any clear sense of the way in which such internal tensions can serve as dynamics of historical change.

While Herder's *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* is significant for the birth of the kind of historically-inflected philosophy characteristic of much of the German tradition of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its overlooking of the significance of conflict and differences within each society is salient. Herder's later *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* pays more attention to the oppressive character of many of the societies examined. Yet even there, the internal differences and

conflicts are not treated as of central importance to historical change. In this respect, Herder is surpassed by the work of thinkers who grappled with the role that intra-societal conflict plays in shaping each society and in driving history, such as Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche. Herder's influence, both direct and indirect, on those thinkers, was substantial. But the new historical approach pioneered by Herder had to be refined and developed by later generations.

Chapter 4: *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele*

Sokrates rief die Weltweisen vom Himmel herunter: ein zweiter Sokrates hob das Erdenkind zur Bürgerin des Himmels empor. Die wahre Wißenschaft wird That wie es die höchste Politik wird und nur das ist gesunde Menschheit, glückseliges Erdgeschlecht wo Erkenntnis und Empfindung als Seel‘ und Körper, als Himmel und Erde, als Mann und Weib sich küßen und bringen Frucht.

Herder, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele,* SWS 8: 333

I

Herder's *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele* is of paramount importance for the study of Herder's ethical thought.[1] It contains a synthesis of his moral psychology, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, and philosophy of language. The essay challenges moral psychological views that pose a sharp distinction between thought and emotion, or intellect and feeling, making it an important precursor of recent work that has sought to undermine such a dualism.[2] To privilege either feeling or

[1] In this chapter, I cite the versions of the text that appear in volume 8 of Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sämtliche Werke,* ed. Bernhard Suphan, 33 vols. (Berlin: Weidmann, 1877-1913). There are three significant drafts of the text, and Herder altered the title with each draft. The first was written in 1774 with the title *Uebers Erkennen und Empfinden in der Menschlichen Seele*. The second, heavily revised and extended, was completed in 1775 with the title *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden, den zwo Hauptkräften der Menschlichen Seele*. The final draft, which was submitted to the Berlin Academy in 1778 for a competition on the topic of the relationship between *Erkennen* and *Empfinden*. Herder's text was not awarded the prize. The final version was given the title *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele. Bemerkungen und Träume.*

In this chapter, I refer to the text simply as *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*. My interpretation is based primarily on the 1775 and 1778 versions. I do not believe that there is any conflict between the two texts, though I will note where there are differences in presentation.

[2] While contemporary readers are likely to think of the views of Hume and Kant as representative of dualistic theories, it was Sulzer whose views were of primary importance for Herder.

For recent work challenging a rigid distinction between emotion and reason, see Ronald De Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); Jerome Neu, *A Tear is an Intellectual*

abstract thought, Herder argues, is gravely mistaken as it attempts to sunder what is in reality one. The text argues that each human being's individuality ought to be developed into a harmonious whole, making it a precursor of the ethic of individuality that was developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schiller, and the *Frühromantiker*. It connects this emphasis on individuality with an account of the historical and social character of the human being, the result being a perfectionist ethic of individuality that is not atomistic.

As with the rest of Herder's corpus, the existing literature that discusses *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*, tends to neglect the ethical dimension of the text.[3] In what follows, I will try to ameliorate this lack. I begin my interpretation by explicating the concept of individuality presented in the text. In doing so, I will discuss how Herder's metaphysics and philosophy of mind ground the view that he develops. I will then discuss the normative basis of this account of individuality, along with the ideal of harmonious development that Herder defends. After that, I explore Herder's account of human dependence, and his rejection of extreme forms of autonomy in light of his theory of individuality. Finally, I examine the place of the emotion of love in Herder's account. Herder makes love a central part of not only human relationships, but even of our cognition of objects.

Thing: The Meanings of Emotions (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Anthony Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam, 1994); Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Robert Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996); Michael Stocker and Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[3] The most thorough discussion of *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* is Marion Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1994), chapter 5. Other valuable discussions are Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 145-9; Rudolf Haym, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Rudolf Gaertner, 1877-85), pp. 699-708.

II

Herder's essay contains one of the fullest early expressions of what has been called the ethics of individuality.[4] While Herder's earlier works occasionally hint at this ideal, it is explicitly articulated and defended in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*. The ethic of individuality is the notion that the ethical task for each human being is to become a unique individual, in which one's various powers are developed and blended into a harmonious whole. The dangers to be avoided, according to this theory, are uneven or imbalanced development of oneself and conformity to a form of life that is not fitted to one's nature. With respect to the first danger, the recommendation is to make oneself like a work of art, where every individual part contributes to the beauty of the whole. With respect to the second, the Delphic advice to "know thyself" and live according to one's nature is marshalled against the demands of conformity and utility.[5]

Herder's conception of individuality is premised on a view of nature, which he believes offers a reason for believing that every human being is utterly unique:

> ...it is, I think, the flattest opinion that has ever entered into a paperhead [*Papierkopf*] that all human souls are alike, that they all come into the world as flat empty tablets. No two grains of sand are like one another, let alone such rich

---

[4] This position is most closely associated with the early German Romantics. See, e.g., Schleirmacher, *Monologen*, II, in Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Gunter Meckenstock and et. al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984-), I/3.; and Schlegel, *Ideen* and *Vorlesungen über die Transzendentalphilosophie*, included in Friedrich Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler, Jean Jacques Anstett, and Hans Eichner (München: Schöningh, 1958-), volumes II and XII.

The ideal is probably most clearly expressed by Wilhelm von Humboldt: "Der wahre Zweck des Menschen…ist die höchste und proportionierlichste Bildung seiner Kräfte zu einem Ganze." *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1967), p. 22.

The interpretation I develop here runs counter to the claim of Frank McEachran that Herder undervalued individuality. See Frank McEachran, *The Life and Philosophy of Johann Gottfried Herder* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939), p. 65.

[5] The early German Romantics, on these grounds, were thoroughly opposed to the ethics of duty advanced by Kant and Fichte because it was an ethics that demanded the same kinds of acts from all persons. On this, see Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003), pp. 25-30 and 92-3.

> germs and abysses of forces [*Kräfte*] as two human souls – or I have hardly any idea of the word 'human soul'.[6]

As even the seemingly simplest inorganic entities in nature are unique, we have reason for believing that this is even more likely in the case of a human soul. This entails a rejection of the Lockean conception of the mind, according to which all minds are alike at birth and only differ with respect to the experiences that are imprinted on them.[7] This initial claim about the unique character of each individual is further supported by other aspects of Herder's account of the human soul and human physiology.

The soul, according to Herder, is not an inert receptacle or passive medium. Rather, each human soul is composed of a variety of dynamic forces and no two such souls have precisely the same forces.[8] These forces are the basis of a person's character, as well as of the various human capacities that are expressed in action. While these forces require the right kind of environment and external opportunities to be developed, a person's character is the product of the interplay between their innate powers, their environment, and their personal history. Neither innate powers nor environmental stimuli alone are sufficient for the development of a person's character and talents. This means that the genesis of human character required both the dispositions produced by the innate forces in an agent's soul, and the experiences that one has over the course of one's life. Hence, one-sided theories which exclude the contributions of either innate

[6] SWS 8: 226.
[7] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 104. Even if one were to consider the metaphor of the blank slate employed by Locke, Herder would also contend that no two slates are identical for one who attends closely.
[8] SWS 8: 192. The same claims are made in the 1775 edition as well, see SWS 8: 317. Some of these ideas are also discusses in Herder's earlier works, as I argue in chapter 2.

capacities or environmental influence are rejected by Herder as inadequate accounts of human nature and individual character.[9]

In addition to this metaphysical conception of the soul, Herder offers an argument for uniqueness on the basis of human physiology.[10] Herder discusses the physiological basis of individuality in the first division of *Vom Erkennen and Empfinden*. He argues there that each human being has a distinct physiological structure and is placed into a unique position in the world.[11] The physiological structure, grounded in the soul's forces [*Kräfte*], enables persons to engage with objects in the world, and is the basis of each individual's character.[12] The basis of all sensation is a capacity for irritation or *Reiz*, a tendency to respond to objects by which one is affected. This capacity for irritation grounds the more articulate and conceptually laden capacity for sensation. The sensations are also themselves, when refined by apperceptive reflection, the source of all human cognition and reason. Hence, each individual's physiology structures how she or he experiences and understands the world.

However, the way in which one's experiences are understood by each person are shaped not only by their physiological constitution, but also by the understanding of the world that each person has internalized through their individual history, social position, and language (these latter two are shaped by the broader history of society, according to Herder).[13] Due to the complex interaction between each person's intricate physiology and the environment into which she or he is placed, no two human beings will have the

[9] As is discussed below, this means that Leibniz's conception of windowless monads is subject to criticism along with Locke's blank slate theory of the mind.
[10] The account of the soul and the account of physiology are complementary, according to Herder.
[11] SWS 8: 316.
[12] SWS 8: 317.
[13] SWS 8: 316.

same character. There will be greater similarities between those whose bodies are similar, as well as those who share a culture and environment. Nonetheless, differences in body and individual experience still set each individual apart from all others.[14]

Also underlying Herder's conception of the uniqueness of each person is his adaptation of Leibniz's conception of individual substances.[15] Though Herder vehemently rejects the theory of pre-established harmony, he endorses Leibniz's view that each individual mind is unlike any other and was placed into a unique position in the world by divine providence.[16] According to Leibniz, each individual is distinct from every other, and no two are exactly alike with respect to all of their properties. If any two persons were to have every property in common, then they would not be distinguishable and would, in fact, not be distinct.[17] Each person thus has a 'notion', such that if one were to grasp the notion fully, one would know everything about that person, including all of the actions that the person will perform, the experiences they will undergo, as well as their relationship to all other existing things. Leibniz uses the example of Alexander the Great, and holds that one who had a complete grasp of Alexander's notion would have knowledge of every detail of Alexander's life. According to Leibniz, such a perfect grasp is not possible for finite, human intellects, but it is possible for God. Each being is

[14] In Herder's later works, such as his *Gott einige Gespräche* of 1787, Herder continues to hold this view of individuality, as he says "Every created thing is defined with a most perfect individuality, and circumscribed by it." SWS 16: 488. See, also, Herder's essay of 1795, "Das eigene Schicksal", DKV 8: 214ff.

[15] For more extensive discussions of Leibniz's influence on Herder, see Nigel DeSouza, "Leibniz in the Eighteenth Century: Herder's Critical Reflections on the Principles of Nature and Grace," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2012); Catherine Wilson, "Leibniz's Reputation in the Eighteenth Century: Kant and Herder," in *Insiders and Outsiders in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. G.A.J. Rogers, Tom Sorell, and Jill Kraye (London: Routledge, 2010).

[16] For Leibniz's account of the uniqueness of each substance, and each intellectual substance, see *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §9 and §13, included in G.W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, trans. Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989).

[17] See, e.g., *Discourse on Metaphysics* §9 and *Monadology* §9. This is, of course, Leibniz's principle of the identity of indiscernibles. I discuss the principle here only as it applies to persons, though for Leibniz its application is much broader and applies to all substances.

so unique that it "is like a complete world and like a mirror of God or the whole universe."[18]

Herder does not employ Leibniz's precise terms in his essay, but the connection to Leibniz's argument is palpable. In a passage infused with Leibnizian spirit, Herder declaims:

> All of God's works are infinite. Each is a sum of delectable [*köstlicher*] thoughts and forces [*Kräfte*], as sands of the sea: and if any would be developed, a universe. The human being, the first of his creatures here below, is in dispositions a small world…[19]

In this passage, Herder claims that each individual is an infinitely complex whole, composed of a variety of forces which makes each being a world of its own. This is a riff on Leibniz's account of the identity of substances, and it is apparent that Herder is drawing on this, as he also describes the individual as a "small world".[20]

Herder's account of individuality is thus the product of joining this Leibnizian view with his own account of the forces that are constitutive of each being. This is the basis of the physiological account of individuality that is also present in the text. Together these form the basis for his view that each human being is a unique individual unlike any other. However, these do not yet reveal the practical or ethical dimension of the account of individuality.

III

[18] *Discourse on Metaphysics* §9.
[19] SWS 8: 314.
[20] Haym contends that, in the first edition of the work: "The spirit of the Leibnizian philosophy pervades it from one end to the other. Yes, it is nothing other than a summation of this philosophy in the reflection of the Herderian spirit." Haym, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken,* vol. 1, p. 665. Though I think Haym exaggerates the case a bit in saying that the text is "nothing other" than a reflection of Leibniz's ideas, he is correct that the influence of Leibniz runs deep through in this work.

In Herder's text, the central part of his account of individuality appears in the midst of a discussion of the concept of genius. The normative dimension of his conception of individuality can be more fully illuminated if we approach it by attending to his explication of this idea. Herder rejects the concept of genius that he believed was common among his contemporaries. On this view, genius is a rare capacity possessed by only a small handful of individuals to excel in one talent. The talents regarded as significant, moreover, are those utilized by artists, scientists, and other intellectuals. Herder believes that there are two striking problems with this view.

First, it ignores the natural talents of human beings who are not scientists, artists, or poets. This is a fault because there are numerous talents at which persons can excel that are thus not recognized by such accounts. A farmer who plants and harvests exercises a variety of skills in plying his trade, yet the standard eighteenth-century account of genius treats such human activity as if it required no thought or sensitivity whatsoever.[21] This is false, however, as such talents also require the development of human powers and can be exercised with varying levels of expertise. A large range of valuable and admirable human activity is thus excluded from consideration by the kind of theory rejected by Herder.

[21] At SWS 8: 223, Herder specifically criticizes Thomas Gray for denigrating the life of a farmer compared to a poet in "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard." While Herder may be correct that there was a general tendency on the part of many intellectuals to despise persons who practice ordinary crafts, he seems to have misread Gray's poem. While Gray does contrast the accomplishments of artists and the powerful with those who lead simpler lives, Gray's tone is not supercilious. Gray, in fact, writes against those who look down on the lives of poor farmers: "Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,/ Their homely joys, and destiny obscure;/ Nor Grandeur hear with a disdainful smile,/ The short and simple annals of the poor." Gray and Herder may differ in some ways, but Gray's poem does not have the sense that Herder attributes to it. The "Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard" is included in Thomas Gray, *Poems* (London: J. Dodsley, 1768).

To speak as if only if intellectuals or statesmen are capable of having genius, Herder claims, involves taking for granted the social fragmentation of the modern age in which each person is assigned a narrow task.[22] The concept of genius has been assumed to involve nothing more than an exaggerated ability in only a narrow range of these tasks – specifically those practiced by intellectuals. Instead, one should have a broader conception of the range of human possibilities, according to Herder. Once one achieves the correct perspective, he contends that one will see that all persons have genius to some degree. The concept, if properly understood, is simply "the individual way of being human [*Menschenart*], which has been given by God."[23] This does not entail that there are no distinctions in excellence between persons. Human powers or *Kräfte* differ in their extensiveness or intensity. Each person may have capacities that are naturally more extensive or intensive. The criticism Herder is making is directed towards thinkers who privilege one very narrow set of human practices and make them the exclusive paradigm of excellence.[24]

A second problem Herder finds with the common conception of genius concerns its practical effects. He avers that the emphasis on excellence in one area of human activity encourages the development of misshapen and unbalanced persons. The paragon of genius on the standard account is a human being that has one of their capacities

[22] Here there is an early criticism of the fragmentation of modern societies of the kind that is also made in Schiller's *Über die aesthetische Erziehung des Menschen*, Friedrich Schiller, *Werke, Nationalausgabe*, ed. L. Blumenthal and Benno von Wiese (Weimar: Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1943-1967), vol. XX. This issue is argued to be a central problem of modernity in Jürgen Habermas, *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985).
[23] SWS 8: 222.
[24] Herder can be seen here as reprising, in a way, some of the arguments that he made in his letters to Mendelssohn and in his comments on Spalding's *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* discussed in chapter 2.

developed at the expense of the others.[25] A person of this kind would be like a physicist who is unable to appreciate a poem or bake a loaf of bread. Herder's critique here is that such a form of character would not be admirable, but rather a "deformity [*Unförmlichkeit*]".[26]

By contrast, the optimal development of a human being is to be a well-balanced whole. A genius, according to this conception would be "a well-formed [*wohlgebildeter*], healthy, forceful [*kräftiger*] person, living in his place, and intensely effective there."[27] Being well-formed is explicitly contrasted with one who has one of their powers developed in such a way that it stands out over and against the person's other capacities, making the person's character disharmonious. In using the term '*kräftiger*', Herder is explicitly drawing on his conception of the soul as constituted by a set of *Kräfte*. A '*kräftiger*' person would be one who has these powers developed and perfected, but to be well-developed as a whole these need to be developed in a balanced way so as to prevent the person from being either malformed or unhealthy. Herder also suggests here that a person of this kind is able to "live in one's place", to fulfill the duties of one's station and to see what is both appropriate and possible in the conditions in which one lives.

In addition to criticizing the ideal contained in the notion of genius found among his contemporaries, Herder also criticizes the form of education that goes along with such a conception. Herder argues that the better, richer, and more balanced kind of person

[25] It is unclear to me that any actual thinker holds the view that Herder criticizes here. Most significantly, Sulzer also argues that genius requires a combination of talents being developed to a high degree, and not one talent or capacity exclusively. See "Entwickelung des Begriffs vom Genie", *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: Weidmann, 1782), pp. 314-5.
[26] SWS 8: 223. In the 1775 edition, Herder claims that such one-sided development is "Mißbildung", SWS 8: 325.
[27] SWS 8: 223-4. I mostly follow Forster's translation of this passage.

tends to develop more slowly.[28] In an echo of Rousseau's *Emile*, Herder claims that the hastened development of young people in the modern world brings out even good qualities only in a superficial, and consequently a delible, way. Becoming a well-balanced, harmonious personality will take more time and patience than becoming a shallower and malformed person with one narrow talent developed to an extreme.

In describing a person as one-sided or malformed, Herder must rely on a conception of natural or complete development. This conception of the natural cannot be merely something that is in accord with the laws of nature as such, for no object of our experience is unnatural in this sense. Rather, Herder must be relying on a normative conception of the natural intended to provide some kind of ideal in light of which he criticizes imbalanced forms of development and commends those who achieve harmony in their character.

The discussion of genius in the 1775 edition is especially useful for understanding the normative character of Herder's account. The argument focuses on the relationship between the various excellences of mind that a person can develop. Each of our various strengths of mind or character is in need of the others in order to be authentically realized: "Wit [*Witz*] without acumen [*Scharfsinn*] is half wit, as imagination without memory, as abstraction without attention, and overall vice versa."[29] A garrulous fool who banters ceaselessly is a pale imitation of genuine wit because such a person fails to be attentive to the details of a situation and fails to see what it is appropriate to respond to and what kinds of responses are most fitting. This is the difference between actual cleverness and mere persiflage.

[28] SWS 8: 227.
[29] SWS 8: 322.

Holding these powers to be mutually dependent does not require Herder to say that all excellent persons will be identical, or that they will have all talents of mind developed and balanced in precisely the same way. It is to say, however, that each talent needs others to be developed and exercised to at least some degree, even if the entire host of powers are not all maximally developed. There can still be excellent persons who tend to be more sensual, and others who tend toward abstract thinking, but these should be tendencies that predominate in a person's character rather than qualities that completely eclipse or squelch their complements. Herder can thus without contradiction endorse Pascal's distinction between the two kinds of spirits – the mathematical and the intuitive – and regard both as healthy and good in their own way without contradicting himself.[30] There may be these two general kinds of character, each of which would has its own host of sub-species, but a person who is an excellent specimen of either type will need some of the talents characteristic of the other type in order for their own qualities to be both authentically excellent and durable.

Herder is in part borrowing a line of argument from Sulzer, who also argues that in a person with genius each talent is balanced with and supported by the others.[31] The key difference, however, is that while Sulzer simply argues that for the rare and exceptional genius all faculties will be developed, Herder goes further and attempts to show that there can be no authentic development of any individual talent in isolation from the others. Herder's argument is about the capacities as such, not only with respect to how the talents are combined in a handful of extraordinary persons.

---

[30] Herder notes Pascal's distinction in the 1778 edition of the text at SWS 8: 233. In the 1775 edition, Pascal's distinction is given a more prominent role, serving as an epigraph for the third division of the essay. See SWS 8: 314. The passage from Pascal in question appears at Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings,* trans. Honor Levi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), XLII, sec. 669, pp. 149-50.

[31] Sulzer, *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften,* 1, "Entwickelung des Begriffs vom Genie", pp. 314-5.

The line of thought developed by Herder here is similar to the ancient doctrine of the unity of the virtues. In the *Protagoras*, Plato contends that in order to possess any individual virtue, an agent must possess them all.[32] This is because any virtue requires wisdom in order to be applied appropriately, but once one has wisdom one will also have all of the virtues concerning appropriate actions. Aristotle also defends a thesis of this kind as well, holding that a virtuous agent is one who acts in the right way, at the right time, in the right place, and for the right reasons. What enables an agent to act in this way is practical wisdom. However, if an agent has practical wisdom, then they have a general capacity to act in the appropriate way in a variety of situations. Because each virtue presupposes practical wisdom, and further the possession of practical wisdom entails that one possesses all of the other virtues of character, it follows that to have one virtue requires one to have all of the others.[33] It is not clear if Herder was directly influenced by such ancient doctrines here, but at the least there is a structural similarity between the views.

This appears to signal a departure, or perhaps deviation, from a line of thought advanced by Herder in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*. There, Herder contended that for each virtue or strength that a person (or society) possesses, there is a corresponding weakness that serves as its necessary complement. The courageous Roman was cruel and bloodthirsty, and the source of the cruelty and the courage were the same. "Peak borders on valley," as Herder expresses the point in that text.[34] In *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*, however, Herder attempts to forge a new ideal in which all

[32] Included in Plato, *Complete Works* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997).
[33] *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book 6, ch. 13. Included in volume 2 of Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).
[34] DKV 4: 37.

human excellences presuppose and reinforce one another. Each excellence or virtue does not seem to require a corresponding weakness or vice, on this account. The position developed in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* thus seems to contradict the one developed in the earlier works, and to thus signal a change in Herder's views.

In later texts, Herder seems to adhere to the position laid out in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* on this matter. In the *Ideen*, for example, at one point Herder says that each individual's nature has a maximum point of perfection towards which every one of their powers tends to converge. Bringing one's various powers to be unified and balanced in this way is the good towards which individuals should aim. While he acknowledges that various forms of deficiency may be necessary steps towards reaching a balanced state (he compares imbalanced powers in a person to the swinging of a pendulum), the good and optimal state involves an agent having their capacities unified into a harmonious whole in which no one power dominates the others.[35]

There may still be a way in which Herder's account of the mutual dependence of talents and virtues is compatible with the earlier views found in texts such as *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*. Herder often shifts from discussions of individuals to cultures or peoples, and it may seem that what applies in his account of qualities in one case applies in the other. However, the focus of *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* is on the psychological constitution of individual persons and not on a social whole. It may be that Herder believes that human excellences should be harmonized and balanced in an individual, but that in assessing the character of a *Volk* we should expect the virtues to be accompanied by vices at the level of the group.

[35] *Ideen*, Bk, 15, ch. 3, DKV 6: 649-50.

An additional premise underlying the normative dimension of Herder's conception of individuality and uniqueness is his conception of nature as divinely well-ordered. Because each person has a host of powers and abilities in them, these capacities must be present as a result of God's will. Genius, or the host of powers each individual is endowed with, itself is "'the individual way of being human [*Menschenart*], which has been given by God', nothing more nor less."[36] The emphasis on the divine gift here is significant, and more than simply a rhetorical flourish.

In the 1775 edition of the text, Herder claims that attending to only one aspect of humanity while ignoring the others is akin to a form of idolatry.[37] Since God would not have given a person any capacity in vain, it follows that each capacity must be significant and intended to play a positive role in the economy of the human soul. Developing all of one's powers into a harmonious whole is thus a kind of piety, a heeding of the divine will for each individual.

While there is a religious basis for this aspect of Herder's view, the logic at work is not that of a divine command theory in which duties are determined by the prescriptions and proscriptions of an anthropomorphic deity. Herder's theological views are complex and can often be difficult to pin down, but such a conception of God is foreign to his conception of the divine.[38] The evidence that God has intended us to be well-rounded

[36] SWS 8: 222.

[37] "Das Hauptgesetz der frühen Erziehung sei also zu nähren Eins in Allem und Alles in Einem, die innere Thätigkeit und Elasticität der Seele. Jede Einschränkung ist Gift und Verbeugung des Baumes, der nicht gerade in frischer Luft wachsen darf…*Sie ist Abgötterei*: mit ihr verblühet jede innere Kraft des Lebens…." SWS 8: 325-6, my emphasis. See also 8: 332-3.

[38] A full discussion of Herder's views cannot be given here. Fuller discussions can be found in Martin Kessler, "Herder's Theology", in Hans Adler and Wulf Köpke, eds., *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder* (Rochester: Camden House, 2009).; Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 221-34.; Benjamin D. Crowe, "Herder's Moral Philosophy: Perfectionism, Sentimentalism, and Theism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 6 (2012): pp. 1155-9.; Hans Dietrich Irmscher, *Johann Gottfried Herder* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001), pp. 29-33.

and holistically developed beings is that nature itself is law-governed and harmonious, and that persons are happier in a condition where their various powers are developed and brought into a proportionate balance.[39] Even when speaking of God, the appeal is to the natural and the immanent, not to the supernatural and transcendent. As Hans Dietrich Irmscher expresses this point, "Divine determination and natural development go hand in hand for Herder."[40]

Herder claims that "each inner force [*Kraft*] of life withers" if it is not developed in harmony with the other forces of the human being.[41] Being as we are naturally determined to be is thus its own reward, and failing to be in such a condition its own punishment. Herder endorses the stoic adage to "follow nature", but this is understood to mean that we must guard against a disharmonious and uneven development of our powers and capacities.[42] Herder even goes so far as to suggest that suicide can be explained as a condition wherein which a person has had their forces cut off from another, and from the environment that nurtures them.[43] Each agent thus has an interest in pursuing the ideal of perfecting oneself into a balanced and harmonious whole.

As was suggested above, Herder's argument that every individual is a genius in some respect, and that each person ought to develop their powers into a harmonious

---

[39] Herder presents his account of God most clearly in *Gott, einige Gespräche*, especially in the second dialogue. See DKV 4:701-19. It is very likely that Herder's conception of how God preserves, and is revealed by, the order of nature is very likely influenced by Shaftesbury, especially *The Moralists: A Philosophical Rhapsody*, *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, 3 vols. (London: Purser, 1732; repr., Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001). This in turn seems to be influenced by Stoic defenses of providence. See, for example, Seneca, *De Providentia*, included in *Dialogues and Essays*, trans. John Davie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

My understanding of this dimension of *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* is indebted to Crowe, "Herder's Moral Philosophy: Perfectionism, Sentimentalism, and Theism," pp. 1155-9.

[40] Irmscher, *Johann Gottfried Herder*, p. 129. The positive references to Spinoza in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* are of interest for understanding how Herder combines his appeal to God's will with a naturalistic account of the human being in this essay, and elsewhere.

[41] SWS 8: 326.

[42] SWS 8: 201.

[43] SWS 8: 234.

whole, is one of the earliest expressions of the ideal of individuality that also appears in the works of Wilhelm von Humboldt, Friedrich Schiller, and the German Romantics.[44] There are two important ideas that Herder contributes to this ethics.

The first is that genius is not a capacity possessed by an elite few, but is instead nothing other than the unique individuality of every human being. Each individual has a set of talents at which they can excel if given the proper education and upbringing, and becoming a unique individual is intrinsically valuable. What prevents many people from developing as they should are either poor educational institutions that reflect a misunderstanding of humanity, or forms of oppression that force persons to live in ways that cause the degradation or unbalanced development of their powers. This idea provides the grounds of a form of social criticism according to which a social formation fails to be what it should if it hinders the healthy development of human abilities. While Herder specifically targets the 18th century for its excessive attention to rationality, he also notes that a human being whose feelings are not harmonized with reason and good sense would be a poorly developed being as well.[45] This means that there is a norm for individuals and what they should strive for, as well as a standard for criticizing societies that fail either to have a healthy and well-balanced set of ideals or which are so deeply divided in terms of social power that education and development are the preserve of an elite few.[46]

---

[44] There is also an echo of this notion in Nietzsche. See, for example, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, sec. 290. However, Nietzsche is happier to preserve a form of hierarchical elitism than Herder and the other thinkers mentioned here.

[45] Herder was always hostile to the eighteenth-century cult of feeling, and an emphasis on blind attention to passions devoid of reflection is criticized at SWS 8: 199-201.

[46] This aspect of Herder's social criticism is part of what endeared him to Marxist readers, such as Emil Adler and Wolfgang Harich. See Wolfgang Harich, "Herder und die bürgerliche Gesellschaft," in *Zur Philosophie der*

A second idea, closely related to the first, is that each person has a form-giving power by which they can not only shape the objects in their world, but also their own experience and even their life.[47] Herder combines this idea with the notion that each individual gives form to their experience in such a unique way that their world is not the same as any other.[48] Each individual human mind gives structure to its world in the same way that an artist gives structure to her work.[49] Hence, the perspective of each person is unique and, because it is the result of a divinely ordered nature, intrinsically valuable. The development of oneself into a unique individual involves attending to the kind of person one is and working to become as fully realized as one can in the situation in which one finds oneself. On these grounds, there is a an aim towards which every individual ought to strive and, as will be developed in greater detail below, this is also a reason for each individual to respect and encourage others in the achievement of this aim.

The conception of a well-developed and balanced personality presented in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* offers a clearer basis for the critical comments about the modern age that Herder makes in earlier texts, such as *Auch eine Philosophie der*

Geschichte: eine Auswahl in zwei Bänden, ed. Wolfgang Harich and Johann Gottfried Herder (1952); Emil Adler, *Herder und die deutsche Aufklärung* (Vienna: Europa, 1968).

A similar ideal is also part of what led William Morris from a general romantic outlook to political radicalism. See, e.g., E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976).

[47] "He [i.e. the human being] is a stringplay, though from another perspective only a string, a tone of a string: but at the same time he is the free player of his own stringplay." SWS 8: 316. See also the description of cognition as giving unity to the confused mass of impressions at SWS 8: 292-3.

This idea can also be found in *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*: "[Die Seele] ruft aus dem Chaos der Dinge, die sie umgeben, eine Gestalt hervor, an die sie sich mit Aufmerksamkeit heftet und so schafft sie durch innere Macht aus dem Viele ein Eins, das ihr allein gehöret." DKV 6: 181.

Nisbet compares Herder's view to Gestalt psychology in *Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science* (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1970), p. 63.

[48] "The human being, the first among [God's] creatures here on earth, is in its structure [Anlagen] a small world…" SWS 8: 314. This passage is from the 1775 edition. For similar passages in the 1778 version of the text, see SWS 8: 170, 188-9 and 208.

[49] Herder makes a comparison along these lines in the 1774 draft of the work, SWS 8: 251. See also Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, pp. 135-7.

Geschichte and the travel journal. In the earlier texts, Herder lambastes the present age with for being one-sided and excessively rational. In those places, he does not develop an account of what the alternative to being one-sided and *missgebildet* would be. In *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*, however, he goes beyond mere suggestion and attempts to lay out the basis of a better ideal. We see here, then, a further working out of the aspirations that were put forth in the texts written in his formative years.

IV

Up to this point, I have focused on the Herder's conception of individuality focusing on issues on the way this is to be understood with respect only to each individual agent. It is important to emphasize, however, that Herder does not think that each individual is a completely autonomous being, capable of perfecting themselves without relying on the natural world or other persons. Herder's conception of human cognition and sensation involves the notion that human beings are dependent on the world outside of them for their knowledge, and for their general development. Each person needs both an environment in which they can have experiences and other human beings to share a form of life with in order to develop their capacities. To draw out the basic elements of his view, it will be helpful to begin by noting how he distinguishes his account of the mind from the views of Locke and Leibniz.

Though emphasizing the importance of experience for the development of human powers and the increase of human knowledge, Herder rejects the Lockean notion that human beings are blank slates devoid of innate tendencies or propensities. Herder argues

that differences in experience alone cannot account for the unique and distinct nature of each individual.[50] Hence, each individual must be regarded as having a distinctive constitution which gives their soul a tendency to develop in particular ways.[51]

And though Herder agrees in many respects with Leibniz, he contends that the latter's theory of each soul as a windowless monad is undermotivated and implausible.[52] Herder finds two faults in Leibniz's account of human selves as self-contained entities that only apparently interact with other beings. First, Leibniz's metaphor of the veined statue, intended to flesh out how his theory differs from Locke's blank slate, treats human beings as inert, dead, organisms that are acted upon, rather than beings that are the sources of their own activity.[53] This may only be so much quibbling over metaphors, however, as Leibniz can hardly be faulted for conceiving of living things in general, or human minds in particular, as passive entities that only undergo change when acted upon by external things. If anything, Leibniz's tendency is toward a panpsychism that attributes mental activity to beings that are ordinarily regarded as inorganic and passive.[54] Further, Leibniz is clear that in human souls there is an active and living element, and that every idea that a person has is uncovered only through the soul's own spontaneous

[50] SWS 8: 226.
[51] SWS 8: 207-9.
[52] SWS 8: 226.
[53] SWS 8: 226-7. Leibniz, *Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas*, in *Philosophical Essays*, p. 27. See also, *New Essays on the Human Understanding*, trans. Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 52.
[54] See, for example, Leibniz, *Principles of Nature and Grace*, §1: "Composites or bodies are multitudes; and substances – lives, souls, and minds – are unities. There must be simple substances everywhere, because, without simples, there would be no composites. As a result, all of nature is full of life." Another statement of this idea occurs in *The Principles of Philosophy* §66: "From this we see that there is a world of creatures, of living beings, of animals, of entelechies, of souls in the least part of matter." Both texts are included in Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*.

activity.[55] Consequently, it doesn't seem as if this aspect of Herder's criticism offers a genuine rejection of any of Leibniz's views.

Herder's second criticism of Leibniz, however, is not beside the point. It targets the claim that human beings are completely independent and self-contained, and have no real interaction with one another or the entities that they encounter in their world. Herder claims that Leibniz's theory of monads is insightful insofar it presents an account of the mind as unified and active, but is mistaken in denying that each soul is completely independent and windowless. Rather, each human soul can only be developed through contact with the world, and through communication with other persons.

Like Kant, Herder believes that the human mind is both spontaneous and receptive.[56] Unlike Kant, however, Herder believes that the character of a person's reason is shaped by experience and instruction. There is no noumenal self capable of acting independently of the laws of nature.[57] For Herder, the idea that a human being could be completely autonomous (either metaphysically or practically) is a gross error, as honest and searching self-examination will reveal:

> The more deeply someone has climbed down into himself, into the structure and origin of his noblest thoughts, then the more he will cover his eyes and feet and say: 'What I am, I have become. I have grown like a tree; the seed was there, but air, earth, and all the elements, which I did not deposit about myself, had to contribute in order to form the seed, the fruit, the tree.[58]

[55] "…we must say that God originally created the soul (and any other real unity) in such a way that everything must arise for it from its own depths, through a perfect spontaneity relative to itself…" Leibniz, *A New System of Nature*, ibid., p. 143.
[56] I do not intend to suggest that this idea is derived from Kant.
[57] Kant's account defense of the idea that free agents should be conceived of as noumenal selves capable of acting independently of the laws of nature or experience is presented in the third part of *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*. *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Wilhelm Dilthey et al., 29 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter), Band 4.
[58] SWS 8: 198. I here use Forster's translation of the passage.

A human being may thus have the ability to act and effect changes in the world, but the means by which this is done are in great part acquired from one's teachers, parents, environment and historical age. This does not involve Herder in a denial that human beings have freedom. Rather, the kind of freedom that each person has is dependent upon the sources of their development. These sources are both the individual's physic-psychological constitution and the socio-historical conditions in which one lives. One may thus be free to develop one's powers and to act in various kinds of ways, but within the social and environmental conditions that make possible and also limit the opportunities for development and action.[59] Herder's view is thus similar to that expressed by Marx's adage that men are free to make their own history, though not in conditions of their choosing.[60]

Herder's account of our dependence on the world has four components. We are dependent, first, on our senses and the objects of experience. Second, we require a language in which to develop our thoughts and understanding. Third, we are dependent on other human beings for both our early education and also as being with whom we can interact in ways that contribute to our development throughout our mature lives. Fourth, we are dependent on God for creating the world and placing us in a particular situation in it.

First, Herder contends that every individual's character is shaped by their particular physiology, and that no two human beings are identical in terms of their

[59] Herder's view bears some resemblance to Heidegger's account of the *Geworfenheit* of *Dasein* in *Sein und Zeit,* 19th ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), sec. 29. This similarity is also noted in Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, p. 123.
[60] Karl Marx, *Der achtzehnte Brumaire des Louis Bonaparte*. *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Berlin: Dietz), Volume 1/12, p. 96.

physiological structure.[61] The body can only develop, and have an effect on the development of a person's character, by means of interacting with objects in the world. In the crudest sense, this involves taking in nutrients from the physical world and allowing the body to increase its powers. In a subtler manner, though, the soul is only able to obtain knowledge or develop its own powers through interaction with material objects. The soul's own activity affects how an agent's experiences form and develop their character, even though it does not do this independently of those objects. As Marion Heinz puts the point, Herder rejects any attempt to privilege either the subjective or the objective side of human knowledge, instead arguing that both are mutually dependent on one another.[62] Heinz's account of Herder's epistemology bears on his account of our character as well.[63] The development of human powers can only occur through a subject's active engagement with a world of objects outside of, and independent of, herself. The development of our character thus depends on our having the opportunity to encounter and engage with objects in our world outside of us, but the way that we engage with them is in part the product of our soul's own activity.

Second, human thought can only occur in a language. This entails that human beings can only increase their understanding of the world and themselves if they have learned a language.[64] While Herder defends the centrality of language for human thought and action in *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, here he alters his view in an important manner. In the earlier treatise he considered it possible for

[61] SWS 8: 317.
[62] "Das Originelle an Herders Ansatz besteht darin, Subjektvorstellung und Objektvorstellung als durcheinainder vermittelt zu denken." Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, p. 121.
[63] Heinz herself notes that Herder conceives of the increase of knowledge of the world involves at the same time an increase of the powers of the subject. Ibid., p. 155.
[64] SWS 8: 196-7.

individual human beings to invent their own language in a situation of isolation. However, in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* he claims that without language shining a light on the inner world of the human being that no one would be able to begin to sense the world in an organized manner.[65] Hence, a person could not engage in even the relatively simple linguistic act of naming an object without a set of concepts that are provided by a language in order to pick out one object in their experience. The account of the relationship between thought and language offered in this is thus more akin to the expressivist interpretation of Herder defended by Charles Taylor.[66]

This account of language leads to the third dimension of human dependence discussed by Herder – our dependence on other persons. If we need a language to develop our thoughts about the world, and also to act effectively in it, then we must learn that language from others. No language is self-taught. To become a speaker of a language requires instruction by others. Further, each language expresses the life of the community in which it is used, and as a result of being brought up in a particular form of life each individual's thought is shaped by their community. Every individual is thus only able to become who he or she is in a particular historical and social context. All of one's capacities cannot thus be developed in social isolation.[67]

We could imagine a possible condition in which human beings needed all of the above – a body that is capable of interacting with objects in the environment, an environment that is reasonably hospitable to human beings, a language, and a community

[65] Herder himself acknowledges that he does not think the earlier account of the relationship between language and thought is adequate at SWS 8: 197.
[66] Charles Taylor, "The Importance of Herder," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); "Language and Human Nature," in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). See also chapter 6 of Michael N. Forster, *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[67] SWS 8: 210-3 and 316. See also the discussion of these issues in chapter 3.

– but were deprived of some of them. However, such deprivation is not the norm for human beings in our world. We are placed into a world that is, at least, good enough. It is a world in which human beings are capable of not only surviving, but of developing their powers and even enjoying their lives. This reveals the fourth dimension of human dependence – our dependence on God. Without divine providence, Herder contends, we could not expect to be so fortunate.[68] The creator shows his care for us by placing us in a climate in which we are able to survive, and also provides us with a medium in which we can develop our thoughts.

The extent of each individual's dependence reveals that human beings are not completely autonomous. In order to develop our powers, to make ourselves into the kinds of harmoniously developed beings that Herder argues we should strive to become, we require much that is outside of our own power.[69] Herder's view is this far removed from an individualistic or atomistic version of perfectionism. No one can become what it is their vocation to become if they do not live in the right kind of world. The ethic of individuality that he develops reveals, rather than occludes, our finitude and our need for others.

V

In addition to its avowal of a form of perfectionism and an ethic of individuality, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* places love at the center of human life. Herder claims, in this text, that love is an integral part of our cognitive activity. This has two very

[68] SWS 8: 288.
[69] SWS 8: 197-8.

important consequences. First, it means that all human cognitive activity involves an agent in relationships with others. Second, it means that the project of self-perfection cannot be pursued without the involvement of, and consideration for, others.

Herder claims that there are two feelings which are central to human cognition and willing: a feeling for oneself and a feeling for others:

> Humanity is the noble measure according to which we cognize and act: self- and other-feeling (once again expansion and contraction) are the two expressions of the elasticity of our will; love is the noblest cognition, as it is the noblest sensation. To love the great Creator [*Urheber*] in oneself, to love oneself into others [*sich in andre hinein zu lieben*], and then to follow this sure pull – that is moral feeling, that is conscience. It stands opposed only to empty speculation, but not to cognition, for true cognition is loving, is feeling in a human way.[70]

This passage is central to Herder's moral vision, though it is rather opaque. One difficulty for understanding it concerns the precise manner in which love is supposed to be, or involve, cognition. The term implies that something is apprehended in such a way that knowledge is increased or gained, but what is it that is known when an agent loves someone or something? Another difficulty concerns the claim that "true cognition is loving." This suggests that cognition is not only involved in love, but that all genuine cognition is indispensably or intrinsically bound up with a loving attitude towards the object cognized. At first glance it is difficult to see what each of these claims means, as well as Herder's grounds for asserting them. I believe, however that it is possible to understand them if they are placed within Herder's moral psychology.

Herder's view here is best understood as a development of a set of ideas that he initially sketches in some of his earliest essays, such as *Versuch über das Sein* and *Zum*

[70] SWS 8: 199-200. In translating this passage, I have consulted Forster's translation for assistance.

Sinn des Gefühls.[71] In these texts, Herder contends that each human being is constituted by a set of natural forces, and further that all of the natural forces that bring human beings into contact with external objects are either forces of attraction or of repulsion. Additionally, each human being is internally constituted by a force that enables them to form representations [*Vorstellungen*], or to have a conscious mental life.[72] Due to the forces of attraction and repulsion that play a role in the economy of each individual's mental life, we are each always connected with other objects in the world.

This underlies Herder's claim that all human cognition is emotionally inflected, as it is only by being drawn towards an object that one cognizes it. All objects in the world are constituted by a set of forces, according to Herder. Cognitive awareness involves the subject encountering the forces in an object of cognition, and taking them into oneself to form a representation of that object. In doing this, the subject becomes united with the object in a manner that Herder considers to be more than metaphorical.[73] This process of merging with the object of cognition is possible because both the subject and the object are both constituted by dynamic forces (*Kräfte*) which are capable of acting on and with one another.[74]

---

[71] *Versuch über das Sein*, DKV 1: 9-21 and *Zum Sinn des Gefühls*, DKV 4: 235-41. A similar idea is sketched more briefly in a short piece from 1769, "Gesetze der Welt: Gesetze der Körper", DKV 9/2: 222.
[72] For a fuller account of this distinction, see Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, pp, 102-8.
[73] "Sie wird in diesem Betracht mit dem Gegenstande würklich Eins, der Gegenstand Eins mit ihr." SWS 8: 293.
[74] Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, pp. 164 ff. Heinz's account focuses on the issues at stake for Herder's epistemology and philosophy of mind, and marginalizes the ethical dimension of the text. Though she notes that love is central for Herder, she tends to reduce what he has in mind to any uniting of subject and object in the act of cognition. I believe that this is too attenuated of an account of the emotional bond that Herder has in mind. Further, it makes it difficult to see how hate and love can be distinguished if this is all that is involved in Herder's account of love, for to have an intense hatred of an object that leads one to attempt to destroy it will involve cognizing it to some degree. But if all cognition involves a subject being imprinted with the forces of an object, and this uniting of forces is what love is, then in attempting to destroy an object one would also simultaneously be loving the object. I do not believe that Herder's account of love in *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden* is complete, but I think that it is most likely compatible with an account that distinguishes love from hatred, so one should be wary of attributing to Herder a theory incapable of admitting such a distinction.

In *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden*, Herder suggests that the feeling of attraction is connected with the positive emotional valence of love. Our awareness of other persons involves cognitive activity, but this is always a kind of activity that is emotional and affective. Herder offers three different grounds for this idea, and emphasizes a different one in each of the major drafts of the text, completed in 1775 and 1778.[75] In the 1775 edition, Herder argues that cognition is emotional because, first of all, cognition only occurs when an agent is interested in an object, and that this cognition involves an increase in the agent's own powers.[76] In that same text, Herder also argues that the more complete one's cognition is, the more one is aware of the connection between all finite beings as dependent on God, before whom "we are all children and brothers."[77]

The 1778 version of the texts also draws on Herder's theology, but the formulation is strikingly different. Instead of presenting an anthropocentric God as a cosmic patriarch, Herder claims that in cognizing the world truly, one cognizes just *as God does*.[78] This means that the subject merges with God, and in doing so one comes to love the world and the beings in it as God does. In achieving this form of loving cognition, we become transformed from slaves of nature into its kings.[79] Herder notes that this is the same as Spinoza's account of the intellectual love of God.[80] This

[75] In calling these two drafts 'major' I mean that they are much more developed and comprehensive than the first draft of 1774.
[76] SWS 8: 293.
[77] SWS 8: 296.
[78] Marion Heinz claims that the 1778 version of the text differs from the 1775 version in that the latter has removed the theological basis of Herder's arguments and removed the theological emphasis. See Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, pp. 170-1. Heinz's claim is hard to square with the numerous places in the 1778 version where Herder uses identical or very similar arguments about the role that divinity plays in making human cognition possible, some of which are discussed above in the present chapter. However, it seems true that the 1778 text is more obviously compatible with Herder's growing enthusiasm for Spinoza, and the heterodox theology that it seems to involve.
[79] SWS 8: 202.
[80] SWS 8: 202. Herder goes so far in his praise of Spinoza that he describes him as even more divine than St. John. Spinoza's account of the love of God and its connection to human freedom appears in Part 5 of his *Ethics*. Included

Spinozistic love involves an awareness of the need of each finite being for other beings, and also an increased sense of the knowing subject's power and pleasure.[81] Hence, true cognition on Herder's view increases the individual's own perfection, while simultaneously increasing their affection for the other beings they share the world with. This increase in perfection and awareness of one's union with others brings about a positive emotional state of love.[82]

There are two important features of Herder's view that can now be made apparent. First, the sense in which cognition is identified with love is connected with an awareness of "the creator in oneself", which is the formative power discussed above. Becoming self-consciously aware of this capacity in oneself should also involve recognizing that other human beings are similarly constituted by the very same powers or forces. Hence, the perfections one finds in oneself are also in others and are likewise worthy of love.

Second, Herder claims that moral feelings are grounded in the ability to "*sich in andre hinein zu lieben*."[83] This means that the capacity to love others requires one to love oneself. It is the "necessary condition" of caring for others, as "it is and remains true that we love our neighbor only as we love ourselves."[84] In addition to incorporating the injunction of Christ to love one's neighbor as oneself,[85] this idea is also connected with Herder's concept of *Einfühlung*, as presented in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*. Herder believes that the ability to understand other human beings is bound up with a

---

in Benedict de Spinoza, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton Unicersity Press, 1985).

[81] For the source of these ideas in Spinoza, see *Ethics*, 5P32 and 5P36.

[82] Again, for the connection to Spinoza, see *Ethics*, 5P36C and Scholium.

[83] SWS 8: 200.

[84] SWS 8: 200.

[85] Matthew 22: 39 and Mark 12: 31.

person's being able to have loving feelings towards them. Thus, Herder's attempt to develop and encourage the study of other peoples and cultures is part of the moral project of cultivating love and sympathy, and when done correctly contributes to our moral growth.

This bolsters one of the other arguments that Herder makes in his criticism of modern culture in other texts, such as *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*. Those who develop what they conceive to be intellectual capacities, while ignoring or stifling the emotional side of human nature, are not only harming their prospects of happiness. They are also engaged in a form of bad faith. By treating the pursuit of truth or knowledge as if that were possible without any emotional or volitional involvement, such persons are deluded about who they are, and how they have acquired the perfections they possess.

Up until this point, we have been looking at the sense of Herder's claim that genuine cognition is a form of love, but he also makes the converse claim – that love is cognition, the noblest cognition. Love must not be understood as a brute feeling that lacks cognitive content. In claiming that love has a cognitive component, Herder is committed to an anti-Humean account of love. Herder's account requires that love involves both a discrimination of the properties of the loved object, which must be apprehended to be regarded as both good and capable of increasing the perfection of the knowing subject.[86] It also includes an understanding of the object's place in the natural order. Together, this means that the knower must be aware of the intrinsic perfections and powers of the object, as well as its extrinsic relations to other beings in the world.

[86] SWS 8: 293.

Any conception of conscience or moral feeling as a brute reaction lacking any cognition must thus be rejected as hopelessly confused.[87]

By drawing love into the heart of human cognitive activity, Herder makes it clear that his perfectionism is thoroughly social. No human being can live as they should, developing and perfecting their capacities, without others. Because of this, we must strive to develop our individual perfection in harmony with that of others. As he writes: "I can only attain my own perfection through the perfection of others."[88] The need for community with other persons is thorough and total. The true love of self, and the pursuit of one's own perfection that this involves, does not thus bring human beings into conflict with one another when we live wisely. Rather, it offers us a reason for taking up a concern for our communities and the individuals who are a part of it.

VI

Vom Erkennen und Empfinden is a text that draws together many of Herder's characteristic concerns. In it, we see Herder striving to find a middle path between several dualisms that have divided philosophers: individuality and social connection, freedom and situatedness, cognition and feeling. All of these apparent dualisms, according to Herder, are only the products of a more fundamental unity. To take a side on these issues, to emphasize the importance of one of these poles of human life at the expense of the other, is both an intellectual and a moral failure – it is to separate what

[87] SWS 8: 199. Herder does not state explicitly which thinkers he has in mind. It may be that Hutcheson is more his target than Hume.
[88] SWS 8: 200-1.

God has joined.[89] The proper form of perfectionism and the truest ethic of individuality, accordingly, will emphasize a life in which human feeling and thought are perfected in a community of individuals who take an interest in one another's well-being.

[89] SWS 8: 293.

Chapter 6: Bonds of Love and the Chain of History: *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menshheit*

Hier also liegt das Principium zur Geschichte der Menschheit, ohne welches keine solche Geschichte gäbe. Empfinge der Mensch alles aus sich und entwickelte es abgetrennt von äußern Gegenständen: so wäre zwar eine Geschichte *des* Menschen, aber nicht *der* Menschen, nicht ihres ganzen Geschlechts möglich. Da nun aber unser spezifische Charakter eben darin liegt, daß wir, beinah ohne Instinkt geboren, nur durch eine Lebenslange Übung zur Menschheit gebildet werden, und sowohl die Perfektibilität als die Korruptibilität unsres Geschlechts hierauf beruhet: so wird eben damit auch die Geschichte der Menschheit notwendig ein Ganzes, d.i. eine Kette der Geselligkeit und bildenden Tradition vom Ersten bis zum letzten Gliede.

Herder, *Ideen*, DKV 6: 337

I

One of the guiding threads of Herder's philosophical thought, running through both his early and later works, is his conception of human beings as inherently social and historical creatures. This means that on the one hand human beings are not capable of living distinctively human lives in isolation from other human beings and, on the other, that human societies develop and change their ways of living over time as no other kind of animal does. Herder's philosophical anthropology is opposed to currents of thought that approach human beings in an ahistorical and individualistic manner. Herder is also committed to a form of naturalism. Though this is also commonly acknowledged by scholars, the specific ways in which Herder's naturalism informs or supports his commitment to the essentially historical and social character of man has not been adequately explained. Herder has one argument in particular that is especially informative about the way in which his naturalism is related to his theory of history and

his philosophical anthropology, though this argument has been largely ignored by most scholars.

The argument to which I refer is found in the first part of Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit.*[1] The argument is that the natural dependence and weakness of human children leads to the cultivation of a social disposition. The argument has been eclipsed in great part due to the presence of another argument that Herder presents in the same text – that the distinctness of human beings can be derived from their upright posture - which has received more scholarly discussion, even though it is both less interesting and less compelling.

In this chapter, my central aim is to present a neglected argument in Herder's text that may point the way towards a better understanding of the relationship between Herder's naturalism, historicism and social theory. I also hope to show how Herder's social thought, which is the basis of his political philosophy, is distinct from other important views in social and political philosophy. Additionally, I will argue that a failure to grasp the place of this argument in Herder's philosophical thought, especially his thought of the 1780s, can lead to inadequate interpretations of Herder's philosophy, as well as to outright misinterpretations.

II

[1] In the rest of the text, I will refer to Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* simply as *Ideen*.

Herder's *Ideen* was published in four parts between 1784 and 1791.[2] In the work, Herder attempts to explain the fundamental characteristics of human nature and to argue for the importance of historical development and change in the study of man. Herder also defends a particular view of history that includes a conception of historical progress, and yet eschews the ethnocentrism of other Enlightenment theories of history, which tended to regard the society of eighteenth century Europe as the model according to which all other societies were to be judged.[3]

The subject of the *Ideen* is the philosophy of the history of mankind. It famously begins with the phrase, "our earth is a star among stars," and then proceeds to consider how the earth's location in the solar system has shaped the kind of life that human beings have.[4] Herder then moves on to consider the variety of organisms that inhabit the earth, and the similarity and dissimilarity of the various organisms to human beings.[5] The first part of the *Ideen* is concerned with the natural conditions in which human beings live – the kind of environment that the earth is, the kinds of organisms that we share the earth with, and also the structure of the human organism. The second, third and fourth parts of the *Ideen* examine the characters of various human societies throughout the earth, and

---

[2] The first part was published in 1784, the second in 1785, the third in 1787 and the fourth in 1791.

[3] The prime example of such a text is François-Marie d'Arouet Voltaire, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. unknown (London: I. Allcock, 1766; repr., 1965). Other noteworthy examples are Nicolas Antoine Boulanger, *The Origin and Progress of Despotism in the Oriental, and Other Empires, of Africa, Europe, and America*, trans. J. Wilkes (Amsterdam: Unknown Publisher, 1764); Claude Adrien Helvétius, *De L'Esprit, Or, Essays on the Mind, and Its Several Faculties*, trans. W. Mudford (London: M. Jones, 1807).

[4] DKV 6: 21.

[5] This led some nineteenth-century commentators to read Herder as a precursor of Darwin's. The most influential statement of this position is Friedrich von Bährenbach, *Herder als Vorgänger Darwins und der modernen Naturphilosophie* (Berlin: Theobald Grieben, 1877). Bährenbach exaggerates his case for such a comparison by attributing to Herder a belief in the mutability of species, which Herder explicitly denies. For a helpful corrective to this view, see Arthur Lovejoy, "Some Eighteenth-Century Evolutionists," *The Scientific Monthly* 71, no. 3 (1950).

Bährenbach's mistake is somewhat understandable, though, as some readers in Herder's day were led to attribute this view to him. See, for example, the letter of Charlotte von Stein stating this, discussed in Robert Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 369-70.

how these societies have developed through history. The *Ideen* is a remarkably ambitious work containing a wealth of astronomical, ethnographic, historical, and biological material. Because of the expansive character of the work, it can be difficult at times for modern readers to see the specifically philosophical import of much of the text.

One of the important philosophical features of Herder's *Ideen*, apparent from the very beginning of the tome, is that Herder adheres to a naturalistic approach to the study of human beings. For example, Herder argues that the physical structure of human beings determines their intellectual and moral character. Specifically, he emphasizes the importance of man's upright posture. This alone, at one point he states, is what distinguishes human beings from other kinds of primates, such as Orangutans.[6] This claim drew much criticism upon the publication of Herder's work, and most scholarship discussing the first part of the *Ideen* focuses almost exclusively on this claim.[7] The

---

[6] DKV 6: 118-20.

[7] The most influential comment on this part of the work is that of Kant, in his "Rezensionen von Johann Gottfried Herders *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*", in Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Wilhelm Dilthey et al., 29 vols. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902-), 8, pp. 43-66. Another of Herder's contemporaries to criticize Herder's arguments about the significance of upright posture was Georg Forster, in his letter to Sömmering of May 19, 1785, in Hermann Hettner, ed. *Georg Forster's Briefwechsel mit S.T. Sömmering* (Braunschweig: F. Vieweg, 1877), pp. 222-3. This letter came to my attention because it is discussed in Hugh Barr Nisbet, *Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science* (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1970), pp. 250-1. Other scholars to emphasize this are Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969), pp. 390-1; Rudolf Haym, *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Rudolf Gaertner, 1877-85), II, pp. 209-10.

While at first glance, Herder's discussion of the upright posture of man might appear ridiculous, especially when one takes account of Herder's crude poeticizing about the matter, there is some reason to take it seriously. First, Herder's emphasis on mankind's upright posture is connected with a discussion of the unique structure of the human brain. Herder argues that it is only an upright posture that could permit the human brain to be organized as it is. There is some recent empirical evidence suggesting that Herder's conjecture is broadly correct. Nonetheless, the best that can be said on those grounds is that Herder has a correct conclusion, though he lacks the premises that would justify his assertion of that conclusion (i.e. the theory of evolution and more adequate knowledge of the human brain).

Second, there is a historical reason for taking account of the details of Herder's argument. Herder was not the first to argue that the upright posture of man is in some way connected to his unique rational and moral character. The Italian doctor Pietro Moscati wrote a treatise in 1770, translated into German in 1771 in which he argued that mankind's upright posture was a punishment for original sin, but at the same time gave man his specific moral character. See Pietro Moscati, *Von dem körperlichen wesentlichen*

details of the argument from man's upright posture will not be dwelt upon here because I believe that Herder has another argument that is more interesting and compelling, yet just as naturalistic. The argument is that the prolonged period of weakness and dependence of human children determines the social, rational and historical character of human beings.

The argument for the importance of human dependence in the *Ideen* arises in the context of the discussion of an issue that was of significant interest to philosophers in the eighteenth century - the difference between human beings and animals with regard to the possession of instinct. A number of thinkers argued that whereas animals had instincts, human beings possess reason in the place of instinct, and hence are distinct from animals on the basis of their possession of reason.[8] Herder asserts that, on the contrary, human beings have the same natural instincts other animals enjoy, and that these instinctual ways of acting can be observed in infants who know how to eat food without being taught, as well as in societies which due to extreme need and danger are capable of living in the natural world as animals do.[9] The real difference between human beings and animals concerns the way in which their instincts are organized. Herder claims that the distinctive character of human beings is the consequence of their ability to suppress certain instincts in favor of others: "the drives of man are not so much robbed from him

---

Unterscheide zwischen der Structur der Thiere und der Menschen (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1771). Kant presented a favorable review of Moscati's work in 1771. Herder was familiar with both Moscati's work and Kant's review, and Moscati's text is cited in the *Ideen*, DKV 6: 151. For an excellent and balanced discussion of these issues, see Nisbet, *Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science*, pp. 249-51.

[8] For a discussion of the debates over instinct in animals and humans, see Gary Hatfield, "Mechanizing the Sensitive Soul," in *Matter and Form in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Gideon Manning (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

[9] DKV 6: 142.

as they are suppressed by him, and ordered under the control [*Herrschaft*] of the nerves and the finer senses."[10]

The finer senses, according to Herder, are those of hearing and vision and the cruder senses are those of smell and touch.[11] Herder regards the senses of sight and smell as finer because he believes that they involve a distance from their object that touch and smell do not, and they permit one to think of their objects in a reflective way.[12] Herder argues that the subordination of the cruder senses to the finer ones is the basis of mankind's rational character.

The different cognitive character of each sense was an interest of Herder's from early on, and his characterization of vision in his fourth *Kritische Wälder* offers the best concise statement of why Herder considers vision to be a finer sense, and what this means about the importance of sight for the rational and intellectual capacities of human beings. Herder states:

> Objects of sight are the clearest [*am klärsten*], the most distinct [*am deutlichsten*]: they are before us; they are outside of and next to one another: they remain objects for as long as we wish. Because they are thus the easiest, the clearest, and however one might wish to express it [*und wie man will*], to cognize; because their parts are more capable of analysis [*Auseinandersetzung*] than any other impression; for that reason their unity and plurality, which give us pleasure, are the most visible…[13]

Vision, as opposed to the senses of touch and smell, is believed to allow for more distinct perceptions. Herder avers that we are capable of dividing what we see up into parts more easily than what we smell or feel. Vision permits the clear recognition of an object and its

[10] DKV 6: 142-3.
[11] DKV 6: 144.
[12] DKV 6: 136-7. Herder discusses the characteristics of each sensory modality in many other works. See, for example *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, DKV 1: 734-7 and 743-51.
[13] DKV 2: 289.

distinct elements, whereas it is more difficult to distinguish parts when feeling an object. Additionally, Herder claims that the objects of vision are sensed as being distinct from and outside of us, and consequently they have a "weak effect upon us."[14] Herder claims that this is of practical importance in our lives because it means that we are not so immediately determined to act by the objects of our senses, as creatures with other kinds of sensory organization are.[15] Herder's conclusion is that the centrality of vision and hearing in human cognition enables human beings to act deliberately and to think clearly – to be rational creatures. Vision is, as Herder expresses the point, "the most philosophical sense."[16]

The central place given to the senses of sight and hearing in human cognition are thus connected to the ability of human beings to "suppress" their instincts as beasts with senses organized in a different manner cannot. According to Herder, how does this happen? Herder bases his explanation on a description of human development, as he believes that this explains the way in which the various capacities that human beings possess at birth are given the specific form that they take in a mature human being.

---

[14] DKV 2: 290.

[15] This is stated in the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*, DKV 1: 712-3. In an omitted draft of the third book of the *Ideen*, Herder also defends an account of the similarity between human beings and some animals on this same basis. Animals with "feinere Sinne", he claims, can also be said to have the kinds of ideas and feelings which are related to those modes of sensation, and in this way have a manner of thinking that is more similar to that of human beings. SWS 13: 446.

Michael Forster offers an interesting discussion of the development of Herder's views on this issue, specifically focusing on the issue of language and animals, in Michael N. Forster, "Gods, Animals, and Artists: Some Problem Cases in Herder's Philosophy of Language," *Inquiry* 45, no. 1 (2003): pp. 69-76.

[16] DKV 2: 290. This conception of the character of these senses was not unique to Herder, but was common in Herder's time. See, for example, Kames' comment in that "the eye and the ear, being thus elevated above those of the other external senses" should be counted as closer to the intellect than the other senses in Henry Home Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism* (London: G. Cowie and Co., 1824), p. 10.

Herder notes that "the human child comes into the world weaker than any of the animals" and human beings develop more slowly than any other animal.[17]

This would seem to be disadvantageous to human beings, but it is in fact what enables them to develop reason and to have the kind of mastery over themselves and their environment that they do. The length and intensity of this period of human dependence contributes to the development of reason because it forces human beings to develop their finer senses before the others. Human beings learn to see objects, pay attention to sounds and grasp objects with their fingers before they are capable of walking.[18] Consequently, they develop the capacity to attend to the details of what they sense, and to compare the objects of their senses with one another very early on, even before they are capable of independent action in the world.

Herder argues that this shows that human beings come into the world without their reason complete, "in order to learn reason."[19] For a human infant:

> Its finest senses, eye and ear, awaken first and become guided by shapes and sounds…It was first an apprentice [*Lehrling*] of the two finest senses: for the instinct for artificial creation [*künstliche Instinkt*], which should become formed in him, is *reason*, *humanity*, *a human form of life* [*menschliche Lebensweise*], which no animal has or learns.[20]

Herder is making two claims here. First, the long period of human dependence means that the senses of hearing and vision, the "finest senses" are the first to be put into practice. Second, the priority of sight and vision is somehow the ground of reason, the

---

[17] DKV 6: 143.
[18] "Ehe das Kind gehen lernt, lernt es sehen, hören, greifen und die feinste Mechanik und Messkunst dieser Sinne üben." DKV 6: 143.
[19] DKV 6: 143.
[20] DKV 6: 144. I have translated "*künstliche Instinkt*" as "instinct for artificial creation" rather than the more literal "artificial instinct" because it is clear that Herder is emphasizing the human capacity for creative activity and production, even though he is also implying that reason and humanity are the products of human creative activity.

capacity for creative activity, and all other distinctively human qualities. This entails that reason is learned, and not innate.[21] It is clear that Herder believes that the protracted length of human dependence means that the finer senses of human beings are more central than in other creatures, and that human reason itself is somehow the product of this long period of dependence and the acute development of the finer senses.

Human young are not capable of developing on their own, due to their weakness. The long period of weakness in human infants is also a long period of *dependence*, and the character of this dependence has great consequences for the psychological, moral and intellectual character of human beings. The period during which children are practicing the use of the finer senses and developing their inchoate reason is a period of time during which they are cared for by their parents. Herder claims that during this time the child receives "motherly love" through an "organic cause", and the child's "tender drives are formed."[22] As they learn to make use of their vision and hearing, infants and children begin to learn how to distinguish between the things in their environment, and this is done through the "aid [*Beihülfe*] of another", who instructs a child in language. Learning a language also enables the child to share its thoughts with others.[23] This also brings the child into a human community and constitutes it as a social being. The care provided for a human infant by those who raise him or her is a "tender bond" which holds human societies together. The human need for others during the formative period of infancy, Herder argues, is the foundation of more than the intellectual capacity of man.

---

[21] See Herder's comment that reason is not "*Automat*", but is rather "*das fortgehende Werk der Bildung des menschlichen Lebens.*" DKV 6: 144.
[22] DKV 6: 158.
[23] DKV 6: 141-2. The sense of hearing is especially important for development of human reason, according to Herder, as it is the sense that has the most influence on the capacity for human language.

It is "the ground of a necessary human society, without which no man would be able to grow to maturity."[24]

This deep need for others, Herder argues, shows that human beings are *naturally* and *essentially* social:

> In the paternal house arose the first society, bound with bonds of blood, trust and love. Thus to break the savagery of men and habituate them to domestic intercourse [*häuslichen Umgange*] the childhood of our species needs to last for many years. Nature compels men to come together, and holds them together, through tender bonds, so that they will not scatter and forget one another, as do creatures which soon arrive at maturity. The father became the educator of his son, as the mother was of the infant; and thus a new link of humanity is knit. Here lies the ground of a necessary human society, without which no man would be able to grow to maturity, and the majority of men would not exist. Man is thus born for society: this the affection [*Mitgefühl*] of his parents and the years of his long childhood tell him.[25]

Herder's account of infancy and its effects is the basis of his conception of the social nature of human beings, which he develops and extends more thoroughly in his account of human history. Men are "born for society", and they learn this because they are forced to perceive their own dependence on their parents. The bonds of human society are deeper than any contract that free-standing agents might enter into. Rather, the bonds are "tender" or "affectionate" ones because they are bonds formed by parental care and love. As a consequence of their natural development, human beings are determined to be social beings who live with others, not individuals who could ever possibly deliberate about whether or not they will live in society.

III

[24] DKV 6: 158.
[25] DKV 6: 158. I have consulted Churchill's translation of the *Ideen* for assistance with the translation of this passage.

Herder's argument that the dependence of human infants and the care given to them by their parents is "the ground of a necessary human society" is important for Herder's social and political thought.[26] In order to understand how, it will be helpful to consider Herder's argument as a contribution to the philosophical discourse about the state of nature. As is well known, many of the most significant moral and political theories of the early modern era involve an appeal to, or alleged examination of, mankind's state of nature. To highlight the distinctive character of Herder's use of the state of nature in his social thought, I will compare Herder to two of the most well-known philosophers who offer a theory of mankind in the state of nature - Hobbes and Rousseau.

Though Hobbes and Rousseau are in many respects contrasting figures, both consider the state of nature to be a pre-social state in which human beings lead solitary lives. Hobbes states that in the state of nature "men have no pleasure, but on the contrary a great deal of grief, in keeping company where there is no power able to over-awe them all."[27] The natural state of mankind, he argues, is a state of war, characterized by fear and hostility. It is only because of the fear of other men that social bonds are formed.[28] Rousseau dissents from Hobbes' pessimistic characterization of human beings in the state of nature as competitive, hostile and vicious. He argues that Hobbes's account of the state of nature involves the projection of qualities characteristic of the most refined societies – forms of pride and self love, and a competitive disposition that

[26] DKV 6: 158.
[27] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Inadianapolis: Hackett, 1994), I.xiii, p. 75.
[28] Ibid., I.xii, p. 78; and I.xiv.

are the product of unnatural desires that are only developed in society.[29] Rousseau insists, contrary to Hobbes, that men are naturally endowed with a form of natural pity and lack the desire to subject others to their will. They would not intentionally attempt to dispossess or harm others, but Rousseau nonetheless holds that human beings in the state of nature "had no dealings with each other" and that each human being lived in such a state "without any need of others of his kind" and was "self-sufficient".[30]

Philosophers such as Hobbes and Rousseau sought to understand what mankind's life in the state of nature was like because they believed that understanding men in the state of nature would help them grasp the fundamental characteristics of human nature – the kinds of motivations, needs, desires and dispositions that are characteristic of human beings. The reason for exploring mankind's life in the state of nature was to understand what led men to form societies and states. It was also supposed to reveal something about the nature of moral and political obligation, and the standards by which social and political arrangements might be evaluated. The state of nature, whether historical or hypothetical,[31] was believed by these two thinkers to reveal that mankind is naturally either anti-social or asocial, and how societies could best manage the anti-social or asocial characteristics of human beings.[32]

---

[29] Discourse on the Origins of Inequality, included in Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Discourses and Other Early Political writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 151-60. This is also the argument of Rousseau's *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, and was largely inspired by Montaigne, especially his *Apology for Raymond Sebond*.

[30] *The Discourses and Other Early Political writings*, pp. 154 and 57.

[31] Rousseau, for example, states that the state of nature he discusses "no longer exists, which perhaps never did exist, which probably never will exist." Ibid., p. 125. At moments, however, he doesn't seems to be undecided on this issue. He sometimes seems to treat his speculations as likely to be borne out by the facts. See, for example, his discussion of Orangutans as possible men in the state of nature in ibid., pp. 205-11.

[32] The philosophical discussion of the state of nature was not limited to Hobbes and Rousseau, but was a central issue in the work of many of the most important moral and political thinkers in the early modern

Herder opposes his account of human nature in the *Ideen* to accounts held by philosophers such as Hobbes and Rousseau in order to show that the political and moral conclusions of these other thinkers were unjustified because their fundamental premises are false. Rousseau was an explicit target in Herder's discussion of the origin and nature of language in the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*. Herder also directs his criticism toward the similar attempt by Hobbes to establish conclusions about the nature of human beings on the hypothesis of a state of nature prior to the formation of social bonds.[33] Both of these philosophers argue that human beings are naturally solitary or antisocial. In such a state, men are required to reflect on the possibility of forming a social pact, if they are to come to live together and become social. The postulation of a state of nature, by such philosophers, is done in accordance with their individualistic conception of human beings that regards them as deciding to live together either out of fear (Hobbes) or in order to satisfy more of their desires than can be satisfied in isolation (Rousseau). According to both of these views, the formation of society occurs as the result of a rational decision, and thus is itself dependent on man's possession of reason. It is supposed to be reason which enables men to contract to live in society, which involves changing the way in which they were determined to live by nature.

Herder offers a deep and powerful challenge to the basic assumption of the views of Hobbes and Rousseau. Herder regards man's possession of reason as a *natural* development of his *natural* powers that is only possible because of his being a social being. Herder contends that reason is a natural capacity that is unique to mankind only

---

era. Other contributors to the discussion include Grotius, Locke, Hume, Pufendorf, Barbeyrac and Leibniz.

[33] Hobbes is clearly referred to by Herder in the *Ideen*. See the reference to philosophers who have claimed that mankind's natural circumstance is a "Stande des Kriegs" at DKV 6: 313-4.

because man develops his powers in a particular way, and this development requires the social affections that are involved in the care of children. Human beings are constituted in such a way that the "finer senses" of hearing and vision are the most central to their way of living.[34] By contrast, other organisms are guided in their lives primarily by touch or smell, and have less distance from the objects they encounter, and are consequently unable to reflect on them.[35] Human beings are capable of reflective thought because of the way in which their sensory capacities are organized during their development. Due to the specific character of human sensibility, human beings are also capable of language. All of this is only possible, however, because they receive care, education and an upbringing from their parents. The result of this process of education is the acquisition and development of reason, which is not immediately possessed at birth by any human being.[36] Without a community and society in which one was brought up, no human being would be able to develop their rational capacities, and would lack the faculty of reason. Hence, Herder reverses the order of priority that the aforementioned thinkers are committed to. For Herder, men are not social because they are capable of forming contracts on the basis of rational decision, but rather *human reason can only be developed by any individual human being because human beings are naturally social.*

Reason is thus, on Herder's view, learned and developed. It is not a talent or quality that they possess apart from being instructed by their caretakers and having experiences in an environment. It is not a supernatural quality or property that was

[34] DKV 6: 136-42.
[35] *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache,* DKV 1: 771-4.
[36] "Hieraus erhellet, was menschliche Vernunft sei: ein Name, der in den neuern Schriften so oft als angebornes Automat gebraucht wird und als solches nichts als Missdeutung giebet. Theoretisch und praktisch ist Vernunft nichts als etwas Vernommenes, eine gelernte Proportion und Richtung der Ideen und Kräfte, zu welcher der Mensch nach seiner Organisation und Lebensweise gebildet worden." DKV 6: 144.

placed in man by a divine source, as the builder of a machine places the motor into the product of his labor. Nor can it be exercised immediately at birth, as one can digest food without needing to learn how to do so. Reason is something that man is born with the capacity for that he develops through his own activity, but the circumstances that make that activity possible are the right kinds of interactions with other human beings and his environment – circumstances which can only obtain if human infants are cared for during their long and intense period of dependence.

Fortunately, according to Herder, human beings are naturally disposed to love and care for their young.[37] Herder suggests that being loved and cared for in this way endows one with the propensity to love and care for one's own offspring later in life. These family ties produce threads that unite even larger communities of human beings. Herder, contrary to the thinkers he is challenging, argues that human beings are only capable of becoming rational creatures because they are naturally disposed to be caring towards their children.[38] Herder describes the nature of this development as follows:

> The suckling at the mother's breast reposes on her heart: the fruit of her womb is the pupil of her embrace. His finest senses, the eye and ear, first awake, and are led forward by sound and figure: happy for him, if they be fortunately led! His sense of feeling gradually unfolds itself, and attentively watches the eyes of those around, as his ear is attentive to their language, and by their help he learns to distinguish his first ideas. In the same manner his hand gradually learns to feel: and then his limbs first strive after their proper exercise. He is first a pupil of the two finest senses: for the instinct for artificial creation to be formed in him is reason, humanity, a human form of life, which no animal possesses or learns.[39]

---

[37] DKV 1: 789, quoted below.

[38] This is also expressed in the *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*: "Allerdings hatte die Mutter mehr das Kind zu lehren als das Kind die Mutter – weil jene es mehr lehren konnte, und *der mütterliche Instinkt, Liebe und Mitleiden*, den Rousseau aus Barmherzigkeit den Tieren zugibt und aus Grossmut seinem Geschlecht versagt, *sie zu diesem Unterricht, wie der Überfluss der Milch zum Saugen zwang*." DKV 1: 789.

[39] DKV 6:144. I have used, though modified, Churchill's translation of this passage, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, p. 91.

Though they are entirely dependent and needy, human infants are cared for and protected in such a way that enables them to safely develop their ability to see and hear. These two "finest senses" are the senses that are most closely connected to the development of reason and language, as Herder argues in both the *Ideen* and in the *Treatise on the Origin of Language*. Because these senses, and hence a nascent or inchoate faculty of reason, develops prior to man's cruder senses, they retain a position of priority over the other senses in the course of a human life. Human beings are thus organically constituted for the formation of reason, and the specific character of their *organic* development is what allows reason to have the form that it has in the life of a human being. This organic development, however, is only possible because of the care that is given to dependent young by those whom they are dependent upon.

In short, the formation of reason in human beings is accomplished through the development of the fine before the crude senses and the physical weakness of human infants. Human infants can only develop appropriately and naturally, according to Herder, because of the affectionate upbringing that they receive from one's parents. Herder believes that this shows both that human beings need to live in social relations with others, and also that they are positively inclined to do so through forms of emotional attachment that are formed through the natural development which human beings have all benefitted from.[40]

Herder emphasized the priority of the nation, or *Volk*, to the state in his political thought. Scholars often note that this is a consequence of Herder's belief that there were

[40] Other thinkers have also more recently argued that human rational capacities are both shaped and informed by a kind of affective engagement that is the result of the kind of upbringing natural to human beings. One example is Axel Honneth's recent work on reification and recognition. See especially his *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).*

forms of social organization that are organic and natural, whereas the state is mechanistic and artificial.[41] What sometimes is omitted in these discussions is that Herder's conception of society as a natural, organically formed entity was not only a matter of faith or a provocative and inspirational metaphor. Herder's organic conception of society is, rather, the outgrowth of his naturalistic approach to his study of the human being.[42]

IV

Herder challenges the individualistic conception of human nature that was defended by a number of thinkers in the early modern era, but he was not the only one to do so. One of the most important criticisms of an individualistic conception of the state of nature was presented by the Scottish philosopher Adam Ferguson in his 1767 *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Ferguson also sought to challenge the conception

---

[41] E.g. Frederick M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought: From Enlightenment to Natonalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 72-87.

[42] While the overwhelming consensus among Herder scholars is that Herder was committed to some form of naturalism, it is still common to run across comments asserting the contrary. Allen Wood, for example, suggests that Herder appeals to some kind of direct divine dispensation of reason to human beings, whereas by contrast Kant's view is that human beings develop their capacity for reason by themselves. See *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 234. It seems to me that the attribution of such a view to Herder involves a rather careless misreading of a single section of a single text of Herder's philosophical works, and is shown to be utterly implausible in the light of the arguments under discussion in the present paper.

Terry Pinkard takes issue with reading Herder as a naturalist, in part, because doing so would somehow not account for the kind of influence that Herder had on the Romantics and Hegel. See *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 133. Pinkard's argument is not based on any specific texts, so far as I can see. However, if the naturalistic element of Herder's thought goes missing in the next generation influenced by Herder, this is hardly a reason to deny that Herder himself was committed to a form of naturalism. In fact, it is more likely that Herder's conception of nature was influential on Hegel and the Romantics, as it is a conception of nature as purposive and living, a conception that Herder inherited from Leibniz and Shaftesbury, though he molded it in his own fashion. There is a strong case to be made for the influence of Romantic thought on the direction of scientific research, as is shown in Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life*.

of human nature advanced by Rousseau and Hobbes, but he additionally sought to undermine the individualism that worried him in his fellow countrymen, and friends, David Hume and Adam Smith. Ferguson argues that one should not think of man's natural state in individualistic terms because we have no evidence that human beings have ever lived apart from society. Thus, in any important sense of the word 'natural', mankind's natural state is a social one. In Ferguson's words:

> If both the earliest and the latest accounts collected from every quarter of the earth, represent mankind as assembled in troops and companies; and the individual always joined by affection to one party, while he is possibly opposed to another; employed in the exercise of recollection and foresight; inclined to communicate his own sentiments and to be made acquainted with those of others; these facts must be admitted as the foundation of all our reasoning relative to man. His mixed disposition to friendship and enmity, his reason, his use of language and articulate sounds, like the shape and the erect position of his body, are to be considered as so many attributes of his nature: they are to be retained in his description, as the wing and the paw are in that of the eagle and the lion, and as different degrees of fierceness, vigilance, timidity, or speed, are made to occupy a place in the natural history of different animals.[43]

Herder was familiar with Ferguson's *Essay*, as Ferguson was a widely read thinker in Germany at the time. It is possible that Ferguson's criticism may have exerted an influence on Herder, though the extent of Ferguson's influence is difficult to establish.[44] Ferguson's argument, at the least, was an influential one. Many critics of the social contract theories of society rejected Rousseauian and Hobbesian arguments about the

---

[43] Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 9. Part I, Section 1 of Ferguson's text is an extended argument for this position, most specifically directed against Rousseau.

[44] Herder's mentions Ferguson in his review of Millar's *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*, SWS 5: 452-6. Ferguson's works were well-known in Germany in the eighteenth-century. The general reception of Ferguson in Germany is discussed in Fania Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment: Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), pp. 130-7. While Herder was certainly acquainted with Ferguson's work, the alleged influence of Ferguson on Herder has at times been overstated. For example, Roy Pascal, "Herder and the Scottish Historical School," *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 14 (1938-9).

state of nature on the grounds that the observation of nature shows us that human beings are naturally social and communal creatures. These arguments involve, in a sense, an updated restatement of Aristotle's claim in the *Politics* that man is a social or political animal.[45]

Herder, however, takes the matter a step further than thinkers who made an argument such as Ferguson's. It is one thing to note that man exists in society everywhere that we can observe mankind to live. It is another matter to ask *why* this is so, and to venture an explanation of this fact through an examination of the biological nature human beings. Herder inquires into what it is about man's natural condition that makes him the necessarily social being that he is. Herder worked, especially in the *Ideen*, to answer the question: "what it is about human *nature* – specifically the biological character of human beings - that has constituted human beings as the essentially social beings that they are?"

Herder's interest in these questions led him to the study of both history and *natural history*. Natural history (much of which today falls under the discipline of biology) is, according to Herder, the subject that reveals to us the basis of the history of mankind's *Geist*, our spiritual and intellectual nature. Herder was not content to offer anecdotal observations about man's nature, and he looked for the material for his theory of man in the natural sciences of his day. Herder drew on scientific works, such as Buffon's *Natural History,* which contains a rich and detailed account of the structural

[45] Aristotle, Politics, Book I. Included in Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

and developmental character of many organisms, including human beings.[46] Though Herder learned his facts from Buffon and other natural scientists, he argued for distinct conclusions about human nature on the basis those facts – conclusions concerning the social, political and moral character of humanity. This empirically informed procedure yielded the unique blend of naturalism and historicism that Herder developed in his Weimar years.

Herder's naturalistic account of the foundations of society and human nature are interesting and have much to recommend them, but there is a challenge for his view, indicated by the passage of Ferguson's quotes above. Herder's view, as I have presented it thus far seems open to the charge of excessive optimism. If human beings are naturally social creatures, and they are so because of the affectionate bonds between children and their parents, and if it is the extension of these bonds that form the basis of society, how are we to account for the violence, hostility and aggression that human beings often display toward one another? As Ferguson stated, mankind's "mixed disposition to friendship and enmity" is a fact that "must be admitted as the foundation of all our reasoning relative to man."[47]

Herder was not unaware of need to account for the hostility and aggression in human beings, and he attempted to do so in the *Ideen* in a way that he did not in *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*. Herder claims that violent and aggressive dispositions

[46] Volume 1, chapter 5 of Buffon's *Natural History*, for example, contains a discussion of human infancy, maturation, the senses, and life expectancy. See Georges Louis Leclerc Buffon, *Natural History of Man, the Globe, and of Quadrupeds, With Additions From Cuvier, Lacepede, and Other Eminent Naturalists*, trans. unknown (New York: World Publishing House, 1875). While Herder was heavily influenced by Buffon, Buffon was not Herder's sole scientific source, as Herder was familiar with many of the scientific works being produced at that time. Herder also argued against the conception of human races, which Buffon defends in *Natural History* volume 1, chapter 6, pp. 138-42.
[47] Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*, p. 9.

are rarer than gentle and peaceful ones. Violent and tyrannical persons, Herder argues, only come to exist through a limited set of possible causes - "inordinate passions", "faulty natural dispositions", "peculiar circumstances of education", or "demands of political necessity."[48] The natural world, especially the organic world, shows us certain deviations from the norm as part of the natural world itself. The exceptional instances of extremely violent and aggressive persons, Herder contends, do not show that human nature as such is marked by dominant inclinations to violence and aggression. Rather, it shows that human beings are naturally subject to the same kinds of variations as other organisms and natural phenomena.[49]

Herder's response, however, doesn't seem adequate. It neglects the fact that many kinds of hostility and aggression may infuse the ordinary lives of human beings in nearly all societies. It also doesn't seem to show how to account for the origin of hostility between various social groups, and how such hostility might endure for long periods of history.[50] In order to account for these phenomena, though, Herder need not abandon his argument as a whole, or any of its fundamental ideas. Accounting for the grimmer aspects of human nature does not require one to abandon either the claim that human

[48] DKV 6: 638.

[49] One Hobbesian rejoinder to Herder could be that even if the mankind's state of nature must be conceived of socially rather than individualistically, it could nonetheless appear to be a state of war. Hobbes' own argument in *Leviathan* I.xii seems to support such an argument. Herder, however, has two arguments against such an account. First, the empirical record does not confirm Hobbes' claim. Second, Hobbes assumes that mankind's desires are more uniform than they, in fact, are. Hobbes, bases his contention that the state of nature is a state of war on the following principle: "if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies" (p. 75). Herder denies a state of war, rather than peace, is natural to men because the objects desired by human beings are both (1) variable, as the ways of thinking and hence the objects of men's desires are not often the same and (2) even when men do desire the same objects, the objects desired are rarely scarce. Herder's arguments are given in *Ideen*, Book VIII, ch. 4.

[50] Herder's discussion of the diversity of languages in the *Treatise on the Origin of Language* might offer a way of accounting for this.

beings are essentially social, or even that they tend for the most part to have a positive affective disposition towards those in their immediate society. An adequate response to the charges of undue optimism would be to admit that tendencies toward hatred may tend to coexist alongside tendencies toward love, but that the natural forms of hatred are somehow tempered enough by natural forms of love and affection such that our natural disposition is still neither solitary nor anti-social.[51]

V

Herder's account of the dependence of human beings provides a naturalistic basis for his conception of human beings as essentially social. It also provides a naturalistic basis for his philosophy of history and for the possibility of history as such.

In the ninth book of the *Ideen*, Herder takes up the problem of the possibility of history. History, according to Herder, requires not just that there be events that unfold in a chronological sequence over time. In order for there to be a history worthy of the name, Herder argues that there must be change and development across time. A history of human beings and societies involves an account of the changes and developments that

[51] I think that Herder could have approached the issue in this manner, as is apparent if we examine one of his early texts, his *Zum Sinn des Gefühls* of 1769. In that text, Herder argues that the two basic powers of the world are attraction and repulsion, that human psychology is governed by these forces like everything else in nature, and also that war and peace in any part of nature can be explained according to these two forces. DKV 4: 235-41. For a discussion of this text, see Marion Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1994), pp. 102-8.

take place in their forms of life and ways of thinking. Herder states the condition which makes such changes, and hence history itself, possible:

> Here lies the principle of the history of mankind, without which no such history could be given. If man received everything from himself and developed it independently of external objects, then a history of a single man would be possible, but not of men, not of the species. Because our specific character as a species lies in the fact that we, born almost without instinct, only become formed into humanity [*Menschheit*] through lifelong practice, and the perfectibility just as much as the corruptibility of our species rests on this lifelong practice: so the history of mankind is for this reason necessarily a whole – that is, a chain of sociability [*Geselligkeit*] and a forming tradition [*bildenden Tradition*] from the first to the last link.[52]

According to Herder, changes are observable over the course of history because human beings are educated into the societies in which they are born, and thus learn the distinctive ways of thinking and acting characteristic of those societies. Societies, nations or *Volk* are not static entities because with each generation the societies themselves are further formed and developed by their members. The reason that societies are not static, but are rather dynamic, developing, and hence historical is that the individual persons who compose them are "born almost without instinct" and are hence forced to work towards becoming the beings that they are disposed to become – beings capable of reasoning, speaking, and living characteristically human forms of life.

What enables human beings to become the rationally self-directed, linguistically competent, and moral beings that they are is their natural way of growing and developing. And as we have seen, Herder holds that this both requires and involves the dependence of a child on the care of its parents. Herder is fond of speaking of history as

[52] DKV 6: 337.

a chain, in which each link is either an individual person or an individual generation. Herder's account of what it is that makes history possible reveals that the bonds that hold these links together are bonds of love.

Conclusion

Herder's work in the *Ideen* draws together many of the ideas that we have seen developed in the texts from the 1760s and 1770s. An important new concept that appears in the *Ideen* and is developed in later texts is the ideal of humanity, or the *Humanitätsideal*. This, according to Herder is the progressive development of the qualities essential to human beings. *Humanität* is, one the one hand, descriptive. It involves an account of the characteristic qualities of human beings. On this the other hand, the concept is prescriptive or normative. On the basis of the description of human beings developed through the study of history, Herder seeks to provide an account of the ends or aims of human development, for both the individual and the species. It is thus, in a sense, Herder's own spin on the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, discussed in chapter two.

Herder's account of the *Humanitätsideal* is one of the crucial areas of his work that is in great need of further exploration. The ideal is fundamental to the *Ideen*, and especially to the *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, which was authored from 1793-7. While it is not possible to explore this idea now, I believe that the best way to understand it is as a continuation of the central concepts laid out in the present work.

In the years after the *Ideen* there are, no doubt, some changes in Herder's views. He also attempted to fill in some of his accounts of human nature and ethical life with greater detail. Some of these developments were responses to intellectual challenges, such as Herder's engagement with Kant's critical philosophy. Others were the product of historic events, such as the French Revolution. Along with these, there are also the natural changes that occur as an individual grows older and sees the world from a different vantage point.

Through all this, I believe, Herder maintains his belief in a form of perfectionism, the centrality of history for understanding human phenomena, a version of naturalism, and the

principle of harmonious individuality. To conclude, I wish to gesture towards how these ideas appear together in Herder's later work, with a passage from the *Briefe*:

> Ihr [i.e. Menschheit] Hauptgut, der Gebrauch ihrer Kräfte, die Ausbildung ihrer Fähigkeiten ist ein gemeines, bleibendes Gut; und muß natürlicher Weise im fortgehenden Gebrauch fortwachsen…
>
> Denn die Natur des Menschen ist Kunst. Alles, wozu eine Anlage in seinem Daseyn ist, kann und muß mit der Zeit Kunst werden.[1]

[1] *Briefe zu Beförrderung der Humanität*, Briefe 25, SWS 17: 117.

Note on Translations

All translations from the German are my own, except where otherwise indicated. Translations from other languages are those of the editions cited in the bibliography.

Abbreviations

DKV	Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Werke in zehn Bänden*.
JubA	Mendelssohn, Moses. *Gesammelte Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe*.
SWS	Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Sämtliche Werke*.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

Abbt, Thomas. *Vermischte Werke*. 6 vols. Berlin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1772. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1978.

Aristotle. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*. 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Augustine. *The City of God Against the Pagans*. Translated by R.W. Dyson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Baumgarten, Alexander. *Ästhetik*. Translated by Dagmar Mirbach. 2 vols. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2009.

Bayle, Pierre. *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*. Translated by Richard Popkin. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1991.

Boulanger, Nicolas Antoine. *The Origin and Progress of Despotism in the Oriental, and Other Empires, of Africa, Europe, and America*. Translated by J. Wilkes. Amsterdam: Unknown Publisher, 1764.

Buffon, Georges Louis Leclerc. *Natural History of Man, the Globe, and of Quadrupeds, With Additions From Cuvier, Lacepede, and Other Eminent Naturalists*. Translated by unknown. New York: World Publishing House, 1875.

Cicero. *Tusculan Disputations*. Translated by J.E. King. Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1927.

———. *On Moral Ends*. Translated by Raphael Woolf. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Condillac, Etienne Bonnot de. *Essay on the Origin of Knowledge*. Translated by Hans Aarsleff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

Cooper, Anthony Ashley, Third Earl of Shaftesbury. *Characteristicks of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*. 3 vols. London: Purser, 1732. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001.

Ferguson, Adam. *An Essay on the History of Civil Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Aus meinem Leben: Wahrheit und Dichtung*. Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1866.
Hegel, G.W.F. *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*. 20 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971.
Helvétius, Claude Adrien. *De L'Esprit, Or, Essays on the Mind, and Its Several Faculties*. Translated by W. Mudford. London: M. Jones, 1807.
Herder, Johann Gottfried. *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*. Translated by T. Churchill. London: Luke Hansard, 1800.
———. *Sämtliche Werke*. 33 vols. Berlin: Weidmann, 1877-1913.
———. *Briefe: Gesamtausgabe*. 10 vols. Weimar: Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1977-96.
———. *Werke in zehn Bänden*. Edited by Martin Bollacher et. al.10 vols. Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985-2000.
———. *Kritische Wälder: Erstes bis Drittes Wäldchen; Viertes Wäldchen; Paralipomena*. 2 vols. Berlin: Aufbau, 1990.
———. *Philosophical Writings*. Translated by Michael Forster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
Hettner, Hermann, ed. *Georg Forster's Briefwechsel mit S.T. Sömmering*. Braunschweig: F. Vieweg, 1877.
Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Inadianapolis: Hackett, 1994.
Humboldt, Wilhelm von. *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Grenzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1967.
Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1888.
———. *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1987.
Hutcheson, Francis. *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue*. London: J. Darby, 1725.
Iselin, Isaak. *Über die Geschichte der Menschheit*. Zürich: Orell, Gessner, und Comp, 1768.
Kant, Immanuel. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Edited by Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaft. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902-.
Leibniz, G.W. *Theodicy: Essays on the Goodness of God, the Freedom of Man, and the Origin of Evil*. Translated by E.M. Huggard. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952.
———. *New Essays on the Human Understanding*. Translated by Peter Remnant and Jonathan Bennett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
———. *Philosophical Essays*. Translated by Roger Ariew and Daniel Garber. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989.
Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975. 1689.
Lord Kames, Henry Home. *Elements of Criticism*. London: G. Cowie and Co., 1824.
Mandeville, Bernard. *The Fable of the Bees*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1924. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988.
Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels Gesamtausgabe*. Berlin: Dietz, 1978-.
Mendelssohn, Moses. *Gesammelte Schriften*. 7 vols. Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1844.
———. *Schriften zur Philosophie, Aesthetik und Apologetik*. 2 vols. Leipzig: L. Voss, 1880.

———. *Gesammelte Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe*. 39 vols. Stuttgard-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann Holzboog, 1972.
Montaigne, Michel de. *The Complete Works*. Translated by Donald Frame. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.
Montesquieu, Charles-Louis de Secondat Baron de. *The Spirit of the Laws*. Translated by Anne M. Cohler, Basia Carolyn Miller and Harold Samuel Stone. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
Moscati, Pietro. *Von dem körperlichen wesentlichen Unterscheide zwischen der Structur der Thiere und der Menschen*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck, 1771.
Newton, Isaac. *Philosophical Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe in 15 Bänden*. 15 vols. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980.
Pascal, Blaise. *Pensées and Other Writings*. Translated by Honor Levi. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995.
Plato. *Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.
Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile: or, On Education*. Translated by Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1979.
———. *The Discourses and Other Early Political writings*. Translated by Victor Gourevitch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
Schiller, Friedrich. *Werke, Nationalausgabe*. Edited by L. Blumenthal and Benno von Wiese. Weimar: Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1943-1967.
Schlegel, Friedrich. *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe*. Edited by Ernst Behler, Jean Jacques Anstett and Hans Eichner. München: Schöningh, 1958-.
Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Edited by Gunter Meckenstock and et. al. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984-.
Seneca, Lucius Annaeus. *Moral and Political Essays*. Translated by John M. Cooper and J.F. Procopé. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
———. *Dialogues and Essays*. Translated by John Davie. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
———. *Hardship and Happiness*. Translated by Elaine Fantham, Harry M. Hine, James Ker and Gareth Williams. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
Spalding, Johann Joachim. *Predigten*. Berlin: Gottlieb August Lange, 1775.
———. *Die Bestimmung des Menschen, Die Erstausgabe von 1748 und die letzte Ausgabe von 1794*. Waltrop: Hartmut Spenner, 1997.
Spinoza, Benedict de. *The Collected Works of Spinoza*. Translated by Edwin Curley. Princeton: Princeton Unicersity Press, 1985.
Stirner, Max. *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 1979.
The Stoics Reader. Translated by Brad Inwood and Lloyd P. Gerson. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2008.
Sulzer, Johann Georg. *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften*. Leipzig: Weidmann, 1782.
Voltaire, François-Marie d'Arouet. *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by unknown. London: I. Allcock, 1766.
Wolff, Christian. *Vernünftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit*. Frankfurt and Leipzig: , 1733.

Other Works Cited

Aarsleff, Hans. "The Tradition of Condillac: The Problem of the Origin of Language in the Eighteenth Century and the Debate in the Berlin Academy Before Herder." In *From Locke to Saussure*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
———. "Herder's Cartesian *Ursprung* vs. Condillac's Expressivist *Essai*." In *Language Philosophies and the Language Sciences*, Edited by Daniele Gambarara, Stefano Gensini and Antonino Pennisi. Münster: Nodus Publikationen, 1996.
Adler, Emil. *Herder und die deutsche Aufklärung*. Vienna: Europa, 1968.
Adler, Hans, and Wulf Köpke, eds. *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*. Rochester: Camden House, 2009.
Altmann, Alexander. *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study*. University AL: University of Alabama Press, 1973.
Anscombe, G.E.M. "Modern Moral Philosophy." *Philosophy* 33, no. 124 (1958): 1-19.
Bährenbach, Friedrich von. *Herder als Vorgänger Darwins und der modernen Naturphilosophie*. Berlin: Theobald Grieben, 1877.
Barnard, Frederick M. *Herder's Social and Political Thought: From Enlightenment to Natonalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965.
Beck, Lewis White. *Early German Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969.
Beiser, Frederick C. *The Fate of Reason*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.
———. *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.
———. *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003.
———. *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism From Leibniz to Lessing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
———. *The German Historicist Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
———. "Mendelssohn Versus Herder on the Vocation of Man." In *Moses Mendelssohn's Metaphysics and Aesthetics*, Edited by Reinier Munk. Dordrecht: Springer, 2011.
Berlin, Isaiah. *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. London: Pimlico, 2000.
Bernasconi, Robert. "“Ich mag in keinen Himmel, wo Weisse sind“: Herder’s critique of Eurocentrism." *Acta Institutionis Philosophiae et Aestheticae* 13 (1995): 69-82.
Brandom, Robert. "Freedom and Constraint by Norms." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 16, no. 3 (1979): 187-96.
Brandt, Reinhard. *Die Bestimmung des Menschen bei Kant*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2007.
Cassirer, Ernst. *Freiheit und Form*. Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1922.
Clark, Robert. "Herder's conception of 'Kraft'." *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 57 (1942): 737-52.
———. *Herder: His Life and Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969.
Crowe, Benjamin D. "Herder’s Moral Philosophy: Perfectionism, Sentimentalism, and Theism." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 6 (2012): 1146-61.
Damasio, Anthony. *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*. New York: Putnam, 1994.

De Sousa, Ronald. *The Rationality of Emotion*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987.
DeSouza, Nigel. "Language, Reason, and Sociability: Herder's Critique of Rousseau." *Intellectual History Review* 22, no. 2 (2012): 221-40.
———. "Leibniz in the Eighteenth Century: Herder's Critical Reflections on the Principles of Nature and Grace." *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2012): 773-95.
———. "The Soul-Body Relationship and the Foundations of Morality: Herder contra Mendelssohn." *Herder Yearbook* 21 (2014): 145-61.
Ergang, Robert Reinhold. *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism*. New York: Octagon Books, 1966.
Flanagan, Owen. "Varieties of Naturalism." In *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, Edited by Philip Clayton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
Forster, Michael N. *Hegel's Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
———. "Gods, Animals, and Artists: Some Problem Cases in Herder's Philosophy of Language." *Inquiry* 45, no. 1 (2003).
———. *After Herder: Philosophy of Language in the German Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
———. "Genealogy." *American Dialectic* 1, no. 2 (2011): 230-50.
———. *German Philosophy of Language: From Schlegel to Hegel and Beyond*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
Foucault, Michel. "Nietsche, Genealogy, History." In *Language, Counter-Memory, and Practice: Selected Interviews and Essays*, 139-64. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.
Gadamer, Hans Georg. *Volk und Geschichte im Denken Herders*. Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1942.
———. "Herder und die geschichtliche Welt." In *Gesammelte Werke*, 318-35. Tübingen: Mohr, 1967.
———. *Truth and Method*. Translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall. New York: Continuum, 1998.
Gillies, Alexander. *Herder*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1945.
Gjesdal, Kristin. "'A Not Yet Invented Logic': Herder on Bildung, Anthropology, and the Future of Philosophy." In *Die Bildung der Moderne*, Edited by Michael Dreyer and Michael Forster. Tübingen: Francke, 2013.
Gray, Thomas. *Poems*. London: J. Dodsley, 1768.
Günther, Jacoby. *Herder als Faust*. Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1911.
Habermas, Jürgen. *Der philosophische Diskurs der Moderne*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985.
Harich, Wolfgang. "Herder und die bürgerliche Gesellschaft." In *Zur Philosophie der Geschichte: eine Auswahl in zwei Bänden*, Edited by Wolfgang Harich, 1952.
Hatfield, Gary. "Mechanizing the Sensitive Soul." In *Matter and Form in Early Modern Philosophy*, Edited by Gideon Manning. Leiden: Brill, 2012.
Haym, Rudolf. *Herder: Nach seinem Leben und seinen Werken*. 2 vols. Berlin: Rudolf Gaertner, 1877-85.
Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit*. 19th ed. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006.

Heinz, Marion. "Die Bestimmung des Menschen: Herder contra Mendelssohn." In *Philosophie der Endlichkeit*, Edited by Beate Niemeyer and Dirk Schütze, 263-85. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1991.
———. *Sensualistischer Idealismus*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1994.
Honneth, Axel. *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
Hurka, Thomas. *Perfectionism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
Irmscher, Hans Dietrich. *Johann Gottfried Herder*. Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001.
———. "Gegenwartskritik und Zukunftsbild in Herders *Auch eine Philosophie zur Geschichte der Bildung der Menschheit*." In *"Weitstrahlsinniges" Denken: Studien zu Johann Gottfried Herder*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2009.
———. *"Weitstrahlsinniges" Denken. Studien zu Johann Gottfried Herder*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2010.
Janaway, Christopher. *Beyond Selflessness: Reading Nietzsche's Genealogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
Joosten, Heiko. *Selbst, Substanz und Subjekt: Die ethische und politische Relevanz der personalen Identität bei Descartes, Herder und Hegel*. Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2005.
Kafka, Franz. *Die Erzählungen*. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1996.
Kuehn, Manfred. "Reason as a Species Characteristic." In *Kant's Idea for a Universal History With a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide*, Edited by Amelie Rorty and James Schmidt. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
Larmore, Charles. *Patterns of Moral Complexity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
Lear, Jonathan. *Radical Hope*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006.
Lorenz, Stefan. "Thomas Abbt und Moses Mendelssohn in ihrer Debatte über Johann Joachim Spaldings *Bestimmung des Menschen*." In *Moses Mendelssohn und die Krise seiner Wirksamkeit*, Edited by Michael Albrecht, Eva J. Engel and Norbert Hinske. Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1994.
Lovejoy, Arthur. "Some Eighteenth-Century Evolutionists." *The Scientific Monthly* 71, no. 3 (1950): 162-78.
Mackie, J.L. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. New York: Penguin, 1977.
Mamdani, Mahmood. *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012.
Mantena, Karuna. *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
Markworth, Tino. "Das “Ich“' und die Geschichte. Zum Zusammenhang von Selbstthematisierung und Geschichtsphilosophie bei J.G. Herder." In *Johann Gottfried Herder: Academic Disciplines and the Pursuit of Knowledge*, Edited by Wulf Köpke, 152-67. Columbia: Camden House, 1996.
May, Simon, ed. *Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
McDowell, John. *Mind and World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996.
McEachran, Frank. *The Life and Philosophy of Johann Gottfried Herder*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939.

Meinecke, Friedrich. *Die Entstehung des Historismus*. München: Oldenbourg Verlag, 1965.
Morton, Michael. *Herder and the Poetics of Thought*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990.
Murdoch, Iris. *The Sovereignty of Good*. New York: Shocken Books, 1970.
Muthu, Sankar. *Enlightenment Against Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
Neu, Jerome. *A Tear is an Intellectual Thing: The Meanings of Emotions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
Nisbet, Hugh Barr. *Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science*. Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association, 1970.
Norton, Robert E. *Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.
———. "The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 68 (2007): 635-8.
———. "Isaiah Berlin's 'Expressionism,' or: 'Ha! Du bist das Blökende!'." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69 (2008): 339-47.
Nussbaum, Martha. *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
Oz-Salzberger, Fania. *Translating the Enlightenment: Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Germany*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1995.
Pascal, Roy. "Herder and the Scottish Historical School." *Publications of the English Goethe Society* 14 (1938-9): 23-42.
Pinkard, Terry. *German Philosophy 1760-1860: The Legacy of Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
Popkin, Richard. *The History of Skepticism: From Savanarola to Bayle*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.
Printy, Michael. "The Determination of Man: Johann Joachim Spalding and the Protestant Enlightenment." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 74, no. 2 (2013): 189-212.
Pross, Wolfgang. "Herder und die Anthropologie der Aufklärung." In *Johann Gottfried Herder, Werke*, Edited by Wolfgang Pross, 1128-216. München: Hanser, 1987.
Redekop, Benjamin W. *Lessing, Abbt, Herder, and the Quest for a German Public*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000.
Reginster, Bernard. *The Affirmation of Life*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2009.
Richards, Robert. *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
Schacht, Richard, ed. *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality: Essays on Nietzsche's On the Genealogy of Morality*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
Scheffler, Samuel. *Death & the Afterlife*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
Schwaiger, Clemens. "Zur Frage nach den Quellen von Spaldings Bestimmung des Menshen. Ein ungelöstes Rätsel der Aufklärungsforschung." *Aufklärung* 11, no. 1 (1999): 7-19.
Sikka, Sonia. "On the Value of Happiness: Herder contra Kant." *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 37, no. 4 (2007): 515-46.

———. *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
Skinner, Quentin. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas." *History and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1969): 3-53.
Solomon, Robert. *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996.
Stadelmann, Rudolf. *Der historische Sinn bei Herder*. Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1928.
Stocker, Michael, and Elizabeth Hegeman. *Valuing Emotions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
Strauss, Leo. *Natural Right and History*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965.
———. *What is Political Philosophy?* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
Taylor, Charles. *The Ethics of Authenticity*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.
———. *The Sources of the Self*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.
———. "The Importance of Herder." In *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
———. "Language and Human Nature." In *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
Thompson, E.P. *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1976.
Tolstoy, Leo. *War and Peace*. Translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky. New York: Knopf, 2007.
Unger, Rudolf. *Herder, Novalis und Kleist: Studien über die Entwicklung des Todesproblems in Denken und Dichten vom Sturm und Drang zur Romantik*. Frankfurt: Moritz Diesterweg, 1922.
Wiese, Benno von. *Herder: Grundzüge seines Weltbildes* Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1939.
Williams, Bernard. *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985.
Wilson, Catherine. "Leibniz's Reputation in the Eighteenth Century: Kant and Herder." In *Insiders and Outsiders in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy*, Edited by G.A.J. Rogers, Tom Sorell and Jill Kraye. London: Routledge, 2010.
Wolff, Hans. "Der junge Herder und die Entwicklungsidee Rousseaus." *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association* 57 (1942): 753-819.
Wood, Allen. *Kant's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
———. "Herder and Kant on History: Their Enlightenment Faith." In *Metaphysics and the Good: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Merrihew Adams*, Edited by L. Jorgensen and S. Newlands. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.
Zammito, John. "Epigenesis: Concept and Metaphor in J.G. Herder's *Ideen*." In *Vom Selbstdenken: Aufklärung und Aufklärungskritik in Johann Gottfried Herders Ideen zur Philosophieder Geschichte der Menschheit*, Edited by Regine Otto and John Zammito, 131-45. Heidelberg: Synchron Wissenschaftsverlag, 2001.
———. *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Zammito, John, Karl Menges, and Ernest A. Menze. "Johann Gottfried Herder Revisited: The Revolution in Scholarship in the Last Quarter Century." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 71, no. 4 (2010): 661-84.

Vita

C. Richard Booher was born and raised in southern California. He earned his Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy at California State University, Fullerton in 2003. He then attended the University of Chicago, where he earned a Master of Arts in Humanities in 2004. His master's thesis was a critique of the distinction between first-order and second-order moral views. Before entering the Ph.D. program in Philosophy at Syracuse University in 2006, he worked as a science and math teacher in Brooklyn. He currently resides in Tustin, California.