

Herder

Philosophy and Anthropology

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Introduction

Anik Waldow and Nigel DeSouza

Herder is very much a thinker for our time. Instead of approaching facets of human existence in an isolated fashion, he brings the entire human being into focus by tracing its connections with the natural, cultural, and historical world. Through this integrated approach, Herder's anthropology develops a holistic understanding of the human sphere in relation to our existence as natural creatures who are crucially marked by the fact that we have language and thought, and understand and express meaning in our actions. By illuminating these contextual dimensions of human existence, Herder's anthropology resonates with many demands and needs arising today, when national and cultural interests—and conflicts—take on new, and old, forms in the wake of unprecedented global challenges.

This volume of essays is a reflection of a recent renewal of interest in the thought of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803).¹ The most obvious signs of this renewal are the excellent new critical editions of Herder's works in the original German,² and the burgeoning of German-language scholarship on Herder.³ But this new interest has not been limited to German-speaking countries: several collections of Herder's writings in English translation have appeared in recent years,⁴ and while there has been recognition of Herder's foundational importance for several disciplines—from classics and history to anthropology and cultural

¹ For an excellent overview of the most recent stage of this Herder renaissance, see Zammito et al. 2010. For a summary of its beginnings, see Nisbet 1973.

² See FHA, vols. 1–10, published between 1985 and 2000, and HWP, vols. 1–3, published between 1984 and 2002.

³ The latest bibliographies of primary and secondary literature can be found in the *Herder Yearbook*, published biennially. For a helpful survey of all previous bibliographies see <http://web.stanford.edu/~tino/HerderBibl.htm>.

⁴ Most important among these for this volume is the excellent set of translations by Michael Forster entitled *Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings*, see Forster 2002. See also:

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studies⁵—Herder’s fortunes as a philosopher and as a figure in the history of philosophy have also been changing, for the better. In the English-speaking world, the writings of Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor, as well as H. B. Nisbet and Hans Aarsleff, certainly helped to put Herder on the philosophical map,⁶ but more recently there have been several studies of Herder’s most celebrated ideas on aesthetics, language, culture, politics, and the philosophy of history, as well as a *Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*.⁷ In German, there have been important examinations of Herder’s philosophy of language and his metaphysics and epistemology and a recently published *Herder Handbuch*, a third of which is devoted to his philosophical writings.⁸ Gradually, Herder is assuming his rightful place in the history of philosophy and as a major Enlightenment figure.

Unifying all of these investigations of Herder’s philosophical thought is the overarching theme of anthropology. In one of his earliest writings, entitled *How philosophy can become more universal and useful for the benefit of the people* (1765), Herder declared: “All philosophy which is supposed to belong to the people must make the people its central focus, and if philosophy’s viewpoint gets changed in the manner in which out of the Ptolemaic system the Copernican system developed, what new fruitful developments must not occur here, if our whole philosophy becomes anthropology” (FHA 1, 134; Forster 2002, 29). This passage is in part striking for its anticipation of Kant’s own later invocation of the Copernican revolution, but it also relates to Kant in a deeper way, for it encapsulates a fundamental orientation in Herder’s approach to philosophy to which he would remain committed for his whole life and which, while initially inspired in large part by the pre-critical Kant of the 1760s, defines itself in opposition to the narrow conception of reason he found in many Enlightenment thinkers and, eventually, to Kant’s critical philosophy too.⁹ Underlying all of Herder’s philosophical thought, and arguably his entire oeuvre, is a philosophical understanding of the human being, a philosophical anthropology that is unique in the Enlightenment and that would come to exercise a powerful influence on

Menze et al. 1992, Adler and Menze 1996, Gaiger 2002, Evrigenis and Pellerin 2004, Moore 2006, Alder and Koepke 2009.

⁵ See, e.g., Kramer 1985, Güthenke 2008, During 2005.

⁶ See, e.g., Taylor 1975, 3–51; Taylor 1995; Berlin 1976; Nisbet 1970; Aarsleff 1974.

⁷ See, e.g., Norton 1991, Adler and Koepke 2009, Forster 2010, Sikka 2011, Spencer 2013, Noyes 2015.

⁸ See, e.g., Gaier 1988, Adler 1990, Heinz 1994, Greif et al. 2016.

⁹ For a detailed study of the relationship of Kant and Herder to each other and to (philosophical) anthropology, see Zammito 2002. One of Herder’s last works was a *Metacritique* of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. See FHA 8 and, for discussion, Heinz 2013.

philosophy and other disciplines in the decades to come.¹⁰ At the heart of this anthropology is a conception of human beings as primarily sensible animals whose unique linguistic and rational capacities are constitutively shaped by their historico-cultural circumstances, which they reproduce and shape in turn. Herder grounds this conception in both a naturalistic account of human development and a metaphysics and epistemology of which soul-body interaction is a central feature. This conception forms the basis of Herder's challenge to, and reinterpretation of, well-established conceptual distinctions, such as those between nature and culture, animal and human, reason and sensibility.¹¹

All of the essays in this volume explore different aspects of Herder's wide-ranging attempts to reform the Enlightenment understanding of philosophy, and of its relationship to the nascent discipline of anthropology, which, in Herder's period, as John Zammito points out, was more like a new "paradigm," "research programme," or "new rubric in the space of knowledge."¹² The first part of the volume examines the various dimensions of Herder's philosophical understanding of human nature through which he sought methodologically to delineate a genuinely anthropological philosophy. This includes his critique of traditional metaphysics and its revision along anthropological lines; the metaphysical, epistemological, and physiological dimensions of his theory of the soul-body relationship; his conception of aesthetics as the study of the sensuous basis of knowledge; and the relationship between the human and natural sciences. The second part then examines further aspects of this understanding of human nature and what emerges from it: the human-animal distinction; how human life evolves over space and time on the basis of a natural order; the fundamentally hermeneutic dimension to human existence; and the interrelatedness of language, history, religion, and culture.

Part I: Towards a New Philosophy: Philosophy as Anthropology

The volume begins with an interview with Charles Taylor, whose writings have been seminal in establishing Herder as an important figure in philosophy and its history. For Taylor, Herder is one of the first thinkers to recognize that human beings and human culture must be understood hermeneutically and not in simple natural scientific terms, and that philosophy must reflect this. Herder's anthropology

¹⁰ See, e.g., Beiser 1987, Heinz 1997.

¹¹ See, e.g., Lifschitz 2012, DeSouza 2012, Waldow 2015.

¹² See Zammito 2002, 3–4. Zammito takes the terms in quotations from Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos, and Francisco Vidal, respectively (Zammito 2002, 4).

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demonstrates in an exemplary way that a rigorous focus on the situated realities of different cultural and historical contexts is needed in order to be able to do social and political philosophy. Thus he argues, for example, that knowing what justice means cannot be decided through normative considerations alone, but requires an understanding of how language is used and what the meaning of key concepts like honour and fairness are when approached from within a specific cultural context. Taylor's reflections also illuminate the fine line between, on the one hand, a naturalism that starts from the question of what kind of animal the human being is and then proceeds to a comparative study of how the related specific differences unfold in different socio-cultural settings and, on the other, a naturalism that is reductive and leaves no room for cultural variation in its attempt to discover natural mechanisms that can be used to exhaustively explain human thinking and acting.

Contrary to the prevailing opinion in Herder scholarship, Marion Heinz argues in Chapter 2 that the aim of Herder's anthropology is not to replace philosophy, but to turn traditional metaphysics into a form of empirical psychology that still preserves metaphysics. Central to Heinz's argument is the claim that, for Herder, philosophy remains a theoretical enterprise that, although inspired by the analytical methods of physics, remains metaphysical insofar as it begins from a philosophical concept of the human being. Anthropology and metaphysics thus emerge as standing in a dual relationship: metaphysics has priority over anthropology if considered from a theoretical-foundational point of view and yet counts as anthropologically grounded when seen in its critical function to challenge established metaphysics.

In Chapter 3, Nigel DeSouza explores this new anthropologically focused metaphysics of Herder. The aim of this essay is to show that Herder's justly celebrated ideas on history and culture are underpinned by an original and unique metaphysics and epistemology. The central element here is the soul-body relationship, according to DeSouza. Just as God realizes himself through the world, so too does the human being realize herself through her body. By means of this analogy, Herder provides a metaphysical foundation and framework for his theory of human nature and of soul-body interaction. The human soul unfolds itself through the body it constructs, through whose senses it then interacts with the external world. Human individuality is a product of both the individual differences of the soul itself and of the differences it acquires through its engagement with the world outside it. This metaphysical picture forms the basis of Herder's anthropology and of his studies of human beings as linguistic, historical, and cultural beings explored by several of the other essays in this volume.

The soul-body relationship also figures centrally in Chapter 4, where Stefanie Buchenau approaches Herder's anthropology from the perspective of the

emerging life sciences and eighteenth-century discoveries in medicine and physiology. The major impulse, Buchenau argues, came from Albrecht von Haller's discovery of the irritability of muscle and the sensibility of nerves. Haller's proposal to understand sensation and thought in relation to particular bodily structures, however, exerted pressure on established philosophical and theological dogmas of the time. It thus became difficult to conceive of physicians as dealing with the human body alone, while entrusting to philosophy and theology the study of the soul. Herder's own response was to see the soul as pervading the body, the irritability and sensibility of different fibres being the most basic manifestation of this relationship.

Stephen Gaukroger's essay (Chapter 5) continues along naturalist lines to develop the claim that Herder's naturalism incorporates elements of the artistic and literary domain. Thus, he argues that for Herder aesthetics played a crucial role in his attempt to develop a philosophical anthropology because essential to his conception of the human being is its sensibility and sensuous knowledge, the study of which, following Baumgarten, he termed aesthetics. This sensibility expresses itself in language, art, and the manufacturing of cultural artefacts. A discipline that seeks to comprehend human motivation and behaviour in their historical expressions, as Herder's anthropology does, must take this aesthetic dimension seriously, which requires it to develop a set of cognitive values different in kind from those that define the physical sciences.

Herder's metaphysics might be understood as analytic in its movement from the analysis of the empirically given to the formulation of a conceptual and logical order. However, when approaching an understanding of nature, his method becomes a form of analogical reasoning. This method, as Dalia Nassar demonstrates in Chapter 6, is comparative and descriptive, and it was inspired by Herder's and Goethe's understanding of literature. It brings into focus the forms of individuals in their relation to nature, and through this facilitates a complex understanding of nature that is not reducible to causal explanations. Nassar argues that, by widening his natural-philosophical methodological repertoire in this way, Herder offers resources for challenging the rigid division between the human and natural sciences that is based on Dilthey's distinction between descriptive understanding and causal explanation.

Part II: The Human Animal: Nature, Language, History, Culture

Chapter 7 examines the extent to which Hermann Samuel Reimarus and his theory of animal instinct influenced the development of Herder's arguments in his *Treatise on the Origin of Language*. John Zammito claims that, far from being

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a mere footnote to the *Treatise*'s central discussion on the human origin of language, Herder's reflections on animal and human instincts offer an important contribution to the reassessment of the animal-human boundary—an issue that became pressing with the rejection of the Cartesian doctrine of the animal machine. Avoiding the recourse to the supernatural adopted by Reimarus in addressing the question of the origin of human language, Herder developed a naturalistic account. By investigating the commentaries of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and Johann Nicolaus Tetens, Zammito argues that this naturalistic aspect of Herder's theory was well recognized by his contemporaries, a point that, seen in the wider context of the eighteenth-century debate, helps us to better assess the impact and significance of Herder's work.

The place of the human being in nature is also the subject of Anik Waldow's discussion in Chapter 8. By engaging with Herder's conception of history as a form of natural growth, she argues that an important aspect of integrating human history into a general history of nature is that it becomes possible to explain how specifically human attributes develop out of nature itself. Key to Herder's developmental account of language and reason is to conceive of humans as affectively responsive and malleable by the constraints found in the human sphere of life, just like the way an animal responds and adapts to the demands of its environmental milieu. With this developmental account of rationality, Waldow argues, Herder guards against an overly universalistic conception of reason and stresses the importance of situational contexts in the shaping of cognitive structures.

In Chapter 9, Kristin Gjesdal investigates the conception of Herder's science of human nature as bringing into focus the usefulness of methods employed in poetry, drama, literary translation, and literary documentation. She argues that for Herder it is clear that the human sciences must regard interpretation as their chief method given that our having language and being expressive beings defines a crucial part of human existence. What matters in particular is that an approach be developed that is amenable to taking into consideration the universal and the particular alike. An aestheticizing approach towards the human being that makes use of the human capacity to sympathize with others addresses this concern. Gjesdal points out that, for Herder, Thomas Abbt's writings elucidate how the human being itself, in its expressive and affective sensibility, can become an instrument that opens up an understanding of others, and thereby helps us to understand what human nature is. This method, instead of simply projecting the individual's own sensibilities onto the other, relies on observation and the analysis of concrete performances of human language and action, so that sympathy-based explanatory principles become verifiable.

The resurgence of interest in Herder's naturalism and anthropology entails that we run the risk of ignoring the inextricable religious dimensions to Herder's thought. Johannes Schmidt's essay helps us avoid this pitfall through an exploration in Chapter 10 of Herder's religious anthropology, in which he argues that an understanding of this anthropology does not require a Lutheran or even a Christian point of view. Herder's religious anthropology, Schmidt suggests, is instead premised on the human capacity for religious experience and is thus sensitive to the history, culture, and language of religions, with the individual human being constituting the focus of interest. Religious writings here emerge as the literary expressions of human agents molded by their time and place, and thus cannot be seen as standing independently of the cultural and historical context within which they were written or as literal expressions of the word of God.

In order to draw out the contrast between plurality and universality in Herder's historical thought, Martin Bollacher offers a detailed analysis of Herder's "globe ontology" in Chapter 11, according to which a sphere has infinite points on its surface but all of which relate to the same middle point. This ontology allows Herder, on the one hand, to recognize the diversity of different human cultures and, on the other, to see them as nonetheless unified by their belonging to one human species. It grounds a method of historical investigation that enables an understanding of the individual in its unique historico-cultural situation through a hermeneutics of "Einfühlung" or sympathy. Defending Herder against the charge of inconsistency for objecting to a teleological conception of history while at the same time regarding the realization of humanity as a universal ideal, Bollacher claims that it is precisely by thinking in opposites that Herder is able to advance a nuanced and innovative position. This position goes beyond many historiographical and cultural-theoretical conceptions of the eighteenth century, and continues to exert a noticeable influence within today's criticism of the hegemony of western culture, as Bollacher demonstrates in his engagement with Peter Sloterdijk's pluralistic spherology.

Focusing on Herder's relevance to contemporary political theory, Michael Forster investigates the tools that Herder's concept of humanity offers for bringing into focus some of the well-founded concerns about the concept of human rights (Chapter 12). These concerns revolve around the concept's legalistic implications, and its close association with property rights that seem to challenge the conception of human rights as inalienable. A second group of worries touches on the concept's focus on the protection of individuals against threats from within a polity—missing here are the threats coming from without, which is a concern that becomes particularly pressing in the contexts of colonialism, imperialism, and globalization. Herder's concept of humanity, Forster

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argues, can help us to overcome these difficulties; it offers a perspective that allows us to understand humans as moral agents rather than as possessors of rights, a perspective that also allows us to address the question of the exclusion of animals from human rights discourse.

In the final contribution to this volume (Chapter 13), Frederick Beiser submits Herder's professed humanitarian pluralism to a test. The occasion for such scrutiny is afforded by a trend in recent scholarship that sees Herder's ideal of the nation with its emphasis on cultural preservation as undermining or ignoring the protection of cultural and religious diversity within the state. The issue surfaces in relation to the Jewish question, which Herder addressed in several of his writings. Beiser responds to recent criticisms of Herder on this front, arguing that, far from requiring the assimilation of Jews in order to homogenize the nation from within, Herder's aim is to win concessions for the Jews that would open up new professional and educational possibilities to them, which would allow emancipation without assimilation. Beiser's discussion shows that the liberal, pluralistic image of Herder still deserves to be preserved.

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