

Cambridge University Press

0521790883 - Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings - Edited by Michael N. Forster

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Part I General Philosophical Program

Cambridge University Press

0521790883 - Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings - Edited by Michael N. Forster

Excerpt

[More information](#)

How Philosophy¹ Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People² (1765)

[Introduction]³

If any science has been an object of contradictions, and yet amid these stones and earthen clods that have been cast at it an object of reverence, then it is exalted philosophy [*Weltweisheit*].⁴ Since its beginning it had constantly been a source of annoyance to the one party, a corner-stone of truth to the other; and this so peculiar phenomenon of contradiction has not merely been a mark of distinction and a shibboleth, so to speak, among whole ages, peoples, and sects, but philosophy has had to survive this metamorphosis of judgment at one time and among one people, indeed often in different phases of one and the same person. This is indeed as remarkable a phenomenon of the human understanding for a person who is not a scholar as it is a remarkable thing for a person who is not a politician when people conflict with people. Philosophy has become a Proteus among the nations. Where it was victorious, behold, it generally built its throne on the ruins of mathematics and experiences from physics; but commonly it remained an ally of philology, with which it also commonly associated

¹ *Philosophie*. In this essay Herder also uses the more colorful word *Weltweisheit* more or less interchangeably with this word.

² This title is taken by Herder's German editor from a letter that Herder wrote to Hamann about this essay on 23 April 1765. An earlier draft of the essay actually bore the similar but not identical title *How Can the Truths of Philosophy Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People?* There would be a good argument for retaining the latter title.

³ Headings in square brackets are supplied by Herder's German editor in light of an essay plan for this essay which Herder wrote.

⁴ Herder uses this word more or less interchangeably with *Philosophie* in this essay. Literally it means *world-wisdom*, but I have translated both terms as *philosophy* throughout.

Cambridge University Press

0521790883 - Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings - Edited by Michael N.

Forster

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General Philosophical Program*

too intimately; whereas one can say that *mathematics* and *philology* hardly ever took root together.

Since in the *defenses*, the offensive wars, and the defensive wars over metaphysics [*Metaphysik*] the most patent *sectarianisms*, partisanships, have certainly been the banner, one ought not to be surprised that the raging heat of the battle and the fog of which each person accused the other left no party's eyes free but only their hands, and that no one lost the blindfold of the fact that he was fighting with specters, and perhaps with his own shadow. But since this battle was so longlasting, switched *between such different* fortunes, since in it the circle of military stratagems, fighter's tricks, and real bravery had almost been exhausted, it is surprising that no *idle* spectator with cool passion made bold enough to turn himself into a *pragmatic* Thucydides or Polybius from it, surveyed the whole in the large with an alert eye, the possibility of explaining the drives, the connection of the motives, and the secret effects. I say a Polybius, for we have no shortage of newspaper reporters.

It is still worse that people have fought over mere abstractions, without seeing the real benefit. The defenders thought their benefit too holy and great and obvious even to want to make trials of it. And even had they been unwilling to do this for the sake of their translators – which trial would have been very necessary, however – they should at least have presented it to the weak as a demonstration of undeniability. The despisers, on the other hand, mostly thought the abstractions so completely useless that it was a new foolishness to think of applying them in other sciences. At least economics had posed the problem: What must I do with a good-for-nothing [metaphysics] which unfortunately exists, which has for so long spread harm? What must I do with it in order to reap from it, instead of harm, some benefit at last?

All enemies of metaphysics fight in two great hordes, each of which has a different side of the enemy, different weapons and rules of warfare, its own manner of attack and defense. One attacks the truths of philosophy [*Philosophie*], the other their use and application. The former is the sect of the mathematicians who often concede to their enemy no truth, never certainty, very rarely clarity; and when they finally add complete uselessness to the result of their calculation, the condemnation is complete.⁵ These two sciences have been constant enemies: if the one won, etc. In the

⁵ The translation here follows Gaier's clearly correct hypothesis about Herder's intentions (G1:973), rather than Gaier's printed text.

Cambridge University Press

0521790883 - Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings - Edited by Michael N.

Forster

Excerpt

[More information](#)*How Philosophy Can Become More Universal*

end, since neither could eliminate the other, they proceeded like the Turks and Saracens: philosophy, the weaker, borrowed from mathematics its manner, its procedure, its expressions, and in the process really lost its spirit. Even in individual men these disciplines' spirits have never been able to coexist: in Spinoza and Descartes philosophy turned into a tissue of unfortunate hypotheses; Leibniz was a more fortunate poet; and Wolff, the great spokesman of his inventor [Leibniz], gave philosophy its mathematical regimentation and slogans with what success? It would be a digression from my purpose to pass judgment on this; I merely point to a theme which has perhaps not yet received an answer.

Whence comes the inner quarrel between philosophy and mathematics? How can it be settled? Should one science be compared with the other, in order to demand mathematical certainty, clarity, and usefulness in philosophy? How can one science flow into the other without doing it the damage which we have experienced from the unification of both? One will see in what respect.

The second species of those who contradict philosophy is merely an offshoot of the former one: the *physicists* (but unfortunately there have been too few of them). They dared to investigate the phenomena of abstraction like the noteworthy features of nature etc., to judge them from experiences not from hypotheses, to transfer the spirit of physical analysis into philosophy instead of mathematical synthesis, in short, to attempt a *dissection* of the products of our spirit, be they errors or truths. In physics Descartes' hypotheses were followed by a Newton. In philosophy, may the mathematical aeons be followed by the physical ones – stat palma in medio, qui poterit, rapiat!⁶

Those who have made a posteriori observations about philosophy also constitute two armies of quite different people: they are the theologians and the political thinkers, or if one prefers, the friends of God and men. The former have in a very premature manner transplanted philosophical truth into the realm of religious truth, and thereby distorted both. What are all the scholastic methods of our dogmatics but sad remains from the Aristotelian leaven, which unfortunately protect themselves by means of the prejudice of holy old age, and which scarcely two or three of our theologico-philosophers have begun to root out with fearful boldness? On the other hand, one will also be able to call to mind the newest

⁶ The palm stands in the middle, whoever can, let him seize it.

Cambridge University Press

0521790883 - Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings - Edited by Michael N.

Forster

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General Philosophical Program*

fashion-philosophy in Germany, which brings postulates from theology into the first principles of metaphysics, considers the whole of philosophy from a trembling theological point of view as though it were an enemy, so to speak, and hence is⁷ the idol of young theologians, who are to be metaphysicians at others' expense. To discover the whole enormous difference in viewpoint, manner of inference, and manner of proof, indeed in the original sources of knowledge of the two sciences (which scarcely bear the name 'science' in a single sense), to eliminate so many useless philosophical doctrines from the method of our theologians, and, on the other hand, to discover new paths and plans for spreading a *philosophical spirit* about the most biblical truths so that one is not believing a holy nullity – this is a labor for which the English and a few German theologians have already bequeathed us fragments, or at least good examples of application.

The fourth *viewpoint* is the most useful and the most appropriate for our economico-political age. It is, with a slight modification, the question of a patriotic society, "How can the truths etc.?"⁸ How can philosophy be reconciled with humanity and politics so that it also really serves the latter? A question which [has had] more than one career-philosopher as answerer, and which least of all needs such a person to decide it. The question over which *Plato, Rousseau, Hume, and Shaftesbury* pondered very deeply and plunged into doubt.⁹

England is full of deep observers of nature, full of natural philosophers, politicians, mathematicians. France is full of literary types [*Schöngeist*], full of *men*, experts in statecraft, full of geometers. Germany – hardworking Germany – has only the national virtue of *being philosophical* [*weltweise zu sein*]. The former cannot reach up to us, and so they belittle us. Oh, is it not therefore a task for everyone who has German blood in his veins and a German philosophical spirit to develop this patriotic theme, to show how philosophy stands in relation to political science, mathematics, the literary arts [*den schönen Wissenschaften*], so that he cedes nothing belonging to philosophy and to its standing?¹⁰

⁷ Reading *ist* for *sind*.

⁸ The "patriotic society" was one in Berne, Switzerland which had set the prize question: "How can the truths of philosophy become more universal and useful for the benefit of the people?"

⁹ As Gaier points out (G1:974), in a deleted passage of the introduction Herder associates these names with that of *Pyrrho* as well. Cf. Herder's remark in the first section below, "I am writing for Pyrrhonists."

¹⁰ Question mark added. Henceforth I shall not specifically note such revisions in punctuation, which are frequent.

Cambridge University Press

0521790883 - Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings - Edited by Michael N.

Forster

Excerpt

[More information](#)*How Philosophy Can Become More Universal*

The people – as one society¹¹ takes the question – is the greatest, the most venerable, part of the public, in contrast to which philosophy is a troglodyte-people living in caves with Minerva's night-owls! If the latter have treasures, well then, they must become common property. If they do not have them, if they are themselves useless to the state, then let their caves be destroyed and let the night-owls of Minerva be taught to look at the sun.

I take the word 'people' in the general sense of each citizen of the state insofar as he merely obeys the laws of healthy reason without choosing higher philosophy as his guide. And although it is so difficult to determine exactly the borders between wealth [*Reichtum*] and being comfortably off [*Wohlhabenheit*], between rhetorical eloquence [*Beredsamkeit*] and good style [*Wohlredenheit*], between healthy thought and learned thought,¹² nevertheless we are secure from confusion if we will take note of the meaning of the word 'philosophy' and understand by 'people' all those who are not such philosophers.

If I were a president of an academy comprising four or more academic trades who unfortunately fits into none of these, then this problem would require a different solution from the theologian, from the geometer, from the natural scientist and the political scientist, and I would judge the matter as a human being, without preference for philosophy (which is in the process of getting condemned), for one of my own pet inclinations, or for one of my academic categories. And in this way the truth would become clear, if one did not aim¹³ to refute, to express novelties, to become famous, but wrote as a human being who is learning and trying to make up his mind.

I have laid out all these various *viewpoints* in advance in order to make clear the necessity which properly belongs to my question, and to show all the various viewpoints and sides from which it can be considered. So I am undertaking to write about this question: ["How can the truths etc.?"], and have had to present justifications for thinking that one must write about it. If the question were one of those set topics of the academies about which one has to shrug one's shoulders, then it would effect its own punishment by virtue of the fact that in general a miserable riddle attracts the company

¹¹ I.e. the "patriotic society" mentioned above.

¹² Note that Herder is here employing the rhetorical figure of chiasmus (i.e. inverting the order) between the first two pairs of examples and the last.

¹³ Reading *wollte* instead of *will*.

Cambridge University Press

0521790883 - Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings - Edited by Michael N.

Forster

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General Philosophical Program*

of a miserable Oedipus. But I wish for this question more attention, better fortune, and more application. I am speaking about a German theme, I am speaking before Germans, who are the deepest and, after the English, the least biased philosophers [*Weltweise*] of Europe. I am speaking as a German. Instead of sowing words, I am planting thoughts and prospects. I leave it to others to raise these seeds, and to make them trees, and perhaps also to gather fruit. And I request for myself only the attention which one applies in order to find a seed that may perhaps be noble.

I will divide up my question, and say about each part of philosophy what sort of fruits it does not bear and how it can bear fruits for the state. I know that my thread, my viewpoint, and often also my thoughts will not seem orthodox. But I also hope that it will in the end become clear why I did not choose the viewpoint which was perhaps easiest and which everyone else would have chosen.

[First section:] Truths in philosophy

If I showed that there are truths in philosophy, I [would] seem to be like that advocate who, in order to defend the innocence of a virgin, laid bare her most private parts merely in order to show that he was not talking about a male person. (But, just as this would not exactly have been the strictest proof of her innocence for the judges, likewise it must merely constitute the possibility of an advocate that philosophy have truths, that they can be applied.) Since I am writing for Pyrrhonists, it follows etc.¹⁴

[Logic in its first part,] since it is opposed to the natural order of our soul, merely contains the order of verbal presentation. And here is a matter of a small though indispensable triviality to which one can never give all those much-promising names.¹⁵

The second part of Logic is merely a word-register which can entertain a distracted attention and somewhat fill out thoughts. And these definitions are mostly quite superfluous in philosophy as instrumental concepts. One learns them merely for the logicians. And *learning*? Yes, that is a real corruption for the *philosophoumenos*:¹⁶ if in the art which teaches him to use his soul he is at most trained to retain, he also comes to think that

¹⁴ There is a gap in the manuscript at this point – probably a fairly substantial one.

¹⁵ The first lines of the section up to this point contain, besides a gap, also various other problems in Herder's manuscript. My translation of them is therefore somewhat conjectural.

¹⁶ *philosophoumenos*: philosophizer.

Cambridge University Press

0521790883 - Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings - Edited by Michael N.

Forster

Excerpt

[More information](#)*How Philosophy Can Become More Universal*

all philosophical thinking is *retaining*. He learns to define, he swears by the words of his teacher. Why do we have so few independent thinkers? Because already in school they were hemmed in with Logic. O you his machine-like teacher, well do you need to suppress his healthy understanding with your school Logic; otherwise he would take your measure, repeat the gobbledygook you took an hour to trot out afterwards *naturally* but without school-cleverness in three words. He would despise you! But woe unto you; from a thousand heads who would have become men only ten will be bold enough to be wise; the rest are choked with school-dust – like the Egyptian midwife.¹⁷

So our Logic contains comfortless, far-too-universal rules, besides these¹⁸ a philosophical register, and then a scholastic method of ancient disputation. Consequently, its truths cannot be made universal for the benefit of the people. Even for scholars it is no instrumental science, even the philosophical use of this method, since this use mostly turns philosophical thinking into disputation, and since our times no longer arm themselves with Sorites paradoxes and enthymemes. [Because of this] it is just as fruitless a task to concern oneself with the tying and untying of such knots as it is to toss lentils through the eye of a needle.

But can they not become more useful? I will answer this question differently for scholars and for the people, which knows nothing about the law of a Logic. When I consider what is good in our Logic precisely, our Logic seems to me to be merely a quite wrongly separated part of psychology [*Psychologie*] that must be treated as metaphysics and not at all presupposed as instrumental knowledge. Our Logic presupposes the greater part of psychology, unless one wants to consider it as mutilated limbs of our soul and as a field full of corpses. For who will speak of the abilities of something whose forces I do not yet know? But our Logic must also be united with the marrow of the science of the soul [*Seelenlehre*] if it is to be useful. In short, I have attempted to plant its limbs back into the body, and I have seen how then everything lives, a spirit enters these bones, they are full of life.

¹⁷ Gaier (G1:976) conjectures that there is an allusion here to the practice among Egyptian peasant women of giving birth while squatting on the ground, a practice presumably leading to the newborn infant sometimes choking in the dust, and to related problems for the midwife. The midwife is presumably the philosophical teacher whom Herder is discussing – in virtue of an allusion to Socrates' use of the metaphor of the midwife to describe himself and his philosophical activity in Plato's *Theaetetus*.

¹⁸ Reading *ihnen* for *ihr*.

Cambridge University Press

0521790883 - Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings - Edited by Michael N.

Forster

Excerpt

[More information](#)*General Philosophical Program*

But is this not *at most* a mistake in ordering [the disciplines]? It would be a big enough one etc. But it is also a mistake in the *matter itself*. If Logic ought to be treated as metaphysics, then I must *dissect* the subjective concept of thought and the objective concept of truth, not explain and name them in an arbitrary fashion, but unfold them, and by means of an extensive analysis of the concept so to speak seek the origin of all truth and science in my soul. In this way this part of psychology becomes an art of invention,¹⁹ an art of judgment and verbal presentation, when it shows these capacities within me, when it, so to speak, impresses on me a philosophical history of good and bad use, when it reveals my soul to me as, so to speak, the spirit from which a science has flowed with all its mistakes, riches, etc. In this way, it cannot fail to happen that if I have a motive within me it will hereby be awakened, that I so to speak make myself into God and philosopher in respect of my own soul, like Peter²⁰ etc. – The proof lies in the inventions.²¹

This much presupposed in order to determine how Logic in itself – but without my giving this name to another science – can become useful. And for the people's use? If there existed a Logic which was arrayed in all the *ideal perfections of our idol*, which banished errors, etc., should it become more universal for the use of the people? As long as one passes judgment on the perfection or imperfection in an ideal science of thought without showing this goddess in the plain clothes of humanity, one acknowledges much to be good which itself shows its flaws in its application. Certainly philosophical thinking is a perfection. But whether this perfection is one for human beings like us whose slogan was spoken by nature, "Live, reproduce, and die!" and whether thinking philosophically is for citizens to whom the state spoke the slogan "Act!" is a question which is *very relevant* for our problem.

All philosophizing (in the strict sense) to which the best Logic can raise us is dispensable to the state. Let someone ask the project-man Beaumelle²² and name for me that greatest action, that finest project, which grew in the lap of abstraction and not in the bosom of healthy reason. The greatest deeds of war, the finest establishments of the state [are] pure fruits of the Logic which our nurses implanted in us, not of the Logic which our schoolteachers wanted to stamp us with. And if no philosophy may be

¹⁹ Or: discovery. ²⁰ I.e. Peter the Great. ²¹ Or: discoveries.

²² L. A. de la Beaumelle (1726–73), an author who wrote on his contemporaries' passion for projects.

Cambridge University Press

0521790883 - Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings - Edited by Michael N.

Forster

Excerpt

[More information](#)*How Philosophy Can Become More Universal*

permitted to raise itself up to these rungs, then the people is even more free of these ordinances.

The highest degree of *philosophical ability* cannot at all coexist with the highest level of the healthy understanding; and so the dissemination of the former becomes *harmful* for the people. As soon as our soul transcends the bounds of need, it is insatiable in the desire for excess, and if philosophy determines nothing essential in what is necessary, then it is among those sciences which never allow an end of curiosity. If philosophy raised us *to thought* we would unlearn action; for if any Muse loves tranquillity it is the goddess of philosophy. Clinging to creations of our own reason – something which we philosophers learn thoroughly – we give up the habit of lively regard for the creations of nature and society. We lose the honorable name of a patriotic people if we want to be scholars. Opinions hold sway here just as much as there. But does not a higher thinking alone remove a thousand mistakes, prejudices, errors of the healthy understanding? Let someone name for me instead of a thousand just one. All the shortcomings of the healthy understanding must be capable of being removed by itself. Thus does nature everywhere cure itself. And it is not angels that are sent as doctors for human beings. Our philosophical reason only, like Daedalus, creates for itself labyrinths, in order to make itself a guiding thread; it ties knots in order to be able to untie them; it throws itself into battles where swords and arrows wound in order to play the part of a holy art. O doctor, aid yourself. Lucky is the people that does not need your aid.

So either [do] nothing or, philosopher, you who teach me to think truths, improve my abilities which I need, the healthy understanding. This needs an improvement, but not a guidance. One sees quite naturally that there must be a Logic of intelligence which merits general dissemination by our people, a Logic which, *not yet invented*, must in part however be more difficult than our rules of reason, since it should²³ order the imagination and sensation, a Logic which never consists in rules but requires much philosophical spirit for its application. In short, it is the method of “preserving for the human spirit its natural strength in full vivacity, and of being able to apply it to each case.”²⁴

²³ Reading *soll* for *sollen*.

²⁴ Herder often, as here, uses quotation marks not for quotation but in order to emphasize a statement of his own. This practice takes a little getting used to, but I have retained it in these translations (rather than substituting italics, for example) for several reasons, including (1) the fact that this preserves a potential for double emphasis – italics within emphatic quotation marks – which