Introduction

Johann Gottfried Herder is commonly regarded as a founding father of the view that each of the world's many nations has a specific and uniquely valuable character, expressed in the various facets of its collective life: its language and literature; its religion, traditions, and customary practices; its values, institutions, and laws. He is therefore frequently mentioned in works dealing with culture or ethnicity, and it is rare to find any extended work on the subject of cultural nationalism that does not allude to the influence of his ideas. Unfortunately, at the same time, he has become one of those authors, not uncommon in history, whose writings are seldom studied in depth or detail, when they are read at all, in spite of the fact that his name is regularly used as a placeholder for a certain roughly defined position. Bhikhu Parekh labels this position "culturalism" (Parekh 2006, 10), a suitably vague term for a host of loosely connected ideas. As a culturalist, Herder is thought to have held the relativistic thesis that the value systems of different societies are incommensurable and equally valid, because there is no common human nature and therefore no basis for postulating universal ethical principles. He is also thought to have believed that peoples form homogeneous organic units, intimately connected to a native geography and bound together by a shared language. The normative implications of these ideas for ethics and politics include the claim that nations should be true to their own way of being, rejecting foreign importations, and that the boundaries between them are natural ones, with which the artificial borders of states should be brought into alignment.[1]

There is a measure of truth in these representations of Herder, but on the whole they paint a superficial and one-sided picture of his understanding of the character of cultural difference, which is significantly more

[1] For example: Anderson (1991, 60, 68); Wolin (2004, 6, 17, 288); Barry (2001, 260, 265); Benhabib (2002, 2–3); Appiah (2005, 106, 244).

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nuanced than the "culturalist" label suggests. The problem is that, because he is more often presented as an example than studied, most accounts attributing to Herder the beliefs associated with culturalism are based on a highly cursory acquaintance with his thought. Rarely do they make an attempt to understand what precisely is involved in Herder's claims about the constitutive components of a culture and the relation between them. Even more rarely do they engage with the underlying grounds for these claims, which would require a sophisticated grasp of Herder's anthropology, aesthetics, epistemology, and philosophy of language. Thus, Herder is regularly assigned a position on the map of contrasting views about culture, which is then targeted for criticism, but without much investigation of whether he actually belongs in that location, or, to the extent that he does, of why he would have chosen to stand there.

I hope, in this book, to help to remedy this situation, by offering close examinations of a number of central issues pertaining to Herder's understanding of the characteristics and capacities of humanity, and their development through culture. My analysis of these issues is guided by a concern with two overarching themes. The first is Herder's theory of cultural identity, including the questions of how a culture is formed, what its essential constituents are, and what makes it a unified whole for which the metaphor "organic" is felt to be descriptively appropriate. The second is the nature, scope, and basis of Herder's positive attitude towards cultural diversity, his belief that cultural differences are significant, and that they should, in some measure, be respected and preserved. While I would like to correct some common misconceptions about Herder's position in relation to these themes, my purpose in doing so is not merely to improve his reputation. Instead, engaging with Herder's writings over the last several years has also led me to conclude that, in spite of some flaws and limitations, his thought contains valuable resources for thinking through significant problems concerning cultural identity and pluralism that remain relevant today.

These resources remain insufficiently appreciated, excavated and utilized, even though several sympathetic studies in English have made an effort to highlight the historical importance of Herder, as well as his continuing relevance. Isaiah Berlin's well-known essay, "Vico and Herder," for instance, first published in 1960, drew attention to three novel theses originated by Herder: "*populism*: the belief in the value of belonging to a group or culture"; "*expressionism*: the doctrine that human activity in general, and art in particular, express the entire personality of the individual or group, and are intelligible only to the degree to which they do

so"; and "*pluralism*: the belief not merely in the multiplicity, but in the incommensurability, of the values of different cultures and societies, and, in addition, in the incompatibility of equally valid ideas" (Berlin 2000, 176). Elaborating upon these three claims, Berlin mentions, among other points, Herder's opposition to imperialism, his focus on language and literature, his sense that there is a common element running through the activities of a given people, and his belief that each culture should be appreciated for what it is, rather than being judged by the standards of another.

In *Herder's Social and Political Thought* (1965), F. M. Barnard discusses some of these same points, situating them within a richer analysis of central concepts like "force" and "organism." Barnard also dedicates greater space to a consideration of the specifically political dimensions of Herder's thought, including his relation to nationalism and internationalism, as well as to the concept of race. Barnard's more recent work, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (2003) reiterates Herder's belief in the "uniqueness and incommensurability of national cultures" (6), while noting the element of universalism conveyed by Herder's notion of "humanity" (77). Although the universalist side of Herder's thought tends to be overlooked in the literature connecting him with culturalism, it is by now generally recognized among scholars more closely engaged with Herder's writings. Frederick Beiser even argues, in *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism* (1992), that Herder always remained fully committed to the universalist ideals of the Enlightenment, to which he was won over in his youth by Kant, and that he only criticized his contemporaries for their hypocrisy and partiality in implementing these ideals (192f.).

As the reader will quickly discover, I am more inclined to see Herder as a genuine, and often harsh, critic of at least some of Kant's fundamental principles, along with those of the "Enlightenment" generally, depending upon how this term is defined. That is also the way Herder saw himself. Yet it is true that he did not entirely reject Enlightenment ideals and the universalism they entailed. Rather, in his accounts of language, climate, and religion, of the variability of human happiness, the nature of reason and the unfolding of history, Herder charts a complex course navigating between the poles of cultural particularism and universalism. I have nonetheless opted to describe Herder as a kind of "relativist," knowing that most sympathetic commentators now tend to shy away from that word, preferring the less offensive term "pluralism."[2] This is because the

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[2] Berlin (2000); Spencer (1998, 2007); see also Berlin (1991b) on the issue of relativism.

idea of "relativism," as I will demonstrate, captures facets of Herder's position that the term "pluralism" does not. It is then genuinely apt, as long as one takes care to define it appropriately, and in a manner that avoids attributing to Herder anachronistic notions developed later in the context of specifically modern varieties of anthropology, or in the context of arguments based on distorted interpretations of the kind of cultural relativism these anthropological theories actually maintained. Herder does not, for example, interpret cultural practices entirely in terms of social function, nor does he analyze cultures as analogous to language. He sees language as a crucial aspect of culture, but he does not use the model of linguistic codes to conceptualize the character of culture, or the relation of cultures to one another. Furthermore, although language is, for Herder, determinative of thought, and shapes people's view of the world, it is also shaped by the world, and it is possible to "feel one's way into" the world of another people.

But the word "relativism" is still appropriate for Herder's thought insofar as it suggests that one needs to suspend the habit of evaluation when approaching the study of a culture, and to try to understand the culture in its own terms, in relation to its own values and beliefs. Herder can also be appropriately described as a relativist, I will argue, because he maintains that the goodness of individual lives is relative, within certain limits, to their achievement of the goals and ideals presented to them as desirable and worthy in the society of which they are members. This claim is contentious, no less so now than in the eighteenth century, but one should not round off the sharper edges of Herder's challenge to the Enlightenment thinkers he confronts. On the issue of diversity, Herder asserts more than the somewhat anodyne thesis that the ideals of freedom and reason allow for a measure of variation in the way they are realized across different societies. It would be difficult to argue with that statement today, whereas one might still oppose Herder's brand of qualified relativism, which is more provocative and also more interesting.

While insisting on the appropriateness of the term "relativism" for Herder, I also want to challenge the common notion that the potentially objectionable elements in his thought all stem from this relativism, and need to be balanced and corrected through the obvious virtues of his universalist principles. Accounts espousing this view (Beiser's is a prime example) fail to engage seriously enough with the critique of universalism launched in many of Herder's works, where he takes his contemporaries to task for the cultural partisanship and prejudice that underlie their unthinking Eurocentrism, and their ignorant condescension towards

non-European peoples. In my view, the most serious flaws in Herder's writings result from his failure to live up to *this* insight, in that he often commits the sins of which he accused his contemporaries. In practice, the problem is that Herder is sometimes not enough of a relativist, and falls short of the principles he articulates. Since the lessons communicated by these principles are still worth heeding, one should not ignore – and I will emphasize – the questionably ethnocentric opinions and attitudes that Herder shared with his fellow modern Europeans, in his view of other peoples as childlike, for instance, or in his relation to the idea of race, which is more ambivalent than might be apparent from his explicit rejection of the term.

There are, then, a number of points on which I disagree with one or another of the few extended studies that have been published to date on Herder's social and political ideas.

More significantly, in relation to these studies, the style of my engagement with Herder is motivated by a sense that he deserves more attention from the perspective of philosophy than he has so far received. For whatever reasons, Herder's thought has tended to evoke more interest among political scientists, historians, and anthropologists than among philosophers. As a result, the epistemological and metaphysical foundations for his claims about culture and politics have received less thorough investigation than one might expect, and certainly less than parallel themes in the writings of other European philosophers of similar sophistication and historical importance. Correspondingly, the relation between Herder's ideas and those of his philosophical predecessors, contemporaries, and successors has also not received adequate attention within the scholarly literature: his criticisms of Kant, for example, or his positive debt to the British empiricists, or his role in shaping the thought of later German philosophers, such as Nietzsche, Hegel, and Heidegger.

Herder's oppositional relation to Kant, in fact, will form a central topic of consideration in this book. Because Herder's stance on a number of points developed through an explicit rejection of central Kantian theses, an exploration of Herder's confrontation with Kant helps to highlight what is unique in his own position. Kant's preeminence, moreover, has in my opinion too often led to a hasty dismissal of Herder's contrasting philosophical views, which have more going for them than is generally appreciated.

In sum, my aim in this book is to provide a philosophically informed analysis of Herder's reflections on the nature of humanity, and on the intricate weaving together of language, religion, place, and history in

the formation of the kinds of social unities which we now describe as "cultures." I will not proceed, however, by offering a broad outline of Herder's position. That is precisely what has already been given in studies such as those by Berlin and Barnard. Instead, each of the following chapters addresses in depth a specific aspect of the question about humanity and culture. Their treatment of Herder on that question is shaped by an orientation towards philosophical concerns that remain relevant today, although it certainly also seeks to situate Herder within his historical context. While some of Herder's ideas on the constituents of cultural identity, and especially on language (Taylor 1985, 1995), have been taken up in recent philosophical discussions, others, such as his understanding of happiness, or of the character of religion, have largely been ignored. In truth, dimensions even of Herder's understanding of the role of language in constructing identity, I maintain in Chapter 5, remain inadequately thematized.

I should acknowledge from the outset that one currently popular position on cultural identity which is ruled out by the basic nature of my inquiry is the one that rejects the very idea of its existence. Any defense of the continuing relevance of Herder's reflections on the character of a "culture" naturally must be premised on the supposition that there exists *some* significant social entity for which this label is appropriate. I think that is a reasonable supposition. It is contested, however, in some of the recent critical literature on the subject, which seems to have two primary targets. One is cultural "essentialism": the view that each culture has a definable core that makes it what it is, and that distinguishes it from any other. Against this thesis, critics stress the internal diversity and temporal fluidity of cultural groupings, the historical and present overlaps between these groupings, the porousness of their borders, and the condition of hybridity.[3] The other target is more difficult to describe with precision, but involves the idea, in the minds of its opponents, that cultures are natural entities of some sort, where their alleged reality and genuineness are founded upon a belief in their naturalness. Debunking such beliefs, constructivist views of identity emphasize the extent to which identities are artificial groupings, manufactured by social and political pressures, often deliberately manipulated by vested interests, and involving a great deal of falsification and forgetting.[4]

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[3] See, for example, Benhabib (2002, esp. 1–23); Bhabha (1994); Appiah (2005, esp. 114–54); Hall (1992); and Bhatti (2005).

[4] The most strongly constructivist accounts of this sort focus on national, rather than cultural, identity (see Gellner 1983; Anderson 1991). But Benhabib's (2002) analysis of cultural identity is also constructivist.

Herder is actually not as strong a cultural essentialist as is sometimes thought. He explicitly acknowledges that cultures are not internally uniform, that they fuse to form new combinations, and that their evolution is shaped by interaction with one another. On the latter point, far from holding the view that cultures should shun foreign influence, Herder largely sees cultural interaction as a good thing, as long as it is not the result either of violence or of imitation arising purely from a sense of cultural inferiority.[5] In addition, Herder denies that there are clear borders between types of things anywhere in nature, and it would be bizarre to attribute to him the belief that human cultures have "essences" which are more definite and stable than those he assigns to natural kinds. He nevertheless *does* think that cultures have distinct characters in a weaker sense, resulting from identifiably real differences among histories, languages, geographies, forms of life, and beliefs. I believe this position is defensible, even if Herder's own version of it is in places still too strong, and in need of modification. Anti-essentialism, however well-founded in some respects, does not establish either the non-existence or the worthlessness of cultural identity.[6] Cultures may be internally diverse, shifting, hybrid, and porous, but the fact is that individuals are shaped by, and feel a special affinity for, *this* configuration of cultural elements rather than *that* one, and this fact still needs to be appreciated, thematized, and examined.

As to the thesis that cultural identities are artificial constructs rather than natural forms, it is not altogether clear what view such a thesis means to refute, or what consequences are supposed to follow from the refutation. No one with any knowledge of history believes that cultures are wholly static, with respect either to their content or to the borders between them, nor does anyone suppose that they are anything other than human constructions. For Herder, cultures are the product of *Bildung*, of processes of education and cultivation involving the active exercise of specifically human, reflective faculties. Individuals become members of cultures by participating in these processes, which they begin to do as soon as they are born into a human society. Presumably, constructivist theories of culture do not mean to deny that the theories of cultural identity they criticize affirm the constructed character of cultures in *these* senses; otherwise, they would too obviously be attacking a straw man. In many cases, constructivist critiques focus, rather, on falsification and invention, on the extent to which national and cultural identities consist of manufactured

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[5] See Spencer (2007, 83–6, 100–1).   [6] Cf. Modood (2000, 175–80).

allegiances that reconfigure and recompose an allegedly common past, suppressing certain historical memories – for instance, of hostility and difference among groups now asserted as forming a unity – while inventing fictive narratives and imagining sentiments of solidarity.

Critiques of this sort perform a valuable function in helping to expose dangerous popular myths about identity – myths that are mobilized in order to mask internal oppression and inequality, as well as to promote exclusion, xenophobia, and other forms of group-based conflict. But one should not draw from them the lesson that the sense of possessing a common cultural identity is entirely an illusion, or that these types of identity are always and only fictions. For one thing, a sense of solidarity has to be distinguished from the existence of the kinds of common features that are generally associated with the idea of culture. The latter features may or may not be sufficient to constitute a basis for social or political solidarity, and they may (in reality, they always do) coexist with divergent economic interests, and with inequalities of class, caste, gender, and color. Moreover, people can share a common culture without being reflectively aware of doing so, or without this awareness being a significant aspect of the way in which they define themselves. Herder's focus is not on solidarity, or on the sense of belonging to a particular cultural group, but on the features that cultural groups do as a matter of fact have in common. That the members of a cultural group may not pay attention to these common features until presented with a pressure that causes them to do so, or that they may not feel solidarity with one another until they face a common threat, or are mobilized against an imagined enemy, is a separate point.

If, on the other hand, the constructivist claim is that a society never possesses *any* common cultural features beyond the false mythologies invented by nationalist discourses, that is a claim Herder would indeed deny. Again, though, I think Herder's position on this point is defensible. It will not seem so if one insists that a culture must be definable through a set of necessary and sufficient conditions in order to be a category of real things, but that is an unreasonable standard to apply. Even biological species will not meet it, let alone social groups. Furthermore, as Nicholas Kompridis argues, "when we allow our talk of 'construction' to distort its object, we come uncomfortably close to a position which fictionalizes culture and identity" (Kompridis 2005, 324), and which treats "cultural identifications and attachments as imaginary constructs that can be as easily constructed as deconstructed" (325), in which membership is a matter of choice (329). On Herder's analysis, by contrast, enculturation, the

process of being formed within the context of a given culture or number of cultures, yields a kind of belonging that is nothing like membership in a voluntary organization. An individual may dislike something, or many things, or even almost everything about the society in which she is raised; she is nonetheless deeply affected by the character of that society simply in virtue of the fact that she took shape as a human being within it. There can be no question of "deconstructing" this shape. One would have to be reborn as a different person.

Herder does tend to attribute to native cultures too great a determining force upon individuals, leaving insufficient room for cultural mobility and the renegotiation of identity. He had not witnessed the kinds of voluntary large-scale global migrations to which we are now accustomed, and much of the cultural dislocation and rupture that he did see was the result of conquest. His view of cultural migration, as opposed to interaction, is generally negative, and his thought contains inadequate resources for analyzing complex, hybrid, and hyphenated identities. Acknowledging these shortcomings, the strength of Herder's account consists in its recognition of the significance of the specific cultural environment within which individuals realize the various aspects of their humanity: their emotions, reason, and habits of thought; their values and modes of social interaction; their practical, aesthetic, and spiritual responses to the world. And while it is important to be critical of relations to identity that engender violence, one should be equally wary these days of what Linda Alcoff has described as the "pathologizing of identity" (Alcoff 2006, 11) within discourses that represent group identities exclusively as constricting and dangerous, to be dismantled or surpassed wherever possible. With respect to cultural identity, Herder's analyses help to show why the goal of transcending the shaping forces of culture is incoherent, and why cultural attachments are profoundly meaningful and important to individuals, needing to be appropriately qualified and balanced, not eliminated.

A final question I would like to broach in this Introduction is that of why Herder is not more widely read and studied, if he is, as I am implying, an important thinker whose works merit serious consideration. Part of the answer lies, I think, in the rather diffuse character of much of his writing. Herder's works lack the degree of systematic organization and focus that one expects to find in philosophical analyses on a particular subject. Consequently, as Michael Morton points out, it is difficult to locate a definitive text within the Herder corpus that could serve as a good point of entry into his thought (Morton 1989, 3). On several occasions, I have myself encountered this problem when faced with a request for a

reference to exactly such a text, evoked by my enthusiastic praise of one or another Herderian idea in conversations with colleagues. The difficulty has been that passages dealing with the idea in question are scattered here and there among a number of Herder's works, sometimes expressed in an effusive literary style, and frequently mingled with highly contemporary references, as well as with hypotheses or empirical observations that have not stood the test of time. One will not find in Herder's writings the kind of extended, principled argumentation and cool analysis typical of a philosopher like Spinoza or Kant. Temperamentally, Herder seems to have lacked the levels of patience and detachment required for the production of that genre of philosophical disquisition. This does not mean, however, that his views on given subjects are either rash or incomplete, or inconsistent with one another. On the contrary, I will show that a careful examination of Herder's works reveals a clear, coherent, and well-developed philosophical position – one of whose elements is that, given the relation between language, knowledge, and thought, abstract reasoning is of limited value, and is prone to self-bewitchment.

Another, more pedestrian, reason why Herder is not more widely read in the English-speaking world, and why it is difficult to refer potential readers to a single text, is the lack of translations. Only a few of Herder's writings have been fully translated into English. Among these, the one complete translation of his major work, *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, dates from about 1800. Readers of Herder in English, therefore, have to rely exclusively on the selected extracts from his works available in a number of anthologies.[7] This restriction reinforces the partial and skewed image of Herder to which I alluded earlier. Serious Herder scholars study his works in German, of course, but many English accounts of his thought, even relatively long ones, are based only on the very limited portion of his writings that is available in translation.[8]

The German reader does not face this problem of accessibility, and yet, although there is more scholarship on Herder published in German than in English, as one would expect, little of it deals with the subject central to this book. That is not surprising. Sympathetic analyses of strong theories of cultural identity within the German tradition are exceedingly

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[7] The most recent of these is Michael Forster's volume, *Philosophical Writings*. See Herder (2002) for details about this anthology and others.

[8] Parekh's account in *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, for instance, is based entirely on Barnard's anthology, along with two translations, one badly outdated and one abridged, of the *Ideas* (Parekh 2006). The same is true of many English-language articles on Herder, such as Whitton (1988) and Wilson (1998).