CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Excerpt
More Information

Introduction

The German eighteenth-century thinker Johann Gottfried Herder has been overlooked by the philosophical tradition. It is not that Herder's work is altogether neglected, nor that his name does not come up at all. But the full philosophical scope and potential of his work – his sustained efforts to furnish the enlightenment project with a historical consciousness, his call for emancipation through education, his critique of how modern philosophy has shaped itself around a distinctively abstract and procedural model of reasoning, and his rejection of cultural, intellectual, and political practices based on Eurocentric premises and assumptions – has hardly received the attention it deserves. Herder enthusiastically declares that education should be spread to all social classes and proceeds by the motto "get more books into women's hands" (PW 26; W I 131). He worries that even though Europe has officially abandoned slavery ("because it has been calculated how much more these slaves would cost and how much less they would bring in than free people"), we still continue "to use as slaves, to trade, to exile into silver mines and sugar mills, three parts of the world" (PW 328; W II 73–74). And he relentlessly critiques the way in which French and German intellectuals expect that "when a storm shakes two smalls twigs in Europe . . . the whole world quakes and bleeds" (PW 325; W IV 70). Herder, it seems, is a philosopher ahead of his time. While some of these sentiments can be found in works by other philosophers in this period (Leibniz, Hume, Diderot, Lessing, and Mendelssohn all deserve mentioning), it is Herder who merges the impulses of Enlightenment thought into an anthropologically informed and critically motivated philosophy of understanding and interpretation.

Why, then, has Herder's philosophy not received the attention it deserves? Herder, for a start, does not launch a philosophical program (as we find it in Kant), nor does he compose a grand, metaphysical system (of the kinds we find in Schelling or Hegel). In fact, Herder questions the usefulness of philosophical programs and systems altogether. One could

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Excerpt
More Information

even say that Herder initiates a kind of anti-systematic philosophy – not in the sense that he encourages inconsistent or disorganized thinking, but in that he disapproves of grand theory constructions and totalizing accounts of reality – that later resonates in the works of the Schlegel brothers, August Wilhelm and Friedrich, Friedrich Nietzsche, and the later Ludwig Wittgenstein.

Throughout his work in the 1760s, Herder advocates an anthropological and historical approach to philosophical problems and questions. At the center of his work stands the notion of human nature as realized through art, language, history, and cultural practice. His philosophical project – his anthropological turn, as he calls it – is an attempt to establish an alternative to the dominant philosophical methods of the day.[1] He is particularly dissatisfied with so-called school philosophy and its attempts at moving philosophy out of the broader, public space that he views as a condition for an open society.[2] This philosophy, in Herder's words, cannot be reconciled with "humanity [*Menschheit*] and politics" (PW 6; W I 108). Against what he perceives as rigid scholasticism and abstract reasoning, Herder calls for a commitment to enlightenment and *Bildung*, modestly pictured as a "logic which [is] *not yet invented*" (PW 11; W I 114).[3] Such a logic, he

[1] In his earliest writings, such as *How Philosophy can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People*, we find Herder worry about the "far-too-universal rules" and the scholastic methods of contemporary logic (PW 9; W I 111). Nine years later, in *This Too a Philosophy of History*, he laments that philosophy fails to realize that "every *general concept*, is only an *abstraction*" (PW 293; W IV 35). In fact, his critique of abstract philosophy, of philosophical drills for their own sake, puts him, at least according to his own self-understanding, on a par with classical Greek philosophers, whose works he took to be underappreciated because Enlightenment philosophers typically assume that the ancients "philosophized *nothing properly universal and purely abstracted*" (PW 324; W IV 69).

[2] As John Zammito defines it, "*Schulphilosophie* came to mean, first and foremost, enclosed thinking: closed conceptually and cloistered in social space. 'School' clearly had these two senses from the medieval genesis of 'scholasticism' throughout the German eighteenth century: it referred both to the esoteric nature of intellectual discourse and to the institutional framework of higher education in which it largely deployed itself." John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2002), 22. Among the philosophers Herder has in mind, Leibniz and Wolff are mentioned by name (PW 5; W I 106). Though Herder admires and borrows from their works, he is critical of the way in which others, in their name, have had a tendency to identify reason with deductive rationality.

[3] As contrasted with mere upbringing or education (*Erziehung*), the term "*Bildung*" refers to education in culture and history. It is conceived as a process (rather than a set of doctrines) and is realized in the will to subject prejudices to ongoing criticism and scrutiny. As we will see, there is a distinctive Rousseauian ring to Herder's notion of *Bildung*. Against the dominant pedagogical thinking of the time, Rousseau had wished to develop in *Emile* an education whose goal is autonomy and happiness. *Bildung* is not about turning a human being into something it is not, but to what it is – it is the realization of human nature. In Rousseau's words, "the eternal laws of nature and order do exist. For the wise man, they take the place of positive law. They are written in the depth of his heart by conscience and reason. It is to these that he ought to enslave himself in order to be free. The only slave is the man who does evil, for he always does it in spite of himself. Freedom is found in no form of

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Excerpt
More Information

emphasizes, must "make the human being its center" (PW 21; W I 125). When understood in this way, philosophy is no master discipline, no science of science – be it of the humanities, social sciences, or natural sciences. Philosophy, for Herder, goes hand in hand with other modes of inquiry and should call for no privileged place among them. Indeed, philosophy is at its best – and can only sustain its relationship to "humanity and politics," i.e., the society of which it is a part – when it learns from and enters into an ongoing conversation with disciplines such as history, political science, anthropology, medicine, and biology.

Herder views philosophy as a call to enlightenment. Enlightenment, in turn, is a matter of education – not education in light of this or that particular goal, but education to independent thought (*Selbstdenken*, as he puts it, PW 19; W I 122). By Herder's lights, education should not be a privilege for the few, but a right for the many: a right to develop and flourish as fully human. Philosophy should thus proceed on the assumption that "each human being is free and independent from others" (PW 25; W I 130). To the extent that such independence also provides a framework for self-determination, political participation, and citizenship, it follows that "the state must be improved from below" (PW 25; W I 130). Self-determination, however, is not a given. Nor, for that matter, is it simply an abstract goal. For Herder it is, rather, a process; it implies a call for thinking to prove itself as independent and for understanding to realize itself as critical and reflective. There is, in other words, a close connection between *Selbstdenken* and *Bildung*. Like Kant, his mentor at the time, Herder emphasizes that independent thought depends on a will to clarify and critique one's own self-understanding as well as the larger set of (prereflective) practices, prejudices, and beliefs that saturate the cultural nexus of which an individual is a part. However, unlike the Kant of the critical period, Herder argues that this kind of reflection must take place from within a given cultural and historical context and not proceed by reference to the a priori conditions for subjectivity, experience, and judgment.

Throughout his work, Herder envisions a philosophy that shapes itself in ongoing dialogue with a wider, enlightened audience. His point is not

government; it is in the heart of the free man. He takes it with him everywhere. The vile man takes his servitude everywhere. The latter would be a slave in Geneva, the former a free man in Paris." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: Or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 473; OC II 445. For a discussion of Rousseau's educational theory, see William Boyd, *The Educational Theory of Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963) and Jean Bloch, *Rousseauianism and Education in Eighteenth-Century France* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1995).

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Excerpt
More Information

that everyone could or should be a philosopher, but that philosophy must understand (and legitimize) itself with reference to questions, problems, and areas of reflection that prove relevant to society at large. Philosophers should, in his words, address the kind of truths that are, directly or indirectly, beneficial for the people (PW 12; W I 115). Hence, they must steer clear of an overly technical and abstract vocabulary. Philosophers should analyze and make use of knowledge drawn from across the sciences, but also, by way of critical reflection, ask what we mean by central social and political terms such as freedom, emancipation, education, and equality. As such, *Selbstdenken* is not based in a set of doctrines that are passed on from professor to student, author to reader, but in a kind of teaching that performatively demonstrates – manifests and exemplifies – the very independence for which it strives. At its best, philosophy *is* the practice of independent thought, an ongoing invitation to question ruling prejudices, corruptions, and bad dispositions (PW 13; W I 116).

The human being with which philosophy communicates is historical, embodied, and realizes itself within a context of language and culture – or, indeed, a plurality of such. Enlightenment philosophy must address all human beings, the entire human being, and muster an arsenal of rhetorical tools so as better to command the reader's attention and encourage him or her to take a stance toward what is being said as well as the mindset with which he or she typically approaches the issue or problem area under discussion. Herder's writing seeks to critique established philosophical ideals and systems, and, relatedly, exemplify an alternative way of philosophizing.

To the extent that Herder's work represents an effort to realize these ideals, it is indeed difficult to classify in terms of the systematic requirements of present-day academic discourse. Further, the scope of Herder's enlightenment vision does not allow him to isolate one particular topic or subfield. His thinking spans epistemology, aesthetics, ethics, and political philosophy – and, indeed, emphasizes that these domains are closely related. As Nietzsche would later put it, Herder's philosophy is borne out of a "restless spirit, the taster of all intellectual dishes."[4] Such a philosophy does not easily gain a following. In fact, it represents a challenge to the very notion of philosophy as a discipline on which a tradition can be built. Hence, we find traces of

[4] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Human, All-Too-Human*, Part II, trans. Paul V. Cohn (New York: MacMillan Company, 1913), (§118) 254; KSA II 603. There are remarkable overlaps between Nietzsche and Herder, who at one point refers to the *gaya ciencia* of the medieval troubadours (PHM 608; W VI 866). There are also overlaps between Herder's and Nietzsche's discussion of tragedy, especially their shared emphasis on the importance of the chorus.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Excerpt
More Information

Herderian thought not only in Nietzsche, but also in the works of nineteenth-century philosophers such as the Humboldt and the Schlegel brothers, Friedrich Schleiermacher, G. W. F. Hegel, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Karl Marx.[5] A school of Herderian philosophy, however, was never a genuine option.

Nevertheless, a version of Herder's philosophy – twisted and stunted though it was – was subject to ideological appropriation in the years leading up to, and during, the Second World War. In this period, Herder's notion of the people was grossly misconstrued and turned from an open-ended cultural-linguistic and political denominator into an ethnic or even racially grounded category.[6] Philosophers also came, in this era, to draw a distorted picture of Herder's contribution. One example is Hans-Georg Gadamer. In a lecture presented to imprisoned officers in Paris, Gadamer criticizes the lax democracies of the West and presents, as an alternative, what he takes to be Herder's notion of the folk.[7] This lecture, which was published by Klostermann in 1942, must have remained an embarrassment for Gadamer.[8] However, rather than confronting this embarrassment head on, Gadamer quietly edited out the political rhetoric and published a less controversial version of the essay in his introduction to Herder's *This Too a History of Philosophy*. This version is later included in Gadamer's collected work.[9] Perhaps it was this faux apology that made Gadamer, who remained positive about Herder's philosophy of history, focus less on his hermeneutic position. This avoidance, though, is most unfortunate. In failing fully to acknowledge Herder's importance for the hermeneutic tradition, Gadamer also comes to overlook the hermeneutic relevance of enlightenment philosophy.[10] In his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, Gadamer discusses Kant, Fichte, Schleiermacher, and Hegel. Herder's work is mentioned every now and then, but never made the

[5] For a discussion of Herder's philosophical influence, see Michael N. Forster, *After Herder*, 9–54. See also F. M. Barnard, *Herder's Social and Political Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 153–179.

[6] Herder defines the people in the following way: "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" (PW 7; W I 108). He also identifies people with the public (ibid.).

[7] See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Volk und Geschichte im Denken Herders* (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1942), 23.

[8] For a more detailed discussion of this point, see my "Aesthetic and Political Humanism: Gadamer on Herder, Schleiermacher, and the Origins of Modern Hermeneutics," *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 24, 3–2007, 275–297.

[9] Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Herder und die geschichtliche Welt," *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. IV (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1987), 318–335.

[10] For a discussion of Gadamer's rejection of enlightenment philosophy, see my *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), Chapter Four.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Excerpt
More Information

subject of a fully-fledged, philosophical discussion. Nor does Gadamer pay attention to Dilthey's effort to revive the Herderian call for an anthropological-historical turn.[11]

Dilthey's understanding of Herder as an enlightenment thinker in the hermeneutic vein – a philosopher who did indeed come "closer to true hermeneutics than anyone else before Schleiermacher"[12] – is also overlooked by Isaiah Berlin, who places Herder on the map of Anglophone philosophy, yet, like Gadamer, does so under the false flag of a Counter-Enlightenment.[13] Aided by Herder's philosophy, Berlin offers a challenging criticism of narrow, rationalist Enlightenment.[14] Yet, as pointed out by Robert Norton and others, Berlin overlooks the distinction, drawn with much care and consideration by Herder, between a particularly narrow and procedural version of Enlightenment thought (often, but not exclusively, associated with rationalist school philosophy), on the one hand, and the broader agenda of enlightenment philosophy, on the other.[15] Herder's philosophy fits squarely in with the latter. Or, stronger still, it is with Herder that a historically sensitive, *Bildung*-oriented program of enlightenment gets its full philosophical articulation. While figures like Diderot,

[11] See for example Wilhelm Dilthey, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutical System in Relation to Earlier Protestant Hermeneutics" (1860), in *Selected Works*, vol. IV, *Hermeneutics and the Study of History*, ed. Rudolf A. Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi, trans. Theodore Nordenhaug (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 33–229; GS XIV 595–787. See also my "Enlightenment, History, and the Anthropological Turn: The Hermeneutical Challenge of Dilthey's Schleiermacher Studies," in *Anthropologie und Geschichte. Studien zu Wilhelm Dilthey aus Anlass seines 100. Todestages*, ed. Giuseppe D'Anna, Helmut Jonach, and Eric S. Nelson (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013), 323–355.

[12] Dilthey, "Schleiermacher's Hermeneutical System," 89; GS XIV, 649. See also Wilhelm Dilthey, "Three Epochs of Modern Aesthetics and Its Present Task," trans. Michael Neville, in *Poetry and Experience, Selected Works*, vol. V, ed. Rudolf Makkreel and Frithjof Rodi (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 175–222; GS VI 242–287.

[13] This kind of attitude is also found in an earlier work such as Robert Clark's 1955 biography. Clark writes about the young Herder's travel journal that it "looks ahead to the complete break with the Enlightenment in [*This Too a Philosophy of History*]." Robert T. Clark, Jr. *Herder: His Life and Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 99. For a more recent manifestation of Berlin's misunderstanding, see Bhikhu Parekh's critique of Herder – his claim that Herder lacks Vico's sense of history and that he endorses a naive and homogenous notion of the people – in Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 67–79.

[14] Isaiah Berlin, "Herder and the Enlightenment," in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 168–242. For Gadamer's reading, see Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (Continuum, 1994), 200, 280–281; *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990), 204, 285.

[15] See Robert E. Norton, "The Myth of the Counter-Enlightenment," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 68, no. 4–2007, 635–658 and "Isaiah Berlin's 'Expressionism,' or 'Ha! Du bis das Blöckende!'," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 69, no. 2–2008, 339–347.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Excerpt
More Information

Lessing, and Mendelssohn made significant strides forward, Herder takes the enlightenment project to the home field of philosophy and systematically explores what the commitment to enlightenment means for philosophical practice and understanding. In this respect, Herder also goes beyond earlier hermeneuticians such as Johann Martin Chladenius and Georg Friedrich Meier. While Meier takes the art of interpretation (*Auslegungskunst*) to include texts universally, he does not, to the same extent as Herder, discuss the relevance of a hermeneutic perspective for the larger, philosophical conception of knowledge, self-understanding, and social practice.[16]

The image of Herder as an enlightenment philosopher, in the broader meaning of the term, has guided a handful of recent philosophical studies in the English-speaking world. Charles Taylor, John Zammito, Robert Norton, Michael Forster, Frederick Beiser, Sonia Sikka, Vicki Spencer, and many others have contributed to a new interest in and better understanding of Herder's philosophical impact. Likewise have Ulrich Gaier, Hans Dietrich Irmscher, Marion Heinz, Christoph Menke, and others strengthened the interest in Herder from within contemporary German philosophy. In these strands of reception, however, one dimension of Herder's work has often been overlooked: Herder's philosophy of literature in the 1760s and early 1770s. It is almost taken for granted that although Herder's early work on lyric poetry and drama might harbor sundry philosophical insights, the proper home of these reflections is literary studies, German Studies, or, at best, some embryonic version of aesthetics or philosophy of language. In the following, I question this assumption. I argue that Herder's encounter with poetry significantly contributes to the development of his hermeneutics and that it is not simply developing in parallel with his philosophical thought, but is, indeed, an integral part of it.[17]

In Herder's view, literature (poetry) is a field in which each and every expression uniquely reflects a larger cultural and societal context. In this field, we cannot – should not, anyway – proceed by way of subsumption under general laws or categories, but must carefully consider the particular expression and move, with the aid of sympathetic feeling and reflection,

[16] For an informative discussion of Enlightenment hermeneutics and the development of universal hermeneutics, see Axel Bühler, *Unzeitgemäße Hermeneutik*. See also Bühler's comprehensive introduction in Georg Friedrich Meier, *Versuch einer allgemeinen Auslegungskunst*, ed. Axel Bühler and Luigi Cataldi Madonna (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1996), vii-cii.

[17] It must be noted that in emphasizing the philosophical valor of Herder's work on poetry, I am not overlooking or denying the aesthetic or literary importance of his contribution – be it as a historian, critic, poet, or as a collector of songs from different social classes and parts of the world.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Excerpt
More Information

from there to the universal. In Herder's books, philosophy should be a critique of all sorts of leveling of differences and erasing of diversity. Humanity is left for the worse if the manifold of its expressions are stunted.[18] Herder's originality does not, as I see it, rest with his articulating this paradigm single-handedly, but in combining the period's unyielding respect for the individual, its interest in the notion of sensuousness and feeling, and its approach to cultural difference in a historically sensitive, hermeneutic model.

Herder's early studies of poetry are borne out of a growing awareness of the difference between the ancient and the modern periods – and, with it, a willingness to address the philosophical significance of this difference.[19] When Herder is read through the lens of his early work, he emerges not only as a proto-historicist thinker (as we find him presented by Zammito and others)[20] or as an early naturalist (as he is portrayed by Beiser and others),[21] but also as a philosopher of modernity – one whose views are rooted in a broad-spanning and original conception of the human being and its ongoing striving for self-understanding and understanding across historical periods and cultures.[22]

[18] Diversity, plurality within that which at first appears to be one, is key to Herder's hermeneutics, as it will be, later on, to a romantic hermeneutician such as Friedrich Schleiermacher. This becomes particularly clear in Schleiermacher's early work. See for example *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. Richard Crouter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 162–188; KGA II 266–292.

[19] Joshua Billings leads this back to eighteenth-century discussions of tragedy. See his *Genealogy of the Tragic: Greek Tragedy and German Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), especially 21–32. See also Constanze Güthenke, "The Middle Voice: German Classical Scholarship and the Greek Tragic Chorus," in *Choruses, Ancient and Modern*, ed. Joshua Billings, Felix Budelmann, and Fiona Macintosh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 53–66.

[20] In this context, Zammito distinguishes between what he calls "critical" and "speculative" philosophy of history, which he defines in the following way: "Critical philosophy of history has to do with the methodology and epistemology of writing history: with how to do it and whether it is done well. . . . Yet simultaneously, and certainly *not* coincidentally, came the most famous burst of speculative philosophy of history of all time (e.g., Turgot, Condorcet, Kant, Hegel). Speculative philosophy of history seeks to establish a meaning for the entire sweep of history, from its origin to its end." John Zammito, "Herder and Historical Metanarrative: What's Philosophical About History?" in *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. Hans Adler and Wulf Koepke (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009), 66. In the following, I will suggest that a third alternative can be given – one that does not fall into the traps of teleology, nor limits reflections on history and historicity to epistemic-methodological issues – and that Herder represents such a position.

[21] As Beiser puts it, Herder had "formulated an explicitly historicist conception of philosophy; and it was a conception that was entirely and emphatically naturalistic. . . . In Herder, no less than Chladenius and Möser the naturalist beginnings of historicism are fully apparent." Frederick C. Beiser, *The German Historicist Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 105.

[22] Hence, it follows that philosophical reflection on modernity does not only or primarily emerge, as it is sometimes assumed, in the era of post-Kantian philosophy, but is intrinsic to the enlightenment and its anthropological turn – or stronger still, it is, in the work of the young Herder, the very core

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Excerpt
More Information

For Herder, the beginning of the modern period is not – as it would later be for Hegel – associated with the individual philosopher's attempt to trace epistemic certainty back to an Archimedean *ego cogito*.[23] In fact, from a point of view like Herder's, the early modern quest for epistemological certainty represents but a domestication of qualities that were, in earlier times, associated with an infinite, divine being (PW 182; SW VIII 266).[24] This secularization – this domestication of the kind of certainty that had so far been a privilege of God alone – is not where modernity gets its first articulation.[25] Herder surmises that the modern period starts with the experience – the hermeneutic challenge, we could even say – of the human being realizing its limits.[26] As he puts it in a text from 1778, "let us, in order to become in some measure useful, call down philosophy from its heaven in the clouds onto the earth" (PW 217; W IV 365). Human being, hence also human understanding, is situated in a historical and cultural context and, as such, is not free of prejudices and biased beliefs. And if human thought and judgment is, potentially, prejudiced, then philosophy can no longer be shaped as a quest for eternal and universal truth, but must proceed critically, and with historical awareness, tolerance, and understanding. This insight, as it emerges with particular force in the modern period, has epistemological, but also ethical, ramifications. Hermeneutics – philosophy of understanding and interpretation – now stands forth as a discipline that is integral to the modern project and its articulation in

and engine of the enlightenment discourse as it revolves around a notion of *Bildung* in and through history and culture.

[23] See for example G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*, three vols., vol. 3, *Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, trans. E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 217; *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, three vols., vol. 3, HW XX 120.

[24] In *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*, Herder addresses philosophers who refuse to approach human reason in terms of a developmental-historical model in the following way: "They speak like the gods, that is, they *think purely* and cognize ethereally – wherefore, then, also nothing but sayings of the gods and of reason are able to come from their lips" (PW 212; W IV 359).

[25] A similar point is later articulated by Heidegger, who sees Cartesianism as a continuation of scholasticism (rather than a fundamental break with it). Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1996); *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 2006), §§19–21. For a discussion of this point, see my "Heidegger, Husserl, and the Cartesian Legacy in Phenomenology," in *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, special edition, *Rearticulations of Reason: Recent Currents*, ed. Leila Haaparanta, vol. 88, 2010, 117–143.

[26] Herder develops his hermeneutic position in interaction with Thomas Abbt, who was known to have taken a critical stance toward the notion of a divine order in history. As Zammito puts it, "behind Abbt's gloomy invocation of the irrationalities of the human past was also an impulse toward a consistent ethical naturalism, the demand that men take responsibility for their own lives and fates without any hope for or recourse to external (divine) redemption." Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, 169.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-11286-5 — Herder's Hermeneutics
Kristin Gjesdal
Excerpt
More Information

philosophy.[27] This hermeneutic ethos, this interest in the human being as historical, culture-producing, and understanding, lies at the heart of Herder's call for an anthropological turn (PW 29; W I 134).

It is important to be clear about what such an anthropological turn does and does not involve. Herder's suggestion is not that *only* modern philosophy is historically and culturally situated. From his point of view, what is new, in the modern period, is that philosophers make this situatedness an object of deliberate study, and hence seek to identify the consequences *and* the possibilities that follow from it.[28] A mature and responsible use of reason is not struggling against or seeking to sublate its historicity, be it within natural science or the humanities. Instead, the modern era takes shape when philosophers no longer avoid the finality of all things human, but begin to explore it in a critical and systematic way. From this point of view, the hero of the modern period is not first and foremost René Descartes,[29] but Jean-Jacques Rousseau and, even more so, David Hume, "certainly one of the greatest minds of our time," as Herder puts it in *Older Critical Forestlet* (PW 265; W II 21). For us later readers, Herder, too, deserves a place in this pantheon.

My emphasis on Herder as a theorist of the modern period, a philosopher whose call it is to map the boundaries of human reason and its potential for growth and flourishing, might lead us to ask if Herder is, then, as Rudolf Haym famously put it, a Kantian of the year 1765.[30] Without denying the influence of Leibniz, Hume, Baumgarten, Rousseau, Diderot, Lessing, and many others, the young Herder's relationship to Kantian philosophy is indeed worthy of a study.[31] For

[27] For a study that emphasizes the relationship between the modern period, the culture of print, and the notion of an individual reader, see Benjamin W. Redekop, *Enlightenment and Community: Lessing, Abbt, Herder, and the Quest for a German Public* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000), 8–9.

[28] At this point, it is helpful to bring in Glenn Most's distinction between a certain tendency toward historicity, which is part of all human existence, and historicism, as a deliberate and reflective strand of German philosophy emerging in between the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth century. In addition, Most introduces the term historicization, which is meant to serve as a special form of cognition. See *Historicization – Historisierung*, ed. Glenn W. Most (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2001). Most's distinction is clearly laid out in the editor's preface (vii-viii in particular).

[29] Herder thus criticizes other modern philosophers, such as Leibniz, for standing on Descartes' bank (PW 182; SW VIII 266).

[30] Rudolf Haym, *Herder*, 2 vols. (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1954), vol. I, 55.

[31] John Zammito's work represents a significant contribution to this field. See Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*. Zammito emphasizes how Kant and Herder were both influenced by the anthropological spirit of empiricism and how even the late Kant, though critical of his former student, remained indebted to his work. See *The Genesis of Kant's Critique of Judgment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992), especially Chapter One.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org