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# Philosophical Writings

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JOHANN GOTTFRIED VON HERDER

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*Philosophical Writings*

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY  
MICHAEL N. FORSTER  
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## Introduction

Herder is a philosopher of the very first rank. Such a claim depends mainly on the intrinsic quality of his ideas, and I shall attempt to give a sense of that in what follows. But another aspect of it is his intellectual influence. This has been immense both within philosophy and beyond (far greater than is generally realized). For example, Hegel's philosophy turns out to be an elaborate systematic extension of Herderian ideas (especially concerning God, the mind, and history); so too does Schleiermacher's (concerning God, the mind, interpretation, translation, and art); Nietzsche is strongly influenced by Herder (concerning the mind, history, and morals); so too is Dilthey (in his theory of the human sciences); J. S. Mill has important debts to Herder (in political philosophy); Goethe not only received his philosophical outlook from Herder but was also transformed from being merely a clever but conventional poet into a great artist mainly through the early impact on him of Herder's ideas; and this list could go on.

Indeed, Herder can claim to have virtually established whole disciplines which we nowadays take for granted. For example, it was mainly Herder (not, as is often claimed, Hamann) who established certain fundamental principles concerning an intimate dependence of thought on language which underpin modern philosophy of language. Through those ideas, his broad empirical approach to languages, his recognition of deep variations in language and thought across historical periods and cultures, and in other ways, Herder inspired Wilhelm von Humboldt to found modern linguistics. Herder developed modern hermeneutics, or interpretation theory, into a form that would subsequently be taken over by Schleiermacher and then more systematically articulated by Schleiermacher's pupil Böckh. In doing that, he also established the methodological foundations of

nineteenth-century German classical scholarship (which rested on the Schleiermacher-Böckh methodology), and hence of modern classical scholarship generally. Herder arguably did more than anyone else to establish the general conception and the interpretative methodology of our modern discipline of anthropology. Finally, Herder also made vital contributions to the progress of modern biblical scholarship (not only developing general hermeneutics, but also, for example, defining the genres of Old Testament poetry more adequately than had been done before, eliminating the bane of allegorical interpretations of Old Testament texts such as the Song of Solomon, and establishing the correct chronology of the four gospels of the New Testament).

The aim of the present volume is to make texts by Herder<sup>1</sup> in core areas of philosophy available to Anglophone readers so that his quality and influence as a philosopher can be studied.<sup>2</sup> To this end, the volume focuses mainly on earlier works. Herder writes in an essay here that “the first, uninhibited work of an author is . . . usually his best; his bloom is unfolding, his soul still dawn.”<sup>3</sup> Whether or not that is *generally* true, it certainly applies to Herder himself, whose earlier writings do indeed tend to be his best. This fact, together with their other notable virtue of brevity, motivated this volume’s concentration on them.

*Reading Herder: some preliminaries*

In certain ways Herder’s philosophical texts are easier to read than others from the period. For example, he avoids technical jargon, his writing is lively and rich in examples rather than dry and abstract, and he has no large, complex system for the reader to keep track of. But his texts also have certain compensating peculiarities which can cause misunderstanding and misgiving, and which require explanation.

<sup>1</sup> Two editions of Herder’s works have been used for this volume: U. Gaier et al. (eds.), *Johann Gottfried Herder Werke* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985–); B. Suphan et al. (eds.), *Johann Gottfried Herder Sämtliche Werke* (Berlin, 1887–). References to these editions take the form of the primary editor’s surname initial followed by volume number and page number (e.g. G2:321 or S5:261).

<sup>2</sup> Two areas have been omitted (except insofar as they are touched on in passing) in order to keep the scale of the volume reasonable: Herder’s philosophy of religion (very important for questions of influence, but less intrinsically relevant given modern philosophy’s secular sensibilities) and his aesthetics (philosophically fascinating, but perhaps less fundamental, and also unmanageably extensive).

<sup>3</sup> *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul* (1778). After a first occurrence most titles will be abbreviated in this introduction.



First of all, Herder's writing often seems emotional and grammatically undisciplined in a way that might perhaps be expected in casual speech but not in philosophical texts. This is intentional. Indeed, Herder sometimes deliberately "roughed up" material in this direction between drafts (e.g. between the 1775 and 1778 drafts of *On the Cognition*). Also, when writing in this way he is often using grammatical-rhetorical figures which, though they can strike an untutored eye as mere carelessness, receive high literary sanction from classical sources and are employed artfully (e.g. anacoluthon, aposiopesis, brachylogy, chiasmus, hendiadys, oxymoron, and hysteron proteron).<sup>4</sup> Moreover, he has several serious philosophical reasons for writing in this way rather than in the manner of conventional academic prose. First, this promises to make his writing more broadly accessible and interesting to people – a decidedly nontrivial goal for him, since he believes it to be an essential part of philosophy's vocation to have a broad social impact. Second, one of his central theses in the philosophy of mind holds that thought is not and should not be separate from volition, or affect; that types of thinking which aspire to exclude affect are inherently distorting and inferior. Standard academic writing has this vice, but spontaneous speech, and writing which approximates it, do not. Third, Herder is opposed to any grammatical or lexical strait-jacketing of language, any slavish obedience to grammar books and dictionaries (he would be critical of such institutions as Duden in Germany and the *Chicago Manual of Style* in the USA). In his view, such strait-jacketing is inimical, not only to linguistic creativity and inventiveness, but also (much worse), because thought is essentially dependent on and confined in its scope by language, thereby to creativity and inventiveness in thought itself.

Another peculiarity of Herder's philosophical writing is its unsystematic nature. This is again deliberate, for Herder is largely hostile towards systematicity in philosophy (a fact reflected both in explicit remarks and in many of his titles: *Fragments . . .*, *Ideas . . .*, etc.). He is in particular hostile to the very ambitious type of systematicity aspired to in the tradition of Spinoza, Wolff, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel: a theory whose parts form and exhaust some sort of strict overall pattern of derivation. Moreover, he has compelling reasons for this hostility. First, he is very skeptical that such systematic designs can be made to work (as opposed

<sup>4</sup> I have indicated some examples of such figures as they occur in the translation.

to creating, through illicit means, an illusion that they do). Second, he believes that such system-building leads to a premature closure of inquiry, and in particular to a disregarding or distorting of new empirical evidence. Scrutiny of such systems amply bears out these misgivings. Herder's well-grounded hostility to this type of systematicity established an important countertradition in German philosophy (which subsequently included, for example, Friedrich Schlegel, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein).

On the other hand, Herder is in *favor* of "systematicity" in a more modest sense: a theory which is self-consistent and maximally supported by argument.<sup>5</sup> He does not always achieve this ideal (so that interpreting him calls for more selectivity and reconstruction than is the case with some philosophers).<sup>6</sup> But his failures are often only apparent: First, in many cases where he seems to be guilty of inconsistency he really is not, for he is often developing philosophical dialogues between two or more opposing viewpoints, in which cases it would clearly be a mistake to accuse him of inconsistency in any usual or pejorative sense; and (less obviously) in other cases he is in effect still working in this dialogue mode, only without bothering to distribute the positions among different interlocutors explicitly, and so is again really innocent of inconsistency (examples of this occur in *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People* [1765] and *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* [1774]). Moreover, he has serious motives for this method of (implicit) dialogue. Sometimes his motive is simply that when dealing with religiously or politically delicate matters it permits him to state his views but without quite stating them as his own and therefore without inviting trouble. But there are also philosophically deeper motives: He takes over from the precritical Kant an idea (inspired by ancient skepticism) that the best way for a philosopher to pursue the truth is by setting contrary views on a subject into opposition with one another and advancing towards the truth through their mutual testing and modification. Also, he develops an original variant of that idea on the sociohistorical plane: analogously, the way for humankind as a whole to attain the elusive goal of truth is through an ongoing contest between opposing positions,

<sup>5</sup> This marks an important point of methodological contrast with Hamann, whom Herder already criticizes for failing to provide arguments in an essay from early 1765 (G1:38–9).

<sup>6</sup> In this connection, Charles Taylor wisely comments that "deeply innovative thinkers don't have to be rigorous to be the originators of important ideas" ("The Importance of Herder," in E. and A. Margalit [eds.], *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* [Chicago, 1991]). The converse holds as well: thinkers can be very rigorous without originating any important ideas.

in the course of which the best ones will eventually win out (this idea anticipates, and inspired, a central thesis of J. S. Mill's *On Liberty*). This yields a further motive for the dialogue method (even where it does not lead Herder himself to any definite conclusion), in effect warranting the rhetorical question: And what does it matter to the cause of humankind and its discovery of the truth whether those opposing positions are advanced by different people or by the *same* person? Second, Herder's appearance of neglecting to give arguments is often, rather, a principled rejection of arguments *of certain sorts*. For example (as we are about to see), he has a general commitment to empiricism and against apriorism in philosophy which leads him to avoid familiar sorts of apriorist arguments in philosophy; and a commitment to noncognitivism in ethics which leads him to refrain from familiar sorts of cognitivist arguments in ethics.

*Herder's general program in philosophy*

Hamann's influence on Herder's best thought has often been greatly exaggerated, but Kant's was early, fundamental, and enduring. However, the Kant who influenced Herder in this way was the precritical Kant of the early and middle 1760s, not the critical Kant (against whom Herder later engaged in distracting and rather ineffective public polemics). Some of Kant's key positions in the 1760s, sharply contrasting with those he would later adopt in the critical period, were a (Pyrrhonist-influenced) skepticism about metaphysics, a form of empiricism, and a (Hume-influenced) noncognitivism in ethics. Herder took over these positions in the 1760s and retained them throughout his career.<sup>7</sup>

Herder's 1765 essay *How Philosophy Can Become*, rough and fragmentary as it is, is a key for understanding the broad foundations of his philosophy, and the debts these owe to the precritical Kant of the early and middle 1760s. The essay was written under strong influence from Kant, and especially, it seems, Kant's 1766 essay *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*, which, Herder reports, Kant sent him before publication "a sheet at a time."

<sup>7</sup> It should by no means be inferred that Herder's debt to the *precritical* Kant is a debt to an *inferior* Kant. On the contrary, for all their greater novelty, systematicity, and fascination for professional philosophers, Kant's contrary later positions in the critical period – for example, that a noumenal freedom of the will, afterlife of the soul, and God must be believed in as presuppositions of morality; that much in natural science and philosophy can be known completely a priori; and that morality rests on a single principle analogous in character to the logical law of contradiction, the "categorical imperative" – are ultimately far less philosophically defensible than the precritical positions just mentioned.

Herder's essay answers a prize question set by a society in Berne: "How can the truths of philosophy become more universal and useful for the benefit of the people?" This question is in the spirit of the *Popularphilosophie* that was competing with school philosophy at the time. Kant himself tended to identify with *Popularphilosophie* at this period, albeit only transiently, and Herder's selection of this question shows him doing so as well, though in his case the identification would last a lifetime. Philosophy should become relevant and useful for people as a whole – this is a basic ideal of Herder's philosophy.

Largely in the service of this ideal, Herder argues in the essay for two sharp turns in philosophy, turns which would again remain fundamental throughout his career. The first involves a rejection of traditional metaphysics, and closely follows an argument of Kant's in *Dreams of a Spirit Seer*. Herder's case is roughly this: First, traditional metaphysics, by undertaking to transcend experience (or strictly, and a little more broadly, "healthy understanding," which includes, besides empirical knowledge, also ordinary morality, intuitive logic, and mathematics), succumbs to unresolvable contradictions between its claims, and hence to the Pyrrhonian skeptical problem of an equal plausibility on both sides requiring suspension of judgment ("I am writing for Pyrrhonists"). Also (Herder adds in the *Fragments on Recent German Literature* [1767–8]), given the truth of a broadly empiricist theory of concepts, much terminology of traditional metaphysics turns out to lack the basis in experience that it would need in order even to be meaningful, and hence is meaningless (the illusion of meaningfulness arising largely through the role of *language*, which spins on, creating illusions of meaning, even after the empirical conditions of meaning have been left behind).<sup>8</sup> Second, traditional metaphysics is not only, for these reasons, useless; it is also *harmful*, because it distracts its adherents from the matters which should be their focus: empirical nature and human society. Third, by contrast, empirical knowledge (or strictly, and a bit more broadly, "healthy understanding") is free of these problems. Philosophy ought therefore to be based on and continuous with this.

Herder's second sharp turn concerns moral philosophy. He remains indebted to Kant here, but also goes further beyond him. Herder's basic claims are these: (1) Morality is fundamentally more a matter of sentiments

<sup>8</sup> This diagnosis in terms of language seems to go beyond the precritical Kant. However, it has deep precedents and roots in the empiricist tradition – especially Bacon and Locke.

than of cognitions.<sup>9</sup> (Herder's sentimentalism is not crude, however; in the *Critical Forests* [1769] and *On the Cognition* he acknowledges that cognition plays a large role in morality as well.) (2) Cognitivist theories of morality – espoused in this period especially by Rationalists such as Wolff, but also by many other philosophers before and since (e.g. Plato and the critical Kant) – are therefore based on a mistake, and hence useless as means of moral enlightenment or improvement. (3) But (and here Herder's theory moves beyond Kant's), worse than that, they are actually *harmful* to morality, because they weaken the moral sentiments on which it really rests. In *This Too* and *On the Cognition* Herder suggests several reasons why. First, abstract theorizing weakens the sentiments generally, and hence moral ones in particular. Second, the cognitivists' theories turn out to be so *strikingly* implausible that they bring morality itself into disrepute, people reacting to them roughly along the lines: "If this is the best that even the experts can say in explanation and justification of morality, morality must certainly be a sham, and I may as well ignore it and do as I please." Third, such theories distract people from recognizing and working to reinforce the *real* foundations of morality: not an imaginary theoretical insight of some sort, but a set of causal means for inculcating moral sentiments. (4) More positively, Herder accordingly turns instead to determining in theory and promoting in practice just such a set of causal means. In *How Philosophy Can Become* he stresses forms of education and an emotive type of preaching (two life-long preoccupations of his in both theory and practice). Elsewhere he adds exposure to morally exemplary individuals, morally relevant laws, and literature (along with other art forms). Literature is a special focus of Herder's theory and practice. He sees it as exerting moral influence in several ways – not only through relatively direct moral instruction, but also through the literary perpetuation or creation of morally exemplary individuals (e.g. Jesus in the New Testament) and the exposure of readers to other people's inner lives and a consequent enhancement of their sympathies for them (a motive behind his publication of the *Popular Songs* [1778–9] from peoples around the world). Herder's

<sup>9</sup> Hume had provided a compelling (though not uncontested) argument for this position in terms of morality's intrinsic motivating force and cognition's motivational inertness. The precritical Kant was evidently influenced by this argument, and there are indications in *This Too* that Herder was as well.

development of this theory and practice of moral pedagogy was lifelong and tireless.

*Herder's philosophy of language*

The materials in the present volume relevant to this topic include not only those in the philosophy of language section but also those in the philosophy of mind and history sections.

The *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772) is Herder's best-known work on language. It is mainly concerned with the question whether the origin of language must be accounted for in terms of a divine source (as Süßmilch had recently argued) or in purely natural, human terms. Herder argues against the former view and for the latter. His motives are not strictly secular. Rather, he is assuming a position from Kant's *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755) that explanations in terms of natural laws are not only explanatorily superior to, but also *ultimately better testimony to God's role in nature* than, ones in terms of particular divine interventions in nature. Still, he probably felt the attractiveness of his case to a secular standpoint to be an advantage – and it is from such a standpoint that it will interest a modern philosopher. Herder's *positive* argument for a human origin is perhaps made best, not in *On the Origin* itself (where it gets entangled with the polemics against Süßmilch), but in the *Fragments* (as excerpted here). The argument is especially impressive for its methodology: its adducing of a number of independent empirical considerations that seem to converge on the conclusion of a human origin, and the admirably tentative, fallibilist spirit in which it does this.

However, for all its broad plausibility, this whole case is unlikely to be a modern philosopher's main reason for interest in Herder's ideas about language – deriving its zest, as it does, from a religious background that is no longer ours. Of much greater modern relevance is Herder's theory of interpretation, including his theory of the relation between thought, concepts, and language. This theory is scattered through many works (several included here). The following are its main features.

Herder's theory rests on, but also in turn supports, an epoch-making insight: (1) Such eminent Enlightenment philosopher-historians as Hume and Voltaire still believed that, as Hume puts it, "mankind are so much the same in all times and places that history informs us of nothing

new or strange.” What Herder discovered, or at least saw more clearly and fully than anyone before, was that this was false, that peoples from different historical periods and cultures vary *tremendously* in their concepts, beliefs, and other propositional attitudes, perceptual and affective sensations, etc. He also saw that similar, if usually less dramatic, variations occur even between individuals in a single culture and period.<sup>10</sup>

(2) Because of these radical differences, and the gulf that consequently often divides an interpreter’s own thought from that of the person he wants to interpret, interpretation is often an extremely difficult task, requiring extraordinary efforts.<sup>11</sup>

(3) In particular, the interpreter often faces, and must resist, a temptation falsely to assimilate the thought which he is interpreting to someone else’s, especially his own.<sup>12</sup>

How is the interpreter to meet the challenge? Herder advances three fundamental theses concerning thought, concepts, and language which underpin the rest of his theory of interpretation. The first two of these made a revolutionary break with a predominant Enlightenment model of thought and concepts as separable from and prior to language, thereby establishing not only modern interpretation theory but also modern linguistics and philosophy of language.

(4) Thought is essentially dependent on, and bounded in scope by, language – i.e. one can only think if one has a language, and one can only think what one can express linguistically.<sup>13</sup> An important consequence of this principle for interpretation is that an interpreted subject’s language is a reliable indicator of the scope of his thought.

(5) Meanings or concepts are not to be equated with the sorts of items, in principle autonomous of language, with which much of the philosophical tradition has equated them – for example, the referents involved, Platonic forms, or the “ideas” favored by the British empiricists and others. Instead,

<sup>10</sup> These positions are prominent in many works, e.g. *On the Change of Taste* (1766) and *On the Cognition*.

<sup>11</sup> See e.g. *On the Origin*. To his credit, Herder does not draw the more extreme – and misguided – conclusion to which some more recent philosophers, such as the Davidsonians, have been tempted that the task would be *impossible*.

<sup>12</sup> This theme is prominent in *This Too*.

<sup>13</sup> This principle is already prominent in the *Fragments*. Indeed it can be found even earlier in Herder’s *On Diligence in Several Learned Languages* (1764).

To his credit, Herder normally refrains from more extreme, but philosophically untenable, versions of this principle, later favored by Hamann and Schleiermacher, which *identify* thought with language, or with inner language.

they consist in *usages of words*.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, interpretation will essentially involve pinning down word usages.

(6) Conceptualization is intimately bound up with (perceptual and affective) sensation. More specifically, Herder develops a quasi-empiricist theory of concepts according to which sensation is the source and basis of all our concepts, though we are able to achieve nonempirical concepts by means of a sort of metaphorical extension from the empirical ones – so that all our concepts ultimately depend on sensation in one way or another.<sup>15</sup> This position carries the important consequence for interpretation that any understanding of a concept must somehow recapture its basis in sensation.

Herder also has two further basic principles in interpretation theory:

(7) A principle of *secularism* in interpretation: religious assumptions must not influence the interpretation of texts, even sacred texts. In particular, the interpreter of a sacred text such as the bible may neither rely on receiving divine inspiration himself when interpreting nor on the original authors having received it, and having therefore produced a text that was true and self-consistent throughout.<sup>16</sup>

(8) A principle of *methodological empiricism* in interpretation: interpretation must not be conducted in an a priori fashion but must always be based on, and strictly faithful to, exact observations of linguistic and other relevant evidence. This applies when determining word usages in order to determine meanings;<sup>17</sup> when conjecturing an author's psychology;<sup>18</sup> and when defining literary genres, or the purposes and rules that constitute them.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The positive side of this doctrine and its rejection of the "way of ideas" are already prominent in the *Fragments*. For Herder's rejection of Platonic forms, see *Johann Gottfried Herder Briefe*, ed. W. Dobbek and G. Arnold (Weimar, 1977–), 1:179–80 (a letter from 1769). The *Fragments* and *On the Origin* already develop several points which speak against equating concepts with referents (e.g. that language is originally and fundamentally *expressive* rather than designative or descriptive in nature), and Herder goes on to reject this explicitly in the *Ideas*.

Note that this doctrine promises a much more satisfactory justification and explanation of doctrine (4) than the one that Herder explicitly gives in *On the Origin* (which in effect just amounts to an illicit stipulative redefinition of "language" to include a certain fundamental aspect of thought, namely the recognition of "characteristic marks [*Merkmale*]"). Herder already gives the superior justification and explanation in question in the *Fragments* and *On Diligence*.

<sup>15</sup> For this doctrine, see e.g. *On the Origin* and *On the Cognition*. This doctrine might seem at odds with the preceding one, but it need not be. For a *usage* of words implicitly requires a *context*, and the context in question might very well essentially include certain sensations.

<sup>16</sup> This principle is already prominent in writings by Herder on biblical interpretation from the 1760s not included in this volume.

<sup>17</sup> This point is prominent in the *Fragments*. <sup>18</sup> See e.g. *On Thomas Abbi's Writings* (1768).

<sup>19</sup> For a classic expression of this position on genres, see Herder's essay *Shakespeare* (1773).



Beyond this, Herder also advances a further set of interpretative principles which can sound more “touchy-feely” at first hearing (the first of them rather literally so!), but which are in fact on the contrary deeply motivated:

(9) Especially in *This Too*, Herder famously proposes that the way to bridge radical difference when interpreting is through *Einfühlung*, “feeling one’s way in.” This proposal has often been thought (e.g. by Meinecke) to mean that the interpreter should perform some sort of psychological self-projection onto texts. But, as the context in which it is introduced in *This Too* shows, that is emphatically not Herder’s idea – for that would amount to exactly the sort of assimilation of the thought in a text to one’s own which he is above all concerned to *avoid*. The same context makes clear that what he has in mind is instead an arduous process of historical-philological inquiry – so *Einfühlung* is really a metaphor here. What, though, more specifically, is the cash value of the metaphor? It has at least five components: First, it implies (once again) that there typically exists a radical difference, a gulf, between an interpreter’s mentality and that of the subject whom he interprets, making interpretation a difficult, laborious task (it implies that there is an “in” there which one must carefully and laboriously “feel one’s way into”). Second, it implies (*This Too* shows) that this process must include thorough research not only into a text’s use of language but also into its historical, geographical, and social context. Third, it implies a claim – deriving from Herder’s quasi-empiricist theory of concepts – that in order to interpret a subject’s language one must achieve an imaginative reproduction of his perceptual and affective sensations.<sup>20</sup> Fourth, it implies that hostility in an interpreter towards the people he interprets will generally distort his interpretation and must therefore be avoided.<sup>21</sup> (Herder is also opposed to excessive identification with them for the same reason.) Fifth, it also implies that the interpreter should strive to develop his grasp of linguistic

<sup>20</sup> In writings on the Old Testament Herder astutely forestalls some obvious objections here, noting that this reproduction need not involve actually *sharing* the sensations. So his idea is that a sort of imaginative reproduction of an interpreted subject’s sensations is possible which, while more than a mere propositional grasp of them, is also less than an actual sharing of them, and that only this is required for interpretation. This is an important idea: for example, it suggests an effective response to Gadamer’s concern that discrepancies in “pre-understanding” preclude unprejudiced interpretation.

<sup>21</sup> Some of Herder’s own successes as an interpreter came from following precisely this principle – e.g. his recognition, in contradiction of antisemitic interpreters such as Kant, that the viewpoints of the Old and New Testaments were far more continuous than discontinuous.

usage, contextual facts, and relevant sensations to the point where this achieves something of the same immediate, automatic character that it had for a text's original audience when *they* understood the text in light of such things (so that it acquires for him, as it had for them, the phenomenology more of a feeling than a cognition).

(10) In addition, Herder insists on a principle of *holism* in interpretation.<sup>22</sup> This principle rests on several motives, including the following. First, in order to begin interpreting a piece of text an interpreter needs to know ranges of linguistic meanings which its words can bear. But, especially when texts are separated from the interpreter by radical difference, such knowledge presents a problem. How is he to pin down the range of possible meanings, i.e. possible usages, for a word? This requires that he collate the word's known actual uses and infer from these the rules which govern them, i.e. usages, a collation which in turn requires that he look to remoter contexts in which the same word occurs (other parts of the text, other works in the author's corpus, works by other contemporaries, etc.), or in short: holism. Second, even when that is done, a piece of text considered in isolation will usually be ambiguous in relation to such ranges, and in order to resolve the ambiguities the interpreter will need to seek the guidance provided by surrounding text. Third, an author typically writes a work *as* a whole, conveying ideas not only in its particular parts but also through the manner in which these are fitted together to make up a whole (either in instantiation of a general genre or in ways more specific to the particular work). Consequently, readings which fail to interpret the work as a whole will miss essential aspects of its meaning – both the ideas in question themselves and meanings of particular parts on which they shed vital light.

(11) In *On Thomas Abbt's Writings* and *On the Cognition* Herder makes one of his most important innovations: interpretation must supplement its focus on word usage with attention to authorial *psychology*. Herder implies several reasons for this. A first has already been mentioned: Herder's quasi-empiricist theory of concepts with its implication that in order to understand an author's concepts the interpreter must recapture his relevant sensations. Second, as Quentin Skinner has stressed (in some of the most important work on interpretation theory since Herder), understanding the linguistic meaning of an utterance or text is only a

<sup>22</sup> This insistence is especially prominent in the *Critical Forests* (not included in this volume).

necessary, not a sufficient, condition for understanding it *tout court* – in addition, one needs to establish the author’s illocutionary *intentions*. For example, a stranger tells me, “The ice is thin over there”; I understand his linguistic meaning perfectly; but is he simply informing me? warning me? threatening me? joking? . . . Third, Skinner implies that one can determine linguistic meanings prior to establishing authorial intentions. That may perhaps *sometimes* be so (e.g. in the example just given), but is it *generally*? Herder implies not. And this seems right, because commonly a linguistic formula’s meaning is ambiguous in terms of the background linguistic possibilities, and in order to identify the relevant meaning one must turn, not only (as was mentioned) to larger bodies of text, but also to hypotheses, largely derived therefrom, about the author’s intentions (e.g. about the subject matter that he intends to treat). A fourth reason consists in the already-mentioned fact that authors typically express some ideas in a work not explicitly in its parts but holistically, and that these need to be determined both for their own sakes and for the light they shed on the meanings of parts. Fifth, Herder also sees a source of the need for psychological interpretation in the second limb of his doctrine of radical difference: *individual* variations in mode of thought even within a single culture and period. Why does any special need arise here? Part of the answer seems to be that when one is interpreting a concept that is distinctive of a particular author rather than common to a whole culture, one typically faces a problem of relative paucity and lack of contextual variety in the actual uses of the word available as empirical evidence from which to infer the rule for use, or usage, constitutive of its meaning. Hence one needs extra help in this case, and knowledge of authorial psychology may supply this.

(12) In the same two works Herder also argues that interpretation, especially in its psychological aspect, requires the use of *divination*. This is another principle which can sound disturbingly “touchy-feely” at first hearing; in particular, it can sound as though Herder means some sort of prophetic process enjoying a religious basis and perhaps even infallibility. However, what he really has in mind is (far more sensibly) a process of hypothesis, based on meager empirical evidence, but also going well beyond it, and therefore vulnerable to subsequent falsification, and abandonment or revision if falsified.

(13) Finally, a point concerning the general nature of interpretation and its subject matter. After Herder, the question arose whether interpretation

was a science or an art. Herder does not really address this question, but his considered inclination would clearly be to say that it is *like* rather than *unlike* natural science. There are several reasons for this. First, he assumes, as did virtually everyone at this period, that the meaning of an author's text is as much an objective matter as the subjects addressed by the natural scientist.<sup>23</sup> Second, the *difficulty* of interpretation that results from radical difference, and the consequent need for a *methodologically subtle and laborious* approach to it in many cases, constitute further points of similarity with natural science. Third, the essential role of "divination" qua *hypothesis* in interpretation constitutes another important point of similarity with natural science. Fourth, even the subject matter of interpretation is not, in Herder's view, sharply different from that dealt with by natural science: the latter investigates physical processes in nature in order to determine the forces that underlie them, but similarly interpretation investigates human verbal (and nonverbal) physical behavior in order to determine the forces that underlie *it* (Herder explicitly identifying mental conditions, including conceptual understanding, as "forces").

Herder's theory owes many debts to predecessors. Hamann has commonly been credited with introducing the revolutionary doctrines concerning thought, concepts, and language (4) and (5). But that seems to be a mistake; Herder was already committed to them in the 1760s, Hamann only later. Instead, Herder is indebted for (4) to a group of authors, including Abbt and Süßmilch, who were influenced by Wolff, and for (1), (2), (5), (7), (8), and (10) to Ernesti. However, Herder's borrowings incorporate important refinements, and his overall contribution is enormous.<sup>24</sup>

Herder's theory was taken over virtually in its entirety by Schleiermacher in his hermeneutics. Certainly, Schleiermacher's theory is also directly influenced by sources which he shares with Herder, especially Ernesti, but such fundamental and famous positions in it as the supplementing of "linguistic" with "psychological" interpretation and the identification of "divination" as the method especially of the latter are

<sup>23</sup> This assumption has been stigmatized as "positivist" by Gadamer, but on the basis of very dubious philosophical arguments. H. D. Irmischer in "Grundzüge der Hermeneutik Herders," in *Bückerburger Gespräche über J. G. Herder 1971* (Bückerburg, 1973), questions the sort of characterization of Herder's position given here, arguing that Herder anticipates Gadamer's own conception of meaning as something relative to a developing interpretative context. There are some things in Herder which can suggest such a view. But it is clearly not his considered position. This can be seen, for example, from the excerpts included in this volume from *On Thomas Abbt's Writings*.

<sup>24</sup> Concerning some of these issues, see my "Herder's Philosophy of Language, Interpretation, and Translation: Three Fundamental Principles" (forthcoming in *The Review of Metaphysics*).

due entirely to Herder. Moreover, where Herder and Schleiermacher *do* occasionally disagree, Herder's position is almost always philosophically superior. For example, unlike Herder, Schleiermacher standardly inclines to inferior versions of doctrine (4) which *identify* thought with language, or inner language (such versions are easily refutable by counterexamples). He attempts to establish the deep individuality of interpreted subjects, not like Herder in an empirical way and as a rule of thumb, but in an a priori way as a universal truth, and with the extremely counterintuitive consequence that exact understanding never occurs. He worsens Herder's theory of psychological interpretation by introducing the unhelpful idea that this should consist in identifying, and tracing the necessary development of, a single authorial "seminal decision [*Keimentschluß*]" (for how many texts are written and properly interpretable in that way?). He worsens it again by restricting the evidence for authorial psychology to textual evidence only, instead of also including nonlinguistic behavior as Herder does. Finally, he mistakenly sees the role in interpretation of "divination," which like Herder he understands as a method of fallible and revisable hypothesis from meager empirical evidence, as a ground for sharply *distinguishing* interpretation from natural science, and hence for classifying it as an art rather than a science, instead of as a ground for *assimilating* them (a mistake caused by a false assumption that natural science works by plain induction).

#### *Herder's philosophy of mind*

Herder also develops an extremely interesting and influential position in the philosophy of mind. His position is thoroughly naturalistic and anti-dualistic in intent. In *On the Cognition* he tries to efface the division between the mental and the physical in two specific ways. First, he advances the theory that minds consist in forces (*Kräfte*) which manifest themselves in people's bodily behavior – just as physical nature contains forces which manifest themselves in the behavior of bodies.<sup>25</sup> He is officially agnostic about what force is, except for conceiving it as something apt to produce a type of bodily behavior, and as a real source thereof (not just something reducible to it). This strictly speaking absolves his theory from some common characterizations and objections (e.g. vitalism),

<sup>25</sup> Note that the general notion of mental forces (*Kräfte*) was already common before Herder among Rationalists such as Wolff and Süßmilch.

but also leaves it with enough content to have great virtues over rival theories: On the one hand, it ties types of mental states conceptually to corresponding types of bodily behavior – which seems correct (e.g. desiring an apple does seem conceptually tied to apple-eating behavior), and therefore marks a point of superiority over dualistic theories, and over mind-brain identity theories as well. On the other hand, it also avoids *reducing* mental states to bodily behavior – which again seems correct, in view of such obvious facts as that we can be, and indeed often are, in particular mental states which receive no behavioral manifestation, and hence marks a point of superiority over outright behaviorist theories.

Second, he also tries to explain the mind in terms of the phenomenon of irritation (*Reiz*), a phenomenon recently identified by Haller and exemplified by muscle fibers contracting in response to direct physical stimuli and relaxing upon their removal – in other words, a phenomenon which, while basically physiological, also seems to exhibit a transition to mental characteristics. There is an ambiguity in Herder's position here: usually he wants to resist physicalist reductionism, and so avoids saying that irritation is purely physiological and fully constitutes mental states; but in the 1775 draft of *On the Cognition* and even in parts of the published version, that *is* his position. And from a modern standpoint, this is another virtue of his account (though we would certainly today want to recast it in terms of different, and more complex, physiological processes than irritation).<sup>26</sup>

A further important thesis in Herder's philosophy of mind affirms that the mind is a unity, that there is no real division between its faculties. This position contradicts theorists such as Sulzer and Kant. However, it is not in itself new with Herder, having already been central to Rationalism, especially Wolff.<sup>27</sup> Where Herder is more original is in rejecting the Rationalists' reduction of sensation and volition to cognition, establishing the unity thesis in an empirical rather than apriorist way, and adding a normative dimension to the thesis – this is not only how the mind *is* but also how it *ought* to be. This last idea can sound incoherent, since if the

<sup>26</sup> This second line of thought might seem at odds with his first one (*forces*), but it need not be, for, given his official agnosticism about what forces are, it could, so to speak, fill in the “black box” of the hypothesized real forces, namely in physicalist terms. In other words, it turns out (not as a conceptual matter, but as a contingent one) that the real forces in question consist in physiological processes.

<sup>27</sup> Herder's introduction to his 1775 draft (included here) shows that he is fully aware of this debt. Hamann can therefore claim little credit as an influence here (though he can claim somewhat more for the further doctrines indicated in the next sentence).

mind is this way by its very nature, what sense is there in prescribing to people that it should be so rather than otherwise? But Herder's idea is in fact the coherent one that, while the mind is indeed this way by its very nature, people sometimes behave as though one faculty could be abstracted from another, and try to effect that, and this then leads to various malfunctions, and should therefore be avoided.

Herder's whole position on the mind's unity rests on three more specific doctrines of intimate mutual involvements between mental faculties, and malfunctions that arise from striving against them, doctrines which are in large part empirically motivated and hence lend the overall position a sort of empirical basis.

The first concerns the relation between thought and language: not only does language of its very nature express thought (an uncontroversial point), but also, as we saw, according to Herder thought is dependent on and bounded by language. Herder bases this further claim largely on empirical grounds (e.g. concerning how children's thought develops with language acquisition). The normative aspect of his position here is that attempts (in the manner of some metaphysics) to cut language free from the constraints of thought or (a more original point) vice versa lead to nonsense.

A second area of intimate mutual involvement concerns cognition and volition, or affects. The claim that volition is and should be based on cognition is not particularly controversial. But Herder also argues the converse, that all cognition is and should be based on volition, on affects (and not only on such relatively anemic ones as the impulse to know the truth, but also on less anemic ones). Herder is especially concerned to combat the idea that *theoretical* work is or should be detached from volition, from affects. In his view, it never really is even when it purports to be, and attempts to make it so merely impoverish and weaken it. His grounds for this position are again mainly empirical.

A third area of intimate mutual involvement concerns thought and sensation. Conceptualization and belief, on the one hand, and sensation (both perceptual and affective), on the other, are intimately connected according to Herder. Thus he advances the quasi-empiricist theory of concepts mentioned earlier, which entails that all our concepts, and hence also all our beliefs, ultimately depend in one way or another on sensation. And conversely, he argues – anticipating much recent work in philosophy (e.g. Hansen and Kuhn) – that there is a dependence in the other direction

as well, that the character of our sensations depends on our concepts and beliefs. Normatively, he sees attempts to violate this interdependence as inevitably leading to intellectual malfunction – for example, as was mentioned, metaphysicians’ attempts to cut entirely free from the empirical origin of concepts lead to meaninglessness. His grounds for this position are again largely empirical.

Herder also has further important doctrines in the philosophy of mind. One of these is a doctrine that linguistic meaning is fundamentally social, so that thought and other aspects of human mental life (as essentially articulated in terms of meanings), and therefore also the very self (as essentially dependent on thought and other aspects of human mental life, and defined in its specific identity by theirs), are so too. Herder’s version of this position seems meant only as an empirically based causal generalization. It has since fathered attempts to generate more ambitious arguments for stronger versions of the claim that meaning – and hence also thought and the very self – is socially constituted (e.g. by Hegel, Wittgenstein, Kripke, and Burge). However, it may very well be that these more ambitious arguments do not work, and that Herder’s version is exactly what should be accepted.

Herder also insists that, even within a single culture and period, human minds are deeply individual, deeply different from each other – so that in addition to a generalizing psychology we also need a psychology orientated to individuality. This is an important idea which has had a strong influence on subsequent thinkers (e.g. Schleiermacher, Nietzsche, Proust, Sartre, and Manfred Frank). Herder advances it only as an empirical rule of thumb. By contrast, a prominent strand in Schleiermacher and Frank purports to make it an a priori universal truth. But Herder’s position is again the more plausible one.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, like predecessors in the Rationalist tradition and like Kant, Herder sharply rejects the Cartesian notion of the mind’s self-transparency, instead insisting that much of what occurs in the mind is unconscious, so that self-knowledge is often deeply problematic. This is

<sup>28</sup> The previous doctrine of the sociality of meaning, thought, and self might seem inconsistent with this doctrine of individuality. However, even when the doctrine of individuality is pushed down as far as the level of meanings, there need be no inconsistency here, provided that the doctrine of sociality is asserted only as an empirically grounded causal rule, as Herder asserts it, rather than as a stronger doctrine about social practice constituting the very essence of meanings. Society, so to speak, provides a common semantical clay, which, however, then often gets molded in individual ways.



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