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**Herder’s Romantic Vision: Organicism, Pluralism, and Belonging**

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*The fervor, depth, and dispersion with which we receive, process, and communicate passion makes of us the shallow or deep vessels that we are. Often there lie under the diaphragm causes which we very incorrectly and laboriously seek in the head; the thought cannot reach there unless the sensation was in its place beforehand. The extent to which we participate in what surrounds us, how deeply love and hate, disgust and revulsion, vexation and pleasure, plant their roots in us – this tunes the string-play of our thoughts, this makes us into the human beings that we are… In my modest opinion, no* psychology *is possible which is not in each step determinate* physiology.

 -- Johann Herder, *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul[[1]](#footnote--1)*

**Introduction**

In this chapter, which is part of a larger dissertation project titled “Race and Vision; Rethinking the Romantic and the Tragic,” I explore the philosophical foundations, conceptual innovations, and ethical motivations animating Johann Gottfried von Herder’s romantic vision of the world and human history. I focus in particular on Herder’s cultural pluralism and show how it is undergirded by his expressivist theory of the subject, according to which the subject is always already embedded in a nature-culture matrix that fundamentally shapes its mode of being-in-the-world. For Herder, such an understanding of the subject and its relation to the world requires that we take seriously the essentially social character of reason, the culturally infused nature of identity formation, and the existence of a plurality of incommensurable values and forms of life. Although Herder’s romantic vision does notamount to an outright rejection of Enlightenment premises and aspirations, his claims regarding embodied rationality, cultural pluralism, and the partiality of all perspectives challenged the validity of the Enlightenment’s belief in the self-sufficiency and autonomy of reason, its linear conception of historical progress, and (some of) its universalistic pretensions. Through these critiques Herder discloses the distortions caused by certain aspects of the Enlightenment vision and calls for the formulation of a new philosophical approach, one informed by a keen historical sense and a posture of humility in the face of the strange and unfamiliar. In short, in place of the abstract, arrogant, and ahistorical universalism of the Enlightenment *philosophes*, Herder develops an empirically grounded philosophy more closely attuned to the complexity, diversity, and dynamism of human experience in its manifold manifestations.

Ultimately, I suggest that in spite of some significant limitations, Herder’s thought remains relevant to the concerns of contemporary political theory broadly speaking, as well as the emergent literatures in comparative political theory, critical race theory, and post-nationalist black political thought. This is the case for a number of reasons. First, Herder’s ruminations on the sources of morality, the character of historical development, and the relationship between the individual and society influenced, or anticipated in significant ways, many of the philosophical debates and developments that have helped shape the contours of western political thought over the past two and a half centuries. Second, Herder’s organic theory of the nation and notion of *Volksgeist*—the idea that nations constitute expressive wholes animated by a collectively shared *spirit*—played a central role in the development of modern black political thought, as can be seen, perhaps most vividly, in the early writings of W. E. B. Du Bois, which themselves continue to “exert considerable influence on post-segregation African American political theory.”[[2]](#footnote-0) Third, irrespective of its particular historical significance, Herder’s thought contains vital insights for theorizing contemporary (racial) politics. Chief among these are its depiction of the complex interrelations between affect, ethics, and politics, its account of how individual strivings, aspirations, and creative expressions are situated in a specific cultural milieu, and its recognition of both the importance and difficulty of forging intercultural understanding.

 In addition to these virtues, however, Herder’s thought contains shortcomings that limit the extent to which it can shed light on the contemporary politics of identity and difference. As has been noted by many of his critics, Herder’s organic conception of the nation is deeply problematic; not only does such an account inadequately capture the complexities and dissonances of (collective) identity formation, it also unduly derogates “hybrid” or “hyphenated” identities and incorrectly dismisses the possibility that a territorial state can accommodate (let alone encourage) a multiplicity of cultural ideals and concrete forms of life. More troubling still, it runs the risk of fostering chauvinism, militarism, and totalitarianism, as the historical fate of the nation idea(l) all too grimly attests. Although Herder’s political philosophy is neither chauvinistic nor totalitarian, the organic image of the nation it projects establishes a potentially dangerous socio-political logic that calls for the consolidation and normalization of collective identity under a unifying principle, thereby silencing or subordinating those voices—usually belonging to the most marginalized and vulnerable within the racial/national group—that do not correspond to the collective ideal being advanced.

Also deeply problematic, I want to suggest, is the romantic vision’s reliance on a providential image of time. As we shall see below, Herder’s philosophy of history secretes the assumption of a providentially designed world in which “we can legitimately believe that our profoundest drives and wishes… may point to something true,” and that the world is conducive to their realization.[[3]](#footnote-1) Drawing critical insight from Nietzsche, one of the principle claims of this dissertation is that providential worldviews, by which I mean any account of the human condition premised on the idea of a world characterized either by intrinsic purpose, providential guidance, or high susceptibility to human mastery and control, are likely to intensify individual and collective drives toward existential *ressentiment*, that is, toward resentment of the basic terms of life itself. Such resentments are often never explicitly articulated; instead, they become embedded in spiritual dispositions, typically resulting in a punitive orientation toward the world and a simmering desire for revenge against those taken to be responsible for life’s inevitable disappointments. Moreover, the dangers posed by the generalization of *ressentiment* are amplified when it is conjoined with a strong sense of national identity, especially when that national identity is taken to be providentially ordained. In such cases, the spirit of revenge is intensified and collectivized, and finds expression through the vilification of outsiders, the persecution of marginalized and vulnerable insiders, or both.

Nonetheless, despite these limitations and aporias, Herder’s thought contains a wealth of insight and innovation; the philosophical orientation he inaugurates helps us to better grasp the importance of affect, sensibility, and disposition to politics and ethics, alerts us to the dangers of methodological arrogance, and demonstrates how a sense of belonging is an integral aspect of human happiness and flourishing. Moreover, despite its contemporary ill repute, Herder’s organic conception of the nation was a key component of his staunch and consistent anti-imperialism, and his promotion of the development of distinct national cultures was motivated, in large part, by his opposition to the oppression and wide-spread degradation that accompanied imperialism and colonial expansion. While this does not mean that Herder’s version of organic communitarianism is unproblematic, it *does* mean that we should not assume that his defense of nationality was simply reactionary or chauvinistic. Furthermore, it suggests that we ought to be mindful of the variability of forms of nationalist thought and practice, of the differing roots and routes of nationalist movements, and of the contrasting political ideals towards which they strive. Indeed, once we understand the ways in which the romantic vision first emerged not as a justification for Empire or a stratagem for imperial expansion but, rather, as a means of opposing them, we may develop a better, more nuanced understanding of why thinkers such as W. E. B. Du Bois who were involved in constructing emancipatory political projects under conditions of racial domination found aspects of the Romantic *Weltanschauung* appealing.

**The Enlightenment Vision and the Romantic Reaction**

The romantic vision first came into focus in Germany near the end of the eighteenth century as a critical response to the worldview expressed by the proponents of the English and, especially, French Enlightenment(s). This is not to say, however, that the romantic vision amounted to an absolute rejection of the ‘Age of Reason’ or the claims of enlightened rationality. Instead, the romantic vision shared some aspirations with the enlightenment vision even as it forged a different spiritual ethos and interpretive orientation.

Although it is not my intention to provide a detailed account of all the historical, political, and social forces that contributed to the emergence of the Romantic Movement, a number of contextual factors are worth noting, including the spiritual influence of Pietism, the fragmentation and relative backwardness of German political institutions at the time, and wide-spread resentment of French cultural and political dominance. All of these contributed to “a post-Enlightenment climate [in Germany], at once critical of some of the main themes of the modern revolution, and yet striving to incorporate much of it.”[[4]](#footnote-2) In any case, against a mechanistic image of a world dissected and objectified by the relentless pursuit of reason, the romantic vision posits an organic, dynamic, and unitary world in which “mankind”—far from being “so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange”[[5]](#footnote-3)—is seen as differing tremendously across time and space.

Johann Gottfried von Herder was perhaps the most important figure in crafting this new philosophical vision. He was one of the principle theoreticians and critics of the *Sturm und Drang* (‘Storm and Stress’) movement in German art and literature, the “prophet” of modern nationalism,[[6]](#footnote-4) and in general the figure who “introduced what became the leading political and social ideas of German Romanticism.”[[7]](#footnote-5) Although Romanticism is often associated with mysticism, the passionate embrace of irrationality, and authoritarian nationalism, this is a one-sided and distorted account of what was in fact a complex and multifarious movement that underwent a number of transformations over time. More specifically, it paints a false picture of Herder’s thought, which, contrary to Liah Greenfeld’s claim, did not aim for “the absolute devaluation of reason and exaltation of its opposite, the irrational, unthinking feeling.”[[8]](#footnote-6) Instead, Herder held that the use of reason was necessary, but not sufficient, for human advancement. What he objected to was not every idea of reason but, rather, the Enlightenment’s relentless pursuit of “a disembodied, eternally selfsame, and universal reason.”[[9]](#footnote-7)

Like many of his contemporaries and romantic successors, Herder found the systems of the French *philosophes* from Helvetius to Voltaire to be full of cold abstractions that resulted in the alienation of man and the tearing apart of the unity of life. In this way much of his perspective brings to mind Rousseau’s critique of Enlightenment culture in the first *Discourse*. Herder rejected mechanistic worldviews, atomistic images of the subject, and any objectification of human nature that rendered it timeless, universal, and unchanging. He objected to the notion that the French Enlightenment offered a universal paradigm to be followed in all cases, and “his anger was particularly aroused by those who, in claiming cultural superiority for European civilization, felt themselves justified in subjugating and exploiting non-European peoples.”[[10]](#footnote-8) Importantly, he came from humble origins and was acutely aware of the stifling restrictions this entailed. Indeed, many commentators have suggested that the experience of imposed limitations and frustrated ambition fostered in Herder an acute sense of discontent with the social and political conditions of his time, as is evidenced in his personal correspondences and many of his political writings.

However, Herder’s deep-seated sense of socio-political discontent and alienation did not lead him, as Liah Greenfeld further claims, to envision “a totalitarian society” that left no room for individual freedom and gathered “all within its iron embrace” as the answer to the ills plaguing modern life.[[11]](#footnote-9) On the contrary, Herder was a committed egalitarian, democrat, and republican[[12]](#footnote-10) who abhorred political coercion, entrenched patterns of inequality, and any form of social organization that failed “to make use of man’s divine and noble gifts” for conscious striving and self-improvement.[[13]](#footnote-11) Above all, he was a ‘man of the people’ motivated by what Sheldon Wolin suggests is the fundamental quality common to all great (or “epic”) political theorists: concern for the world and care for the *res publicae*.*[[14]](#footnote-12)* Philosophy, Herder insisted, must be for the “benefit of the people;” it must function as a tool in the continual process of *Bildung[[15]](#footnote-13)*—the comprehensive shaping and harmonious development of the intellect, character, and spirit of the people.

Echoing Rousseau, Herder argued that the spread of the Enlightenment—of “philosophical reason” and “*philosophical ability*”—had, in fact, been “*harmful* for the people.”[[16]](#footnote-14) It had destroyed ancient virtues, diminished the power of local ties, alienated men from one another, weakened the sentiments upon which morality depends, and diminished the people’s attachment to existence. “Our age,” Herder laments, “has used *aqua fortis* to etch the name ‘Philosophy!’ on its forehead, and this seems to be having its effect deep inside the skull.”[[17]](#footnote-15) The problem was not simply that the Enlightenment vision was distorted but also that it had begun to infect and distort every facet of existence, creating a world of alienation, superficiality, and decay:

The cold, sensationlessly thinking science of the soul has perpetrated its deception as far as into life and action… Thus there arose a hypocritical figment of the imagination which the metaphysician calls the soul, clothes in the gloomy rays of abstractions, but which only appears in the presence of his magical lamp… representing to us a vaporous skeleton as a true, whole, living human being. Hence the great enmity between metaphysics and experience, between the abstract and the concrete, between thought and sensation. Hence the great illusion with which all abstractionists consider the living human being, and themselves act as shades of living human beings… [and] know so much about the human soul in general that they know nothing about each individual human soul and *no longer have any vision for seeing it as it is.*[[18]](#footnote-16)

The way out of this crisis, according to Herder, was not to be found in a retreat into irrationalism, mysticism, or primitivism, for “only philosophy can be an antidote for all the evil into which philosophical curiosity has plunged us.”[[19]](#footnote-17) What was needed, then, was a new way of doing philosophy, a new framework for philosophical investigation. Instead of seeking to transcend existence, “our philosophy must descend from the stars to human beings”;[[20]](#footnote-18) instead of abstracting from experience and dividing the human and non-human world, it must “seize the whole in its fullness, in all its peculiar, complex, historically changing manifestations”;[[21]](#footnote-19) and instead of seeking to generalize on the basis of a set of supposedly universal criteria, it must strive for a sympathetic understanding that respects the uniqueness of each particular in its relation to the whole. Ultimately, Herder’s call for a reformulation of philosophy is a call for philosophy to *see differently* and approach the world from a different perspective than the “*eagle’s view*” of the Enlightenment.[[22]](#footnote-20) This new perspective and the interpretation of the human condition that developed alongside it established the basic parameters of the *romantic vision*. Although the romantic vision would subsequently come to take a range of forms, each with varying emphases and implications, it was Herder who first gave it shape and established its general parameters.

**The Romantic Subject**

For Herder, nothing better captured the poverty of the Enlightenment vision than its mechanical and dualistic rendering of the subject. By separating thought from sensation, dividing the mind into discrete faculties, and isolating the subject from its constitutive environment, the Enlightenment vision had reduced the subject to a mechanical being forever set in opposition to itself and the world. According to Herder, (human) life is composed of a single stream of movement, development, and expression, no part of which can be adequately grasped in isolation from the others. He found the notion of a solitary human being isolated from society to be unintelligible,[[23]](#footnote-21) and he believed that thought could not and should not be separated from feeling. In opposition to the mechanical image of the subject, Herder developed the anti-dualist and vitalist notion of a self-unfolding subject striving toward the *expressive self-realization* of an inner essence or purpose.[[24]](#footnote-22) As an expressive being man is an indivisible whole in whom cognition and sensation are indelibly intertwined such that they cannot be understood in opposition to one another or seen as different modes of existence.Man is also whole in the sense that everything he does is an expression of his inner nature and a reflection of his complete personality.According to this image of man, language both expresses the subject’s inner nature and is constitutive of thought such that human consciousness is fundamentally linguistic.

To be human is to be engaged in a continual process of striving and holistic development toward the fullest expression of an inner ideal or essence, the meaning of which can only be realized in the very act of expression. Man achieves self-fulfillment only with the expressive realization of his inner purpose, which, in turn, requires the harmonious development not just of his thought but also of his feeling, inclination, and volition. In other words, because sensation, cognition, and volition are intertwined within the indivisible whole that is man, the development of each ‘aspect’ of the human soul requires the harmonious development of all:

*Cognition* without *volition* is nothing as well, a false, imperfect cognition… Hence also, *no* passion, *no* sensation is excluded that would not become volition through such cognition; precisely in the best cognition all can and must be effective, because the best cognition arose from all of them and only lives in all of them. [Those are] liars or enervated people who boast of having nothing but pure fundamental principles and curse inclinations, from which alone true fundamental principles arise! That would amount to sailing without wind, and fighting without weapons.[[25]](#footnote-23)

By separating sensation, affect, and bodily disposition from the individual’s cognitive and moral development, the mechanical view of the subject not only leads to a distorted image of man but also serves as an obstacle to human flourishing. On the one hand, all thought (and morality) are dependent on (perceptive and affective) sensation, such that separating the mind from the body distorts cognition and harms the foundations of morality. On the other hand, expressive realization requires the purposive cultivation of dispositions and the rationally guided organization of affect**.** In short, the development and improvement of cognition and bodily-disposition are mutually dependent on one another. Thought and feeling are not two separate modes of existence; they are interrelated aspects of a unitary subject striving toward expressive self-realization. Man is not just another animal with reason added on top,[[26]](#footnote-24) but a spiritually unified whole, a “multitudinous harmony”[[27]](#footnote-25) in which body and spirit are imbricated aspects of an expressive unity integrally related to its (natural and cultural) environment. “Hence, there is nothing one must guard against as much as one-sided mutilation and dissection.”[[28]](#footnote-26)

**The Romantic Subject of Belonging**

Not only must we guard against imposing an artificial separation between cognition and sensation within the subject, we must also guard against imposing an artificial separation between the subject and her immediate community. As noted above, Herder found the notion of an individual subject isolated from society to be unintelligible, and he believed that “the human being is in his destiny a creature of the herd, of society.”[[29]](#footnote-27) Why is this so? One way to think about this is to consider the implications of Herder’s notion of expressive self-realization. In order to express my inner essence, I require a community of meaning in which such expression is possible. In other words, I can only express myself with the symbols I have been brought up with and taught from a young age; these symbols in turn imply a background of implicit meanings, shared understandings, collective values, and common strivings—in short, a comprehensive *way of life*. Therefore, a concrete sense of belonging (with)in a discrete community is not just a source of social cohesion but, more importantly, the necessary condition for the possibility of individual self-improvement and expressive realization. For Herder, there can be an ‘I’ only on the basis of a ‘we’ within which the ‘I’ shines.

The individual thus *belongs* to his place in a fundamental sense; he has roots and can express himself only in terms of those symbols, values, and meanings that shaped his upbringing and socialization. According to Herder, Providential Nature brings the individual into the world in an incredibly vulnerable state, “weaker, needier, more abandoned by nature’s instruction, more completely without skills and talents, than any animal,” so that “he may enjoy an *upbringing*” through participation in a common way of life.[[30]](#footnote-28) In other words, the individual does not come into the world fully formed, but rather becomes what he is only through his constitutive attachments to society:

The more deeply someone has climbed down into himself, into the structure and origin of his noblest thoughts, then the more he will cover his eyes and feet and say: “What I am, I have become. I have grown like a tree; the seed was there, but the air, earth, and all the elements, which I did not deposit about myself, had to contribute to form the seed, the fruit, the tree.”[[31]](#footnote-29)

The subject is inexorably a part of some group, and all of his activity is in some way an expression of the spiritual ideals of that group. Moreover, the group to which he belongs is not some soul-less entity or a contractual arrangement among atomistic individuals; it is an organic network of social affiliations that nurtures and shapes him.[[32]](#footnote-30) The individual “is always a flower which, torn from its roots, broken from its stem, lies there and withers.”[[33]](#footnote-31) Hence, it follows that despite the fact that the ideal he aims to realize comes from within him and is distinctly his *own*, it also reflects and is a product of the life-world in which he is organically embedded. Herder’s point, then, is not simply that as inherently social creatures we require a tangible sense of belonging within a discrete community, but also that that belonging defines to a large extent who we are, how we understand the world, and what we find meaningful. Likewise, what unites a ‘people’—a *Volk*—is not a set of innate racial traits but, rather, a common language, culture, and history that binds them together and shapes their distinctive national character. “*Manner of living* (habitus) is what defines a kind; in our diverse humanity it is extremely various.”[[34]](#footnote-32)

**A Pluralism of Nations**

Herder’s cultural pluralism functions as a corollary to his ideas about the nature of belonging and provides the context in which his support for nationalist development is situated. Herder was by no means the first person to recognize that nations (or ‘peoples’) are different from one another, but he affords this observation a radical significance and import. There are a multiplicity of national cultures, forms of life, and modes of expression. “Like *individual human beings*, similarly *families* and *peoples* are different from each other,” and just as each person has a unique spiritual ideal towards which she is striving, so to does each nation.[[35]](#footnote-33) This means that there are a variety of conceptions of self-realization or, put another way, numerous values and ideals in the world. Moreover, Herder adds to this the important claim that some of these values are *incompatible* with one another. In other words, the realization of one value (e.g. devotion to one’s family) may be fundamentally at odds with the realization of other values (e.g. devotion to one’s nation), and moments of conflict between two values or ideals cannot be resolved into a higher synthesis that could accommodate both. Some ideals are simply incompatible with one another, and no one form of life can contain all of the good things in the world.

Furthermore, Herder suggests that values are not only frequently incompatible, but also *incommensurable*—that is, they lack a common measure according to which one could make comparative judgments of worth. For Herder, there is no universal scale of values and no general overall ranking of the realization of one value against the realization of others. It is in this sense that different forms of life can be said to be *incomparable*, for each way of lifebears within itself its own system of values, modes of fulfillment, and forms of happiness. As such, there is no answer to the question “Which people, in history, might have been the happiest?”[[36]](#footnote-34) Every society has its own virtues and vices, which are themselves usually inextricable from one another since they are a part of the same whole, and the forms of happiness possible in one society cannot be realized in others. “Basically, then,” when it comes to different forms of happiness and ideals of realization, “all *comparison* becomes *futile*,”[[37]](#footnote-35) for “who could compare the shepherd and father of the Orient, the ploughman and the artisan, the seaman, runner, conqueror of the world?”[[38]](#footnote-36)

The pursuit of one form of life—and its attendant values and mode(s) of happiness—necessarily includes the cost of excluded alternatives. Every victory is accompanied by a form of defeat. Indeed, one of Herder’s great insights was to recognize, as Nietzsche puts it, that “by doing we forego:”[[39]](#footnote-37) in pursuing a particular way of life, one must necessarily forego other possible modes of being. Of course, for Nietzsche such a choice should be a matter of personal preferment whereas for Herder the individual’s ‘choice’ is largely determined by her constitutive relationship to society. Nonetheless, for both thinkers the good is inherently heterogeneous, and, as such, there is no singular, universally valid moral principle or ideal form of life. As Isaiah Berlin explains,

If Herder’s view of mankind was correct – if Germans in the eighteenth century cannot become Greeks or Romans or ancient Hebrews or simple shepherds, still less all of these together – and if each of the civilizations… are widely different, and indeed incompatible – then how could there exist, even in principle, one universal ideal, valid for all men, at all times, everywhere?[[40]](#footnote-38)

In place of the Enlightenment vision of singular model for civilization, Herder posits a rich plurality of incommensurable cultures, each with its own way of pursuing human fulfillment and flourishing, its own internal “standard of perfection, totally independent of all comparisons with that of others.”[[41]](#footnote-39)

To be certain, Herder’s account of cultural pluralism is replete with sites of tension and ambiguity, especially in relation to his elusive notion of *Humanität*—the idea that the full breadth and meaning of something like universal humanity is revealed in the global development of the diverse array of national cultures and forms of life. But his general position is that the world is composed of a rich plurality of distinct and incommensurable national cultures, each striving toward its own unique spiritual ideal. This is what he means when he proclaims, “every nation has its *center* of happiness *within itself,* as every ball has its center of gravity!”[[42]](#footnote-40) If we wish to understand a people different from ourselves, then we must do our best to enter into their life-world, feel the gravitational pull of their ideal, and grasp the *spirit* that animates their strivings. As such, “it is completely necessary that one be able to leave one’s own time and one’s own people in order to judge about remote times and peoples.”[[43]](#footnote-41) If we fail to do this, not only will our assessments be incorrect, but we will also be likely to unfairly disparage and denigrate those different from us simply because they deviate from our ideal(s).[[44]](#footnote-42) Above all, we must avoid presuming that there are universally valid criteria for judgment, given to us by “universal reason.” At best the notion of universal human reason is too abstract and devoid of feeling to be applied to any particular cases, at worst it “is a cover for our favorite whims, idolatry, blindness, and laziness” in which we narcissistically presume our own manner of thought to be universally valid.[[45]](#footnote-43) To avoid the dangers of interpretive arrogance, Herder urges us to adopt a relativistic spirit and assess things according to their own standards. “Each nation must therefore be considered solely *in its place with everything that it is and has*.”[[46]](#footnote-44)

**Pluralism and Belonging**

Herder’s apparent cultural relativism raises a number of pressing issues, not the least of which concerns the practical and ethical implications of the idea that there are no universally applicable standards of judgment. Let us set that concern aside for the moment, however, and consider another likely objection to Herder’s position: namely, that the empirical diversity of life-worlds does *not* demonstrate that there is no universally valid form of life toward which all mankind is (or ought to be) striving and that *in principle* there is an ideal form of life, discoverable through the use of reason (or revealed to us by Providence). This objection could take a number of forms. For example, it could be argued that the apparent diversity of forms of life represents notthe plurality of incommensurable ends but, rather, the different ways in which humans strive after the same fundamental set of ends and values (i.e., that beneath the apparent diversity there is uniformity). Or it could be argued that while the diversity of forms of life *does* signify a real plurality of values, these values are neither incompatible nor incommensurable but, rather, can be synthesized in an ideal form of life that accommodates them all. Alternatively, the different forms of life may be seen as evidence of differential levels of historical development along the singular path of civilization. While it was this last view that Herder particularly objected to (because he thought it treated the existence of purportedly less advanced peoples as if it were merely a means for the achievement of a higher end), he thought that all such arguments were based on a flawed and highly abstracted account of the subject and an impoverished understanding of human experience.

As noted above, Herder argues that cognition ultimately depends on (but cannot be entirely reduced to) sensation; the senses “are so to speak the door for all our concepts, or the *optical medium* through which the idea comes in like a ray of sunlight.”[[47]](#footnote-45) If our thinking is indeed embodied in this way, then all of our concepts (whether they be aesthetic, moral, or theoretical) will vary with the structure of our sensations, the scope of our experiences, and the nature of our bodily disposition. On a fundamental level, then, it is cognition’s relation to sensation and the embodied, culturally infused nature of thinking that accounts for the variation in human mentality throughout history:

Our species falls into heaps: peoples, cities, families, which all certainly live closer in a single circle of sensation, a single region, a single mode of life. Sons of a single tribal father of more identical organizations, hence also of more similar manners of thought. How different is the world in which the Arab and the Greenlander, the soft Indian and the rock-hard Eskimo, live! How different their civilization, food, education, the first impressions that they receive, their inner structure of sensation! *And on this structure [of sensation] rests the structure of their thoughts, and the offprint of both, their language*… What a mode of life and sensation in Japan compared to neighboring China! The former people’s manner of thought is as really the daughter and witness of their sky and earth, their mode of life and their government, their mountain and their sea, as the Chinese language and wisdom is the daughter of strict rein and rules.[[48]](#footnote-46)

Herder posits an image of a dynamic and organic world composed of a plurality of national cultures, and he locates the source of this plurality in the mutual interactions of body and spirit and the subject’s integral relationship to its (cultural and physical) environment. It may be objected that in anchoring the diversity of human mentality in the variations in human sensation Herder is ultimately reducing human culture to natural or biological factors, thereby endorsing a dangerous and pernicious view of cultural development. However, Herder’s point is neither that cognition can be reduced to the effects of sensation nor that culture can be explained in purely naturalistic terms, but, rather, that the boundaries between body and spirit, sensation and cognition, and nature and culture are less definitive and more porous than the Enlightenment vision would have us believe. Thus, he advises us to allow sensation and affect to have their say in thought while taking care not to become blind servants of inclination: “in short, follow nature! Be no polyp without a head and no stone bust without a heart; let the stream of your life beat freshly in your breast, but let it also be purified up into the subtle marrow of your understanding and there become *life-spirit.*”[[49]](#footnote-47) Moreover, he suggests that bodily disposition and structures of sensation may themselves be altered through repeated acts or practices of the self that become habits deeply rooted in our way of being.[[50]](#footnote-48) Lastly, Herder asserts that with respect to a “people’s manner of thought,” in addition to sensation, “laws, government, manner of life count still for more, and in this way a people’s manner of thought, a daughter of the whole, become also the witness of the whole.”[[51]](#footnote-49) This approach may frustrate those who wish to determine clear and definitive lines of causality in the realms of politics, ethics, and culture, but Herder’s point is that in a world of complex interrelations no such definitive lines can be drawn.

In any case, Herder’s expressivist notion of the subject and concomitant theory of embodied rationality suggest a mode of theorizing human diversity that does not (automatically) disparage the different as the deficient or dismiss the unfamiliar as the irrational. By virtue of recognizing the ways in which we are fundamentally shaped and constituted by our cultural environment and upbringing (such that reason is always situated and partial), Herder refuses the temptation to presume that he can understand forms of life different from his own solely on the basis of his own experiences, concepts, and values. From this point of view, the different forms of life one encounters (many of which are profoundly strange and unfamiliar) cannot be assimilated to one’s own experiences and values or dismissed as provincial or backward modalities of social organization that must be brought in line with the rational order of things; they do not represent different levels of advancement along the singular scale of civilizational progress. Rather, they are distinct and vital sites of belonging that provide the necessary possibilities for individual and collective flourishing. Likewise, history is not an integrated system oriented toward the achievement of a singular end but, rather, a dynamic process of endless “transformation” and “continued metamorphosis” through which the diversity of human forces express themselves.[[52]](#footnote-50)

Herder not only recognizes a rich tapestry of human variation, he exalts in it, marveling at the numerous paths taken by human striving: “Of what endless variety is our artful structure susceptible!” he exclaims.[[53]](#footnote-51) And he sets out to give his readers “examples of how far the diversity of human beings can extend,”[[54]](#footnote-52) not only because he finds this to be fascinating, but also because the knowledge thus acquired has a morally edifying effect: by studying the diverse manifestations of the human spirit, we acquire an enriched appreciation for the nearly infinite possibilities and potentialities of human flourishing and, in so doing, begin to recognize the partiality of our own outlook and thereby take the first steps necessary for the noble and arduous task of forging inter-cultural understanding. But if we take our partial and limited perspective to be the universally valid standard of judgment, this becomes impossible, for such an approach inevitably impoverishes socio-historical understanding and prevents us from grasping the distinctiveness of that which is truly different, seeing in it “nothing but anomaly, merely deviation from the rule” we have presumptuously established beforehand.[[55]](#footnote-53) In short, if the study of history is to be a vehicle for the expansion of inter-cultural understanding, it must begin not with *a priori* principles but rather with empirical investigation informed by feeling and imaginative insight in the quest for sympathetic understanding.

**Pluralism, Language, and Sympathetic Understanding**

Language—the “offprint” of sensation and thought—constitutes a vital site of interpretative inquiry into the spirit of distant times and places. According to Herder, words do not just designate something external; they also express a mode of consciousness. In fact, our consciousness is fundamentally linguistic in character.[[56]](#footnote-54) Thought is both dependent on and shaped by language—“language sets [the] limits and outline for the whole of human cognition.”[[57]](#footnote-55) To think is to use a language, and to use a language is to think. For Herder,

Language is essential to thought. And if thought or the characteristically human activity can only be in the medium of language, then the different natural languages express each the uniquely characteristic way in which a people realizes the human essence. A people’s language is the privileged mirror or expression of its humanity.[[58]](#footnote-56)

Language offers a means for entering the inner world of thought and feeling—of “*character and ethics* in short, the secret of the nation”—and the study of national literatures and folk art is therefore indispensible for grasping the spirit of a people.[[59]](#footnote-57) However, language cannot be abstracted from the lived context in which it is embedded, and any interpretation of language, literature, or art must therefore proceed with reference to the comprehensive historical context of the expression. To truly understand ancient Greek tragedy, we must know something about what it was like to be an Athenian citizen in 5th century B.C.E.; we must strive to think and feel as they thought and felt, otherwise in our philological studies we only “grasp their formalities and have lost their spirit, we learn their language and do not feel the living world of their thoughts.”[[60]](#footnote-58) However, to think and feel in a manner foreign to us is no easy task; in fact, it may even be impossible. Are we therefore tragically fated to perpetual inter-cultural misunderstanding and unintelligibility? Herder entertains such a conclusion, but he ultimately rejects it, arguing that there are in fact means available for acquiring historical knowledge and expanding inter-cultural understanding.

In *Another Philosophy of History* Herder attempts to develop a method for grasping a foreign way of life with his notion of *Einfühlung*, an empathetic “feeling one’s way into.” Because of its passion for classification and generalization, human reason alone is ill equipped for the task of grasping the rich complexity and unique spirit of a distant people. Thus, we must supplement our reason with feeling, more specifically with a sympathetic and imaginative immersion into the life-world of a people:

One would first have to *sympathize* with a nation to feel a *single* of its *inclinations* and *actions*, to feel them *all together*, to *find* one word, to *think* all in its richness… To empathize with the *entire nature* of a soul, which rules through everything, which *molds* all other inclinations and forces of the soul *after its model, coloring* even the most indifferent actions, do not answer with words, but enter into the age itself, follow the compass, enter into all history; feel your way into everything – only then will you be on your way to understanding the word; only then will the thought fade whether all this, taken separately or taken together, is really you! You as everything taken together? *The quintessence of all ages and people?* That already shows the foolishness![[61]](#footnote-59)

We must “feel our way into everything,” into the thoughts, strivings, sensations, and experiences of a people. But for Herder, empathetic feeling is not a mystical turning away from the use of reason. *Einfühlung* is a meticulous method of empirical inquiry and a demanding process of historical, psychological, and philological investigation. Sympathy does not replace the scientific study of historical events and material relations but, rather, helps us to grasp their significance and meaning. The achievement of sympathetic understanding requires rigorous research into historical context, the willingness to cast aside preconceptions and *a priori* categories, the performance of audacious acts of imagination, and, above all, the cultivation of an *ethos* of responsiveness to the strange, paradoxical, and unfamiliar. So, while the challenges facing historical and inter-cultural understanding are immense, Herder thinks that we can achieve a good measure of these so long as we recognize that we cannot judge another era or culture according to our own standards and are willing to proceed with appropriate modesty and care.

 Even then, though, there is always the possibility that we will be mistaken in the conclusions we reach, for there will always be ineradicable elements of opacity, indiscernibility, and mystery in the world:

Whoever has noticed what an *inexpressible thing* the *peculiarity* of one human being is, how difficult it is to be able to *put the distinguishing distinctively*, how he feels and lives, how *different* and *peculiar* all things become for *him* after *his* eyes see them, *his* soul measures, *his* heart senses—what *depth* there is to the character of even *one nation* that even though one may have perceived and marveled at it often enough, yet *flees the word* so persistently, and that put into words, rarely becomes recognizable to *anyone*, so that he may understand and empathize.[[62]](#footnote-60)

There will always be aspects of the world which escape our cognitive reach, and so the possibilities of misunderstanding, error, and confusion are inescapable. The quest for absolute certainty is a futile endeavor. But just because our understanding is fallible and our perspective always partial, it does not follow that we have no hope of understanding or communicating with others, that peoples must remain mutually inexplicable to one another. Rather, Herder means to impress upon us that the first step to forging mutual understanding is to recognize these limitations and acknowledge the partiality of *all* perspectives. We must come to terms with the fact that abstract reason alone cannot bridge the differences in outlook between peoples and that, whether it be past or present societies different from our own, the work required for forging a common horizon is both difficult and indefinite. Again, though, nowhere does Herder claim that it is impossible to understand cultures different from one’s own; he merely warns that such an endeavor is fraught with challenges and limits: it and requires that we (do our best to) leave behind our own culturally determined point of view and be willing to approach the world from a new perspective.

It is because Herder believes in the possibility of achieving (some measure of) cross-cultural understanding that he cannot properly be classified as a *moral relativist* if by this term we mean the position which holds that because “right” can only mean “right for a given society,” we have no “right” to criticize or condemn the values and practices of cultures different from our own—indeed, that we are acting unjustly when we do so—and that we must therefore maintain a posture of evaluative neutrality in which we assent to whatever practices and values have been agreed upon by a given collectivity.[[63]](#footnote-61) This is not Herder’s position. In urging his readers to adopt a relativistic approach towards forms of life different from their own, Herder did not mean that they must forgo all judgment and critical assessment. Rather, his argument is that *understanding must precede judgment*, and that the former is only possible if one remains sensitive to a variety of contextual factors, maintains a posture of humility, and resists the urge to elevate “one’s own likes and dislikes to an absolute and universal standard of judgment with little concern for understanding the experiences of those in different cultures and historical times.”[[64]](#footnote-62) Nowhere does Herder suggest that different cultures are without their faults, only that these faults must be understood in context.

On my reading Herder does not believe that the type of radical evaluative neutrality supported by the moral relativist is possible, yet alone desirable. Indeed, Herder himself “persistently passes ethical judgments, often negative ones, on many aspects of the societies he describes, foreign” ones as well as his own.[[65]](#footnote-63) For Herder, judgment is an inescapable and indispensible aspect of the human condition. One simply cannot go about life without passing judgments, without finding some things to be good and others to be bad. However—and here is the rub—not only is judgment indispensible, it is also uncertain and fallible; we lack ready-made universal criteria capable of definitively guiding or grounding our judgments of value. This conclusion follows from Herder’s theory of human cognition, according to which reason is not autonomous but, rather, inseparable from sensation, (in)formed by experience, and conditioned by language. From this, “it follows that, in the sphere of morality, there are no intuited principles… no pure reason… [and] no *transcendent* norms to which individuals in every culture could have access.”[[66]](#footnote-64) Herder, then, confronts us with a fundamental dilemma with which we must grapple: “One is without criteria, yet one must decide.”[[67]](#footnote-65)

This is not to say, however, that Herder does not espouse a certain form of (weak) universalism. On the contrary, there is a sense in which he “accepts the basic content of the universal moral principles we have come to associate with the Enlightenment,”[[68]](#footnote-66) namely, that all persons are of equal moral worth and have “an equal right to the enjoyment of life.”[[69]](#footnote-67) Indeed, Herder places ultimate value on the self-determination and freedom of the individual and the group, with freedom generally being understood as authentic expression and self-realization. He thereby places human fulfillment and flourishing at the center of his ethical thought. Put another way, in surveying the diverse manifestations of the human spirit throughout history, Herder argues that we gradually “discern the grand law of nature: let man be man; let him mould his conditions according as to himself shall seem best… we every where find mankind possessing and exercising *the right of forming themselves to a kind of humanity*.”[[70]](#footnote-68) But because forms of life, happiness, and expressive realization vary so greatly across time and space, we cannot infer from this “grand law of nature” a single set of principles from which we could judge in all instances what contributes to and what hinders human flourishing, that is, what is good and band. In order to do that, we must turn to history and anthropology, not abstract metaphysics. And if these endeavors are to be successful, if they are to render the kind of knowledge necessary for producing discerning judgments, they must be carried in a spirit of modesty and humility that resists the imperialist urge to subsume the particular under the “universal.”

**Enlightenment and Empire**

Modesty and humility, however, are precisely what the *philosophes* lack; their attitude and approach toward history—their belief that they represent the highest achievement of human civilization and their insistence on *a priori* methods of historical inquiry—are inimical to the task of recognizing (let alone grasping) the unique *spirit* of other peoples. According to Herder, they insist on judging all of history from their own standpoint, taking themselves to be the quintessence of all ages and the (sole) measure of all things. This leads to a variety of misconceptions and confusions, which are not merely of intellectual interest but also of political importance. In particular, Herder thinks that the arrogance of the Enlightenment perspective helps to fuel the pernicious drive for colonial expansion and exploitation by contributing to a smug sense of European superiority that is purchased through the devaluation of other peoples. Indeed, the advocates of the imperial venture are only too happy to draw upon these universalist prejudices since “people readily draw support from contemptuous judgments about other peoples in order to justify dark deeds, savage inclinations.”[[71]](#footnote-69) Thus, as Frederick Beiser explains, “a major source of Herder’s dissatisfaction with the *Aufklarung*, then, was his belief that it justifies oppression. The *Aufklarer* are the allies of the princes in their campaigns to exterminate local self-government and to exploit the native peoples of Africa, America, and Asia.”[[72]](#footnote-70)

Moreover, even if the colonial project were in fact a benevolent “civilizing mission,” the attempt to force all of humanity into a singular form of life is doomed to generate disastrous consequences. A people’s way of life cannot simply be replaced with another one at will: it develops organically in response to local conditions through the development of social bonds and can only be transformed through the gradual work of subtle and persistent forces. “What,” asks Herder, “is a foisted, foreign culture, a formation [*Bildung*] that does not develop out of [a people’s] own dispositions and needs? It oppresses and deforms, or else it plunges straight into the abyss.”[[73]](#footnote-71) Far from representing universal progress toward “civilization,” the desire to reduce the rich complexity of forms of life to a singular model is a destructive endeavor that spreads misery and desolation across the globe.

Let the land be named to which Europeans have come without having sinned against defenseless, trusting humanity, perhaps for all aeons to come, through injurious acts, through unjust wars, greed, deceit, oppression, through diseases and harmful gifts! Our part of the world must be called, not the wise, but the *presumptuous, pushing, tricking* part of the earth; it has not cultivated but has destroyed the shoots of peoples’ own cultures wherever and however it could.[[74]](#footnote-72)

Amid the growing hegemony of colonialist ideology across Europe, Herder recognized that the expansion of European civilization, while bringing light for some, also had the effect of “blinding so many eyes, causing so much *misery* and *gloom*.”[[75]](#footnote-73) Moreover, he recognized something that many are all too quick to forget today: the damages wrought by colonial exploitation will not be repaired over-night, for colonialism not only exploited these lands for profit, it fundamentally disrupted and disabled the growth of organic forms of life and thus deprived these populations of their primary source of social cohesion, cultural development, and expressive realization. It may be objected that Herder’s argument here slides toward an uncritical embrace of nativism, which has often functioned as a corollary to colonial ideologies. But for Herder the organic forms of life harmed by colonialism are not static and unchanging formations that attest to the uniqueness of some “primitive mentality” but, rather, are forms of developed and developing culture capable of providing for the health and happiness of a people.

**Nationalism and Expressivism**

Herder is often credited (or, perhaps, blamed) with laying the intellectual groundwork for the principle of nationality through his valorization of community and his belief that nations form distinct organic entities, inherently linked to a native territory and bound together by a shared language, history, and culture. Indeed, he declared, “the most natural state is … *one* people, with one national character” and further asserted that nothing was “so obviously counter to the purpose of government as the unnatural expansion of states, the wild mixture of all types of races and nations under one scepter.”[[76]](#footnote-74) As such, Herder is one of the first thinkers to advocate the principle of nationality according to which the borders of the nation and the state ought to coincide.

The nation is taken to be an expressive whole in which each part—including its government—should relate harmoniously to the others and express the character of the whole. Whatever form it takes, then, the political organization of a national community is only legitimate if it is integrally related to and reflective of the nation’s culture, “which is at once the product and the source of its shared activities, ideas, values, artifacts and process, in short, its shared way of life.”[[77]](#footnote-75) Herder thus espouses what Charles Larmore calls *political expressivism*—the idea that the political organization of a society should *express* the shared commitments, beliefs, and values of the people. Accordingly, the state is neither an autonomous body, over and above the national community, nor an artificial mechanism created to serve tightly circumscribed ends; instead, it is (or ought to be) an organic formation that both reflects the spirit of the people and plays an active role in cultivating their collective development [*Bildung*]. Herder offers a paradigmatic example of political expressivism, Larmore argues, because “he passionately extolled the worth of the state, so long as… it did express the society’s shared conception of the good life.”[[78]](#footnote-76) And though Larmore does not directly address the role of nationalism per say in Herder’s political thought, he is clear that the adoption of Herder’s ideas by a number of “Romantic successors”—particularly the argument that the ideal of the holistic individual should be applied to state and society—led to “an aestheticization of politics” that had “disastrous consequences” and contributed directly to “the tragic course of German political thought and practice for more than a century.”[[79]](#footnote-77) Indeed, from our contemporary vantage point, such a valorization of the State as the exponent of the cherished folk-spirit of the people strikes an ominous tone that evokes the aggressive, ascriptive, and absolutist forms of nationalist thought and practice which still haunt us today.

But to think of Herder as a nationalist in this way is misleading in important respects. Although he stressed the importance of national belonging and advocated the cultivation of a distinctive German national identity and culture, Herder did *not* support (and, in fact, vehemently opposed) the idea that any one nation was superior to others and therefore ought to rule over them. “Let no one put into the hands of any people on earth,” he proclaimed, “the scepter over other peoples—much less the sword and the slave whip.”[[80]](#footnote-78) Herder’s theory of nationality insisted on the right of self-determination for *all* peoples, and he believed that every nation (and certainly not just the German nation) should preserve and cultivate its unique way of life, for each nation has an important and irreplaceable contribution to make to the development of humanity as a whole. In fact, nothing displeased him more than the attempt by one nation to impose its cultural formation on another, and his rejection of multinational “machine-states” should be understood in this light: Herder took them to be the product not of natural or voluntary plans for cooperation between different peoples but, rather, of foreign conquest and subjugation. According to Herder, such artificial contrivances were both inherently oppressive and destined to fail, “for the very statecraft that brought them into being is also the one that plays with peoples and human beings as with lifeless bodies. But history shows sufficiently that these instruments of human pride are made of clay, and like all clay on earth, they crumble and dissolve.”[[81]](#footnote-79) Although Herder’s organic conception of the nation is certainly out of step with some of the complex, differentiated, and pluralistic ideals of our time, it is important to recognize that his rejection of multinational states did not stem from a commitment to preserving national or racial “purity” but, instead, was motivated by his concern for the cultural integrity, well-being, and independence of all peoples.

Moreover, insofar as Herder urged patriotic attachment, it was to be directed not toward the State per say but, rather, toward the *people* and what they share in common—their language, art, customs, traditions, ideals, and strivings. In fact, far from passionately extolling the virtues of the state, Herder’s nationalist sentiment was resolutely anti-statist, leading some commentators to conclude that he was “hostile to *all* sates” and merely saw the nation-state as the *least unnatural*, the least oppressive, of existing forms of political rule.[[82]](#footnote-80) Although this interpretation of Herder’s opinion of the state is by no means universally accepted,[[83]](#footnote-81) Herder clearly harbored serious doubts about the ability of centralized bureaucratic states to promote human flourishing, and he even suggested that, as a general rule, the greatness of the state and the happiness of individuals tends to exist in an inverse relationship.[[84]](#footnote-82) Ultimately, Herder sees the modern state as a necessary, yet (hopefully) transitory, institution for securing internal order, providing protection from external threats, and, at its best, fostering social cohesion. For Herder, government in one form or another—i.e., the organization of social life according to authoritative rules and generally agreed upon principles and practices—is an indispensible aspect of social life. But the state-form is only one example of government generally speaking. In fact, his theory of national consolidation and development ultimately aims for “the disappearance of the State as an administrative ‘machine’ of government, and its replacement by an ‘organic’ way of ordering social life, in which active co-operation would render all forms of sub-ordination obsolete and superfluous.”[[85]](#footnote-83) Thus, although he argues that each nation ought to have its own state and govern itself, Herder neither looks to the (modern) state for worldly salvation, nor approaches anything like Hegel’s divinization of the state.[[86]](#footnote-84)

What binds a people together is not allegiance to the State but, rather, a common language, history, culture, and way of life. It is towards one’s fellow countrymen and women, and the common life-world one shares with them, that loyalty should be directed. In almost every case loyalty to the state is misguided. Should we conclude, then, along with Isaiah Berlin, that “Herder’s nationalism was never political” but, instead, was always cultural?[[87]](#footnote-85)

Perhaps, but only if we are also careful to recognize that Herder drew significant political implications from his cultural conception of the nation. Chief among these, of course, was the principle of nationality. Underlying Herder’s support for this principle was his conviction that a nation, or ‘people’, constitutes an expressive whole, held together not by a social contract, but by a shared form of life that nourishes and shapes them. *This*—the concrete sense of belonging and the constitutive attachments to which it gives rise—Herder concluded, was “the one and only effective cohesive force in socio-political association” and, therefore, the “essential element” of political development and social growth.[[88]](#footnote-86) Thus, while it is certainly the case that Herder’s understanding of the nation is fundamentally cultural, his “approach to politics itself is essentially cultural.”[[89]](#footnote-87) For Herder, the purpose of government, and of political life generally speaking, is to ensure the happiness of the people by fostering the progressive development of the nation’s cultural formation; “a good government is one that strengthens and preserves the national character.”[[90]](#footnote-88) Indeed, this is in keeping with the expressivist thesis, and should come as no great surprise. The Herderian wager, then, is that progress, “genuine reform and social change can best take place when a sense of shared purpose animates the body politic,”[[91]](#footnote-89) when there is a sympathetic relationship between the people and government, and when unity and co-coordinated action are premised on the collectively shared sentiments and outlooks imparted to the people through shared processes of enculturation. In other words, Herder’s ideal of cultural authenticity “is an ideal of *development*; it does not encourage societies to remain as they are, but suggests that their evolution needs to consist in the unfolding of their own potentialities.”[[92]](#footnote-90)

However, given his mistrust of the state—not to mention his disdain for the existing social and political order in Germany—Herder doubted the state’s ability to effectively express and advance the national character, and he therefore placed his faith in the emergence of popular leaders whom he called *aristodemocrats*,*[[93]](#footnote-91)* “‘men of the people’, who, imbued with missionary zeal, would preach and spread the gospel of education (*Bildung*) and guide the rest of the nation to a stage where it would no longer be in need of political rulers.”[[94]](#footnote-92) Much like Plato’s philosopher-kings, Herder’s aristo-democrats would lead and guide the ignorant, inerudite masses, who were currently “educationally and politically unfit for government” due to “centuries of neglect” and socio-cultural stagnation.[[95]](#footnote-93) Unlike Plato’s philosopher-kings, however, the rule of Herder’s aristo-democrats was conceived of as a temporary expedient, the best way to encourage the development of the people and prepare them for self-rule, that is, for the day when all forms of hierarchical governance—whether state based or consisting in elite leadership—would no longer be necessary:

Self-determination, that is, the ability and willingness of individuals and groups of individuals to order their social and economic lives within a legal framework of their own making, conscious of their freedom *and* inter-dependence: this is the goal of the political transformation which Herder had in mind… This is as far as Herder would go. We search in vain for a more detailed treatment of the transition from the somewhat paternal system of ‘aristo-democracy’ to the ‘pluralist’ diffusion of government associated with his concept of ‘nomocracy’… [[96]](#footnote-94)

The aristo-democrats seek not only to cultivate the intellect of the people, but also shape their dispositions and sentiments, ultimately instilling in them an enhanced national consciousness and an awareness that they could only achieve individual self-realization by taking part in the common life of the nation and working toward its improvement. In other words, by fostering a sense of homogeneity and collective identity, the period of aristo-democracy would also foster a spirit of reciprocal obligation, active co-operation, and, ultimately, civic virtue that would enrich the life of the nation, creating the social conditions most conducive to human flourishing.[[97]](#footnote-95) In this sense, *Herder’s cultural nationalism is also a form of civic nationalism*, the purpose of which is to create a self-sustaining political community that could safeguard the liberty of the people. Indeed, far from being totalitarian in spirit, as some commentators have suggested, Herder’s nationalism aims to cultivate a noble “sense of community” and encourage practices of self-organization so as to provide “security, activity, [and the] occasion for every free, beneficent practice” among the people.[[98]](#footnote-96)

For Herder, the importance of collective development as a means for protecting collective self-determination was given added significance by the rapid pace of change and increasing levels of inter-dependence that he thought were, and would continue to be, characteristic of the modern world:

All the peoples of Europe (not excluding the other parts of the world) are now in a contest of, not physical, but *mental and artistic forces* with each other. We one or two nations accomplish steps of progress in a short time for which formerly centuries were required, then other nations cannot, and may not, want to set themselves back by centuries without thereby doing themselves painful damage. They *must* advance with those others; in our times one can no longer be a barbarian; as a barbarian one gets cheated, trodden on, despised, abused. The epochs of the world form a moving chain which no individual ring can in the end resist even if it wanted to.[[99]](#footnote-97)

This ultimately, is the larger context in which Herder’s defense of the right of national self-determination and development must be situated. Indeed, as I discuss in a subsequent chapter, it was the combination of developmental and democratic ideals contained in Herder’s organic theory of the nation that appealed to W. E. B. Du Bois, who developed and advocated his own brand of cultural-civic nationalism as a response to the dilemma of under-development and marginality.

**Conclusion: The Romantic Vision and the Perils of Homesickness**

I have provided an overview of Herder’s philosophical project as it developed in opposition to various aspects of the Enlightenment vision and discussed some of the primary political motivations and theoretical insights contained within Herder’s romantic vision. I have attempted to show, in particular, how the romantic vision articulated by Herder opposed the Enlightenment assumption of an *a priori* universal standpoint and offered in its place an image of a world characterized by dynamic pluralism and the incommensurability of perspectives. A key aspect of this development was Herder’s expressivist notion of the subject and his corresponding doctrine of *Volksgeist*, both of which are fundamental to his ideas about human history, politics, and culture. As we have seen, in positing the existence of a plurality of incommensurable cultures, Herder neither rejected the idea that cultures could understand or learn from one another, nor endorsed a form of moral relativism entailing a radical suspension of ethical judgment. Instead, Herder means to warn that achieving cross-cultural understanding and reaching discerning judgments are difficult tasks that cannot be left up to the work of abstract reason alone. Moreover, we also saw that in arguing for the preservation of national borders and distinct cultural communities, Herder was neither a chauvinist obsessed with preserving the purity of racial/national essences nor an authoritarian determined to secure German superiority over all other nations. On the contrary, his ethico-political motivations were thoroughly democratic, egalitarian, and anti-imperialist in character.

Though perhaps somewhat underappreciated today, Herder’s earlier intellectual influence was immense. He was a central figure of the *Sturm und Drang,* and he contributed greatly to the development of the Romantic Movement in Germany, which culminated in what Isaiah Berlin has termed the “unbridled romanticism” of Fichte, Schlegel, Schelling, and others.[[100]](#footnote-98) Despite their significant differences from one another, in these latter thinkers the romantic vision underwent an intensification and amplification towards mystical vitalism, deepened yearning for wholeness, and glorification of the virtues of the unrestrained will. This last element—the celebration of the self-determining and indomitable will—was often applied to both the individual subject and the nation itself, which came to be understood as a metaphysical unity in its own right. Thus, the Romantic Movement as a whole can be seen as contributing to the current of nationalist sentiment that ran through Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to conclude that the romantic vision articulated by Herder must necessarily culminate in racist or fascist thought.

In fact, romantic visions take many forms and varieties. As Isaiah Berlin notes, “it is impossible to pin down romanticism to any given political view,” for it may be reactionary or revolutionary depending on circumstances and the organization of its doctrinal elements, and it often appears “on the surface to say everything and its opposite.”[[101]](#footnote-99) Yet, in speaking of a romantic vision, I do not think we are speaking of nothing. Rather, inside the diversity of its articulations, we can identify a general set of assumptions about the nature of the individual’s relationship to the world. Herder, it turns out, is exemplary in this regard because he offers a paradigmatic expression of the romantic vision.

What, generally speaking, are the basic parameters of the romantic vision? As we have seen, it posits an organic social ontology and a related notion of the history or tradition of a ‘people’ as unfolding from a single potency or essence. Within this framework the romantic vision places ultimate value on the self-determination and freedom of the individual and the group, with freedom generally being understood as the authentic self-realization of an inner essence. Moreover, the world is seen as being composed of a rich plurality of unique and incommensurable (national) forms of life such that the freedom and authentic self-expression of one group cannot legitimately be imposed on another. An emphasis on the distinct spiritual or cultural identity of different peoples is central to any romantic vision, but the way in which these differences are understood and the consequences that are attributed to them can vary greatly from one articulation to another. This, in fact, accounts for a great deal of the ideological diversity possible within romanticism. For example, the diversity of forms of life may be attributed a positive value, leading one to a position of pluralist affirmation; or pluralism may be seen as a neutral but ineluctable fact of existence, leading one to a position of tolerant acceptance of diversity; or difference may be seen as a threat to the security of one’s identity or the self-determination of one’s nation, leading one progressively down the path of bellicose nationalism. Each of these possibilities exists within the broad parameters of the romantic vision.

Somewhat at odds with its notion of pluralism, there is in romanticism a desire for harmony with nature and one’s fellow man, for a sense of spiritual and social unity, and for universal sympathy, all of which the Enlightenment is seen as having put in grave danger through its objectification of man and nature. The romantic vision, in short, is a profound version of what Nietzsche terms homesickness—the longing to establish a ‘home’ in the world where one can realize life’s most cherished ideals and obtain transparency, security, and freedom. According to Nietzsche, homesickness dreams of recapturing the lost unity that is supposed to have existed in the ancient Greek world:

German philosophy as a whole—Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, Schopenhauer, to name the greatest—is the most fundamental form of *romanticism* and homesickness there has ever been: the longing for the best that ever existed. One is no longer at home anywhere; at last one longs back for that place in which alone one can be at home, because it is the only place in which one would want to be at home: the *Greek* world! But it is precisely in that direction that all bridges are broken… But what happiness there is already in this will to spirituality, to ghostliness almost! How far it takes one from “pressure and stress,” from the mechanistic awkwardness of the natural sciences, from the market hubbub of “modern ideas”! [[102]](#footnote-100)

Above all, the romantic vision yearns to be at home in the world “again” and to make the world “One”—to be free of that sense of exile and alienation wrought by the modern revolution. Although Nietzsche thinks homesickness expresses itself in the (impossible) desire to “go back,” it may in fact be more helpful to think of it as the desire to re-establish the unity of life once enjoyed in the Greek world within the more complex conditions of modernity. Herder recognizes that there is no question of actually going back, for “the human vessel… must always *depart* as it *moves on*,” yet ancient Greece remains an archetype because it was “the cradle of *humaneness,* of *friendship* *between peoples,* of *fine legislation*, of all that is *most agreeable*.”[[103]](#footnote-101) For Herder, what is most significant about the Greeks was that they experienced *“a unity and diversity* that… made for the *most beautiful whole*” because they retained “their *spirit of community, the feeling of one nation, one fatherland, one language!*”[[104]](#footnote-102)

Herder’s homesickness is expressed in an overriding desire to establish a sense of integral belonging and secure rootedness in “*one fatherland*,” with *“one language*.” His deepest longing is to belong to a community in which he can create and express himself while being a part of a common cause or undertaking. His writings articulate the desire to truly *belong* to something, to be a part of a community in which he can understand and is understood by those who create and express with him. In this sense, Herder’s project can be understood as the quest to uncover the sources of social cohesion that can provide for a communal existence and common way of life that harmonizes the diverse interests, perspective, and values in a nation.

As William E. Connolly explains, homesickness manifests itself as “the demand, the insistence, that one realize within theory what one yearns for most in life. It becomes translated into presuppositions and assumptions one treats as the unquestionable standard by which all other elements in the theory are to be judged.”[[105]](#footnote-103) Homesickness results in a mode of theorizing that derives the “can” or the “is” from the “ought”—it identifies or establishes an ultimate *desiderata* in human affairs and proceeds to insist upon a set of assumptions about the world that are necessary for its achievement. For example, according to Herder, both man and society are expressive wholes existing in a harmonious interrelationship, which is possible only if we take as a starting point an organic social ontology. For Herder holism and organicism of this sort are seen as absolutely fundamental and any theory of man or society that violates them is rejected out of hand because belonging as he understands it requires both holism and organicism. The constitutive attachments that connect the members of a society together must tie them all “to a single substantial purpose or conception of the good life. Either a society forms an expressive whole or it has collapsed into a heap of indifferent or antagonistic fragments, stripped of any shared bonds of conviction.”[[106]](#footnote-104) Likewise, each subject must exist in a harmonious relationship with the constitutive bonds of society, “without which he could neither have received his being, nor have become a man.”[[107]](#footnote-105) The nation must constitute an expressive, organic whole, and each individual must exist in a harmonious relationship with that whole, otherwise it sinks into the abyss. The key is this: although Herder sees a world composed of a plurality of national cultures, that pluralism does not extend to the internal dynamics of a “people” who must be defined by a unitary spiritual essence in order to avoid being pulled apart by the centrifugal forces of multiple and conflicting circles of happiness.

One of Herder’s principle virtues as a political thinker is that he brings into sharp focus the need for belonging and community that we all experience in one form or another. Indeed, one way of conceptualizing politics itself is as the quest for belonging or as that which seeks to generate political community.[[108]](#footnote-106) The accompanying problem, however, is that Herder translates that desire into an insistence that the world *must* be designed to accommodate harmonious communality rooted in place. Thus Herder writes that though much is uncertain in this world, “whatever I may be, a call from heaven to earth [assures me] that like everything else, so I, too, must have *some* meaning in my place—with *powers reserved for the whole* and with a *feeling* of happiness that adequately reflects the *scope* of these powers!”[[109]](#footnote-107) This ultimately becomes an article of faith for Herder— he places his faith in a providential order that ensures that we can be comfortably at home in the world. He assumes but does not demonstrate that Nature, through the work of Providential Guidance, has constructed a meaningful world designed to accommodate human belonging as he construes it. This must be a world composed of distinct nations, each with a unique essence that is expressed in its language, customs, values, and beliefs and which ensures the cohesive identity of the nation. As such, national identity is seen not as one possible outcome of politics but as both the basis *and* intended purpose of politics and collective striving.

But what if the world is not structured in that way? What if it lacks purposive design or providential guidance? What if belonging is both a human drive and the world is not all that conducive to its fulfillment? What if communal harmony is a contestable end among other ends and not the sole good or purpose of society? What if neither an organic (at least of this sort), nor a mechanistic, nor an individualistic metaphor provides a sufficient framework for interpreting human society? Indeed, even if we were to adopt for a moment an organic worldview, what reason do we have to assume that nations constitute holistic organisms? What makes them the privileged locus of belonging and principle unit of history? What if the quest for community is fraught with dangers and haunted by incompleteness in ways that Herder does not acknowledge? What if the organic ideal trades off its contrast to individualistic and mechanical ideals, failing to come to terms with modes of connection and pluralism that fit neither model? If we question whether the world is designed in this way, then we have reason to question the costs of Herder’s communitarian ideal.

Herder’s thought itself contains insights that ought to lead us to doubt that national cultures constitute relatively homogenous organic wholes. Indeed, this image of the nation as an organic whole can only ultimately be justified by appealing to some providential design or plan. Recall that Herder’s cultural pluralism is undergirded by his expressivist theory of the subject in which cognition and sensation are imbricated aspects of the expressive unity that is the human being. In short, it is the variability and diversity of human sensation that accounts for the variability and diversity of human mentality. But if this is the case, then a great deal of the diversity Herder sees existing between national cultures can also subsist *within* them. To be sure, Herder acknowledges that a certain amount of diversity exists within nations, for no two individuals are exactly alike, and a national culture necessarily contains a range of practices, enterprises, and institutions. Nonetheless, in the final instance, the nation must be held together and defined by a common spiritual essence such that the pluralism which does exist within it is significantly bounded. Perhaps it is Herder’s homesickness—his desire for wholeness and harmonious communality—that causes him to fail to apply his own pluralistic insights to the internal life of a *Volk*. Whatever the sources, this failure carries with it significant political and ethical dangers.

Consider, for example, Herder’s insistence that “it is not your place to ponder theoretically about your fatherland, for you were not its creator, but you must join others in helping it where and as you can, encourage it, save it, improve it – even if you were the goose of the Capitol.”[[110]](#footnote-108) In one sense this expresses a noble sentiment and demonstrates his commitment to the advancement of the common good, but we must also keep in mind that for Herder *this requires that the nation as a whole be committed to a single purpose* and that each individual embodies fully the collective identity. And this demand for a unity of purpose is potentially dangerous not only because it may take perverse or aggressive forms (Herder recognized the threat of ‘narrow nationalism’ but thought it could be contained) but also because it demands a normalization of in-group identity that can force people to reform themselves in ways that may be arbitrary, violent, or harmful. Simply put, if we do not assume as Herder does that all the members of a nation share a common spiritual identity or *essence*, then the attempt to impose one may be as violent, destructive, and wasteful as the attempt to reduce the global plurality of national forms of life to one ideal. But if we start with Herder’s core assumptions—that nations grow naturally like organisms and only thrive if they maintain their unitary organization in accordance with the natural order of Being—then concerns over the potential costs of communitarian harmony do not register sufficiently.

In saying that Herder’s communitarian ideal harbors some unacknowledged or unresolved dangers, I am not suggesting that there is a social ideal without dangers. Indeed, as Foucault says, “everything is dangerous.”[[111]](#footnote-109) If everything is dangerous, “then we always have something to do”; we must constantly be on the guard, assessing and struggling against the dangers we take to be the most pressing and urgent, and this is why Foucault described his work as leading “to a hyper- and pessimistic activism.”[[112]](#footnote-110) But the way in which Herder figures organicism and holism as necessary aspects of any vision of social and political life bars precisely this kind of critical examination. If we want to evaluate the allure, insight, and limitations of the romantic vision, then we must reckon with both the articles of faith that hold its elements together and their potential implications. Doing so reveals how the romantic vision courts disaster by fleeing complexity, ignoring the irrevocably composite nature of *all* identities, and demanding a normalization of in-group cultural identity. Thus, although Herder’s political thought is deeply democratic and emancipatory in intention, it also contains impulses that run counter to these noble intentions. As a result, it cannot, in and of itself provide the theoretical and political resources necessary to forge the emancipatory politics for which it strives.

In the second part of this project I will articulate a tragic account of racial politics that incorporates Herder’s insights into pluralism and perspective but that also emphasizes the creativity of becoming, the element of real uncertainty in life and action, the absence of a close fit between human aspiration and the world, and the importance of ethical practices that foster existential affirmation. This tragic account of (racial) politics, indebted to the thought of Nietzsche, Sophocles, and James Baldwin, is animated by a historical sense that rejects the notion of an *a priori* black identity or essence *and* recognizes the crucial importance of efforts to forge black solidarity. In articulating such a perspective I will explore how a tragic vision both enriches our understanding of the intertwined legacies of the Enlightenment, the elaboration of racial hierarchy, and the struggle for freedom, and provides a valuable framework for making sense of the ethicopolitical and tactical dilemmas facing contemporary black politics. Though skeptical of appeals to Revolution and Redemption, a tragic sense is not one of resignation, despair, or political quietism. Instead, by urging respect for the contingent, paradoxical, and unpredictable in life, tragic wisdom teaches a lesson of modesty and responsiveness out of which a noble ethic of solidarity, care for the world, and militant struggle may arise.

1. Johann Herder, *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*,in *Herder’s Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 196. [↑](#footnote-ref--1)
2. Robert Gooding-Williams, *In the Shadow of Du Bois: Afro-Modern Political Thought in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009)*,* 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
3. Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 2011), 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
4. Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
5. David Hume, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, e*d. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
6. E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
7. Charles E. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 93-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
8. Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads To Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 332. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
9. Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
10. F. M. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought: From Enlightenment to Nationalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
11. Greenfeld, *Nationalism,* 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
12. These are Herder’s political ideals concerning domestic and (European) politics, where he generally favors a republican form of government and the impersonal rule of law. However, for reasons that will become clear, Herder is hesitant to suggest that other nations should necessarily adopt these political forms, for he contends that the best form of government does not exist and that, even if it did, it would not be suitable to every nation. Just as there is no one best form of life, there is no one best form of government. Herder is a fierce advocate of freedom and the right of all peoples to self-determination, that is, the right to pursue their own happiness and self-realization, but this also means that they be allowed to develop the mode of self-government that is most appropriate for them. Cf. Letter 121 of Herder’s *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
13. Quoted in Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 79, from a letter Herder wrote to Duke Karl August of Weimer, dated December 14th, 1785. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
14. Sheldon Wolin, “Political Theory as a Vocation,” *The American Political Science Review.* 63, no. 4 (1968): 1078-1082. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
15. *Bildung* is one of those German terms that is notoriously difficult to translate into English. Michael Forster lists the following as possible translations for the term: formation, education, civilization, or culture, to which we might also add development and cultivation. Johann Herder, *Philosophical Writings,* ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002),xliii. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
16. Johann Herder, *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People*, in *Herder’s Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 11; see also, Johann Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, trans. Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2004), 49-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
17. Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 11 [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
18. Herder, *Cognition and Sensation,* 183; emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
19. Herder, *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal,* 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
20. Herder, *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal,* 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
21. Isaiah Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, ed. Henry Hardy and Roger Hausheer (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 380. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
22. Herder, *Another Philosophy*, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
23. This is one of the crucial ways in which Herder differed from Rousseau. For Herder, there is no need to posit the existence of a hypothetical social contract because man is born in and for society, which itself is a natural formation arising out of human interdependence. According to Herder we can only properly conceive of social life as something that is given; in other words, the state of society *is* man’s state of nature. Cf. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 54.

“we cannot but regard social life as something this is given: the state of society *is* man’s state of nature” (Barnard 1965: 54). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
24. Taylor, *Hegel,* 13-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
25. Herder, *Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*,213. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
26. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 56; Taylor, *Hegel,* 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
27. Johann Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, trans. Frank E. Manuel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
28. Herder, *Cognition and Sensation,* 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
29. Johann Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, in *Herder’s Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
30. Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
31. Herder, *On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul,* 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
32. Cf. Herder, *Reflections*, p 59: “Conceived in the bosom of Love, and nourished at the breast of Affection, he is educated by men, and receives from them a thousand unearned benefits. Thus he is actually formed in and for society.” [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
33. Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
34. Johann Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity,* in *Herder’s Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002),396. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
35. Herder, *Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul,* 219. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
36. Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
37. Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
38. Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
39. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1974), §309 [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
40. Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” 426. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
41. Herder, *Reflections*, 98. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
42. Herder, *Another Philosophy,* 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
43. Johann Herder, *Fragments on Recent German Literature*,in *Herder’s Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002), 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
44. Herder, *Fragments*. 53, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
45. Herder, *Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul,* 222. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
46. Herder. *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 395. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
47. Johann Herder, *On the Change of Taste*, in *Herder’s Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
48. Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*,220 fn 42; emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
49. Herder, *Cognition and Sensation*,215 [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
50. Herder, *On the Change of Taste*, 252-3. In general Herder seems to offer a negative assessment of the way in which habit becomes “deeply rooted *stubborn idiosyncrasy* in *sensation*.” (253). This is the case, I think, because he tends to see the cultivation of “idiosyncrasy” as amounting to an affectation—a deviation which takes us away from an authentic expression of our true essence or nature. Thus, it is Herder’s belief that we each have a true essence and his corresponding concern for authenticity which prevent him from seeing the positive political and ethical possibilities at work not just in purposive cultivation of disposition (which he thought was necessary and important insofar as it corresponded to our authentic essence) but also in the creative experimentation with multiple modalities of existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
51. Herder, *Cognition and Sensation,* 220. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
52. Herder, *Reflections*, 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
53. Herder, *Reflections*, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
54. Herder, *On the Change of Taste*, 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
55. Herder, *Fragments*,57. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
56. Cf. Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, 128-132. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
57. Herder, *Fragments,* 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
58. Taylor, *Hegel*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
59. Herder, *Fragments,* 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
60. Herder, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, 138-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
61. Herder, *Another Philosophy*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
62. Herder, *Another Philosophy*, 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
63. This definition of relativism is taken from Bernard Williams, *Morality: An Introduction to Ethics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
64. Vicki Spencer, “In Defense of Herder on Cultural Diversity and Interaction,” *The Review of Politics* 69 (2007): 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
65. Sikka, *Herder on Humanity,* 15 [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
66. Sikka, *Herder on Humanity,* 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
67. Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming,* trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
68. Sikka, *Herder on Humanity,* 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
69. Herder, *Reflections*, 71. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
70. Herder, *Reflections*, 84; emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
71. Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 394. To be clear, Herder’s claim is not that Enlightenment doctrines were formulated for the express purpose of providing ideological cover for colonialism but, rather, that they contributed to an atmosphere of arrogance and false judgments among Europeans that served to mask the *in*humanity of the colonial project. This is why he declares in Letter 115 of his *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, “All works which nourish the—already in itself intolerable—pride of the Europeans through distorted, unproved, or manifestly unprovable assertions—the genius of humanity throws them back with contempt and says: ‘An unhuman [*Unmensch*] wrote them!’” (386). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
72. Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought—1790 – 1800* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
73. Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 382. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
74. Herder. *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 381-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
75. Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
76. Herder, Johann. “Governments as Inherited Regimes,” in *Another Philosophy of History*,128. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
77. F. M. Barnard, “Culture and Political Development: Herder’s Suggestive Insights,” *American Political Science Review* 63, no. 2 (1969): 390. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
78. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, 97. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
79. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, 99. Larmore asserts that although Herder’s thought operated at a higher “level of sophistication” and “appreciated the truth of pluralism” more than its Romantic successors (99), it was nonetheless “paradigmatic for the argumentative style of German Romanticism” as a whole (98). [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
80. Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 394. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
81. Herder, “Governments as Inherited Regimes,” in *Another Philosophy of History*,128. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
82. F. M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003),10. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
83. Allen Patten, “‘The Most Natural State’: Herder and Nationalism,” *History of Political Thought* 31, no. 4 (2010), argues that, for pragmatic reasons, Herder endorsed “a ‘remedial’ view of the state” (677). Likewise, David Eggel, Andre Liebich, and Deborah Mancini-Griffoli, “Was Herder a Nationalist?” *The Review of Politics* 69, no. 1 (2007) suggest that Barnard “fails to recognize the positive transitory role” Herder thought “states might play” in fostering nationalist development (76). [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
84. Cf. Herder, Refelctions, p77: “With the greatness of the state… the danger of rendering individuals miserable is infinitely augmented. In large states, hundreds must pine with hunger, that one may feast and carouse: thousands are oppressed, and hunted to death, that one crowned fool or philosopher may gratify his whims.” [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
85. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
86. This is an important distinction (among many) between Herder and Hegel, one that, so far as I can tell, Larmore does not address in *Patterns of Moral Complexity*. The impression that the reader receives from this otherwise insightful and provocative book is that Herder and Hegel shared a common, organic -expressivist view of state and society and, therefore, shared a common, anti-liberal political ideology. This is not the case, and it does a great disservice to Herder (or, perhaps, to Hegel, depending on one’s philosophical and political proclivities). Even if one chooses to read Herder as an anti-liberal thinker, his politics are still markedly different from Hegel’s, especially, though not exclusively, with respect to the international order. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
87. Berlin, “Herder and the Enlightenment,” 397. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
88. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
89. Robert Louden, *The World We Want: How and Why the Ideals of the Enlightenment Still Elude Us* (Oxford, Oford University Press: 2007),75. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
90. Eggel, *et al.*, “Was Herder a Nationalist?” 49 [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
91. Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 325. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
92. Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
93. Herder, *Letters Concerning the Progress of Humanity,* in *Herder’s Philosophical Writings*, ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002),364 [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
94. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
95. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 81 [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
96. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought*, 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
97. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality*, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
98. Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
99. Herder, *Letters for the Advancement*, 377. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
100. Isaiah Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press 1999), 93-117. There are, of course, important differences between these thinkers (e.g. Fichte’s doctrine of the will and Schelling’s doctrine of the unconscious), but it is not possible in this space to adequately attend to these. In general, however, we can say that the “unbridled romantics” who followed Herder tended to extend his critique of reason into a position of anti-rationalist mysticism and mutate his advocacy of the self-determination of individuals and nations into a fanatical assertion of the indomitable will of the nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
101. Berlin, *The Roots of Romanticism*, 127,134. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
102. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Random House, 1968), §419. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
103. Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
104. Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*, 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
105. William Connolly, *Political Theory and Modernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988.), 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
106. Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity*, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
107. Herder, *Reflections*, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
108. Cf. Michael Hanchard, *Party/Politics: Horizons in Black Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
109. Herder, *Another Philosophy of History*,74. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
110. Herder, *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*, 376. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
111. Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,” in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth, Essential Works of Foucault, 1954-1984, Volume 1*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
112. Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics,” 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)