



J. G. Herder and the Politics of Difference

**Immigration, Minorities and Multiculturalism
In Democracies Conference**
Ethnicity and Democratic Governance MCRI project
October 25-27, 2007
Montreal, QC, Canada

Michael L. Frazer
Assistant Professor of Government and Social Studies
Harvard University
mfrazer@gov.harvard.edu

Prepared for Presentation at the Immigration, Minorities and Multiculturalism in Democracies

Herder believed the tremendous space between different worldviews and cultures made normative judgments across such chasms impossible,

I. The Political Problem of Difference

1. Young's Critique of Impartiality

Issues of diversity have take

115). It is in this way that Rawls's attempt to construct impartial principles of justice can actually serve to support existing injustices. "Where social group differences exist," Young writes, "and some groups are privileged while others are oppressed," a "propensity to universalize the particular reinforces that oppression. The standpoint of the privileged... is constructed as normal and neutral." When the underprivileged fail to follow supposedly impartial standards built from the standpoint of the privileged, "their difference is constructed as deviance and inferiority" (p. 116).

The ideal of impartiality, by "allowing the particular experience and perspective of privileged groups to parade as universal," is responsible for a particular form of injustice which Young calls "cultural imperialism" (p. 10). Members of groups which are the victims of cultural imperialism are simultaneously "invisible" and "marked out." Their perspective is excluded from the construction of the allegedly impartial norms which govern their lives, rendering their unique culture and experiences "invisible." At the same time, they are "marked out" as deviant when they fail to abide by these norms, becoming the objects of condemnation (p. 123). Young argues that cultural imperialism is one of the greatest injustices suffered by women, the elderly, the disabled and members of racial, ethnic, religious, and sexual minorities today.

It might be thought that, in his later works, Rawls moved away from the cultural imperialism which Young finds endemic to *A Theory of Justice*

justice as fairness. The moral module of impartial justice, Rawls claims, can mesh cleanly with many otherwise conflicting “comprehensive doctrines,” such that the only individuals left outside a liberal society’s overlapping consensus—the only ones who run afoul of the process of mutual political justification that Rawls calls “public reason” and which defines the boundaries of the “domain of the political”—are those a

2. Politics without Impartiality

Young's insistence that it is impossible to formulate universally valid principles from an impartial point of view might be thought to rule out virtually any sort of normative political theory. Such theories inevitably appeal to certain features of human nature to validate their normative claims, and Young is adamant that "any definition of a human nature is dangerous because it threatens to devalue or exclude some acceptable individual desires, cultural characteristics, or ways of life." At the same time, however, she admits that "normative social theory... can rarely avoid making implicit or explicit assumptions about human beings in the formulation of its vision of just institutions." Young herself, for example, feels the need to appeal to a basic human need to be free of oppression and domination. Her opposition to these defining features of injustice in turn implies the existence of what are admittedly "universalist values." A universal opposition to cultural imperialism, for example, can only be made on the basis of a claim that this injustice harms all who fall victim to it, regardless of differences in group membership or identity.

Young thus does not make the mistake, so common among relativists, of denying the very justificatory grounds necessary to validate her own claims. Never denying "the universality of moral commitment," Young instead distinguishes "between meanings of universality." Her hope is that her own insistence on "universality in the sense of the participation and inclusion of everyone in moral and social life" can avoid the cultural imperialism of "universality in the sense of the adoption of a general point of view" (p. 105). Unlike the exclusionary universal norms constructed under an ideal of impartiality, Young's universality demands only universally inclusive democratic participation. There is, she claims, a natural affinity between the ideal of

impartiality which she opposes and the creation of authoritarian hierarchies. “The ideal of impartiality legitimates hierarchical decision-making and allows the standpoint of the privileged to appear as universal,” Young writes. “Based on assumptions and standards they claim as neutral and impartial, their authoritative decisions often silence, ignore and render deviant the abilities, needs, and norms of others.” The remedy for this cultural imperialism is obvious; simply “dismantle the hierarchy.” Young’s conclusion is that “just decision-making structures must... be democratic, ensuring a voice and vote to all the particular groups involved in and

Yet Young's ideal of politics without impartiality faces a number of important objections. First, since it insists that universally valid substantive norms (norms, that is, other than insistence on the inclusion of all in democratic life) can only be arrived at only through broadly inclusive democratic politics, a single individual cannot arrive at such norms through private reflection. This severely limits the ability of individuals—be they political theorists or simply reflective citizens—to question the norms arrived at by collective democratic processes. Young's insistence on inclusively participatory democracy can be rightly praised for precluding individual

3. Pluralist Empathy as an Alternative Impartiality

Young never denies that some degree of mutual understanding is always possible among members of different groups, even if she does deny that it could always be “complete.” After all, “to say that there are differences among groups does not imply that there are not overlapping experiences, or that two groups have nothing in common... Different groups are always similar in some respects, and always potentially share some attributes, experiences and goals” (p. 171). Difference, as Young is quick to admit, “is not absolute otherness, a complete absence of relationship or shared attributes.” Whenever members of two different groups are attempting to understand one another, they can be certain that their identities “can be likened in certain respects,” even as they must remember that “similarity is never sameness, and the similar can be noticed only through difference” (p. 98).

Indeed, Young acknowledges that the diversity of social groups around us is reflected in the heterogeneity within our very selves. “The varying and contradictory social contexts in which we live and interact,” she writes, “along with the multiplicity of our own group memberships and the multiple identities of others with whom we interact, make the heterogeneity of the subject inevitable” (p. 153). The existence of such internal heterogeneity and overlapping group memberships should aid in the quest for mutual understanding. When two groups fail to understand one another, perhaps someone with overlapping membership in both groups can function as a facilitator. Or perhaps the divisions between these groups will be echoed by the divisions within them—or even within the psyches of their individual members—thus allowing the successful negotiation of one set of divisions to serve as a model for the successful

differently situated,” Young writes, “denies the difference among subjects.” Although Young acknowledges that “subjects are not opaque to

of all those they affect, we need a fuller account of the conditions of its possible success. First, we need an account of the nature and origins of human diversity. Second, we need an account of how empathy can sometimes allow individuals to feel their way into the worldviews of even those very different from themselves. Finally, we need to know whether and how a full empathetic understanding of the scope of human di

Despite our later development of “artificial language,” our own version of natural language of sensation still erupts among human beings in “the most violent moments of feeling” (G 1:698-699, F 66-67). Although we may speak different artificial languages, all human beings can communicate their sentiments to all other human beings. “Who is there who, faced with a shaking, whining tortured person,” Herder asks, “is not touched to his heart by this “Ah!”? Who is such a feelingless barbarian?” He argues that “the bond of this natural language” is so strong that we can only resist it with the most painful effort (G 1:706, F 72-73). Even when artificial language and human culture have led human beings to mistreat one another, the natural language of feeling often breaks through, reminding us of the susceptibility to suffering which we share with all our fellows. Herder observes that “Europeans everywhere—despite their cultivation [*Bildung*] and miscultivation—have been strongly moved by the primitive moans of savages” (G 1:706, F 73).

At its most basic, Herder’s commitment to universal moral and political norms— and hence his opposition to the remarkable cruelty of the empires of his day—is an appeal to the natural, instinctual sympathy we share, not only with every other human being, but also with all of creation. “Behold the whole of nature,” Herder enjoins us; “observe the great analogy of creation. Everything feels itself and creatures of its kind... Each string reverberates to its sound, each fiber interweaves itself with its playmate, animal feels with [*fühlt mit*] animal, why should not human being feel with human being?” (S 8:200, F 214).

follows the reference to the German edition: e.g., (G 1:559, F 50). The translations consulted are: Hans Adler, Ernest A. Menze and Michael Palma, tr. and ed. (A) *On World History: An Anthology*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1997; F. M. Barnard, tr. and ed. (Ba) *J. G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1969; Marcia Bunge, tr. and ed. (Bu)

Human sympathy, however, is never wholly identical to that felt by other creatures. Human beings, Herder insists, are unique in their ability to critically reflect on themselves and their instincts, choosing which of these instincts to obey and which to suppress. With self-reflection, Herder observes, a human being “becomes free-standing.” No more “in the hands of nature, he becomes his own end and goal of refinement” (G 1:717, F 82). Self-consciousness involves the ability of the human mind as a whole to reflect upon itself as a whole, a process which leaves none of it unchanged. Herder’s preferred term for “the whole organization of all human forces” (G 1:717, F 82-83) is *Besonnenheit* (G 1:719, F 84), which might best be translated as “reflective awareness.”¹¹ *Besonnenheit* allows a creature to “separate off, stop, and pay attention to a single wave” in the “ocean of sensations which floods the soul,” all while being “conscious of its own attentiveness” (G 1:722, F 87). The sensation so self-consciously isolated can then be labeled with a name, a process which Herder identifies with the invention of artificial (that is, human) language. The natural language of feeling can communicate emotion from one creature to another on an instinctual level, but the same reflective awareness which gives human beings consciousness of their own emotions also allows them to artificially communicate them to others through the medium of language. Artificial language, in turn, is responsible for the uniquely human phenomenon of culture, which Herder believes to be the primary source of diversity among human societies.

¹¹ “*Besonnenheit*” is a particularly difficult term to translate. Herder sometimes identifies it with “reflection” (*Reflexion*), but sharply distinguishes it from mere “consciousness” (*Besinnung*)

2. The Development of Human Diversity

Human beings are, according to Herder, the most diverse of all earthly creatures. “All the animal species are perhaps less different among themselves,” he writes, “than human being from human being” (S 8:207, F 217). Each human being is a unique product of nature, “a cosmos in himself and, as such, a wholly incomparable being” (S 13:253, B 282). And what holds true of each human individual also holds true of each human group. “Like *individual human beings*,” Herder writes, “similarly *families* and *peoples* are different from each other, and still more so” (S 8:210, F 219). Commentators today often forget that the diversity among groups, for Herder, develops in a world in which individuals are already irreducibly unique. It is important not to confuse Herder with later, romantic nationalists who—by understanding each nation as a natural, organic unity—combine a commitment to diversity among nations and cultures with an insistence on homogeneity among individuals within a single culture.¹²

While the diversity of individuals begins naturally as a product of human biology, the diversity of groups is almost entirely an artificial product of human reflective awareness, as different populations self-consciously react in different ways to their various social and physical environments. Herder’s cultural etiology of group diversity is thus directly tied to his rejection of biological racism; he insists that “notwithstanding the varieties of the human form, there is but one and the same species of human beings throughout the whole of our Earth” (G 6:251, C

¹² Maurizio Viroli seems guilty of such confusion, interpreting Herder as a defender of “national homogeneity;” (See Viroli, *For Love of Country: An Essay on Patriotism and NatNat*

163).¹³ The study of human difference therefore belongs “not so properly to the systematic study of natural history, as to the physico-geogra

though he brings his powers and limbs to the world, he must learn how to use these powers and limbs, how to use and develop them” (G 7:124, A 100). With different languages and different patterns of education, human beings in different social groups will be formed into different sorts of creatures. “If human nature is no *independent divinity* in goodness,” Herder reasons, “if it has to *learn* everything, to be *formed* [gebildet] through *progression*... then naturally it is formed [gebildet] *most* or *only* on those *sides* where it has such *occasions* for virtue, for struggle, for progression” (S 5:505, F 294).

The virtually untranslatable German notion of *Bildung*—the cultivation or formation of the soul—is the process by which we become who we are. Despite the term’s frequent translation as “education” (a translation best reserved for *Erziehung*), Barnard observes that for Herder

idea.”¹⁵ Indeed, Herder’s work represents a first step toward the pluralization of the previously singular term “culture.” Although Herder himself continued to use *Kultur* in the grammatical singular, the later terminology of “cultural pluralism” or “multiculturalism” accurately captures an important aspect of his thought.¹⁶ “Is there a people on earth totally uncultured?” he asks. “And how contracted must the scheme of Providence be, if every individual of the human species were to be formed to what *we* call culture?” (G 6:12, C v).

Yet Herder’s ideas, as Isaiah Berlin has repeatedly emphasizes, represent much more than a mere pluralization of such traditional German concepts as *Kultur* and *Bildung*; they represent nothing less than a rejection of the monistic conception of human flourishing which had dominated Western philosophy since Plato and Aristotle.¹⁷ “Human nature is no container of an *absolute, independent, unchangeable happiness* as the philosopher defines it,” Herder insists, for human nature is not a rigid structure but “*a flexible clay*, in the most different situations, needs and pressure, forming itself differently.” In this way, “the very image of happiness *changes* with each condition and region” (S 5:509).

3. The Implications of Diversity

Herder’s revolutionary doctrine of cultural pluralism could not help but have profound implications for our understanding of ethics and politics. On the level of political policy, it is an

¹⁵ Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity and History*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2003, p. 134.

¹⁶ Raymond Geuss observes that Herder “doesn’t in general share Kant’s penchant for creating a distinctive technical vocabulary... Despite this pluralism about national ways of life, Herder’s use of the term *Kultur* is still that of Kant and the Enlightenment: it refers to the general state or level of human faculties. As has been pointed out, Herder never uses the word *Kultur* in the plural” (Raymond Geuss, “*Kultur, Bildung, Geist*,” in *Morality, Culture and History: Essays on German Philosophy*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 29-50, p. 34). Indeed, the word *Kultur* was not to be used widely in the plural until the 1870’s (Ibid., pp. 35-37).

¹⁷ For a brief and eloquent statement of Berlin’s position on this topic, see “The Pursuit of the Ideal” in Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. Edited by Henry Hardy. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 1-19.

obvious ground for opposition to colonialism and imperialism.¹⁸ Herder argues that each group which shares its own unique cultural standards of human flourishing should be allowed to govern itself according those very standards—an idea which greatly contributed to the rise of ethno-cultural nationalism as the dominant political movement of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and which still has profound implications for our understanding of international relations today.

Yet while today's anti-imperialists might happily support Herder's politics, they must be wary of his cultural pluralism's power to undermine any set of putatively universal normative commitments—moral, political, aesthetic or otherwise. Herder himself was well aware of the potentially corrosive effect of cultural pluralism, and he addresses this issue most directly in his provocative essay of 1766 known as *Von der Veränderung des Geschmacks* (*On the Change of Taste*). The title given to this work by Herder's editors can be misleading, for Herder's subject is not mere aesthetic taste, but all of human judgment. "As soon as I find something true or beautiful," Herder observes, "then nothing is more natural than the expectation that every human being will have the same sentiment [*Empfindung*], the same opinion, with me. Otherwise, of course, there would be no basic rule of truth and no firm basis for taste." Yet Herder knows that, in different times and places, most human beings do not find the same things to be true, good or beautiful. He expects that most of his fellows will find this discovery shocking. The average man, Herder writes, "is amazed when he comes upon a story and discovers that manner of thought and taste change with climate, with regions of the earth, and with countries" (G 1:149, F 247).

After nature, by placing the individual in a particular cultural circle, allowed him to develop only a limited subset of the potential with which she endowed us, she then "*reined in the*

¹⁸ For more on Herder as an opponent of colonialism and imperialism, see Muthu, 2003, Chapter 6, pp. 210-258.

human *view* so that after a small period of habituation this circle became a *horizon* for him. Not
to look beyond it

beings can extend, to bring it into categories, and then to try to explain it,” he writes. “I shall lead my readers out onto a knoll and show them how in the valley and on the plain creatures stray about that are so diverse that they hardly have a common name left; however, they are our fellow brothers, and their history is the history of our nature” (G 1:151, F 249). This historical project produced Herder’s masterworks: the methodological essay *Auch Eine Philosophie der Geshichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (*Yet Another Philosophy of History for the Bildung of Humanity*) of 1774; and the magisterial, if uncompleted, application of this methodology in the four volumes of the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geshichte der Menschheit* (*Ideas towards the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*) published between 1784 and 1791. Yet the insistence that his project is merely a historical one is disingenuous, for it is through his empirical inquiry into the development of diversity out of our shared human nature that Herder is able to overcome the social and psychological barriers which block cross-cultural empathy, and then to use his empathetic understanding of others to identify universal norms which are implicitly endorsed by all the radically different branches of the human family.

III. From Human Diversity to Empathetic Understanding

1. *Einfühlung* through Analogy

The diversity which Herder observes among human beings is indeed considerable, but it has been overestimated by commentators nonetheless.¹⁹ As should now be clear, Herder never rejects the notion of a single human nature; he only insists that this nature is, under the influence

¹⁹ Anthony Pagden, for example, claims that “Herder pushed the notion of incommensurability to the point where the very concept of a single human genus became, if not impossible to achieve, at least culturally meaningless.” See Anthony Pagden, *European Encounters with the New World*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993, p. 180. For a refutation of Pagden’s interpretation of Herder which was an invaluable guide to my own, see Muthu, 2003, pp. 232-233.

of *Bildung*, far more culturally malleable than most of his contemporaries supposed.²⁰ It is understandable that we might overlook the unity of human nature, however, because “time has

Berlin then goes on to recount that ideas along these lines already formulated (apparently unbeknownst to Herder) by Vico would be developed by later German thinkers such as Max Weber as “understanding” or “*Verstehen*”—the key to all adequate social inquiry.²⁴

Not only is Herder rightly celebrated as one of the first theorists of this mode of empathetic understanding; he has also been recognized for centuries as one of its greatest practitioners. “You possess the gift,” Moses Medelsohn wrote Herder in 1780, “to feel yourself, whenever you wish, into the situation and mentality of your fellow beings.”²⁵ Even Kant, in his otherwise hostile review of the *Ideas*, was forced to complement Herder’s gifts in this regard, albeit in the most backhanded manner. Kant writes of his one-time student, with whom he would now forever remain estranged:

His approach does not entail... a logical precision in the definition of concepts or careful distinctions and consistency in the use of principles, but rather a cursory and comprehensive vision and a ready facility for discovering analogies, together with a bold imagination in putting these analogies to use. This is combined with an aptitude for arousing sympathy for his subject... by means of feelings and sentiments [*durch Gefühle und Empfindungen einzunehmen*

situation and empathize with him, I must consider how his situation might in certain respects resemble my own. By carefully mapping parallels between these two different situations, I can come to feel what it would be like to be someone radically unlike myself

beings over the course of history are great indeed, but so too are those over the course of a single human life; Herder hopes that we can feel our way through the human transformations we have not experienced personally by drawing parallels to those we have. The “ages” of humanity are not meant to be compared in terms of their maturity; Herder insists that they represent modes of living “which I indeed in no way mean to *compare*... for I do not like *comparing* at all!” (S 5:494, F 285). Instead, Herder urges his readers to see that, just as what allowed for happiness and fulfillment in our own lives changed over time, so too did what allowed for human flourishing over the course of history; as was mentioned earlier, the heterogeneity within the self can serve as an aid for the empathetic understanding of others. Herder writes:

We all believe that we still now have *parental* and *household* and *human drives* as the Oriental had them; that we can have *faithfulness* and *diligence in art* as the Egyptian possessed them; *Phoenecian activeness*, *Greek love of freedom*, *Roman strength of soul*—who does not think that he feels a *disposition* for all that, if only *time*, *opportunity*... And behold! My reader, we are precisely there (S 5:502, F 292).

2. The Education of Empathy in the Humanities

Herder’s myriad writings on history, anthropology, language and literature were meant to guide the reader towards an empathetic understanding of the whole range of human cultures and worldviews. All of Herder’s work, Wulf Koepke notes, was “designed to have an impact on their readers, and that is, according to rhetorical tradition, both an intellectual and an emotional impact.”²⁸

a) The Proper Method of History

Of all his varied studies in the humanities, which he pursued with contagious enthusiasm, Herder was perhaps most enthralled by his study of history. “Since we read everything with a spirit of *participating concern*,” he explains “the history of humankind is for us humans the most appropriate, the most important, and the most pleasing subject” (S 32:85, M 69).

What Herder looks for in history is not the meticulous attention to documented details so valued by academic historians today, but rather empathetic insight into the inner workings of past ages. Unfortunately, such insight is never easy to come by. Herder complains that, while the leading historians of his time had real insight into their own psychology and that of those around them, when they “model all centuries after the one form of their time... Hume! Voltaire! Robertson! ... What are you in the light of truth?” (S 5:508, F 296). Indeed, in an early draft of *Yet Another Philosophy of History*, Herder complains that this has *always* been the fatal flaw of the historian. “Almost every one of them from Herodotus to Hume has his favorite time, his favorite people, his favorite ethics in accordance with which he models everything else” (F 296). As a result, Meinecke elaborates, most historians have “proved unable to go down into the interior world of individuality, the psychological depths of man or the ultimate profundities of history.”²⁹

The proper historian must not approach his subject with a pre-existing theory of human

“we cannot cut ourselves off from *human feeling* [Menschengefühl] when we write or read history,” (G 7:733, F 411). In this way, Herder’s historian foreshadows Walt Whitman’s democratic poet in the breadth of his sympathetic imagination far more than he does the contemporary scholar of history. “I raise myself up,” Herder declares in one of his many moments of Whitmanian ecstasy, “and expand my soul into every clime... I encompass the spirit of each people in my soul!” (G 1:26, M 32).

The challenge for empathetic historians is to activate imaginatively those latent elements of their own psyche which were more fully developed by the different modes of *Bildung* adopted in the past. While studying the ancient Hebrew patriarchy of Genesis, for example, we may “still now after millennia feel the so long preserved *pure Oriental nature*” latent within ourselves (S 5:486-487, F 280). Those who engage in this empathetic endeavor successfully will discover how these foreign modes of soul-formation allowed for forms of living which, while each was the *sui generis* product of human reflective awareness, all built from common human material. In this way, Herder is convinced, history can be a tool for the development of cross-cultural understanding in its students. With sufficient study of the past, “we will learn to see the value of ages that we now despise—the feeling of *universal humanity* and *bliss* will stir” (S 5:567, F 342).

b) Travel Accounts and Cultural Anthropology

Much of what Herder says concerning the study of human history applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the study of contemporary human cultures. “On our round earth,” Herder writes, “all epochs of humanity still live and function” (G 7:738, F 416). Like his analogy of the different periods of a single human life to the different periods of human history, Herder’s comparison here was a familiar one. Since “the *synchronic* dispersal of cultural levels

demonstrated by the travel literature mirrored faithfully the *diachronic* evolution of human cultural levels,” Zammito recounts, the frequent eighteenth-century juxtaposition of so-called ‘primitives’ with Enlightened Europeans “told the same story of human ‘civilization’ that could be constructed from the sequence of human cultures from the ancient Fertile Crescent to the *siècle des lumières*.”³⁰ Again, however, Herder is using a common trope of his time for his own culturally pluralist purposes.

The popular travel accounts of Herder’s day, early predecessors of today’s cultural anthropology, were generally written with the underlying assumption that those in other climes were decidedly inferior to Europeans, but nonetheless fascinating in their primitive diversity. To these authors, Herder protests that the myriad peoples of the world do not exist “in order to delight the idle European in copper engravings.” The typical travel-writer wants to collect exotic specimens of humanity without ever empathetically entering into the worldview of others, and Herder complains that works “authored in this presumptuous, covetous conceit are indeed written in a European manner but certainly not *humanely*” (G 7:688, F 385).³¹

In contrast to these exoticizing accounts, Herder writes that “faithful travel descriptions lead to the recognition of the humanity in the human being much more surely than do systems... Travel descriptions of such a sort... expand our horizon and multiply our sensitivity for every situation of our brothers” (G 7:701-702, F 397). Herder praises the travelers who authored such

er 4Ji.6n in refBT.74 Tm0.00278.13eit40

anatomists of the moral sentiments. “Without losing a word about this,” Herder observes, “they preach sympathy [*Mitgefühl*], tolerance, forgiveness, praise, compassion [*Bedauren*], many-sided culture of the mind, satisfaction, wisdom” (G 7:701-702, F 397).

c) Language, Literature and Translation

Unlike later romantics who advocated self-expression for its own sake, Herder always valued creative literature, as he valued history and anthropology, for primarily moral purposes. As Michael Forster observes, however, Herder believed the edifying effects of literature to come “not only through relatively direct moral instruction, but also through... the exposure of readers to other people’s inner lives and a consequent enhancement of their sympathies for them.”³² “In every period and language, poetry embodied the imperfections and the perfections of a nation,” Herder writes; “poetry was a mirror of a nation’s sentiments, the expression of its highest aspirations” (S18:137, Bu 143). Even millennia after the disappearance of classical Greece, for example, “each person who took delight in its writings thereby entered its realm and sympathetically shared in [*nahm Teil an*] them” (F 378). And just as much of the moral value of creative literature stems from its ability to help us empathetically understand the culture which produced it, no work of literature can be correctly interpreted without an empathetic understanding its cultural context. The task of the scholar of literature is thus fundamentally the same cultivation of empathetic understanding characteristic of the successful historian or cultural anthropologist. “He is the greatest philologist of the Orient,” Herder insists, “who understands... the character of the native language like an Easterner” (G 1:559, F 50).

³² Forster, 2002, p. xiii.

Since analogy to the self is the general means by which we may achieve empathetic understanding of those different from ourselves, understanding the language and literature of distant times and places is a matter of relating these foreign linguistic practices to our own. “Our mind clandestinely compares all tongues with our mother tongue,” Herder observes, “and how useful this can be! Thereby, the great diversity of languages is given unity; our steps exploring foreign regions become shorter and more self-assured” (G 1:26-27, M 32-33). A sure sign of the successful empathetic understanding of another culture is the ability to translate the literature of that culture’s language into one’s own. Successful

not imply relativism, Barnard observes that one needs to remember “the distinction between applying a perspective of historical contextualism and applying a wholly relativist ethic.”³⁵ To be sure, Herder was scornful of the abuse heaped on foreign cultures by those of his contemporaries who believed anything that fell short of eighteen

been accused “of exaggeration and a heated imagination; but no one has convicted him of lying.”

Herder himself sees this “heated imagination” as instead “a noble fire of sympathy [

“value pluralist” is as mistaken as the interpretation of Herder as a moral relativist which Berlin wisely rejects. Under Berlin’s definition, a value pluralist looks “upon life as affording a plurality of values, equally genuine, equally ultimate, above all equally objective; incapable, therefore, of being ordered in a timeless hierarchy, or judged in terms of some one absolute standard.”³⁹ Yet Herder’s *cultural* pluralism does not imply *value* pluralism of this sort; empathetic appreciation of the diversity of human ways of life does not suggest that there is an irreducible plurality of incommensurable yet objective moral values. Indeed, Herder explicitly argues that there is a single, absolute standard against which all of our myriad values and ways of life can be judged. He calls this standard *Humanität*, or “humanity.”

2. The Universal Ideal of *Humanität*

Herder’s notion of *Humanität* has long puzzled commentators. “It never even seems to have occurred to Herder that an exact definition of *Humanität* was needed,” Gillies observes; indeed, its “seductive vagueness” may have been part of the concept’s deep appeal for the anti-systematic Herder.⁴⁰ Although Barnard observes that “here and there Herder makes the attempt” to define this central term in his philosophy, it “never quite seems to come off.” Herder cannot capture *Humanität* in a mere definition because he wishes the concept to include everything positive that can be said “about the noble constitution of man for reason and freedom, finer senses and impulses, the most delicate and most robust health, the realization of the purpose of

³⁹ Berlin, 1990, p. 79. For another refutation of Berlin’s interpretation of Herder, see Doman Linker, “The Reluctant

the world and the control over it.” *Humanität* is the name for man’s “destiny”; it is “that which expresses the essence of himself as a human being” (S 13:154, B 267).

Talk of humanity’s “essence” as its “destiny” suggests that Herder understands *Humanität* as the end set for human beings by their natural potential, hearkening back to Aristotle and the teleological, perfectionist ethics of classical philosophy. Humanity, according to this ancient conception, is a bundle of potentialities which, by their very nature, authoritatively demand actualization; to fail to realize our distinctly human potential is to defeat the purposes of nature and, in post-classical interpretations, its divine creator. Although every human being has the potential to achieve *Humanität*, Herder insists, “the effort to attain this quality is a task which must be carried on incessantly, or we will sink back... to raw animality, to *brutality* [Brutalität]” (G 7:148, A 106). Herder sees the struggle to actualize human potential wherever he looks in human history. Of course, our progress towards *Humanität* is not consistent in all times and places; it can be “turned out of its way for centuries, and lain as if dormant beneath its ashes” (G 6:667, C 465). Nonetheless, “in all states, in all societies, man has had nothing in view, and could aim at nothing else, but *Humanität*, whatever may have been the idea he formed of it” (G 6:631, C 439).

This last qualification is key, for while Herder believes that all nations and cultures pursue the ideal of *Humanität*, he also believes that “each bears in itself the standard of its perfection, totally independent of all comparison with that of others” (G 6:649, C 452). *Humanität* is a product of natural human potential but, as Herder observed, human nature is highly malleable, and the particular forms the expression of our potential takes will be determined by the unique form of *Bildung* we receive in our particular cultural context. “Each individual, each nation, has its own peculiar image of *Humanität*,” Barnard observes. Precisely

what *Humanität* requires in any particular context depends “not on rigid formulations or clearly definable theoretical concepts but rather on a practical understanding of, or sensitivity to, what it is to be human in diverse situations or human encounters.”⁴¹

product of the empathetic understanding of diverse human cultures and their history. As we come to comprehend the standards by which various human groups evaluate themselves, we come to see many underlying similarities across these practices, similarities that can be attributed to the common humanity of all. Similarity, as much as difference, enlivens the study of history and anthropology for Herder; we are always “delighted when in the history of our species the echo of all ages and nations reverberates nothing from the noblest mind but human goodness and human truth [*Menschengüte und Menschenwahrheit*]” (G 6:652, C 454). No metaphysical account of human teleology is needed to observe this empirically verifiable fact of unity amidst diversity, which in turn implies an underlying unity among what otherwise might seem to be an irreducible plurality of incommensurable values.

3. The Universal Norm of *Billigkeit*

The actualization of natural human potential which Herder calls *Humanität* necessarily has substantive moral and political content. Like the ancients, Herder believed that the perfection of the individual necessitates the moral treatment of others within a rightly ordered political community. “No human being can live *for himself alone*, much as he might wish to do so,” Herder writes. “The capacities which he attains, the virtues or vices which he acts out, to a lesser or greater degree will bring pain or joy to others” (G 7:124, A 100). The other-directed moral and political content of *Humanität* is generally referred to by the term *Billigkeit* which, as Barnard observes, “like *Bildung* and *Humanität* is not easily translatable. In Herder’s use it can be said to combine the meanings of words such as reasonable, fair, just and equitable.”⁴³ Herder’s *Billigkeit* shares with the later Rawls’s “reasonableness” its status as a moral commitment to fairness or reciprocity which can be shared across otherwise divergent

⁴³ Barnard, 1965, p. 98. Like the English word “reasonable,” the German *billig* is now often used to denote inexpensiveness, indicating that a piece of merchandise is fairly and reasonably priced.

“dispositions of peace” (*Freidens-Gesinnungen*) which must be cultivated by people of all

Unlike an attempt to craft an overlapping consensus based on Rawls's a priori requirement of reasonableness, a Herderian attempt to construct a consensus based on *Billigkeit* today cannot be a work of pure political philosophy. Instead, it requires precisely the sort of empirical research about the history, language and culture of the full spectrum of the world's peoples which Herder carried out in his own work. Since our knowledge of human societies has increased exponentially since the Enlightenment era, there is a good possibility that we can translate the values of one culture into the language of others more successfully than Herder himself could, and achieve a deeper level of universal empathetic understanding than would have been possible in the eighteenth century. Yet the increased intellectual division of labor which has accompanied our increase in knowledge about the human condition means that this empathetic understanding cannot be the achievement of a single scholar alone. A turn from the aprioristic Kantian approach of Rawls and Habermas to an empathetic, empirically-informed approach inspired instead by Kant's student Herder would require a fundamental change in the practice of political theory, compelling scholars in the subfield to collaborate with their peers across all of the humanities and social sciences. A fuller examination of the potential of this interdisciplinary approach will have to wait for another occasion.