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

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Michael L. Frazer

Assistant Professor of Government and Social Studies, Harvard University

mfrazer@gov.harvard.edu

The political implications of human diversity have become a central concern of political theory today. The wide variety of social groups in our own society makes it difficult to imagine what political principles could prove acceptable to all those whose lives they are meant to govern. The still greater degree of diversity on the international level makes finding acceptable principles to govern the increasingly interconnected global order an even more formidable challenge. Rather than seek to find such universal norms, many have sought refuge in an easy relativism, under which no moral or political principles could ever be universally binding. This essay, however, will argue that, although a full appreciation of the scope of human diversity may make constructing truly universal political principles more difficult, it does not render this task impossible. As is so often the case, possible solutions to today's seemingly intractable political problems can be found through a reconsideration of certain canonical authors of the past: in this case, the eighteenth-century philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.

Although Germans have long recognized Herder as one of their greatest philosophers of language and history, Herder was largely ignored in the English-speaking world until his recent rescue from obscurity by Isaiah Berlin. In the decades since Berlin's groundbreaking work, Herder has been frequently celebrated as one of the first to appreciate the plurality of human cultures. Few, however, have recognized how Herder can help us in our quest to find cross-culturally acceptable moral and political norms. It is often believed that Herder's cultural pluralism made him some sort of moral relativist or, as Berlin argues, value pluralist—that

Herder believed the tremendous space between different worldviews and cultures made normative judgments across such chasms impossible, precluding the possibility of a single set of truly universal moral or political standards. Yet Herder actually argues that the recognition of human diversity, far from leading us to moral relativism, can only serve to improve the accuracy and enhance the authority of our universally applicable moral convictions. Indeed, he gives a thorough account of how we must feel our way into the position of individuals radically different from ourselves in order to adequately render any sort of judgment about their modes of existence. Through his empathetic inquiry into the full scope of human diversity, Herder constructs a single ideal of *Humanität* which can be shared by all human beings despite their otherwise conflicting values. *Humanität*, in turn, is associated with universal moral and political norms of reasonableness, fairness and reciprocity (*Billigkeit*) which Herder believes can serve as a shared basis for just relations between those of different ethical and cultural commitments.

Anticipating the political liberalism of John Rawls, Herder claims that we can build an overlapping consensus supporting justice from a broad spectrum of existing worldviews. Unlike Rawls, however, Herder refuses to impose any a priori requirements for participation in this overlapping consensus, excluding those who do not abide by mainstream norms as “unreasonable.” To the contrary, Herder believes that shared norms of reciprocity can only be discovered a posteriori. Careful empirical investigation of the world’s diverse cultures reveals that they have certain basic moral principles in common—most famously the “golden rule” of reciprocity—and cross-cultural empathy allows these norms to be translated from one culture into another. In this way, Herder argues, close attentiveness to the actual differences among human cultures supports rather than undermines an overlapping consensus supporting our commitment to justice.

I. The Political Problem of Difference

1. Young's Critique of Impartiality

Issues of diversity have taken center stage in contemporary political theory thanks largely to the late Iris Marion Young's 1990 book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Here, Young's goal is to "expose... modern political theory's tendency to reduce political subjects to a unity and to value commonness or sameness over specificity and difference"¹ The "denial of difference" is a moral as well as a philosophical failing, Young argues, since it "contributes to social group oppression" (p. 10).

Young argues that in much of modern political theory the denial of difference takes the form of an "ideal of impartiality" which "by claiming to provide a standpoint which all subjects can adopt... denies the difference between subjects" (p. 10). John Rawls's "original position" is the paradigmatic example of such an allegedly impartial standpoint, placing imaginary agents asked to formulate principles of justice behind a "veil of ignorance" which hides their particular interests and identities.² Rawls is well aware that the level of impartiality built into the original position is impossible in actual political deliberation, but he believes that principles of justice ought to be formulated impartially nonetheless, and that his thought experiment provides the proper standpoint for their impartial formulation. Young counters, however, that the impossibility of such a standpoint gives those who try to adopt it "a propensity to universalize the particular... The situated assumptions and commitments that derive from particular histories, experiences and affiliations rush to fill the vacuum created by counterfactual abstraction" (p.

¹ Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990, p. 3. Henceforth cited parenthetically.

² See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*. Revised Edition. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971/1999.

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*. The political liberalism of these later works "applies the principle of toleration to philosophy itself,"³ thus opening the way for adherents of a variety of worldviews to participate in an overlapping consensus supporting

³ Rawls, *Political Liberalism*. Revised Paperback Edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993/1996, p. 10) This turn of phrase is first used in Rawls's "Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*. Vol. 14 (1985), pp. 232-252. Reprinted in *Collected Papers*. Edited by Samuel Freeman. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 388-414, p. 388. I take this essay to mark Rawls's real break with his views of justification as presented in *A Theory of Justice*, and all references to Rawls's "recent" or "later" works imply books and essays published in 1985 or later.

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 adhering to comprehensive doctrines which “cannot support a reasonable balance of political values.”⁴

While, in her review of *Political Liberalism*, Young acknowledges that Rawls’s new appreciation for diversity represents “an important advance” over his earlier work, she still has serious reservations about his approach.⁵ The very notion that our commitments are articulated in the form of “comprehensive doctrines” can itself represent a form of cultural imperialism. “Describing contemporary cultural pluralism as a clash between diverse belief systems,” she writes, “tends to privilege those social segments whose culture is more liable to be so described and fails to notice so well the cultural specificity of social segments less easily defined by ‘doctrines.’”⁶ In her recent book *Inclusion and Democracy*, Young also argues that, although “reasonableness” is an appropriate norm for public discourse, even this legitimate requirement can easily become a tool of anti-democratic exclusion, as can any other such allegedly impartial discursive norm.⁷ It should come as no surprise, then, if a wide variety of oppressed groups find themselves excluded from Rawls’s overlapping consensus on the grounds of their failure to espouse a reasonable comprehensive doctrine.

⁴ Rawls, 1993/1996, p. 243.

⁵ Young, “Rawls’s *Political Liberalism*,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy*. 3:2, June 1995, pp. 181-90, p. 187.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁷ Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, especially pp. 24-25, pp. 36-51.

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 affected by the decisions” (p. 116).

Any attempt by members of one group to construct norms meant to be valid for all other groups will result in cultural imperialism. Since they cannot claim to speak from an impartial standpoint valid for all—or even to speak for members of groups whose cultures, experiences and identities are different from their own—members of dominant groups must listen silently while members of oppressed groups are given the opportunity to speak for themselves. “To promote a politics of inclusion,” Young writes, “participatory democrats must promote the ideal of a heterogeneous public, in which persons stand forth with their differences acknowledged and respected, though perhaps not completely understood, by others” (p. 119). This participatory ideal, in turn, requires policies designed to “provide mechanisms for the effective recognition and representation of the distinct voices and perspectives of those of its constituent groups that are oppressed or disadvantaged” (p. 184). Once impartiality is seen as impossible, the alternative is a broadly inclusive democratic politics in which myriad partial groups are allowed their say—but none are allowed to speak for others, either through appeal to impartial norms which are meant to transcend their differences, or for any other reason.

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 officials from making authoritative decisions on the basis of allegedly impartial norms, hence delegitimizing bureaucratic hierarchies. Yet it also precludes citizens from rejecting the authoritative decisions of heterogeneous democratic publics, hence delegitimizing individual conscience.

Second, and just as importantly, it is unclear how democratic decision-making itself can operate successfully if members of different groups cannot appeal to common, impartial standards to reconcile their differences. Genuine moral consensus, under Young's view, would seem to be impossible. The politics of difference which she describes bears a disturbing resemblance to traditional, interest group politics, in which deal-making among competing coalitions as to how political spoils should be divided among them replaces the moral imperative to construct principles of governance genuinely acceptable to all. Without some significant degree of inter-group understanding and substantive moral agreement, deal-making of this sort would seem to be the only available alternative.⁸

⁸ Young grapples with criticism of her work along roughly these lines in *Inclusion and Democracy*, Chapter 3, pp. 81-120. Although Young is surely correct that her politics of difference is not simply another form of interest group politics, she never explains how avoiding something *resembling* interest group politics is possible without a greater degree of inter-group understanding than she seems to allow for in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

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

negotiation of others. Nor should we expect reaching such an understanding to be a painful, unpleasant process; Young admits that there is a “kind of pleasure... in coming to encounter a subjectivity, a set of meanings, that is different, unfamiliar. One takes pleasure in being drawn out of oneself to understand that there are other meanings, practices, perspectives... and that one could learn or experience something more and different by interacting with them” (p. 240).

The possibility of largely successful (if rarely perfectly “complete”) inter-group understanding points to an alternative interpretation of impartiality. “Some writers who agree with this critique of the... traditional ideal of impartiality,” Young acknowledges, “suggest that rather than think of impartiality as a view from nowhere one can arrive at the same results by thinking of the view from everywhere.” Young makes particular reference to Susan Okin’s reinterpretation of Rawls’s original position “as a reasoning process that takes account of all the particular positions and perspectives in the society in order to arrive at the just outcome” (pp. 104-105). As Okin explains:

To think as a person in the original position is not to be a disembodied nobody. This, as critics have rightly pointed out, would be impossible. Rather, it is to think from the point of view of everybody, or every “concrete other” whom one might turn out to be... To do [so] requires, at the very least, both strong empathy and preparedness to listen carefully to the very different points of view of others.⁹

“This idea of taking the point of view of everyone,” Young observes, “depends on the ability of the moral reasoner to be sympathetic with every particular position and point of view.”

Yet such universal sympathy, she insists, is impossible. The idea that “from my particular perspective... I can nevertheless empathize with the feelings and perspectives of others

⁹ Susan Moller Okin, “Reason and Feeling in Thinking about Justice,” *Ethics* 99:2, 1989, pp. 229-249, pp. 245-248. Okin is here borrowing the notion of the “concrete other” from Seyla Benhabib, whose reinterpretation of Habermas’s communicative ethics echoes Okin’s reinterpretation of Rawls. See Benhabib, *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, pp. 327-353, especially p. 341.

differently situated,” Young writes, “denies the difference among subjects.” Although Young acknowledges that “subjects are not opaque to one another” and “their difference is not absolute,” she nonetheless insists that “one subject cannot fully empathize with another in a different social location, adopt her point of view; if that were possible then the social locations would not be different” (p. 105). Later, Young explains that “such an ideal of transparency of subjects to one another denies the difference, or basic asymmetry, of subjects” because, for reasons made famous by Sartre, “the regard of the other is always objectifying. Other persons never see the world from my perspective, and in witnessing other’s objective grasp of my body, actions and words, I am always faced with an experience of myself different from the one I have” (p. 231).

All of us, however, have had experiences of the sort of interpersonal relationships which Sartre’s philosophy declares impossible—I-Thou relationships in which the other is seen, not as an object, but as much of a subject as myself, with a perspective on life different from, but analogous to, my own. Such relationships are familiar among close friends and loved ones, but, given the proper attitude towards others, they can also be developed among perfect strangers. Once an I-Thou relationship is established, empathy then allows us to see the world from another’s perspective. Although its operations may never be perfect, as our empathetic experience of another’s worldview improves it can asymptotically approach identity with the original experience of this worldview. Barriers of difference may make the development of empathetic understanding more difficult, but there is no reason to think that they make it impossible.

In order to support Okin’s claim that empathy can cross the cultural cleavages within a pluralist society, allowing each individual to consider political principles from the point of view

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 diversity allows us to construct universal norms acceptable to all. The remainder of this essay will be devoted to addressing how Herder can help provide us with each of these elements of a full theory of the politics of pluralist empathy.

II. From Human Nature to Human Diversity

1. Natural and Artificial Languages

Herder's 1772 *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (*Treatise on the Origin of Language*) begins by observing that, when we experience any sort of strong emotion, both animals and human beings instinctually cry aloud. "The struck string performs its natural duty," Herder writes. "It sounds! It calls to a similarly feeling echo—even when none is there, even when it does not hope or expect to be answered by one." Since it successfully communicates emotion from one creature to another, Herder describes the cry of an animal in pain as a sort of language. "Hence there is a language of feeling [*Empfindung*]," Herder concludes "which is an immediate law of nature" (G 1:698, F 66).¹⁰

¹⁰ There are two widely used editions of Herder's works in German: Ulrich Gaier, et. al. ed. *Johann Gottfried Herder Werke in Zehn Bänden*. Frankfurt Am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985 and Benhard Suphan, et. al. ed. *Johann Gottfried Herder Sämtliche Werke*. Berlin, 1887-1913. Reprinted Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1967-1968. The latter of these has the virtue of being more complete, the former of being more recent and in Latin script; I have consulted both. Following the convention established by Michael Forster, for any given parenthetical citation to the volume and page numbers in a German edition of Herder's work, an "S" refers to the Suphan edition, a "G" to the Gaier. English translations were also consulted whenever possible, although I have occasionally modified these translations when quoting Herder in the body of the paper. With a few exceptions, translations of Herder's works into English have appeared in anthologies which collect complete translations of some shorter works alongside translated excerpts from longer ones. Whenever a translation has been consulted, a page reference to the relevant English volume (indicated with the first-listed editor/translator's surname initial)

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) *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language and History*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993; T. Churchill, tr. (C) *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*. [A complete translation of Herder’s *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*.] London: 1800. Reprinted New York: Bergman Publishers, 1966; Ioannis D. Evrigenis and Daniel Pellerin, tr. (E) *Another Philosophy of History and Selected Political Writings*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2004; and Michael N. Forster, tr. and ed. (F) *Herder: Philosophical Writings*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

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*). As Forster observes, “for Herder *Besonnenheit* is a precondition for *Besinnung* but not conversely,” whereas normal German usage “would if anything have suggested converse dependence” (F, p. 82, fn.). Forster chooses to translate *Besonnenheit* as “awareness” and *Besinnung* as “taking-awareness;” I hope my own choices of “reflective awareness” and “consciousness” respectively help clarify Herder’s meaning while remaining recognizable as English. Barnard suggests instead “the power of thinking” as a translation of *Besonnenheit*; see F. M. Barnard, *Herder’s Social and Political Thought: From Enlightenment to Nationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1965, pp. 42-43. For more on the philosophical implications of Herder’s concept, see Charles Taylor, “The Importance of Herder,” in *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995, pp. 79-99.

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 Nationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995, p. 120). For an important corrective to the mistaken interpretation of Herder as contrasting “the immense diversity of the globe as a whole with clusters of relatively homogenous units (be they families, small communities, cities or nations),” see Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003, p.222.

163).¹³ The study of human difference therefore belongs “not so properly to the systematic study of natural history, as to the physico-geographical history of humanity” (G 6:256, C 166).

In order to trace this history of difference, Herder begins by observing that we will have stronger empathetic bonds to those tied to us by kinship or other forms of resemblance. “Everything that is still *similar* with my nature, that can be *assimilated* to it, I covet, strive for, make my own,” Herder writes. “Beyond that, kind nature has armed me with *feelinglessness, coldness and blindness*; this can even become *contempt and disgust*” (S 5:510, F 297). In a world of scarce resources, we will all struggle to acquire what we can for those with whom we have the strongest ties of love and sympathy. Competition between family groups breeds mutual enmity, and mutual enmity breeds “complete division and separation. Who wanted to have anything in common with such an enemy...? No familial customs, no remembrance of a single origin, and least of all *language*” (G 1:796-797, F 152-153). The language of one’s group soon becomes its most precious possession—“characteristic word of the race, bond of the family, tool of instruction, hero song of the fathers’ deeds, and the voice of these fathers from their graves” (G 1:797, F 153).

The exclusive language of a people has its greatest effect as a tool of instruction. “The *education* [Erziehung] of the human being begins with the inception of life,” Herder writes, “for

¹³ “O human being, honor thyself!” Herder proclaims. “Neither the pongo [chimpanzee] nor the gibbon is thy brother. The [native] American and the Negro are; these therefore thou shouldst not oppress, or murder, or rob; for they are human beings, like thee” (G 6:255, C 166). It is an interesting question whether subsequent developments in evolutionary biology might suggest that we should further extend our moral concern beyond the bounds of species to include, not only apes, but the entire animal kingdom. Indeed, although we may applaud Herder’s rejection of biological racism, we should be careful to do so on moral and not scientific grounds; Herder’s conception of the biology of race and species was as thoroughly misguided as that of his racist contemporaries. Specifically, Herder believed that skin tone and other observable racial characteristics were traits acquired over the course of an individual lifetime due to the influence of climate. Assuming a white complexion to be natural to humanity, Herder attributes the darker skin tone of equatorial peoples to a sort of permanent suntan. Indeed, he writes that “a Negro child is born white; the skin first becomes colored around the nails, the nipples, and the sexual organs; and the same correspondence of parts in the disposition to color is observable among other peoples” (G 6:235, A 183). This account of the etiology of observable racial characteristics led Herder to the morally laudable policy of opposing racial prejudice on the scientifically dubious ground that “we all have the potential of becoming Negroes” (G 6:233, A 181).

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 *Bildung* is “not something specifically intellectual... but rather an interactive social process in which men influence each other within a specific social setting.”¹⁴ The emphasis on holistic self-formation is common to much German thought of the time; Herder’s distinctive contribution is to see that each people develops its own unique mode of *Bildung*, one which guides its members toward a unique mode of living. As different local traditions of *Bildung* develop over generations, they diverge more and more from those of their neighbors. Thus there cannot be a single standard which determines whether an individual is cultured or *gebildet*. Instead, as Herder writes:

A chain of culture may be drawn, flying off in extremely divergent curves. In each it designates increasing and decreasing greatness, and maximums of every kind. Many of these exclude or limit one another... so that were we to reason from one perfection of any nation concerning another, we should form very treacherous conclusions (G 6:650, C 453).

“At a time when it was common to distinguish cultured from uncultured nations,”

Barnard observes, “Herder’s insistence upon culture as a universal phenomenon was a novel

¹⁴ Barnard, 1965, p. 12.

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*, hardly *to suspect beyond it!*” (S 5:509-510, F 297). For many of us, the worldview of our particular inherited culture is the only one we know, or if we encounter another culture whose worldview is sharply at odds with our own, we do not see it as one of many possible expressions of the manifoldness of human nature, but instead dismiss it as wrong, barbaric and inhuman. Nature had good reason to set up these ethnocentric blinders, for once I look beyond them I may come to doubt my own convictions as nothing more than groundless local prejudices. “As soon as it is shown that what I on the basis of reasons take to be true, beautiful, good, pleasant can likewise on the basis of reasons be regarded by another as false, ugly, bad, unpleasant,” Herder worries, “then truth, beauty and moral value is a true *Proteus* who by means of a magic mirror ever changes, and never shows himself the same.” (G 1:149, F 247).

The relativists and skeptics who have appeared throughout the Western philosophical tradition have long used the diversity of tastes, judgments and worldviews among the world’s plural cultures as grounds for rejecting any particular commitments or beliefs (see G 1:150-151, F 248). Herder wants to reject their view, but finds it difficult to do so while at the same time maintaining his cultural pluralism. “Is not truth, fairness, moral goodness the same at all times?” he asks. “Yes,” he answers himself, “and yet one observes that propositions for which at certain times each person would have sacrificed his last drop of blood at other times get damned to the fire by precisely the same nation... This skepticism should almost put us off trusting our own taste and sentiment [*Empfindung*]” (G 1:160, F 256).

Herder, who always avoided creating a systematic philosophical ethics, chooses not to address this problem head-on, insisting that he is an empirical historian rather than a moral philosopher. “I merely want to gather historical examples of how far the diversity of human

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 changed everything so much that one often needs a magic mirror in order to recognize the same creature beneath such diverse forms” (G 1:159, F 255).

Fortunately, human feeling and imagination provide precisely such a “magic mirror.” Herder argues that we can imaginatively put our selves into the place of others, “feeling our way into” their experience of the world. “The sensing [*empfindende*] human being feels his way into everything [*fühlte sich in Alles*],” he writes, “feels everything out of himself, and imprints it with his image, his impress” (S 8:170, F 188). This is a matter of imaginative projection of the self into the position of the other, “for it is only through ourselves that we can, so to speak, feel into others [*hinein fühlen*]” (S 8:200, F 214). Herder is widely credited with the coinage of the word *Einfühlung*, later translated into English as “empathy,” to name this process of self-projection.²¹

The study of human beings is, for Herder, an exercise in imaginative *Einfühlung*. “Unlike the natural scientist,” Barnard writes, “the historian must enter the human heart if he wants to discover the *meaning* of actions, if he wants to understand the inner thrust of the dispositions and motives that prompt people into action.”²² Berlin elaborates this realization of Herder’s thusly:

To explain human experiences or attitudes is to be able to transpose oneself by sympathetic imagination into the situation of the human beings who are being ‘explained’; and this amounts to understanding and communicating the coherence of a particular way of life, feeling, action; and thereby the validity of a given act or action, the part it plays in the life and outlook which are ‘natural’ in the situation.²³

²⁰ In an early, unpublished draft of *Yet Another Philosophy of History*, Herder went so far as to say that “the human heart has always remained the same in its inclinations, just as the mind has in abilities, and whatever sorts of angelic or devilish forms people have sometimes wished to imagine in it, has always been only human” (F 268).

²¹ See, e.g., Meinecke, *Historicism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*. Translated by J. E. Anderson with a Foreword by Sir Isaiah Berlin. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972, p. 297; Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*. Incorporating *Vico and Herder* (1960) and *The Magus of the North* (1993). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 197.

²² F. M. Barnard, *Self-Direction and Political Legitimacy: Rousseau and Herder*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 197.

²³ Berlin, 2000, p. 178.

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*]” (Kant, RH, 8:45, p. 201).

While Kant dismisses Herder’s empathetic method for its lack of rational rigor, Herder replies, “I am not ashamed of myself... I run after images, after analogies... because I do not know any other game for my thinking powers” (S 8:171, translated in Beiser, 1987, p. 148).

The idea of analogy is key here, for we cannot understand others except by analogy with ourselves.²⁶ Through the use of analogy, what is foreign and baffling is explained through its similarities to what is known and familiar. When I find that I cannot put myself in another’s

²⁴ For the classic formulation of this empathetic conception of *Verstehen*, see Max Weber, *Economy and Society*. Edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1922/1978, pp. 8-9. The parallel between Vico and Herder’s conceptions of *fantasia* and *Einfühlung* on the one hand and later German conceptions of *Verstehen* on the other is observed in Berlin, 2000, p. 48.

²⁵ Letter dated June 1780 from Moses Mendelssohn to J. G. Herder; printed in H. Düntzer and F. G. v. Herder, *Aus Herders Nachlass*. Frankfurt am Main: Meidinger, 1856, 2:216. Quoted and translated in Barnard, 1988, p. 259.

²⁶ I am indebted on this point to Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 153.

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, and I can come to empathize with even those whose experiences and worldviews were once inaccessible.

As an example of this analogical method, consider the dominant trope from *Yet Another Philosophy of History*: the analogy between the various periods of a single individual's life and the various periods of humanity's history. The parallelism of ontogeny and phylogeny is not original to Herder. Typically, eighteenth century authors used the growth of an individual to describe what they saw as the unilinear progress of history from the darkness and immaturity of the past to the Enlightened maturity of the present. In the preface to the *Ideas*, Herder regrets that his use of this common trope in his earlier essay had so often been misinterpreted along these conventional lines. "It had never entered into my mind, by employing the few figurative expressions, the *childhood, infancy, adulthood* and *old age* of our species," he writes, "to point out a highway, on which the history of culture... could be traced with certainty" (G 6:11, C v). Herder's biographer Robert Clark is incorrect, however, to claim that the dominant trope of Herder's greatest essay is intended to be read entirely ironically, that Herder means only to mock his fellow Enlightenment-era Europeans who saw the peoples of all other times and places as mere children.²⁷ "My analogy taken from human ages in life is no child's play," Herder insists (S 5:488, F 281).

Neither sharing his contemporaries' condescending attitude toward earlier times nor merely intending to parody it, Herder meant his use of the common analogy between the growth of an individual and the course of human history to allow his reader to empathize with the peoples of times past by evoking memories of the reader's own past. The changes in human

²⁷ Robert T. Clark, *Herder: His Life and Thought*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1955, p. 193.

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 If an author’s work is to lead to my moral improvement, Herder insists, he must speak to “my heart, not the understanding” (G 1:116, F 13). And Herder believes that scholars speak to the human heart more directly with work in the “humanities,” defined in his 1779 essay on the subject as “those studies and exercises which form in us the feeling of humaneness [*Menschlichkeit*]” (S 9:304).

²⁸ Wulf Koepke, *Johann Gottfried Herder*. Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1987, p. 8.

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! Roberstson! ... 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 nature based on contemporary individuals, but with an imaginative and emotional openness to the difference of the past. Herder urges his readers to “go into the age, the clime, the whole history, feel yourself into everything [*fühle dich in alles hinein*]—only now are you on the way toward understanding...” (S 5:503, F 292). Since the true history is no matter of dry scholarship,

²⁹ Meinecke, 1972, p. 300.

“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 works as possessing the same empathetic abilities as his ideal historian; together, they are nothing less than “representatives and guardian angels of humanity” (G 7: 689, F 386). Such authors do more moral good for their readers than any overheated painters of virtue or dry

³⁰ John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2002, p. 236.

³¹ “The dehumanization brought about by... exotic characterizations of Amerindians and others,” Sankar Muthu observes, “undercut whatever possibilities existed... for cultivating a genuine cross-cultural sympathy with historically real, flesh-and-blood aboriginals” (Muthu, 2003, p. 67).

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 translation does not involve a word-for-word correspondence between the translation and the original, but a recreation of the original process of poetic creation; the goal is to transfer the spirit as much as the meaning of the text.³³ The greater the cultural distance between a translator and the author he is translating, the greater the challenge. What is needed in the case of the earliest or most foreign works of literature is “a translator who is at once philosopher, poet and philologist”; such a scholar, Herder predicts, “shall be the morning star in a new epoch of our literature!” (G 1:293, M 187).

IV. From Empathetic Understanding to Universal Norms

1. Herder’s Rejection of Moral Relativism and Value Pluralism

Under the mistaken notion that to understand all is to approve of all, it has commonly been thought that Herder is a moral relativist, one who maintains that a full empathetic understanding of the world’s cultures will reveal that all their values are valid for their respective times and places.³⁴ In order to understand how Herder’s understanding of human diversity does

³³ For more on Herder’s theory of translation, see A. Gillies, *Herder*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1945, p. 34.

³⁴ For a few of the many descriptions of Herder as a relativist along roughly these lines, see Beiser, 1987, pp. 142-143; Clark, 1955, p. 320 and Arthur O. Lovejoy, *Essays in the History of Ideas*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins

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 eighteenth-century European standards—or, for some nostalgic classicists, fifth-century BC Greek standards—was to be condemned. “Authoritative decrees of praise and blame which we heap onto the whole world from *a... favorite people*,” he declares, “what is your legitimacy!” (S 5:507, F 295).

Far from disabling our normative judgments of distant others, however, our empathetic understanding of human difference is intended to improve our judgments of them, robbing these judgments of prejudice and presumption. “It is completely necessary that one be able to leave one’s own time and one’s own people in order to judge [*urteilen*] about remote times and peoples,” Herder explains (G 1:613, F 62). The problem with eighteenth-century historians, such as Voltaire and Hume, who present all of human history as a single tale of moral progress from the darkness and barbarism of the past to the light of their own day is not that they are making moral judgments about those whose values are different from their own; it is that their moral judgments are poor ones. Indeed, the improvement of our moral judgments is sometimes presented as the very point of Herder’s study of history and culture. “History’s highest *interest*, its value,” Herder writes, “rests on this human sentiment [*Menschenempfindung*], the *rule of right and wrong*” (G 7:733, F 411).

The best historians and anthropologists are driven by moral passion; Herder here singles out Bartolomé De Las Casas, author of the 1552 *Short Account of the Destruction of the Indian Nation*. Herder notes that, in his passionate denunciation of Spanish cruelty, De Las Casas has

Press, 1948, p. 172. “This *idée reçue* seems to me now to be a widespread error,” Isaiah Berlin writes, “like the label of relativism attached to Hume” (Berlin, 1990, p. 76).

³⁵ Barnard, 2003, p. 103.

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 [*edles Feuer des Mitgeföhls*] with the unfortunate, without which he would indeed *not* have written and also *not thus*” (G 7:689, F 387). If he had believed that civilized Europeans are necessarily superior to primitive, aboriginal peoples, De Las Casas’ moral-historical masterwork would have been impossible, but it would have been equally so if the author were a relativist incapable of denouncing cruelty on the part of either the European conqueror or the aboriginal conquered.

Throughout the human history presented in the *Ideas*, Herder is no more willing to refrain from moral judgment of his subjects than was De Las Casas.³⁶ Of course, the quality of Herder’s various moral judgments depends on the full extent of his understanding of the peoples and practices being judged, which, as Meinecke observed, “had variable results, depending on the extent of Herder’s knowledge and freedom from prejudice.”³⁷ Throughout, however, Herder strives for a balanced appraisal of all he encounters, convinced that humanity is never “capable of pure *perfection* in a single present condition” and that “*shortcoming* and *virtue* always dwell together in one human hut” (S 5:507-508, F 295).³⁸

We must judge others only after achieving full empathetic understanding of their position, yet judge them we must, and judge them according to moral standards to which all human beings can be held accountable. In this respect, Berlin’s interpretation of Herder as a

³⁶ Clark thus could not be further from the truth when he writes that “the unjustifiable injection of value judgments such as ‘good’ and ‘bad’ into the discussion of human social organizations is usually avoided by Herder” (Clark, 1955, p. 320).

³⁷ Meinecke, 1972, p. 336.

³⁸ Consider, to give but a single example of Herder’s balanced appraisal of a non-European culture, his careful moral evaluation of Hinduism and the Indian caste system. “This doctrine of the transmigration of souls, as great as its hypothesis was in the minds of its first inventors, and as beneficial as it may have been for the advancement of the humane [*Menschlichkeit*], must necessarily have occasioned much evil also,” he writes. “In that it indeed aroused a false compassion [*Mitleid*] for all that lives, it thereby diminished genuine sympathy [*Mitgeföh*] for the misery of our own kind, the unfortunate of which were presumed to be malefactors burdened by past crimes, or as people tested by the hand of fate whose virtue would be rewarded in a future state of existence” (G 6: 456, A 243).

“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 Pluralism of J. G. Herder,” *The Review of Politics*. 62:2 (Spring 2000), pp. 267-293. Linker’s interpretation of Herder differs from my own, however, by arguing that “a theological philosophy of history” is “the only ground” on which Herder thinks “transcultural moral judgments can be made” (p. 278). Although there is much which could be written about the relationship between Herder’s highly heterodox Christian faith and his embrace of universal moral norms, I argue in the next section of this essay that Herder’s account of these norms can be understood as empirically rather than theologically or metaphysically grounded.

⁴⁰ Gillies, 1945, p. 92.

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 In all their diversity, Herder concludes, we thus “everywhere find human beings possessing and exercising the right of forming themselves to a kind of *Humanität*, as soon as they have discerned it” (G 6:632-633, C 440).

Judging another time and place according to its own standards is thus simultaneously judging it according to universal human standards. Take the example of the aesthetic evaluation of a literary text. It has been widely recognized that Herder, in his literary criticism, is largely an internal critic of the works under consideration. According to Herder, Beiser writes, “the fundamental task of the [literary] critic is... to put himself in the position of the author, sympathizing with his purposes and identifying with his cultural background. He should then criticize the work internally, according to the author’s own purposes and values.” Such internal criticism involves asking questions such as “Does the author succeed in his plans? Does he express the characteristic life of his culture? And does he exploit the natural riches of his own language?”⁴² Yet an author’s self-imposed standards, regardless of their cultural particularities, are at the same time expressions of universal, if underdetermined, human standards. For any given writer of the past, Herder believes, “the bond of language, of one way of thinking, of the passions, of content tied him to humanity... Since he was a *human being*, he composed for *human beings*” (G 7:494, E 119).

It is therefore possible to reinterpret *Humanität*, not as a metaphysical conception of human perfection dependent on a traditional conception of natural teleology, but instead as the

⁴¹ Barnard, 1965, p. 97; Barnard, 2003, p. 77.

⁴² Beiser, 1987, p. 141.

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.

comprehensive worldviews. “There lies in the human species an infinite variety of sentiments [*Empfindungen*], thoughts and efforts towards the unity of a true, effective purely moral character *which belongs to the whole species*,” Herder insists. “An infinite variety striving for a unity that lies in all, that advances all. Its name is... understanding, fairness [*Billigkeit*], goodness, *feeling of humanity*” (G 7:750, F 423-424). The basic “guiding rule” of *Billigkeit* can thus be seen expressed—often explicitly—in the foundational texts and traditions of every human culture: “Do not unto others what you would not wish them to do unto you; but what you expect others to do unto you, do unto them too” (S 13:160, B 270). Herder is hopeful that, even when we encounter a human culture which has never expressly stated the guiding principle of *Billigkeit*, a sufficient empathetic understanding of its values will likely reveal an implicit commitment to precisely this golden rule.

Of course, given the diversity of human cultures and worldviews, no two nations or individuals will interpret the demands of *Billigkeit* in precisely the same way. Rather than seeing this as a source of potential conflict, however, Herder embraces it as a fruitful division of moral labor. Since each individual “feels the evils of the world *in accordance with his own situation*: he is therefore under the duty to address these evils from that vantage point, to come to the assistance of the flawed, the weak and the oppressed at that point to which *his mind and his heart* direct him.” In this way, “*diverse characters and mentalities* work for the benefit of the larger whole” (G 7:130-131, A 103-104).

It is Herder’s hope that, despite their moral disagreements, the peoples of the world can build on their common sense of *Billigkeit* to create the conditions necessary for peaceful coexistence. His rather un-Kantian proposal for the achievement of perpetual peace in Letter 119 of the *Letters for the Advancement of Humanität*, for example, lists the “sentiments” or

“dispositions of peace” (*Freidens-Gesinnungen*) which must be cultivated by people of all nations. Among these are a horror of war, reduced respect for heroic glory, a horror at false statecraft, a purified sense of patriotism and a feeling of fairness or reciprocity [*Gefühl der Billigkeit*] toward other nations. Herder describes the last of these thusly:

Every nation must gradually come to feel it as unpleasant when another nation gets disparaged and abused; there must gradually awaken a *common feeling* so that every nation feels itself into the position of every other [*jede sich an die Stelle jeder andern fühle*]... Under whatever pretext someone steps over the border in order to cut off the hair of his neighbor as a slave [or] in order to force his own gods upon him... he will find in the heart of *every nation* an enemy who looks into his own breast and says: “What if that happened to me?” If this feeling grows, then there will arise imperceptibly an *alliance of all civilized* [gebildeten] *nations* against every individual presumptuous power (G 7:725, F 406-407).

Just as *Billigkeit* can serve as the basis for international peace, so too can it serve as a foundation for domestic stability in nations otherwise divided by cultural differences. Herder, of course, is famous for his cultural nationalism—for his claim that “the most natural state [*Staat*] is... one people [*Volk*], with one national character” (S 3:337, C 249). Whether Herder was right to insist that political boundaries ought ideally to reflect cultural boundaries is a still-controversial issue which can hardly be addressed here with any adequacy. Suffice it to say that, as a longtime resident of Riga—a city with substantial German, Latvian, Russian and German populations—Herder was well aware that existing cultural diversity within a single territory often made his ideal of the monocultural nation-state impossible to achieve.⁴⁴ Although it might be significantly easier to find political principles acceptable to all the members of a culturally homogenous nation, the same forces which Herder believes could lead to a global overlapping consensus in support of *Billigkeit* could surely also lead to a similar consensus within a single, multicultural state of the sort we find ourselves living in today.

⁴⁴ I am grateful to Allen Patten for this observation about Riga, as well as for his insightful explication of Herder’s nationalism more generally, currently being circulated in draft form.

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.