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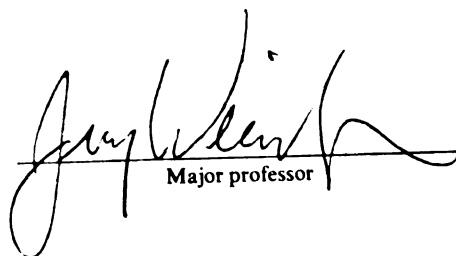


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The Case of J.G. Herder"

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CAN COMMUNITARIANS LIVE THEIR COMMUNITARIANISM?
THE CASE OF J.G. HERDER

By

Damon S. Linker

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

CAN COMMUNITARIANS LIVE THEIR COMMUNITARIANISM? THE CASE OF J.G. HERDER

By

Damon S. Linker

I examine communitarian social theory with an eye to suggesting that the form it most often takes contains resources insufficient to satisfy the aims of those who propose it. This is shown to be the case through an analysis of the writings of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803), the first philosophically rigorous communitarian in the West. Herder's communitarianism, like that of so many of our contemporaries, combines a description of what he believes to be man's ineradicably communal nature with a normative longing for an experience of community we have supposedly lost. But unlike today's communitarians, who usually propose ways for modern man to reattain primordial happiness in communal particularism, Herder became convinced that he could only satisfy his normative longing for community by supplementing his descriptive communitarianism with a radically universalistic theology that took the form of a providential philosophy of history. I conclude that Herder's attempt to fashion a new,

humanistic religion as a means to making it possible for him
to "live" his communitarianism has much to teach
contemporary communitarians as well as their critics.

For my father

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

I have used the following abbreviations to cite Herder's works within the body of the text. See the References beginning on page 191 of the dissertation for complete citations.

AU = Herder, [1774] 1994b/ Herder, 1968
BR = Herder, [1793-1797] 1991a
EB = Herder, [1781-1782] 1993/ Herder, 1833
EE = Herder, [1778] 1994e
FL = Herder, [1764] 1985c/ 1991b
GT = Herder, [1787] 1994d/ Herder, 1940
ID = Herder, [1784-1791] 1989/ Herder, 1800
IR = Herder, [1788-89] 1988
KL = Herder, [1800] 1955
MC = Herder, [1799] 1997
ND1 = Herder, [1767] 1985d/ Herder, 1991a
ND3 = Herder, [1765] 1985e/ Herder, 1991b
P = Herder, [1774] 1994a
PH = Herder [1765] 1985f.
RE = Herder, [1769] 1997/ Herder, 1952
SP = Herder, [1772] 1985a
ST = Herder, [1780-1] 1994c
VA = Herder, [1765] 1985b
VK = Herder, 1990
VS = Herder, [1764] 1985f
WR = Herder, [1780] 1978
ZS = Herder, [1769] 1994f

When an English translation of a work exists, I have cited it immediately following the German citation (after a slash mark (/)). Quotations within the text are taken from those translations, although I have often significantly altered the translations to improve clarity and accuracy. Because of those frequent changes, as well as the fact that many of the translations are in old editions or unpublished dissertations (and are hence relatively difficult to find), I have often placed the German in brackets or, in the case of longer quotations, in footnotes.

INTRODUCTION

Political theorists today are likely to think of J.G. Herder (1744-1803) as little more than a footnote in the history of political philosophy -- a minor figure on the way from Kant to Hegel in the development of German political thought who espoused an unsavory doctrine of nationalism. Perhaps a few others -- those influenced by Isaiah Berlin's pioneering studies of the continental "Counter-Enlightenment" -- would be inclined to view Herder as an early (and maybe even the first¹) advocate of value "pluralism" (Berlin, 1992, Gray, 1996, Larmore, 1987, and Larmore, 1996a). But on the whole, Herder has been, and shows every sign of continuing to be, a largely neglected figure.²

However, a recent development in political theory points to the possibility that the obscurity to which Herder has been relegated is undeserved. I am referring to the remarkable rise to prominence of a cluster of ideas usually described as "communitarianism." Although it is always hazardous to generalize about theories articulated by

¹ Except, perhaps, for G.B. Vico. See Berlin 1976. But see also Lilla, 1993, 11-12 on how Vico was actually deeply opposed to pluralism.

² One of the few recent works to treat Herder as a serious political and social thinker is Beiser, 1992, chapter 8.

numerous people over an extended period of time, it is nonetheless possible to identify two core ideas that animate the work of virtually every communitarian theorist writing today.³

The first of these ideas, which I shall call *descriptive communitarianism*, holds that morality and virtue, meaning and personal identity arise from and are sustained by the social context of communal relationships among individuals. In fact, descriptive communitarianism holds that even to speak of individuality is to assume the prior existence of a community that defines what it means to be an individual. As one communitarian philosopher puts it, the social, communal "us" is a necessary condition of "me" or "you" (Taylor, 1995a, 194, cf. 188-9). In short, descriptive communitarianism claims to be just that: a simple description of the fact that whenever and wherever we find them, human beings are always embedded in communal norms, practices, and beliefs that fundamentally constitute them from the ground up.⁴

³ For a representative sampling, see Sandel, 1982, Taylor, 1995a, Etzioni, 1995, MacIntyre, 1984, Barber, 1984. In addition to these more strictly theoretical works, communitarianism (especially in its descriptive aspect) has had an enormous influence, both on empirical political science (see Huntington, 1996 and Putnam, 1993) and the work of political journalists of the right (Will, 1983) and left (Lerner, 1996).

⁴ Communitarianism in this sense is not limited to the authors we usually associate with the term "communitarian." For there is a growing consensus among liberals, pragmatists, and

The second core component of communitarian social theory is one I shall call *normative communitarianism*. The normative teaching of communitarianism is that the errors of liberal political theory -- especially its tendency to try to derive a rational and just foundation for political life from how an imagined asocial individual would choose to live and act -- have had dire *practical* consequences for the health and vitality of communal life within existing liberal democracies. In other words, communitarians hold that liberalism's theoretical defects have come to infect common sense within modern democracies, and they frequently point to contemporary *anomie* as evidence for their claims about the detrimental effect of those "atomistic" social theories on the self-understanding of democratic citizens (Taylor, 1992). As for the moral convictions and feelings of attachment that continue to exist amidst the discontent of communal decay, communitarians tend to point to their source in pre-liberal traditions, which continue to provide us with a minimal, although ever-decreasing reservoir of meaning in our lives (Sandel, 1992). Hence, the writings of

postmodernists that the attempt to ground moral principles in universal conceptions of human nature or subjectivity is doomed to failure; despite their differences with one another, all agree with communitarians that such attempts inevitably prove to be expressions of particular cultures or groups, rather than reflections of reality as it is in itself. See, for example, Rawls, 1993, Rorty, 1989, Gray, 1995.

communitarians frequently conclude by urging political thinkers and actors alike to follow them as they replace liberal errors with the truths unearthed by their descriptive communitarianism and, on that basis, set out on a "redrawn map of political possibilities" (Taylor, 1995a, 202).

Communitarianism is thus comprised of two very different elements. On the one hand, it claims dispassionately to describe man's nature as a fundamentally and ineradicably communal animal; on the other, it expresses a normative longing for an experience of community it claims we have lost. But are these two components consistent with one another? If man cannot help but be constituted by the community in which he finds himself at birth, how is it possible for him to fall into a non-communal way-of-life? In other words, if descriptive communitarianism is true, then is not its normative counterpart incoherent? And in contrast, if the longing for community embodied in normative communitarianism is a valid one, then does not descriptive communitarianism miss something of fundamental importance about human beings -- namely, that they are only potentially communal? But even if these two aspects of communitarianism are conceptually consistent with one another, is combating

the supposed errors of liberal political theory and seeking to replace it with the truths of descriptive communitarianism sufficient to satisfy the normative longing for community, as today's communitarian theorists seem to think?

It is in trying to answer these and related questions that Herder's writings can help us. To begin with, Herder was the first thinker in the West to espouse a genuinely descriptive communitarian conception of human social life. In addition, he was also among the first to give voice to the fear that, under the influence of philosophical theories that fail to take the fundamentally communal nature of human beings into account, modern man was becoming alienated from his own essence. In other words, over 200 years before today's communitarians began to write their own essays about the dangers of "atomism," Herder articulated a form of normative communitarianism -- he expressed a longing for a feeling of oneness in community that he thought we were in imminent danger of losing (Taylor, 1992). Moreover, he also anticipated the projects of today's communitarians by proposing a form of theoretical reflection that was designed to heal the social and psychic wounds inflicted by erroneous philosophical speculation.

But Herder should be of interest to us today for more than his prescience. Above all, his philosophical ideas are worth studying because the content of his proposed philosophical solution to the problem of communal decay differs so greatly from those proposed by his descendants in our time. Instead of appealing to his own descriptive communitarianism as the means to satisfying his normative longing for community as today's communitarians tend to do, Herder made a different argument: he claimed that modern man could only recapture his primordial experience of wholeness in community if he were to come to believe in the truth of a new, radically universal religion -- a form of theological communitarianism. Why did Herder come to this conclusion? Was it the result of some strange idiosyncrasy on his part? Or was there something deeper and more profound at work in the mind of this obscure, largely forgotten thinker? Might he have thought that the communitarianism of today's communitarians needs to be supplemented by a religious view similar to his own? Lastly, what might the character of Herder's theory -- both its strengths and its limitations -- have to teach us about the communitarian sensibility that is still very much with us today? As we shall see, there is ample reason to think

that the development of Herder's communitarian thinking, far from being reducible to biographical contingency, was motivated by his desire to think his way through a cluster of conceptual conundrums that plague communitarianism social theory as such.

In what follows, I begin (in Chapter 1) by elaborating Herder's descriptive communitarianism in order to establish his view of the natural or primordial human condition, in contrast to which he develops his normative critique of modern social life. Next, I turn (in Chapter 2) to an analysis of Herder's normative communitarianism, paying special attention (in Chapter 3) to the way in which the longings that give rise to it are both intensified and frustrated by the knowledge of historical contingency that accompanies his own descriptive communitarianism. Having shown that he can only resolve this problem -- that he can only come to "live" his communitarianism -- by appealing to the existence of a "higher," theological community, I then lay out the contours of the communitarian religion that Herder proposes as a means to satisfying his normative longing for community (this takes up Chapters 4 - 7). Finally, I conclude (in Chapter 8) that Herder's philosophical journey from descriptive to normative and,

lastly, to theological communitarianism has much to teach contemporary communitarians (as well as their critics) about what it would take truly to satisfy the longings that motivate them to propose their theories in the first place.

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Chapter 1

HERDER'S DESCRIPTIVE COMMUNITARIANISM: MEANING AND PURPOSE PRESENT

From the time of his earliest writings, Herder was a thoroughgoing descriptive communitarian for whom community is fundamentally constitutive of individuals. In arguing in favor of such a view, Herder distanced himself from many of the most respected political and social theorists of the early modern period. His ideas contrast most sharply with those philosophers of the social contract tradition (such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau) who based their theories on a account of man's natural asociality. But Herder's ideas also differ from figures of the Scottish Enlightenment like Francis Hutcheson, David Hume, and Adam Smith -- all of whom rejected the assumption of natural asociality that characterized so much of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century thought. In their own ways, each of these authors held that individuals have a capacity for compassion or benevolence that leads them to seek happiness in sympathetic community with others. For Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, then, human beings make a kind of choice to be social, both as a means to happiness and because the experience of living in community is pleasant in

itself (Hutcheson, 1969, 132-165, 190-217; Hume, 1978, 493; Smith, 1982, 37, 86, 116-17, 148).

But Herder's vision of man's sociality was much more radical than that of his Scottish counterparts. For Herder, community is fundamentally constitutive of who we are as individuals. As such, it is not a matter of choice, for either eudemonistic or moralistic reasons, but rather one of spontaneous identification, attachment, love, and devotion. According to Herder, each individual is fundamentally and inescapably grounded in a limited "horizon" [*Horizont*], a "whole" [*Ganze*]⁵ to which he is bound and in which he serves as a vital, constituent part; each individual is a reflection of that whole, and that whole is itself a reflection of each individual of which it is comprised (**AU**, 39, 33/ 193, 184; cf. 56, 28/ 219, 176; contrast, **EE**, 376). An individual does not and cannot deliberate about whether or not to join (or, for that matter, to leave) a community; he simply belongs to one by virtue of having been born and raised in a particular time and place (**ND3**, 408-9/ 206-7; cf. **VA**, 45-6, 50; **PH**, 115; **SP**, 758-9; **AU**, 68-9, 72/ 240, 245; **ID**, 333-5, 544-5/ 222-3, 375). It is impossible to imagine a non-communal human being; to be human is to be a

⁵ On the issue of wholes and parts in Herder, see Larmore, 1987, 93-99, and in modern social theory more generally, see Yack, 1997.

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part of some particular community (**SP**, 698-9).⁶ And this is advantageous, since, for Herder, human happiness consists in feeling oneself to be a part in a larger communal whole that confers meaning and purpose upon him. As he writes in a pithy statement: "Happiness consists in the simple, rooted feeling of existence, which is irreplaceable" (**ID**, 331/ 221; cf. **AU**, 36/194).⁷

If we assume for a moment that Herder is right in his emphasis upon the fundamentally constitutive character of community for human beings, then we must confront the question of why so many of the greatest philosophical minds of the early modern period so profoundly misconstrued human nature. According to Herder, the failure of philosophers to recognize the communal essence of mankind can be traced, at least in large part, to the erroneous theoretical presuppositions that almost always accompany philosophical investigations of human phenomena.

⁶ Herder would thus have agreed with Joseph de Maistre's famous proclamation that "there is no such thing as *man* in the world. I have seen, during my life, Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc.... But as far as *man* is concerned, I declare that I have never met him; if he exists, he is unknown to me." Quoted in Holmes, 1993, 14.

⁷ "Dies einfache, tiefe, unersetzliche Gefühl des Daseins also ist Glückseligkeit."

The Pathologies of Philosophical Psychology

At the most basic level, theoretical errors begin with the philosophical analysis of human psychology. Herder's own reflections on psychology can be found mostly in his essay, *On Knowing and Feeling in the Human Soul* [Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der Menschlichen Seele] (1778).⁸ Written in response to a question posed by the Berlin Academy, the essay actually denied the validity of the assumptions on which the question was based. In asking competitors to contribute essays on the respective place of "knowing" and "feeling" in the "soul," the members of the Academy were following conventional philosophical practice, according to which a two-fold division within individuals was taken for granted. First of all, man was thought to be composed of two distinct and separable parts: the body and the soul. Secondly, the soul itself was usually said to be made up of a rational "faculty" on the one hand, and a mass of unruly passions or desires on the other; in addition, the former was often claimed to be man's "highest," most purely spiritual part, while the latter were naturally directed toward the material body and the pleasures and satisfactions that could be enjoyed through it.

⁸ The essay underwent many substantial revisions between 1774 and 1778. I rely on the final, published version of 1778.

But Herder vehemently rejected these assumptions on the grounds that, if they were true, human wholeness (and hence happiness) would be an extremely rare achievement, if not entirely impossible to attain (at least in this life). This would be the case because, according to the traditional view, man is naturally divided against himself and hence disunited at the core of his being. It is for this reason that philosophers prior to Herder held that unity could only come about through either the "perfection" of nature or the "denaturing" of man altogether. Plato, Aristotle, and their theological descendants in the Middle Ages espoused the former view, asserting that psychological unity requires that one "part" of the soul (namely, "reason") come to "rule" the passions; Rousseau, on the other hand, advocated the latter view, claiming that the attainment of unity of soul under civilized conditions depended upon an individual being able wholeheartedly to identify with something other than himself -- either another individual (as in *Emile*) or a political community as a whole (as in the *Social Contract*).

In contrast to both of these views, Herder held that the division in human beings identified by philosophers is neither natural nor a sign of what nature has become under civilized conditions. On the contrary, theories of

psychological dividedness tell us more about the errors of "cold speculation" than they do about its object of study (**EE**, 361, 362). Contrary to what philosophers -- or, those who engage in "one-sided dismemberment and dissection" -- apparently believe about human beings, Herder claims that, as we find them in the world, each individual is actually a complete unity: a "whole I" [*ganzes Ich*] (**EE**, 332, 341). As we writes in another work, "...the whole, undivided soul is at work in everything" (**SP**, 718).⁹ Far from being a "clump of earth" with a soul artificially attached, man's entire self is "ensouled" [*beseelen*] (**EE**, 337, 353).¹⁰ The price of dividing man into physical and spiritual halves, and then breaking the latter into parts separated by "wooden partitions" [*Bretterwände*], is a fundamental distortion of what the philosophers claim they want to understand (**EE**, 338). According to Herder, the aspect of human beings usually described as a "soul" [*Seele*] is, in itself, indivisible (**EE**, 338). It is the philosophers themselves who insist on trying to separate their own reason, imagination, and feeling, and then attempt to construct "plank walls of card houses" out of what this distorted mode of thinking produces. In doing so, they foolishly mistake

⁹ "...überall aber wükt die ganze unabgeteilte Seele."

¹⁰ For the implications of this view on hopes for the afterlife, see *Zum Sinn des Gefühl* (**ZS**).

their own attempts at self-imposed dividedness for an essential attribute of humanity itself (**ID**, 124-5/ 77; cf. **EE**, 341, 330, 359, 373-4). If Herder can show this to be the case, then he will have demonstrated that the dividedness within individuals pointed to by generations of philosophers is an illusion generated by their way of thinking.

But what kind of method enables Herder to show that man is, by nature, a "living circle" [*lebendigen Kreis*]? How does he demonstrate that those who supposedly have thought most deeply and carefully about humanity are actually farthest from the truth? As it so happens, Herder proposes several such methods in *On Knowing and Feeling* that he believes can accomplish these goals. He calls the first a simple "description of life" [*Lebensbeschreibungen*] in all of its diversity and irreducible vitality. Second, he recommends a careful consideration of the "observations" [*Bemerkungen*] provided by an individual's "doctors and friends," presumably because, respectively, they would be able to detect and then convey important truths about a particular person's "body" and "soul" that could then be united into a single, accurate portrait of the whole person (**EE**, 340-4). It is important to note that, strictly

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speaking, neither "description" nor "observation" makes use of causal explanation of the phenomena being described or observed; we must therefore conclude that Herder intends these "phenomenological" methods simply to allow us to "see" the phenomena of the world as they are, without superimposing any philosophical assumptions upon them (see **EE**, 344-5). Herder's third method of securing an accurate understanding of the self requires that we carefully consider the "prophetic wisdom" [*Weissagungen*] of poets, since "Homer and Sophocles, Dante, Shakespeare and Klopstock have provided more regarding psychology and human knowledge than the Aristotles and Leibnizes of all ages and peoples" (**EE**, 340-1, 331).¹¹

But what, precisely, do these methods reveal about human psychology? Herder's essay begins with a discussion of what he says are the two most fundamental elements of the human psyche: "impulse" [*Reiz*] and "sense" [*Sinne*]. He describes "impulse" as the "dark" root of all organic feeling -- a conglomeration of animating "forces" [*Kräfte*] within the "dead material" of which life is composed (**EE**, 331; cf. **ID**, 82-3/ 46). According to Herder, impulse permeates the entire organism, from the beating of the heart

" "...Homer und Sophokles, Dante, Shakespear und Klopstock der Psychologie und Menschenkenntnis mehr Stoff geliefert haben, als selbst die Aristotles und Leibnitze aller Völker und Zeiten."

to hunger and thirst, from physical and spiritual striving to fear, anger, joy, and every other emotion that human beings exhibit (**EE**, 333-5). Impulse thus also manifests itself in love, or eros, the quest for unification with, for a "melting into" [*Zerschmelzung*], another human being -- a quest whose ultimate end is the reproduction of the species (**EE**, 332-3, 336). Far from being Cartesian subjects standing disattached from these vital forces, able dispassionately to decide whether or not to give in to them, we simply are the totality of their "expression" [*Äußerung*]. They determine who will be a hero, who will be a coward, and every human possibility in between. It is thus an error to see the noble actions of rare, "great" individuals as setting a standard from which eternal qualities of human nature can be derived and according to which others can and should be judged or ranked. Instead, we must have the courage to stare at the forces that stream forth out of the "abyss" [*Abgrund*] within us without giving in to the philosophical temptation of relying on easy classifications and "sterile words" that conceal them (contrast **EE**, 339-40 with 359).

When it comes to identifying predecessors in history who plumbed the depths of impulse and recognized our truly

expressive nature, Herder claims that Shakespeare was perhaps the greatest of thinkers, for he shone a light of unparalleled clarity onto our nature without attempting to reduce or explain it away (**EE**, 343-4). Against the pretensions of philosophers, and in defense of the poetic, Shakespearean approach to understanding humanity, Herder asks rhetorically, "what is there to ponder or argue about when we feel the most secret drive of our heart willingly follow an object of desire like tips of grass in the wind or an iron filing roused by a magnet?" (**EE**, 344-5).¹² Allowing ourselves to be swept away by forces we do not control, without trying to construct a philosophical explanation of the experience, is the first step toward coming to realize the true character of human existence.

According to Herder, the second fundamental component of the human psyche is "sense" -- the "medium" [*Medium*] through which the world flows into us (**EE**, 347). The "empire" of "invisible" forces within us "swims" in and "floats" on the sea of sensations brought to us via the "nervous system" [*Nervengebäude*] and unified by "imagination" [*Einbildungskraft*] (**EE**, 353, 350-1, 349, 352).

¹² "Wenn ein Gegenstand...daß, wie der Wind die Grasesspitzen, der Magnet den Feilstaub regt, ihm die geheimsten Treibe unsres Herzens willig folgen: -- was ist da zu grübeln, zu argumentieren?"

Simply to surrender to sense -- to allow time and space themselves to "disappear" in the flood of sense experience -- is to come closest to understanding the essence of things (**EE**, 352-353). As he writes in *On the Sense of Feeling* [*Zum Sinn des Gefühls*] (1769), a brief essay that remained unpublished in his lifetime, each individual sense is responsible for giving us access to a thoroughly unique aspect of reality. For example, Herder speculates that a world experienced through touch alone would be one of "direct presence," utterly lacking in "distance" [*Entfernung*], surface, color, and imagination (**ZG**, 235). Similarly, he claims that a blind philosopher would be able to attain far greater self-knowledge through a kind of Platonic recollection than those with vision, who allow themselves to be "thrown" too far outside of themselves; it is little wonder, then, that three of history's greatest poets (Homer, Ossian, and Milton) were supposedly born blind (**ZG**, 236, **EE**, 348; cf. also **SP**, Part I, Chapter 3).

At this point, despite some highly unorthodox ways of describing the architecture of the psyche, Herder's psychology seems to replicate -- albeit in a far more poetic mode of expression -- the very problems to which he pointed in more traditional theories of philosophical psychology.

That is, he seems to have reproduced the tendency of previous theorists to assume the naturalness of internal dividedness. For if we substitute the words "passion" or "desire" for "impulse" in his description of the motivating forces within us, and combine that account with his assertions about the centrality of sense, Herder begins to look remarkably like a traditional philosopher with an empiricist bent. But as Herder himself never tires of reminding his reader, he wants nothing to do with those thinkers whose theories show that psychological disunity is coeval with man. But how does Herder avoid this conclusion? What resources does his psychology contain to help him do so -- to enable him to show that each individual is, in fact, a "whole I"?¹³

As it turns out, Herder is able to make a plausible case for the unity of what at first sight seems to be

¹³ Anticipating arguments that he will not fully develop until almost a decade later (see Chapter 5 below), at some points in *On Knowing and Feeling*, Herder asserts that all of the chaotic forces flowing through us can be understood to be manifestations of a single, unified "Force" [*Kraft*], or even a "Force of God" [*Gotteskraft*]. That is, as he writes in a somewhat oblique statement, all of the forces within us must be assumed to be "expressions of One and the same energy and elasticity of the soul" [*Äußerungen Einer und derselben Energie und Elastizität der Seele.*] (*EE*, 357, 336-7; cf. *GT*, 709/ 103). Although the assertion that man is, at bottom, "a Many [that is also] one" [*"`ein Vieles eine'"*] has the inexplicable character of a mystical pronouncement, Herder seems to think that there simply might not be any better way to express the character of man's fundamental unity in manifoldness (*EE*, 354; cf. *ID*, 99-100, 106-7, 124-5, 128-30, 143-4/ 58-9, 64, 77, 80-1, 91).

radically differentiated impulses within the human psyche by invoking a peculiar kind of argument: one I will call a "priority argument." In order to understand the character of this kind of argument -- as well as why Herder feels justified in invoking it as a means of explaining the character of human psychology -- we must turn momentarily to one of Herder's earliest writings.

The Origins of the Priority Argument

Herder's first known essay was a brief exercise that remained unpublished in his lifetime and only became widely accessible to scholars over 200 years later, in 1985. Written in 1764 when he was only 20 years old and still a student of Immanuel Kant in Königsberg, Prussia, the *Essay on Being* [*Versuch über das Sein*] takes the form of a critical reflection on one of his teacher's recently published essays. In *The Only Possible Basis of Proof for a Demonstration of the Existence of God* [*Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes*] (1763), Kant had tried to contribute to the long tradition of "ontological" proofs by attempting to derive "a priori" a demonstration of God's existence by reflecting on the logical "grounds," or "necessary conditions," of "thought." For example, Kant had claimed that he could prove the

existence of reality outside of our minds because the existence of reality is the condition of the possibility of thinking anything at all, including the act of thinking about how to prove the existence of reality. But Kant had gone further, to claim that this same procedure could be extended to prove *a priori* the existence of a necessary Being, or God, on the grounds that existence must presuppose a "ground of all possibility" (Kant, 1902-83, II, 78-9).

Now the details of the pre-critical Kant's neo-Scholastic ambitions need not detain us here. For our purposes, the importance of his essay lies in the role it plays as a stimulus for Herder's earliest surviving theoretical reflections. Herder's criticism of his teacher begins with an appeal to Aristotle and Locke, who held, he claims, that "all of our concepts are sensate" [*Sinnlich*] in origin (**VS**, 9-10). One might therefore expect the young Herder to challenge Kant with a standard empiricist account of Being or existence, according to which these concepts arise simultaneously with the subjective perception of objects and only come to be thought of as ideas independent of those objects as a result of a process of reflection within the mind. But Herder did no such thing. Although, like empiricist philosophers, he recognized the need to

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appeal to "Something" [*Etwas*] beyond simple sense data to account for the unity of experience in subjective consciousness, he rejected the solution proposed by Locke, Condillac, and Hume, all of whom pointed to a capacity within the mind to reflect on and abstract concepts from experience *a posteriori* (**VS**, 11). Instead, Herder claimed that the concept of "existence" arises *prior* to the experience of objects within the world. But this position seems to be virtually identical to Kant's *a priori* appeal to the concept of "existence." However, unlike Kant, Herder maintained that "existence" is itself "the most sensate concept," not a merely *logically* necessary condition of thought or experience (**VS**, 19). That is, he claimed that experience of objects within the world is *temporally* preceded by a prior subjective feeling or experience of simply being alive -- of existing -- that stands as the source of our concept of existence and thus as the ground of experience (cf. **ID**, 376/ 254).

Herder's critique of Kant thus amounted to a charge of redundancy. For Herder, there is no way and no need to "prove" existence (or God, for that matter) in the way that Kant had tried to do; we have a "common sense" [*gemeine*

Sinn] certainty of existence, and thus a concept of "Being," simply by virtue of being alive (**VS**, 17). As he writes,

"[Being] is the first sensate concept whose certainty grounds everything else: this certainty is innate in us; nature has thus relieved philosophers of the toilsome burden of proving it, since it has always already convinced us: it is the center of all certainty" (**VS**, 19).¹⁴

According to the young Herder, only "overstudied philosophers...come to doubt" the most elementary building block of human experience, and thus understanding; it is hence only they who feel the need to "prove" it through a rational demonstration as a means of reassurance (**VS**, 19). The rest of humanity, benefiting from the simple fact that "human beings existed before philosophers," escapes such doubt to enjoy the certainty granted by immediate, spontaneous feeling. As he writes in later works: "I feel myself; therefore, I am" (**ZG**, 236).

But there is an important, if elementary, theoretical difficulty with the position Herder stakes out in his first essay. For he seems to be making the paradoxical, if not outrightly incoherent, claim that experience only becomes

¹⁴ "[Das Sein] ist der erste, sinnliche Begriff, dessen Gewißheit allem zum Grunde liegt: Diese Gewißheit ist uns angeboren, die Natur hat den Weltweisen die Mühe benommen zu beweisen, da sie überzeugt hat: -- er ist der Mittelpunkt aller Gewißheit..." This passage is quoted and translated in Norton, 1991, p. 42; I have relied on his translation, despite a few minor alterations.

possible on the basis of a prior experience -- a view that contradicts itself, since even the primordial experience of "existence" that supposedly grounds all future experiences would, as an experience itself, seem to become possible only on the basis of yet another, more primordial experience. Herder seems, in other words, to have set up the conditions for an infinite regress. Although Herder gave no clear indication of how he might avoid this problem in his brief essay, it is possible to say that his view could be rendered defensible if we assume that he meant to be making a distinction between two kinds, or modes, of experience. When we do so, we can begin to speculate that perhaps Herder meant to point, at the deepest level, to what might be called the *form of sense* as such, which he thinks temporally precedes all other experiences and conveys nothing more than the bare feeling of existence. Only after this form of sense has been established does it become possible to have a sense experience with a particular *content*. Hence, on the basis of this assumption, one could say that, for the early Herder, content-filled experience of the world becomes possible only on the basis of a prior experience that establishes the formal structure -- the framework, or the

"background understanding"¹⁵ -- within which those later experiences take place.

Whether or not Herder had this kind of distinction in mind when he composed his first essay is a question of little concern to us here. However, it is important to recognize that such a distinction between background conditions on the one hand, and subsequent experiences and thoughts that only take place on the basis of those conditions on the other, did come to play a crucial role in Herder's later works, in which he actively set out to identify the formal structure that lies behind, grounds, and unifies human experience and thought (cf. **EE**, 358). That is, Herder tries to show that before a human being becomes conscious of any object or, in turn, any possible activity related to that object, his "thought" [*Gedanke*] must "always already" [*schon immer*] be unified; the most elementary awareness of oneself and the world "presupposes" [*voraussetzen*] unity as the prior condition of its possibility (**EE**, 337-8, 354-8).

LANGUAGE, DENKART, COMMUNITY

But what is this "Something" that unifies individuals and makes each of them a whole? Like the greatest

¹⁵ This is Charles Taylor's phrase; see 1995, 79-99, and 1989, Chapter 1.

descriptive communitarians of our century, Herder claims it is nothing other than "language" [*Sprache*] (**EE**, 354, 357ff.), which he understands to be the entire ordering and unifying structure within which sense experience takes place, and thus that which "gives our thinking [*Denken*] its entire shape and direction" (**EE**, 358).¹⁶ In other words, Herder understands "language" to be the structural constellation of significations that, along with other, less fundamental factors, determines the "form of thinking" [*Denkart*] through which each individual comes to understand each object of sense experience as this or that particular object (**EE**, 368-72). As he writes in a striking passage,

"If no instruction were provided for us ahead of time and, so to speak, no ready-made thought-forms stamped into us, then we would be left to grope around blindly in the night, despite all of the sights and sounds and even flood streaming in from outside of us" (**EE**, 358).¹⁷

In other words, we must understand that whenever a person comes to be aware of an object given in a sense experience, that person silently testifies that he has already been immersed in a language -- and thus a community of communicating individuals, or a "culture" [*Kultur*] -- that has stamped an orienting *Denkart* into him. It is for this

¹⁶ "...gibt unserm Denken seine ganze Gestalt und Richtung."

¹⁷ "Ohngeachtet alles Sehens und Hörens und Zuströmens von außen, würden wir in tiefer Nacht und Blindheit tappen, wenn nicht frühe die Unterweisung für uns gedacht und gleichsam fertige Gedankenformeln uns eingeprägt hätte."

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reason that Herder likens each individual to a tree dependent upon the soil in which it grows:

"The deeper someone delves into himself and the foundation and origin from which his noblest thoughts arise, the more he will cover his eyes and feet and say: 'What I am, I have become. Like a tree I have grown: the seed was there, but air, earth, and all the elements that I did not place around myself were also necessary to form the seed, the fruit, the tree'" (EE, 359).¹⁸

According to Herder, cultural and communal rootedness is the necessary condition of meaningful experience at its most elemental level.

And so now we can see how Herder is able to account for the fundamental unity he claims to find in the human psyche. For according to Herder, man is an expressive and impulsive animal, but his expressions and impulses are "always already" focused and unified by the *Denkart* that is "stamped" into him by the language in which he finds himself at birth. In making these claims, Herder had laid the psychological foundation for a comprehensive theory of human nature according to which man is naturally inclined to be spontaneously devoted to the communal whole of which he is a part, and within which he finds meaning and purpose. For

" "Je tiefer jemand in sich selbst, in den Bau und Ursprung seiner edelsten Gedanken hinab stieg, desto mehr wird er Augen und Füße decken und sagen: "was ich bin, bin ich geworden. Wie ein Baum bin ich gewachsen: der Keim war da; aber Luft, Erde und alle Element, die ich nicht um mich satzte, mußten beitragen, den Keim, die Frucht, den Baum zu bilden."

Herder, a man without society -- for instance, in an imagined pre-social "state of nature" -- would not be a human being at all. He would be a creature of impulse without purpose, sense without coherence, and thought without meaning.

Now Herder certainly pointed to factors besides language that contribute to the formation of a *Denkart*. Physical terrain, weather patterns, the accessibility of nourishment, population density within a community, proximity between that community and others, and many other influences comprise what Herder calls "climate" [*Klima*], the "chaos of causes" that determine a *Denkart*; it is not for nothing that Herder is thought of as the founder of anthropology and an important link between Montesquieu and the modern social sciences (**ID**, 263-70/ 172-7; **SP**, G, 791ff.).¹⁹ However, we must also recognize that language

¹⁹ As we examine of Herder's descriptive communitarianism, it is useful to compare his ideas to those of Montesquieu, the political philosopher to whom he in many ways comes closest. Herder much admired the French theorist and was greatly influenced by his focus on the way in which extra-political factors such as climate, terrain, and historical circumstance influence political life. But despite this admiration and influence, Herder thought that, in the end, Montesquieu had fallen prey to the same reductionistic, abstracting tendencies that had plagued the entire Western philosophical tradition. According to Herder, instead of facing up to the relativistic implications of the manifest diversity he rightly noticed in the world, Montesquieu perversely insisted on assigning the "the empty names of three or four forms of government" to political orders "which never are or stay the same in two times or places." (**ID**, 371-2/ 250-1; **RE**, 84-5/ 339; **AU**, 88-90/ 272-4).

plays a role of such crucial importance in the formation of a *Denkart* that it cannot be matched by other "environmental" factors. Why is this the case? Because, although *Klima* might determine the contours of how a language develops over time, and thus have a significant indirect effect on a *Denkart*, once that language has come into existence, even in an extremely primitive form, it will determine how the community that uses that language experiences, understands, and interprets all subsequent climactic influences. In fact, the precise effect that a climactic influence has on the formation of a *Denkart* will depend on how it is experienced, understood, and interpreted through language. For example, the effect that a violent storm has on a community's *Denkart* will vary considerably depending upon whether it is taken to be "a low-pressure system" or "an act of punishment by angry gods." And, according to Herder, language is what determines this difference.

Herder clearly thought that his analysis of the radically constitutive character of language was a significant improvement over all prior attempts to think about it -- attempts whose incoherence was reflected in the fact that so many of them took the form of investigations of language's *origin* at some time and place in human history.

In doing so, previous theorists of language proceeded as if they were attempting to discover the origins of an object or thing in the world. That is, they looked back to a state of human existence in which the object of investigation was presumed to have been lacking, and then they attempted to construct a plausible explanation of how it first came into existence out of the philosophical equivalent of "thin air." In his own *Essay on the Origin of Language* [*Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache*] (1772), Herder points out that this method characterized the efforts of the two main schools of interpretation on the issue. On the one hand, theologians generally claimed that language was a divine gift granted by God to man after he had already lived for a time without it. On the other hand, philosophers such as Condillac, Rousseau, Maupertius, Diodorus, and Vitruvius argued that human beings invented language while in a pre-linguistic social state as a kind of tool for communicating emotions and thoughts to one other with more efficiency (**SP**, 710-11).

Herder rejects both of these accounts because, in his view, they each falsely assume that man lived in a social condition prior to the appearance of language, which, he claims, is patently impossible, since language is nothing less than the condition of the possibility of experience as

such, and thus must always be presupposed already to exist wherever human beings are present. Both groups of theories thus inadvertently presuppose what they set out to discover, and the result is incoherence. As he writes in the following ironic summary and criticism of the work of Peter Süßmilch, an eighteenth-century representative of the theological view:

"Without language, man has no reason, and without reason no language. Without language and reason he is incapable of receiving divine instruction, and without divine instruction he has neither reason nor language....As Mr. Süßmilch himself admits, in order to be capable of receiving the first syllable of divine instruction, man must have been able to think clearly. But with his first clear thought, language was already there in his soul; it thus came to be of its own means and not through divine instruction" (**SP**, 727).²⁰

Herder makes a similar charge against Condillac's and Rousseau's secular theories of the origin of language. They too, he claims, fall prey to circularity, arguing, in essence, that "words arose because words were there before they were there" (**SP**, 710).²¹

²⁰ "Ohne Sprache hat der Mensch keine Vernunft und ohne Vernunft keine Sprache. Ohne Sprache und Vernunft ist er keines göttlichen Unterrichts fähig, und ohne göttlichen Unterricht hat er doch keine Vernunft und Sprache....Um der ersten Silbe im göttlichen Unterricht fähig zu sein, mußte er ja, wie Herr Süßmilch selbst zugibt, ein Mensch sein, das ist deutlich denken können, und bei dem ersten deutlichen Gedanken war schon Sprache in seiner Seele da; sie war also aus eignen Mitteln und nicht durch göttlichen Unterricht erfunden."

²¹ "...es entstanden Worte, weil Worte dawaren, ehe sie dawaren."

In contrast to all prior views, then, Herder holds that man as such never exists outside of some language, some structure of understanding that determines the *Denkart* of individuals and thus the meaning of every object and every expression within that structure. Deprived of their "context" [*Zusammenhange*], even the simplest and purest expressions of human feeling -- a sigh, a tear -- become mere "ciphers" [*Ziffern*], arbitrary signs lacking significance (**SP**, 700). The ability to use language thus cannot be described as a "potential" that arises in man after he has moved beyond a previous, more "natural" state, as Rousseau had argued (**SP**, 720ff.). On the contrary, a man without words is in "the greatest contradiction with himself," for language makes him what he "essentially" [*wesentlich*] is: a creature who, unlike any animal, has "consciousness" [*Besinnung*] of himself and the world of which he is a part (**Spr**, 715-6, 774ff.).²²

The key to Herder's account of the origin of language is a virtually undefinable, and thus untranslatable, word that he uses to describe the "whole disposition" [*ganze Disposition*] of man's nature (**SP**, 719). Usually translated into English as "reflection," the meaning of "*Besonnenheit*"

²² Herder claims that man and animals are different "in kind" [*in Art*] (**SP**, 716).

is actually much more elusive than this definition would lead one to believe.²³ Far from describing a subjective capacity for forming ideas about sense data, as, for example, "reflection" was used in Locke, Herder understands *Besonnenheit* to be intimately connected to "reason" [*Vernunft*], which he here defines, not as "a separate, independently functioning force [in man], but rather as his species's peculiar [capacity] for the orientation of all [of its] forces" that is present in every human being from the moment of birth (**SP**, 719).²⁴ With this definition of reason in mind, Herder goes on to describe *Besonnenheit* as "the tempering of all [of man's] forces in the direction of this core orientation" (**SP**, 720).²⁵ How are we to interpret this obscure definition of *Besonnenheit*? We might be tempted to paraphrase it as "man's capacity for becoming a unified whole," which, as we saw in his essay on psychology, comes about through language. But to do so would imply that man can exist in a pre-linguistic state in which that "capacity"

²³ To be sure, Herder contributed to this tendency by placing the Latin "*Reflexion*" in parentheses after "*Besonnenheit*" in the text of the essay and subsequently using the two terms interchangeably (**SP**, 772ff.) However, as I hope the following quotations make clear, the nuances of the term cannot be captured by any single-word equivalent, including the English "reflection."

²⁴ "...keine abgeteilte, einzelwirkende Kraft, sondern eine seiner Gattung eigne Richtung aller Kräfte..."

²⁵ "...Besonnenheit...ist die Mäßigung aller seiner Kräfte auf diese Hauptrichtung..."

is not used -- and that his "coming-to-use-language" is an actualization of a potential that was previously present but dormant with him. But as we have seen, this is precisely the kind of claim that Herder's theory is meant to overthrow.

There is, however, another possibility: instead of assuming that Herder thinks of *Besonnenheit* as a *real* potentiality of man, we can interpret him to be saying that it is a *transcendental* one. In other words, *Besonnenheit* could be interpreted to be something like man's linguistic essence considered "prior" to language -- in a condition that can never *actually* be seen in itself, but must be *presupposed* to lie behind and ground each individual's use of language.²⁶ Herder's account of the origins of language must be understood in light of this consideration. That is, in describing the process whereby a person "invented" language while he was "in the condition of *Besonnenheit*," Herder is not describing real or even potentially real events, but instead laying bare the formal structure of language as such to show the way in which it makes possible the revelation of the meaningful and purposive world in

²⁶ Once again, there can be no condition prior to language because Herder defines man as a creature whose vital impulses and expressions have always already been unified -- that is, given their "core orientation" -- by a particular language.

which any given individual finds himself at his first moment of existence. He believes that doing so highlights man's profound dependence on language and demonstrates the remarkable extent to which experience, understanding, and thought are derivative from it.

With this point in mind, we are prepared to examine Herder's idealized, hypothetical reconstruction of how language might have arisen. The process is actually quite a simple one. According to Herder, language merely depends upon a person being able to identify "distinguishing characteristics" [*Merkmale*] within one particular object -- that is, the characteristics that make it that particular object and not another one (**SP**, 722). But the existence of language presupposes "not [simply that man is capable of] vividly and clearly identifying all of these qualities, but also that he himself can recognize one or another of them as different qualities" (**SP**, 722; second emphasis added).²⁷ Herder claims that the first clear concept, and thus language, arises on this basis.

To illustrate what he means by this, Herder gives a concrete example of how the word "lamb" might have come into existence. Insisting that we must consider the lamb, not as

²⁷ "...nicht bloß alle Eigenschaften lebhaft oder klar erkennen, sondern eine oder mehrere als unterscheidende Eigenschaften bei sich anerkennen kann..."

it might be understood by a hungry wolf or lion, or by a ram in heat -- that is, as an object of instinctually-driven anticipation -- but instead as it would have come to sight for a human being lacking language, which Herder claims is as a totality of meaningless sensual characteristics.

Herder then imagines a human being coming to identify and recognize the lamb by the distinguishing characteristic that makes it a lamb and not something else. And so, in this case, man comes to think of a lamb as "that which bleats" [*das Blökende*] (**SP**, 723). In other words, anticipating Nietzsche's famous discussion of language in the first essay of *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Herder claims that nouns are ultimately derivative from verbs, substantives from actions (Nietzsche, 1989, Essay I, Aphorism #13). For both thinkers, a thing is what it does. According to Herder, it is in this way that particular things come to be understood as the particular things denoted by any particular language.

Or, one could say that, for Herder, language functions as what Heidegger would much later call an "as-structure" [*Als-Struktur*]: that is, the web of significations within which meaning and everyday understanding take place -- within which, for example, a "table" comes to be understood as a table, a "door" as a door, and so on (Heidegger, 1953,

149-51) Viewed as the totality of these signifiers, a "language" amounts to nothing more or less than the formal structure of the meaningful whole of lived experience -- the whole in which every human being finds himself before he does anything at all *within* that whole, from brushing his teeth to trying to come up with a theory of how human experience of the world takes place (**ID**, 87-9; 294-6/ 50, 194-5).

The implications of this radically constitutive, even existential, view of language on the character of human sociality are clear.²⁸ To begin with, Herder claims that it implies that man is fundamentally "a creature of the herd, of society" (**SP**, 783).²⁹ By this he means that, as Charles Taylor has put it, since language "grows not primarily in monologue but in...the life of a speech community," each individual human being is in a fundamental sense derivative from the community into which he was born (Taylor, 1995, 98). How so? According to Herder, every individual person is the totality of his thoughts and feelings -- that is, his

²⁸ Herder presents these implications in the form of four "Natural Laws" [*Naturgesetze*]. The discussion below concerns the second and third ones. The first is little more than a restatement of the view, articulated above, that man has a linguistic essence. The fourth extends the radically particularistic implications brought out in the second and third laws to the universal level; it is thus the first move in the direction of his later work, which will be examined in depth in later chapters.

²⁹ "...ein Geschöpf der Herde, der Gesellschaft..."

Denkart.³⁰ But that *Denkart* is itself formed most immediately by the *Denkart* of the person's family (its *Familiendenkart*), and ultimately by the *Denkart* of the community as a whole (**SP**, 785-787). A father passes on his understanding of the world, his passions, his loves, his hates, and his traditions to his child long before the child has any ability to choose whether or not to accept them. But even if he could choose to reject them, there simply would be nothing else for him to put in their place; every person needs to have some orientation for his impulses and thoughts.

A second, related implication of Herder's view of language is that, since differences in "climate" have brought many different languages into existence, it is natural for mankind to be divided into radically (even insurmountably) different and often mutually hostile linguistic communities (**SP**, 791-2, 793-4, 795-6). Although, as we shall see in later chapters, Herder believes that there is reason to think that such differences among communities can be bridged, at first sight, such hopes appear to be misplaced. This is the case because each

³⁰ For discussions of the "*Denkart*" in works beside *On Knowing and Feeling in the Human Soul* (1778) (**EE**) and the *Essay on the Origins of Language* (1772) (**SP**), see **FL**, 23, 27/ 30, 32-3; **VA**, 42; **AU**, 27-8/ 175-6.

member of every community experiences a natural love of his own with an intensity and consistency that Herder likens to the pull of gravity (**ID**, 35-7/ 10-11). He calls each of these cultural communities a "People" [*Volk*] or "nation" [*Nation*] and claims that each has its own standard of good and perfection within itself (**ID**, 649-50/ 452). Invoking one of his favorite metaphors to describe the nation, Herder writes that "a People with a single national character...is as much a natural plant as a family, only with more branches" (**ID**, 369/ 249).³¹ As a family writ large, the nation functions like a well-ordered household that contains no hierarchy without mutual affection and respect, and often no hierarchy at all. When not invoking parallels between the nation and the family or a plant, Herder uses medieval images of the "ship of state" to describe it (**RE**, 20/ 221), or claims that the "harmony" and "nobility" of a "field army" is the "archetype of human society," since both of these images capture the unified purposiveness that is characteristic of human communal existence (**AU**, 72/ 245). Each of these national "closed horizons" even has its own interpretation of the divine, its own "myths," that are "deeply stamped" into, "adapted" and "suited" to "its own

³¹ "...Ein Volk mit Einem Nationalcharacter...ist sowohl eine Pflanze der Natur als eine Familie, nur jenes mit mehreren Zweigen."

sky and earth," and which "spring" from its "form of life" [Lebensart]; handed down from father to son and vitally expressed through the generations, this national culture is "firmly intertwined [Zusammenhange] with body and soul" in every one of the community's members (ID, 294-5/ 194-5; AU, 38-9/ 192-3).

Herder believed that this holistic form of social life was the norm rather than the exception -- that it was both appropriate and common for mankind to enjoy life within a community that is "founded on the respect that the son owes the father and all the subjects to the Father of the Country, who protects and governs them like children through all of his governing authorities" (ID, 431-2/ 291).³² But still, he found a particularly clear example of authentic communitarianism in the ancient Hebrew state founded by Moses. We therefore close this chapter on Herder's descriptive communitarianism with a brief examination of Herder's assessment of Moses's communitarian achievement.

Herder calls the form of government that Moses instituted a "nomocracy [Nomokratie]" (which he claims is virtually identical to a "theocracy [Theokratie])," whose laws aimed at nothing less than making "the national

³² "...ist auf die Ehrerbietung gebautet, die der Sohn dem Vater und alle Untertanen dem Vater des Landes schuldig sind, der sie durch jede ihrer Obrigkeiten wie Kinder schützt und regieret..."

observance of religious service one with the constitution of the people, and the law itself into a sacred bond, a contract, a concession between God and the nation" (**EB**, 1056/ 99 (II)).³³ In other words, Moses sought to unite the divine and the political into a coherent social unit. In doing so, his laws penetrated into every facet of life, leaving their stamp on "health, morals, political order and organization, and the worship of God,"³⁴ all of which were fused together into one whole, unified system and way of life (**EB**, 929; cf. 1013, 1071, 1088/ 271 (I); cf. 113-4, 125-6 (II)). According to Herder, Moses created a "priestly kingdom" with a "priestly character," and since the priest is "a nation's original wise man," it should come as no surprise that, building on his firm foundations, some of Moses's successors (Herder singles out Isaiah in particular) achieved "more than a Republic of Plato" (**EB**, 1050, 933, 936/ 94-5 (II), 275-6, 278-9 (I); **ID**, 373/ 252).

But what exactly made Moses's political institutions so successful and beneficial to his People? How was Moses able to unify his People and keep it unified? Herder points to

³³ "...die einen Nationalgottesdienst mit der Konstitution des Volks Eins machen, und das Gesetz selbst nur als Bund, als Vertrag, als eine Kapitulation Gottes mit der Nation heiligen sollte."

³⁴ "...Gesundheit, Sitten, politische Ordnung und Gottesdienst nur ein Werk sind."

two crucially important qualities of the Mosaic Law. The first is, as we have already seen, its comprehensiveness. Moses made sure that his commands "embraced the whole *Denkart*" of the People, and he never lost sight of the fact that "everything had to remind them of their law: every season of the year, every fertile place, every pasture and plague, but still more so, their worship of God with its festivals and duties" (**EB**, 1090/ 128-9 (II)).³⁵ This leads us to the second quality of the Mosaic law that made it so beneficial for his people: Moses claimed that it was backed up by the authority of God and the threat of divine punishment (**EB**, 1088/ 125-6 (II)). In doing so, Moses placed the law in an exalted position from which it could do its unifying work all the more effectively, which is to say, "invisibly." As Herder writes, "the lighter and more invisible are the bonds that unify a society; the more the principle of rule is allowed to work upon their minds in secret, without witnesses, as a motive of inward observance...the more noble and the more worthy of man the constitution will be."³⁶ And this is precisely how Moses's

³⁵ "Alles mußte sie an ihr Gesetz erinnern, jede Witterung im Jahr, jeder Fruchttort, jede Aue und Plage, der Gottesdienst mit seinen Festen und Pflichten erinnerte sie daran noch mehr."

³⁶ "Je leiser und unsichtbarer die Bande sind, die eine Gesellschaft zusammenknüpfen, je mehr das Principium der Beherrschung auf ihr Gemüt wirken darf, und zwar auch im Verborgnen, ohne Zeugen, als ein Motiv innerer Handlungen darauf wirken kann...desto edler, desto Menschenwürdiger ist die

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"sacred government" functioned: "The law ruled, clothed inwardly with the voice of God and outwardly with the united voice of the people..." (EB, 1090-1/ 129-30 (II)).³⁷ Herder can think of no form of government more perfect or better suited to man's nature than this one -- a form of government characterized by the absolute rule of divine law that brings about spontaneous, undeliberative devotion to the whole community on the part of each individual within it. And such is the natural or primordial human situation according to Herder's descriptive communitarianism: each individual a unified part in a closed, linguistically-constituted, meaningful and purposive communal whole.

Verfassung."

³⁷ "Siehe! das war Moses Gottesregierung. Das Gesetz herrschte, von innen mit Gottes- von außen mit der einmütigen Stimme des Volks bekleidet..."

Chapter 2

HERDER'S NORMATIVE COMMUNITARIANISM: MEANING AND PURPOSE ABSENT

It was as obvious to Herder as it is to us today that the account of the primordial human situation contained within his descriptive communitarianism did not describe the political situation of modern Europe. Rather than being filled with communities characterized by spontaneous national unanimity, Europe was comprised of countries whose Peoples were led by semi-autonomous governments (ID, 332-5/222-4). Herder's opinion about this situation was unambiguous: "if nothing else in the history of the world indicated the baseness of the human species, the history of governments would demonstrate it (ID, 366/ 247).³⁸ But how did Herder explain the distressingly large discrepancy between the communal form of life he depicts in his descriptive communitarianism and the contrary form of life that seemed to prevail in the actually existing world of the late eighteenth-century? He did so in normative terms.

That is, Herder launched a radical critique of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and its social effects as a means of explaining how modern men and women came to live in

³⁸ "Wenn kein Punkt der Weltgeschichte uns die Niedrigkeit unsrer Geschlechts zeigte, so weise es uns die Geschichte der Regierungen desselben..."

societies so far removed from the condition of primordial, communal happiness he believed to be the natural human situation. In choosing this path, Herder followed the lead of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, whose own uncompromising criticism of modern social life inspired so many young "romantics" in the German-speaking regions of Europe at the end of the eighteenth-century.

Rousseau's Critique of Modernity and Enlightenment

Rousseau's practice of treating philosophical speculation as a form of social and political criticism was nothing new to the Enlightenment (Gay, 1977). Whereas ancient and medieval political philosophers had never wavered from the conviction that their proper object of study was "nature," many theorists of the early modern period practiced a somewhat different mode of philosophical reflection. Men such as Hobbes, Spinoza, and the French *philosophes* believed that the so-called "natural" vision of man and the world promulgated by the Christian religion exercised such a pernicious effect on human thought and action that philosophy had to adopt an unprecedentedly caustic method to dislodge it. Much of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political thought was thus openly anti-clerical in orientation and boldly critical of the

religious, social, and political practices common to Europe since the fall of Rome.

But Rousseau was no ordinary *philosophe*. Refusing to limit his criticism to the objects of scorn that were common in his time, he engaged in a lacerating attack on what he believed to be the defects of that time as a whole. It was an attack that far surpassed those of his contemporaries in scope and implication.³⁹ For whereas those contemporaries were relatively certain that the spread of the arts and sciences in their century represented an improvement over past conditions, in such works as the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and the *Letter to M. d'Alembert on the Theater*, Rousseau issued an uncompromising condemnation of modern life and the kind of human being it engendered. The "men of our days" had become, he claimed, "bourgeois" -- that is, a kind of human being who lives "always in contradiction against himself, always floating between his inclinations and his duties" (Rousseau, 1979, 40). Such a man finds it impossible to enjoy the true happiness that comes from unity of soul.⁴⁰ He is restless -- a slave of ever-multiplying, insatiable desires he strives in vain to fulfill. He spends

³⁹ For portraits of Rousseau as a *philosophe* engaged in a "dialectical" critique -- or, an "autocritique" -- of the Enlightenment, see Melzer, 1996 and Huilling, 1994.

⁴⁰ On the concern with "unity" as Rousseau's deepest preoccupation, see Melzer, 1990, pp. 63-77.

his life a slave to his own vanity (*amour-propre*), constantly worrying about how others judge him, concerning himself with appearing to be what he thinks they wish him to be. He is, in other words, radically dependent upon the opinions of his fellow human beings.

But that is not all. When disunified beings come to dominate an age of history, as Rousseau clearly thought they had in Europe by the mid-eighteenth-century, vices tend to be treated as virtues, with devastating implications for social and political life. For Rousseau, the modern age is a time in which luxury, idleness, softness, superficiality, pettiness, indifference to suffering, hypocrisy, insecurity, and cowardice reign, and when noble-sounding cosmopolitan principles mask icy insensitivity to family and friends, neighbors and fellow citizens. It is, in short, an age of "honor without virtue, reason without wisdom, and pleasure without happiness" (Rousseau, 1964a, 180; cf. 111, 164; 1964b, 38, 48-50, 51-2, 56, 58; 1979, 39-40, 82-3, 335).

If Rousseau had written nothing other than polemical tirades against his time, he probably would have come to be known as a mad misanthrope, albeit with formidable rhetorical skills. But of course, Rousseau wrote much more, quite a lot of it devoted to answering the questions that

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all philosophically-serious polemicists must confront: When in human history has it been otherwise? What brought about the decline? And what, if anything, might be done to reverse it?

As is well known, Rousseau claimed that the situation he described in modern Europe had not arisen simply from man's nature, which he held to be fundamentally good, but instead resulted from radical changes man has undergone as he has become ever more civilized "in the bosom of society." He writes:

"...the human soul, altered in the bosom of society by a thousand continually renewed causes, by the acquisition of a mass of knowledge and errors, by changes that occurred in the constitution of bodies, and by the continual impact of the passions, has, so to speak, changed its appearance to the point of being nearly unrecognizable..." (Rousseau, 1964a, 91).

What does Rousseau claim to find beneath the crust of conventions? To begin with, he asserts that man is naturally solitary, peaceful, and, most importantly, that he was able to experience the pure joy or happiness of simply being alive -- what Rousseau calls the "sentiment of existence" (Rousseau, 1964a, 117; cf. 174). How is natural man able to experience the wholeness and happiness that modern man so painfully lacks? Rousseau points to at least three reasons. First of all, man in the state of nature has

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the ability to live entirely "within himself" (Rousseau, 1964a, 179). In contrast to the soul of modern man, then, natural man was not torn between duty and desire; when he acted, he did so wholeheartedly and spontaneously, without self-doubt and the torments of uncertainty. Second, natural man desired only that which he needed to survive; he was not enslaved to insatiable, restless desires whose presence can only lead to dissatisfaction (Rousseau, 1964a, 117; cf. 195). And lastly, living alone and, for the most part, prior to the emergence of "comparative sentiments," natural man was radically independent of others; he did not long to be judged good in the eyes of his fellow human beings, and thus he did not concern himself with appearances that lead to insincerity and self-loathing. In other words, he was able to be thoroughly transparent (Rousseau, 1964a, 126, 222; cf. 155-6, 179-80).

But how did such a perfectly happy, and thus unified, moderate, and independent entity come to be the miserable creature that Rousseau claims is currently inhabiting the modern, civilized world? As he describes it, the "fall" from the state of nature happened largely by accident. Natural man lost the "sentiment of existence" through chance occurrences and decisions that brought about the

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institutions of property, metallurgy, and agriculture -- practices and skills that led to the augmentation of natural man's meager capacities of language and reason, memory and imagination (Rousseau, 1964a, 151ff.). Once those faculties reached a level of development at which they became capable of allowing a human being to compare himself to others, man became divided against himself -- living, so to speak, half of his life outside and half of it inside of himself (Rousseau, 1964a, 179-80; 1979, 40). After this process of comparison began, the sentiments that we recognize from Rousseau's critique of modernity appear for the first time: vanity, resentment, envy, contempt, and insatiable desire (Rousseau, 1964a, 175, 179-80, 195, 221-2). Natural man has thus become civilized or social man.

But this account of man's decline points to an important issue: namely, that the miseries of the modern age that Rousseau seems to take such delight in exposing turn out not to be unique to the age. In fact, Rousseau's own account of their development appears to trace them to the character of man in civilized society as such. If this is indeed the case, then those of his contemporaries on whom he heaps so much scorn actually deserve far less blame for the modern condition than we might at first be led to

believe. The worst that could be said about them is that they have exacerbated certain tendencies inherent in social life by advocating the spread of the arts and sciences, which inevitably furthers civilization and thus human disunity and unhappiness. Once we recognize that the writings of Hobbes and Spinoza, Voltaire and d'Alembert are not the root cause of the problem, Rousseau's famous pessimism regarding the prospects for overcoming it begins to make important sense. For overcoming the problem would require much more than merely refuting the arguments of his contemporaries. It would require devising a way to counteract the effects of civilized society as such on the human soul and to immunize it against further corruption. That is, it would require nothing less than devising a way to restore the lost unity and happiness of the "state of nature" under conditions that are extraordinarily hostile to such a restoration.

Rousseau's Stepchild

At first sight, Herder appears to be direct descendant of Rousseau, especially in the frequent, impassioned outbursts of discontent with the character of modern life that color his work from the time his earliest essays of the mid-1760s through much of his four-volume magnum opus, the

Ideas Toward a Philosophy of History of the Human Race
 [Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit] .
 (1784-1791). But Herder was no simple devotee of Rousseau. We can begin to see the differences between them -- and the important implications of those differences -- when we compare their analyses of what caused the decline they both believed to be taking place in modern Europe. As we have seen, Rousseau ultimately traced modern problems to the disunity that takes place in man's asocial nature once he enters civilized society as such. To be sure, Rousseau held that certain modern intellectual trends (especially the Enlightenment) had exacerbated the problem, but those trends were not its deepest cause. In contrast, Herder vehemently denies the premise on which this Rousseauian explanation rests: namely, man's natural asociality. As we saw in Chapter 1, against Rousseau -- as well as Hobbes and Locke, who, in other respects, held altogether different views of human nature than Rousseau -- Herder claims that man is fundamentally and radically *social* by nature (**SP**, 805; **WR**, 243-5; **ID**, 158, 362/ 101, 244)

Herder's descriptive communitarianism thus gives his critique of modernity and Enlightenment a different cast than Rousseau's; unlike Rousseau, Herder does claim to find

the ultimate cause of modern unhappiness in the human condition itself. Instead, Herder radicalizes Rousseau's critique of the Enlightenment, which now must shoulder far more of the blame for bringing about a fracturing of social and psychic unity in the modern world. That is, like the communitarians of our own day, who point to the detrimental practical effects of liberal political theory, Herder pointed above all else to the influence of certain erroneous philosophical theories on the social and psychological condition of modern men and women. He thus made a strict distinction between two opposing classes in eighteenth-century society. On the one hand, the People -- savages, peasants, and common people -- continue to live in happy simplicity, immersed in historically- and communally-based traditions and their unquestioning love of the "fatherland" (*Vaterland*) (**ND3**, 394-6/ 197; **PH**, 113; **EE**, 374, 386). But on the other hand, a highly educated elite of "philosophers" arrogantly dismiss the customs and beliefs of the People in each country as mere "prejudices" that should be subjected to the "light" of reason -- a process that inevitably culminates in the substantial modification or rejection of those customs and beliefs (**AU**, 15-6, 18-9, 39-40, 78-9/ 155, 160-1, 194, 256-7). Herder's most

spirited normative attacks on his time were directed at this narrow elite, whom he believed to be exercising an exceedingly damaging effect on the self-understanding of modern man. Thus, in contrast to Rousseau, for whom the focal point of modern discontent was the "Bourgeois," a human type already found throughout Europe by the mid-eighteenth-century and whose centrality to modern life would come to be reflected in the English term "middle class," Herder's *bête noire* was the comparatively obscure figure of the "philosopher."⁴¹

But what, in more precise terms, makes Enlightenment philosophy so dangerous, in Herder's view? Exactly what effect did he believe it was having on modern Europe? To mention only a few of the most colorful epithets that Herder hurls at the philosophers of his time: they are variously described as "buffoons" and "phrase-mongers," as "apes of humanity," as practicing a "barbarism of words" by "tying knots" only they know how to loosen; the philosopher, he claims, is a "troglodyte," who, contrary to what Plato would have us believe, lives in the darkness of a cave, while the

⁴¹ Of course, Rousseau also had many critical things to say about philosophy, but rarely did he make it seem as if it was the primary cause of modern discontent. Moreover, even when he did choose to chastise the philosophers of his own time for their errors, the attack was frequently a nuanced one. See, for example, Rousseau, 1991, 11 and 1964b, 43-5.

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rest of humanity basks in the light of the sun (**EE**, 356; **AU**, 63-4/ 231; **PH** 116-17, 113-14, 111; cf. **AU** 18-9/ 161; **RE**, 116-7/ 392-3). But there is a substantive view behind these venomous attacks -- a view that begins to come to light when we consider the description of modern times with which Herder opens his *Yet Another Philosophy of History* [*Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*] (1774). For there, Herder decries the "philosophical spirit" of his century and castigates it for its "mole's eye view" [*Maulwurfsauge*] of the world (**AU**, 12/ 149). It seems that Herder thinks philosophy is responsible for distorting human vision and thus man's understanding of himself and his relation to his communal essence.

This supposition is confirmed by a number of other passages in his work. For example, Herder informs his reader that philosophers insist on using logic to understand mankind and the world of human experience, despite the fact that it is nothing but "gibberish" [*kauderwelsch*], a method incapable of making sense of the most natural and basic of human phenomena (**PH**, 111; cf. **RE**, 49-50/ 276). Philosophy's "barren abstract terms" reduce to selfishness the purity and nobility of patriotic attachment to the "whole" of the "fatherland"; hence only modern political philosophers such

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as Machiavelli, Hobbes, Mandeville, and Helvétius deny its centrality to human life (**ID**, 292-4/ 193; **VA**, 51). But what is worse, philosophers are not only deluded about how best to understand and interpret human experience and behavior. They also attempt to spread the "poison" of their mechanistic abstractions throughout the world, which has the effect of destroying the vitality of communally-constituted, organic ways-of-life. It is a practice that is stunning in both its arrogance and misanthropy (**AU**, 61-4, 78-9/ 228-32, 256-7; **PH**, 122 and 125; **EE**, 376).

And this is where the real problems begin. For without its crusading, conspiratorial spirit, the seriousness of philosophy's self-imposed errors would make philosophers deserving of sympathy, not indignation. But philosophers are not content simply to live quietly in their delusions. Instead, they try their best to demonstrate the superiority of their life-denying methods to all other ways of understanding and interpreting human experience. The results are disastrous, for "theory" "rips away the veil" of the People's "happy ignorance," thus inspiring the "bitterness of curiosity" (**PH**, 118-20). As Herder writes, the "opium" of "contemplation" is "enervating, consuming, [and] stupefying" (**ID**, 329/ 220). It destroys the

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possibility of engaging in great deeds and leads us away from the path that brings us contentment: "Unhappy [is] he who...takes the pains to dive beneath the surface for the happiness of life" (**PH**, 113; **ID**, 330, 350-2/ 221, 235-7).⁴² Put simply, in its attempt to spread its "light," philosophy "murders" the "feeling" on which communal existence rests (**AU**, 52-4/ 215-6; **EE**, 376). Herder thus thought it appropriate to accuse Voltaire, the arch-*philosophe*, of being a "traitor to mankind" for irresponsibly setting out to dissolve the bonds of human feeling without adequately reflecting on what might replace them (**EE**, 376; **AU**, 78-9/ 256-7).

But Herder's normative critique of modern life was not limited to social and psychological concerns; it also touched on more narrowly political matters. For example, Herder gives many reasons to think that political philosophers have had an unambiguously destructive influence on the development and character of modern politics. For just as the use of inappropriate philosophical methods to study human beings leads to the perception of, and then belief in the reality of, disunity within individuals (see Chapter 1), so political philosophers wrongly teach

⁴² "Wehe dem Armen, der seinen Genuß des Lebens sich erst ergrübelt!"

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political leaders to think of themselves as standing over, above, and outside of the People, and to look after themselves at the expense of the nation to which they owe their very existence and primordial understanding of the world. In other words, according to Herder, political theorists such as Machiavelli and Voltaire spread a kind of false consciousness among political elites that hides their true dependence upon the nation (**AU**, 61-3, 65-6, 98ff./ 227-29, 234-5, 290ff.). With their power in place and its use justified by philosophical arguments, the state then sets out to transform the nation into an "artificial form of society," which "rob[s] us of ourselves" and makes "individuals miserable" by destroying the possibility of experiencing the "happiness" that comes about whenever social relations are modeled on the familial love and interdependence that exist between "father and mother, husband and wife, son and brother" (**ID**, 334/ 224).

According to Herder, the destructive effects of the philosophical understanding were everywhere to see. He claims that modern man is nothing but a "learned machine" whose components, rather than cohering into a unified, organic whole, form little more than an aggregate of disunified, atomistically functioning parts (**ID**, 359-60/

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242). Modernity, he claims, is a time in which "everything is divided," when "this or that tiny force [Kraft] within the soul" is emphasized at the expense of all others, and individuals sigh under the weight of the "miserable mechanism" within themselves. Looking at the Europe of the mid-1770s, Herder sees a world filled with "[philosophical] speculators without touch or vision, chatterers without feeling, rule givers without art or experience,...[and] miserable half-thinkers and half-feelers" (**EE**, 375-6)⁴³ The "advance" of the arts and sciences -- the attempt of the eighteenth-century's most prominent minds to spread the "light" of technical knowledge and universal moral principles -- had led, not to a greater happiness, but instead to moral degradation. Cowardice, servility, aimlessness, idleness, superficiality, senseless luxury -- for Herder, as it was for Rousseau before him, the so-called "Age of Enlightenment" was a time in which "rationalization" and "skepticism" had come to replace "heart, warmth, blood, humanity, life!" (**AU**, 64-66, 101, 53-4, 18-9/ 232-5, 296, 216, 160-1; cf. **PH**, 129, **RE**, E, 75ff., 117ff./ 322ff., 393ff., **ID**, 327-8/ 219-20).

⁴³ "Spekulanten ohne Hand und Auge, Schwätzer ohne Gefühl, Regelgeber ohn' alle Kunst und Übung,...elende Halbdenker und Halbempfinder."

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In Pursuit of a Higher Enlightenment

Herder was preoccupied with fashioning a solution to this cluster of psychological, social, and political problems for most of his productive life. His first thoughts on what such a solution would entail can be found in an early essay that was written in 1765, when he was just 21 years old. Left unfinished and unpublished during his lifetime, *How Philosophy Can Become More General and More Useful for the Good of the People* [*Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks allgemeiner und nützlicher werden kann*] is a remarkable document. In it, Herder combines some of his most blistering attacks on the practical effects of philosophical speculation with pregnant suggestions about how philosophy itself might be used to counteract those effects. This latter form of philosophy would serve as an "antidote" to the unhappiness spread by the "poison" of theoretical reflection (**EE**, 122-5). It would be a "useful," "patriotic philosophy" that employs a "negative logic" -- a "logic of feeling" -- to bring the Enlightened masses of Europe back to a "healthy," communal understanding of the world (**PH**, 126, 121-2, 114; **EE**, 365; **ID**, 350-2/ 235-7; **ND3**, 394-6/ 197)). In fact, this new mode of philosophizing would make the goodness and happiness of the People its

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primary concern; in and doing so, it would "smash the idols" constructed out of curiosity and put up "state houses" in their place (PH, 121-2). Herder even goes as far as to suggest that the new, "higher" form of speculation he advocates would require that philosophers become "teachers of religion" (PH, 126-7). In short, Herder envisions a form of education designed to make it possible for those damaged by philosophical speculation to return to something analogous to the natural human condition of unity within the meaningful and purposive whole of a community.

In turning to a new, specialized method of education as a solution to the problems of modernity, Herder was both following in Rousseau's footsteps once again (cf. PH, 126-7) and introducing a theme to which he would return throughout his life.⁴⁴ Unlike the form of education outlined in Rousseau's *Emile*, however, Herder's educational project would not be limited to single individuals, and it would not require that the student's environment be thoroughly controlled virtually from the moment of his birth. In fact, Herder sometimes wrote as if his education to harmony and happiness could take place in a normal schoolhouse under

⁴⁴ Herder often wrote about the role of education in works concerned with post-Enlightenment Christianity (he served as a minister for most of his life). See, for example, *An Prediger. Funfzehn Provinzialblätter* (P) and *Briefe, das Studium der Theologie betreffend* (ST).

relatively standard conditions of daily instruction during childhood (**RE**, 41ff., 51ff./ 259ff., 279ff.). It is even possible to say that Herder intended his own published works to serve this same educational purpose in the population at large. We certainly get that impression when we turn to the end of his unfinished essay of 1765. For here, in the form of lists, notes, and outlines, Herder lays out a program for an ambitious logical, moral, and political education [*Bildung*] for mankind that he hoped would accomplish the goals he laid out earlier in the essay (**PH**, 126-134). It is no coincidence that the themes he summarizes in these few pages read like a precise of his own career, written before the fact. The remainder of this dissertation will treat much of Herder's work as an attempt to institute this education through his own writings.

But what, precisely, did Herder think the character of this communitarian education should be? What exactly would it teach? This question is a particularly crucial one, for until now, Herder has actually sounded remarkably like contemporary communitarians, both in his description of the extent to which we are determined by the community into which we are born, and in his normative account of how our fall away from community in recent times has been brought

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about by a form of false philosophy. The parallels to contemporary communitarians would be even more striking if we were to discover that Herder ultimately tried to realize his communitarian ideal by engaging in something like an education to rootedness -- that is, if he primarily sought to return the members of the People who had been touched by philosophical Enlightenment to their primordial state of wholeness in a particularistic meaningful and purposive community. But Herder did *not* propose any such education to the particular. In fact, despite his reputation as an unambiguous advocate of nationalism, Herder ultimately came to see the longing to return to some past state of communal unity as a dead end -- as insufficient to solve the problems of modern life. And in rejecting the attempt to solve the problem of communal decay by attempting to return to some prior form of particularistic community, Herder's communitarianism does differ significantly from that of our contemporaries.

But why did he choose to take this path? Is there something about the character of Herder's communitarianism -- with its descriptive and normative components -- that necessitates the rejection of the hope for a return to a prior state of particularistic community? Moreover, given

that Herder refused to advocate a simple return to a pre-modern form of communal life in his educative project, what form did that project eventually take? And did the form of education on which Herder eventually settled turn out to be capable of achieving the lofty goal that he set for it -- namely, to make the genuine experience of wholeness and happiness in community once again possible for human beings? We will attempt to answer these and related questions in the following chapters.

Chapter 3

COMMUNITARIAN CONUNDRUMS

Convinced that human happiness depends upon man feeling himself to exist as a part of a larger whole in which he finds meaning and purpose, Herder believed himself to be living in a time of crisis. For most of human history, individuals had experienced happiness as members of particular Peoples, rooted in the unified whole -- the closed horizon -- of a culture or nation. But the spread of modern philosophical approaches to understanding mankind had had a devastating effect on man's capacity to experience wholeness within the social unit of which he is naturally a part. For Herder, then, the situation of Europe in the latter half of the eighteenth-century was a grave one.

As we saw in Chapter 2, Herder longed to be able to help remedy this situation through a kind of education. But we also saw that he did not conceive of this education as one that would restore us to our original wholeness and happiness in particularistic community -- that is, his pedagogical project did not take the form of an education to rootedness. Why is this the case? The answer lies in the tensions (perhaps even outright paradoxes) that arise from

within his own communitarianism -- with its distinct descriptive and normative components.

The Communitarian Crisis

The paradoxes that accompany Herder's communitarianism become apparent when we begin to reflect on its implications with regard to claims to objectivity. For according to everything Herder tells us about human beings and the world, there should be no such thing as objective truth. Any claim to philosophic or scientific knowledge must be recognized to be fundamentally determined by the background understanding that prevails within a particular cultural context. The "meaning" [*Sinn*] of a given thing will always be relative "to country, time, and place" -- that is, to the web of linguistic significations in which it first shows up as this or that particular thing (**AU**, 38/ 192). Thus a claim to objectivity is actually nothing more than an expression of what a particular language or culture considers to be true, rather than a reflection of something that is true-in-itself.

However, despite this clear implication of his communitarianism, there can be no doubt that Herder considered that theory itself to be objectively true, or true-in-itself. How do we know this to be the case? To

begin with, according to what his descriptive communitarianism tells us about the prejudiced character of thinking that takes place within the closed horizon of a culture, Herder's own writings cannot be understood to be an expression of such a narrow horizon. If they were, they would have taken the form of an unselfconscious defense of one People (his own) against all others; his writings, in other words, would have been indistinguishable from those of an unreflective patriot. But, despite considerable evidence that Herder was indeed highly attached to his own People⁴⁵, his theoretical speculations cannot be reduced in any simple way to the narrow confines of a single cultural and historical milieu. For rather than defending the historically contingent norms, practices, and beliefs of eighteenth-century Prussia against any and all others, Herder identifies certain permanent structures common to all communities as such. It appears, then, that, even though we might expect him to defend parochialism, the theoretical basis of Herder communitarianism is inescapably cosmopolitan.

But might not someone say that, rather than understanding Herder's descriptive communitarianism to be

⁴⁵ See, for example, *Italianische Reise* (**IR**) and *Volkslieder* (**VK**).

either objectively true or an expression of a particular culture, it is most accurate to think of it as an expression of his age as a whole? If this were the case, then, despite appearances to the contrary, his theory would prove to be largely consistent -- its cosmopolitan elements merely the expression of the fact that Herder lived in a cosmopolitan age. But there are at least two obstacles to accepting the plausibility of this explanation. First of all, the content of Herder's descriptive communitarianism denies that he or anyone else could be first and foremost a child of his time as a whole rather than a child of his culture at a particular age of its history; after all, Europe has many languages and thus, from the standpoint of Herder's descriptive communitarianism, must have contained many truths hidden beneath the comparatively superficial commonalities on which most of the philosophers of the eighteenth-century preferred to focus. This brings us to a second, more decisive consideration. For Herder makes it abundantly clear that, far from being its authentic or deepest expression, he means his writings to stand in fundamental opposition to his age and what he thought was its tendency to abstract from cultural differences. For example, Herder claimed that he wrote one of his most

important works (*Yet Another Philosophy of History*) primarily for the purpose of heaping "fire and glowing coals upon the skull of our century."⁴⁶ It thus seems clear that Herder meant his own work to be a corrective, not a contribution, to the cosmopolitanism of his age.⁴⁷

So, apparently Herder did indeed wish to claim objective truth for his theory according to which nothing can be objectively true. This paradox runs like a raw nerve through Herder's writings, threatening at times to lead him into blatant irrationalism. But Herder was unwilling to take such a path. Instead, he chose to confront and attempt to find his way out of the conundrums engendered by his communitarianism, eventually coming to realize that, in regards both to logical coherence and psychological satisfaction, the theory needed to be supplemented by some kind of standard beyond the closed horizon of particular national communities. With reference to the issue of consistency, the need for a standard beyond the particular is obvious. For according to the teaching of Herder's own descriptive communitarianism, it should be impossible to have any understanding -- let alone an objective one --

⁴⁶ "Es ist Feuer darin und glühende Kohlen auf die Schädel unseres Jahrhunderts." Quoted in Irmscher, 1990, 141.

⁴⁷ See also the famous attack on cosmopolitanism in **ID**, 333/222-3.

outside of a given contextual whole. But if this were the case, then Herder would not have been able to produce the very theory that tells him that this is so; he would have been incapable of attaining the independence from his own culture that, one must assume, is a necessary condition of coming to identify structural features that are common to all cultural communities as such. The very existence of his theory of descriptive communitarianism thus seems either to demonstrate the dubiousness of what that theory posits about the impossibility of human thought taking place outside of a contextual whole, or to point to the existence of a larger, trans-cultural whole in the light of which Herder is able to identify and understand each culture as a component part.⁴⁸ If the latter turned out to be the case, then his ability to identify structural commonalities among different cultures would be rendered much less problematic. For just as it is possible for individuals within the whole of a given culture to subsume various entities within it under categories based on attributes they share, so Herder could be understood to be doing something similar, albeit at a "metacultural"

⁴⁸ As he writes, "...every particular already appears to be a whole! But each particular is always only an undetermined unity unless it reveals itself to be a part in a greater whole!" ["...in jeder Einzelheit schon so ein Ganzes erscheint! in jeder Einzelheit aber nur auch immer so ein unbestimmtes Eins, allein aufs Ganze, sich offenbaret!"] (AU, 105/ 303-4)

level. Paradoxically, then, Herder's theory according to which nothing can exist beyond the horizon of a particular cultural whole seems to require as its necessary condition that something -- a higher whole -- does in fact exist beyond the horizon of each particular culture.

But in addition to this rather abstract concern with logical consistency, there is a far more pressing, psychological motivation for Herder to appeal to the existence of a trans-cultural whole. For in the very act of identifying contextual structures common to all cultures as such, Herder manages to insure that he and his readers would be unable to experience the happiness he believes can only take place within the closed horizon of a particular culture. In other words, Herder's own descriptive communitarianism appears to stand in the way of him being able to realize his own normative longing for community. This is the case because, according to Herder's descriptive communitarianism, what a person needs, wants, desires, and strives for -- in short, the standard of happiness by which he orients himself in the world -- is a function of his culture's norms, practices, and beliefs, which he naturally holds to be true-in-themselves; as Herder writes, "Every nation has its center of happiness within itself, just as

every sphere has its center of gravity!" (AU, 39/ 192-3).⁴⁹

But as we have seen, Herder's descriptive communitarianism has the effect of reducing each culture's norms, practices, and beliefs to the same ontological level, thus seemingly making it impossible for anyone who believes in the objective truth of Herder's theory to believe simultaneously in the objective truth of what his culture teaches him about himself and the world. In the light cast by Herder's descriptive communitarianism, the stories that each nation tells itself -- stories about its privileged status in the world, about the relative nobility and baseness of various ways-of-life within it, about the actions that deserve reward and punishment, about the order and hierarchy of natural beings -- appear to be merely "its" stories, possessing no more objective truth than those of any other culture.

This central paradox of Herder's communitarianism can perhaps best be illustrated by returning to the account of Moses's political rule that we examined in Chapter 1. As we saw there, the ancient Israelites enjoyed a life lived entirely within an all-encompassing community. This happy situation was made possible by the fact that for the

⁴⁹ "...jede Nation hat ihren Mittelpunkt der Glückseligkeit in sich, wie jede Kugel ihren Schwerpunkt!"

Israelites themselves, the Mosaic Law was unquestionably given by God Himself. But acceptance of the divinity of the Mosaic Law is far from universal. Many modern political philosophers, for example, began their theoretical reflections by rejecting that faith. For instance, Machiavelli insinuates that the extraordinarily widespread and long-lasting belief in the divine origin of the Mosaic Law proves nothing so much as Moses's remarkable skills as a political founder. That is, in convincing the Hebrews that God authored his laws when, in fact, He did not, Moses managed to secure his own power and glory to an extent rarely, if ever, rivaled in the history of mankind (Machiavelli, 1985, VI; 1996, I, 11).

Surprisingly, Herder seems to be an unambiguous descendent of Machiavelli in this regard. He claims, for instance, that a combination of "necessity" [Notwendigkeit] and "prudence" [Klugheit] led Moses to give his laws the "appearance" [Ansehen] of being sacred (**EB**, 1096/ 134-5 (II)). In other words, Herder seems to follow Machiavelli in claiming that Moses did not receive, and that he did not believe himself to have received, a genuine divine revelation on Mount Sinai. But Herder was a Machiavellian with a difference. For whereas Machiavelli himself

unabashedly praised Moses's political skills from the standpoint of one interested in perpetuating pious frauds of his own, Herder speaks in praise of Moses from the point-of-view of the People, i.e., those who would believe in them. In this, Herder once again resembles Rousseau, whose "lawgiver" in the *Social Contract* makes "recourse to the intervention of heaven" so that the "people...might obey with freedom and bear with docility the yoke of public felicity" (Rousseau, 1978, 69). Now, Rousseau did not include himself among the ranks of those who might come to believe in the truth of those pious frauds. But the same cannot be said of Herder. For, as the following passage makes clear, he did long to experience a divine revelation:

"And what of this *sacred authority* that is so often scoffed at [today]? I would hope that we could have it in a form adapted to the character of our culture; for it is precisely this for which all men wish, for which all wise men have worked, and which Moses alone was able at such an early point in history to realize: namely, *that the law rules and not a lawgiver, that a free nation should accept it freely and follow it willingly, that an invisible, reasonable, beneficent power should govern us, and not fetters and chains.* This was the idea of Moses, and I do not know if it would be possible for there to be any more pure or noble. But, alas, he came with his idea and the institutions founded upon it three or four thousand years too soon..." (EB, 1090/ 129 (II), emphasis in original).⁵⁰

⁵⁰ "Und das Gottesregiment, das so oft verspottet worden? Ich wollte, daß nach der Stufe unsrer Kultur wir es alle haben könnten; denn es ist gerade, was alle Menschen wünschen, worauf alle Weise gearbeitet haben, und was Moses allein und so frühe

It seems, then, that Herder longs to experience a divine revelation analogous to the one that the ancient Israelites experienced, despite the fact that his own account of Moses's achievement, like Machiavelli's and Rousseau's before him, seems to point to the fraudulent character of that experience. One could say that Herder was in the unenviable position of possessing knowledge that made it impossible for him to have the communal revelatory experience for which he longed.

There thus seems to be an unbridgeable gap between the way Herder's descriptive communitarianism understands authentic communal experience and the way that experience would be understood by *actual members* of particular cultures. Viewed from the *external* perspective occupied by Herder himself -- the perspective from which he is able to identify permanent structural features common to every community as such -- any given community's norms, practices, and beliefs must be said to be *relatively true* or *true-for-them*. In contrast, for a member of one of those communities -- someone who lives his life entirely *within*

schon auszuführen das Herz hatte, nemlich -- daß das Gesetz herrsche und kein Gesetzgeber, daß eine freie Nation es frei annehme und willig befolge, daß ein unsichtbare, vernünftige, wohlthätige Macht uns lenke, und nicht Kette und Bande. Dies war die Idee Moses; und ich wüßte nicht, ob es eine reinere, höhere gäbe? Leider aber kam er mit ihr und mit allen Anstalten, die er darauf gründete, drei [oder] vier Jahrtausende zu früh..."

its closed horizon -- his norms, practices, and beliefs would be experienced as being *absolutely true* or *true-in-themselves*. For example, a member of a national community as Herder describes it would not understand his gods to be merely "his," equal in ontological status to the gods of a neighboring nation. On the contrary, he would understand his own gods to be the real or true gods and those of his neighbor to be untrue or false ones.⁵¹ It is only *within* such a community that an individual would experience the kind of meaningful, purposive wholeness for which Herder longs, and on which he thinks that human happiness depends. So, although his descriptive communitarianism shows that such wholes do, in fact, exist, in the very act of showing this to be the case, Herder manages to insure his own (and, one supposes, his readers's) permanent exclusion from them.

But Herder's communitarian thought not only makes it impossible for him to believe in the simple truth of any particular culture's norms, practices, and beliefs. It also contains a positive teaching about man and the world that differs radically from what he holds to be the holistic and

⁵¹ Unlike Rousseau, who seems to hold that polytheism was compatible with a tolerant pluralism (see Rousseau, 1978, 124ff.), Herder believes that all religion is absolutist because it arises within closed cultures (AU, 17-8/ 158).

purposive content of every culture: the most profound lesson of Herder's descriptive communitarianism is that human life is fundamentally grounded in finitude and arbitrariness. According to Herder, although cultures often view themselves as static and permanent entities, the deepest truth of things is that nothing is eternal. As he writes, it is a simple fact that in the history of the world,

"...no People remained or could have remained as it was for a length of time; that everything -- like every art and science, and what in the world does not? -- has its period of growth, flourishing, and decline; that each of these changes only lasted precisely as long as could have been given to them on the wheel of human fate; and that, finally, no two moments in the world are the same..." (AU, 34/ 185).⁵²

How does Herder react to the apparently arbitrary, fleeting, and purposeless character of all that seems so stable and enduring? Does he simply to accept it? The answer is an unequivocal no. For Herder is also a normative communitarian -- that is, he longs for happiness to be possible for modern man, something that can only take place if he understands himself to exist as a part in a meaningful and purposive whole. But now we can see that Herder's own

⁵² "Daß kein Volk lange geblieben und bleiben konnte, was es war, daß jedes, wie jede Kunst und Wissenschaft, und was in der Welt nicht? seine Periode des Wachstums, der Blüte und der Abnahme gehabt; daß jedwede dieser Veränderungen nur das Minimum von Zeit gedauert, was ihr auf dem Rade des menschlichen Schicksals gegeben werden konnte -- daß endlich in der Welt keine zwei Augenblicke dieselbe sind..."

descriptive communitarianism has the effect of showing that every culture is itself a part lacking any larger whole to bestow meaning and purpose upon it.

Some of the most haunting passages in Herder's corpus can be found in those sections of his *Yet Another Philosophy of History* in which he confronts the devastating psychological implications of what his own theory shows him about man and the world. According to Herder, each human life, which seems so laden with significance when viewed within the context of a cultural whole, appears to be a mere "comma" or "dash" in the "book of the world" when it is seen from outside of a given horizon (**AU**, 84/ 265). To be sure, Herder sometimes denies that it is possible for any human being to attain such a lofty point-of-view, it being identical to the point-of-view of God. Yet it is clear that his theory is based on his own ability to attain such a position, and so it is no surprise that he often writes as if he knows what God would see from his transcendent standpoint: "The whole world is an abyss, which God scans in a single moment -- an abyss in which I stand entirely lost!" (**AU**, 83/ 264).⁵³ Each man is nothing more than an "insect perched on a clod of earth....," who cannot help but

⁵³ "Abgrund die ganze Welt, der Anblick Gottes in einem Momente -- Abgrund, worin ich von allen Seiten verloren stehe!"

feel that "...I am nothing..." (**AU**, 82-3, 106/ 263, 304).⁵⁴

In these and similar passages, all of the meaning and purpose that Herder discovered within particular communities vanishes. In their place, he invokes metaphors of desolation. First man is pictured to be wandering in a "desert," searching for an "idealistic spring" that will quench his thirst by showing him that a "plan" [*Plan*] exists beneath the superficial "chaos" [*Verwirrung*] that reigns throughout the "ruins of history" [*trümmervollen Geschichte*] (**AU**, 89-90/ 275-6). Next, Herder adopts a different image, describing man as a creature lost on a vast and stormy sea, shrouded in fog and deceived by illusory lights that falsely lead him to believe he is close to the safety of the shoreline (**AU**, 102, 105/ 298, 303). At times, Herder even shows signs of contempt for those very people who, at other moments, serve as his human ideal, i.e., those who live entirely within the closed horizon of a culture, "as if their anthill were the universe" (**AU**, 106/ 304).⁵⁵

Apparently he resents the fact that they never confront the "melancholy prospect" of having "to see in the revolutions of the earth nothing but ruins upon ruins, eternal

⁵⁴ "Isekt einer Erdscholle..."; "ich nichts"

⁵⁵ "...als wäre ihr Ameisenhaufe das Weltall..."

beginnings without end, upheavals of fate without any lasting purpose." (**ID**, 343/ 230; see also 628/ 437).⁵⁶

It appears, then, that Herder's attempt to benefit modern man by making it possible for him to reacquire the wholeness and happiness that is experienced within the closed horizon of a particular community -- that is, his attempt to realize the ideal of normative communitarianism -- cannot succeed by appealing to descriptive communitarianism as many of his twentieth-century descendants do. This is the case because his thought shows that descriptive communitarianism actually has the psychological effect of intensifying our feeling of alienation from genuine community, and thus also increasing our longing for it, while simultaneously placing an insurmountable obstacle in the way of us satisfying that longing.

Thus, just as the logical problem outlined above seemed to point toward the need for an appeal to the existence of a higher whole that transcends each particular culture, so the longing for happiness that Herder's normative communitarianism embodies seems to make a psychological demand for something similar -- namely, that each particular

⁵⁶ "Grausenvoll ist der Anblick, in den Revolutionen der Erde nur Trümmer auf Trümmern zu sehen, ewige Anfänge ohne Ende, Umwälzungen des Schicksals ohne dauernde Absicht!"

culture itself exists as a part in a larger meaningful and purposive whole. If Herder could come to believe (as well as teach others to believe) in the existence of such a larger whole, then the apparent arbitrariness of human history would be redeemed; happiness could be possible for himself and his readers, despite the appearance of arbitrariness, because the existence of that whole would show that the events of world history take place for a reason -- as a means to fulfilling a higher purpose (see, for example, **AU**, 84/ 265-6).

But before we turn to a closer examination of the character of the trans-cultural whole to which Herder ultimately appeals, we must confront the peculiar manner in which Herder justifies that appeal. Given that his attempt to claim objective truth for his own particularistic theory raised significant problems for its internal coherence, how does Herder defend the seemingly much more extreme proposition that he is able to acquire positive knowledge of something as radically universal as a doctrine that transcends every particular culture and even determines each of them in a fundamental way? He does so by claiming, in effect, that there simply *must* be something in the universe that insures human happiness. In other words, he believes

that sheer human need can justify his appeal to a higher whole (**AU**, 87, 97/ 270, 289; **ID**, 11-18/ v-x).⁵⁷

Excursus on Kant and the Needs of Reason

But is it not the case that in taking this path, Herder definitively demonstrates his lack of intellectual seriousness -- his willingness to engage in wishful thinking rather than rigorous analysis and acceptance of the truth, no matter how disappointing it might be? Certainly compared to contemporary theorists such as Richard Rorty and Jacques Derrida who exult in historical contingency, Herder appears to be overly dramatic in his worries about the prospects for psychological solace in a world shorn of "foundationalism." They would say, in other words, that Herder's unwillingness to accept the contradictions and embrace the liberating potential of his insights into the radically arbitrary basis of human understanding and practices demonstrates his continued attachment to untenable "metaphysical" assumptions and longings. But before rushing to judgment, we should recall that Herder's tendency to base his appeal to the existence of a trans-cultural whole on a need or a

⁵⁷ His justification for making this appeal takes something like the following argumentative form: Without a purpose common to all parts, there is no unity and no whole; it is impossible either to conceive of this conclusion or to accept it psychologically; therefore, there must be a purpose and thus a unified whole (see **GT**, 774-5/ 172-3).

conviction that such a whole *must* exist is not a mere idiosyncrasy or a sign of philosophical cowardice on his part, but places him firmly within a powerful stream of modern philosophical thinking. Beginning with Rousseau and stretching through the philosophers of German Idealism to the early Nietzsche and beyond, this stream of thought holds to the view that becoming truly enlightened requires that one come to realize that human beings simply need to believe in certain things that cannot be known or proved to exist using the methods of early modern science and philosophy.⁵⁸ One of the most formidable exponents of this view was none other than Herder's teacher, Immanuel Kant, who, long after Herder left his classroom, went on to make a series of such arguments a crucial component of his mature ("critical") philosophy. In order to illuminate the reasons why the thinkers within this tradition chose to engage in such an unusual mode of theorizing, as well as to highlight the distinctiveness of Herder's contribution to that tradition, we would do well briefly to examine the way in which Kant justified his own appeal to what he called, in no uncertain terms, a "faith" [*Glaube*].

To begin with, regarding the metaphysical question of the relationship between wholes and parts, Kant held that

⁵⁸ On Rousseau as the source of this tradition, see Melzer, 1996.

the "whole" -- understood (in his technical terminology) as the "absolute totality of the synthesis of appearances" -- can never be given in a possible experience, and thus that it can never be known to exist; in essence, he claimed that human beings only have access to parts (Kant, 1965, A482-484/B510-512). However, he simultaneously asserted that, although "an *absolute whole* is not itself a perception," it is a "need of reason" [*Bedürfnis der Vernunft*] to be given the totality of conditions (the "unconditioned whole") for every conditioned thing it encounters in experience (the parts) (Kant, 1965, A484/B512 (emphasis in original); and cf. A505-507/B533-B535; A583/B611ff.; 1991c, 272-3). According to Kant, the attempt to satisfy this need (or "craving" [*Begierde*], "demand" [*Foderung*], "interest" [*Vernunftinteresse*], or "expectation" [*Erwartung*])⁵⁹ of reason for "the unconditioned" [*Unbedingte*] through the attainment of knowledge has led to the wildly speculative claims of the metaphysical tradition. But since it has become apparent (thanks largely to Kant's own efforts in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) that mankind cannot grasp the whole through theoretical knowledge, we must come to accept that what we call the whole is in fact

⁵⁹ See, respectively, Kant, 1965, A796/B824, A623/B651, A667/B695, A764/B792.

one of several "Ideas" [Ideen] that reason must employ as a "regulative principle" in order to unify and guide human understanding within the world (Kant, 1965, A312/B368ff., A462/B490, and especially A644/B672ff.). In other words, Kant teaches that human beings cannot avoid having to presuppose the existence of something about which they have an *Idea* but no possible *knowledge* whatsoever.

Similarly, and more notoriously, Kant went on to claim in his practical writings (especially the *Critique of Practical Reason*) that man must come to have a "rational faith" [Vernunftglaube] in the existence of freedom, God, and the immortality of the soul, despite the fact that he can acquire no theoretical knowledge to prove their existence. Kant invokes these "postulates" in order to resolve a "dialectical" contradiction that emerges within practical reason itself. As he describes it, practical reason prescribes that we should always do the morally right thing -- that is, follow the strictures of the moral law (the Categorical Imperative) -- regardless of the consequences to ourselves. At the same time, however, Kant concedes that, as a finite being, man cannot help but be concerned with his own happiness. But within the world, right action (or virtue) and happiness are often entirely

independent from one another. In other words, doing the morally right thing -- acting in a way that would make me worthy of happiness -- does not in any way guarantee that I will in fact be happy, especially when the morally right action requires great sacrifice on my part. This disjunction between virtue and happiness thus threatens to lead to despair and the eventual abandonment of morality altogether, as man, in his finitude, finds himself tempted to pursue happiness for its own sake -- a choice that will itself ultimately prove to be fruitless, since, according to Kant, true happiness consists in agreeableness experienced in direct proportion to one's worthiness of it. It thus seems that true happiness is possible only for the person who becomes worthy of happiness by making the moral law the determining ground of his will, which is to say that happiness is only possible for someone who is willing to sacrifice his happiness for the sake of the moral law. But as soon as an act of sacrifice fails to bring true happiness -- as, at least in this life, it often will -- we return to the core of the dialectical contradiction (Kant, 1965, A804/B832ff.; 1993a, 119-20; 136, 155; 1987, 341-2).

In order to be moral, then, man (or, in Kant's terms, his "faculty" [*Vermögen*] of reason) needs to have faith or

hope that the moral man will receive the happiness he deserves (this would be the "highest good"). And since human experience testifies that this does not happen consistently in this life, man also *needs* to believe both in an afterlife in which the moral man can experience the happiness he deserves and in a just God who will insure it (Kant, 1993a, 121, 128ff.; 1987, 340). Despite the fact that we possess (and can possess) no knowledge or understanding of how either of these postulates of practical reason can be true, Kant claims that no amount of "sophistry" can shake the conviction of someone who has come to have a rational faith in them. For since the postulates are not *theoretical*, and thus do not claim to describe the world as it *is*, but instead give us *practical* orientation within the world by telling us how it *ought* to be, this mode of "holding-to-be-true" [*Fürwahrhalten*] is invulnerable to skeptical refutation based on facts about the world. This is the case because, although "knowledge" [*Wissen*] is a holding-to-be-true that is sufficient to warrant assent to a conviction of truth on both subjective and objective grounds, and an "opinion" [*Meinung*] is the considering of something to be true on objective grounds despite a subjective consciousness that those grounds are inadequate,

"faith" [Glaube], including faith in the truth of the postulates, has a thoroughly different ground. That is, "faith" is a holding-to-be-true that is *subjectively sufficient* to warrant assent to a conviction of truth, even though it is, and must remain, *objectively insufficient*. (Kant, 1965, A820/B848ff.; 1993a, 140ff.; 1991c, 275-7; 1987, 360-368; 1902-83., IX, 65-73; 1993b, 59-62). In coming to live our lives believing in the truth of the postulates, not only does right action become possible, but since we have thereby satisfied the deepest needs of our reason -- something that could never be accomplished in reason's theoretical employment, in which it demands to be given an object of knowledge -- we enjoy the "contentment" [Zufriedenheit] that accompanies doing so (Kant, 1993a, 167, 124). In later works, Kant went on to expand the list of things in which he thought we needed to (and could) believe in order to satisfy the needs or demands of our reason, including that the world is a moral whole governed by final ends authored by God and that history is characterized by moral progress (Kant, 1965, A686/B714ff.; 1991a, 231ff.; 1987, 23, 259-64, 278-9, 317-323, 333; 1960, 85-139).⁶⁰

⁶⁰ The charge that Kant's postulates represented nothing more than wishful thinking was first made by Thomas Wizenmann in the 1780s, who (in Kant's words) "disputed the right to argue from a need to the objective reality of the object of the need." This respectful summary of Wizenmann's position, as well as Kant's response to it, can be found in a footnote in Kant, 1993a, 151.

Existential Neediness and the Philosophy of History

Although Herder shared Kant's assumption that man is both fundamentally needy and justified in positing various things about the world in order to satisfy that neediness, he differed from his teacher in a number of ways, three of which have important implications for the character and plausibility of the theory that Herder eventually produced.⁶¹ First of all, as we saw in Chapter 1, Herder rejected the "faculty" psychology on which Kant's entire philosophical edifice was constructed. In particular, Herder never accepted that there was such a thing as an independent faculty of reason within the human mind -- let alone that that faculty could be characterized as having its own peculiar kind of need. In fact, Herder would most likely have argued that in making such a claim, his teacher inadvertently demonstrated the *aporiai* that result from dividing the human psyche into distinct parts; what sense does it make, he might have asked, to attribute passionate "needs," "desires," and "demands" to the part of the mind that is supposedly uniquely rational? For Herder, neediness is not located or focused in one particular part of the human body or soul, but rather arises from and expresses a

⁶¹ Most of Herder's direct criticism of Kant's philosophy can be found in two of his last works, the *Eine Metacritique der reinen Vernunft* (MK) and *Kalligone* (KL).

longing of a person as a whole. That is, according to Herder, all human neediness is existential in character and thus fundamentally determines how we experience, understand, judge, and act within the world (see **EE**, 345, 361-3, 379). In other words, we have no capacity to reflect dispassionately on our needs and to seek to satisfy them in one domain of life rather than another -- in, say, practice rather than theoretical speculation.

Second, whereas Kant was primarily concerned with morality and saw belief in the postulates merely as a necessary concession to the inescapable human longing for happiness, Herder had little interest in abstract moral principles and the conditions of the possibility of their fulfillment. Instead, Herder sided with Rousseau against Kant in placing a concern for happiness above all others; for Herder, human beings experience happiness spontaneously when they feel themselves to exist in a meaningful and purposive whole -- it is not something of which they have to make themselves worthy, least of all by trying to live up to the supposedly permanent ethical standard set (or "discovered") by a philosopher. Hence, in contrast to the comparatively complex cluster of postulates in whose truth Kant believed any moral actor would have to have faith,

Herder thinks that the deepest human need can be satisfied much more simply and easily. All it requires is that an individual accept that he exists within a meaningful and purposive whole. As we saw in Chapter 1, all human beings lucky enough to have escaped the psychological, social, and political effects of the Enlightenment experience life within just such a whole -- the whole of a closed cultural community. As for those who have been exposed to philosophical skepticism, we have also seen that they must be able to have recourse to a larger whole that transcends the cultural community into which they happen to have been born. But precisely how simple and easy did Herder think it would be for someone to accept the existence of such a whole?

In order to answer this question, we must confront the final and most important difference between Kant and Herder: the latter's complete rejection the former's attempt to distinguish between different modes of "holding-to-be-true." Herder rejected Kant's distinctions between "knowledge," "opinion," and "faith" because he believed that they were based on a rigid separation between human subjectivity and the objective world -- a separation about which Herder is, at best, ambivalent. For as we have seen, in his

descriptive communitarianism, Herder seems simultaneously to reject the subject/object dichotomy, claiming that truth arises within and is inevitably an expression of a particular culture, and to hold that his own awareness of this fact counts as an objective truth about the world. But instead of trying to resolve this tension in the way that Kant would have -- that is, by reflecting on which claims have merely subjective, as opposed to fully objective, validity -- Herder went on to abandon subject/object dualism altogether, and along with it Kantian (and one might even say traditionally philosophic) concerns about how to establish the objective "correctness" of one's own statements about man and the world. One could say, then, that, according to Herder, just as a particular culture's understanding of truth is a function, not of a correspondence or lack of correspondence between subjective consciousness and an objective world, but instead of how entities come to be revealed through the formal structure of that culture's language, so a meaningful and purposive pattern comes to be revealed in the totality of all cultures when it is viewed in the light of what our existential need for happiness tells us *must* be true-in-itself. It is on this basis that Herder claims to have direct, unmediated

access to the revealed, trans-cultural truth of "God's course through the ages" -- a truth that transcends, transforms, and absorbs the relative truths that prevail within the closed horizons of particular cultures (**AU**, 88/272). This revelatory philosophy of history teaches that what Herder's descriptive communitarianism claims to be an arbitrary and meaningless conglomeration of conflicting national communities is in fact an expression of God's providential will as He leads the human race through various cultural permutations as a means to realizing a divinely-ordained end, which he calls "Humanity" [*Humanität*].

We will have the opportunity to examine this theory in considerable detail in Chapters 4 - 7. But for now it is sufficient to notice that unlike so many authors writing today who either enthusiastically embrace or fail to acknowledge the radically relativistic implications of their communitarianism, Herder both recognizes it and maintains that the logical and psychological ramifications of that relativism demand that it be supplemented by a providential philosophy of history (see **ID**, 649-50/ 452). Herder was convinced that only in this way could the seeming randomness and arbitrariness of human history be redeemed -- be given

the meaning and purpose the existence of which he held to be a fundamental, ineradicable need of human beings as such. If Herder is right, then nothing could be more desirable than for us to be able to say with him that "...history no longer appears to me what it once did, an abomination of desolation on a sacred earth" (**ID**, 344/ 231).⁶²

⁶² "...ist mir die Geschichte nicht mehr, was sie mir sonst schien, ein Greuel der Verwüstung auf einer heiligen Erde." If someone were to reject that such redemption is possible, he would still have to confront Herder's assumption that our happiness depends upon it. If Herder is right to think that this is so, then our inability to follow him has tragic consequences; if he is wrong, then his futile attempt appears to be comic. See the discussion of this theme in Chapter 8.

Chapter 4

HERDER'S THEOLOGICAL COMMUNITARIANISM I: HUMANITY'S PROPHET

Herder's communitarianism -- an unstable amalgam of descriptive and normative elements -- culminates in a crisis of logical incoherence and psychological distress. According to Herder, the norms, practices, and beliefs that give meaning and purpose to life -- and thus make it possible for us to experience happiness -- are rooted in particular communities from which Herder himself, in the very act of recognizing this to be the case, cannot help but be alienated. When viewed from the inside of a particular community, the events of history, no matter how seemingly random or unjust, are understood to happen for a reason -- as a result of the will of the community's God or gods, for example. But seen from Herder's standpoint outside of every particular community, history appears to be arbitrary, an "abomination of desolation," "nothing but ruins upon ruins, eternal beginnings without end, upheavals of fate without any lasting purpose" (**ID**, 343-4/ 229-30).⁶³ In short, Herder's descriptive communitarianism teaches that human history is comprised of closed communal parts lacking any

⁶³ "Greuel der Verwüstung," "in den Revolutionen der Erde nur Trümmer auf Trümmern zu sehen, ewige Anfänge ohne Ende, Umwälzungen des Schicksals ohne dauernde Absicht"

larger whole to bestow meaning and purpose upon them. In Chapter 3, we saw that, as a result of this insight, Herder came to see that his descriptive and normative communitarianism needed to be supplemented by another, "higher" form. And we also saw that he thought it was possible to appeal to such a meta-community the basis of his own existential need to believe that human history amounts to more than a planless chaos; in other words, this need was sufficient to justify assuming that, contrary to appearances, the totality of closed communal cultures are, in fact, parts in a meaningful, purposive whole that transcends them.

In this and the following three chapters, we will see that Herder reaches this goal by treating the totality of cultures in human history, and even the natural world and its metaphysical substrate -- as themselves constituting a community *writ large* -- a kind of community of communities not tied to any particular People. That is, just as a prophet within a particular community tells a story about God or the gods in order to give meaning and purpose to his community's historical experience, so Herder does something analogous at the macro-communal level -- he writes a philosophy of history and nature according to which the

norms, practices, and beliefs of each and every historical community serve as means to realizing a divinely-ordained end, which he calls, "Humanity." In doing so, he finally realizes the goal he set for himself in his earliest essays: he develops an educative form of "useful" philosophy designed to make it possible for modern, enlightened man to experience the happiness enjoyed by those simple members of the People who remain untouched by the Enlightenment -- the happiness that can only be attained by man when he feels himself to be a part in a meaningful and purposive whole.

Predecessors and False Starts

In Herder's first confrontation with the tensions between his descriptive and normative communitarianism (the *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte* of 1774) he fastened on two possible principles of unity in the world as it exists in itself, outside of any particular community: God's providence and the historical process independent of God's will. With regard to the issue of providence, he makes it very clear that he wishes his work to be a vindication of God's presence in history against the "skeptical" historical writing common to his century, which tended to highlight human causes in history and deny any overarching plan directing our fate.⁶⁴ But Herder's theory of providence

⁶⁴ Herder is thinking of such authors as Voltaire, Hume,

would have to be different than the traditional theological ones found in the writings of such authors as Eusebius and Bossuet: it could not be tied to any particular culture, as had all others in history (including Christian accounts). For despite the fact that each community in history claims that its notion of providence is true-in-itself, Herder's descriptive communitarianism shows that every one of those notions is actually an expression of culturally-rooted norms, practices, and beliefs, rather than genuine reflections of the world as it is in itself. One indication of the culturally-relative status of all prior providential accounts of the world is the fact that the gods of each particular community always seem to favor that community over others and often at the expense of others. An account of a trans-communal whole modeled on such an arrangement would thus be one characterized by partiality rather than genuine holism. Hence any notion of providence invoked by Herder would have to be radically reconceived -- it would have to be thoroughly universal and egalitarian. That is, it would somehow have to show that the good of each

Montesquieu, Montaigne, Bayle, Diderot, Robertson, and Iselin. See **AU**, 11, 13, 36-9, 40-1, 51-2, 88-9, 99-100, 103-5/ 148, 152, 189-191, 195-6, 212-13, 272-3, 294, 300-2.

particular community is compatible with the good of every other one, and thus also with the good of the whole.⁶⁵

Another model of trans-cultural unity -- one that at first sight seems to avoid the problems of providential favoritism -- was proposed by some representatives of the Enlightenment -- namely, a vision of moral and material progress brought about by education leading to liberation from ignorance and fear, and thus, in turn, a general increase in happiness over time. But Herder judged this kind of account to be thoroughly unacceptable for his own project, since, like traditional notions of providence, it favored some communities in history over others and thus showed that it was meant to justify and defend the norms, practices, and beliefs of a particular culture -- specifically, that of modern, enlightened Europe. Moreover, if this narrative of progress were true, it would affirm that an underlying arbitrariness and injustice reigns in human history, since the possibility of individuals attaining happiness would be contingent upon when and where they happened to have been born; for example, according to the preferred historiography of Enlightenment scholars, an inhabitant of eighteenth-century Paris would be more capable

⁶⁵ For discussions of providence in **AU**, see 19-20, 21, 36-7, 39-40, 45-6, 50, 56, 57-8, 59, 82-3, 86, 89-90, 97-8/ 161-2, 165, 189, 194, 204, 210, 220, 222, 224, 262, 269, 275, 289-90.

of being happy than someone who found himself in the so-called "dark ages" of medieval Europe, let alone in less "civilized" regions of the world. But this was unacceptable to Herder. In contrast, then, any vision of progress would have to be compatible with the view that Herder consistently expressed throughout his career: each community in history has to have its own standard of happiness within itself. In other words, with respect to happiness, each community would have to be an end in itself, in addition to being a means to a higher end. Only in this way could the world outside of any particular community be thought of as a true whole.⁶⁶

Herder's entire philosophy of history and nature must be understood as an extraordinarily ambitious attempt to show that the world is, in fact, such a whole.

In the 1774 *Philosophy of History*, Herder moved in the direction of developing a theory of progress that met this demand by appealing to an analogy of organic growth -- the idea that the history of the human race as a whole is analogous to the life of an individual human being -- rather than a notion of unambiguous progress in happiness. This theory went a significant way toward overcoming the problems associated with the comparatively simplistic and one-dimensional accounts of progress common in his time

⁶⁶ See *AU*, 38-9, 41, 54-5/ 192, 196, 217.

because, to speak analogically, while the stage of childhood in the life of a human being (and the degree of happiness possible at that stage) can be viewed as an imperfect version of what the person becomes in later stages of life, it also makes no sense to denigrate or condescend to a child by holding it to standards appropriate only to those later stages. Herder constructed a vague theory along these lines in the 1774 *Philosophy of History*, building on ideas first put forth in even earlier works in which he wrote of the contrast between youthful, vibrant, poetic cultures and old, worn-out, prosaic ones (ND1, 181-4/ 104-7). On this basis, he described the ancient Hebrews and Egyptians as analogous to infants, the Greeks as exhibiting youthful vigor, the Romans as belligerent adolescents, and medieval and modern men as comparable to adults and the elderly in temperament. But despite the presence of these analogies in his first philosophy of history, Herder never worked out the details or their implications in a philosophically satisfying way.

The End of History

But by the time Herder came to write his mature philosophy of history in the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte* of 1784-91, he had developed a highly unusual and complex theory of progressive providentialism. An

examination of how the "fingers of divinity" operate in human history, the *Ideen* seeks to show that it is possible to "wander through the labyrinth of history to perceive everywhere harmonious, divine order" (**ID**, 508, 669-70/ 348, 466).⁶⁷ Herder believes that detecting divine meaning and purpose in history will show us that even in the those most extreme cases in which "the history of miscarriages, wastes, and monstrosities" leads us to believe that "the laws of nature seem to be upset through alien causes," the apparent disturbance can be explained away, for he believes that "even in the seemingly greatest chaos" one can find "constant nature, that is to say, immutable laws of a highest necessity, goodness, and wisdom" that are oriented toward the end of realizing Humanity in the historical process as a whole (**GT**, 775/ 173; **ID**, 139, 155-60/ 87, 99-102).⁶⁸

As did his first *Philosophy of History*, Herder's mature theory of human historical development begins with his

⁶⁷ "das ganze Zusammenwirken lebendiger Kräfte in ihrer bestimmtesten Individualität entscheidet wie über alle Erzeugungen der Natur, so über alle Ereignisse im Menschenreiche," "...durchwandre ich das Labyrinth der Geschichte und sehe allenthalben harmonische, göttliche Ordnung."

⁶⁸ "die Geschichte der Mißgeburten, der Verwahrlosungen und Ungeheuer," "durch fremde Ursachen die Gesetze der Natur in Unordnung gesetzt zu sein scheinen," "auch im scheinbar-größesten Chaos die beständige Natur d.i. unwandelbare Regeln einer in jeder Kraft wirkenden höchsten Notwendigkeit, Güte und Weisheit gefunden."

attempt to identify an aspect of human existence that is common to each and every particular community and that can also provide a sign or indication of the end towards which history as a whole can be said to be developing. The first such element of commonality to which he points in the *Ideen* is language or speech [Rede] (**ID**, 138-9/ 87). But this gets us nowhere, for as we saw in Chapter 1, despite its ubiquitousness and seemingly essential connection to mankind, language is a ground of radical difference, not similarity; it is a merely formal characteristic compatible with virtually any imaginable content. Does Herder intend to make nothing more than our capacity to be immersed in and adopt radically different norms, practices, and beliefs the end of human development? If so, then he would have to be understood to be defending the paradoxical view that human history is oriented toward the end of the diversification of ways-of-life -- a view that seems to land him back in the middle of the conundrums examined in Chapter 3.

But Herder did not simply affirm difference for its own sake. Rather, his philosophy of history is developed within a theological framework. It is possible to see the effect of that framework on his original theory of language in statements from the *Ideen* in which he emphasizes that

language is a "divine gift" [*göttliche Geschenk*] and that "nature...constructed man for the use of language" (**ID**, 138-9, 141/ 87, 89).⁶⁹ That is, in contrast to the standpoint of his early *Abhandlung über die Sprache*, Herder now indicates that something outside of each particular community (namely, God) is responsible for the development of language within it.⁷⁰ This suggestion is confirmed by other statements in which Herder claims that language is the "rudder of our reason"⁷¹ and that, in turn, this linguistically-dependent notion of reason is essential to the progressive development of what he calls our "Humanity" [*Humanität*] (**ID**, 139, 155-160/ 87, 99-102). Herder sees it as the task of a "genuine philosophy of man" to detect and trace the development of this quality of Humanity as it pervades all communal norms, practices, and beliefs throughout history (**ID**, 160/ 102-3).⁷²

But how exactly does our Humanity manifest itself in history? Is there any concrete norm, practice, or belief in which it shows itself and thus gives us an indication of the content of the end towards which mankind is supposedly

⁶⁹ "den Menschen baute die Natur zur Sprache"

⁷⁰ But see the end of the *Abhandlung*, where Herder announces that, in fact, language becomes a capacity worthy of God through mankind's ability to fashion it for itself: **SP**, 809.

⁷¹ "das Steuerruder unsrer Vernunft"

⁷² "die echte menschliche Philosophie"

developing? Perhaps not so surprisingly, in light of statements examined above, Herder claims to find the core of man's Humanity in his practice of and belief in religion (**ID**, 372ff./ 251ff.).⁷³

Unlike modern critics of religious belief like Hobbes, Hume, and many other advocates of the Enlightenment -- authors who tended to claim that religion arises from ignorance and fear and thus can and should be diminished by the adoption of a skeptical stance toward experiences (or reported experiences) of the divine -- Herder asserts that religion is as coeval with man as language and reason, and that it comes about as a means both of explaining events within the world and of giving them meaning and purpose: it is "the instructor of man, his comforter and guide through the dark and dangerous mazes of life" (**ID**, 161/ 103).⁷⁴ One could say that, for Herder, God made man in such a way that he would develop diverse religious norms, practices, and beliefs through the use of his language and reason -- and that, in doing so, he would contribute to the formation of a

"Godlike Humanity" [*Gottähnliche Humanität*] that will

⁷³ See also the whole of *Ideen*, Book IV, Chapter VI, titled "Man is Formed for Humanity and Religion" ["Zur Humanität und Religion ist der Mensch gebildet"], as well as **ID**, 160/ 103:

"In the end, religion is the highest Humanity of mankind" ["Endlich ist die Religion die höchste Humanität des Menschen."].

⁷⁴ "die Belehlerin der Menschen, die ratgebende Trösterin ihres so dunkeln, so Gefahr- und Labyrinthvollen Lebens."

eventually come to fruition at the end of the historical process (**ID**, 189/ 124). As he writes, "Religion, considered merely as an exercise of the understanding, is the highest Humanity, the most sublime blossom of the human mind" (**ID**, 162/ 104).⁷⁵

Now, Herder does not mean by this statement that man's end is the simple and continuing development of the religious norms, practices, and beliefs that prevail within particular communities; if he did, then, as we saw in Chapter 3, both he and his Enlightened readers would be excluded from that end, since they are incapable of believing any of them to be true-in-themselves. But neither does he mean to suggest that the members of particular communities must explicitly reject their own particularistic religious views; Herder never relented in his scorn for the kind of cosmopolitanism that tries to create a cultureless citizen of the world (see, for example, **ID**, 333/ 222-3). Instead, Herder held that those particularistic religious norms, practices, and beliefs must be given a new interpretation according to which the mark of their divinity is contained, not primarily within themselves, but rather in

⁷⁵ "Religion ist also, auch schon als Verstandesübung betrachtet, die höchste Humanität, die erhabenste Blüte der menschlichen Seele"

their contribution to the formation of a new, trans-communal religion of Humanity.

This new humanitarian religion would be characterized by peace, love, and mutual sympathy among members of different cultural communities (**ID**, 154ff./ 98-102). But once again, this religion would neither require nor assume an abandonment of particularistic norms, practices, and beliefs on the part of members of those communities. For want of a better term, they would be (to invoke a Hegelian concept) "sublated" (*aufgehoben*) -- that is, the meaning and purposiveness contained within each community's norms, practices, and beliefs would be canceled, transcended, and yet also preserved in the new religion of Humanity. So, for example, the world that Herder prophesies would be one in which Muslims, Jews, and Buddhists from nations throughout the world would simultaneously affirm their own religious standpoints and, at the same time, they would love, respect, and sympathize with those of the others in the knowledge that, despite (or rather, because of) the differences between them, each of their communities is a part in a larger whole of Humanity which is comprised of them all. In other words, the religion of Humanity that Herder claims lies at the end of human historical-cultural development is

one in which the greatest degree of diversity or difference is combined with the greatest degree of unity.

But has there ever been anything like such a religion? Is there any model, any indication of what one might look like? Or does Herder understand his prophecy to be entirely without precedent in the annals of human history? There is certainly ample reason to think that it would have to be entirely novel, for all prior religions have been radically exclusionary in character. Not only have they been hostile to outsiders⁷⁶, but they have persecuted dissenters within their own boundaries. That is, every historical religion has upheld particular dogmas and punished those within its ranks who strayed from its official teaching. Hence, to the extent that Herder's new religion resembles actually existing religions, it will tend toward homogeneity (i.e., it will seek actively to minimize particularistic differences within itself as much as possible), and thus not be based on the love and mutual respect of cultural difference as he claims it must be. But on the other hand, if Herder's humanitarian religion does allow for genuine differences, it would seem to have little in common with religion as it has historically been understood; it is thus

⁷⁶ Hostility to outsiders is not a concern for Herder, since, strictly speaking, nothing would exist outside of the community of Humanity as Herder envisions it.

far from clear how it could provide the meaning and purpose he thinks it must in order to make it possible for modern man to be happy.

But, as it turns out, Herder does claim that there is an actually existing religion that can be used as a model to anticipate the one he spies on the horizon of human history. That religion is none other than Christianity. But does not the bloody history of Christianity show that it behaved like all other historical religions in its intolerance of norms, practices, and beliefs different than its own? Had not Christianity espoused a single doctrine and demanded absolute allegiance to it for most of its history? Had it not either excluded members of its community who attempted to dissent from its dogmas or resorted to violence as a means of enforcing uniformity of opinion on doctrinal issues? Although Herder does not deny any these facts, he nonetheless maintains that they stand in stark contrast to the "fundamental principles" [*Grundsätzen*] taught by Jesus Christ himself -- the principles that constitute the essence of Christianity and which also provide a model for the religion of Humanity he prophesies in his own work (*ID*, 492/710). In other words, Herder claims that there is a core of purity in Jesus's teachings that contains "the most

genuine Humanity," that is, "a genuine bond of friendship and brotherly love" that extends throughout the entire human race (**ID**, 708, 714/ 491, 495)." This core of Christianity, this "religion of Christ" [*Religion Christi*] which is "Humanity itself" [*Humanität selbst*] can and should become the model of the future humanitarian religion, as long as it is adequately separated out from the distortions that arose within it when it became associated with one particular group of communities in history -- namely, those of Western Europe in the Middle Ages (**BR**, 130; **ID**, 716ff./ 497ff.).

Thus radicalizing the typically Protestant challenge to the legitimacy and authenticity of the institutions of the Catholic Church that dominated Europe for the better part of a thousand years, Herder claims that the purified essence of Christianity's deepest teaching is at odds with any administrative or institutional organization, the imposition of which onto that teaching inevitably has the effect of degrading it to the level of the oppressive and mechanistic social relations characteristic of the modern, secular state. Herder thus prophesies a purified form of Christianity -- one that has been purged of any positive doctrine, ritual, or organization that would alienate or

" *"Die echte Humanität....," "...ein echter Bund der Freundschaft und Bruderliebe..."*

exclude any particular religiously-grounded form of life. In place of these particularistic vestiges of actually existing Christianity, Herder proposes a religion based entirely on a doctrine of spontaneous brotherly love -- one in which we are able to sympathize with one another despite our radical differences.

Now there are undoubtedly significant problems with this position, some of which can best be seen by way of a contrast with Kant's own quasi-Christian account of how individuals would behave toward one another at what, for want of a better term, we shall call the end of history. For Herder (and in contrast to Kant), those who realize the ideal of Humanity will be "rational, just, and happy," not because they choose to make the rational form of the moral law into the motivating ground of their wills and, in the process, make themselves worthy of the reward of happiness from a moral God (**ID**, 669-70/ 466, and see 144ff./ 91ff.; **BR**, 128; compare Kant, 1993a, 128-38). Rather, the religion of Humanity that Herder envisions will be one characterized by a form of social interaction and organization that is organic and spontaneous; Herder's thoroughly humanized human beings will simply feel themselves to be unified with all

other members of the human race, and they will treat each other accordingly.

But Kant, who shared so many of Herder's concerns, would have explicitly rejected such an ideal of spontaneous action, and he would have done so for at least two reasons. First of all, Kant claimed that human beings as such (as opposed to God) always have to overcome contrary inclinations in order to be moral; to presume otherwise would be an unreasonable hope, since acting morally without effort could only be possible for a being capable of acting consistently without regard for its own happiness -- something impossible for a "rational, finite being." Second, and more importantly, Kant went on to argue that the very worthiness or nobility of moral actions depends upon the one who does them having to overcome those contrary inclinations. In other words, for Kant, the nobility and grandeur we associate with great moral deeds depends upon them requiring sacrifice. Thus, from the standpoint of Kant's phenomenology of moral experience, Herder's attempt to show that the human race will develop into a state characterized by spontaneous mutual affection not only inappropriately promises man that he is destined to overcome his nature more completely than he ever could. It also

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fails to take into account that, were such an ideal to be realized, the very possibility of the kind of moral whole to which Herder is so profoundly drawn would be destroyed.

But Herder was never one to limit his claims about mankind and the world to what reason could validate. And, as we saw at the end of Chapter 3, in conceiving of truth as a kind of revelatory intuition based on an existential need, Herder placed his thought in a region that lies beyond such traditionally philosophic, rigorously argumentative considerations as those raised in Kant's work. Thus, in defiance of these kinds of objections, Herder insisted on maintaining that to be truly human -- to live up to the humanitarian potential embedded in us by God and expressed in the primarily religious norms, practices, and beliefs of every historical community -- the human race must inevitably come to realize the ideal of Humanity in history.

It is important to recognize that, although the realization of this vision of Humanity "lies beyond our present existence,"⁷⁸ it is not intended to serve as a transcendent standard or ideal *outside* of the world toward which we strive but which we can never reach, say, in the way that Kant's idea of a cosmopolitan goal of human history does (ID, 188; cf. 147, 630-2/ 123; cf. 93, 438-9; Kant,

⁷⁸ "dieser Zweck geht über unser Dasein hinaus"

1991b). For, according to Herder, if this were the case -- if we were able to catch "sight of nobler beings" than ourselves -- man would most likely come "to despise himself" (**ID**, 197/ 130).⁷⁹ Instead, Herder understands his vision of Humanity to be an articulation of the *intrinsic* end of human development which mankind is destined to realize in history.⁸⁰ As Herder conceives it, his own philosophy of history provides prophetic evidence to demonstrate this divine determination of mankind -- it provides prophetic evidence that, despite appearances to the contrary, from the beginning of human history, "truth, beauty, and love were the end at which man strove in all his endeavors, even without being conscious of it, and often by the most devious paths" (**ID**, 190/ 124-5).⁸¹ Herder likens this striving and the development of the species that comes about as a result of it to the metamorphosis that takes place when a

⁷⁹ "...ward ihm der Anblick edlerer Wesen entzogen: denn wahrscheinlich würden wir uns selbst verachten, wenn wir diese kennten."

⁸⁰ Kant, too, holds that we are destined to realize his cosmopolitan idea. But our doing so is only a practical postulate based on a "rational faith" [*Vernunftglaube*], for Kant holds that we can never realize a rational idea in the world. In other words, for Kant, we must believe in something about which we simultaneously possess no positive knowledge (but, of course, neither do we possess any knowledge to speak against its possibility).

"Wahrheit, Schönheit und Liebe waren das Ziel, nach dem der Mensch in jeder seiner Bemühungen, auch ihm selbst unbewußt und oft auf so unrechten Wegen strebte." We will see below where Herder is led by the problem of having to account for these "devious paths."

caterpillar transforms itself into a butterfly; the two creatures appear to be utterly distinct from one another, but they are also somehow one and the same (**ID**, 191-2/ 125-6). Similarly, we can trust that the "invisible operating hand" of the deity will insure that the "*flowering of the bud of Humanity* will certainly appear in a [future] state of existence, in a truly *godlike form of mankind*, which no earthly sense could conceive in all its grandeur and beauty" (**ID**, 190-1/ 125).⁸² Herder has no doubt that our evolution into this higher state is guided by a "superior influence" [*höhere Einwirkung*] for "a divine economy has certainly ruled over the human species from its origin and led him through the most effortless course [of development]" (**ID**, 196-7/ 129).⁸³ And so, to the extent that the philosophy of history reveals this process, it shows that, far from being a mere aggregate of communal parts, the totality of human history is, in fact, a community of communities, an ordered whole directed by the divinity toward the end of realizing Humanity in the

greatest possible diversity of religiously-grounded forms of

⁸² "So können wir ihrer unsichtbaren Künstlerhand gewiß zutrauen; daß auch die *Effloreszenz unsrer Knospe der Humanität* in jedem Dasein gewiß in einer Gestalt erscheinen werde, die eigentlich die *wahre göttliche Menschengestalt* ist und die kein Erdensinn sich in ihrer Herrlichkeit und Schöne zu dichten vermöchte."

⁸³ "Eine göttliche Haushaltung hat gewiß über dem menschlichen Geschlecht von seiner Entstehung an gewaltet und hat es auf die ihm leichteste Weise zu seiner Bahn geführt."

life. Hence every newly discovered norm, practice, or belief, far from being a sign of arbitrariness or relativism in history, is now taken by Herder as the opposite -- as evidence that the world is oriented toward a fixed end by God (**ID**, 147/ 93). In revealing the divine process that determines the virtually infinite religious particularism that exists within human history, Herder's philosophy of history thus prophesies a new, radically universalistic religion of Humanity for himself and his "enlightened" readers to replace the meaning and purpose that can otherwise only be experienced within the closed horizon of a particular community.

Chapter 5

HERDER'S THEOLOGICAL COMMUNITARIANISM II: THE GOD OF THE COMMUNITARIANS

If it were possible to accept the truth of the philosophy of history sketched in Chapter 4, then Herder could be said to have worked his way out of the communitarian conundrums that we examined in Chapter 3. But there is something profoundly unsatisfying about Herder's proposed theological solution to those conundrums, at least as it is articulated in the *Ideen*. For the reader of the mature *Philosophy of History* is left with a number of unanswered questions of crucial importance. For example, what kind of deity is directing the progress of mankind toward the realization of Humanity? Why should we believe that that particular deity (as opposed to some other kind of deity, or even no deity at all) exists? Does Herder believe that there is any evidence for the existence of such a God? Or is belief in Him based solely on some kind of pietistic faith? Does the humanitarian God on which Herder's philosophy of history rest directly and miraculously intervene in human history? Or is His will somehow manifest in the regular and rational laws that govern the natural world? In short, what is the nature of the deity that

supposedly stands behind or transcends, as well as fundamentally determines, every particularistic culture's religious norms, practices, and beliefs? Despite some suggestive comments in the *Ideen* about a vaguely pantheistic God, Herder's mature *Philosophy of History* contains precious little to back up his remarkable assertions regarding the course of human development over time.

Hence, for an answer to these and related questions, we must turn to another of Herder's works -- one that he wrote in 1787, between the writing and publication of the second and third parts of the *Ideen* (there were a total of four). That work is *God: Some Conversations* [Gott: Einige Gespräche]. It is only in light of the theology developed there that the deepest implications of Herder's philosophy of history -- and thus the full import of his theological solution to the conundrums of his communitarianism -- become apparent.

In the Realm of the Rationalists

Herder had religious interests for his entire productive life. In fact, he served as a court preacher and chief pastor from 1771 until his death in 1803. But despite his religious concerns (and having written a number of works on the subject) he only attempted to articulate a

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full-blown theology of his own after he had undergone a rigorous encounter with the writings of G.W. Leibniz and Benedict Spinoza -- two philosophers with whom Herder had a much greater affinity than the materialists and skeptics he attacked in his early work. His interest in the former thinker is not surprising, for like Herder himself, Leibniz had been deeply disturbed by the melancholy course of history -- by the fact that "...often the worst things happen to the best; innocent beings, not only beasts but men, are struck down and killed, even tortured...[and] the world seems rather a kind of confused chaos than something ordained by a supreme wisdom" (Leibniz, 1956a, 795). And, also like Herder, Leibniz had come to the conclusion that, despite all of the seeming evidence that history is governed by arbitrariness, "the opposite can be established" if we choose to view the world from the right standpoint -- that is, from a "position that suits it" (Leibniz, 1956a, 795). Leibniz argued that this appropriate point-of-view was one from which we could see that ours had to be the "best of all possible worlds," since a benevolent God would not have chosen to create anything less (Leibniz, 1991, 75-6). For Leibniz, the existence of evil could be explained (or explained away) by the fact that our world was not the best

simply, but only the best possible, since in creating the world, God's will was constrained by an independent standard of "compossibility" -- that is, by a maximum limit on the extent of compatibility of some intrinsically possible substances with others. Hence Leibniz's philosophy culminated in a transcendental "theodicy" that sought to demonstrate that, despite the misfortunes experienced by individuals within history, the world could not possibly be better than it is (Leibniz, 1952).

As this brief summary should make clear to us, Herder took much from Leibniz, especially his vision of the world as a "multiplicity in unity," comprised of a diversity of dynamic and energetic substances (or "monads") acting in harmony with one another, each expressing its motive appetites (or "entelechy"), offering a unique perspective on the ordered totality of which it is a part, and experiencing "the greatest happiness possible in the whole" (Leibniz, 1956b, 334-5; 1991, 76-7; Cassirer, 1979, 29-33, 121-2; **ID**, 197-99/ 130). However, despite their significant affinities, Herder could not offer a simple restatement of Leibniz's views in his philosophy of nature and history. Aside from the fact that Leibniz's austere rationalism was anathema to Herder's much more passionate and poetic

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temperament, Herder had significant philosophical disagreements with his predecessor. Most importantly, although Herder agreed with Leibniz on the need to show that ours was the best of all possible worlds, and, in turn, that every individual experiences the greatest possible happiness in the time and place in which he happens to find himself, Herder could not accept Leibniz's highly anthropomorphic, and thus traditionally theological, notion of God on which that doctrine was based.

According to Herder, it was utterly incoherent to imagine God existing outside of time and space "in the great nothingness of primeval, inactive eternity," contemplating "worlds as children play with soap bubbles" and then, at some point, choosing to create one of them on the basis of its superior "fitness" or worthiness to be created (GT, 729-31/ 125-6).⁸⁴ For Herder, the incoherence of this view could be seen on a number of levels. To begin with, it inappropriately assigned a litany of distinctly human attributes to God, including the capacity for deliberation and choice, not to mention the limitations on His power that flow from the notion that God's will to create the simply best world is constrained by an independent standard of

⁸⁴ "im großen Nichts der uralten, müßigen Ewigkeit," "Er spielte nicht mit Welten, wie Kinder mit Seifen blasen spielen..."

"compossibility."⁸⁵ Moreover, Herder found it impossible to conceive of anything whatsoever, including God, existing outside of the world, in some region beyond space and time -- for where, he wondered, could such a placeless place be, and at what timeless time could God be said to have come to decide to create the world out of nothingness?⁸⁶

Lastly, and most significantly for Herder, by imagining that God makes the choice of which world to create on the basis of its relative goodness, Leibniz had presupposed that a standard of the Good exists above God -- a standard to which even He must appeal in making his decision. But this assumption -- in addition to the one according to which the possible goodness of the world God would create was limited by compossibility -- leads to the perplexing question of who

⁸⁵ See **GT**, 709/ 103 on the inappropriateness of assigning any attribute ("Eigenschaft (Attribut)") to God -- an injunction which, as we shall see, Herder himself later disregards.

⁸⁶ See **GT**, 705/ 99: "Where is there a place outside of the world? The world itself, and space and time therein, the sole means by which we measure and count things, all exist only through Him, the infinite One" ["Wo ist ein Ort auer der Welt? Sie selbst und Raum und Zeit in ihr, durch welche nur wir die Dinge messen and zhlen, sind ja allein durch Ihn, den unendlichen da"] and **GT**, 768/ 166, where Herder has one of his interlocutors pronounce that we can know "the most beautiful truth...namely, that there is no Nothing in nature, that there never was and never will be, because a Nothing is something unthinkable" ["Die schnste Wahrheit ruhet darauf, nmlich: da kein Nichts in der Natur sei, da es auch nie gewesen sei and nie sei werde, weil es etwas Undenkbare, ein Nichts ist"]. See also, Herder's letter to F.H. Jacobi of Feb 6, 1784, in which he writes, "If God does not exist in the world and everywhere in the world...then God exists nowhere" (cited in Herder, 1993a, 120-3).

or what created that standard. If some other entity created the standard, then would it not be more appropriate to treat it as the true God? Herder seemed to think that these and other perplexing implications of Leibniz's stated view led it inevitably to collapse into something like medieval Nominalism, according to which there simply is no standard of goodness (or compossibility) above God -- and thus that the goodness (or badness) of the world followed from nothing more than His will to create it above others. Seen in this light, ours would be the best of all possible worlds for no other reason than that God willed to create it instead of others, any one of which would have been the best possible world if He had chosen to create it instead. Hence, Herder maintains that in seeking to redeem the goodness of the world in the way he did, Leibniz inadvertently "ended in attributing everything to God's arbitrariness" (**GT**, 733/128-9).⁸⁷

Thus, however much Herder admired the beauty of Leibniz's theodicy, he could not accept the theology that the latter constructed to explain and justify it. How could Herder avoid the problems that plagued that theology? He would find an inspiration for an alternative theological account, and thus a solution to those problems, in the

⁸⁷ "alles zur Willkür Gottes zumachen."

philosophy of Spinoza. At first blush, this is a surprising claim, since, unlike Leibniz with his reputation for sublime piety, Spinoza was almost universally considered to be an atheist in Herder's time. For in addition to writing what is generally acknowledged to be the first work of modern Biblical criticism, the *Theological-Political Treatise*, Spinoza had begun his most fully realized philosophical work (the *Ethics*) by defining God as a simple, infinite substance identical with the universe in its totality (Spinoza, 1951; 1955). He thus explicitly denied God's transcendental status as the first cause or ground of the world.⁸⁸ Moreover, Spinoza antagonized defenders of traditional religious doctrine still further by arguing that, since God is identical with the natural world when it is grasped as a whole, the pursuit of the scientific study of nature using modern mathematical and experimental methods, far from being an example of hubristic impiety as it was often claimed, actually stood as the highest possible act of devotion to the deity. In other words, in Spinoza's system, the natural philosopher or scientist replaces the priest as the human being who stands at the pinnacle of piety. That Spinoza

⁸⁸ The traditional view of pantheism was expressed by another seventeenth-century author with a much deserved reputation for impiety: "...by God is understood the cause of the world; and to say the world is God is to say there is no cause of it, that is, no God" (Hobbes, 1994, 239).

genuinely believed the system that justified this remarkably bold, anti-clerical *coup d'état* to be a vindication of belief in God was something that virtually no one accepted during the first 100 years after his death; Spinoza's pantheism seemed to be an example of the purest atheism hiding behind the thinnest of theological veneers.

But as Herder would argue (and popularize⁸⁹) in *God: Some Conversations*, it was possible to see in Spinoza's philosophy more than merely a cover for atheism. Herder directed his readers to take seriously a very different Spinoza -- one who, after advocating a thorough and rigorous scientific study of the efficient causes and laws that constitute the natural world, claimed that doing so had to be understood, not as an end in itself, but merely as a means to attaining what he described as a "third kind of knowledge" that culminated in an "intellectual love of God" (Spinoza, 1955, Part V).⁹⁰ Moreover, Herder pointed out that Spinoza concluded his system by returning to the divine in

⁸⁹ F.H. Jacobi defended and radicalized the traditional view in a work published two years before Herder's *Gott* and thus sparked the so-called "Pantheism Controversy," about which much has been written in English in the last few years (see, for example, Beiser, 1987 and Vallée, 1988). On Herder's reasons for rejecting Jacobi's claims, see his letters dated Feb 2, 1784 and December 20, 1784 (cited in Herder, 1993a, 120-5).

⁹⁰ The first kind of knowledge is the false knowledge characteristic of the pre-philosophic understanding of the world based on the imagination; the second kind is the knowledge acquired through science.

order to put forth a quasi-mystical view according to which, for certain rare individuals, science could culminate in a form of salvation in which the individual comes to reach an intuitive awareness of how his particularity fits in to the deterministic whole of the universe -- a whole governed by the causal laws of physics, physiology, chemistry, and psychology. In short, Herder claimed that, for Spinoza, if the world is conceived *a priori* as God, rather than as a mere aggregate of matter in motion, then science itself could become a means to religious self-transcendence within the immanent world.

In Spinoza, then, Herder found a model of what his own account of human history and its metaphysical substrate could be: a scientifically valid description of the parts of the immanent world combined with a single *a priori* assumption that makes it possible to attain an intuitive awareness of how those parts cohere into a unified whole. Herder believed that this notion of divine immanence made much more sense than, and avoided the problems of, Leibniz's transcendent and anthropomorphic God. But just as Herder could not simply adopt Leibniz's theory *tout court*, so he felt the need to modify Spinoza's account of the world operating according to strict laws of efficient causality,

lacking any conceivable final cause, and existing as modifications of a God understood to be a static substance. Here Leibniz's vision of the world comprised of a plurality of dynamic substances complemented Spinoza's pantheism perfectly. The result of this amalgam was perhaps the most important concept of Herder's mature theory of the natural world and human history: "force" [*Kraft*].

Present in his work in some form from the time of his earliest writings (see Chapter 1 for an account of how it figures into Herder's psychology), force was also one of the most common scientific and philosophic concepts in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-centuries. Often used synonymously with "cause" (as when Newton held that the "force of inertia" was the "cause" of motion), force was one of several concepts that early modern thinkers developed to explain the determinateness of appearances within the world -- that is, the reason why things appear as they do rather than some other way. Because a force was known to exist only by its effects or expressions within the world, philosophers and scientists were led to posit the existence of a number of forces, some of which are still considered to be genuine today (these include gravitational, magnetic, and centrifugal forces), as well as others that have since been

rejected by scientists (for example, in an early scientific work much admired by Herder, Kant posited the existence of an independent "force of repulsion" [*Zurückstossungskraft*] and a "sinking force" [*Senkungskraft*], in addition to the more conventional ones listed above⁹¹). Leibniz even asserted the existence of a universal living force or kinetic energy (*vis viva*) that he held to permeate the natural world as a whole. In the eighteenth-century, it was thus possible to imagine that eventually a heretofore hidden force or conglomeration of forces would one day be discovered that could explain absolutely everything in nature.

Herder appeals to such an all-encompassing notion of force from the opening pages of the *Ideen*, where he first posits the existence of a vital force of growth and regeneration that pervades all the parts of the universe, and then goes on to assert the following as one of the "fundamental propositions" [*Hauptgrundsätze*] of his philosophy of the natural world and human history:

"Wherever there is an effect in nature, there must be an effective force" (*ID*, 87/ 50).⁹² Herder thus frequently speaks of the world as a whole that is permeated by and

⁹¹ See Kant, 1981, 114-16 and the discussion in Shell, 1993, 127ff.

⁹² "Wo Wirkung in der Nature ist, muß wirkende Kraft sein."

composed of "organic life-forces" [*organischen Lebenskräfte*], manifesting themselves in everything from the growth and regeneration exhibited by the lowest forms of microscopic life to the most complicated drives and motivations of warm-blooded animals (**ID**, 89-93/ 51-53). Even a human being is, at bottom, an "abyss" [*Abgrund*] of forces, according to Herder (**EE**, 331-2, 337-340, 385) -- a conglomeration of animated forces within the dead material of which life is composed (**EE**, 331; **ID**, 82-4/ 46).⁹³

But if he had left his discussion of force at this, Herder would hardly have succeeded in explaining how it is that "every creature in all of its parts is a living cooperating whole," let alone shown that "one organization holds sway through the whole animated creation of our globe" (**ID**, 129, 76/ 80, 41).⁹⁴ In other words, he has yet to explain "the whole cooperation of vital forces" that supposedly characterizes the natural world (**ID**, 507-8/ 348).⁹⁵ For even if positing the existence of forces helps to explain the determinateness of appearances, Herder must

⁹³ He even speaks of matter itself being animated by forces in some of his more poetic moments. See **GT**, 710-11, 773-4/ 105, 171-2.

⁹⁴ "denn jedes Geschöpf ist in allen seinen Teilen ein lebendig-zusammenwirkendes Ganze," "durch die ganze belebte Schöpfung unsrer Erde das Analogon Einer Organization herrsche...."

⁹⁵ "...das ganze Zusammenwirken lebendiger Kräfte..."

still explain the determinateness of those forces themselves -- that is, lacking a Leibnizian notion of harmony having been "pre-established" by God from outside of the universe, it is far from clear why this dynamic world does not simply fly apart into chaos. How does Herder explain the determinateness of the forces that permeate the natural world? He does so, following Spinoza's example, by making a single, crucially important assumption *a priori*, according to which all of the various forces at work in nature are "at bottom but one and the same organic force" -- that a "living force" -- a "God-force" [*Gotteskraft*] -- "binds all of the parts into a community" (**ID**, 104-5, 275/ 62, 180; **EE**, 357).⁹⁶

We can begin to grasp the import of this metaphysical or supersensible doctrine, as well as how it enables Herder to justify his claims about the wholeness of the natural world, by turning to the discussion that takes place in *God: Some Conversations*. For in this work, Herder tried to develop a comprehensive, immanent theology of God as the "primordial force of all forces" [*die Urkraft aller Kräfte*] (**GT**, 710/ 104). In keeping with his enthusiasm for analogical reasoning, Herder maintained that, just as a particular effect in the world could be understood to be an

⁹⁶ "...im Grunde nur Eine und dieselbe organische Kraft ist...", "da die Lebenskraft alle Teile zur Gemeinschaft bindet..."

expression of a particular organic life-force, so all of those forces as a whole could be understood to be expressions of a single, unifying force which is the reason or ground of their appearing as they do. As he writes, "all things must depend on one self-dependent essence as much for their existence as in their unification [with one another], and thus also in every expression of their forces" (GT, 704/97).⁹ According to Herder, it is necessary that we conceive of the world as a "realm of effective forces which form a whole picture, not just in their appearance to our senses, but in their nature and their unification" (GT, 774/172-3),¹⁰ for if we did not do so, we would not even be able to explain the elemental human ability to use the verb "to be" -- that is, to have a stable experience of anything being anything at all. Herder thus holds that the use of the word "is" is sufficient to prove the existence of a non-anthropomorphic deity that unifies the diversity of forces within the world and, in doing so, "reveals himself in infinite ways through infinite forces" (GT, 709; cf.

752-3/ 103; cf. 150).¹¹ Whereas in his early work, Herder

⁹ "daß indessen alles von Einem selbstständigen Wesen sowohl in seinem Dasein als in seiner Verbindung, mithin auch in jeder Äußerung seiner Kräfte abhängen müsse..."

¹⁰ "es ist ein reich wirkender Kräfte, die nicht nur unsern Sinnen in der Erscheinung, sondern ihrer Natur und ihrer Verbindung nach ein ganzes Bilden."

¹¹ "daß sich die Gottheit in unendlichen Kräften auf unendliche Weisen offenbare."

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treated the unity and coherence of human thought as irreducibly a function of the *Denkart* that prevails within a particular community, the more mature and theologically-minded Herder goes beyond the merely local perspective to appeal to the operation of an underlying divine force that actively unifies the thoughts of individuals within each particular community. As we have already seen, this notion of a determinative force forming the content of every community's norms, practices, and beliefs, and then directing its development over time, is given full expression in Herder's understanding of human history.

The Science of God

But before we return to Herder's account of that history, it is important to note that in conceiving of "the whole world as an expression, an appearance of [God's] eternally-living, eternally-effective forces" (**GT**, 772/170), Herder has made it possible to interpret the diversity of immanent forces, and thus each of their myriad effects as a "finger of divinity" [*Finger der Gottheit*] at work in the world (**ID**, 173/ 112).¹⁰⁰ That is, having posited *a priori* the existence of a primordial force, he is able to treat the findings of science as *a posteriori* evidence of its

¹⁰⁰ "die ganze Welt in Ausdruck, eine Erscheinung seiner ewig-lebenden, ewig-wirkenden Kräfte."

existence and immanent presence within the world. In this way, Herder as a scientist of human history attains his own version of Spinoza's "intellectual love of God" by discovering and contemplating the operation of the forces that determine its course. As he writes, "the most beautiful admiration, love, and veneration of God" comes from finding natural laws whereby everything arose according to "inner necessity and unification of effective forces" (GT, 737/ 133).¹⁰¹ The scientist thus "seeks and finds...in every object and point of creation the whole God," and thus also "intrinsic truth, harmony, and beauty in all things" (GT, 736/ 132).¹⁰² In other words, science ends up being the key to coming to know the ordered whole of which we are a part -- "the whole which, down to its smallest unities, is but a single system" (GT, 737/ 133).¹⁰³

But Herder cannot stop with the claim that the whole is merely meaningfully ordered, for from the time of his earliest writings, he sought to show that the whole was also purposive, just as a particular community, united by a *Denkart* and the norms, practices, and beliefs that flow from

¹⁰¹ "die schönste Bewundrung, Liebe und Verehrung Gottes," "innrer Notwendigkeit und Verbindung wirkender Kräfte."

¹⁰² "Er sucht und findet...in jedem Gegenstande und Punkt der Schöpfung den ganzen Gott," "in jedem Dinge eine ihm wesentliche Wahrheit, Harmonie, und Schönheit."

¹⁰³ "das Ganze..., das bis auf seine kleinsten Verbindungen nur Ein System ist..."

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it, bestows purposiveness on the individuals who comprise it. Viewed from the inside of one of these particular communities, the source of this purposiveness is almost always a story about experiences of gods who grant or assign a teleological end for which the community strives. Now, Herder's descriptive communitarianism showed that these divine experiences are not genuine reflections of the world as it is in itself, but are rather an expression of the community's culture. In other words, what seemed to be an authentic example of gods speaking to or founding the community from some transcendent place beyond its confines turned out really to have had immanent sources: the community unknowingly gave itself its own end. But in developing the notion of God examined in this chapter, Herder actually ends up redeeming the community's original intuition about the divine, but not in the same sense that the community originally understood it. That is, according to Herder's theological communitarianism, the development of the norms, practices, and beliefs of every particular community can ultimately be traced to the working of a single force for which the end of each community is also a mean to a higher end that lies outside of each of them (**ID**, 341-2/ 229).

What is the metaphysical character of this higher end to which the end of each particular community stands as a mean? By articulating a notion of a primordial force which, if not identical with the world (see **GT**, 747/ 144), nevertheless approaches complete immanence (see **GT**, 722-3/ 117), Herder closes off the possibility that this entity assigns us our end from outside of the world in the way that the gods of particular communities are thought to do.¹⁰⁴ In contrast to this view, Herder understands the natural whole along the lines of a massive organism, with each particular community acting as a cell within it. For just as a cell can be understood to be a kind of self-contained, semi-independent whole with its own distinct parts that function in harmony with one another and for the sake of its own survival, so that cell can also be seen as an integral part of a larger whole -- the cell's life and growth as a means to the end of the life and growth of the whole organism of which it is a part. According to this analogy, then, there would be *intrinsic*, but not *extrinsic*, teleology in the purposive whole of nature.¹⁰⁵ That is, the whole

¹⁰⁴ Presumably Herder would have rejected this kind of account for similar reasons that he rejected Leibniz's defense of the "best of all possible worlds" thesis -- namely, because it would make God's actions appear to be arbitrary. See above.

¹⁰⁵ On these terms, see Kant, 1987, 251ff., and Shell, 1993, 126 on how he anticipates this distinction in his *Universal Natural History*, which Herder greatly admired and used as a model for

would indeed have a purpose or end to which all of the parts contribute, but it would be an end *internal* to the whole, just as an organism can be said to have its own growth and survival as the end to which all of its component parts contribute *without* necessarily presuming that the organism is oriented toward an end or purpose *external* to it in the way that, say, a tool is meant to serve the independent purpose for which it was made. Similarly, Herder's vision of the natural world as a purposive whole whose animating and ordering principle of development is understood to be a non-anthropomorphic, primordial force does not assume (and even positively denies) that there is any end or goal external to the closed, self-contained system or meta-community. This notion of each particular community simultaneously serving as both an end in itself and as a means to the higher end of the development of the whole functions as the basic underlying metaphysical foundation of Herder's theological communitarianism.

But in what sense can the natural whole understood in this fashion be thought of as good, and thus as the best of all possible worlds? The answer is not immediately apparent, for what we usually mean when we call something good is that it successfully attains its *extrinsic* end. For

his *Ideen* (see, footnote in **ID**, 21-2/ 1).

example, a "good tool" is one that does well the task (or end) for which it was made. Similarly, when we call someone a "good human being," we mean that he lives up to some notion of what we think a perfect man would be -- that he comes closer to reaching an extrinsic end that we assume to exist independently of any particular person. Lacking any external end or standard, it is far from clear how the tool or the human being could be judged to be "good." Likewise, Herder's concept of the natural whole united by intrinsic, but not extrinsic, teleology at first sight seems to be incapable of possessing moral worth in one way or another. But Herder believes it possible to avoid this problem by maintaining at least one connection to traditional theologies by holding that God -- even understood along the lines of a primordial force -- must be assumed to be necessarily good (as well as wise and beautiful) in Himself. And since, in its essence, the world is inseparably connected to God, the world, too, must be considered to be intrinsically good. As Herder writes,

"The world of God is thus the best, not because He selected it from among the less good, but rather because neither good nor bad existed without Him, and He, according to the inner necessity of His existence, could effect nothing bad. All of the forces are there which could exist; all of them are an expression of His

infinite wisdom, goodness, and beauty" (**GT**, 771-2/
169).¹⁰⁶

This assumed equation between God, the good, and the world allows Herder to claim that the world shows traces of divine goodness, wisdom, and beauty in absolutely everything, and thus also that the doctrine of "compossibility" by which Leibniz sought to explain the existence of evil in the world is superfluous, for "...nothing evil exists in the realm of God....All evil is a Nothing" (see **GT**, 792; cf. 733-35/190-1; cf. 129-31).¹⁰⁷ In other words, according to Herder, the natural world is a whole that is self-contained, self-sustaining, and intrinsically good.

When conceived in the light of this assumption, science acquires theological luster, not just because, as we have already seen, it becomes a means of teaching us about God through the study of forces in the world, but also because, in enabling us to understand that whole better and discover the laws by which it functions, science increases our awareness of our own place in the goodness of the whole, and, in doing so, it contributes to restoring the happiness

¹⁰⁶ "Die Welt Gottes ist also die Beste; nicht weil er sie unter Schlechteren wählte, sondern wil ohne ihn weder Gutes noch Schlechtes dawar und Er nach der innern Notwendigkeit seines Daseins nichts Schlechtes wirken konnte. Alle Kräfte sind also da, die Dasein konnten; allesamt Ein Ausdruck der Allweisheit, Allgüte, Allschönheit."

¹⁰⁷ "Im Reich Gottes existiert also nicht Böse....Alles Böse ist ein Nichts."

that had been stolen from us by the skeptical and materialistic philosophy of the Enlightenment.¹⁰⁸ Science accomplishes this extraordinary task by banishing the apparent arbitrariness that threatened to engulf us when it seemed that descriptive communitarianism was the highest truth of things. Herder describes this power of science in the following, ecstatic tones:

"the more true physics advances, the more we depart from the realm of blind power and arbitrariness and enter the realm of wisest necessity, of a goodness and beauty steadfast in themselves. All senseless fear vanishes when there is everywhere discovered the joyous, clear confidence of a creation in whose smallest point the whole God with his wisdom and goodness is present in his totality, working according to the essence of each creature with his undivided and indivisible God-force" (**GT**, 723/ 117).¹⁰⁹

Hence, what once appeared to be an "abomination of desolation" governed by randomness now comes to light as a whole so thoroughly and exquisitely ordered that each

¹⁰⁸ By not beginning with the Spinozist assumption that we learn about the essence of God by studying the natural world, materialists naturally come to very different conclusions about the meaning of their discoveries -- they begin by assuming, and thus end with the conclusion, that the universe is composed of lifeless matter-in-motion. Herder would say that, since in both cases the conclusion is based on a pre-scientific presupposition, the requirements of human happiness (the need to feel as a part in a meaningful and purposive whole) make the choice a simple one: side with Spinoza's pantheism.

¹⁰⁹ "Je mehr die wahre Physik zunimmt: desto weiter kommen wir aus dem Reich blinder Macht und Willkür hinaus, ins Reich der weisesten Notwendigkeit, einer in sich selbst festen Güte und Schönheit. Alle sinnlose Furcht verschwindet, wenn die freudige klare Zuversicht allenthalben ein Schöpfung gewahr wird, in deren kleinstem Punkt der ganze Gott mit seiner Weisheit und Güte gegenwärtig ist, und dem Wesen dieses Geschöpfs nach mit seiner ungeteilten und unteilbaren Gotteskraft wirkt."

particular part is precisely as perfect as it could possibly be -- each is itself

"a replica of wisdom, goodness, and beauty as it was able to reveal itself in a particular combination. Thus, nowhere in the world, in no leaf of a tree, in no grain of sand, in no fiber of our body, does arbitrariness rule. Everything is determined, fixed, ordered by forces which work in every point of creation, in accordance with the most perfect wisdom and goodness" (GT, 775/ 173).¹¹⁰

In other words, according to Herder's mature vision of nature, "neither in the world as a whole nor in its smallest part is there contingency" (GT, 734/ 129).¹¹¹ Thus, far from leaving us wallowing in existential doubts and despair, when science acts as a handmaiden to Herder's theological communitarianism, it helps us to affirm our life and our place in the whole by finding necessity within it:

"To pursue nature, first to conjecture her lofty laws, then to observe, test, and confirm them, then to find them verified a thousandfold and to apply them anew, and finally, to perceive everywhere the same wisest law, the same divine necessity, to come to love it and make it one's own -- all of this is what gives worth to human life" (GT, 784/ 182-3).¹¹²

¹¹⁰ "...ein Abdruck der Weisheit, Güte und Schönheit selbst ist, wie solche sich in diesem Zusammenhange sichtbar machen konnte. Nirgend in der Welt also, in keinem Blatt eines Baums, in keinem Sandkorn, in keinem Fäserchen unsres Körpers herrscht Willkür; alles ist von Kräften, die in jedem Punkt der Schöpfung nach der vollkommensten Weisheit and Güte wirken, bestimmt, gesetzt, geordnet."

¹¹¹ "weder im Ganzen der Welt, noch in ihrem kleinsten Tiele ist also Zufall."

¹¹² "Der Natur nachzugehen, ihre hohen Gesetze erst zu ahnen, dann zu bemerken, zu prüfen, sich darüber zu vergewissern, jetzt sie tausendfach bestätigt zu finden und neu anzuwenden; allenthalben endlich dieselbe weiseste Regel, dieselbe heilige Notwendigkeit

This is the case because there is, according to Herder, "much comfort and sweet pleasantness...in the word 'necessity'" (GT, 766/ 164).¹¹³ It should come as no surprise, then, that he looks forward with eagerness to the day when "the observational study of nature, which is still so young, will...advance so far in all this that it will finally banish all blind arbitrariness from the world..." (GT, 782/ 181).¹¹⁴ Herder's philosophy of history must be understood to be his greatest contribution to this project of banishing arbitrariness from the world and affirming necessity and goodness in its place.

wahrzunehmen, lieb zu gewinnen, sich selbst anzubilden; das eben macht den Wert eines Menschenlebens."

¹¹³ "Wie viel Trost, was für süße Anmut liegt in dem Wort 'Notwendigkeit'."

¹¹⁴ "Die bemerkende Naturlehre, die noch so jung ist, wird in diesem allen einmal weit reichen, so daß sie zuletzt jede blinde Willkür aus der Welt verbannen wird..."

Chapter 6

HERDER'S THEOLOGICAL COMMUNITARIANISM III: THE COMFORT OF NECESSITY

Having examined the theology with which Herder undergirds his philosophy of history, we are now in a position to return to his thoughts on human progress to see how that theology gave him the resources to avoid a potentially devastating problem with his attempt to escape from the communitarian conundrums outlined in Chapter 3. For there are reasons to think that, despite the purposiveness with which it is suffused, Herder's philosophy of history as we have thus far described it would fall short of his goal of securing the conditions of human happiness for modern man. This is the case because, by focusing so steadfastly on the macro-communal end to which each particular community stands as a means -- that is, on a future time in which, in contrast to the comparative fragmentation of the present, genuine wholeness will be experienced in all of its fullness -- Herder's thought threatens to inspire resentment in all those who live at a time prior to that end. In other words, finding themselves trapped within a world that so manifestly falls short of the ideal that Herder reveals to them, modern individuals would

likely be led to despair at having been born at a time whose happiness and wholeness falls so far short of what later generations will be lucky enough to experience. Those modern individuals might even come to resent the fact that they must make sacrifices for the sake of a future state of happiness that they themselves will never live to see. And that despair and resentment might even come to manifest itself in an anxious, apocalyptic desire to find a way to bring the end of history into existence at the present moment.¹¹⁵ Herder's philosophy of history would thus seem to reproduce and even intensify the problems he identified in the more traditional theories of progress common to the Enlightenment.¹¹⁶ That is, in treating each particular community as a means to a higher end, Herder's philosophy of history seems liable to reawaken (or at the very least, keep alive) an awareness of arbitrariness and injustice within history; it thus also seems to show that the totality of human history is not the genuine community that Herder wishes it to be.

But of course, Herder did not posit a simple process of historical progress toward a predetermined end. On the

¹¹⁵ For a similar account of the dangers of the philosophy of history, see Kant, 1963.

¹¹⁶ For problems with the Enlightenment's philosophy of progress, see Chapter 4.

contrary, he understood his philosophy of history to be a response to the problems that arose from just such way of looking at the course of human events. How exactly did he avoid this problem? As we have already seen in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5, he did so by claiming that, in addition to serving as a means to a higher end, each community in history is also, at the same time, an end in itself. But it is one thing for Herder to propose such a counterintuitive, even fundamentally paradoxical doctrine as a statement of what would have to be true about man and history in order for happiness as he understands it to be possible under modern conditions. It is quite another for him to provide a plausible interpretation of human historical events to back up his conviction that at whatever stage in the formation of Humanity an individual happens to find himself, he manifests the greatest degree of Humanity possible at that time and place. In other words, Herder has set himself the daunting task of showing nothing less than that mankind *everywhere and always* exists (and has existed) at the peak of creation:

"Hence what every man is or can be -- that must be the end of the human species. And what is this? Humanity and happiness in this place, in this degree, as this and no other link in the chain of improvement that extends through the whole species" (**ID**, 342/ 229).¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ "Was also jeder Mensch ist und sein kann, das muß Zweck des Menschengeschlechts sein; und was ist dies? Humanität und Glückseligkeit auf dieser Stelle, in diesem Grad, als dies und

In short, Herder must show that every single individual in history contributes to the formation of Humanity -- and thus can enjoy the benefit of happiness that flows from it -- just by existing in a particular time and place.¹¹⁸

Herder's attempt to redeem every moment in history begins with his examination of the process whereby belief in gods arose within each community. As we have already seen, Herder claims that communities come to believe in divinities as a result of their first tentative attempts to make sense of the world around them -- for example, by attributing an effect to an unseen cause (**ID**, 299-300/ 198). Hence, "the mythology of every people is an expression of the authentic way in which they viewed nature" (**ID**, 301/ 199).¹¹⁹ Now since each community's view of nature will be determined in some fundamental sense by the influence of the local "climate" [*Klima*]¹²⁰ on the "vital forces" [*Lebenskräfte*] or raw, unformed "feeling" [*Gefühl*] flowing through the members

kein andres Glied der Kette von Bildung, die durchs ganze Geschlecht reicht."

¹¹⁸ Of course, we should not expect such an interpretation to be persuasive for someone who does not share his assumptions: Following Spinoza (and Leibniz to an extent), his *a posteriori* "evidence" will be persuasive if and only if one shares his *a priori* assumption about nature being a whole of organic forces determined by a God-force.

¹¹⁹ "die Mythologie jedes Volks ist ein Abdruck der eigentlichen Art, wie es die Natur ansah."

¹²⁰ See Chapter 1 for more on *Klima* and its determinative role in forming the *Denkarten* of communities.

of the primordial community, and since those climactic influences are, in turn, a function of the primordial force that directs them through history, Herder comes to the tentative conclusion that the radical "diversity" of ways-of-life, and thus religious norms, practices, and beliefs in history, is divinely ordained (**ID**, 267-8, 269-72, 287-8, 312-3/ 175, 176-8, 189, 208).

But of course that diversity is not an end in itself. For "the history of mankind is necessarily a whole, that is, a chain of socialness and plastic tradition, from the first link to the last" (**ID**, 337/ 226).¹²¹ His "philosophy of the history of man" deciphers the order and unity that lies behind all the diversity -- the chain that connects each community to the others to form a whole (**ID**, 338/ 226-7). The principles of this philosophy are simple. They consist of the following: first, "tradition," which is "genetic" [genetisch] and amounts to the power of passing on the communal culture [Kultur] received from the past; second, creative "forces," which are "organic" [organisch] and can be thought of as powers of applying and transforming that which is received from the past into one's own (**ID**, 339-40/ 227-8). According to Herder, these two principles are the

¹²¹ "die Geschichte der Menschheit notwendig ein Ganzes d.i. eine Kette der Geselligkeit und bildenden Tradition vom Ersten bis zum letzten Gliede."

key to showing that "all the works of God have this property, that, although they belong to a whole too vast to be seen in its entirety, each is itself a whole, and bears the divine character of its destination" (**ID**, 341/ 229).¹²² In other words, in following the ways in which mankind has adopted and transformed traditions over time, the philosopher of history discovers exactly what Herder thinks he needs to discover: namely, that "all of [God's] means are ends: all his ends are means to higher ends, in which the infinite, filling all, reveals himself" (**ID**, 342/ 229).¹²³

We see our first concrete example of what this philosophy of history looks like only in the second half of the *Ideen* (the first half of the book is primarily concerned with laying out the end of man's development and discussing the prehistory of the human race), and when we finally do, we cannot help but be surprised at what we find. For Herder's account of concrete communities in history, while demonstrating a remarkable degree of learning on his part, amounts to little more than a simple description of the

¹²² "Alle Werke Gottes haben dieses eigen, daß ob sie gleich alle zu Einem unübersehlichen Ganzen gehören, jedes dennoch auch für sich ein Ganzes ist und den göttlichen Charakter seiner Bestimmung an sich trägt."

¹²³ "Alle seine Mittel sind Zwecke; alle seine Zwecke Mittel zu größern Zwecken, in denen der Unendliche allerfüllend sich offenbaret."

diversity of those communities. To be sure, Herder offers a certain amount of praise for some of them and blame for others; the former are usually those run like a well-regulated household (see, for example, **ID**, 431-2/ 291), and the latter are those that try to create supranational imperial domains and thus inappropriately "unite a lion's head, dragon's tail, eagle's wing, and paws of a bear into one unpatriotic picture of a state" (**ID**, 370/ 249-50).¹²⁴ But, on the whole, it seems at first that there is surprisingly little philosophy to Herder's so-called philosophy of history.

The first indication we receive that Herder is not simply writing a disinterested, scholarly history of the human race comes almost 350 pages into the work, at a point at which he pauses in his rich historical descriptions to compare each community in history to a plant in a garden. How, we wonder, does the garden as a whole appear to "the historian of mankind," who "must see with eyes as impartial, and judge as dispassionately, as the creator of the human race"? (**ID**, 509/ 348-9).¹²⁵ Herder gives us a tentative

¹²⁴ "wo sich das Löwenhaupt mit dem Drachenschweif und der Adlersflügel mit dem Bärenfuß zu Einem unpatriotischen Staatsgebilde vereinigt."

¹²⁵ "Der Geschichtschreiber der Menschheit muß wie der Schöpfer unsres Geschlechts...unparteiisch sehen und Leidenschaftlos richten."

answer to this question by making what at first sounds like a peculiar claim according to which the observation that ancient states were founded on education, tradition, and religion, whereas modern ones rest on "money, or mechanical politics," is not merely a statement of fact, but instead, an example of necessity: the ancient communal structure was necessary for the infancy of the human race (**ID**, 512-3/351). Now it is important to realize that in making this claim, Herder does not simply mean to be arguing for the relatively uncontroversial point that, given their lack of development in comparison to modern communities, ancient communities had to be structured the way they were. If this were his intention, then the effect of this statement would be to show that the structure of ancient communities was conditional, or contingent, on the comparatively underdeveloped character of life in the ancient world, which implies that, had the character of the ancient world been different, another form of community would have been appropriate to the age. But, as other passages make perfectly clear, Herder wishes to make a far stronger claim: namely, that the quality of the age as a whole was thoroughly determined and necessary -- it *had* to be the way it was.

That this is the intended meaning of the passage becomes clear in later interludes within Herder's detailed historical account of the human race. The next such section occurs at the end of his discussion of the ancient Greeks. There, after having commented on how, more than any other People in history, the Greeks clearly passed through every possible stage of life -- including birth, growth, maturity, old age, and death -- Herder states the following as a general principle of the philosophy of history: "Whatever can take place among mankind within the sphere of given circumstances of nation, time, and place, actually does take place" (**ID**, 567-8/ 391, emphasis added).¹²⁶ In other words, the study of history becomes genuinely philosophical for Herder when the events of the past are given a specific interpretation -- not an interpretation that takes the form of a narrative account that privileges one community at the expense of others or which claims in a one-dimensional way that some communities are more advanced than others along the way toward realizing the end of Humanity, but, on the contrary, one in which as little narrative as possible is combined with the *a priori* assumption that, no matter what took place, "it could not have been otherwise" (**ID**, 569/

¹²⁶ "Was im Reich der Menschheit nach dem Umfange gegebner National-, Zeit- und Ortumstände geschehen kann, geschieht in ihm wirklich."

392).¹²⁷ So, for example, in answer to the question of why an early form of enlightenment existed among the Greeks, Herder answers with a thoroughly tautological statement: "because they were there, and in such circumstances could not have been anything other than enlightened Greeks" (**ID**, 569/ 392).¹²⁸ In making this and other similar assertions, Herder does not mean to be pointing to specific factors that could be singled out as causes in the way that a modern social scientist would do; rather, he is speaking of the specifically Greek constellation of norms, practices, and beliefs, as well as climactic forces, as a whole, no one or cluster of which can be isolated from the others as an explanatory variable.

Now if Herder had meant these statements to apply only to this or that particular community, they could possibly be interpreted as simple restatements of his descriptive communitarianism. But Herder did not mean to limit his thoughts on historical necessity to the forms of life that arise within particular communities; what is true of Greece is also true of every other community in history, and that fact points to the guiding force underlying them all. So,

¹²⁷ "es nicht anders als also sein konnte"

¹²⁸ "Warum waren die aufgeklärten Griechen in der Welt? Weil sie da waren und unter solche Umständen nicht anders als aufgeklärte Griechen sein konnten."

for example, the fact that the ancient Romans "were and became what they could become" is taken by Herder to be a further indication that "everything has blossomed on earth that could blossom, each in its time and in its sphere," and thus also that "the work of providence pursues its eternal course according to grand, universal laws" (**ID**, 626/ 435).¹²⁹ But according to Herder, if viewed in their proper light, these laws that underlie the seemingly random tumult of history are actually different manifestations of a single law -- one that "reaches from the sun, and from all the suns [in the universe], to the most insignificant human action" (**ID**, 655-6; cf. 630/ 456; cf. 438).¹³⁰ Hence, although Herder admits that doubts, complaints, and uncertainty arise from the fact that we often perceive little evidence of moral progress in history, we should not despair because we will one day know the laws of such progress with as much depth as modern man has come to know the laws of nature (**ID**, 656/ 457). For Herder, those who doubt providence have either a superficial view of things or a flawed idea of what it is; most likely they accept traditional Christian

¹²⁹ "Die Römer waren und wurden, was sie werden konnten....Alles hat auf der Erde geblüht, was blüen konnte; jedes zu seiner Zeit und in seinem Kreise....Das Werk der Vorsehung geht nach allgemeinen großen Gesetzen in seinem ewigen Gange fort..."

¹³⁰ "Ein und dasselbe Gesetz also erstreckt sich von der Sonne und von allen Sonnen bis zur kleinsten menschlichen Handlung..."

theological accounts that, like Leibniz's, describe an anthropomorphized God intervening in history rather than realizing that, as Herder writes, "the God whom I seek in history must be the same as in nature, for man is only a small part of the whole" (**ID**, 664-5/ 462-3).¹³¹ Providence rightly understood is thus analogous to the ironclad, deterministic laws of modern physics applied to human history by the presumption that what *does* happen, *has* to happen, and that, likewise, if something else *could have* happened, it *would have* happened.¹³²

So, when Herder writes that the philosophy of history shows us that the infinite end or destination of the human race is the attainment of a state in which it becomes thoroughly rational, just, and happy, he does not mean to imply that we could ever conceivably avoid the experience of hardships and suffering, for he never abandons the view that we examined in Chapter 3, according to which everything on earth, including man, is perishable and thus unavoidably subject to decay and death (**ID**, 15-16, 198-9, 665-9/ viii,

¹³¹ "Der Gott, den ich in der Geschichte suche, muß derselbe sein, der er in der Natur ist: denn der Mensch ist nur ein kleiner Teil des Ganzen..."

¹³² "Everything that can take place upon earth must take place upon it, provided it happens according to rules that carry their perfection within themselves" ["Alles, was auf der Erde geschehen kann, muß auf ihr geschehen, sobald es nach Regeln geschieht die ihre vollkommenheit in ihnen selbst tragen"] (**ID**, 665/ 463).

131, 463-6). Rather, Herder means to say that our hardships and suffering can be redeemed -- can be given meaning and purpose -- through the philosophy of history. When misfortune befalls us, we will be able to conceive of an answer to the question of "why?" -- the question on which our happiness depends -- once we have studied the philosophy of history and come to know its truths. The answer it conveys will always be the same: "Because in this time and in this place it could not have been otherwise, and, as such -- in making that necessary contribution to the realization of an end that is good -- that incident of apparent hardship and suffering is also good." But, according to Herder, this answer is enough -- it is sufficient to make each of us happy, despite the misfortunes and injustice that would otherwise leave us in a state of existential despair, because it places us within a divinely ordered, meaningful and purposive whole that is good in itself and to which each of us must conceive of ourselves to be making the best, the most appropriate -- the only -- contribution possible at the time and place in which we find ourselves in history. As Herder writes: "There is no nobler use of human history than this: it unfolds to us, as it were, the counsels of fate, and teaches us, insignificant as we are, to act

according to God's eternal natural laws" (**ID**, 671/ 467).¹³³

But what could the word "act" possibly mean in such a context? For once Herder has shown us that "all senseless arbitrariness vanishes from history" and that "in it, as in every production of the realm of nature, all or nothing is fortuitous, all or nothing is arbitrary" (**ID**, 632/ 432)¹³⁴ -- once we have come to accept this core teaching of the philosophy of history, what remains of human freedom to act in one way or another? Is there even a way to conceive of acting contrary to God's law so defined, to defy the "counsels of fate"? The answer must be an unequivocal "no." To admit anything else would be to jeopardize the closed, deterministic system Herder reveals to himself and his readers -- the ordered whole the existence of which is a necessary condition of our happiness. Herder experiences no second thoughts about having sacrificed human freedom on the altar of necessity, for in doing so, he attains the goal he set out for himself from the time of his earliest writings.

¹³³ "Keinen edlern Gebrauch der Menschengeschichte gibts, als diesen: er führt uns gleichsam in den Rat des Schicksals und lehrt uns in unsrer nichtigen Gestalt nach ewigen Naturgesetzen Gottes handeln."

¹³⁴ "Bei dieser Betrachtung verschwindet alle sinnlose Willkür auch aus der Geschichte....In ihr sowohl als in jeder Erzeugung der Naturreiche ist Alles oder Nichts zufall, Alles oder Nichts Willkür." See also **GT**, 783/ 181: "...natural laws must prevail everywhere, or else creation falls apart like a chaos." ["...so müssen allenthalben Naturgesetze walten oder die Schöpfung fällt wie ein Chaos aus einander."]

There is thus no reason for him to resist his own conclusions. In fact, he believes that he has far more to gain by embracing the "counsels of fate," for, as he has one of the interlocutors in his *God: Some Conversations* pronounce, "Happy [is] he who follows willingly!" (**GT**, 786-7/ 184).¹³⁵ Herder thus invites his readers to gaze at the universal history of the human race, as much as their own lives, to say

"Shakespeare was no Sophocles, Milton no Homer, Bolingbroke no Pericles: yet they were in their kind and in their situation what those were in theirs. Everyone therefore strives in his place to be what he can be in the course of things: this he should be and to be anything else is impossible" (**ID**, 573/ 395).¹³⁶

¹³⁵ This statement takes place within a passage that contains one of the fullest statements of Herder's theological communitarianism and how it solves the problem that had animated his work from its earliest days. "He who does not wish to follow, must follow, for everything compels him; he cannot escape the all-powerful chain. Happy [is] he who follows willingly: he possesses the sweet, illusory reward that he forms himself, although it is God who unremittingly forms him. By obeying with reason and serving with love -- in this way, all productions and events stamp him with the imprint of the deity. He becomes reasonable, good, orderly, happy: he becomes like God." ["...wer nicht folgen will, muß folgen: denn alles ziehet ihn, er kann der allgewaltigen Kette nicht entweichen. Wohl dem, der willig folgt: er hat den süßen täuschenden Lohn in sich, daß er sich selbst bildete, obwohl ihn Gott unablässig bildet. Indem er mit Vernunft gehorcht und mit Liebe dient: so prägt sich ihm aus allen geschöpfen und Begebenheiten das Gepräge der Gottheit auf: er wird vernünftig, gütig, ordentlich, glücklich; er wird Gott ähnlich."]

¹³⁶ "Shakespear was kein Sophokles, Milton kein Homer, Bolingbroke kein Perikles; sie waren aber das in ihrer Art und auf ihrer Stelle, was jene in der ihrigen waren. Jeder strebe also auf seinem Platz, zu sein was er in der Folge der Dinge sein kann; dies soll er auch sein und ein andres ist für ihn nicht möglich."

Each and every person who follows Herder's path can rejoice in the awareness that, in becoming what he has no choice but to become, he makes a vital and necessary contribution to the development and formation of Humanity within a larger whole that is meaningful, purposive, and good. In this way -- through a communitarian "theodicy of wise necessity" (GT, 792/ 190-1)¹³⁷ -- Herder believes he has solved the human problem: the problem of happiness.

¹³⁷ "eine Theodizee der weisen Notwendigkeit ist in meinen Gedanken."

Chapter 7

THE FINAL CRISIS: FROM THEODICY TO DIALECTIC

But has Herder really solved the problem of happiness? As it turned out, even Herder himself came to doubt that he had fully succeeded in solving the problem. For his theodicy stands or falls with its ability to show, not only that each and every event in history is necessary, but also that each and every one of those necessary events contributes in an indispensable way to the realization of an end (the future religion of Humanity) that is good-in-itself; it is faith in the reality and goodness of that end that redeems the superficially arbitrary and unjust course of human history. The extraordinary therapeutic power of such a philosophy of history can be seen in the final quarter of Herder's *Ideen*, when, after he has made the most extreme case for his theodicy, he immediately turns back to the concrete particulars of history to discuss the advent of modernity in the fifteenth- and sixteenth- centuries. In vivid contrast to the venomous wrath of his youthful polemics against the modern age, Herder now paints the early modern period in a remarkably positive light. His anti-modern rancor having vanished in the midst of his

attempt to interpret the events of history as both ends in themselves and as means to a higher end, occurrences that once inspired revulsion in his heart now come to seem both necessary and good.

But are there any limits to the capacity to make such an interpretation of history? What if an event took place that seemed blatantly to contradict or defy the end toward which Herder maintains history inexorably moves? What if it led to doubts regarding the goodness, or even the existence, of an end of history to which each and every community stands as a means? Clearly, the effect of such an inexplicable event on Herder's theodicy would be disastrous, since it would stand as evidence that the totality of human communities does not cohere into a closed whole, directed by a primordial God-force toward an end of perfect goodness. As one can see from his major work of the 1790s -- the *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* [*Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*] (1793-7) -- Herder was indeed confronted by such a potentially calamitous event in the Terror that followed the French Revolution. The final, most fully developed form of Herder's philosophy of history takes shape as he tries to absorb these events into his progressive historical system. As we shall see, doing so

required that Herder come to develop an explanation of how evidence that seemed so clearly to speak against his theory could actually be interpreted as evidence in favor of it.

The work that eventually became the *Briefe* was originally intended as the fifth and final part of his monumental *Ideen* -- the part that would bring the philosophy of history down to the present -- but Herder was led to abandon his plan to complete this work by the French Revolution. Convinced at first by the events of the Revolution that mankind had just entered a period of radical change for the better, he wanted to do everything he could to contribute to this march of progress toward the realization of Humanity.¹³⁸ With this goal in mind, Herder hit upon the idea of writing an entirely new work that would eschew the form of a treatise in favor of a fictional epistolary discussion among various members of a philosophical and philanthropic organization.¹³⁹ The

¹³⁸ See the discussion in Clark, pp. 365ff. It is also important to note that Herder's enthusiasm about change for the better points to the failure of his philosophy of history fully to convince even himself that each time and place in history is an end in itself, for if he truly believed this to be the case, he would not have longed for a future state of improvement, for one only longs for a better future when one is dissatisfied with the present.

¹³⁹ See Clark, p. 365 and Haym, II, p. 485 on how Herder was influenced by Benjamin Franklin's plan in the *Political, Miscellaneous and Philosophical Pieces* for the Philadelphia "Junto" or society for the discussion of philosophical and philanthropic projects. See also Letters 2-3 of the *Briefe* for a discussion of Franklin's ideas.

members of this elite society would debate one another on such subjects as the viability of the idea of progress in Humanity, the contribution that literature and the arts could make to that progress, and many other related topics. As the title of the *Briefe* makes clear, Herder hoped that the publication of these fictional letters would contribute to the advancement of Humanity among those who read them.¹⁴⁰

Written in 1792 (and thus before the Revolution turned the corner into the Terror in early 1793), the first draft of the *Briefe* presents us with a remarkable opportunity to gauge Herder's initial reaction to what was taking place in France. Moreover, when we compare that reaction to the views expressed in the revised version of the *Briefe* that was published in April, 1793, we acquire a means by which to determine how Herder responded to and altered his view of history and progress in the light of events that seemed to refute his early optimism. Herder was hardly alone in seeing the Revolution in an overwhelmingly positive light, although he was certainly among the first to go as far as to claim that its importance rivaled that of the advent of Christianity in Europe (**BR**, 780).¹⁴¹ And, from what we have

¹⁴⁰ Whether they actually did so is, of course, debatable at the very least. But what is clear is that they did succeed in popularizing Herder's philosophy of history in Germany. See Clark, 366.

¹⁴¹ Other events that come close the Revolution in importance,

already seen about his predilection to view history in a theological light, it should come as no surprise that in the first draft of the *Briefe*, Herder sees the Revolution as a "sign of the times" [*Zeichen dieser Zeit*], as proof that the human race lives under a "higher economy" [*höheren Haushaltung*], and that nothing less than God Himself directs the flow of human history (**BR**, 772, 780, 781). Overall, the Herder of 1792 is of the opinion that "fate" or "destiny" [*Schicksal*] will decide the future, as the world is transformed by principles¹⁴² that, until quite recently, were little more than a "political wish" [*politischer Wunsch*] found in the minds of philosophical speculators (**BR**, 782-3). In keeping with the view articulated in the *Ideen*, Herder holds that, whatever happens, "providence" [*Vorsehung*] had placed the events in France before the eyes of the world so that all of its Peoples could learn from them as an example

according to Herder, include the barbarian invasions of Europe, the rebirth of the sciences and the Reformation in the early modern period, and perhaps the Crusades and 30 Years War. For other extravagant claims from the period regarding the historical importance of the Revolution, see Kant, 1979, Part 2, Chapter 7, and Friedrich Schlegel's essay, "Athenäums," which listed the Revolution along with Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* as exhibiting the "greatest tendencies of the age." See the note on page 1131 of **BR**.

¹⁴² These include the view that there is only one People and one class within each country, and that that unified nation has the right to self-determination. This kind of consideration leads Herder to proclaim that, were a France newly liberated from despotism to take up arms against its neighbors in order to defend itself against hostile powers, it would be the first example of a justified war in human history (**BR**, 767-8, 785-9).

of what mankind is capable of becoming in the future (BR, 783-4, 789).

In the months that separated the writing of these passages and the publications of the first two parts¹⁴³ of the *Briefe* (in April, 1793), King Louis XVI had been beheaded (on January 21, 1793) and the Terror had begun in France. How did Herder respond to this turn of events, so seemingly opposed to the humanitarian spirit he hoped to see prevail in the world? Did he see it as an occasion to reign in his extraordinarily high, even eschatological, hopes for the future -- as a sign that perhaps the events of the world are not guided by a benevolent providence toward an end of peace, love, and mutual understanding among individuals and nations? Not surprisingly, the answer was no. On the contrary, if anything, Herder theological approach to understanding the events of the political and historical realm became radicalized. How did he express his newly intensified hopes for the realization of Humanity in the face of evidence that would at first sight seem to undermine them? He did so by invoking the concept of "Spirit" [*Geist*], and especially what he called the "Spirit of the Times" [*Geist der Zeiten*]. Although Herder defines the

¹⁴³ The first two parts of the serialized work included Letters 1-13 and 14-26.

Spirit of the Times in virtually the same way in both the draft and published version of the *Briefe* -- as the "sum of the thoughts, attitudes, strivings, and vital forces that express themselves with given causes and effects in a determinate course of things"¹⁴ (**BR**, 764, 87-8) -- the presentation of these trans-communal characteristics is altogether more abstract in the published version. In the draft, Herder had moved rather quickly from a metaphysical discussion of the relation between Spirit and Time to a concrete description of how the Spirit of human progress had been stifled throughout the ages due to the effect of secular and sacerdotal institutions and hierarchy, which led to such offenses against Humanity as the attempt forcibly to convert the Muslim world to Christianity during the Crusades of the Middle Ages (**BR**, 765-8).

In the published version of the *Briefe*, however, Herder begins his discussion of the idea of the Spirit of the Times with a Letter (#15) in which it is said to be most akin to the doctrine of the medieval philosopher and theologian,

¹⁴ "...die Summe der Gedanken, Gesinnungen, Anstrengungen, und lebendiger Kräfte, die sich in einem bestimmten Fortlauf der Dinge mit gegebenen Ursachen und Wirkungen äußern." In the draft, this statement is found in a letter separate from (and after) the one in which Herder discusses "Spirit" and the "Spirit of the Times" in the greatest detail, whereas in the published version, it comes right at the beginning of the discussion and is found within a letter that sets the terms for the definitions of Spirit and Time that follow it. Compare **BR**, 85ff. to 771-2.

Averroës, according to whom the entire human race shares a single soul in common. And in contrast to the content of the draft, Herder never descends from this level of abstraction in the published version (**BR**, 85).¹⁴⁵ We learn, for example, that the power of this Spirit is great, but it is invisible (**BR**, 86). The man who is able to comprehend it in his thoughts brings order and form to the otherwise chaotic course of historical occurrences (**BR**, 87), and those whom providence has given the capacity to detect the working of this Spirit by observing it retrospectively in its effects through the proper study of history -- that is, by opening themselves up to "meditative experience" [*nachdenkende Erfahrung*] -- are the ones who are truly happy (**BR**, 87). The fictional author of Letter 15 thus presents his reader with a radically contemplative ideal of happiness in detachment; it would seem that, for Herder, the historian of Spirit replaces the ancient philosophical sage as perhaps the highest human type.¹⁴⁶

This quasi-mystical tone continues in Letter 16, in which we learn that Spirit cannot be described, shown, or made by human effort; thus neither can we speak of the Spirit of the Times as having a clear and understandable

¹⁴⁵ "...Averroës glaubte, daß das ganze Menschengeschlecht nur Eine Seele habe..."

¹⁴⁶ For more on Spirit, see **BR**, 153-4, 266-7.

essence (**BR**, 87, 89). Yet, despite its enigmatic quality, Herder claims that Spirit "forms a chain in the advancement of the times" and "binds together ever more tightly what has transpired and what takes place every day."¹⁴⁷ Spirit, we learn, is working to build an as yet "invisible church" [*unsichtbare Kirche*] comprising all of the members of the human race. Thus, no matter what seemingly contrary events might take place, we can be sure that the ever-expanding "communal spirit" [*Gemeingeist*] of enlightened Europe cannot possibly be extinguished (**BR**, 89). In accord with this view, Letter 16 closes with the claim that a "World-Spirit" [*Weltgeist*] has already been responsible for creating two distinct "epochs" [*Epochen*] of history and is currently in the process of giving birth to a third. The first -- the Middle Ages -- is "long passed away" and "hopefully will never return."¹⁴⁸ The effects of the second -- the period stretching from the Protestant Reformation through the Enlightenment -- still continue to be felt at the end of the eighteenth-century. As for the third, which is only just now beginning to come to light, we can know only that it will be an epoch in which "against our wills (and with God's

¹⁴⁷ "...bilden allerdings eine Kette im Fortgange der Zeiten," "was vorgegangen ist und täglich vorgeht, binden sie fest und fest an einander."

¹⁴⁸ "längst vorüber," "kommt hoffentlich nie wieder"

graces), we must become more reasonable and just men" (BR, 89, 103).¹⁴⁹

One could say, then, in the face of the bloody violence of the Terror in France, Herder's philosophy of history, already abstract in the *Ideen* and draft of the *Briefe*, moved to an even greater distance from the real world of political and historical events in the published version. In this way, Herder was able to maintain his optimism, despite occurrences that might have otherwise led him to despair of his seemingly unbounded hopes for the future.

But Herder had not lost all touch with reality. In fact, his *Briefe* actually contain eloquent and well-argued Letters from a "pessimist" that show that he was well-aware of the dangers and self-deceptions to which his philosophy of World-Spirit was prone. It is in the Letters in which Herder responds to those who would deny the reality of a progressive Spirit in history that his philosophy of history -- his theological communitarianism -- reaches its final, most fully-developed form.

The first (#21) of two Letters written by a pessimist¹⁵⁰ is substantially similar to the corresponding Letter in the

¹⁴⁹ "wider unsern Willen müssen wir einmal, Gott gebe bald, vernünftigere, billigere Menschen werden."

¹⁵⁰ We can assume that both pessimistic Letters are supposed to be written by the same person because their counterparts in the draft version were both signed by the same letter of the

draft version of the *Briefe* (see #13, 772-4). However, what must have been meant as little more than a generalized reactionary diatribe against his time in its original setting (much like Herder's own early essays and *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte*) had been transformed by recent spectacular events in France into a model of skeptical prudence and concern for civilized life. The fictionalized author of Letter 21 begins by raising the sensible question of whether or not the high hopes that accompany talk of a *Weltgeist* and an impending epochal transformation of the human race are truly justified. Would anyone deny, he asks, that good things often do not accompany one another in human life and history -- that, for example, "often the loudest patriots are [also] the pettiest egoists"? (**BR**, 103-4).¹⁵¹

Is it not, then, dangerous to place one's hopes in the uneducated mass of the People on the one hand, and abstract, philosophical speculators on the other? (**BR**, 105) But, according to the fictionalized author of Letter 21, this is precisely what is implied by talk of a *Weltgeist* and universal progress. In contrast to Herder's own view, the pessimist claims that a clear-sighted assessment of the

alphabet (this was a device that Herder dropped in the published version, i.e., all of the Letters became anonymous).

¹⁵¹ "...die lautsten Patrioten sind oft die engherzigsten Egoisten."

world leads one to conclude that the true "Spirit of our Times" [*Geist unsrer Zeiten*] is one of "disintegration" [*Auflösung*] -- one in which political systems have lost their base of support and "the worst as well as the best decline into ruins" (**BR**, 105-6).¹⁵² That is, the pessimist's argument amounts to the claim that historical events at the close of the eighteenth-century provide concrete, factual evidence against the reality of universal progress.

When the pessimist returns in Letter 24, he does not mention and attack the French Revolution explicitly as he had in the corresponding Letter of the draft version (see **BR**, 778-780).¹⁵³ Instead, Letter 24 contains a series of damning attacks on Herder's entire theological-communitarian project, beginning with the suggestion that the very idea of progress toward the perfection of the human species is simply a dream, the product of a "deceptive, blind hope" (**BR**, 121).¹⁵⁴ But, he goes on to argue, even if we grant

¹⁵² "...stürzen sie, so, fürchte ich, geht unter den Trümmern des Schlechteren auch das Beste mit unter."

¹⁵³ It is highly unlikely that Herder removed all explicit reference to the Revolution in the published version of the *Briefe* because of concerns with censorship, since the highly critical comments about the events in France contained in the pessimist's second Letter of the draft would certainly have endeared him to government officials had he chosen to keep them in the text. I believe it makes more sense to speculate that Herder removed those references in order to broaden and intensify the pessimist's case against his own ideas so that he could launch a more powerful defense of his own views.

¹⁵⁴ "...täuschende, blinde Hoffnung." It is possible that this objection is meant to be an attack on Letter 22, which had

(with Rousseau, for example), that the human race is unique among species in possessing the capacity for perfectibility, it is still far from clear what the path to that end might look like. Is it a simple line of progress? An ellipse? Or is it some kind of curve? (**BR**, 121). In other words, the pessimist challenges Herder to specify in greater detail than he previously had the historical process whereby man evolves toward the end of perfection.¹⁵⁵

But that is not all. The fictional author of Letter 24 goes further to question what one could possibly mean by positing an end of perfection towards which the entire human race is supposedly developing. For example, he argues that, if progress is understood to be a process whereby the species undergoes an "increase in forces" [*Vermehrung der Kräfte*], then it amounts to an incoherent view according to which man is destined to evolve into an "overman" [*Übermensch*] or a "superman" [*Außermensch*] (**BR**, 122 with

responded to the pessimist's first Letter (#21) by positing a view of progress similar to Kant's -- namely, one according to which we must have "hope" that human history is progressive in order to overcome despair that arises from doubting the reality of providence (**BR**, 116, 114). On how this view differs from Herder's, see the concluding section of Chapter 3. But for an indication that Herder's own views became increasingly similar to Kant's (despite their increasing (public) animosity toward one another), see the comments about reason in **BR**, 128.

¹⁵⁵ The pessimist also raises an objection with which Kant was particularly concerned -- namely, the problem of how the progress of the species could be reconciled with individual human finitude. Compare **BR**, 121 with Kant, 1991b.

123). But this is clearly impossible, since, by definition, man "can never become a God or an angel" (BR, 122). But what if progress is understood to mean instead that man will fashion ever-greater means to employ the forces he has? In other words, what if human perfection consists in technological progress? But, as so many critics of technology in our century have argued, the pessimist points out that technological advances could only be interpreted to be genuine progress if they were matched with advances in the knowledge of moral ends that determine how those technological devices are to be used. Progress understood as advancement in technology thus points toward the need for moral improvement -- for improvement in inclinations, passions, and virtues (BR, 122). But where in history is there evidence of such improvement? According to the pessimist, there is none. On the contrary, he maintains that the study of history reveals that, at best, it is characterized by radical diversity and change with no sign of progress (BR, 122).

How could Herder respond to the devastating objections that he himself raised to his project of trying to redeem the course of human history? How could he alter "the whole view of things"¹⁵⁶ to show that history is oriented toward

¹⁵⁶ "...die ganze Ansicht der Dinge..."

the end of progressively realizing the ideal of Humanity -- to show that "the present and future are a unity," that "the present is pregnant with the future," and that within every particular community as well as among them all, "the farmer and citizen, the philosopher and statesman" are actually one and the same? (**BR**, 118-19)¹⁵⁷ We receive our answer in Letter 25.

For it is there that Herder gives his fullest, most mature summary statement of his philosophy of history.¹⁵⁸ Under the title "On the Character of Mankind" [*Über den Charakter der Menschheit*]¹⁵⁹, Herder adds a new dimension to his philosophy of history -- a dimension that is meant to inoculate it against evidence that seems to speak against the reality of progress. What is this dimension? It is one that could only be described as "dialectical." That is, in answer to the pessimist's provocative question about whether

¹⁵⁷ "Gegenwart und Zukunft nur Eins war," "die Gegenwart ist schwanger von der Zukunft," "der Feldherr und Bürger, der Philosoph und Staatsmann trennten sich nicht von einander." In describing a future of wholeness and unity in Letter 23 that is "[ancient] Greece, but also not" ["es war Griechenland und war es auch nicht], Herder articulates an ideal that will be echoed many times in the philosophies of German Idealism. See, **BR**, 119.

¹⁵⁸ As the following discussion makes clear, I assume that, more than any other Letter in the second collection of the *Briefe* (Letters 14-26), Letter 25 gives clearest and fullest expression to Herder's own views.

¹⁵⁹ Against the pessimist's claim in Letter 21 that the Spirit of the Times is one of "disintegration" [*Auflösung*] (**BR**, 105-6), Letter 25 asserts that mankind has an "unauslöschlichen Charakter" (this could best be translated as an "undisintegratable character") (**BR**, 123).

or not progress follows a straight line through history, Herder claims that the path of human advancement is neither "straight nor uniform" (BR, 126).¹⁶⁰ Rather, it proceeds "in all directions, through all possible alterations and around every angle" (BR, 126).¹⁶¹ That is, all events in history must be understood to contribute to progress; no matter how many apparently bad things occur, we must recognize that each one of them helps to insure that, in the end, the humanitarian potential embedded within the species will ultimately be realized (BR, 129).¹⁶² For example, the often violent "competition" [*Wettkampf*] that takes place among peoples throughout history leads to a proliferation of new forces and, in turn, to more "communal productions" [*gemeinschaftliche Produktionen*]. The "conflict of all peoples" [*Konflikt aller Völker*], which at first sight seems unambiguously destructive, is something for which we should be thankful, for, at bottom, there is a "reason" [*Grund*] for it; every apparently negative event eventually brings about a higher rule of justice and truth (BR, 127, 129).

¹⁶⁰ "...die Linie dieses Fortganges nicht gerade, noch einformig..."

¹⁶¹ "...nach allen Richtungen, in allen möglichen Wendungen und Winkeln."

¹⁶² Herder's answer to the charge that he thinks man will develop into an "overman" or "superman" is nothing more than the view he consistently espoused throughout the *Ideen* -- namely, that, in realizing the ideal of Humanity, mankind in a certain sense becomes what it already is (that is, in potential) (BR, 123ff.).

Herder thus teaches that apparent division among the parts that comprise the whole of world history, far from demonstrating the fundamental wrong-headedness of his philosophy of progress, actually provides further evidence of its truth. In the light of this dialectical account of historical progress, an indisputable advance toward the realization of Humanity will, just as before, inspire immediate and spontaneous joy; however, what at first sight appears to be a setback will now be interpreted to be a necessary precondition for even further progress in the future (**BR**, 130-1). Hence, Herder concludes that, all pessimists aside, belief in the inevitable perfectibility of the species is no deception -- you need only "lift up your eyes and see" that absolutely everything that takes place in the world, even that which seems worst of all, is both necessary and good (**BR**, 131).¹⁶³

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It thus seems that happiness as Herder understands it depends upon believing something to be true about the world that at first sight is not supported by the facts. Herder's dialectical theory of historical progress is designed to

¹⁶³ "Hebet eure Augen auf und sehet." Herder quotes this sentence from the Bible, John 4:35. That it contains the verb (*aufheben*) that will become perhaps the most important word within Hegel's system is perhaps not insignificant.

enable us to overcome our attachment to those facts -- to let go of the world as it is in favor of how it *has to be* in order for human happiness to be possible. But we cannot help but wonder if, having adopted such a stance toward the world, there is any way for Herder to distinguish his theory from an act of willful self-deception in the name of existential solace. We have reason to doubt that there is any way for him to do so. For as soon as he begins to interpret the course of human events in a dialectical way -- in such a way that absolutely everything can be said to contribute to the realization of a predetermined teleological end, even those events that would seem to stand as evidence against its very existence -- Herder's claims become immediately unfalsifiable and thus indistinguishable from dogmatic components of a blind, irrefutable faith. To be sure, being radically humanitarian in aim and emphasis, Herderian faith was unique in the history of Western theology at the time it was first proposed.¹⁶⁴ But it was a faith nonetheless.

And it is one that has proved to be remarkably flexible over the years. Whether the event was the French Terror, the invasion of Jena by Napoleon's armies, the failed

¹⁶⁴ See Barth, 1959, chapter five, but also Lilla, 1999 on Kant's similar theological-political proposals.

uprisings of 1848, the Russian Revolution, or Hitler's ascension to power in 1933, thinkers within the philosophical tradition that Herder helped to inaugurate have not hesitated to interpret historical occurrences as providing evidence that history is moving in the direction predicted by their respective theories -- theories that share little with one another besides the assumption that all of human history can be conceived of as a whole inevitably moving toward a single end, and the belief that making such an assumption somehow serves the noblest interests of mankind, however those interests happen to be conceived. Hence, in the century and a half after Herder proposed his philosophy of history, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger (to mention only the best known figures) each claimed to have discovered indisputable evidence in the panorama of world history to "prove" the irrefutable truth of his own personal historical inevitability. That this was the case leads one to suspect that following Herder's dialectical pathway left the thinkers within this tradition incapable of adequately distinguishing between their own existential longings and the character of the world as it exists independent of human concerns. Although, in comparison to the masters of immoderation who followed in

his footsteps, Herder's own project seems relatively benign, we should not lose sight of the fact that his thought provides us with an early lesson in what can happen when philosophers set out to become "teachers of religion," even if they do so with the best of intentions -- for the sake of securing the necessary conditions of human happiness.

Chapter 8

CONCLUSION

What are we to conclude about Herder, his preoccupations, and where they led him? What, in the end, does this neglected figure from the late eighteenth-century have to teach us today? We begin by noting that, although Chapter 7 closed on a note of caution and criticism about the dangers of the mature Herder's quasi-prophetic philosophical stance, the prospect of our contemporaries following him on his theological-political road to redemption is hardly something with which we need to be concerned. In fact, if anything, we suffer from an excess of the opposite tendency -- that is, a generalized skepticism about all such "meta-narratives" that frequently bleeds over into a rejection of the possibility of philosophical inquiry as such, and the claim that all of Western thought is infected with the same untenable "onto-theological" pretensions that are most visible in Herderian philosophies of history. But as the account of Herder's thought in this dissertation makes clear, this currently fashionable historiography is historically dubious. For, as we have seen, Herder developed his

philosophy of nature and history in explicit opposition to another, far more skeptical form of philosophical speculation that, in his youth, he even went so far as to identify with philosophy as such. That he later came to think that the so-called "rationalist" tradition of philosophy could be marshaled against the philosophically-inspired skepticism he so despised helps us to see that the Western tradition is not a homogeneous bloc, as so many of our contemporaries would have us believe.

But neither is it a simple dichotomy, with Herder defending the forces of dogma against the party of the skeptics with his own personal onto-theological meta-narrative. Instead, Herder's position is far more complicated. For today's critics of universalistic philosophies of history -- of whom communitarians are among the most prominent -- oppose them primarily in the name of cultural "difference," on the grounds that they artificially enforce monistic homogeneity on the manifest diversity of the world. But, in making this claim, these critics echo sentiments that are also central to Herder's writings, especially, but not exclusively, those of his youth. Herder thus seems to be a friend and ally of today's advocates of difference and diversity at the same time that he commits

what they would consider to be the greatest offenses against these qualities. As we have also seen throughout the course of this dissertation, Herder was able to hold both of these positions because they arose from a single source -- that is, the same longings that led him to adopt his particularistic communitarian views eventually led him to propose a primitive version of the very meta-narratives for which today's communitarian particularists feel nothing but scorn. Hence, one of the most important questions raised by this study of Herder is the following: are today's communitarians led to adopt their views by the same longings that motivated Herder? If so, and if Herder was right in his analysis of what it would take to satisfy those longings, then today's communitarians miss something of fundamental importance about themselves -- namely, that their particularistic communitarianism needs to be supplemented by precisely the kind of radically universalistic theory that they wrongly judge to be their own worst enemy.

But given that none of today's communitarians think that their theories require anything like a Herderian philosophy of history and nature, how can we possibly make this kind of determination about them? As we saw in

Chapters 1 - 3, the evidence lies in the tension between *descriptive* and *normative* communitarianism that can be found in the writings of virtually every contemporary communitarian. For not only do these authors make a *descriptive* communitarian claim, according to which man is naturally and inevitably formed by the communal structure -- the closed horizon of norms, practices, and beliefs -- in which he finds himself at birth. They also make a *normative* communitarian argument, according to which man as he exists in the present has undergone a fall away from this primordial condition, which we desperately need to reattain in order to soothe the nagging sense of *anomie* that plagues us. It is this latter, normative communitarian claim that signals that today's communitarians are caught up in the same conundrums outlined in Chapter 3 -- conundrums from which Herder was able to extricate himself only by proposing the theological philosophy of history and nature we examined in Chapters 4 - 7. Herder's often tortured experience of wrestling with these tensions shows us that the attempt to reacquire primordial communal wholeness -- to satisfy the normative longing for community -- by remaining at the level of descriptive communitarianism leads, not to a regeneration of community we have supposedly lost, but, on the contrary,

to an intensification of the feeling of being alienated from all particular communities. In other words, Herder shows us that the normative longing for community can only be satisfied by a belief in the existence of a "higher," theological community that simultaneously transcends and absorbs each and every particular community in history. Thus, after a thorough study of Herder's philosophical development, one cannot help but conclude that, were they to think through the implications of their own views, contemporary communitarians would see that they need to appeal to the very same onto-theological meta-narratives which they set out to tear down in the name of particularistic community.

But, as we remarked above, even if Herder can help us to see that, on its own terms, communitarianism needs to be supplemented by some kind of religion, it is highly unlikely that contemporary communitarians will either begin to propose their own, or to believe in the truth of someone else's, theology. In the age of deconstruction, no one, it is safe to say, is going to be tempted to worship at the alter of Herder's humanitarian God. However, it would be unfortunate if critics of communitarianism were to take this fact to be a simple confirmation of their predilections. It

would be unfortunate because, in doing so, they would sidestep the most profound issue that is at stake in Herder's works -- one that is too often ignored in debates among political theorists today. That issue is the problem of happiness.

As we have seen over and over again in this dissertation, it is an unargued premise of Herder's work that man's happiness is dependent upon him feeling himself to be a part in a whole in which he finds meaning and purpose -- a feeling that is undermined by the cosmopolitan form of life that grew up in Western Europe in the wake of the Enlightenment. This assumption, combined with his belief that he can and should contribute to enabling man to reacquire the capacity to have such a feeling of wholeness is what drives Herder first to advocate a particularistic, and then, eventually, a theological form of communitarianism. If today we find it impossible to believe either in the simple truth of any particular community's norms, practices, and beliefs, or in the doctrines of Herder's prefabricated communitarian religion, a pressing -- perhaps the most pressing question -- still remains: was Herder right to think that our happiness depends upon being

able to believe in the truth of one or the other of these holistic views of the world?

If our happiness does depend on such a belief, then our inability to accept the simple truth of either of these options seems to indicate that our situation is a tragic one. Rendered incapable of believing in the one thing that would give us what, in our heart of hearts, we most desire, we would have to understand ourselves to be marooned in a world -- the modern world -- constantly at war with the necessary preconditions of human contentment. Seen from Herder's standpoint, as Enlightenment skepticism spreads around the world, undermining ever-more of the pre-modern norms, practices, and beliefs that make happiness possible, and as the bloody history of our century confirms that the attempt to recapture those preconditions of happiness by promulgating a new, philosophically-generated religion is bound to end in disappointment and delusion, we seem to slip ever-further from a form of social life in which we could be said to be truly at home in the world. If Herder is right, then this would be our miserable fate, despite the fact that we enjoy political freedoms that make human life less burdensome than it has been for most of human history. There would thus also be a tragic paradox at the heart of

modern politics: the most decent modern regime (liberal democracy) would destroy the possibility of experiencing genuine happiness in the very act of freeing its citizens to "pursue" happiness as they individually define it. Liberal democracy would have this unintended effect because, as the modern regime that most fully and consistently embodies Enlightenment principles, it creates and perpetuates a form of social life characterized by internal division -- a form of social life fundamentally hostile to the experience of being a part in a unified whole. Confronted with this paradox, it is no wonder that some who have shared Herder's concerns have concluded that "the sole possibility that is left for us is to prepare a sort of readiness, through thinking and poetizing, for the appearance of [a new] god..." (Heidegger, 1993, 107).

Another possibility is that Herder is right about the requirements of happiness, but wrong to think that the obstacles to experiencing it have only developed in recent history, in the modern period (see Yack, 1992). If this is the case -- if it is not modernity, the Enlightenment, or liberalism, but instead the human condition as such, that stands in the way of man experiencing happiness as Herder understands it -- then our situation is still certainly

tragic, perhaps even more profoundly so, since then we would know for certain that there is absolutely no hope for escaping our fate, at least in this life, short of total self-forgetting. But there is a way in which it might actually be less tragic than the anti-modern alternative, for then the possibility might exist for adjusting our hopes for happiness to fit the situation in which we find ourselves -- that is, to become reconciled to the human condition. It is possible to imagine a kind of education that would consist precisely in this: moderating what we can hope for from the world. And, on this basis, it is also possible to imagine a kind of happiness, contentment, and inner peace that would derive from developing a clear-sighted view of the world, even if it is clear-sightedness of the fact that our most extravagant hopes for happiness can never be satisfied. Of course, the possibility of there being such a modified and moderate version of happiness is based on the psychological assumption that we (or at least a few of us) would prefer to know the truth, whatever it might be -- even if it turns out to dash our highest hopes -- than to believe in consoling lies. Whether this is the case, as the ancient political philosophers seemed to think, or whether Herder was right to

deny it, is another question that we have hardly begun to ask, let alone to answer.

But there is yet another possibility: Herder might simply be wrong about happiness and its necessary preconditions. That is, liberals and quasi-liberals from Hobbes through Rorty might be right in thinking that the belief that man can attain the kind of holistic happiness for which Herder longs is both illusory and dangerous, and that, in contrast, the kind of restless, mutable "felicity" of which we are capable is best attained within a constitutional regime in which a sizable private sphere leaves individuals free to pursue it as they see fit (Hobbes, 1994, 34-5). If this is the case, then Herder and those who have followed his lead would appear to be somewhat comical in their stubborn insistence on keeping alive a romantic longing for an experience of wholeness and happiness of which we have never been capable, and which, for the sake of both self-awareness and social well-being, we would do well to overcome entirely.

But have liberals shown this to be true, or have they merely presupposed it? No less than communitarians who take their holistic understanding of the preconditions of happiness for granted, today's liberals more often than not

treat their own assumptions about human happiness as self-evident, as beyond argument. But are they? Are their convictions really just the product of non-rational assent? Or, instead, might it be possible to argue for the truth of one view over the other -- to show that one of them misses something of crucial importance in human experience that makes the case for the other more persuasive? Have we even begun -- or have we forgotten how -- to reflect on the experiences that would help us to answer the question of what human happiness consists in, and what its preconditions are? To the extent that today's liberals and communitarians do not think about the issue that divides them in these terms, they bear witness to the sorry fact that we have come to be satisfied with answering these and kindred questions with silence.

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