

Gjesdal, Kristin

Herder's Hermeneutics: History, Poetry, Enlightenment

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Kristin Gjesdal's book—with a full title in which each word carries considerable significance—is a major contribution to the growing philosophical literature that is finally granting Herder recognition as a major Enlightenment philosopher. The work of scholars such as Beiser, Forster, Heinz, Norton, Zammito, Zuckert, and others has finally corrected, at least in the professional literature, Isaiah Berlin's association of Herder with the so-called "Counter-Enlightenment." In building on, and often critically moving beyond their insights, Gjesdal makes a wise choice in not aiming to survey the full breadth of Herder's astoundingly varied writings. Although hermeneutics as such is her main topic, she is not concerned with the full literary and theological complexity of Herder's hermeneutical work but concentrates on the directly philosophical implications of his early period, the 1760s and 1770s. This narrowing of focus fits in with her own interest in defending a contemporary philosophical approach that is thoroughly hermeneutical, albeit in a sense that—as she stresses—contrasts with the non-Enlightenment features of the work of other well-known advocates of hermeneutics such as Hans-Georg Gadamer.¹ Perhaps her most important point—and one that I thoroughly agree with—is that, in concentrating progressively on late modern aesthetic issues such as the phenomenon of change of taste, Herder was by no means taking a detour into peripheral topics but was perceptively showing the way to how philosophy, through a hermeneutical concern with the issue of human nature, can be most valuable in our time.

Gjesdal also repeatedly takes note of the fact that Herder's ideas overlap in many positive ways with Kant's early philosophy. Herder quickly became Kant's most famous student and built

¹ See also Gjesdal (2009).

very creatively on the rich empirical information featured in Kant's first years as a lecturer, a period marked by what Günter Zöller has called Kant's invention of the discipline of "geo-anthropology."² But Herder also quickly moved beyond Kant by immediately placing even more emphasis on history and the phenomenon of change in worldview. Ever since, the Idealist tradition in Germany has been characterized by a contrast between the largely a priori and Newtonian orientation of Kant's Critical system, and the more organic and history-oriented work of Herder-influenced figures such as Schelling and Hegel.

Gjesdal characterizes in impressive scholarly detail what she calls Herder's revolutionary anthropological and "historical turn" (48) beyond Kant.³ In moving on to philosophically assess this turn, it is only natural to begin by working out a comparison and contrast with Kant's philosophy. I happen to have sketched out my own way of making this contrast in *Kant and the Historical Turn: Philosophy as Critical Interpretation* (which is not about a historical turn in Kant's work but about a contrast between Kant and what I call the "historical turn" in later philosophy) as well as in a recent essay on Kant's 1780s reviews of Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Humanity*, and in several writings on Karl Reinhold, a pivotal Jena figure who provoked the post-Kantian Idealist movement by initially attempting a synthesis of Herder's and Kant's approaches.⁴ Gjesdal's work provides an ideal opportunity to revisit this topic now by reflecting on some of the key distinctions that arise in her interpretation. She begins by making a convincing proposal that Herder's turn should be understood as part of a philosophical hermeneutical project and not—as some have thought—as a move to make anthropology and related empirical studies a substitute for philosophy (7). She notes, however, that, unlike what happens in Kant's philosophy, for Herder "reflection must take place within a given cultural and historical context and not proceed by reference to the a priori conditions for subjectivity, experience and judgment" (3).

² Zöller (2013).

³ Gjesdal also seems very much in sympathy with this turn, even though she does not express as radical a preference for Herder as can be found, for example, in Zammito's and Forster's work.

⁴ See Ameriks (2006), (2012b), chs. 10 and 13-15; as well as (2005), (2014), and (forthcoming).

Here one can ask whether this demand is to be understood, first, very broadly as a universal demand that philosophical reflection should not bother anywhere with “a priori conditions.” Herder’s relentless attacks on the abstractions of traditional philosophy often do suggest such a radical demand. Of course, one might take the limitation on reflection, secondly, in a very narrow way, that is, as a proposal merely concerning how to carry out the empirical core of cultural studies. But this is an innocuously narrow limitation, because culture is obviously an empirical phenomenon, and hence—as even philosophers who are otherwise quite interested in the a priori can easily concede—it is something that, in its empirical detail, needs to be studied empirically. One can also propose, thirdly and more interestingly, a not so narrow limitation that might seem to be Herder’s main concern and is still specifically about culture. This would be an insistence not only of the claim that the specific empirical data of culture needs to be approached empirically, but also that it is important for philosophy never to go on to lay claim—as, for example, Dilthey and Husserl do—to the determination of any kind of a priori features of something like cultural “space” in general.

Given this specific limitation, there still could be something called a philosophy of culture, but it would be little more than a matter of making, at a second circumspective level, what are just empirical generalizations concerning information gathered at a crude, first empirical level. The initial presentation of Herder’s own position, quoted above, makes it appear as if, along these lines, he was committed to endorsing both the broad universal proscription—no a priori claims anywhere in philosophy!—and also, with special emphasis, the narrower demand: no a priori claims concerning fields such as culture, not even at a second, reflective level! Gjesdal’s ultimate defense of the distinctive project of hermeneutical philosophy, however, is more moderate and more appealing. It argues that the prime value of Herder’s work goes far beyond the generalizations of empiricism, or even interpretations that just amount to particular claims about striking cultural phenomena, for example, that Shakespeare’s plays reflect the special open character of English life in the modern age, in contrast to the relatively fixed setting of ancient drama (135). More positively, she argues that the best way to read Herder’s work philosophically is as supporting the view that, along with sensitive first-level interpretations, there can arise a global perspective-altering second-level insight into the general character of

proper hermeneutical orientation. This is the fundamental Herderian insight that, as interpreters, we always need to appreciate the unique sense that each work has within its own particular context (96) as well as in view of a general realization that cultural contexts significantly differ over space and time. This realization is a claim about deep diversity in the empirical world of culture, but it appears to be understood now as a certain philosophical thesis that is more than a probabilistic inductive result. It implies a constitutive claim, with many normative implications, about the very structure of human society and understanding, given that we are finite, earthbound creatures “caught in the throng”⁵ of a highly dynamic nature.

A similar characterization may be appropriate for another of Herder’s fundamental positions, namely that, as the modern period has played itself out, we have come to recognize our basic reflective limits,⁶ and learned that “philosophy can no longer be a quest for eternal and universal truth” (9). This point may sound at first like the mere recognition of a particular historical event, but its meaning goes far beyond that. It suggests a commitment to a philosophical claim that seems presented, paradoxically, as an eternal and universal truth, namely that philosophy, as a human enterprise carried out by finite language and nature and culture-bound agents, is in principle incapable of discovering eternal and universal truth. The claim, surely, is not that, once upon a time, philosophers were making this kind of discovery, and then in our era we have somehow lost the capacity; rather, what has happened, presumably, is that we have learned that the very notion of such a discovery by us is incoherent.

It is helpful to escape the paradox of this formulation by retreating to what can be called a hermeneutical reduction to the metalevel. The corrected and limited Herderian claim would then

⁵ Herder (1985), VI, 26, cited by Gjesdal (11 n 45). Gjesdal does not note that Herder’s insistence here is probably a non-accidental parallel to one of Kant’s earliest points, namely, that we should first determine what really “can be done” before we preach about what “ought” to be done. See e.g., Kant (1997), 42 (AA 27: 244).

⁶ “Herder surmises that the modern period starts with the experience—the hermeneutic challenge, we could say—of the human being realizing its limits” (9). In a footnote to this comment, Gjesdal mentions Herder’s relations to some ideas of Thomas Abbt, about taking responsibility for oneself, but it can be argued that the themes of taking responsibility and recognizing limits were already impressed upon Herder in Kant’s lectures. It is important to note also that for Kant the main limits, given our sensible nature, are on our certain *theoretical knowledge*, and these are not meant—as is all too often forgotten—as absolute limits on our practice, faith, or thought. In his own way, Herder also accepts a duality of the knowable and the merely believable (and divine), but Kant’s objection to Herder in his reviews is not so much a general point about empiricism or metaphysics but a concern that Herder encourages the thought that simply looking at nature in a dynamic, holistic, and theoretical (rather than “pure practical”) way is enough to warrant the exuberant providential optimism of the *Ideas*.

be that philosophy about “first-level” topics cannot establish eternal and universal truths, but there can be significant metaphilosophical claims, which are eternal and certain, about the limits of our intellect.⁷ Phrased in these terms, Herder’s position does sound consistent and, in an important sense, more than merely empiricist after all. Moreover, as Gjesdal notes, it would in general be a mistake for a Kantian to immediately suppose that anyone, in stressing a historical rather than a specifically transcendental approach, must immediately be taken to be merely an empiricist (48 and 176, n72). There are, nonetheless, some complications still to be sorted out. Recall that Gjesdal’s initial Herderian thesis—a thesis that has become enormously influential in our time through the indirect influence of Herderians such as many of Hegel’s followers—seemed to be saying that reflection should be historical and context sensitive and never proceed transcendently, that is, not “by reference to the a priori conditions for subjectivity, experience, and judgment.” One kind of Kantian rejoinder to this claim is precisely that a systematic study of “subjectivity, experience, and judgment” reveals the most significant limits of philosophical reason, and that it does so transcendently, that is, by showing the conditions of the very possibility of a certain kind of limited experience. In other words, it is not clear why Kantian transcendentalism needs to be rejected *tout court* by Herderians, especially because it can, not accidentally (given Herder’s education), lead to some similar limitative results.

Nonetheless: This rejoinder can appear to miss the key hermeneutical aspect of the Herderian claim, for it still seems obvious that the specifically Herderian kind of study of “subjectivity, experience, and judgment” involves a concrete approach to particular historical texts and contexts (75) that contrasts dramatically with Kant’s highly theoretical explorations of constitutive and regulative judgments in the first Critique. But here a Kantian still might counter that it is precisely the pluralistic Herderian (119) who should open up to the possibility of accepting an inclusive rather than exclusive attitude toward philosophical methodologies. That is, rather than demanding of philosophy that it proceed only by finding limits through the method of starting from sensitivity to the particularity of local contexts, why not allow that there are more abstract procedures that can also establish significant limits to human experience without at first

⁷ Such claims can come to acquire an a priori status, somewhat like truths about limits in advanced logic, which might have required considerable reflection before they became evident.

dwelling on historical specifics? Furthermore, unless it goes back to a general and paradoxical a priori exclusion of all a priori claims, a modest Herderianism should grant, I believe, that in many fields—philosophy of logic, language, and mathematics come immediately to mind⁸—a priori and transcendental argumentation is certainly worth exploring and can reach some “eternal” results that have a restrictive character at least somewhat similar to Herder’s broadest philosophical claims. At the same time, it is only appropriate to concede that, with respect to the specific topic of the philosophy of culture, there is special value in Herder’s innovative attention to the appreciation of distant and exotic texts—not only Hebrew poetry (185) and Shakespeare but also Egyptian civilization (156) and many other religious and aesthetic traditions that have been all too neglected by “mainline” philosophy.

It is important, however, to try to pinpoint what is truly distinctive in this “special value.” It does not suffice to contrast the colorful detail of Herder’s concrete historical and aesthetic discussions merely with the abstract prime subject matter of Kant’s first Critique. The fact is that in many other places Kant too has a lot to say about particular historical and aesthetic phenomena and often, like Herder, in a very enlightened and cosmopolitan manner. Unfortunately, it is also true that, at times, Kant voiced many of the most unfortunate prejudices of his own context—and it is not an easy matter to evaluate exactly how a Herderian can best deal with issues such as the indisputable offensiveness of several of Kant’s cultural remarks. Precisely because it is Herder who insists that we first must try to understand others in terms of how they are determined by their own age and context, it might seem not so easy to mount a Herderian criticism of even Kant’s worst prejudices—for example, his repeated endorsement of sexism and racism (77). These prejudices can, after all, be seen as very much a function of the general and long-standing attitudes of Kant’s context, and sometimes they even seem based largely on so-called scientific findings—findings that, as Kant sometimes points out, need further

⁸ See Brandom (2005), 160: “it is possible to make non-genealogical sense [of logical concepts].”

checking.⁹ Moreover, as Gjesdal notes (197), Herder too is not free from what appear to be some highly improper expressions of prejudice. Gjesdal does not deny these lapses, and she admirably argues that we simply have to be prepared at times to critique Herder himself severely, while also realizing that then we are being true to the spirit of his own best Enlightenment principles, one of which is that the essence of true Enlightenment is openness to self-critique (200).¹⁰

If, however, we do rely in this way on genuine Enlightenment principles—for example, as Gjesdal does when she repeatedly praises the many “progressive” and pluralistic aspects of Herder’s writings (e.g., 167, 186), then it seems only fair to add that we also need to acknowledge that we cannot and should not avoid being “judgmental” in view of truths now taken to be “eternal and universal.” That is, it is not easy consistently to scold Herder whenever he is harsh, for example, about some ancient Chinese customs, while at the same praising him for his enlightened attitude toward “women, gender, and race” (13). Even if we need, as he reminds us, to proceed very cautiously in presuming we can genuinely understand what their ancient customs mean, it seems only self-deceptive to suppose, from what we do know, that they wouldn’t often clash sharply with our current progressive values. In other words, to be properly hermeneutical—and I trust Gjesdal would agree—is not to say, as Gadamer infamously suggested, that we can only understand “differently” and not better.¹¹ Even if Egyptian art should not be hastily condemned, as Herder points out that it improperly was by Winckelmann because it did not meet Greek standards (70, 126, 154), this does not mean that Egyptian slavery practices cannot be severely condemned by us. This is, of course, not to say that this ability to criticize shows that our own society remains above reproach; on the contrary, as Herder very strikingly pointed out about his all too satisfied imperialist era, there are many ways in which our own

⁹ See the remark on Tahitians, discussed in Ameriks (2012b), 227. Gjesdal reads this remark as basically an expression of Kant’s greater prejudice against “non-European cultures” (11, n 37), but I take Kant’s main point here to be rather an ethical one about Herder’s being dogmatically committed to a teleological scheme that at times appears to absolutize the value of mere sensory happiness (in which case, the “tranquil indolence” of Tahitians—if the characterization truly applies, for Kant explicitly states that the matter deserves further investigation—would, absurdly, be a highest ideal).

¹⁰ A similar strategy has been fruitfully employed in reacting to problematic issues in Kant. See e.g., work by B. Herman, J. Kneller, and P. Kleingeld.

¹¹ Gadamer (1989), 96.

culture exacerbates problems in ways that may be less acknowledged but are as pernicious as ancient slavery (91, 152, 168).

An appreciation of these points about value shows how, in yet another fortunate way, Herder's philosophy need not be as distant, as it at first appears, from many traditional and a priori views. Near the very beginning of Gjesdal's book (2, n 3), there is a reference to Rousseau's idea of "eternal laws of nature and order," and there is every reason to believe that both Herder and Kant, right from the early time that they were together in Königsberg, were above all committed to this general Rousseauian idea in its basic egalitarian sense. There are, of course, many differences in specifying what these "laws" are, for Herder has much more faith than Kant does in supposing that the notions of happiness and perfection are the most important ones to stress¹²—but this difference does not affect the basic point about their having some shared a priorism.

There is an additional very important aspect to what I would call Herder's underlying a priorism, an "elephant in the room" that is largely ignored in Gjesdal's work, as it is in most current treatments of Herder.¹³ This elephant is Herder's manifest commitment to a robust teleological and religious view of the basic structure of the universe¹⁴—a commitment that I see as not a matter of a later "metaphysical" (90) or mystical period but as a constant underlying standpoint, one which often does not get emphasized simply because it is being taken for granted. This point is not inconsistent with the fact that it is understandably fashionable nowadays to highlight how strikingly naturalistic, humanistic, and revisionist Herder's attitudes were toward biblical texts, traditional doctrines, and institutions.¹⁵ These very secular-sounding attitudes were quite common in the late eighteenth century German Enlightenment, and they should not blind us to the fact that, like many others then, Herder obviously felt comfortable in espousing such revisionist attitudes toward texts largely because he also thought that, given a

¹² See e.g., Herder (1997), 47.

¹³ An important exception is Boyle (2005), ch. 2.

¹⁴ On Herder's confident providentialism and faith in immortality, see e.g., (1997), 41-2 and 160.

¹⁵ See e.g., Herder (1997), 64, 94.

firm general providential faith, it does not matter if one cannot claim to have certainty about the esoteric truth or meaning of institution-based and scholastic creeds. As a confident and emotionally engaged believer (although a Deist, not a fundamentalist), he could be quite skeptical about particular dogmatic formulations as long as he always lived—as Rousseau, Jefferson, and many other brilliant minds also did then—with the strong presumption that the basic moral teachings of the founder of Christianity¹⁶ most appropriately express moral truths that are supposedly as self-evident as the basic harmony of the forces of nature (cf. “we hold these truths to be self-evident...”).

The crucial final link in this teleological attitude, common to Herder and Kant even if they expressed it philosophically in quite different ways, is the keystone belief that the laws of morality and the laws of nature are not just each necessarily valid but are tightly bound together, so that thereby at least something like an eternally meaningful human existence is secured in the long run. The remaining key question for them is simply how proper attention to these beliefs can be most effectively encouraged in a modern world that, as Rousseau argues, is complicated by ever more entangling layers of self-incurred immaturity. It is at this point that I believe one can best see how Herder’s historical turn is a kind of advance on Kant after all. The late Kant went out of his way to show that, despite his anti-fundamentalism, he was attached to the pure essence of the religious texts of his tradition as well as to the achievements of exemplary writers such as Milton, who, through their especially effective popular use of aesthetic and revolutionary ideas, could help hasten a “moral commonwealth” in line with the universal egalitarian doctrines of the Enlightenment.¹⁷ In the third Critique, the Religion book, and several carefully composed final essays, Kant began to work out a philosophical guideline, a *Leitfaden*, for how history might thus proceed in a fully progressive direction. What he could not do himself was engage in

¹⁶ On religion and Christianity’s special role, see Herder (1997), 87, 103, 145-8, and 159, “a divine economy has certainly ruled.”

¹⁷ See Ameriks (2016) and (2017). Gjesdal (54, n 56, and 71, n 71) tends to read the advocates of Jena Romanticism, such as Manfred Frank, as proposing that art (what the Romantics called “universal progressive poetry”) serve as a *substitute* for philosophy, but I read their key notion of “symphilosophy” as indicating an agreement with the view that, as hermeneutical, late modern philosophy and art can work most effectively *in tandem*. See Ameriks (2012a) and (2018). The latter essay concerns Nietzsche’s remark: “that [the limitation of science to phenomena] is tragic. That is Kant’s problem. Art now acquires an entirely new dignity. The sciences, in contrast are degraded to a degree.” From Nietzsche (1979), § 73.

rallying all classes in this Enlightenment direction through the most effective popular means. This was, however, a project that was taken up right then by Herder and several even more gifted poetic writers such as Schiller, Hölderlin, and Novalis—the Miltons of the German world.

Tragically, these extraordinarily talented philosopher-poets did not live long enough, and have enough help, to bring about lasting progress in their own era. History took a step backwards with the complications caused by reactionary responses to Jacobin and Napoleonic excesses. It might have seemed that all was lost then, around the turn into the nineteenth century—and yet, at the same time there was developing, within academic philosophy itself and among the comrades of the great German poetic writers, a movement that I have treated as the key “historical turn.” This turn was not historicism, or an anthropological turn, but rather a fundamental change in the style of at least one main branch of influential philosophical writing. It was undertaken in the face of the realization—which orthodox Kantianism admittedly was not up to—that late modern philosophy—or in Herder’s typically colorful phrase, “this autumn of our reflectiveness”¹⁸—in the wake of the event of the widespread success of the Scientific Revolution, needs to be distinguished by the feature of no longer trying to model itself (redundantly) on exact science. Instead, and in view of this development, philosophy needs to take on the form of a kind of broadly genealogical writing “in between” art and science—to invoke a characterization that Gjesdal also uses in describing a point that Herder especially appreciated (23), and that can be applied to works such as Hegel’s *Differenzschrift* and *Phenomenology*, on a modest reading. Philosophy in this new key is carried out not by quasi-geometric or Newtonian system-building, but primarily by means of a detailed and sequential argumentative engagement—with a hermeneutical sensitivity that reveals itself to be constantly in need of further improvement—with the complex human-nature-characterizing texts of one’s immediate predecessors.¹⁹

This revolutionary philosophical historical turn can be said to have been first influentially exemplified, albeit in a larval form, by none other than Herder, although—and this is mainly

¹⁸ Herder (1997), 46.

¹⁹ Examples of this progressive style of writing —neither art nor exact science but narrative *argument*—albeit expressed in a less abstract terms, can be found in legal history and other humanistic disciplines, including art history.

where I have picked up the story elsewhere—it took on its mature form only in the Jena writings of Reinhold, Schelling, and Hegel. The allies and successors of these exemplary geniuses are legion: Schlegel, Heine, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and many others in our time, in analytic (e.g., Brandom) as well as continental philosophy. In sum, it is as the procreative godfather (he presided at Reinhold’s wedding), one might say, of the ongoing historical turn in this sense that Herder deserves, after all, all the credit—and even more—that Gjesdal’s book has given him.

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