

Herder's Hermeneutics: Reply to Anne Pollok and Karl Ameriks

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A book on Herder's hermeneutics might strike some readers as unexpected and in need of justification. Herder's work, after all, falls outside the traditional canon of thinkers in this period; even for those who take his work seriously, hermeneutics might seem like a surprising focus for a monograph. In what follows, I want first to explain my motivation, as somebody who works in the areas of hermeneutics, aesthetics, and nineteenth-century thought, for turning to Johann Gottfried Herder. I also want to shed light on the main arguments of my study: the idea that Herder has a hermeneutic philosophy and that his hermeneutic philosophy is worth our time. I will also sketch what I, during my work on Herder, perceived as the limitations of his position and then point out a few ways in which to respond to these limitations and make productive use of the resources provided by his contribution. Finally, I turn to the responses offered by my two very thoughtful readers, Anne Pollok and Karl Ameriks.

1.

Why a study of Herder? Why a study of his contribution to hermeneutics? And why a study that centers on his early work, the work in between his reflection on the discipline of philosophy in the mid-1760s and *This Too a Philosophy of History* (1774)? My book is not limited to this period, although it is, no doubt, its *Schwerpunkt*.

If philosophy, in a hermeneutic spirit, is viewed as dialogical, then a turn to history is often presented as a gesture facilitating high-quality conversation. Past works that have been handed down to us have withstood the test of time. For this reason, they are, we tend to think, worth engaging with. However, most of us would grant that the formation of disciplinary canons—who is seen as worth listening to, who is credited as “original,” “deep,” and so on—is not free of prejudice, bias, and historical limitations. We need not be fully-fledged Nietzscheans to grant

that a canon is not given, but constructed. From this point of view, turning to a philosopher such as Herder—clearly important, yet not somebody whose work has not received the kind of attention bestowed on Kant or Hegel—can serve as a genealogical reality-check. It can be a critical exercise; it can help us clarify the way we have, typically, written the history of a given period and help us think about what priorities undergird the choices made. Does it, for example, matter that Herder is such an interdisciplinary thinker? Does it influence the reception (or lack of reception) of Herder's philosophical work that he is critical of transcendental philosophy in an era during which the idealists, such as Hegel, were able to write the history of the immediate past? Does it matter that the young Herder focuses so centrally on aesthetics, which itself is a subfield that is often under-prioritized? Does it make a difference that his agenda is pursued in an anthropological and political spirit and thus challenges our dominant understanding of the ideal of a disinterested, pure science?

Beyond these questions, I am interested in the intellectual tendencies that crystallize in Herder's work. Herder is quite unique in the way he draws on anthropology, history, literature, and politics. His philosophy, further, promotes disciplinary modesty. It seeks to initiate conversation across the human, social, and natural sciences. Relatedly, I take an interest in his commitment to an empirically and historically informed approach to philosophy—what he himself addresses as a bottom-up rather than top-down approach. In this respect, Herder was part of a larger movement in the late eighteenth century. I would include A. W. and Friedrich Schlegel, Schelling, and Schleiermacher in this lineage of thought. Staël was also influenced by his work – its content *and* methodology.

Herder's work is not easy to read. A stern critic of high-flying system-building and abstract theoretical constructions, his writing is experimental. He is testing out ideas, returning to and revising old notions, provoking his readership with polemical outbursts, exaggerations, and Socratic irony. He writes fragments, dialogues, essays, letters, poems, and songs. He theorizes about poetry *and* collects and translates folk songs. In this sense, his work not only encourages thinking about the embedded interests and biases shaping our narratives on nineteenth-century philosophy but also provokes reflection on what philosophical writing and thinking can be—and

what kind of work we, as historians, will have to invest in trying to reconstruct the rationale behind these different ways of philosophizing and do justice to them.

Herder's work is also refreshing to read. He writes with unusual energy. He is indignant. He is unashamedly political. At times, he is unapologetically angry. The reader clearly senses that he cares about his topics. But not only does Herder write with unusual passion about the topics under investigation. His topics are also such that we should care about them. These are a few examples: In a time-period where racism and Euro-centric discourse abounds in philosophy, Herder is deeply and profoundly critical of colonialism, slavery, and Euro-centric discourses of all kinds. The young Herder preaches religious tolerance. He defends social justice and the idea of education to a wider public. He pleads for getting more books into the hands of women and, further, realizes that women can in fact do philosophy (they should not only read but also write philosophy books). He wants to get philosophy out of its ivory tower. He wants to put an end to philosophers' often condescending attitudes to the other human sciences. He defends an interesting version of naturalism, of second nature, and of *Bildung* in and through culture and the cultural (human) sciences. He wants philosophy to be part of a broader, enlightened commitment to civic discourse. He seeks to think about normativity in understanding while remaining committed to his historicist approach. Herder, in short, deserves our attention: He is not an easy thinker, but he asks questions that are still philosophically burning and relevant.

2.

Why a turn to Herder and hermeneutics, then? I would like to make two initial points of clarification. First, I am not claiming that Herder's philosophy is *only* a hermeneutic philosophy. He has an interesting philosophy of nature, a political philosophy, a philosophical anthropology, an aesthetics, an epistemology, an ethics, and so on. Hermeneutics is only one plane along which his thinking develops. However, because of his commitments to historically and culturally sensitized ways of philosophizing, hermeneutics is particularly central to his thought. If he cannot provide a hermeneutic anchoring point, his contribution is likely to falter. Second, I am not claiming that Herder is the *only* late 18th-century philosophy whose contributions to hermeneutics, broadly understood, is worth our time. There is Meyer, for a start, and

Schleiermacher a bit later. Friedrich and A. W. Schlegel should also be mentioned. Their contributions are many and extraordinarily rich. They extend both back in time, to the figures Anne Pollok is working on, and forward in time, towards, for example, Karl Reinhold, who has been a figure Karl Ameriks has done much to rehabilitate.

There are a number of reasons why, among these figures, I made Herder the focus of my study. Having worked for a while on Heidegger and Gadamer's contributions to hermeneutics – their respective versions of the ontological turn – I was frustrated with how they collapsed a discussion of Dasein's historical being-in-the world, on the one hand, and the question of interpretation (of texts, art, historical events), on the other. It is, in my view, not given that we best address the challenges of interpretation (of symbolic meaning) by reference to a philosophy of the human being in the world. Nor is it, in my view, given that there is *one* way of being-in-the-world and that our world-disclosive practices can be described in universal categories à la Heidegger. I was also frustrated with Heidegger's and Gadamer's reconstructions of the history of hermeneutics, which, I felt, were both too polemical and too teleological. On their models, the history of hermeneutics is not constructed as a set of competing, systematical alternatives, but as a narrative of trial and error that led—necessarily?—to Heidegger's ontological turn with *Being and Time*. Finally, and most importantly, I was unsatisfied with the deeper question, the driving philosophical concern, that motivates their works: the sense that our understanding of tradition is withering, that the great works of the canon are no longer taken to be authoritative. While certainly legitimate, this question has steered hermeneutics into a one-way street. And Herder, I think, is a philosopher whose work can help us look beyond this impasse.

In Herder's work, especially the early texts, reflections on understanding grow out of a set of questions that are very different from the leading questions of later philosophers such as Heidegger and Gadamer. Herder is not interested in ontology of the Heideggerian kind. Instead, he poses questions such as: Who gets to write the history through which we tend to understand ourselves? Whose voices are heard? Whose voices are forgotten? Who gets, say, to decide what art is important? What works are left out of the spotlight? Can we think about normative questions within art, culture, social and political practice without also taking into account how our self-understanding and vocabularies are situated in a particular time and a particular culture,

being limited and biased? Is there a relationship between the way in which we understand ourselves, as presumably enlightened and critically minded, and the way we treat others? And could we imagine alternatives histories—and in their wake, alternatives to colonializing, slavery, and potentially condescending, Euro-centric attitudes?

These, I think, are important questions. It is important that they are asked as part of the late Enlightenment turn to history and culture. It is, moreover, important that they are pitched in the period just prior to and around the pre-critical Kant. And, as hermeneutic philosophers, it is important to ask what our discipline will look like (what systematic vistas are disclosed) if we take the late Enlightenment to be a moment that shapes our commitments and orientations.

This, in short, is what I have tried to do in *Herder's Hermeneutics*. And in this sense, the study is a follow-up – historical in form, systematic in its interest—to my previous monograph, *Gadamer and the Legacy of German Idealism* (CUP 2009). I am interested, in short, in diversifying the field of hermeneutics: both in the sense of including philosophers whose significance has previously been downplayed, and in emphasizing a hermeneutic model that does not simply spring out from a mourning for a lost tradition, but from an excitement about traditions merging, discourses enriching each other, and pluralism within a given culture being both a challenge and a resource.

3.

For those of us with an interest in hermeneutics, the young Heidegger and later Gadamer shaped our discipline as it stands today. Critiquing what he saw as a prevailing lack of historical consciousness, Gadamer emphasized the power and all-pervading importance of tradition. It is through our being part of, being born into, a tradition that a culture and symbolic space are disclosed to us. It is the continuum, the background, against which understanding and interpretation occurs. I fear that this approach to hermeneutics leaves us with an unproductive and binary choice: either we are abstract and ahistorical (the way Gadamer accuses the Enlightenment and the later idealists of being) *or* we follow him in emphasizing the self-productive, self-correcting power of tradition. Herder, I think, plots an alternative route through this territory. For him, language and tradition certainly disclose a world. But neither language nor

tradition should be one and monolithic. Nor is tradition free of mistakes and bias. We are in tradition and need tradition and culture as beings whose lives are realized through our second nature, but *yet* we need an on-going and critical reflection on—a Nietzschean would say a genealogy of—the values handed down to us.

For Herder (and later Schleiermacher), this gets articulated through a commitment to method—a commitment Heidegger and Gadamer steadily critiqued. In my view, though, it is an open question what is implied in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century turn to methodology in hermeneutics. Herder, Schleiermacher, and Dilthey all have different notions of a hermeneutic method. For Herder (and here, the early Kantian influence comes to mind), a reflected, hermeneutic-methodological approach is one that is self-critical and that takes into account the limitations of a given tradition or culture. A critical-methodological approach reflects on prejudices. Herder does not provide absolute standards by which such reflections should proceed. However, he thinks that we are, as human beings, capable of approaching others with sympathy and that we need to add to this initial sympathy or congeniality a willingness to try and understand them with reference to their own world, the things they cared about, and the vocabularies they had at their disposal. Does this guarantee objective understanding? No, it does not. All it guarantees is that we, as historical beings, have a way to conceptualize the kind of commitments that can lead us to question prejudices and bias and thus help towards facilitating genuine understanding. For Herder, this is not simply a question of understanding culturally and temporally distant others. It is also a question of understanding what kind of creatures we are, what kind of epistemological horizons we work within, and what our goals, as epistemic and practical agents, should be.

Herder is a Kantian in the sense that he cares about the conditions of possibility for understanding (and he does not think that securing correct interpretation in each particular case is within the scope of philosophy). But he is not a Kantian in that he will insist, definitely in his early period and probably also in his later work, that our thinking about—even our normative thinking about—interpretation will have to proceed from and on the basis of actual interpretative practices. Further, the imperative of understanding—I do think there is such a thing in his work—does not have to do with an interpreter following a methodological check-list that eventually

leads to understanding. It follows from our historical outlook—an outlook that is limited: not contingently, but *constitutively* so. As historically embedded, we are creatures that simply function better, that grow and develop, when we gain a broader scope and understanding of ourselves and the world in and through hermeneutic encounters with others.

4.

Many thanks to Anne Pollok and Karl Ameriks for their perceptive and generous comments: I feel lucky to have two such well-qualified and perceptive readers. Of the questions they raise, I want to focus on determining Herder's position as an Enlightenment thinker. Pollok and Ameriks are right to point out that it is now more or less *comme il faut* to see Herder in these terms. The question, though, is what *kind* of an enlightenment thinker he is. While Pollok's areas of expertise helpfully cover the period immediately prior to Herder, Ameriks turns to his contemporaries and successors.

I want to start by addressing the concern, raised by both Pollok and Ameriks, about Herder's attempt to bring together a commitment to historicity and a commitment to normativity. This is related to, but not entirely overlapping with, the worry about a possible inconsistency in Herder's dealing with transcendental arguments (or in my dealing with Herder's dealing of this point). I admit that these are not easy questions. Moreover, I don't think Herder's work provides us with only one response to these questions. This, rather, is something he grapples with throughout his work and he explores a number of different solutions.

In his early work, Herder appears to insist that the standards by which a culture should be assessed are relative to a culture. His claim, more precisely, is that the standard of happiness, i.e., of human flourishing, is internal to a way of life and cannot be universalized. There is a strong and a weak way of reading this point. The weak reading would suggest that we humans live and thrive across a spectrum of cultures and that each of these cultures will facilitate different models of flourishing. This, in a certain sense, is a trivial point and would not take much to endorse. The stronger (normative) reading would take Herder to indicate that cultural diversity and the fact that we, as finite human beings, are constitutively situated in culture make it impossible to say anything at all about what is right and what is wrong beyond our particular cultural practices

(i.e., Right or Wrong). Herder has sometimes been taken to defend a position—epistemically and morally—of the latter kind. This, however, is a misreading. He *does* critique other cultures' practices: widow burning, ancient and modern slavery, and colonialism are some examples. When he criticizes, say, slavery, he actively and consciously criticizes this practice with a notion of humanity in hand. On the one hand, he is, in other words, descriptively (or historically, as Pollok puts it) pointing out cultural diversity across regions and time-periods. On the other, he holds up, normatively, a notion of shared humanity. How, then, can these points be squared? Or, rather, how does the young Herder set out to square them?

Herder, as I read his early work, assumes that every culture realizes, or allows for, a range of human possibilities. This is, as it were, a standard to which they can be held responsible. Herder points out that oftentimes when we encounter inhuman practices such as slavery, these practices are justified by exempting the enslaved from the general understanding of humanity. The same applies to practices such as widow-burning or leaving physically handicapped children to die (Herder's examples). From this point of view, his critical strategy is not ahistorical or launched from an external standpoint. It is, rather, to ferret out and respond to what he views as a failure, within a given practice, to live up to its own standard of humanity.¹

As a naturalist of sorts, Herder defends the idea that the human race extends to all human beings. From the side of nature, there is no group, race, or gender that is over or beyond others. There are no groups within our species, that of humankind, that should be excluded from our understanding of the species as such. This is the basic claim from which Herder proceeds. We could call it normative, but I am not sure he would be happy with that. From his point of view, he is simply describing the nature of the human being as a being that develops, corresponding with its predispositions and in a given environment, with language, reason, feelings—and in practices that are necessarily intersubjective, historical, and culturally coined.

The hermeneutic standard he holds us to is that we should treat others (all others, not others who simply look like us or speak our language) with tolerance, respect, and as human

¹If, say, men are not thrown on the pyre when their wives die, then this tells us something about a standard of humanity in this context: women are not perceived as fully human. Likewise if boys get education, but girls do not. The standard need not be external to the culture, but could be led back to the fact that only the humanity of boys is fully recognized. The only thing that is needed, on Herder's account, is thus the insistence that the governing notion of humanity includes all members of the human species.

beings. In his view, tolerance is required because it belongs to the nature of our species—and here we differ in degree from other species—that we realize ourselves in an infinite number of ways. To understand what it is to be part of our species involves a commitment to reflect on and be open to this diversity.

With respect to this point, Herder's position changes in his later work. In the years after *This Too a Philosophy of History*, there is a period of more dense, theological writings. Then we get the big and significant opuses of *Ideen* and the *Humanitätsbriefe*. These works, in my view, display a religious motivation. Especially in *Ideen*, we see that Herder hopes for a gradual development of humankind, a realization of its manifold potential, that will, eventually, lead to a point from which its potential is fully realized. He is hoping, as a regulative idea, that at this point, finite human beings can fully understand themselves: that our humanity has been realized and expressed. I see him, at this point, as close to Hegel (and follow Charles Taylor's early work at this point). Thus, I think the relevant question here is not so much whether Herder, in the late period (the period going beyond what I cover in my book), is a transcendental philosopher of the Kantian sort, but, rather, whether he helps himself to some notion of absolute knowledge—which, at least according to his early outlook, would be a problematic notion. I don't have a final answer to this question, but I am inclined to think that there are such tensions in his late work.

I want to turn at this point toward Ameriks' concern about a tendency to emphasize the more "progressive" dimensions of Herder's philosophy. I have tried to be reasonably balanced in my survey of his work. That is, I have tried to show how his commitment to tolerance, say, is sometimes exercised in his own judgments, and sometimes not. I am also aware of the risk of passing judgments on his work from within our twenty-first-century setting and our particular scheme of values. However, I don't think one needs to be unduly presentist in order to see Herder's anti-slavery activities as progressive. They were progressive in his time. He followed the anti-slavery movement and read about the Quakers in Philadelphia. He systematically demolished the arguments by the anti-slavery movement in England and found them unacceptable in that they focused on economy, not on humanity. In this sense, I think he does stand out within his own cultural horizon. With his judgment on Chinese culture, by contrast, I think he was behind some of the existing literature that was available to him, Leibniz being only

one example. The same applies to his reading of ancient Hebrew literature: some of it is fascinating, while other parts are problematic (to us, as they must also have been Herder's contemporary readers). Even though I take the point that we should be careful in our selection of what views to endorse as "progressive," and maybe it is better not use this language at all, I think we *can* indeed see that there were ways, in the 1770s, say, to be more or less enlightened in one's practices and thinking about others.

Like most of us, Herder is not always true to his principles. In my study, I wanted to emphasize this point because I fear there is a tendency, in the literature, to see him either as a problematic *Sturm und Drang*-persona (who, like Plato, Hegel, and Nietzsche would find favor with later National Socialists) *or* as a philosophical saint. My own view is that, as somebody working in hermeneutics, there is very interesting material in his work, but I am not committed to accepting each and every dimension of it, nor to suggesting that his work is entirely superior to other philosophers writing in the period.

Then to Ameriks' point about Herder, in spite of his being critical of transcendental philosophy, being a closet Kantian. A few basic points: First of all, one of the things I wanted, in my book, is to emphasize the similarities between Herder and Kant, especially the pre-critical Kant, whose work I find systematically underrated. I think it is clear that Herder's and Kant's philosophies develop out of the same intellectual environment, and that they do, in important ways, seek to answer the same kinds of questions. One can only think of how Kant, even the mature Kant, lets his three questions (What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope for?) culminate in a fourth: What is a human being?

There are many ways to read Kant, though, and there are many ways to read his (or any) commitment to transcendental arguments. I much appreciate Ameriks' work in this area—and have found inspiration in his emphasis on a historical turn. One can, as Ameriks and others have shown, be a transcendental philosopher without overlooking or denying the fairly obvious fact of historical and cultural variation. But one can also have a normatively coined model without being a (Kantian) transcendental thinker. Likewise, is it possible to have a sturdy philosophy of math or logic without being a Kantian.

Herder's stance here is tricky—and I hope I made that clear in my study. One point to bring up here is how he starts out as a critic of what he views as abstract school philosophy. In this context, he does not mention names. We do, in other words, find an intensely polemical criticism of a movement whose spokesmen remain largely unidentified. The same goes for the representatives of Francophile, classicist aesthetics. When addressing, say, the named contributions of Leibniz, Winckelmann, or Lessing, Herder is often fair and balanced in his reading. The same goes for Voltaire as a philosopher (though not as a dramatist). A charitable way to read his criticism of school philosophy (and classicist aesthetics) would be to assume that Herder addresses a philosophical “picture,” spelling out the risk of a certain trend or tendency to identify philosophy with abstract system building. This, at times, bleeds into his discussion of what we, today, would identify as transcendental philosophy. But school philosophy and transcendental philosophy are not the same thing. As I hope I make clear in my book, I think both Herder and Kant, distancing themselves from the paradigm of school philosophy, should be seen as trying to synthesize the resources of rationalist and empiricist philosophies. From this point of view, they do, indeed, have a lot in common, and it is not for nothing that Herder was one of Kant's favored students and Kant Herder's favored teacher. In the period, I have focused on, the two are still fairly close. So why, then did their ways eventually part?

I think it is fair to say that Herder, in his late period (i.e., beyond the period I focus on in this study), constructs a too polemical picture of Kant. Or, perhaps to be more historically sensitive, that the Kant he criticizes is not necessarily the Kant many Kant scholars today want to defend. But his polemics aside, it is clear that somebody like Herder could not accept a notion such as the *Ding an sich*. He could not accept the idea of transcendental categories, nor of transcendental subjectivity. He views language—our forms of understanding, if you like—as historical and as developed in interaction with our environment and with other cultures. He fears that a faculty such as the imagination is always doing its job from within a particular context and thus cannot be entirely free (*Ideen*). An a priori point of view is not given. Universality must be historically gained. Yet, if we look at what the two philosophers want—and if we look at reading such as the cosmopolitan Kant we find defended in the work of Pauline Kleingeld—it is clear that the two have a lot in common. Yet the commonalities should not cover over significant

differences—differences that ultimately boil down to Herder’s historicist approach. Needless to say, this is not to deny that there is room for a basic notion of historicity in Kant. It is just that historicity, especially for the early Herder, but also in his later work, sits right at the core of his conception of the human being—and of human understanding and reason, more broadly.

Now to Pollok’s question about how, on Herder’s scheme, we should proceed as hermeneuticians. Again, I think there is a link between the practical question of how to proceed as hermeneuticians, on the one hand, and the question of transcendental commitments, on the other. Right from the beginning, hermeneutics develops with a twin commitment—or maybe even a three-pronged set of commitments. First, it wants to tell us what understanding is, and how we, at a descriptive level, proceed in our interpretational efforts. These efforts can, post Schleiermacher, be those of ordinary understanding (speaking to our neighbor about the weather is his example), or our scholarly endeavors (seeking to understand Herder’s work, for example). Then, second, hermeneutics has a normative dimension: how ought we, as interpreters, to proceed. Third, there is a transcendental (or maybe quasi-transcendental) aspiration at stake: how is it that beings such as us, beings that are historically and culturally situated, can at all understand others and thus move towards a relative transcending or expansion of their horizon? Or, with the ontological turn of Heidegger and Gadamer: how is it that beings like us encounter the world, at a basic and entirely fundamental level, as disclosed through understanding? And how best to think of understanding across traditions and cultures? As it is, Gadamer, himself by no means a Kantian, at one point speaks of his aspirations as transcendental in this sense. He must, one assumes, have had Heidegger’s reading of Kant in mind—a reading that, in the late 1920s, connected a hermeneutic and a transcendental approach by decoupling the transcendental perspective from that of Kantian subjectivity by prioritizing the A-deduction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Herder deals with all of the questions above. However, unlike Schleiermacher and Gadamer later, he does not have a lecture series or a book that addresses interpretation. He works, throughout his life, as an interpreter. And he insists that we should think about interpretation in light of the challenges we encounter as interpreters, editors, and translators. He has general advice to offer. Yet we are not, on his model, provided a clear set of methodological

guidelines. Nor are we guaranteed an objective or true understanding. No method can guarantee its own successful application. Moreover, a conscious and reflective practice focuses on the attitude of the interpreter, not on the object interpreted (here is his Kantianism, again, for those who appreciate the relative parallels between them). In our interpretative efforts, we moderns should, Herder claims, aim towards a mix of sympathy, an initial experience of the text or expression as a whole, and a more reflected (historical and philological) attempt at seeing it in its own context and ask what it could have meant there. His is, as Gadamer would say, a hermeneutic model of reconstruction. He does not celebrate the idea of a meaning that grows over time, nor of a fusion of horizon in Gadamer's meaning of the term. It is not that his theory excludes this, but unlike Gadamer he is committed to the ideal of an impartial reconstruction. Why is this? We are situated in our own culture. We see the world from within it. Yet we can know that this is one perspective and try to expand our horizon by allowing our thoughts to visit others (to borrow a Kantian image). Interpretation is a way of allowing us to see the world as it is seen from perspectives beyond our own. We grow through this. Our outlook gains in universality, gets less parochial. However, unlike Gadamer, such gain, for Herder, requires a commitment to objectivity or impartiality in understanding.

In this way, my main point has not been historical. I have wanted, rather, to ask what kind of impulses we, as contemporary philosophers working in the fields of understanding and interpretation, could get when we seek to identify, post Heidegger and Gadamer, alternative ways to move forward for the discipline of philosophical hermeneutics.