

Johann Gottfried Herder's *Another Philosophy of History* (1774) & the Development of *Bildung*

"Nature brings forth families; the most natural state therefore is also one people, with a national character of its own. For thousands of years this character preserves itself within the people and, if the native princes concern themselves with it, it can be cultivated in the most natural way: for a people is as much a plant of nature as is a family, except that it has more branches. Nothing therefore seems more contradictory to the true end of governments than the endless expansion of states, the wild confusion of races and nations under one scepter. An empire made up of a hundred peoples and 120 provinces which have been forced together is a monstrosity, not a state-body."—*Materials for a Philosophy of History* (1784)

Historicism

While sometimes, the term *historicism* has been used to refer to what is more commonly called *metahistory*, that is the belief and therefore study of historical developmental laws that are observable and predictable, historicism more generally refers to the approach to historical thought that arose in nineteenth-century Germany. The historicist school, which owed its origins to Jean Bodin, Vico and Herder, argued that people groups (i.e. cultures, nations, *ethnoi*) are shaped by their histories. For historicists, nations are people-units who share a common language and worldview. Yet this national shaping of ourselves does not make communication across cultures incommensurable because we share a common human intuition (*Verstehen*) that makes it possible for us to grasp other understandings. Historicists in general also insisted that history is not progressive, linear, or predictable. Only God can know what course history will take. Historicism in some strands tended toward either historical relativism or racial doctrines of purity and superiority, though it is arguable whether either should have followed from the historicist school itself.

F. M. Barnard argues that Herder's thought made five important contributions to modern nationalism and individualism:

1. "the conviction that optimal human creativity requires a national matrix of embeddedness";
2. "the need for caution, lest one mistake embeddedness for sameness, or for the relationship for identity";
3. "the recognition that historical progress involves the cost of excluded alternatives";
4. "the counsel that relating the particular and the universal—such as nationality and humanity—must resist absorption of one by the other if their interaction is to preserve what is distinct and incommensurable in each";
5. "the realization that coming to grips with history's sequences of events may call for different methods of enquiry than the application . . . of theoretical formulas . . . to yield the possibility of imaginative seeing an empathetic understanding."

Barnard, F. M. *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's UP, 2003.

Exploratory Questions

- Is there a common nature that all humans share?
- How much are we shaped by our cultures?
- Does our language shape our ideas?
- Can one discover a predictable pattern for the course of history?
- Are there universal principles of reason that apply to all human civilizations?

- How much do our understandings of things depend upon our intuitions and feelings?
- Are all prejudices and stereotypes wrong? Why and/or why not?
- Are historical periods real entities? Or are they convenient tools for analysis?

The People	Its Age	Virtues	Vices
The Orient	Infancy	Esteem, Example, Authority, Submission	Despotism
Egypt	Childhood	Security, Ownership, Law, Civility, Artisanship	Heaviness, Religion, Fear
Phoenicia	Twin of Childhood	Commercial spirit, Liveliness, Internationalism	(Crass commercialism}
Greece	Youth	Friendship, Humanness, Friendship, Poetry	Pederasty, Weakness
Rome	Adulthood	Courage, Virtue, Pride, Heroism, Justice, Completeness	Cruelty
Arabia	[transition—brought classical culture to the West]		
The Gothic North	Renewal	Courageous, Honest, Pious	Wild, Savage

Discussion Questions

First Section

1. How does Herder regard Adam, our first progenitor? The Golden Age?
2. Why does he insist that the ages of the past can be seen in a positive light?
3. Why does Herder pull back from being too sure of generalizations about the past?
4. Why does he place happiness at the center of cultural purpose?
5. Why does he argue that comparisons between nations are ultimately useless?

“The Influence of Free Legislation on the Sciences and the Arts (1780)

1. How does Herder trace the accomplishments and limitations of key figures in ancient Greece and Rome?
2. To what does he attribute the decay of freedom and the weakening of the commonwealth in the modern world?

Second Section

1. Why does Herder argue that the pagan culture was fading and needed Christianity?
2. What benefits did the Church bring to the pagan world and the post-pagan world?
3. Why does Herder insist that a period of history must be judged by end and means?
4. How much does Herder insist upon context to understand past actions?
5. What is Herder’s view of mechanical invention? Of the Enlightenment?
6. How does Herder see the relationship between education and a period’s character?
7. How does Herder connect the Enlightenment and colonial abuses?
8. Why does he charge the Enlightenment with disrupting local communities?

“Do We Still Have a Fatherland?” (1765) & “Do We Still Have a Fatherland of the Ancients?” (1795)

1. Why does Herder argue that religion is at the center of any culture?
2. How does modern freedom differ from ancient freedom?
3. In what way does fatherland remain a modern concept and experience? In what ways does it not?

Third Section

1. What is the combined effect of Herder’s sarcasm in section three?
2. Why does he charge that the Enlightenment has lost the capacity to discern?
3. Why does he insist that we cannot know the divine plan for history or that our own era is the goal?
4. Likewise, why does he stress that we can’t repeat the past?
5. Why does Herder hold that we can only have a universal impact by local involvement? Do you agree?
6. Why does he further charge that the Enlightenment is an age of atrocities?
7. What is Herder’s concluding advice?