

Beyond the Enlightenment: Key Concepts in Herder's Writings

"We think in a *language* that our ancestors invented. We think in a way that was shaped and formed by many thinkers, enriched by the finest geniuses of the human race, including those of other languages, who thereby graciously bequeathed to us the noblest part of their existence—their innermost being, their acquired treasures of thought. Every day we enjoy and use thousands of *inventions* that have come to us from the past and in part from the most distant regions of the earth, and without which we would have been forced to lead a bleak and paltry life. We have inherited *maxims and morals* which not only illuminate the natural law that lies obscurely within us, but also inspire and empower us to soar above depression and the daily grind, to shake off prejudices, and by feeling other souls who are filled by the same light of truth, goodness, and beauty, to unite ourselves with them in friendship and action far more intimately than irrational, inanimate objects could ever unite. The chain of effects has reached us; it has surrounded and embraced us; against our will we are bound to hold onto it and continue to influence the present and the future, be it for better or worse, in an effective or an obstructive way."—*On Human Immortality* (1791)

"Can you name a land where Europeans have entered without defiling themselves for ever before defenseless, trusting humanity, by the unjust word, greedy deceit, crushing oppression, diseases, fatal gifts they have brought? Our part of the earth should be called not the wisest, but the most arrogant, aggressive, money-minded: what it had given these people is not civilization but the destruction of the rudiments of their own cultures wherever they could achieve this."—*Letters on the Advancement of Mankind* (1793-97)

1. History, culture, and language embed the human person within a particular context; no person stands outside such a context.
2. Rationality is impossible without a culture, language, and their accompanying predispositions. We make sense of the world using words and categories that we share with our culture.
3. Our language shapes our consciousness and, therefore, our identity. The gift of language has both divine and natural components. (Herder stressed different sides of this at different times in his career.)
4. Each historical culture has a certain spirit or cultural preoccupation that is beautiful and not to be dismissed as without value by other cultures and times. This spirit is the center of its cultural creativity.
5. The past is always interpreted from the present culture and its own preoccupations. Likewise, comprehensive human feeling is at the heart of interpretation.
6. Therefore, the organic whole of life is to be experienced and grasped rather than an isolation of only certain aspects.
7. Poetry in particular makes linguistic development and growth possible, when language (and therefore culture) can be subject to stasis and decadence.
8. The Christian Scriptures should be understood as works that arose in a particular place and time with a particular set of cultural understandings. They should be read as inspired works, yet also very human ones. Hebrew poetry has a special beauty worth prizing.
9. An ethical religion of love and good works is essential to the health of any culture. Religion is at the center of human personhood, feeling, and convictions, and religion provides the framework for meaning and order for each person. Its daily practice, as well as its subjective quality, is not, however, equivalent to academic dogma and theological debate.
10. Herder rejected pantheism and deism and, in turn, popular pietism. He preached a form of Lutheran Christianity that was philosophical, imaginative, and culturally-moderate, stressing the Fatherhood of God and the character of Christ's sacrifice.

11. He also stressed religious tolerance and genuine appreciation for “primitive” mythology and ritual. Mythology, in particular, reveals the early metaphysics of a people.
12. *Humanity* (i.e. human flourishing) is the universal goal of all cultures. This goal is realized in each people when healthy cultural formation (*Bildung*) is taking place in multiple venues of cultural creativity. Without continued creativity and formation, cultures decline and fail.
13. Cultures transmit and develop *Bildung* through traditions. The human (and social) sciences are to be valued for their role in this.
14. The Scriptures are a particularly powerful form of cultural development and formation (*Bildung*).
15. Culture creation is the way peoples continue to grow rather than decay. Traditions have to have an active component that cultivates change and development.
16. Cultural progress, therefore, is not measured by a universal scale, but according to the needs of each people.
17. One must guard against overly broad generalizations about the wide variety of cultures across space and time. At the same time, there are traces of the natural law across the beliefs and practices of all cultures.
18. Providence has a purpose in history and across historical changes and developments, yet this purpose can only be intuited by human beings and never seen with any completeness.
19. The complexity of human history provides a rich collection of symbols that reveal the hand of God and hint at the purpose in their beautiful variety and nuances.
20. Nature helps bring into existence peoples (i.e. nations, cultures) and not centralized governments. Centralized control dampens human freedom and creativity and undercuts cultural formation and growth.
21. The various nations or people should help one another in their common pursuit of human flourishing and not enter into war against one another. War is not a true instrument of formation or cultural growth.
22. The family and the small kingdom are the natural, providential arrangement in which *Bildung* flourishes. Imperial states are not natural and lead to moral failure. The German peoples should be on a cultural mission rather than an imperial one. Cultural deportation in particular robs individuals of the contexts in which they grew and flourished.
23. States should be based upon the natural, common feeling of family, community, and people, not upon the mechanism of political laws and centralized power imposed upon peoples. Centralization takes away the natural responsibility of local and regional groups to continue to develop and change.
24. Cultural identity and heritage should be defended and not assimilated, even as peoples also learn from and grow alongside other cultures and cross-cultural encounters. This is the process of friendship and not that of colonial or imperial absorption.
25. Herder was not an ethical relativist, but he did recognize a cultural pluralism in which each people realizes in differing forms the general categories of *humanity*, i.e. of natural law. Therefore, there is no one ideal form of human government or even of local community.