

## ARTICLE

# HERDER'S MORAL PHILOSOPHY: PERFECTIONISM, SENTIMENTALISM AND THEISM

Benjamin D. Crowe

While the last several decades have seen a renaissance of scholarship on J. G. Herder (1744–1804), his moral philosophy has not been carefully examined. The aim of this paper is to fill this gap, and to point the way for further research, by reconstructing his original and systematically articulated views on morality. Three interrelated elements of his position are explored in detail: (1) his perfectionism, or theory of the human good; (2) his sentimentalism, which includes moral epistemology and a theory of moral education; and (3) his theism, which deepens and justifies these other elements.

**KEYWORDS:** J. G. Herder; ethics; naturalism; perfectionism; sentimentalism; God; religion

## INTRODUCTION

J. G. Herder (1744–1804) is widely acknowledged as one of the most remarkable and influential figures of late-eighteenth-century German intellectual life; the time when one had to argue for Herder's importance is now largely past.<sup>1</sup> It is not at all surprising, then, that recent decades have witnessed something of a renaissance of Herder scholarship, with collections of essays appearing virtually every year since the early 1990s. My primary aim in this essay is to open the way toward appreciating another area of Herder's thought in which, in some respects at least, he proves to be remarkably relevant to contemporary debates, viz. his moral philosophy. Somewhat surprisingly, this is one domain of his thought that has received little independent treatment. This might be due to the nature of Herder's corpus. Like his friend and mentor, Hamann, Herder rejected the deductive

<sup>1</sup>In the Anglophone world, this happy state of affairs is mainly due to the efforts of Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor at securing Herder's stature. See Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton, 2000); Taylor, 'The importance of Herder', in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA, 1995) 79–99. Similarly, Frederick C. Beiser has ably defended Herder's importance in the development of post-Kantian idealism. See *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge, MA, 1987) 127–64.

model of systematicity (derived from Wolff) that prevailed in eighteenth-century German philosophy. Moreover, there is no one treatise that articulates his core commitments. Herder does not do philosophy with the mathematical precision so prized by Wolff and his immediate successors. This makes it challenging to treat any part of his thought independently. Yet, as I hope to show, the importance of his distinctive ideas on morality is such that the attempt is worth making. Not only is it possible to isolate his core commitments and to reconstruct their many systematic links to one another; as it turns out, Herder's views can also be seen as fitting in with contemporary conversations about moral naturalism, moral psychology and the metaphysical foundations of value.

Herder's moral philosophy is composed of three interlocking and mutually supporting elements: perfectionism, sentimentalism and theism. In what follows, I will reconstruct each of these elements in this order. I focus on the key claims that constitute each of these elements as distinctive aspects of his theory, as well as on the many ways in which they fit together. I also bring out features of Herder's position that bear on current debates. Herder emerges from this analysis with an original, coherent position that is surprisingly contemporary in many ways.<sup>2</sup>

## 1

The first element of Herder's theory is his substantive position about the good life: perfectionism. In many ways, the dominant moral theory from antiquity to the early modern era, perfectionism has more recently staged a comeback.<sup>3</sup> I take perfectionism to be the claim that the good life is one in which the characteristic capacities of a human being, typically envisioned as a complex of biological and psychological traits, are fully realized. Typically, perfectionism involves further claims about how various character traits, pursuits and institutions are instrumentally valuable toward

<sup>2</sup>Herder's works are cited parenthetically in the body of the text using the following abbreviations:

- DKV    *Werke in zehn Bänden*, edited by Günter Arnold et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker Verlag, 1994ff.).
- PW     *Philosophical Writings*, edited By Michael N. Forster (Cambridge, 2002).
- SEW    *Selected Early Works, 1764–1767: Addresses, Essays, and Drafts: Fragments on Recent German Literature*, edited by Ernest A. Menze and Karl Menges (University Park, PA, 1992).
- SWA    *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, translated by Gregory Moore (Princeton, NJ, 2006).

<sup>3</sup>Some of the most important recent works in this tradition include: (1) Thomas Hurka, *Perfectionism* (Oxford, 1993); (2) Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford, 1999); and (3) Philippa Foot, *Natural Goodness* (Oxford, 2003).

the attainment of this end. The employment of practical rationality, however conceived, is also seen as part and parcel of the pursuit of perfection. All of these features are present in Herder's thought, as will be made clear in short order. His basic view is that an individual's life is to be governed and ordered in such a way that, as he puts it in the important § 25 of *Letters on the Advancement of Humanity*, one gradually realizes the 'ineradicable characteristic of his type and species' in accord with the 'laws of his nature' (DKV 7, 123). This rests on the general claim that '[t]he perfection of a thing can be nothing but that thing's being what it should and can be' (DKV 7, 123).

The more immediate intellectual background of Herder's position lies in the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition.<sup>4</sup> For Wolff, the perfection of a human being constitutes a person's well-being, and we respond to instances of such perfection with warm approval. In Herder's case, he often uses the term 'humanity [*Humanität*]' to refer to the specific perfection of a human being. The term 'humanity' is deployed with deliberate ambivalence by Herder; it serves to indicate *both* the ideal at which human beings should aim *and* the set of capacities or dispositions that achieve their full realization in this ideal.<sup>5</sup> For example, in another of the *Letters*, Herder writes:

Humanity is the *characteristic of our species* [*Geschlecht*]; but it is only inborn within us as predispositions [*Anlagen*], and it must be truly built up [*angebildet*]. We do not bring it along ready-made into the world; but in the world it ought to become the goal of our efforts, the sum of our exertions, our work. [...]. Humanity is the treasury and the harvest [*Ausbeute*] of all human endeavors, as it were the *art of our species*.

(DKV 7, 148)

This ambivalent use of 'humanity' makes Herder's perfectionism a kind of moral naturalism; a morally significant fact or property ('humanity' in the sense of perfection) is grounded in a natural fact or property (the full realization of 'humanity' in the sense of a set of capacities and dispositions). For this reason, Herder is committed to maintaining that a broadly empirical inquiry into the conditions of human life, behaviour and culture reveals generalities about human nature that yield prescriptive claims about human perfection. Herder's study of human nature brought in its wake a healthy appreciation for human diversity; for this reason, he never provides anything that he claims to be an exhaustive list of the capacities and predispositions that characterize humanity and that point to its perfection. Indeed, Herder argues for the plasticity of human nature. Given sufficient

<sup>4</sup>Two important, and accessible, loci for Wolff's ethics are the so-called 'German Ethics', or *Rational Thoughts on Human Actions and Sufferings for the Promotion of Human Happiness* (1720), and a letter of May 1715 to Leibniz.

<sup>5</sup>For a good discussion of this ambivalence, see Samson B. Knoll, 'Herder's concept of *Humanität*', in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Innovator Through the Ages*, edited by Wulf Koepke and Samson B. Knoll (Bonn, 1982) 9–18.

time, there are no limits to the ways in which human capacities and predispositions get realized (the potentially sceptical implications of this view will be examined more fully below). Still, Herder also thinks that valid generalizations can be made, and that these are substantively informative rather than trivial or platitudinous. In one of his most important works, *Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* (1784–1791), he presents two accounts of the capacities and predispositions that manifest themselves historically in human culture.

In Books 1–3, Herder develops a synoptic natural history of the universe, firmly anchoring humanity in the larger natural world. The underlying picture in play in this natural history is that nature is, as a totality, an *organism*, i.e. a dynamic whole that undergoes developmental change.<sup>6</sup> Human beings, too, are organisms; human beings are subject to a developmental process that tends towards the actualization of a particular ‘shape’ or ‘form’ (DKV 6, 185). This developmental process involves the emergence and at least partial realization of a cluster of capacities. In *Ideas*, Herder provides two overlapping accounts of this cluster. In Book 4, he argues that the morphology of the human body reveals a further purposive arrangement for ‘higher’ capacities, including rationality [*Vernunftfähigkeit*], ‘refined senses’, ‘refined drives’, sociality (which he here refers to as ‘humanity’) and religiosity. Later, in Book 8, he lists sensibility, imagination, practical rationality [*praktische Verstand*], and sentiments [*Empfindungen*] and drives. These organic ‘powers’, in addition to being the products of natural history, also undergo development within the life of any particular individual. This development is impacted, according to Herder, by various natural and cultural factors.

Importantly, Herder also argues that the plasticity of human nature is considerably more pronounced than that of other animals. Human beings are born in an undeveloped state, and the subsequent course of a human life is a process of context-dependent development of innate predispositions. As he puts it in the *Letters on the Advancement of Humanity*, ‘The nature of the human being is *art*. Everything for which there is a predisposition in his existence can and must become, with time, an art’ (DKV 7, 126). With respect to capacities like sensibility and imagination, Herder refers to aesthetic creativity and aesthetic enjoyment as their characteristic realizations. Similarly, corresponding to sentiments and drives, Herder mentions, *inter alia*, various kinds of social relationships, political organizations, moral attitudes and religion. Finally, with regard to the capacity for

<sup>6</sup>Frederick C. Beiser offers several reconstructions of this metaphysics in his studies of the intellectual context of the last decades of the eighteenth century: (1) *The Fate of Reason*, 145–49, 153–64; and (2) *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), especially chapters 8–10. For the role of organic metaphysics in the development of nineteenth-century biology, see Robert J. Richards, *The Romantic Conception of Life: Science and Philosophy in the Age of Goethe* (Chicago, 2003). Richards discusses Herder’s place in this development pages 223–6.

practical rationality, he discusses the formation of a plan of life, the governance of appetites and passions and effective instrumental reasoning. Humanity, in the sense of an ideal, thus refers to the fullest possible participations in these activities and the fullest possible realization of their respective ends.

Herder builds a formal condition into this ideal. In a way that anticipates, for example, Schiller's views on aesthetic education and his critique of Kantian ethics, Herder endorses a kind of *holism*.<sup>7</sup> That is, the development and realization of the various capacities comprising humanity in the sense of the predispositions characteristic of our species must be brought about in a balanced, harmonious way. There are several rationales behind the inclusion of this condition. One of the most important is Herder's resolute rejection of faculty psychology. In *On the Cognitive Knowledge [Erkenntnis] and Sensation of the Human Soul*, he issues a strong challenge to the division of the mind into faculties. The practical lesson to be drawn is stated by Herder thus:

Be no polyp without a head and no stone bust without a heart; let the stream of your life beat freshly in your breast, but let it also be purified up into the subtle marrow of your understanding and there become *life-spirit*.

(PW, 215)

What Herder is here arguing is that a proper appreciation for the integral structure of the human mind should cause us to strive for a similarly integrated and all-encompassing kind of personality. That obedience to this admonition constitutes human well-being, and so perfection is clear from a remark in the 'Second Essay': 'The healthiest human beings of all time had nothing exclusive about them: in them cognitive knowledge and sensation flowed *together* for human life, for action, for happiness' (PW, 226).

The link between this theory of the mind and his further claims about human flourishing is made in Herder's metaphysics. The substance of the latter can be seen clearly in *God, Some Conversations* (1787). In developing his own position, Herder appropriates several ideas from Johann Heinrich Lambert (1728–1777), a Swiss-Alsatian mathematician and astronomer. In

<sup>7</sup>Martin Bollacher examines the development of Herder's version of the larger ideal of *kalokagathia* in 'Das Konzept einer "menschlichen Philosophie" in Herders Frühwerk', *Johann Gottfried Herder und die deutschsprachige Literatur seiner Zeit in der baltischen Region. Beiträge der 1. Rigaer Fachtagung zur deutschsprachigen Literatur im Baltikum 14. bis 17. September 1994*, edited by Claus Altmayer and Armand Gutmanis (Riga, 1997) 80–93. I have also relied on Robert E. Norton, *The Beautiful Soul and Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, NY, 1995), for information about the larger trajectory of this brand of perfectionism in eighteenth-century philosophy. More recently, Frederick C. Beiser has surveyed the broader rationalist tradition in which aesthetic perfectionism found its home in German philosophy. See *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing* (Oxford, 2009).

his 1761 treatise, *Cosmological Letters on the Arrangement of the Structure of the World*, Lambert puts forth elements of a nebular hypothesis regarding the origins of the solar system. A parallel account can be found in Kant's *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755), a work also much admired by Herder as a young man. Lambert's account of the formation of stable planetary bodies is echoed by Herder:

[T]he persistence [*Beharrungsstand*], along with the essence [*Wesen*] of every limited thing rests upon a maximum, in which opposed rules cancel [*aufheben*] or limit one another, and the survival of a thing and its inner truth, along with the proportion, order, beauty, and goodness that accompany them, are grounded on a kind of *inner necessity*.

(DKV 4, 721)

On the basis of this general thesis, Herder further asserts that 'all survival [*Bestand*], all well-being, indeed, the existence of the thing itself can only be founded upon measure, proportion, and order, and can only be preserved by these means' (DKV 4, 721). The claim here is that the 'maximum', or optimal state, of an individual consists in a kind balance that is maintained over time. The maintenance of this maximum is what endows an individual with a kind of cohesion or integrity. It is on the basis of these commitments that Herder includes harmony and proportionality within his ideal of 'humanity'. If the well-being of any organism requires that there be a maximum in the sense described above, then this must also be true of human beings. Among the sorts of activities or processes that Herder thinks are characteristic of human life are those that express the basic capacities described previously. A human being must achieve the appropriate kind of equilibrium of these activities or processes in order to achieve the well-being that comes with perfection.<sup>8</sup>

In sum, Herder's view is that the good life is one in which humanity is perfected. The perfection of humanity consists, first of all, in participating in various activities and in the realization of the ends coordinated with them. Equally important, however, is Herder's insistence that this realization be attained in a harmonious or balanced manner. Like many of his contemporaries steeped in the tradition of Leibniz and Wolff, Herder thus views perfection as a kind of unity-in-diversity. By appropriating the cosmological hypotheses of Lambert and the young Kant, Herder eventually comes to see this kind of unity-in-diversity as the essential condition for the flourishing of any organism, human beings included.

<sup>8</sup>For an excellent discussion of the influence of natural historians like Lambert on Herder's ideas in this dialogue, see Ulrich Gaier, 'Herders systematologische Theologie', in *Johann Gottfried Herder: Aspekte seines Lebenswerks*, edited by Martin Keßler and Volker Leppin (Berlin, 2005) 203–18.

Linked as it is with naturalism, Herder's perfectionism is certainly open to a number of challenges. Here, I will only discuss two of these potential challenges. My selection of these two is not meant to imply that these are the only problems faced by Herder. Rather, my selection is guided by the fact that Herder has unique resources within his thought for addressing these challenges. A reconstruction of the moves available to Herder on this score helps to fill in some of the more distinctive aspects of his moral philosophy.

The first problem is simply stated. By basing prescriptive claims about human perfection on descriptive claims about human nature, Herder, it would seem, has transgressed the distinction between fact and value. His theory of mind, however, allows for a possible response by undermining the fact-value distinction. Herder develops a notion of what we today might call the 'unconscious', arguing that our minds are not transparent to our observation, and that processes that are largely hidden from our view play a constitutive role in our cognitive lives.<sup>9</sup> In the 'Preface' to *On the Cognitive Knowledge and Sensation of the Human Soul*, he defends the claim that a 'broad region of sensations, drives, and affects' is at work in the mind 'even in its most abstract functions' (PW, 181). He later reiterates this claim, arguing that obscure sensations and imaginative formations are in play even in the higher reaches of science and philosophical theorizing, claiming that Newton, Buffon, and Leibniz each 'became a poet contrary to his wishes' (PW, 188). In other words, according to Herder, the formation of higher-level scientific theories depends upon processes of association and judgement akin to those involved in certain kinds of artistic production. This suggests that a rigid dichotomy between value-free science and value-laden activities like artistic creation and art criticism is, by Herder's lights, misguided.

Herder drives the point home in a typically colourful passage:

Oftentimes there lie under the diaphragm causes which we very incorrectly and laboriously seek in the head; the thought cannot reach there unless the sensation was in place beforehand. The extent to which we participate in what surrounds us, how deeply love and hate, disgust and revulsion, vexation and pleasure, plant their roots in us – this tunes the string-play of our thoughts, and this makes us into the human beings that we are.

(PW, 196)

Herder's claim here is that our cognitive lives are invariably 'coloured' by processes that constitute our fundamental orientation towards the world. This fundamental orientation is, by definition, not something that we arrive at through disinterested observation and reflection; it determines the

<sup>9</sup>Hans Adler has convincingly explicated this aspect of his position. See especially 'Fundus Animae – der Grund der Seele. Zur Gnoseologie des Dunkeln in der Aufklärung', *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Litteraturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* 2 (1988) 197–220; more fully, *Die Prägnanz des Dunkeln – Gnoseologie – Aesthetik – Geschichtsphilosophie bei J.G. Herder* (Hamburg, 1990).

different ways in which the world matters to us. Hence, there is a sense in which basic evaluations are prior to the cognition of facts. This claim undermines the fact-value distinction that underwrites the objection set forth above. The upshot of Herder's theory of mind is that, by his lights, there is no such thing as neutral observation and theorizing, or what his contemporaries might have called 'pure reason'. Given that the mind provides us with our access to the way the world is, this would seem to imply that we do not have access to a world rigidly compartmentalized into facts and values.

A second challenge that a view like Herder's faces, and which he also has unique resources for deflecting, likewise focuses on the naturalistic element of his perfectionism. Herder quite clearly identifies the human good with the realization of human nature. For such a move to be in any way informative, Herder is obliged to tell us something about what human nature is. Classically, the way to do this would be to discover what the *essence* of a human being is, i.e. to treat human beings as members of a natural kind possessing a circumscribed set of distinctive and identifiable properties. The worry is that this kind of essentialism falls foul of both the biological (e.g. facts about variance in populations) and social (e.g. facts about cultural diversity) details.<sup>10</sup> If nothing meaningful can be said about the essence of humanity, then the claim that our good is the realization of this essence loses its force.

Interestingly enough, Herder has a possible response in hand. His views on human nature and culture actually anticipate, in some striking ways, the findings of modern evolutionary biology and of the social sciences. In *On the Cognitive Knowledge and Sensation of the Human Soul*, Herder endorses the idea that life is a historical process, and that this insight militates against the notion that there are fixed natural kinds (PW, 188). In *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity*, Herder adapts this basic perspective to human culture. Running throughout the essay is the basic claim that human culture is best viewed developmentally, much as one would study the early life of an individual human being. Thus, against the triumphalist views of eighteenth-century historiographers, Herder argues that human perfection is inherently always partial and in process, and that its emergence and development are influenced by a complicated interaction of countless influences, both physical and cultural (PW, 294). Indeed, the development of human cultures is best seen as precisely analogous to other organic processes of growth and change in nature, which are similarly open-ended and subject to environmental influences (PW, 298–9). Variance is inherent to the overall process of nature's self-organizing development. With respect to human culture, in particular, Herder is keen to emphasize that expressions of

<sup>10</sup>I have relied here on an excellent discussion of the problems posed by modern biology for perfectionism by Philip Kitcher, 'Essence and Perfection', *Ethics* 110 (1999) 59–83.

human capacities, and even these capacities themselves, are *pluralistic* and are capable of being developed in literally countless ways (PW, 335).<sup>11</sup>

*Ideas Towards a Philosophy of the History of Humanity* is Herder's most ambitious effort to situate the development of humanity within nature. Herder first outlines a process of growing diversification and complexity in the inorganic and animal worlds (DKV 6, 116–7; 166). To connect humanity with this process, he relies upon contemporary studies of apes, highlighting physiological and behavioural similarities. The right conclusion, he thinks, is that human nature is the result of historical formation (DKV 6, 166). Moreover, he insists that the classificatory schemes that we adopt for the purposes of description and explanation barely approximate the full extent of the complexity and variation in organic nature (DKV 6, 168). Herder then argues that what is true of an organism in general, i.e. that it is the result of a historical process, is true, in the case of human beings, of our characteristic mental activities. He cites, *inter alia*, cognition, self-consciousness, personality and agency or practical identity (DKV 6, 181–3). What others might be inclined to treat as *faculties* that are simply given with the structure of human nature, Herder wants to treat as themselves products of the natural development of both the species and the individual human being.

Importantly, Herder holds onto the idea that accurate generalizations about human beings can indeed be made. Underlying the diversity of human culture lies '[n]othing but a predisposition to *reason, humanity, and religion*, the three Graces of human life' (DKV 6, 372). In other words, Herder thinks that the facts of biology, history and psychology serve to undercut essentialism while at the same time grounding valid assertions about the principles of human behaviour. This is not to say, however, that Herder does not address the spectres of relativism or scepticism that often seem to travel together with a healthy appreciation for human diversity. On the contrary, in relatively early works like the fragmentary *On the Change of Taste* (1766), he explicitly acknowledges the sceptical consequences that might follow from human diversity. One who comes to see the incredible variability within human culture may well conclude that 'truth, beauty, and moral value is a phantom' that changes its shape (PW, 247). He goes on to list various 'doubters' who have drawn just this conclusion, from ancient sceptics, to humanists like Montaigne, to Hume (PW, 248).

Relativism and scepticism as theoretical options notwithstanding, Herder himself resists this inference from diversity. As he goes on to reveal in *On the Change of Taste*, Herder thinks that correct historical practice should be

<sup>11</sup>The underlying metaphysics of nature as an organically developing system of forces is at the heart of another of Herder's most well-known and influential writings, *God, Some Conversations* (1787) (DKV 4, 703, 709). Here as well the conclusion that Herder draws from this historical view of nature is *pluralistic* and open-ended, rather than strictly essentialist (711). For an account of the moral and political implications of Herder's pluralism, see Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, 2003) 210–58.

modelled on what he, following Polybius, calls ‘pragmatic history’ (PW, 255). Pragmatic history, for Herder, is founded on the straightforwardly naturalistic intuition that cultural change obeys causal laws in much the same way as the rest of the universe. Knowledge of causal patterns provides the pragmatic historian with the wherewithal to offer both well-founded conclusions about human value and, more importantly for Herder, to offer advice. In an early text that advocates just this approach, *On Recent German Literature* (1767–1768), he writes that ‘such a history should aspire to be what it was for the ancients, the voice of patriotic wisdom and the reformer of the people’ (SEW, 94). The very same naturalistic approach that underwrites his perfectionism also serves, at least in his eyes, to deflect relativism and scepticism.

## 2

The second distinctive feature of Herder’s moral philosophy is his sentimentalism. Here, Herder is a participant in the ‘silent revolution’ described by Ian Ross in his intellectual biography of a figure greatly admired by Herder, David Hume’s distant cousin and sometime patron, Henry Home, Lord Kames.<sup>12</sup> In a more or less coherent intellectual tradition, stretching from the Third Earl of Shaftesbury to Adam Smith, British philosophers gradually shifted attention away from *reason* as the defining feature of human beings, and towards the constitutive role of emotions, desires and affects in our moral, social and even cognitive lives. Herder’s writings reveal a deep familiarity with, and appreciation for, many of the principle figures within this tradition, particularly with its inaugurator, Shaftesbury.<sup>13</sup>

Herder can be viewed as domesticating this British tradition within his native Wolffianism. The Wolffian theory of mind undercuts faculty psychology by conceiving of otherwise disparate mental processes and events as occupying various positions along a generically unified continuum of ‘representation’. This move allows Herder to develop his own account of how processes like sensation, emotion and imagination form the basic layer of human cognition. He thus views reason not as an independent faculty, but rather as a process that emerges from and depends upon the operations of processes that occupy places further down the continuum. In keeping with this view of the mind, Herder develops two claims that serve to both modify and substantiate his perfectionism. First, he maintains that moral

<sup>12</sup>Ian Ross, *Lord Kames and the Scotland of his Day* (Oxford, 1972) 101.

<sup>13</sup>In a letter of 1 August 1772, to Hamann, we learn of Herder’s enthusiasm for Scottish writers like Ferguson and Beattie. See Walther Zieseimer and Arthur Henkel (eds), *Johann Georg Hamann: Briefwechsel 3: 1770–1777* (Wiesbaden, 1957) 13. Several of his early writings on aesthetics disclose his familiarity with Lord Kames’s *Elements of Criticism* (SWA, 43, 186, 276–77).

sentiments (sometimes collectively designated as the 'conscience') orient our moral lives by attuning us to valuable features of the world and checking our less sociable proclivities. Second, Herder argues that our sentiments need to be carefully cultivated in such a way that a mature moral personality can emerge. In both respects, Herder anticipates some recent discussions of the role of the emotions and sentiments in morality.

Relatively early evidence of Herder's commitment to a sentimentalist theory can be seen in his programmatic *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People* (1765). Here, he maintains that 'sensations', or 'voices of *conscience*, our leader, sent by God' (PW, 13), provide the basic orientation and guidance of our moral lives. According to Herder, the more abstract principles favoured by philosophers are, if they can claim any purchase on the actual motivational economy of real people, simply clarifications or articulations of these 'sensations'. As he puts it here, '[a]ll the light that the philosopher gives the rule makes a thing distinct that was already certain for me beforehand. He teaches it to my *understanding*. And my heart, not the understanding, must feel it' (PW, 13).

Various essays from the 1770s reassert and deepen this sentimentalism. One of the more rhapsodic passages in the *Oldest Document of the Human Race* (1773) describes the '*feeling of virtue*', the 'inner sentiment [*Empfindung*] of *order, justice* [*Beschaffenheit*], according to which and for the sake of which all [human] nature is constructed' (DKV 5, 232). He goes on to single out the '*noble and gentle drives*' that comprise the roots and ultimate 'glue' of human social relationships (DKV 5, 232–3). On this account, the traditional concept of human nature as made in the image of God is cashed out primarily in terms of affectivity. The function of sensibility and sentiment is to attune people to relations of value that obtain in nature, and to make possible both the coherence of an individual life (as oriented towards values) and the coherence of society. The latter is accomplished through the constraining capacity of moral sentiments vis-à-vis our less sociable tendencies.

Both the preface and the main text of *On the Cognitive Knowledge and Sensation of the Human Soul* anchor Herder's sentimentalism in his theory of mind. In the preface, Herder defends the central importance for 'action' of the 'broad region of senses, drives, affects' (PW, 181). The colourful passage from the 'First Essay' about the diaphragm, already quoted previously, finds Herder claiming that the so-called 'lower faculties' are what embed us in the world in such a way that things *matter* to us. They also shape the basic contours of our personalities, and so form the ineluctable roots of any character formation that we might undergo.

One interesting feature of Herder's sentimentalism is that he is not committed to an obviously non-cognitivist account of the moral sentiments. This can be seen, for example, in the relatively late *On Religion, Doctrinal Opinions, Customs* (1798), where he observes that '[conscience] is to a human

being in his sphere just as certain and fitting as inclination and instinct are to the animal in its sphere. It awakens reason; it spurs and warns' (DKV 9/1, 753–4). Just as instincts attune animals to potentially beneficial or harmful features of their immediate surroundings, so too our moral sentiments (here again identified with the 'conscience') tune us in to morally salient features of our surroundings, making it possible to pursue the development of our capacities in a way that harmonizes with, and indeed, promotes, the well-being of others. Moreover, Herder maintains that emotional responses are actually functional in reasoning. At the very least, they initiate reflection, which suggests that there is no deep antagonism for Herder between reason and affect.

Herder's sentimentalism clearly anticipates some current ideas about the importance of emotions in moral life.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, Herder would resist the direction of some contemporary positions. Much of the recent debate focuses on how emotions factor into moral evaluations. One influential camp argues that emotions, conceived of as something like brute intuitions, are more critical to evaluation and to practical reasoning than are ratiocinative processes.<sup>15</sup> For these anti-rationalists, moral judgements issue from something more akin to gut reactions than from principled reflection. At first glance, it might indeed seem that Herder's view fits quite comfortably with this anti-rationalist position. Indeed, Herder was an appreciative reader of Hume, whose own views on the moral sentiments are often regarded as a historical reference for this kind of position. However, closer inspection reveals complexities in Herder's account that prevent it from being too closely assimilated to contemporary anti-rationalism. Here again, it is his neo-Wolffian theory of mind that does important work in grounding the distinctiveness of his own view. Rather than taking moral sentiments to be immediate or 'raw' reactions, Herder regards them, like all other mental activities, as products of complex formative processes. This allows Herder to accommodate approximations of more contemporary insights about the centrality of emotions in moral life while simultaneously avoiding the potentially deflationary consequences of anti-rationalism.

The key text in which Herder's position is developed is the posthumously published 'Fourth Grove' of the *Critical Forests* (1769). Herder here challenges Friedrich Justus Riedel (1742–1785), a sometime professor at Erfurt and eclectic disciple of the classicist Christian Adolf Klotz (1738–1771). Herder objects vehemently to Riedel's account of the psychological roots of aesthetic judgement. On Riedel's view, properties like beauty and

<sup>14</sup>See, for example, Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (Oxford, 1990). Allan Gibbard examines the connection between emotion and value in *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Oxford, 1990). Finally, for a theory of the role of emotions in practical rationality, see Ronald de Sousa, *The Rationality of Emotion* (Cambridge, MA, 1987).

<sup>15</sup>See, for example, Joshua Green and Jonathon Haidt, 'How (and where) Does Moral Judgment Work', *Trends in Cognitive Science* 6 (2002) 517–23.

goodness are the objects of an immediate feeling. Herder first argues that all cognitions that pass the threshold of conscious awareness are already the results of a complex formative process (SWA, 177–8). The only genuinely ‘immediate’ feeling that Herder is willing to grant Riedel is the impression we have of our own existence (SWA, 178). A coherent, intelligible experience of the world requires more than sensations and feelings; instead, it depends upon processes like ‘juxtaposition . . . comparison and judgement’ (SWA, 180). Herder claims that these processes become habitual over time, and consequently drop below the level of conscious awareness. ‘We judge, we infer rapidly and habitually, and we believe we are still receiving immediate sensations’ (SWA, 180).

Herder goes on to argue that the products of these habitual, and so largely unconscious, processes form a kind of ‘intermediate and vivid level’ in our cognitive lives. This level ‘is the very horizon that we commonly call the *sensus communis* in matters of knowledge, the conscience in matters of right and wrong, and taste where objects of beauty are concerned’ (SWA, 180–1). In other words, most of the ‘action’ in our mental lives occurs neither at the level of brute sensations nor in the higher reaches of abstract cognition. Instead, we live our lives for the most part within a context of habitual judgements. Riedel is thus simply wrong in claiming that it is ‘an immediate feeling for truth, beauty, and goodness that impels me, without developed concepts and rational inferences, toward these three lofty goals of the human soul’ (SWA, 183). Herder concludes that, on Riedel’s view, criticism of any sort becomes impossible (SWA, 184). Since the conscience or moral sense is exactly parallel, on Herder’s view, to aesthetic judgement, Riedel’s position would make rational analysis and criticism impossible in the domain of morality as well.

The basic ideas worked out with most detail here in the ‘Fourth Grove’ come to be recurring features of Herder’s discussions in aesthetics, philosophy of mind and philosophy of religion. Traces of them can be seen, for example, in *On the Causes of Sunken Taste* (1775), where Herder attacks the fashionable cult of irrational genius, arguing that true aesthetic creativity requires the organizing influence of taste, and that reason is instrumental in its formation (SWA, 312). In *On the Influence of the Belles Lettres on the Higher Sciences* (1781), Herder admonishes his readers to avoid the ‘fool’s gold’ of empty sentimentality that only stymies people’s efforts to internalize the ‘art of living’, the fruits of which include a clear conscience (SWA, 338). Most relevant to the present discussion is a long passage on the conscience from *On the Cognitive Knowledge and Sensation of the Human Soul*, in which Herder makes public many of the ideas first explored in the ‘Fourth Grove’. With typical rhetorical aplomb, Herder writes:

Is there a conscience, a moral feeling that, separated from all cognition, might show me the right path? The words themselves seem nonsense when one

presents them in that way – but I hardly believe that such a thing has ever been a human being’s opinion. If no thorough cognition exists without volition, then also no volition can exist without cognition; they are only a *single energy* of the soul. But just as our cognition is only human and must be that way if it is to be *right*, likewise our volition can only be *human* as well, hence from and full of *human* sensation.

(PW, 214)

There is abundant evidence, then, that in rejecting the primacy of formal principles and reason in moral life, Herder is not suggesting that we fall back on raw intuitions and gut feelings, or that this is actually how human beings behave. Moral sentiments, which are, after all, central to the formation of *all* of our characteristic capacities in the ideal of humanity, are themselves the outcome of processes that Herder can only think of as rational.

At the same time, Herder’s sentimentalism does serve to differentiate his perfectionism from that of the larger Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition. For Wolff and his closest disciples, the goal of our actions is perfection, and instances of it, or even approximations of it, excite our pleasure and moral approval. Perhaps not surprisingly, Wolff and Leibniz both cast their notions of human perfection in much the way that the Aristotelian tradition had done previously. That is, for Wolff, the perfection of a thing is the realization of its specific *differentiae*; in the case of a human being, reason is clearly what distinguishes us, as a natural kind, from other creatures. Herder, on the other hand, inaugurates a shift within this perfectionist tradition. This shift is most visible later on in Schiller’s famous quarrel with Kantian ethics. This new kind of perfectionism, which emerges most clearly in the last few decades of the eighteenth century, affords sensibility a central place in the project of self-formation. Herder is one of the earliest figures within this overall intellectual tradition to argue forcefully and publicly for such a revision of perfectionism.

It is quite beyond the scope of the present essay to explore, in all the detail that they merit, Herder’s complicated views on moral education. A few examples suffice. First, in the programmatic *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People*, we find Herder contending that moral instruction is most effective when it builds upon the basic moral sentiments that are shared by most people, and which are rarely articulated into explicit rules or principles (PW, 24). *On the Influence of the Belles Lettres* contains one of Herder’s lengthiest treatments of formation of sensibility. He maintains that the so-called ‘lower faculties of the soul’, including ‘sensuous cognition, the wit, the imagination, the sensuous appetites, enjoyment, the passions and inclinations’ should be foci of moral education (SWA, 338). This is because these are the real roots from which ‘virtue’ emerges (SWA, 339). The *belles lettres* are valuable precisely for the cultivation of sensibility (SWA, 342).

The foregoing discussion suggests several important ways in which Herder's sentimentalism fits with his perfectionism. First, he maintains that our moral sentiments attune us to what is worthwhile and guide our pursuit of it. It is the 'conscience' that ultimately points the way toward the ideal of humanity. Second, viewing the importance of the moral sentiments in this light, and in the light of how they come to exist in the overall economy of the mind, helps to underwrite the pluralistic and holistic aspects of his perfectionism. The perfection of reason cannot constitute the totality of the ideal of humanity if Herder's views on the moral sentiments are right. Hence, third, the education of these sentiments, primarily through artistic means like the *belles lettres*, becomes more than an aesthetic diversion. Instead, it is by means of this education that the moral personality comes to be shaped and the ultimate goal of human perfection is most effectively pursued.

## 3

The final defining feature of Herder's moral philosophy is his theism.<sup>16</sup> I am here using 'theism' in a broad sense to capture a variety of religious concepts and commitments that collectively play an important role in marking off Herder's position as a distinctive one. Obviously, the core commitment here is that there is a God. For Herder, this constitutes a kind of hub around which other views about the nature and function of religion in moral life are gathered and given focus. Theism occupies two levels within his theory. The first is *foundational*; moral life is possible because the universe is an orderly, law-governed whole created and sustained by a benevolent God. The second level is *functional*. His perfectionism is deepened and supported by a theory of moral formation in which religious traditions, practices and institutions play the key roles. As with the naturalistic foundations of his perfectionism, Herder's claims about religion might occasion resistance from contemporary philosophers. Herder does not offer anything new or particularly decisive by way of arguments for theism (though his conception of the divine nature, and his revisions of Spinozism, turned out to be watershed moments in modern intellectual history). Nevertheless, two considerations can be offered that make Herder's theism worth taking seriously. The first is simply that it is integral to his theory. To fail to do justice to the role that religion and theistic metaphysics play in his moral philosophy would be to mutilate it. Second, Herder provides a way of thinking about the relationship between morality and religion that is distinctive in its accommodation of

<sup>16</sup>For an overview of Herder's philosophy of religion, see Marcia Bunge, 'J.G. Herder's View of Religion', in *Sein ist im Werden: Essays zur Wirklichkeitskultur bei Johann Gottfried Herder anlässlich seines 250. Geburtstag*, edited by Wilhelm-Ludwig Federlin (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1995) 9–20.

both a modern, pluralistic humanism and of a serious acknowledgment of the ways in which religion is deeply rooted in human nature.

Herder's theism is foundational for other elements of his moral philosophy in several important ways. His claim that the law-like development of characteristic human capacities is good depends upon the further claims that (1) the world is governed by laws and that (2) this system of laws reflects the designs of a benevolent God. By Herder's lights, only if there is some order to the course of human life in nature is it possible for people to rationally pursue the development of their capacities. Moreover, only if this order reflects divine benevolence can one be confident that living in accord with nature is good. Herder's sentimentalism is also tightly integrated with his theism. Herder regards religion as a natural phenomenon firmly rooted in the basic dispositions of the human mind. Furthermore, he draws on his theism to link our moral sentiments with objectively valuable features of the world. Here, theism plays a founding or justificatory role. In addition, as an affair of the 'heart [*Gemüt*]', which grips the human mind at its very roots in sensibility, religion turns out to be uniquely equipped to promote the moral formation of humanity.

Theses about natural history ground the character of Herder's theism. He hypothesizes an optimal state of an organism, consisting in the balance of countervailing forces; that is, proportionality must be present for an organism to subsist and flourish. The universe as a whole is a complex 'system of systems', an organic whole held together by relations of lawful order. Herder's theism is tantamount to the claim that the universe is, like each organism that inhabits it, a whole that is sustained in existence by an organizing principle that affects a harmonizing of the various forces constitutive of it. God, for Herder, is precisely this 'primal force [*Urkraft*]'. *God, Some Conversations*, is the *locus classicus* of this view. The universe, according to Herder, is a collection of organized forces. The key idea is that God, as the 'force of forces' (DKV 4, 710), exercises lawful governance of the other forces that constitute the basic layer of reality. Without such a lawful order, it is difficult to see how human efforts to attain well-being and perfection could succeed, or even how they could be coherently pursued. Moreover, that this lawful order is a product of God's benevolence gives one reason to believe that the characteristic ends that people are driven to pursue by their natural predispositions are indeed worthwhile. That God's governance of the world is benevolent, that the laws of the universe are thus good laws, is something that Herder explicitly asserts in many places. Here, he maintains that 'all subsistence, all well-being, the very existence of things itself is founded solely upon measure, proportion, and order, and through these all things are conserved in being' (DKV 4, 721). Recall that Herder had used precisely notions such as proportion to define the idea of a maximum or optimal state of an organism, and so to underwrite his perfectionism. God's benevolence consists precisely in the laws that order the universe in such a way that this maximum tends to be realized.

*On Religion* also brings out the close connection he sees between God's benevolent rule of the universe and the goodness of human perfection. He argues that God is both 'root of things', i.e. their efficient cause, and 'at the same time the order of the world, its living, acting law, its rule' (DKV 9/1, 755). Herder also insists that this order is benevolent (DKV 9/1, 750–1). Religion is the 'noble consciousness of ourselves in creation, as in the well-ordered house of a father, feeling ourselves as participants in his fatherly honor [*Huld*]' (DKV 9/1, 747). It is because the laws of nature reflect God's benevolence that it is good for us to act in accord with them. Moreover, the capacities and dispositions that reflect this lawful order, and that we are called upon to realize, are best attributed to the prior activities of divine benevolence.

Naturally, Herder also needs an account of how we come to grasp morally relevant features of the world. It is only because the human mind, itself a system of forces, is firmly integrated into the universal order by means of natural laws that we can be confident about our appraisals. *On the Cognitive Knowledge* contains numerous assertions to this effect. Herder maintains that the 'feeling of the One who rules in all manifoldness' constitutes a kind of cognitive glue that makes possible a coherent experience of the world (PW, 188–9). In other words, underlying our otherwise disconnected or momentary mental activities there is a sense that the universe as a whole (and so our minds as part of it) fits together an ordered way. This underlying sense serves to make us feel 'at home' in the world on a pre-reflective level. The higher reaches of our cognitive achievements, such as the articulation of the laws of nature in science, depend upon this more inchoate sense of the coherence of nature. Just as God is the 'primal force' that guarantees the integrity of an individual organism, as well as of the universe as a whole, so too God is the 'medium' that links our cognitive capacities to the world (PW, 203).

In view of these close links between religion and the moral sentiments, and of the robustly theistic metaphysics that underpins his moral philosophy more generally, it is not surprising that he also affords religion a primary role in human moral development, in both the lives of individuals and in that of the species as a whole, considered historically. In a series of studies of the New Testament, particularly in his important historical treatment of the person of Christ, *On the Savior of Humanity* (1796), Herder highlights the role that exemplary individuals, portrayed in a religious narrative, function to shape moral character. Elsewhere, for example, in *Ideas*, Herder describes religion as the 'primal tradition' in and through which characteristically human capacities are given form (DKV 6, 373). Similarly, in *To Preachers*, he describes how the poetic language of the Bible is best seen as an effort to implant 'germs [*Sämenkornen*]' for the moral maturation of humanity (DKV 9/1, 83). The stories of the Bible are, he asserts, the best 'instruction manual [*Bildungsbuch*]' of humanity (DKV 9/1, 84). Religious faith is the attitude

that best corresponds to the developmental, and so necessarily incomplete, character of human life; one is, Herder observes, the ‘child of a higher power’ for one’s entire life (DKV 9/1, 85). Religion is, therefore, ‘the *only treasury for all the powers of humanity!* in every domain, every development, and for its entire existence’ (DKV 9/1, 86).

In *Letters on the Study of Theology*, Herder adapts Lessing’s notion of revelation as the ‘education of the human race’ to make roughly the same point (DKV 9/1, 390). Herder maintains that revelation, conceived of here as embracing both the content of the Bible and the historical experience of all nations at various points in their development, is what actually instructs human beings in the use of reason, and so that reason is not autonomous (DKV 9/1, 390–1). Reason, he notes, ‘did not fall from heaven’ (DKV 9/1, 391). Going beyond the picture found in *This Too a Philosophy of History*, Herder tries to make the case for the fact that the process of instruction that comprises revelation as a historical phenomenon is not simply a necessity for so-called ‘primitive’ peoples, but continues in this function, despite the protestations of his ‘Enlightened’ contemporaries (DKV 9/1, 393).

On Herder’s view, religion is capable of playing this crucial formative role because, by its nature, it addresses the totality of the characteristic capacities of humanity. In *To Preachers*, he argues that religious language, such as that of the Bible, is able to ‘nourish a soul *at its deepest and eternally*’ addressing ‘*all powers*’ (DKV 9/1, 84). That is, religious language functions in the same way that the *belles lettres* do more generally; the key difference, however, is that the moral content of religion makes it particularly powerful and efficacious. ‘The Word of God’, he writes, ‘nourishes, expands, supports and edifies the whole soul’ (DKV 9/1, 85).

Herder’s theism, in a manner not out of keeping with the Enlightenment mainstream, diverges from the more traditional sort in a number of ways (to say nothing of his position towards some of the traditional doctrines of orthodox Christianity).<sup>17</sup> Yet, unlike his erstwhile teacher Kant, for example, Herder does not attempt either to reduce religion to morality, or to simply append it to morality in order to clarify theoretical difficulties in a particular account. Rather, as I have argued above, Herder assigns both foundational and functional roles to religion, both of which, in his view, render it indispensable for the advancement of humanity. Thus, Herder manages to promote a broadly humanistic, secular outlook without jettisoning religion either from the intellectual world or from the everyday

<sup>17</sup>For the idea of different ‘Enlightenments’, some ‘moderate’ and reformist, others ‘radical’ and revolutionary, see Jonathan I. Israel’s influential *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2002) and *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man, 1670–1752* (Oxford, 2009). For an illuminating discussion of the ‘moderate’ Enlightenment, in which Herder would have been more at home than among Israel’s ‘radicals’, see David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton, 2008).

lives of people in modern society. For Herder, human beings need religion in order to (1) make sense of the nature of moral requirements and of how they fit into the universe as a whole, and (2) to cultivate a proper discernment for these requirements. When linked, as it should be, to his perfectionism and sentimentalism, Herder's religious view comprises a viable and, indeed, attractive alternative to various competing contemporary accounts of the relationship between morality and religion, whether these are themselves secular or religion in orientation.

I make no claim here to have provided an exhaustive treatment of Herder's moral philosophy. At the same time, by articulating the fundamental features of his theory – perfectionism, sentimentalism and theism – I hope to have provided a solid basis for the systematic exploration of related aspects of his moral philosophy. Some of the areas in which new light might be cast by the account developed here include his theory of education, his political philosophy and his practical activities as preacher and church leader in Riga, Bückeburg and Weimar. Thus, while much more needs to be said about Herder's moral theory, the account given here provides some hitherto lacking clarification about his fundamental philosophical orientation. Many of the elements of Herder's theory anticipate contemporary discussions in surprising ways, rendering Herder a potentially fruitful conversation partner for current moral philosophers. As in virtually every other aspect of his vast oeuvre, Herder here stands out as a genuinely original and important thinker.<sup>18</sup>

University of Utah

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