

Historicism and Critique in Herder's *Another Philosophy of History*: Some Hermeneutic Reflections

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Abstract: In *Another Philosophy of History*, J.G. Herder claims that his aim is not to compare and judge different cultures, but merely to describe and explain how each came into being and thus to adopt the standpoint of an impartial observer. I argue, however, that there is a tension between Herder's understanding of his own project—his stated doctrine of historicism and cultural relativism—and the way in which it is actually put into practice. That is, despite Herder's stated aims, he is nevertheless unable to avoid justifying premodern forms of life and making context-transcending evaluative judgments in the process of trying to understand cultures on their own terms and holding them up as exemplars vis à vis the Enlightenment. This tension presents the challenge of accounting for it in the most charitable and illuminating way. I argue that this goal can be achieved by appealing to the resources of the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, which enables us to disclose two enabling conditions for Herder's project of which he was not explicitly aware, viz., the internal connection between understanding and justification and the enabling character of prejudice as the condition for the possibility of understanding as such.

In *Another Philosophy of History*, J.G. Herder develops a distinctive methodology for historical inquiry that poses a challenge to his Enlightenment contemporaries on the grounds that their methods radically distort and, as a result, fail to genuinely understand and learn from premodern cultures and civilizations. Against the assumptions of cultural superiority of Enlightenment historians, based on a historical narrative of linear progress which posits the Enlightenment as history's terminal point, Herder argues that no such comparative, context-transcending evaluative judgments can be made since every culture has to be understood on its own terms and evaluated on the basis of the criteria internal to each. By situating cultures within their own historical context, therefore, we can come to understand and appreciate the particular virtues distinctive of each. As such, according to Herder's historicism, the aim is not to compare and judge different cultures, but rather to describe and explain how each came into being; that is, to adopt the standpoint of an impartial observer in order to avoid the hubris of Enlightenment historians on the one hand, and the tendency to overly romanticize and 'pick favorites' among premodern cultures, on the other.

There is a tension, however, between the way Herder understands his own project—his stated doctrine of historicism and cultural relativism—and the way in which it is actually put into practice. That is to say, despite Herder's stated aims, he is nevertheless unable to avoid justifying premodern forms of life and making context-transcending evaluative judgments in the process of trying to understand cultures on their own terms and holding them up as exemplars vis à vis the Enlightenment, which inevitably involves introducing his own prejudices (pre-understandings) into his interpretations (e.g., happiness, virtue, wisdom, Providence, etc.). Indeed, his critique of the Enlightenment would have little force without recourse to context-transcending values, which represent distinct dimensions of a common humanity. Hence, Herder is able to claim that the Enlightenment is an unhappy age vis à vis its predecessors, precisely because happiness represents a universal dimension of human being—a conceptual space shared by all cultures—which allows for context-transcending comparisons and judgments.

This tension between Herder's stated doctrine and its *actual* practice presents the challenge of accounting for it in the most charitable and illuminating way, viz., in such a way that avoids ascriptions of incoherence, while allowing for the distinctive insights yielded by Herder's philosophy of history and hermeneutics to be preserved and foregrounded. In this paper, I will draw upon the resources of the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer to argue that this goal can be achieved by disclosing two essential enabling conditions for Herder's project in *Another Philosophy of History* of which he was not explicitly aware, viz., the internal connection between understanding and justification and the enabling character of prejudice or pre-understandings as conditions for the possibility of understanding as such. Achieving reflective awareness of the enabling conditions of Herder's project—making explicit what is implicit in his practice of historical inquiry—in turn, allows for the possibility of going beyond Herder's own self-understanding to retrieve what is most valuable in his practice and of doing justice to the transformative aims of his critique of the Enlightenment.

In the first part of the paper, I will briefly introduce the notion of 'prejudice' as it is understood in philosophical hermeneutics and relate it to Herder's use of the term in order to lay the foundation for my hermeneutical reading of Herder. In the second, I will provide a sketch of the way Herder understands his own method and doctrine as expounded in *Another Philosophy of History*. In the third and final section, I will show how his stated commitment to historicism and cultural relativism stand in tension with his actual practice and explain the tension by making explicit two enabling conditions implicit in his practice: the internal connection between understanding and justification and the presence of prejudice as a condition of the possibility of understanding and interpretation as such.

1. On the Concept of 'Prejudice' in Gadamer and Herder

In this paper, I will be following Gadamer's rehabilitation of prejudice in *Truth and Method*—or pre-understandings/prejudgments as I will be referring to them

from now on—which are to be understood not as subjective impediments to understanding, but conditions for the possibility of understanding as such. According to Gadamer, “prejudice” [traditionally] means a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that can determine a situation have been finally examined [. . .] Thus “prejudice” certainly does not necessarily mean a false judgment, but part of the idea is that it can have either a positive or a negative value [they may either distort or illuminate] [. . .] There are such things as legitimate prejudices.¹ ‘Prejudice’, understood as a pre-judgment or a pre-understanding, has a provisional and revisable character and thus provides a preliminary basis for understanding and further inquiry; it does neither determine nor provide the ‘final say’ on the matter in advance, but is indispensable for understanding as such. Pre-understandings or pre-judgments are thus constitutive of what both Heidegger and Gadamer call the ‘fore-structure’ of the understanding: the background of beliefs, concepts, knowledge, etc. that precede and anticipate every encounter with and make possible understanding of phenomena.² In other words, prejudices, in the positive sense outlined above, are ‘biases of our *openness to the world*’ (Gadamer 1977: 115; italics added). In short, according to this view, there is no presuppositionless inquiry, no ‘view from nowhere’; understanding is always contextual, perspectival, and enabled by our conceptual frameworks.

It should be noted, however, that Herder understands ‘prejudice’ as precisely an impediment to understanding, which is reflected in his stated aim to overcome what he considers to be the prejudice of the Enlightenment: a facile ethnocentrism that dogmatically assumes the absolute superiority of its categories and normative standards by which it judges premodern cultures. So Herder believes what distinguishes him from his Enlightenment counterparts is that he does not naively assume the superiority of the standards of his own culture and tradition and project them onto premodern cultures; by trying to understand them on their own terms instead, we can come to see that Enlightenment standards, values, etc. are also context-dependent and, therefore, cannot claim universal validity. Thus, Herder is still caught up in what Gadamer calls the ‘Enlightenment prejudice against prejudice’, which is based on the distinction between ‘the prejudice due to human authority and that due to overhastiness. This distinction is based on the origin of prejudices in the persons who have them. Either the respect we have for others and their authority leads us to error, or else an overhastiness in ourselves’ (TM: 274). Indeed, Herder does in fact exhibit such an understanding of prejudice in that he is critical both of the authority of his interlocutors—e.g., the *philosophes*—and their ‘overhasty’ judgments of premodern peoples.

This negative understanding of prejudice, however, is not undermined by Herder’s own rehabilitation of prejudice as a crucial component of education (e.g., in his discussion of the Orient). This is because prejudice, in this context, is still associated with blind obedience to authority—its instrumental value notwithstanding—and thus with ‘darkness’, in direct opposition to the ‘light’ of (abstract) reason. Herder does not recognize the fact that prejudice enables

understanding and provides the basis for rational inquiry and, as a result, does not have to be the product of a blind adherence to authority, but can arise from experience or rational reflection. As such, he falls into the Romanticist trap of simply opposing prejudice—as dogmatic and unreflective—to abstract reason, thereby implicitly accepting the terms of the debate as formulated by the Enlightenment:

In contrast to the Enlightenment's faith in perfection, which thinks in terms of complete freedom from 'superstition' and the prejudices of the past, we now find that olden times—the world of myth, unreflective life, not yet analyzed away by consciousness, in a 'society close to nature', the world of Christian chivalry [which Herder praises]—all these acquire a romantic magic, even a priority over truth [. . .] In fact the presupposition of a *mysterious darkness* [a key term for Herder] in which there was a mythical collective consciousness that preceded all thought is just as dogmatic and abstract as that of a state of perfect enlightenment or of absolute knowledge. Primeval wisdom is only the counterimage of 'primeval stupidity'. (TM: 275–6)

In this context, the more interesting issues at stake lie deeper than the confrontation between reason and prejudice and the question of which side manages to successfully transcend their own prejudices, which is impossible *in toto*, viz., 'which interpretive framework has the most descriptive accuracy, can tell the most compelling narrative and what normative conclusions should we draw from them?' Consequently, the aim of the paper is precisely *to go beyond* Herder's understanding of prejudice because it obscures its positive and enabling character for understanding and knowledge, which, in turn, prevents us from fully appreciating the positive insights into premodern cultures and the interpretive/historical methodology yielded by his prejudices. Seen in this light, what distinguishes Herder from many of his Enlightenment contemporaries is the relative sophistication of his conceptual framework, which employs concepts such as 'wisdom', 'happiness', 'virtue', etc. as context-transcending values that represent universal dimensions of human existence and, therefore, as legitimate categories and criteria for understanding and evaluating cultures.

The Enlightenment, by contrast, understands and judges premodern cultures exclusively in terms the categories and standards of scientific and instrumental rationality, which not only distort premodern cultures, but obscures other legitimate criteria of evaluation according to which premodern societies might even be *superior* to Enlightenment society. Indeed, implicit in Herder's practice is the recognition that an effective internal critique of the Enlightenment must involve the introduction of different conceptual tools and the modification of certain concepts. Charles Taylor (1982) makes a similar 'Herderian' point in his paper 'Rationality', arguing that human rationality cannot be reduced to abstract reasoning and scientific–technical reason; it is a much richer notion, encompassing human *wisdom*, for example, which is concerned with ethical and existential issues. This, in turn, opens up the possibility of multiple standards of context-

transcending evaluation, allowing for more nuanced judgments to be made, e.g., that Enlightenment Europe might be technologically and scientifically superior, but ethically—existentially inferior (e.g., less *happy*). As we will see in the final section, Herder's account of happiness constitutes such a standard.

2. Herder's Historicism and Cultural Relativism

From Herder's remarks about the nature of his own enterprise, it is possible to identify two interrelated pillars of his philosophy of history, viz., historicism and cultural relativism. Herder's commitment to historicism lies in his view that an adequate understanding of alien cultures requires situating them within their proper historical context and avoiding projecting upon them certain concepts, values, and standards of rationality that are the product of our own (modern) era. For example, in trying to understand the work of Homer, it would be a mistake to evaluate his work according to or ascribe to him standards of rationality characteristic of the Enlightenment, standards unavailable to ancient Greek society. This leads to the second pillar, which is the view that each culture is to be understood and evaluated solely on its own terms, i.e., according to standards internal to that culture. This, in turn, rules out the possibility of context-transcending comparisons and evaluative judgments, precisely because there are no context-transcending criteria or values upon which to base such judgments. Each culture has its own distinctive virtues, vices, 'center of happiness', etc., which must be grasped in all their specificity. Properly understanding other cultures, therefore, requires that the historian understand them from 'the inside', i.e., grasp the irreducible singularity of the *Volkgeist* that animates each culture and to recognize our own as merely one among many branches or fruits on what Herder calls 'the tree of life'.

From the universal perspective of the tree of life, all cultures have their distinctive function and place in history such that it makes little sense to judge one as superior to the other or to 'play favorites' between them. In light of Herder's stated commitment to historicism and cultural relativism, therefore, the proper role of the historian is that of the impartial observer, not in the sense that her descriptions of other cultures must be value neutral, but in the sense that her descriptions and explanations of the genesis of other cultures must do justice to their irreducible uniqueness, which, in turn, means she is not in the business of making comparative, context-transcending evaluative judgments.

This commitment to historicism and cultural relativism is revealed when Herder chastises Enlightenment philosophers and historians for falsely projecting Enlightenment ideas, standards, values, etc. on premodern cultures (the Orient, in this context):

How foolish [it would be] for you to tarnish this ignorance and admiration, this imagination and reverence, this enthusiasm and child-sense with the *blackest devilry of your age*, with *fraud and stupidity, superstition and slavery*—to fabricate for yourself an army of *priest-devils and tyrant-*

ghosts that exist only in your soul! A thousand times more foolish [still] for you magnanimously to bestow upon a child your *philosophical deism*, your *aesthetic virtue* and *honour*, your *universal love of all peoples* full of tolerant *subjugation*, *blood-sucking*, and *enlightenment* according to the high taste of your time [. . .] You would rob [a child] of his *better inclinations*, of the *bliss* and *foundations* of his nature; you would turn him [. . .] into the most monstrous thing in the world: into an *old man of three years*. (APH: 11)³

Indeed, Herder goes on to quote Rousseau to illustrate that proper historical inquiry into premodern cultures will inevitably lead to ‘encounter[ing] *inclinations* that could have only been formed and set upon the *human species* in *that land*, in *that* manner, for the great purposes of *Providence*’ (APH: 11). In short, each and every culture (nation) represents a historically unique product of a confluence of contingent forces, including geography and climate, within the overarching plan of divine Providence; when we take a retrospective look at the unfolding of history, we can come to see that premodern cultures could not have been other than what they were, given the specific historical, geographical, climactic, etc. circumstances.⁴ It is precisely because Enlightenment philosophers fail to see this that they fall prey to empty moralizing and assumptions of superiority.

As Herder reveals in his discussion of the transition from the Orient to Egyptian civilization, it is precisely the fact that the *Volkgeist* of each culture is so intimately tied to the land and time in which it came into being that renders it impossible to make context-transcending comparisons and evaluations, thereby making it all the more necessary to understand them in their particular historical contexts as self-contained worlds unto themselves:

Here, again, it would be foolishness to tear a *single Egyptian virtue* away from the land, the time, and the boyhood of the human spirit and to measure it by the *standard of another time*! If, as it has been shown, the Greek could be so very wrong about the Egyptian, and the Oriental could loathe the Egyptian, then I reckon that it should be our first concern to see him in none but *his own place*—or else we would see, from the European perspective especially, [his face distorted into] the most hideous grimace [. . .] On a map, [the earth] appears to me as nothing but a *board full of images*, where everyone has found [his own] meaning: *each country* and its *products* so original, each its own *human species*! (APH: 14)

The essential point in this context is one of *anti-ethnocentrism*: when we judge other cultures based exclusively upon the evaluative criteria and standards of our own culture, assuming that they are absolutely valid, we distort and become blind to their distinctive virtues and, as a result, we fail to adequately understand them. Therein lies the Enlightenment’s ‘prejudice’ against premodern cultures, which Herder wishes to combat. This is precisely why philosophers and historians must try to understand other cultures *on their own terms*—according to their own normative standards—if they are to understand at all. In doing so, they can come to see that their own standards, which are contingent products of

their own historical epoch, cannot claim universality (e.g., the Orient can hate Egypt, Egypt the Greeks, etc.). Indeed, as Herder remarks in relation to the historian of art Johann Winkelmann's exaltation of Ancient Greece and his application of Greek artistic standards to Egyptian art, 'Winkelmann [. . .] clearly judged the Egyptians' artworks solely according to Greek standards, doing very well as far as *condemnation* was concerned, but describing so little of their *own nature and kind* that a blatantly one-sided and cross-eyed quality comes to light in almost every one of his sentences in this major treatment [. . .] As it is usually the Egyptians' lot to be approached from Greece, and thus with an exclusively Greek eye, how could they fare any 'worse'? (APH: 15). The ethnocentric tendencies of Enlightenment historians and philosophers, therefore, distort our understanding of other cultures and thus fail to do justice to their unique attributes and virtues. As a result, they are unable to do anything more than belittle and condemn. By contrast, the motivation behind Herder's historicism and cultural relativism is precisely to characterize premodern cultures in the most positive light possible as a corrective against Enlightenment hubris.⁵

As mentioned above, Herder's emphasis on the plurality and singularity of cultures as self-contained historical worlds/narratives unto themselves, captured by the metaphor of the garden, coexists with the holist/universalist standpoint of the tree of life, which unites them into a single narrative, each with its own functionally differentiated place within it (Zusi 2007: 89, 91). That is, cultures both possess an irreducible singularity and yet are interconnected and interdependent. Thus, while Herder claims that each culture builds upon and could not exist without previous cultures, he nevertheless stresses that what emerged out of each culture was an entirely new and unique world:

Now of course the Oriental shepherd's life had become well-nigh *incomparable* to this emerging state [Phoenicia] [. . .] all in all, what a change *in the form of human society!* [. . .] what a different world of *activity, of purpose, benefit, inclination, application of the soul!* Now the ship- and coast-dweller, the expatriated *roamer across seas and amidst peoples* [Phoenician], had to appear an entirely different creature to the tent- and hut-dweller. The Oriental must have needed to accuse him of weakening *that which is human, the Egyptian, of weakening patriotism* [. . .] All true. It is only that something very different developed at the same time (though something that I am by no means willing to compare with the former, since I do not wish to *compare* anything at all!). (APH: 16–17)⁶

So in the attempt to do justice to the particularity of each culture, Herder explicitly expresses his intention to resist comparative judgments and evaluations: the Orientals are so different from the Egyptians, the Egyptians so different from the Phoenicians, etc., that we should content ourselves to grasping their unique character or *Volkgeist* instead. Indeed, the historian or philosopher must look to understand other cultures 'from the inside', which is not a purely intellectual exercise, in that, they must also 'feel their way in' through empathy and feeling sympathy for 'the spirit of the inclinations' of nations/cultures (APH: 24).

As such, it should be no surprise that when Herder arrives at the end of his sketch of premodern history from its childhood (Orient) to adulthood (Rome), emphasizing both the singularity and interconnected character of each nation/culture, he claims, 'So far we are in no way talking about advantage or disadvantage, only of *effect*' (APH: 23). Once we adopt the universal/holist perspective of tree of life, which ultimately grows according to the plan of divine Providence, then we are able to '*grasp the whole of such alternating ages, to impose order on them, to pursue them gently* [...] To isolate only the *main causes* underlying each scene, to *follow the currents* quietly' (APH: 26). Consequently, it appears the philosopher or historian must both be able to feel her way into other cultures to grasp them in their singularity from the perspective of the garden, and be capable of observing and explaining the sequence of events and historical transitions from the holist/universal perspective of the tree of life. Both perspectives, however, preclude the kind of 'partial' historicizing based on the 'discovery of a favorite ancient people' because all cultures are valuable in their own right when viewed exclusively from the inside, and each has a distinctive and equally important role to play in the progression of humanity (APH: 27).⁷

In the context of describing the constant movement and often violent progression of human history, characterized by the rise and fall, birth and death of nations/cultures, Herder makes perhaps the most emphatic and revelatory statement about the aims of his own enterprise, which are consistent with his remarks above and follow from his commitments to historicism and cultural relativism:

Nothing could be further from my mind than to defend the endless mass migrations and devastations, the vassals' wars and feuds, the armies of monks, the pilgrimages and crusades: I only wish to explain them, [to show] how *spirit* breathes in everything, after all! [...] Who could read this history and not cry out repeatedly: *inclinations* and *virtues* of honor and *freedom*, of *love* and *courage*, of *politeness* and *keeping one's word*—where have you gone? [...] Give us *something* of your *reverence* and *superstition*, your *darkness* and *ignorance*, your *muddled* and *crude customs*, and take our *light* and *lack of faith*, our *numbed coldness* and *refinement*, our *philosophical exhaustion* and *human misery*! (APH: 42–3)

This passage is of great significance for our purposes for two reasons. First, after claiming he does not intend to justify some of the more objectionable characteristics of nations/cultures throughout history, Herder goes on to do just that shortly afterward, by claiming that if we were to understand these nations/cultures as he does, then we would see that we should 'forgive them' (APH: 42). This, in turn, reveals Herder's abandonment of evaluative neutrality, thereby illustrating the internal connection between understanding and justification; a neutral observer cannot, after all, be in the business of offering forgiveness. Second, the values enumerated above—especially inclination, virtue, wisdom, and happiness—represent universal dimensions of the human condition on the basis of which Herder launches his critique of the Enlightenment, which sug-

gests that they possess context-transcending validity. As such, they represent crucial components of Herder's conceptual repertoire, i.e., his prejudices or pre-understandings, which make possible his positive characterizations of pre-modern cultures that challenge the self-understanding of the Enlightenment. Consequently, despite Herder's claim to the contrary, it matters a great deal to the success of his critique of the Enlightenment that it not be the case that *Another Philosophy of History* might just as well be written by a Muslim or a Mameluke!⁸ In the following section, I will elaborate upon these two points in greater detail.

3. Explaining the Tension between Herder's Stated Doctrine and Actual Practice: The Internal Connection between Understanding and Justification

Let us begin where we left off in the previous section, namely, where Herder states his intention not to defend or justify premodern cultures, but to explain and describe them, only to do the opposite shortly thereafter. Herder goes on to claim,

How differently I view the ages in this light! [i.e., in light of the descriptive/explanatory stance of his approach to the understanding of other cultures] How much we should *forgive* them when we see them always *wrestling with their faults, struggling for an improvement* truly more visible than that attributed to a certain other age! How much *derision* is simply dreamt up by the brains of strangers, or else since they were at the time much *milder* and more *inevitable* [than we imagine], or were already being *compensated for* by a corresponding good, or are already discernable to us as a means to a *great good* in the future, of which [*those ages*] *themselves were not aware*. Who could not read this history and not cry out repeatedly: *inclinations and virtues of honor and freedom, of love and courage, of politeness and keeping one's word*—where have you gone? (APH: 42)

What is even more striking is that in the immediately following passages, Herder provides his famous rehabilitation of the Middle Ages, claiming, among other things, that its *Volkgeist* was the 'spirit of chivalry', a product of 'the sound form of the North', and that 'Despite all barbarism, the *insights* that were treated *scholastically* were more *refined* and *exalted*, the *sentiments* put to *barbaric* and *popish* uses more *abstracted* and *exalted*. From these flowed *morality*, the very model thereof. What other age had ever known *such a religion*, wretched though it appeared?' (APH: 43–4). Herder goes so far in his defense of the Middle Ages that he makes the stunning claim that 'Even the more refined elements of the *Turkish* religion, for which our deists have such high regard, only *came about "through the Christian religion"*' (APH: 44). In short, Herder argues that when viewed the particular standpoint of the garden, we can see that the Middle Ages did in fact possess virtues worthy of admiration and that from the universal historical standpoint of the tree of life, we now have enough historical distance

to see that it was a necessary phase in the progression of humanity, a necessary condition for the Reformation to have taken place.

How are we to make sense of the evident tension between Herder's stated doctrine and actual practice, as witnessed above, indeed as it occurs virtually within the same passage? First, the passages above clearly demonstrate that in trying to understand premodern cultures on their own terms and to characterize them in the most positive light possible, Herder cannot avoid simultaneously justifying them. This is because to understand the meaning of practices, institutions, texts, etc., of a nation or culture, is to understand the underlying rationale or reasons behind them or the conditions under which they could possibly be valid or true. This, in turn, requires that the historian or interpreter bring his own beliefs and pre-understandings about the subject matter into play in order to evaluate the plausibility of the claims made by a culture. In other words, one must abandon the perspective of the neutral observer and adopt the standpoint of a *participant* within the culture one is trying to understand. For example, in trying to understand the belief in witchcraft of the Azande tribe, one can come to see how they might be justified in holding this belief by examining the reasons behind it, which involves understanding the purpose of the practice within the wider context that gives it meaning (the Azande tradition/worldview). In doing so, one may ultimately choose to assent to or to reject the beliefs or validity claims made by other cultures, but one cannot avoid adopting an evaluative stance as such. Gadamer puts the point this way, viz., that trying to understand another culture involves coming to a common agreement about the subject matter with the other as a participant in dialogue, and in order to do so, 'we don't try to transpose ourselves into the author's mind but, if one wants to use this terminology, we try to transpose ourselves into the perspective within which he has formed his views. *But this simply means that we try to understand how what he is saying could be right . . .* The task of hermeneutics is to clarify this miracle of understanding, which is not a mysterious communion of souls, but a sharing in a common meaning' (TM: 292; italics added).

Frederick Beiser is also keenly aware of the internal connection between understanding and justification and, as a result, like Gadamer, likens the role of the historian to that of the critic: 'Just as a critic must judge a work according to the purpose of the author, so the historian must understand an action according to the intention of the agent. He must know not only the causes of the action (the conditions that make it necessary according to natural laws), but also the reasons for it (the value and beliefs that justify it in the eyes of the agent himself). No less than the critic then, the historian must sympathize with the agent and identify with the language, customs, and values of his culture' (Beiser 1987: 142–3).⁹ To put it simply, Herder's methodological principle of understanding cultures from the inside, in *actual practice*, undermines his stated commitment to evaluative neutrality.

The point here is not that Herder understands himself as providing value neutral descriptions of premodern cultures, but that he ultimately cannot avoid using value-laden terms in his interpretations. Rather, the point is that as soon

as he takes himself to have provided a plausible interpretation of a nation/culture, it is, in a sense, already too late for him to ask what he himself should believe precisely because what he finds plausible 'passes into [his] own thinking on the subject' (TM: 375). In other words, Herder cannot avoid defending and justifying the culture/nation in question against the criticisms of the Enlightenment, precisely because he takes his interpretations to be valid, which means the 'Who am I to judge?' option is simply not available to him (APH: 96). Indeed, Herder's defense of premodern cultures neither begins nor ends with the passages quoted above, but can be seen as early on as his discussion of the Orient:

Induction will easily demonstrate that this world of inclinations contained *conditions* that we often *imagine*, by one of our age's deceits, to have been far *stranger and more terrible* than they actually were. We have construed for ourselves an *Oriental Despotism* by singling out the most extreme and violent occurrences from what are usually decaying empires, which resort to it only in their final throes and thus reveal their very fear of death! And as, in our European terms (and perhaps emotions), one cannot speak of anything more terrible than despotism, so we console ourselves by alienating it from itself and *putting it in a context* where it could *not* have been *the terrible thing* that we dream up *on account of our own condition*. (APH: 7)

As we have already seen, this defense occurs both at the level of the garden and of the tree of life (particular and universal): the garden standpoint allows us to hone in on the unique qualities and virtues of each nation/culture, while the perspective afforded by the tree allows us to situate each nation/culture in its proper place along the continuum of human progress. It is interesting to note that part of Herder's defense of the Orient's brutalities lies in pointing out that they occurred during the death throes of their empires, which is a manifestation of their *fear of death*. If we accept that the fear of death is a natural and universal condition of humanity—and this seems to be what Herder is implying in this context—then what is doing the justificatory work is essentially a context-transcending feature of humanity. That is to say, when viewed from the universal, yet 'internal' vantage point of the fear of death, one cannot help but to sympathize with and thus be less judgmental and harsh in our criticisms of the Orient. In the following section, we will turn to Herder's appeal to context-transcending values as part of the pre-understandings that makes possible his own enterprise and critique of the Enlightenment.

3.1 Prejudice as the Condition for the Possibility of Understanding and Interpretation as Such

It is worth raising from the outset an important issue that emerges from the previous section, in order to set the stage for a discussion of the role of prejudice

in interpretation: If genuine understanding requires adopting the internal perspective of the members of that culture, then how is it possible, if at all, to prevent our own culturally inherited beliefs, values, etc. from 'infecting' our interpretations? Beiser puts the problem in the following way: 'There are obvious difficulties in achieving an internal understanding of another culture. How can we adopt the standpoint of another culture without covertly allowing the values and beliefs of our own culture to influence our perception and judgment?' (Beiser 1987: 144). According to Beiser, Herder recognizes the problem in the *Werke*, but can provide only an unsatisfactory solution, one that is in tune with the objectivist pretensions of historicism, viz., 'to make a more thorough study of the facts, to examine with greater patience and precision all the data about the language, customs, and traditions of other cultures. The more we examine the data, he argues, the more we will creep outside our own cultural epistemological shell [. . .] Herder is simply restating the need for objectivity—when its very possibility is in question' (Beiser 1987: 144–5).

There is certainly textual evidence in *Another Philosophy of History* to support Beiser's claim about Herder's proposed solution to the problem, which would be consistent with the latter's historicist commitments. In the following passage, Herder expresses optimism about the possibility that the accumulation and discovery of travel reports, historical documents, monuments, etc. will provide the raw materials for a more enlightened and fuller understanding of human history:

We have crawled through and ransacked our *present* age, in almost all the nations, as well as the *history* of almost all prior times—almost without any notion of *why* we should have rummaged through them. The historical facts and explorations, the discoveries and travel reports lie before us, but who will sort through and examine them? [. . .] A path appeared branching off to the *Arabs*, towards a world of monuments by which we might know them. Though for very different purposes, monuments of *medieval history* have likewise been found, and some of what remains hidden in the dust will no doubt be discovered soon, perhaps within the next half-century [. . .] Our *travel reports* are multiplying and improving: everyone who has nothing to do in Europe is running *around the world in a philosophical fury*. As we are collecting '*materials from all the ends of the earth*', we will one day discover among them what we are seeking least: *discussions of the history of the most important world*, the *human world*. Before long, our age will open some eyes: soon enough, it will drive us to seek out *wells of ideas* [to slake] the thirst of the desert. We will learn to appreciate ages we now despise—the feeling of a *universal humanity* and *happiness* will become keen. The prospect of a higher *existence in the present* than our [merely] *human one* will emerge from the rubble of history and will reveal a *plan* to us where we were only able to see *confusion* before [and where] everything has its proper spot and place. (APH: 78–9)

To the extent Herder considers the problem raised by Beiser as genuine, and that his proposed solution is simply to insist upon greater objectivity through the careful examination of historical documents, then we should claim that Herder was not explicitly aware of the fact that prejudice is not a subjective impediment to understanding, but rather a condition of the possibility of understanding and interpretation as such. Indeed, as we saw in the previous section, if a historian or philosopher wants to understand a foreign culture from the inside, she must inevitably bring to bear her own pre-understandings, knowledge, beliefs, etc. to the encounter since understanding is intimately related to justification, i.e., to understanding the conditions under which the claims of the other can be true or valid.¹⁰ An attempt to bracket or transcend our inherited pre-understandings, therefore, would be self-defeating, in that, it would deny the interpreter of the only resources she has at her disposal to understand foreign cultures. Consequently, it is not prejudice as such that is the problem. Rather, the real issue at stake is to identify and distinguish between prejudices that distort or obscure our understanding and those that do not, i.e., those which illuminate and contribute to an enriched and undistorted understanding of the subject matter. Seeing matters in this light enables us to understand Herder's confrontation with the Enlightenment as a debate about which interpretative paradigm gets the phenomena (premodern cultures) right and thus possesses the most descriptive accuracy, which inevitably involves determining which framework's prejudices are most appropriate for the task.

In fact, there is no shortage of examples demonstrating Herder's dissatisfaction with the concepts, values, and standards of Enlightenment philosophers and historians that guide their interpretations of premodern cultures. This suggests that he did in fact implicitly grasp the crucial role of prejudice in understanding and interpretation, which is reflected, for example, in his criticism of Winkelmann's uncritical application of the aesthetic standards and concepts of Ancient Greece to his interpretations of Egyptian art, as well as in his criticism of the Enlightenment historian's concept of 'Oriental despotism' for distorting the true nature of Oriental institutions and concealing the virtues and wisdom behind them: 'What, in its most delicate seed, you call *despotism*, and what was merely the *paternal authority* to rule over house and hut—look what things it accomplished that you, with all your *cold philosophy of the age*, would surely have to leave undone today!' (APH: 8). Herder is also critical of the Enlightenment's simplistic, one-sided notion of 'human being', which fails to grasp the fact that 'Human beings in the form of angels and demons are *but the characters of fiction*, for man is always something in between [. . .] Man—*hieroglyph of good and evil* with which *history is filled*. Man—never other than a *tool*' (APH: 71). If the Enlightenment is guilty of getting the meaning of the foundational concept of 'human being' wrong, then this will inevitably have profound (negative) implications for the descriptive accuracy and explanatory power of the Enlightenment paradigm; its interpretations will be 'infected' all the way down. Indeed, it is particularly telling in this context that Herder, true to his anti-ethnocentric spirit, chooses to characterize human beings in terms of a hieroglyph, an

Egyptian script. Lastly, throughout *Another Philosophy of History*, Herder criticizes the Enlightenment paradigm's systematic privileging of abstract reason and the paradigm of scientific knowledge, which yields an impoverished framework that cannot but degrade the (ethical) wisdom of premodern cultures.¹¹

Moreover, what is at stake in the debate is also the self-understanding of the Enlightenment: unless Herder is able to compare and contrast Enlightenment society with premodern cultures, hold the former up to be exemplary according some universal dimension of human existence—e.g., virtue, happiness, wisdom, etc.—and make comparative, context-transcending evaluative judgments on that basis, he will not be entitled to the claim quoted above, viz., that from the encounter with premodern and foreign cultures, 'We will learn to appreciate ages we now despise—the feeling of a *universal humanity* and *happiness* will become keen. The prospect of a higher *existence in the present* than our [merely] *human one* will emerge from the rubble of history'. Indeed, if Herder's actual practice adhered entirely to his stated historicist and cultural relativist commitments, his study of premodern cultures would have no critical purchase on his own age; if there is no way out of our 'cultural prisons', then there is nothing we can learn from other cultures that might bear upon our own self-understanding and thus lead to a transformation of our present society, to 'a higher existence in the present'.

So while Beiser might be right to claim that Herder's historicist solution to the alleged problem posed by prejudice is unsatisfactory, he fails to recognize that the solution is already implicit in Herder's interpretive practice, viz., that in order to adequately understand other cultures, we must not only make use of our inherited pre-understandings, but make a conscious choice about the kinds of concepts appropriate for that task and exclude those that distort the phenomena. Consequently, the more relevant question to pose, in this context, is not whether Herder is able to overcome the problem of prejudice as formulated by Beiser, but rather whether his conceptual repertoire does a better job than his contemporaries at understanding premodern cultures and thus for providing a more plausible basis for a philosophy of history. In short, far from inhibiting his inquiry into premodern cultures, it is precisely Herder's prejudices—e.g., the notions of inclination, virtue, wisdom, happiness, Providence, etc.—that enable him to arrive at his distinctive insights into premodern cultures and to challenge the self-understanding and the predominant historical methodology of the Enlightenment. A brief examination of one of Herder's central prejudices, 'happiness', will be sufficient to demonstrate why this is indeed the case.

We saw in the passage quoted above Herder's claim that 'We will learn to appreciate ages we now despise—the feeling of a *universal humanity* and *happiness* will become keen'. The notion of happiness is a crucial element of his conceptual repertoire, in that, it provides an important normative standard for assessing and ultimately criticizing Enlightenment society and values. Happiness, however, cannot fulfill its critical/evaluative function unless it is conceived as a universal dimension of the human condition, which would allow for context-transcending comparison. Hence, one way to understand the upshot of

Herder's critique of the Enlightenment is in terms of establishing the possibility of evaluating cultures and societies according to alternative standards of an ethical/existential nature—e.g., wisdom, virtue, happiness, etc.—as opposed to those provided by the Enlightenment (e.g., abstract reason, scientific knowledge, and technological mastery). That is to say, Herder's critique enriches and expands the range of evaluative criteria on the basis of which cultures/nations can be judged, which allows us to ask questions such as the following: 'Yes, Enlightenment society exhibits a higher degree of instrumental rationality than previous epochs, but is it, for all that, a *happier* one?' Herder's response is an emphatic 'No' and what makes possible such a comparative, context-transcending judgment is precisely the fact that happiness represents a universal dimension of the human condition; if it were simply the case that the Enlightenment has its own happiness and other nations and cultures have theirs, then Herder's repeated criticisms of the Enlightenment society's *misery* vis à vis premodern cultures would entirely lack force. Indeed, there would be no possibility of the Enlightenment to genuinely learn from other cultures in order to bring about a transformation, which might contribute to 'a higher *existence in the present*'.¹²

It is worth noting, however, an important passage in which Herder's stated commitments to historicism and cultural relativism are in apparent tension with the universality of happiness.

A learned society of our day, no doubt with the loftiest of intentions, has proposed the question, 'Which people, in history, might have been the happiest?'. If I properly understand the question, and if it is not altogether *beyond* the scope of a human answer, I can think of nothing to say except that at a certain time and under certain circumstances every people must have experienced such a moment or else it *never* was [a people]. Then again, human nature is no vessel for an *absolute, independent, immutable happiness*, as defined by the philosopher; rather, she everywhere draws *as much happiness towards herself as she can*: a supple clay that will *conform* to the most different situations, needs, and depressions. Even the image of happiness changes with every condition and location (for what is it ever but the *sum* of 'satisfaction of desire, the fulfillment of purpose, and the gentle overcoming of needs', all of which are shaped by *land, time, and place?*). Basically, then, all comparison becomes *futile*. As soon as the inner *meaning* of happiness, the *inclination* has changed; as soon as external *opportunities* and *needs develop* and *solidify* the *other* meaning—who could compare the different satisfaction of *different* meanings in *different* worlds? [. . .] Every nation has its *center* of happiness *within itself*, as every ball has its center of gravity. (APH: 28–9)

The absolute relativity of happiness expressed in the passage above, however, is virtually absent when Herder develops his critique of the Enlightenment; there he has no problem claiming that premodern societies were happier than those of the Enlightenment period, which are repeatedly characterized in terms of *wretchedness* and *misery* (APH: 85–6).¹³ This is as it should be not only because

if it were otherwise, happiness could not properly perform its critical role, but also because even the passage above reveals the constitutive elements or basic form of happiness as a universal dimension of the human condition, viz., the 'satisfaction of desire, the fulfillment of purpose, and the gentle overcoming of needs'.

Happiness thus possesses an irreducibly sensuous/physical and affective dimension, in that, it is intimately related to the satisfaction of desire and basic needs, to pleasure, to affects such as the love for one's parents, as well as to human activity (fulfillment of purpose).¹⁴ As such, Herder's conception of happiness resembles Aristotle's notion of human flourishing in significant respects, which is what allows it to play the role of a corrective against the cold, abstract reason of the Enlightenment; Herder warns us that formal, abstract reason alone is neither necessary nor sufficient for happiness and criticizes his contemporaries for conflating intellectual *enlightenment* with happiness (APH: 30). Consequently, it is no surprise that Herder associates happiness with *health* and *activity*, which is reflected in his remark that the institution of feudalism 'undermined the welter of populous, opulent cities, building up the land, employing hands and human beings, making *healthy* and therefore *happy* people' (APH: 33). Herder, like Aristotle, also recognizes the important role that education and habituation—the inculcation of prejudice—play in promoting happiness: 'Prejudice is *good* in its time: it makes men *happy*' (APH: 29).

Furthermore, Herder likely had Ancient Greece in mind when he criticizes Enlightenment philosophy for the fact that philosophy once 'took its start from *practice* and *hastened towards practice* and thus had only the purpose of creating *complete, healthy, and active souls*; but ever since it has been standing *alone* and has become a trade—it has been [just that], a *trade*' (APH: 50). In sum, there can indeed be a fact of the matter about happiness for Herder; we can compare nations and societies along the criteria of satisfaction of basic needs, health, and access to resources and activities conducive to human flourishing (gainful employment, etc.). If this were not the case, we would be unable to make sense of the passages above. Of course, different societies in different epochs will have, to some extent, different desires and needs that will be satisfied in different ways and the possibilities for human existence and flourishing—the range of life options available—will also differ. This in no way, however, entails that happiness, as a fundamental mode or condition of human existence, can be understood and evaluated only according to criteria internal to a particular culture or society. Indeed, as Herder points out, 'beneath the much-changed husk, the same *kernel of being* and *capacity for happiness* could be stored and indeed be expected, based on all human experience, to be [preserved for the future]' (APH: 71). The capacity for happiness, therefore, is what all humans share qua human beings and the extent to which this capacity is fulfilled cannot be a matter wholly internal to a culture; different nations and societies can produce and contribute to happiness in different ways in different epochs, but can nevertheless be compared in terms of what might be the most effective means to achieve a common aim. Another way of putting it, following an example from Herder, might be that happiness, like religion, is a 'form' that must be interpreted and

'filled in' in different ways in different context, epochs, etc. and, therefore, can never be 'purified' of empirical content and intelligible independently of concrete social and historical conditions.¹⁵

As such, Herder argues that the well-being or happiness of a people is 'to be taken to some extent as *means to be attained* [. . .] for *kingdoms with entirely different constitutions and regimes, for all the world present and future*', which presupposes that one of the functions of the state is to promote the well-being of its citizens: 'The court assumes the *name of this academy, this worthy prytaneion of distinguished men, this [token of] support for the precious sciences, this superb ballroom for the monarch's birthday celebrations.* But what does it do for the education of *this land, this people, these subjects?* And even if it did everything, to what extent would this produce happiness?' (APH: 94; 55–6). Again, the fact that for Herder, societies can be compared and evaluated based on the criterion of happiness is not surprising given his claim that the happiness of mankind represents one of the poles 'around which everything revolves' (APH: 95). Thus, he recognized that because happiness is a goal that is *external* to practices and institutions, they could be evaluated in terms of their *effects*, i.e., as means to achieving an end.¹⁶ In sum, once we go beyond Herder's self-understanding and stated doctrine and examine the presuppositions behind his actual practice, we can begin to see that far from being a subjective impediment to understanding that needs to be overcome, Herder's prejudices are precisely what enable him to criticize and challenge the self-understanding of the Enlightenment and to *educate* his age, which involves the '*awakening and strengthening* of those inclinations by which mankind is *made happy*' (APH: 53).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we saw that according to Herder's historicist self-understanding and stated commitment to a brand of cultural relativism, his aim is not to compare and judge different cultures, but merely to describe them and explain how each came into being. That is, the proper role of the historian or philosopher is to adopt the standpoint of an impartial observer in order to avoid the hubris of Enlightenment historians on the one hand, and the tendency to overly romanticize and 'pick favorites' among premodern cultures, on the other. Because each culture/nation, according to Herder, represents a self-contained world unto itself that can be judged only according to its own evaluative standards, the possibility of making context-transcending, comparative evaluations is thereby ruled out.

We saw that there is a tension, however, between the way Herder understands his own project—his stated doctrine and methodology—and the way in which he puts it into practice. Despite Herder's stated doctrine and aims, however, he is nevertheless unable to avoid justifying premodern forms of life and making context-transcending evaluative judgments in the process of trying to understand cultures on their own terms and to hold them up as exemplars vis à vis

the Enlightenment, which inevitably involves introducing his own prejudices (pre-understandings) into his interpretations (e.g., happiness, virtue, power, Providence, etc.). Indeed, his critique of the Enlightenment would have little force without recourse to context-transcending values, which represent distinct dimensions of a common humanity.

This tension between Herder's stated doctrine and its *actual* practice, in turn, presents the challenge of accounting for it in the most charitable and illuminating way, viz., in such a way that both avoids ascriptions of incoherence and allows for the distinctive insights yielded by Herder's philosophy of history and hermeneutics to be preserved and foregrounded. Drawing upon the resources of the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer, I argued that this goal can be achieved through disclosing two essential enabling conditions for Herder's project in *Another Philosophy of History* of which he was not explicitly aware: the internal connection between understanding and justification and the enabling character of prejudice as the condition for the possibility of understanding and interpretation as such. Achieving reflective awareness of the enabling conditions of Herder's project—making explicit what is implicit in his practice of historical inquiry—therefore, allows for the possibility of going beyond his own methodological self-understanding, for retrieving what is most valuable in his practice, and, finally, for doing justice to the transformative aims of his critique of the Enlightenment.¹⁷

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NOTES

¹ Gadamer 1994: 273. Henceforth cited in the text as TM.

² For a detailed account of the fore-structure of the understanding, see Heidegger 1996: 139–44.

³ Henceforth cited in the text as APH.

⁴ See also his remarks on p. 25 in *Another Philosophy of History* (APH).

⁵ Indeed, Herder takes great pains throughout *Another Philosophy of History* to portray premodern cultures in the most positive light possible.

⁶ Compare also with APH: 25.

⁷ See also his remarks about choosing Greeks and Romans as 'favorite peoples' and 'partial history' in general (APH: 58, 71–2, 79)

⁸ Herder again appeals to his self-understanding as an impartial observer when he claims 'One can see that it is a stranger observing the matter, one who might as well be a Muslim or a Mameluke to be writing this. So I shall continue [. . .]' (APH: 36).

⁹ Compare with Gadamer's remark in *Truth and Method* (339–40). Now one might ask why trying to adopt another's perspective requires that one employs her own pre-understandings in the process and whether it is not possible to learn something different

than what one previously thought. First, understanding a particular cultural practice, for example, requires that I understand its purpose and the reasons that justify it from the standpoint of the participants within that culture. In short, I have to grasp the conditions of intelligibility—the context of application—of such a practice. But in order to understand and be able to recognize a reason for a practice, claim, etc.—‘reason’ being a normative notion—I have to already know what a reason is and thus what constitutes good or bad reasons, i.e., I already have to have my own normative criteria/framework. Knowing what a reason is, therefore, is inseparable from knowing the criteria on the basis of which they can be evaluated and the contexts in which they are applicable.

This is why Beiser and Gadamer both recognize that the role of the historian is no different from that of the critic; trying to understand a culture from the inside means that one cannot abandon an *evaluative* stance altogether. So to the extent Herder wants to challenge the self-understanding of the Enlightenment by taking the validity claims of premodern cultures seriously, i.e., *as having something to say to us in the present*, he has to abandon his historicist commitment to evaluative neutrality and impartiality.

Moreover, if we want to learn something different than what we previously thought, if we want the encounter with premodern cultures to have a self-transformative dimension, then we have no choice but to put our own pre-understandings at stake by being open to truth or validity claims of the other. This is what it means, for Gadamer, to take seriously the truth claims of the other as a partner in dialogue. It is only by being self-consciously aware of the pre-understandings that guide our interpretations of other cultures and by maintaining an openness to learning from the other—to the possibility of our pre-understandings being challenged and thus potentially revised or rejected—that we can bring about what Gadamer calls a ‘fusion of horizons’: the achievement of an expanded and enriched horizon of understanding by accommodating the perspective of the other within our own. By adopting the naive stance of the ‘objective’ historicist, whose task is simply to ‘observe’, track, and record the beliefs, values, practices, etc. of a culture, we end up ‘learning’ neutral facts interesting only from a theoretical standpoint but which have no normative import, i.e., have no (self) transformative potential. In other words, what we ‘learn’ does not challenge, but rather leaves our preexisting prejudices intact. I take it this is precisely the opposite of what Herder intends in his critique of the Enlightenment in spite of his stated historicist commitments.

¹⁰ A similar point can be found in Donald Davidson, whose approach to interpretation and understanding bears important similarities to that of Gadamer: ‘In this endeavor [in making the object of interpretation intelligible] the interpreter has, of course, no other standards of rationality to fall back on than his own’ (Davidson 2001: 215).

¹¹ See, for example, Herder’s remarks about the futility of abstract reason to adequately grasp and perform the moral/educational function of habituation (APH: 10), as well as his remarks about the way in which Enlightenment prejudice can conceal phenomena and prevent us from seeing them for what they really are (APH: 89–90). See also his critical remarks directed against Voltaire, Hume, Iselin, etc. (APH: 40).

¹² Indeed, Herder’s concern with educating his own age with a view to challenging the complacency and self-understanding of the Enlightenment suggests that he was at least implicitly aware of the way in which genuine understanding involves application to one’s own hermeneutic standpoint (making the past contemporaneous with the present). This is also reflected in his remarks about Christianity as a kind of ‘dough’ that is kneaded in different ways in different contexts on pages (APH: 37–8).

¹³ Nor does Herder have a problem with claiming that some nations/epochs are more virtuous than others (APH: 83).

¹⁴ Herder also associates happiness with being 'satisfied' and 'fully-sated' (APH: 69).

¹⁵ Herder's remarks about Christianity are also relevant here (APH: 37–8).

¹⁶ Indeed, the efficiency or suitability of a means for producing a particular end is not a criterion foreign to Herder (APH: 34).

¹⁷ This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

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