
Building Bridges: The Importance of Johann Gottfried Herder's Humanism for the Humanities

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*Splintering
of humanities
has brought
marginaliza-
tion.*

Both the humanities and one of their primary foci, Humanism, have lost significance during the last three decades. In response to a number of pressures, the humanities have splintered into ever more specialized subdisciplines. Inside the academy the welcome study of issues, such as race, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationalism, and colonialism, has emphasized the particular and the local. Yet the splintering of the humanities into sub-disciplines has also resulted in their marginalization.¹ This marginalization has provoked a call for certain universal values, a common ground, to counteract the disorienting effect of diversification and the dwindling relevance of the humanities.²

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¹ See, for instance, John Guillory, *Cultural Capital* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (New York: Basic, 2003); Robert Scholes in his presidential address of 2004, "The Humanities in a Posthumanist World," *PMLA* 120.3 (2005): 724-33, summarizes Guillory's and Eagleton's arguments about the current malaise of the humanities. Accordingly, the humanities have lost in importance partly because they imitated the discourse of social and natural sciences in an attempt "to bring the humanities in alignment with an increasingly technobureaucratic culture" in order to appear "more useful" and regain their lost value "in the cultural marketplace" (726). Scholes, Eagleton, and Guillory all agree that this was a misguided attempt as the humanities became what could be called "a subset of academic disciplines" (727).

² Scholes calls for a return to the humanities' original mission to interpret the important texts "that come to us from literature and the arts" to show

In view of these concerns it would be timely to ask whether and how the humanities should refocus on their central mission of addressing universal, humanist questions (universalism) without neglecting cultural diversity (particularism).³

This mission also has a significant tradition in German eighteenth-century Enlightenment thought. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) is a central figure in German and European arts and letters who strove to define what it means to be human in a physiological, intellectual, and ethical sense.⁴ With his attempts to resist the separation of human knowledge into more narrowly defined disciplines, Herder could indeed be regarded as an early proponent of interdisciplinary studies.⁵ The universal ideals he helped to promote, such as freedom, equality, moral justice, and compassion, still influence today's moral values. Whether these universal principles can still have a justification in a racially, culturally, ethnically, and socially diverse society with a pluralist mix of lifestyles that all beg to be recognized as equal but different is only one aspect of the more fundamental question of whether these values are compatible with today's definition of human nature. Herder's goal was to work against social fragmentation and contribute to restoring the human being to its "original unity," which comprised more than the sum of its individual parts; on the other hand, he was acutely aware of a growing body of empirical research, which he incorporated into his "holistic" philosophy.

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"how our heritage and our disciplines can help our society through the difficult present and into an unfathomable future" (731).

³ There are other studies that focus on the possible synthesis of universality and particularity, albeit not in view of Herder. See Claes G. Ryn, *Will, Imagination and Reason: Babbitt, Croce and the Problem of Reality* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1997) and *A Common Human Ground: Universality and Particularity in a Multicultural World* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003). Also Joseph Baldacchino, "Ethics and the Common Good: Abstract vs. Experiential," *Humanitas* 15:2 (2002), esp. 40-49.

⁴ For a concise assessment of current research on Herder, see Hans Adler, "Einführung. Denker der Mitte: Johann Gottfried Herder 1744-1803." *Monatshefte* 95.2 (2003): 161-170.

⁵ In his introduction to an anthology that investigates Herder's significance for the "academic disciplines and the pursuit of knowledge" Wulf Koepke has already addressed Herder's unconventional universalist approach that advocated a "holistic" view of the human being. Koepke, "Introduction." *Johann Gottfried Herder: Academic Disciplines and the Pursuit of Knowledge*, ed. Wulf Koepke (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996): x-xii .

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Yet, in his view, empirical science alone was inadequate for capturing the totality of the human experience. Rather than imitating the sciences, Herder and after him many other writers, philosophers, and scientists of his time—such as Goethe, Alexander von Humboldt, Lorenz Oken, Novalis, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and Carl Gustav Carus—assumed that nature is an organic totality with an inner purpose or life force and attempted to integrate scientific knowledge into a universal human ethics.⁶ In light of discoveries in neuroscientific research and recent debates about the moral implications of genetic manipulation, the question of what it means to be human has gained new relevance.⁷ This analysis discusses to what extent Herder's eighteenth-century humanism provides justifications for linking specialized scientific discourses to today's questions of human ethics and, by extension, for revitalizing the humanities.

However, humanist ideals have begun to ring hollow after

⁶ A discussion of the differences of the individual philosophies of these thinkers would go beyond the framework of this essay. However, they all share the common philosophical assumption that nature is an organic totality with an inner purpose or life force that is at work in all of its elements and organisms. See, for instance, Goethe's "Studie nach Spinoza," and "Morphologie," *Hamburger Ausgabe* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1994), 13:7-8, 55; on Goethe's pantheism and his opinion on the ability to recognize 'Inner' nature see Alfred Schmidt, *Goethes herrlich leuchtende Natur* (Munich: Hanser, 1984), 47-54, 134; Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling, "System des transzendentalen Idealismus," *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. K.F.A. Schelling (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1858), 3.1: 629; Novalis, *Schriften in vier Bänden* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1960), 3:468; Alexander von Humboldt, *Kosmos. Entwurf einer physischen Weltbeschreibung*, 5 vols. (Stuttgart: Cotta, 1845-58), 1:65; Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *Über den Bildungstrieb und das Zeugungsgeschäfte* (Stuttgart: Fischer, 1971); Carl Gustav Carus, *Lebenserinnerungen und Denkwürdigkeiten*, 4 vols. (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1865), 1:70; on Carus's philosophy of nature, see Jutta Müller-Tamm, *Kunst als Gipfel der Wissenschaft* (Berlin: deGruyter, 1995), 1-50.

⁷ James Rachels lists the following principles, among others, as relevant to today's bioethics: "that people are moral equals—that no one's welfare is more important than anyone else's; that personal autonomy, the freedom of each individual to control his or her own life, is especially important; that people should always be treated as ends in themselves, and never as mere means; [...] that what is 'natural' is good and what is 'unnatural' is bad." James Rachels, "Ethical Theory and Bioethics," *A Companion to Bioethics*, ed. Helga Kuhse and Peter Singer (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2001): 19. Herder contributed to promoting all of these principles. His philosophy can be regarded as an attempt to protect human life from technological advances that threatened to subordinate human life to reason.

the rise of capitalism and fascism. In light of the perversions and crimes committed against humanity in spite of—or even in the name of—humanist values, skepticism toward these principles seems warranted.⁸ Postcolonialist, poststructuralist, feminist, and other posthumanist⁹ approaches reject a universalist humanist ethic, arguing that it has neglected, if not thwarted, the emancipation of minorities by privileging dominant Western moral values.¹⁰ They no longer view the human subject as master of his own destiny but as a historically determined cultural construct that needs to be positioned within larger contexts, such as evolution, technological progress, or the ecology.¹¹ These posthumanist approaches also reject the

⁸ More recently Giorgio Agamben accused traditional Western philosophy of focusing on the exclusion of the “non human” from the human. Accordingly concentration and extermination camps can be viewed as “an extreme and monstrous attempt to decide between the human and the inhuman.” Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 22.

⁹ For an explanation of the concept of the *posthuman* see Martin Halliwell and Andy Mousley, *Critical Humanisms: Humanist/Anti-Humanist Dialogues* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 184-190. As in current feminist, postcolonialist, poststructuralist discourses (i.e., according to Lyotard, Derrida, or Jameson), the so-called master narratives that attempted to define humanism in its totality cannot render the multifaceted aspects of human existence in modernity. While the posthuman is intricately linked to the human, it refutes “the classical humanist vision of the self-reliant and masterly individual” (188) and gives expression to the idea of a technologically altered human existence that supersedes the humanist ideal of self-determination.

¹⁰ While Herder’s anti-colonialism, his engagement for ethnic minorities, as well as his historic multiperspectivism suggest that he does not deserve to be called a universalist, he is sometimes labeled as such, especially in light of his later work. For a detailed discussion of the tension between the particularist and universalist aspects in Herder’s work see Anne Löchte, who stresses that Herder maintains his particularism even though the universalist and normative tendencies carry a stronger weight in his later works. *Johann Gottfried Herder: Kulturtheorie und Humanitätsidee der Ideen, Humanitätsbriefe und Adrastea* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2005), 13. In contrast to many scholars Löchte argues that the tension between particularism and universalism should not be considered as weakness but as a strength of Herder’s philosophy. In line with this argument she prefers to call Herder’s philosophy pluralist rather than relativist because pluralism implies the tolerance of a multitude of different values that are still guided by a framework of humanist ethical principles (203-225). Löchte views Herder’s humanism as one that recognizes the differing values of diverse ethnicities and cultures without giving up certain core values.

¹¹ See Neil Badmington, ed., *Postmodernism: Readers in Cultural Criticism* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave, 2000); Stefan Herbrecter, *Posthumanismus: Eine*

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notion of a universal human nature that created humanity's great cultural achievements. Yet certain fundamental principles and goals that motivate these emancipation movements are not incompatible with the ones advocated by late-eighteenth-century humanist thinkers. After all, posthumanist approaches are indebted to the humanist legacy and do not advocate a radical break with humanist values but rather an altered form of humanism.¹² Some posthumanist thinkers, such as Francis Fukuyama and Jürgen Habermas, present the dehumanizing aspect of technology in a critical light.¹³ Likewise, eighteenth-century philosophers like Herder attempted to defend the rights of the individual against the threat of an instrumental reason that viewed the human subject only as a means to an end, a threat that continues to this day. Progress in the natural sciences resulted in more specialized research areas and thus had consequences for a redefinition of disciplinary boundaries. Herder—albeit open to new empiricist approaches—was concerned about the increasing specialization as it contributed to the human subject's fragmentation. As this analysis will show, he attempted to maintain human sovereignty by subordinating scientific progress to a humanist ethics without neglecting the particular discoveries in the emerging fields of empirical philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and medicine. Research by Claes G. Ryn and Joseph Baldacchino has suggested that the particularity of intuition can be articulated by reason or rationality of a simultaneously philosophical and historical type.¹⁴

kritische Einführung (Darmstadt: WBG, 2009); Donna Haraway, *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Katherine N. Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

¹² Herbrechter, *Posthumanismus*, 46-64.

¹³ See Francis Fukuyama, *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution* (London: Profile Books, 2002); Jürgen Habermas, *Die Zukunft der menschlichen Natur: Auf dem Weg zu einer liberalen Eugenik?* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2002).

¹⁴ "Formulated differently, our rational conceptualizations of the way the 'real world' operates are grounded in the intuitive worldviews that are held before we begin to study or to think or to reflect. 'Before we can reflect,' Ryn observes, 'there must be imaginative wholes upon which we reflect'" [...] "The uniqueness of circumstances calls for *creative mediation* between the moral universal and the never-to-be-duplicated situation of the acting individual in that particular moment. Thus all ethical universality known to man is

Another factor that has contributed to humanism's notoriety is its reception in Germany. There the anti-humanist mission was promoted not only by philosophers who have been labeled reactionary, from Schopenhauer to Nietzsche to Heidegger, but also by anti-fascist writers and thinkers on the left who have shown how the Nazis glorified the classics and co-opted humanist pathos to serve their own ends.¹⁵ In view of humanism's perceived conservative bent, many West German postwar intellectuals shunned its reactionary aura and attempted to construe a trajectory from German idealism to fascism.¹⁶ Additional examples of the utilization of humanist ideals for political purposes include the GDR's attempt to present itself as the true inheritor of the divided nation's classical humanist legacy as well as the invocation of humanist values by Western Marxists against capitalism's alienating division of

embodied in concrete historical examples" (Baldacchino 44, 48).

¹⁵ There is a wealth of literature that proves the postwar critics' skeptical attitude toward humanism. Among the most informative overviews of postwar literary criticism can be found in Franz Schonauer, "Friedrich Sieburg & Co: Rückblick auf eine sogenannte konservative Literaturkritik," *Literaturmagazin* 7, ed. Nicolas Born and Jürgen Manthey (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1977), 237-51; Jost Hermand, *Geschichte der Germanistik* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1994), 121-193. See also Peter Demetz, "Zur Situation der Germanistik: Tradition und aktuelle Probleme," *Deutsche Literatur der Gegenwart*, ed. Manfred Durzak (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1971): 347-61; Heinrich Vormweg, "Deutsche Literatur 1945-1960: Keine Stunde Null," *Deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur*, ed. Manfred Durzak (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981): 14-31. While social humanism was still politically accepted, in fact became the dominant ideology in the GDR, writers and critics of the younger generation in the FRG shunned classical humanism because it reminded them of the high-falutin language of the so-called Third Reich. They turned to modernist and expressionist ways of writing in the fashion of Hemingway or Kafka instead.

¹⁶ See Bernd Fischer, "Herder heute? Überlegungen zur Konzeption eines transkulturellen Humanitätsbegriffs," *Herder Yearbook* 8 (2006): 175-93. In a lucid essay on the significance of Herder's philosophy for a transcultural understanding of humanism today, Bernd Fischer examines Christoph Hein's novel *In seiner frühen Kindheit ein Garten* [*In his Early Childhood a Garden*] as a noteworthy probing of the political exploitation of humanist ideas. In the novel, a left-wing terrorist group justifies violence in the name of humanist utopian ideals against an inhumane political system. Ironically the dominant political system, which the terrorists attack, also legitimizes itself by invoking humanist principles (179). Hein's novel not only reveals how humanism can serve to justify an inhumane political reality but also how both the political violence against this system and the criticism of this violence are motivated by humanist ideals.

labor, a division that prevented human self-realization.¹⁷

Humanism's diminished credibility in light of the foregoing and new findings in neurobiological research together have caused contemporary philosophers to question some of the most fundamental assumptions of what a human being is and consequently some key principles on which a humanist ethics is based. The German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, for instance, argues in his 1999 essay "Rules for a Human Theme Park" that humanism is based on repression and insinuates that the unsuccessful domestication of human instincts may have culminated in fascism.¹⁸ He implies that the biogenetic revolution of our time could provide an opportunity to liberate mankind from its self-imposed repression and offer an alternative to humanism.¹⁹ Sloterdijk's essay came in the wake of humanists' growing preoccupation with the consequences of the Human Genome Project. Far from welcoming its promise of unlocking the human genetic make-up, some scholars have expressed reservations regarding the project. Catherine Waldby, for instance, warns us of the project's ideological assumption that humans are a "stable, knowable 'species', an organic integrity whose limits can be positively specified."²⁰ Yet other theorists—who could be described as posthumanist feminist thinkers, such as Donna Haraway, Teresa de Lauretis, and Sadie Plant, perceive biogenetics as an opportunity to challenge the myth of biological humanism and liberate women from their traditional role as "a deficient version of humanity which is already male."²¹

Recent discoveries in the cognitive neurosciences and consciousness research have led German philosopher Thomas Metzinger to claim that there "is a new image of man emerging, an image that will dramatically contradict almost all tra-

¹⁷ See, for instance, Herbert Marcuse, "Humanismus—gibt's den noch?" *Neues Forum* (1970): 349-53.

¹⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *Regeln für den Menschenpark. Ein Antwortschreiben zu Heideggers Brief über den Humanismus* (Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1999).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 17, 30-31, 39, 46-47.

²⁰ Catherine Waldby, *The Visible Human Project: Informatic Bodies and Posthuman Medicine* (London: Routledge, 2000), 7. For another skeptical perspective, see Michael J. Sandel, *The Case Against Perfection: Ethics in the Age of Genetic Engineering* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 2007).

²¹ Sadie Plant, "On the Matrix: Cyberfeminist Simulations," in *The Gendered Cyborg: A Reader*, ed. Gill Kirkup et al. (London: Routledge, 2000), 265-6.

ditional images man has made of himself in the course of his cultural history.”²² Metzinger bases this claim of “a radically new understanding of what it means to be human” on recent scientific research, “since about 1990,” that supposedly has enabled scientists “to learn more about the human brain than in the three preceding centuries.”²³ Metzinger, a philosophy professor at Johannes Gutenberg University in Mainz, claims “that no such things as selves exist in the world.”²⁴ According to his theory, subjects experience themselves as subjects due to misrepresentations or simulations of brain signals. These simulations appear as real due to an inherent blind spot that does not allow humans to grasp the constructed character of phenomenal reality. Subjects experience themselves as being someone because the system mistakes the internal model of itself for an actual conscious self, or in Metzinger’s words: “The phenomenal property of selfhood as such is a representational construct; it truly is a *phenomenal* property in terms of being an appearance only.”²⁵

*Existence of
the human self
denied.*

I am introducing Metzinger’s self-model here because it stands in opposition to Herder’s idea of the human self. Contrary to Herder, who takes the self for granted and describes sensations from the perspective of the perceiving subject, Metzinger approaches the self from an external position that aims at avoiding the fallacies of a distorted, subjective point of view. And yet, while Metzinger uses an abundance of empirical data to substantiate his claims, his theory cannot explain how a subject with an independent self-awareness appears, or “how the body that sits presently in front of my computer, gives rise to *me* as a subject with a first-person point of view that is unique.”²⁶ Even though Herder’s philosophy cannot

²² Thomas Metzinger, “Introduction,” in *Neural Correlates of Consciousness*, ed. Thomas Metzinger (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 6.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Thomas Metzinger, *Being No One: The Self-Model Theory of Subjectivity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), 563.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Kenneth Einar Himma argues that “Metzinger’s framework does little more than change the terms of the question [of how brain activities constitute the appearance of a self]. . . . While it might be that conceiving of selves this way makes it easier to explain how particular selves arise from particular bodies [...], much more is needed to resolve the problem: merely equating selves with self-models says nothing about why particular self-

explain the mind-body problem either—and it is questionable whether any philosophy will be able to establish how brain activities constitute a unique self—his approach of depicting subjective sensory experiences from a first-person point of view is in many ways more tangible than Metzinger’s phenomenological account.

In this essay I will show how Herder’s poetic descriptions of sensory experiences and emotions render human states of consciousness more vividly and clearly than Metzinger’s scientific discourse on electrochemical processes of our brain. Since this analysis is, however, not based on neuroscientific expertise, its focus will be limited to the ethical implications and possible ramifications of these discoveries for understanding Herder’s humanist views. After all, Herder addresses ethical problems connected to freedom, individual autonomy, and subjectivity that over two hundred years later have arisen again in connection with such bio-ethical issues as cloning. While Herder’s views about human nature contain metaphysical assumptions regarding the autonomy of the human self that would not be acceptable to many contemporary neuroscientists and posthumanists, one can still justifiably ask whether his interdisciplinary approach of synthesizing scientific and poetic discourses could serve as a model for conveying human experiences that purely scientific discourses are unable to convey. Related to this issue is the question whether scientific standards can adequately judge Herder’s poetic and emotionally charged discourse and whether the knowledge we gain from it transcends the scientific purview.

In light of the challenges to universally acceptable humanist core values that are often associated with Western culture—including reason, freedom, virtue, the pursuit of happiness, tolerance, religion, education, culture, truth, and beauty—the proposition of a reinvigoration of the humanities through humanism seems daunting.²⁷ Yet while one has to refrain from

models arise from particular organisms.” *Metapsychology Online Reviews* 7.21 (May 25 2003): [http://metapsychology.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=book&id=1720&cn=394].

²⁷ Herder’s understanding of *Humanität* is complex and cannot be defined in one word. In letter 27 of *Briefe an die Humanität* he associates *Humanität* with *Menschheit*, *Menschlichkeit*, *Menschenrechte*, *Menschenpflichten*, *Menschenwürde*, *Menschenliebe* (HW 7:147); for the values associated with Humanism, see

overstating analogies between current and late eighteenth-century notions of humanism, one could speculate that current trepidations about the fragmentation of the humanities are still symptomatic of more deep-seated concerns about the loss of the value of the human. The widespread use of humanist ideals for diverse political agendas suggests its broad significance, for it addresses not only ethical and spiritual standards of human existence but also its physical and emotional dimensions. Herder's philosophical writings attempt to appeal to the envisioned totality of human existence by employing a language rich in metaphors and imagery that replicates human emotions and feelings from an internal point of view. Naturally this type of poetic language differs from the distanced or seemingly objective description of conventional scientific discourses. While scientific inquiries tend to examine specific natural phenomena or historical processes from an objective and therefore somewhat distant viewpoint, Herder's descriptions aim at rendering a totality of sensual impressions from a first-person perspective by integrating emotional, physiological, and spiritual experiences.²⁸ My analysis of excerpts from Herder's "Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit" ["This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity"] (1774), "Über den Ursprung der Sprache" ["Treatise on the Origin of Language"] (1772), and "Über das Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele" ["On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul"] (1778) seeks to demonstrate how Herder rises to the challenge of investing a growing body of scientific discoveries with universal meaning. By showing how Herder integrates scientific

Herder's descriptions render a totality of impressions from a first-person perspective.

Löchte, 48, and Hans Erich Bödeker, "Menschheit, Humanität, Humanismus," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, ed. Otto Brunner, Wilhelm Conze, Reinhart Kosellek (Stuttgart: Klett, 1982), 1090-93.

²⁸ See Hans-Dietrich Irmscher, "Beobachtungen zur Funktion der Analogie im Denken Herders," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift* 55 (1981): 64-97. Irmscher emphasizes that Herder's deviation from the scientific discourses of his time serves the purpose of inspiring creativity through his use of poetic language and analogy. According to Irmscher, Herder attempts through his deliberate use of analogy to describe historical or natural phenomena from the subjective perspective of the individual because human comprehension of reality depends on personal bodily experience: "Verstehen also kann der Mensch die Wirklichkeit nur, wenn er seinen eigenen Leib von innen her kennt" (86).

Ability
to decide
liberates
humans
from reign of
instinctual
forces.

knowledge into his literary descriptions of concrete sensual and physical experiences, I will point out techniques that allowed him to traverse disciplinary boundaries and thus open the doors for viewing the human in a new light.

In contrast to those philosophers who reject the benefits of a humanist education (e.g., Sloterdijk) or who dispute the notion of individual autonomy, even the subject's agency, altogether (e.g., Metzinger) in view of the latest bio-genetic research, German philosopher Manfred Frank has defended the subjective position of philosophical and literary discourses against the threat of privileging the seeming objectivity of brain research.²⁹ In an interview with the German weekly *Die Zeit*, Frank argues that brain research is unable to account for the fact that humans have an emotional understanding or feeling for themselves before they can express it. Subjective self-knowledge and the ability to reflect with empathy for other human beings permit individuals to make ethical decisions for themselves, and these remain the domain of the humanities.³⁰ For Herder, the ability to decide liberates humans from the reign of instinctual forces and allows them to act according to moral principles (HW 6:144).³¹ In contrast, philosophies like Metzinger's attribute human actions to biological processes and reject the subject's freedom to make decisions.

Yet there are epistemic analogies between eighteenth-century goals of humanist thought and current efforts at revitalizing the humanities. After all, today's calls for a renewal of the humanities can be linked to trepidations about a loss of universal human values. Such fears were also germane for Herder's philosophy, which can be interpreted as an attempt to give meaning to a growing body of scientific knowledge and empirical facts. After an introduction to Herder's unique philosophical ideas within the context of eighteenth-century Enlightenment discourse, I will analyze a passage from "On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul" to illustrate how

²⁹ Manfred Frank, "Der Mensch bleibt sich ein Rätsel." Interview. *Die Zeit*, 27 Aug 2009.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ All references to Herder's essays will be taken from Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke in zehn Bänden*, ed. Martin Bollacher et al. (Frankfurt/M: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag: 1985-2000). Future references to this source will be documented parenthetically as HW, including volume and page number.

Herder uses poetic language to integrate the latest empirical knowledge of his day and age in his humanist philosophy. The third part of my essay will contrast Metzinger's philosophical model to that of Herder in order to underline the significance of the humanities in today's academic environment.

I

Herder distinguished himself from the rationalist metaphysics of the Wolff-Leibniz tradition as well as from the newly emerging empiricist approaches, the so-called *Popularphilosophie*.³² The fact that Herder's unique position stands in contrast to a number of established scholarly discourses has a historical explanation. During the late Enlightenment, dogmatic metaphysical philosophies prevailed because empiricist scientific approaches were unable to provide all-inclusive explanations of the universe and its development through history.³³ Herder's philosophy of history can be seen as a response to the inadequacy of conventional metaphysical models of explanation in light of a growing body of empirical knowledge. Herder's unique position comes to the fore in his philosophy of history, especially his essay "Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit." Emphasizing how specific geographical, climatic, and social differences account for physical and cultural characteristics, he rejects both the idealist stand-

³² Even though Herder became "one of the earliest and most radical advocates of supplanting philosophy with anthropology" in order to break free from the metaphysical tradition, as John Zammito points out, he also distinguished himself from a materialist empiricism. See Zammito, *Kant, Herder and The Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 3.

³³ See Karl Menges, "Erkenntnis und Sprache. Herder und die Krise der Philosophie im späten achtzehnten Jahrhundert," *Johann Gottfried Herder: Language, History, and the Enlightenment*, ed. Wulf Koepke (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1990), 48. Menges refers to Hegel when he explains the crisis of philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century: "In dieser Phase dominiert ein Interesse an der Empirie, auch an der Nützlichkeit 'als dem Wesen der Dinge.' Doch es ist gerade das unmittelbare, empirische Bewußtsein, das in seine Deutungsversuchen der Realität [...] an seine Grenzen stößt [...]. Dem Zuwachs an Wissen fehlt ein Erklärungsmodell, ein transzendentes Paradigma, wie es erst die Bewußtseinsphilosophie des deutschen Idealismus [...] bereitstellen wird. Da dieses Konzept der Aufklärung inzwischen noch abgeht, erscheint die Ordnung der Dinge vorderhand nicht anders erklärbar, als im Rückgriff auf eine dogmatische Metaphysik."

An underlying
correspondence
between the
spirit of
history and a
divine inner
human nature.

point that bases human knowledge on innate ideas (Descartes, Leibniz) and mechanistic concepts of human life (La Mettrie, Ernst Platner). Yet in the very first sentence of his essay Herder subordinates the study of historical and cultural particularities to the discovery of the human species' common origin: "The further illumination advances in the investigation of the ancient world history, its migrations of peoples, its languages, ethics, inventions, and traditions, the more probable becomes, with each new discovery, *the origination of the whole species from a single man as well*" (Forster 272).³⁴ In spite of his awareness of the empirical differences that shape cultural diversity, Herder adheres to a pantheistic idea of nature that unfolds its divine destiny in history. He attempts to integrate cultural, social, and geophysical particularities by claiming an underlying correspondence between the spirit of history and a divine inner human nature.³⁵

Herder's seemingly paradoxical attempt at combining empiricist and pantheistic views reflects the desire to reconcile the increasingly disparate body of knowledge with a philosophy that was still indebted to an overall purpose. As the ushering in of the modern scientific age undermined the divine cosmic order, in which each living creature had its place and meaning, the philosophers of the Enlightenment attempted to compensate for the uncertainty of a purely secular perspective by investing the new scientific outlook with meaning. Establishing analogies between human existence and the cosmic order, understanding nature in allegorical, mathematical, or geometrical correspondence expressing a universal harmony, or reading the universe as a book are just a few examples of such anthropocentric projections that aimed at providing existential com-

³⁴ Unless otherwise indicated, the translated passages of Herder's essays are taken from Michael N. Forster, ed. *Johann Gottfried von Herder: Philosophical Writings*, transl. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002). Future references to this source will be cited parenthetically.

³⁵ This is particularly obvious in "This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity" where Herder compares the history of humankind to the different ages of one human being. While he depicts a multifaceted, panoramic view of the cultural, climatic, geographical diversity of humankind throughout the ages he subordinates the diversity to history's divine purpose: "Wenn hat in der ganzen Analogie der Natur die Gottheit anders als durch Natur gehandelt? und ist darum keine Gottheit, oder ist's nicht eben Gottheit, die so allergossen, einförmig und unsichtbar durch all ihre Werke würrt?" (HW 4:48).

fort in a rapidly changing outlook on the world. Hans-Dietrich Irmischer pointed out that the analogies in Herder's thought establish relationships between totalities and structures. In his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* Herder attempts to capture the essence of what is human by drawing analogies to plant and animal life.³⁶ In "Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit" Herder confronts the great philosophers of the age of Enlightenment by telling them that human understanding has not been able to make sense of the enormous changes of world history (HW 4:57). Even though he concludes that everything in history is (HW 4:58) "fate! *neither thought through, nor hoped for, nor effected* by human beings" (Forster 313) and that human beings are just like little ants crawling on the big wheels of fate, he is absolutely convinced that history has a divine purpose. Instead of imposing a rational system on historical events, Herder respects the increasing body of empirical facts about seemingly unrelated cultural developments and incidents. His method trusts in the observation of individual developments that in his view are part of a cosmic order and divine nature, as they belong to "dem großen Buche Gottes" (HW 4:106) ["to the great book of God"] (Forster 357).

*Individual
development
part of a
cosmic order.*

In spite of its rejection of the metaphysical rationalism of the Wolff-Leibniz school Herder's own discourse is replete with associative analogies and relies on metaphors that suggest a different kind of metaphysics.³⁷ In book 15 of the *Ideen* Herder still clings to a notion of reason that is capable of uniting the incongruities of natural phenomena thus permitting humans to create order out of chaos (HW 6:649). In light of such claims about an inexplicable presence of an underlying ordering principle, Kant's criticism of Herder's unscientific methodology, which accuses the *Ideen zur Philosophie der Ge-*

³⁶ Hans-Dietrich Irmischer, "Beobachtungen zur Funktion der Analogie im Denken Herders," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschriften* 55 (1981): 68.

³⁷ In "This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity" he compares world history to a whole series of natural and cultural phenomena, such as the different phases in the life of a human being, a tree, a river, and drama. While Herder's analogies are sometimes contradictory and were far from conforming to the discursive conventions of his day, they produce an aesthetic experience that renders the subject matter from an individual's subjective perspective.

Unlike Herder,
Kant rejects
all knowledge
obtained
through
experience as
non-philosophical.

schichte der Menschheit of falling prey to the very metaphysical speculations that he is claiming to avoid, is well taken, indeed.³⁸ However, if one were to judge Herder's philosophy according to Kantian principles, one would hardly do justice to the inner logic of Herder's philosophical thinking. Herder's philosophy is based on assumptions that are radically different from those of Kant "concerning the very idea of science, its purpose and status within culture as a whole, its standards of rationality, methods of inquiry and verification, and—last but not least—its proper use of language."³⁹ Katherine Arens exposes the Kantian attack on Herder's scientific method as an attempt to present philosophy as "the queen of the sciences [...] while essentially rejecting the humanities as anything but arts, as tradition or critique instead of scientific interpretation."⁴⁰ In contrast to Herder who bases his philosophy of history on empirical evidence, Kant rejects all knowledge obtained through human experience as non-philosophical. Consequently, "Kant designates historical (or perhaps, practical) knowledge as second rate, as knowledge *ex datis*, not *ex principiis*."⁴¹ Kantian philosophy "privileges the mind over empirical data" and focuses on "the relation of all knowledge to the essential ends of human reason."⁴² Likewise, one could argue, as Arens does, that the Kantian privileging of conceptual reasoning anticipates the later denigration of the humanities as second-class faculties.⁴³ While Herder has often been in the shadow of Kant, often neglected is his enormous legacy for the humanities and the arts—a legacy that addresses a wide range of historical, anthropological, linguistic, ethical, and aesthetic questions that Kant

³⁸ Karl Menges, "Erkenntnis und Sprache. Herder und die Krise der Philosophie im späten achtzehnten Jahrhundert," *Johann Gottfried Herder: Language, History and the Enlightenment*, 53.

³⁹ Eva Knodt, "Hermeneutics and the End of Science: Herder's Role in the Formation of 'Natur-' and 'Geisteswissenschaften,'" *Johann Gottfried Herder: Academic Disciplines and the Pursuit of Knowledge*, ed. Wulf Koepke (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1996), 1.

⁴⁰ Katherine Arens, "History as Knowledge: Herder, Kant, and the Human Sciences," *Johann Gottfried Herder: Academic Disciplines and the Pursuit of Knowledge*, 109.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Arens stresses that "Kant's 1798 *Conflict of faculties* echoes this point: the humanities are listed among only the second tier of sciences essential to the university."

ignored. It would therefore be unsuitable to judge Herder's philosophy according to Kant's standard, as he deliberately considered the adherence to abstract principles as an obstruction to the realization of a human being's fullest potential.

Herder's awareness of the heterogeneity of cultural and historical developments is counterbalanced by his all-pervasive attempt to make sense of a rapidly growing body of knowledge. By comparing the course of world history to different ages of an individual human life, he imposes an organic, anthropocentric order on an otherwise disjointed accumulation of events that allows him to discover meaning in world history.⁴⁴ While this anthropocentrism gives the historian a superior point of view that overlooks the entire course of history, Herder deemphasizes the claim to universality by stressing that his philosophy is only one among many other possible accounts—as the title of his essay “Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit” suggests. The title of his more comprehensive *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1782-1791) also refers to the open-ended sketchiness of his system.⁴⁵ This duality between Herder's belief in an underlying universal order and reliance on empirical knowledge pervades his entire philosophy.

Herder combines belief in underlying universal order with reliance on empirical knowledge.

II

For Herder humans constitute themselves as human by creating their individual image of the world through the production of language.⁴⁶ This assumption makes Herder's

⁴⁴ E.g., the so-called patriarchal age of the Orient is portrayed as the childhood of humankind (HW 4:17); the Egyptian era is likened to boyhood as a phase of learning; ancient Greece is associated with early manhood with its awakening individual freedom and the blossoming of the arts; the Roman empire is equated to male maturity.

⁴⁵ See Zammito, *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology*, 331. Zammito points out that the “ontogeny/phylogeny parallelism is central to [Herder's] whole way of thinking.”

⁴⁶ While Herder refers to language as the distinctive feature between humans and animals in his early “Treatise on the Origin of Language” (HW 1:708-17), he also implies that the human race has evolved from animals. “Schon als Tier, hat der Mensch Sprache” (HW 1:697) reads the first sentence of this groundbreaking essay that answers the question of whether early humans have been able to invent their own language when left to their natural abilities. Although Herder points out the communicative similarities between the

Humans create individual image of the world through language.

philosophy unique and provides another opportunity to bridge the gap between the empirical and the spiritual world, between body and mind, between the particular and the universal.⁴⁷ Herder's theory of language anticipates poststructuralist theories as it views human existence embedded in pre-existing language structures.⁴⁸ For Herder it is language and not consciousness that constitutes human existence. As the first sentence of Herder's *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* indicates—"Schon als Tier, hat der Mensch Sprache" (HW 1:697) ["Already as an animal, the human being has language"] (Forster 65)—language is embodied in the human being's physical or animal existence. It transcends the limits of human consciousness as an *a priori* structure and at the same time constitutes the individual human being in a dialogic process of interaction. Herder emphasizes the reciprocity of reception and production in the creation of speech, which allows humans to define and recognize themselves as individuals. Jürgen Trabant

utterances of early humans and animals, he rejects the idea that animal sounds developed into human language as Condillac and Rousseau had suggested. For humans have the ability to reflect on themselves in language, according to Herder (HW 1:717). Whereas animals produce their sounds instinctively, humans create language as free expressions of an individual self-awareness. In this respect Herder's anthropological views certainly comply with eighteenth-century attempts to define the human in opposition to the non-human.

⁴⁷ Herder is certainly indebted to the Western tradition of privileging the human species as the crowning glory of creation. His claim that humans are not related to apes could suggest a paranoid attempt to set humans apart from other anthropoid species. According to Giorgio Agamben such efforts to distinguish the human from the non-human can be attributed to the fact that eighteenth-century scientists were at a loss to find generic differences between humans and apes (26). Carolus Linnaeus, the founder of modern taxonomy, admitted, however, to hardly knowing "a single distinguishing mark which separates man from apes." Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, transl. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 24. Herder's philosophy reveals an ambiguity that is typical of the idealist exemption of the human from nature. Accordingly, human beings distinguish themselves from all other creatures by having the freedom to control and suppress their animal nature (HW 6:138-39). This ability to resist instinctual forces sets humans free and allows them to act according to a "higher" moral justice. Yet while Herder grants humans independence from nature, he attributes the privilege of human reason to the species' developmental characteristics within nature. Since humans are born helpless and remain physically weak for a much longer period than other species, their cognitive and cerebral abilities are more differentiated (HW 6:110-46).

⁴⁸ See Menges, 59.

made this clear by pointing to Herder's privileging of the spoken sound over the written word. Accordingly, Herder favors the spoken word because it lets the subject experience its own production of sound through the medium of the ear: "Hearing guarantees the reflexivity of the sound movements and hence their production [...] Through the ear wo/man experiences her/himself as a maker, as a poet."⁴⁹ As an all-pervasive medium that connects the human to the non-human and the body to the mind, language also transcends all disciplinary boundaries. What constitutes human beings is their ability to create themselves through the production of language (HW 7:817-19).

Every human being is an artist because of the ability to express individual sensory impressions of nature (HW 7:363). In fact, the individualized representation of sensory impressions is key to human existence. Without this creative activity humans would not distinguish themselves from other living beings. Artistic representation is the calling and purpose of human nature. The senses play a very important role because they allow the subject to see, feel, hear in an original fashion, making the subject aware of his/her unique individuality. By representing their own particular nature in relation to nature at large, human beings become God-like as they recreate their image in the image of nature. Similarly, language as medium of this artistic self-representation aims at expressing an utterance that is both characteristic and at the same time universal as it can communicate a subjective experience to the human community in general.

Artistic representation the calling and purpose of human nature.

Herder's proclaimed coexistence of the universal and the particular permits him to define the human according to what it lacks versus an all-encompassing meaningful totality. In his essay "On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul" Herder characterizes humans as composed of an outer and inner sensorium that are intertwined, and recognition always builds on sensation. In this essay Herder develops the fundamental principles of his theory of cognition, which affects all aspects of his cultural historicism. Accordingly,

⁴⁹ Jürgen Trabant, "Language and the Ear: From Derrida to Herder," *Herder Yearbook* 1 (1992): 16.

Language
synthesizes
complex
diversity of
experience into
a meaningful
totality.

we can recognize only what we first grasp with our senses.⁵⁰ Humans create the universe in analogy to the unity of the human body. Herder's poetic imagery illustrates how particular stimuli become synthesized into sensations and how language can reflect the totality of the sensual and spiritual convergence of the human faculties. The subjective and poetic quality of his language aims at synthesizing the complex diversity of sensual experience into a meaningful totality.⁵¹ Scientific language, on the other hand, is analytical and therefore concerned with the particular.⁵² The following citation is an example of Herder's poetic depiction of the dialectic interaction between the physical and spiritual, between automatic stimulus and conscious sensation (HW 4:332).

Nature has woven together a thousand little, living strings into a thousandfold fight, into such a manifold touching and resisting; they make themselves shorter and longer with inner force, participate in the play of the muscle, each one in its own way—that is what makes the muscle carry and pull. Has anything more wonderful ever been seen than a beating heart with its inexhaustible irritation? An abyss of inner obscure forces, the true image of the organic almighty, which is perhaps deeper than the motion of suns and earths.—And now irritation spreads out from this inexhaustible fount and abyss through our whole I, enlivens each little playing fiber—all according to a single-formed simple law. If we are in good health, our chest is broad, the heart beats healthily, each fiber performs its duty in the play. Then *fright* storms upon us, and behold, as our

⁵⁰ In this respect Herder is still indebted to his teacher Kant, for whom knowledge is shaped by the categories of human understanding.

⁵¹ Kant already noticed Herder's 'poetic spirit' in his well-known review of Herder's *Ideen*. Although Kant acknowledges some well-phrased passages, he criticizes Herder's alleged tendency to hide unsubstantiated truth claims behind his abundant use of allegories, bold metaphors, poetic imagery, and mythological references: "Aber ebenso wenig wollen wir hier untersuchen, ob nicht der poetische Geist, der den Ausdruck belebt, auch zuweilen in die Philosophie des Verfassers eingedrungen; ob nicht hie und da Synonymen für Erklärungen und Allegorien für Wahrheiten gelten [...]; und ob an manchen Orten das Gewebe von kühnen Metaphern, poetischen Bildern, mythologischen Anspielungen nicht dazu diene, den Körper der Gedanken [...] zu verstecken." Imanuel Kant, *Schriften zur Geschichtsphilosophie*, ed. Manfred Riedel (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1974), 59-60. Future references to this text will be cited parenthetically.

⁵² In recalling Aristotle's comparison between poetry and history one could sum up this distinction more succinctly: "for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular." Eva Knodt has pointed this out with regard to Herder's philosophy of history and its affinity to Aristotelian poetics.

first movement, without yet any thought of fear or resistance, our irritable I retreats to its center, our blood to our heart, our fiber, even our hair, stands on end—so to speak, an organic messenger ready for counterattack, the guard stands ready (Forster 189-90).

For Herder the human heart serves as a microcosm that mirrors the spirit of nature. The human body exemplifies nature's universal laws as each part of the human organism follows the same unanimous principle. The metaphor of weaving ["verflechten"] stresses the intricate diversity and complexity of the human organism, which had become apparent with the discovery of the nerve system as a mediator between body and mind.⁵³ Herder emphasizes organic nature's dynamism, which is driven by an all-pervasive inner force or energy that is reminiscent of pantheist and vitalist philosophies.⁵⁴ Empirical observations of biological processes, such as the interrelatedness of physical and mental sensations, made it necessary to explain the mutual stimulations of body and mind or the continuity of matter and spirit.⁵⁵ Herder's metaphorical, emotionally charged language effectively recalls the totality of the human body's psycho-physical processes.

The first part of "Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele," from which the passage above is taken, is entitled "Vom Reiz" ["Of Irritation"]. Here Herder refers to Albrecht von Haller's (1708-1777) physiological experiments with nerve tissues. Simon Richter has convincingly shown how Herder deliberately misinterpreted the Swiss physiologist's usage of "Reiz" for his own purposes.⁵⁶ In the passage

⁵³ As Wolfgang Riedel points out, Albrecht von Haller was instrumental in endorsing the central nerve system's significance as a mediator between body and mind. Wolfgang Riedel, *Die Anthropologie des jungen Schiller* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1984), 97.

⁵⁴ Zammito, *Kant, Herder and the Birth of Anthropology*. Zammito points out that these vitalist influences stem from Herder's occupation with Spinoza and Leibniz: "In short, Herder sought to revise Leibnizian dynamism from a transcendent to an immanent monadology." In order to accomplish this, Herder "read Leibniz through Spinoza and Spinoza through Leibniz to find a philosophical mode for articulating his consistently naturalist insight" (316). Another source for Herder's occupation with "the problems of 'vitalist materialism'" was Diderot (317).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Simon Richter, "Medizinischer und ästhetischer Diskurs im 18. Jahrhundert: Herder und Haller über Reiz," *Lessing Yearbook* 25 (1993): 89.

above Herder uses “Reiz” not only in a medical sense as “Reizbarkeit” [“irritability”] but also in an aesthetic sense as “reizend” [“appealing or attractive”]. “Has anything more wonderful ever been seen than a beating heart with its inexhaustible irritation?” denotes also the aesthetically appealing effect that this heart has on its observer, a meaning of “Reiz” that became part of the eighteenth-century aesthetic discourse.⁵⁷ While “inexhaustible irritation” is a direct translation of Haller’s “perpetua irritatio” (HW 4:1130; Forster 189), Herder does not limit it to the medical sense in which Haller uses it but consciously applies it to the semantic field of sensibility and affect (HW 4:1085). Herder’s broader usage of “Reiz” connects the physiological with the emotional and aesthetic dimension of the term and thus supports his underlying argument that life is permeated by an energy that links all organic processes to a meaningful totality. In other words, Herder implicitly criticizes Haller’s strictly empiricist method that separates organic parts from living organisms and bases its scientific conclusions on what Herder must view as artificial mutilations of organic entities: “[W]ho would suddenly here cut off the course of analogy, the great course of creation, with his pocket knife. . . ?” (HW 4:337; Forster 194). In fact, Haller derived his insight that nerve tissue itself was not excitable from countless experiments with living animals.⁵⁸ Since excitability occurs in organs that have been separated from their link to the brain, for instance in decapitated chickens, Haller concluded that “Reiz” was not connected to the soul and therefore had nothing to do with life. In contrast to Haller, Herder views “Reiz” as “the mainspring of our existence” (HW 4:360; Forster 212). He uses “Reiz” as a focal point for his inquiry into the human soul as he regards it as an expression of the life force that no philosophy has been able to explain (HW 4:337). Although Herder believes that this

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 84-86.

⁵⁸ Richter also provides an explanation for the ideological spin that underlies Haller’s conclusions (86-87). The claim that nerve tissue itself is not “reizbar” [“irritable”] permits Haller, whose “religious and philosophical orientation remained very traditional,” to refute materialist theories which claimed that the nervous system was purely mechanical (Zammito 232). Haller’s other claim that irritability cannot be connected to life can also be attributed to his religious convictions. It is based on the assumption that any life-giving force must be connected to the soul.

force is ultimately inexplicable and simply has to be *believed*, all human beings can nevertheless feel this life-giving energy both within themselves and through their affinity to all other living organisms (HW 4:335).

For Herder the life-giving force can be perceived in the living organism's interaction with its environment. This is why Herder, unlike Haller and the French materialists, is not interested in the analysis of isolated body parts but rather in the effect of outside influences on the entire human organism. In the passage above, Herder's narrator does not give a distanced scientific description but an emotionally charged eyewitness account of an oncoming panic attack. Herder's re-enactment of this emotional reaction blends the "objective" scientific terminology of empiricist observation with "subjective" expressions of amazement. By directly addressing his audience through a rhetorical question and shifting the point of view from that of scientific observer to that of a personally stimulated spectator, the narrator imparts the intensity of the emotional effect on the reader. The sudden interruption of the descriptive mode conveys the abruptness of an overwhelming thrust of fear and puts the readers in the shoes of the experiencing *I*, having his readers live through the panic attack in the present from the inside perspective of the affected body. He resorts to this technique in order to stress the common bond between the narrative voice and its audience and to illustrate the mutual relationship between body and mind. Significantly, the body's effect on the mind happens in a pre-conscious state. The fact that sensual perception is guided by nature's divine spirit *before* the *I* can reflect resonates with Herder's idea that life progresses from simple organic plant life to more complex processes in animals to the human organism as the highest forms of existence. Accordingly, human consciousness is always a reaction to a previously existing "life energy" or "Reiz."

*Common bond
between the
narrative voice
and its
audience.*

Herder's intermixing of different discourses is a deliberate choice of style that serves to support his claims about the dialectic interrelations of life and its environment (HW 4:1085). Herder's fusion of poetic and scientific discourse was by no means always considered successful. In his review of the "Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit" Kant questioned the validity of Herder's "canvas of bold

metaphors, poetic images, mythological insinuations” because he felt it veiled his ideas rather than revealing them.⁵⁹ Kant criticizes the lack of “logical accuracy” and “precise definitions,” in what he calls Herder’s idiosyncratic method that displays sweeping analogies and bold imagination rather than cool judgment.⁶⁰

While Kant separates the spiritual from the material world and aims at establishing an absolute *a priori* truth that transcends worldly experience, Herder integrates the spiritual with the material world in his attempt to account for the totality of human experience. Ironically Herder, who stands accused of concealing his ideas behind “a canvas of bold metaphors” (Kant 60), expresses his thoughts in more concrete terms than Kant who resorts to philosophical abstractions. Herder clearly stated already in 1775—nine years before Kant’s critical review of Herder’s *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*—that he is hardly concerned about “the superterrestrial abstraction which places itself beyond everything that is called ‘circle of our thinking and sensing’ onto I know not what throne of divinity, creates there words of worlds, and passes judgment on everything possible and actual” (Forster 188).

Herder’s invectives were directed against the discourse of Wolffian dogmatism [*Schulphilosophie*] with its rationalist generalizations and tautological explanations.⁶¹ Kant, albeit

⁵⁹ Immanuel Kant, “Rezensionen von J. G. Herder’s ‘Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit.’ Teil 1.2, *Schriften zur Geschichtsphilosophie*, 60. The translation is mine.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 40-41. See Michael Maurer, “Geschichte zwischen Theodizee und Anthropologie. Zur Wissenschaftlichkeit der historischen Schriften Herders,” *Johann Gottfried Herder: Academic Disciplines and the Pursuit of Knowledge*, 120-36. Herder’s prose was attacked not only by philosophers like Kant but also by eminent historians, such as August Wilhelm Schlözer, professor of history at the *Universität Göttingen*. Michael Maurer argues that Herder published his philosophy of history at a time when “disciplines such as academic historiography were defining themselves as separate and autonomous fields of knowledge” (Maurer 136). Like Kant, who is disturbed by Herder’s loquacious imprecision (61), Schlözer also disapproves of Herder’s inappropriately allegorical language (Maurer 123). Kant rejects Herder’s unscientific “canvas of bold metaphors” [“Gewebe von kühnen Metaphern”] (60), and Schlözer condemns his imprecise imagery (Maurer 129). And they both have objections to Herder’s method of rendering the interconnectedness of natural developments and human history (Kant 51; Maurer 136).

⁶¹ For a detailed historical analysis of the crisis of Wolffian *Schulphilosophie*, see Zammito. Zammito identifies three impulses that “conjoined to spawn an

also opposed to the assumptions of *Schulphilosophie*, nevertheless follows this tradition in so far as he attempts to establish a universal truth that he can formulate in abstract, general terms.⁶² While both make human experience the mother of all knowledge, Herder also believes in a divine, rational order of the universe that can be discovered through the senses. This divine order reveals itself in the analogies between human nature and nature in general (HW 4:338). Although the human subject has a certain freedom from nature, it is also part of nature and generates its meaning and purpose from within by force of an inner power. This inner power or life force permeates all of nature and cannot be comprehended by reason alone.⁶³ It must first be perceived by the senses and only then can the human subject try to understand it by using reason. This is why for Herder reason is a secondary human faculty that attempts to rationalize the sensual impressions, with which the inner power or “Reiz” of nature makes itself known to all living beings. Contrary to animals, humans have the ability to understand nature’s inner power by reflecting on it.

For Herder, reason is a secondary faculty, which reflects on precognitive experience.

opposition to Wolff even before his death. First, there were the immanent philosophical objections to his system, especially to the idea of the mathematical method in philosophy. Second, there was the massive incursion of foreign thought, both French and British. Third, there was the retrieval of Thomasius’s idea of ‘eclecticism’ precisely as a resource to bring the philosopher, the university scholar in general, ‘down to earth’ or back into the ‘world’” (10).

⁶² The pre-critical Kant was influenced by all three factors mentioned above that contributed to the crisis of Wolffian philosophy and was an outspoken critic of Wolffian philosophy; he was also opposed to the mathematical dominance in *Schulphilosophie*: “Kant aimed for a universal, necessary transcendental grounding of human experience; he remained in the established disciplinary order of philosophy” (Zammito 214).

⁶³ For a discussion of Herder’s understanding of reason, see Hans Adler, “Herder’s Concept of Humanität,” *A Companion to the Works of Johann Gottfried Herder*, eds. Hans Adler and Wulf Köpke (Rochester, NY: Camden House), 105-111. Accordingly, human *Vernunft* “is the faculty that makes human beings godlike because it enables them to participate in God’s reason, which is accessible to the human beings via recognition of the order that regulates the universe” (106). And “it is through reason that the human being can understand the word of God and read the ‘book of nature’” (ibid.). Yet Herder also stresses that *Vernunft* is “an acquired faculty that changes with the changing world of experiences” (111). For Herder *Vernunft* corresponds to its original meaning derived from *vernehmen* (to hear, learn, perceive), which makes it dependent on the sensory perception.

Language illustrates this process of reflection, a process that also marks the beginning of human self-awareness. For Herder humans distinguish themselves from all other living organisms through their freedom to be creative and reflect this freedom from nature in human language. In other words, language is the self-reflection of the human soul (HW 1:715-22):

The sensing human being feels his way into everything, feels everything from out of himself, and imprints it with his image, his impress [...] Just as our whole psychology consists of figurative terms, for the most part it was *a single* new image, *a single* analogy, *a single* striking metaphor that gave birth to the greatest and boldest theories (HW 4:330; Forster 188).

Abstract language expresses distance to nature by losing sight of the human element.

Language is the mirror in which the human subject can define itself over and against the rest of nature. Yet before humans can express themselves they have to feel nature's "Reiz" or power through their senses. In contrast to animals, which respond to nature's call instinctively, humans define themselves in opposition to nature by translating the imprint of nature's call into their own idiom (HW 1:716). While animals react to pain, hunger, and other physical emotions by making undifferentiated sounds characteristic of their species, humans have the ability of responding to sensual impressions by impregnating their reactions with their own individual mark. This is why language is essentially different from animal sounds. Although human language is a less direct answer to the calls of nature than the sound of an animal, it gives humans the freedom of defining themselves in relation to nature by recreating nature on a human scale in the medium of language. Abstract language expresses the distance to nature to the extent that it loses sight of the human element. Metaphorical or poetic language is capable of portraying the human in relation to nature by building bridges between the self and outside nature. Whereas traditional philosophy and science are interested in analyzing objects by taking them apart, Herder's goal is to provide an account of how human life is connected to all natural phenomena. For Herder all human knowledge is based on subjective experience and therefore on a comparison of the self with the outside world: "What we know we know only through analogy, from the creation to us and from us to the Creator" (HW 4:330, Forster 188). Consequently the predominant rhetorical feature that allows humans to develop self-consciousness is

analogy.⁶⁴ Poetic images, metaphors, anthropomorphisms, and onomatopoeias, for instance, permit Herder to illustrate the relationship between nature's powers and the human. The truth is guaranteed by the subject's candid self-examination in light of personal experiences:

This quiet similarity which I sense and intuit in the whole of my creation, my soul, and my life; the great spirit [*Geist*] that breathes upon me and shows me a single course, a single sort of laws, in what is small and what is large, in the visible world and the invisible world—this is my seal of truth (HW 4:330-31; Forster 188-89).

Herder emphasizes the mutual dependence of body and mind and the interrelatedness of all organisms in order to render human experience in its totality. His language intends to render aspects of human experience that lie beyond the scope of scientific discourse. By re-enacting from an inside perspective sensual experiences that are also subject to new scientific discoveries, such as the transmission of nervous impulses, through literary descriptions of the affects that accompany these bodily phenomena, Herder makes sensual experience come alive. His synthesis of anthropological, religious, philosophical, and poetic discourses depicts a broader horizon and in many instances more concrete rendition of human sensual experience than Kantian philosophy or Haller's scientific writings. In this regard Herder's humanism points to the humanities' broader mission of connecting the outside world to human life and looking at the impact of the sciences from a human perspective.

The truth guaranteed by subject's candid self-examination in light of personal experiences.

The humanities connect the outside world to human life.

III

From a posthumanist point of view, Herder's philosophy includes metaphysical conjectures about the human subject that are unverifiable. For instance, his assumption that human reason permits human beings to participate in divine reason presupposes an essential human nature distinct from all other living creatures that is, of course, incompatible with posthumanist perspectives. These philosophies—from Nietzsche, to

⁶⁴ For an in-depth discussion of Herder's use of analogy, see Hans-Dietrich Irmscher, "Beobachtungen zur Funktion der Analogie im Denken Herders," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschriften* 55 (1981): 64-97.

For Herder,
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Heidegger, to the deconstructionists and the contemporary posthumanist approaches informed by recent biotechnological and neuroscientific developments—view human beings in terms of a process rather than an essence.⁶⁵ Yet, as Hans Adler has pointed out, Herder also “moves away from the traditional type of concept [of *Humanität*] defined by its ‘substance’ and conceives of his new type of concept in terms of function and relationship.”⁶⁶ While Herder still upholds the notion of human autonomy (HW 6:630), he also envisions human beings as part of a nature that changes through history and thus subjects human autonomy to its laws (HW 6:627). In this respect Herder’s philosophy resembles posthumanist approaches that imagine the human determined by historical, social, and cultural phenomena (HW 6:671). Herder’s tautological definition of what is human suggests that human nature is continuously evolving according to divine laws: “Humanity is the purpose of the human being—with this purpose nature and God have placed into the hands of our race its own fate” (HW 6:630).⁶⁷ This seeming contradiction allows Herder to view the development of the human species as a process while the underlying laws of nature, including human nature, remain essentially the same (HW 6:628).

Philosopher Thomas Metzinger’s *Being No One* could serve as an example of a contemporary posthumanist discourse that in some respects follows Herder’s spirit. However, there are fundamental differences between Metzinger’s and Herder’s approach. While Herder attempts to preserve the unity of the human subject as a metaphysical entity, Metzinger aims at dismantling this very unit as a construct that prevents higher levels of self-knowledge. Although Metzinger presents a more differentiated model of human consciousness that draws heavily on neuroscientific research and makes no mention of Herder, his study does make an effort to build “a better bridge between the humanities and cognitive neuroscience” to achieve “a philosophically interesting growth of knowledge.”⁶⁸ Like

⁶⁵ For a concise overview of current posthumanist approaches, see Stefan Herbrechter, *Posthumanismus: Eine kritische Einführung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgemeinschaft, 2009).

⁶⁶ Adler, “Herder’s Concept of Humanität,” 106.

⁶⁷ The translation is mine.

⁶⁸ Metzinger, *Being No One*, 3. Future references to this source will be cited

Herder, Metzinger resorts to metaphorical descriptions, albeit more technical, to depict his self-model theory of subjectivity (SMT), which aims at providing “a general outline for a theory of consciousness, the phenomenal self, and the first-person perspective” (547). This phenomenal self is an inner representation. In this respect it resembles Herder’s assumption of an inner stable self. While Herder’s inner self is a “true” self because it corresponds to the underlying essential laws of nature, Metzinger’s phenomenal self model (PSM) is a virtual apparition that represents not only the external world but also the phenomenal body’s interactions with it in a deceptively consistent way so that the self-model is mistaken for an actual autonomous subject. Metzinger uses Plato’s famous parable of the cave dwellers to illustrate the internal make-up of human consciousness. In contrast to Plato, Metzinger equates the entire cave to “the physical organism as a whole, in particular its brain” (548). The shadows on the cave’s walls are “phenomenal mental models” or “low-dimensional projections of internal or external objects in the conscious state” (548). The fire that causes the flickering shadows of consciousness “is the incessant, self-regulating flow of neural information processing, constantly perturbed by sensory and cognitive input” (549). Metzinger’s cave model is another attempt to depict how physiological stimuli become transformed into subjective perceptions. Like Herder, whose poetic analogies served to emphasize the interconnectedness of mind and body, Metzinger also stresses that “the wall and the fire are not separate entities: they are two aspects of one and the same process” (549). In other words, the brain and its neurological activities constitute human consciousness, which are an ongoing activity, and not a thing or image of the self. In fact, in Metzinger’s model “the cave itself is empty,” which means that the projection of the self does not exist as a thing but only as a process.

In contrast to Herder who attempts to find the “true” self by moving inward to the deep recesses of the soul—as expressed in his poem “Selbst” (HW 3:830-34)—Metzinger compares the inner self to a dungeon that keeps human beings in a state of deception tied to the mistaken belief in such an autonomous inner self. While Metzinger’s assumption that

parenthetically in the text.

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“phenomenal experience as such unfolds in an *internal* space, a space quite distinct from the world described by ordinary physics” (548), bears similarities to Herder’s inner deep structure, it also negates Herder’s metaphysics by claiming that the inner self is an illusion. This illusion is created by a complex system of neurological processes in the brain that provide a first-person perspective. Metzinger introduces a “representational metaphor” that equates the mind to a virtual city map to illustrate how the self is situated in the world. Like an external city map the virtual city map created by the brain has “a little red arrow and the deictical sentence YOU ARE HERE” (551). However, in the virtual city map this arrow is neither fixed nor “recognizable as variable” to suit the imagination of different travelers who identify with it (552). In contrast to an external city map “[t]he conscious self-model in the caveman’s brain [...] is in large portions transparent” (552). This means that the phenomenal self does not recognize the system as such because the data that create the first-person perspective are constantly updated and surreptitiously change the perspective of the phenomenal self in accordance to the changes of its position in the outside world. In other words, whereas an external city map leaves the traveler with a choice to identify with the position of the arrow, the virtual city map conceals the fact that the phenomenal self is the product of a system and not an autonomous self. In Metzinger’s words, the phenomenal self is “characterized not only by full-blown prereflexive embodiment but by the comprehensive, all-encompassing subjective experience of *being situated*” (552).

Metzinger likens this fully immersed state of mind to the first-person experience created by a flight simulator. Just as these complex devices let student pilots experience a virtual reality as close as possible to actual real-life situations, the brain creates through this all-encompassing subjective experience a subjective reality:

A total flight simulator is a self-modeling airplane that has always flown without a pilot and has generated a complex internal image of itself within its *own* internal flight simulator. [...] Like the neurophenomenological caveman “‘the pilot’ is born into a virtual reality from the beginning—without a chance to ever discover this fact” (557).

Metzinger concedes, however, that the human brain has cre-

ative and introspective capabilities that a flight simulator lacks. In addition, human subjectivity has the capacity of not only experiencing the world from a first-person point of view but also “of mentally ‘ascribing’ this act of reference *to* oneself while it is taking place” (574). These additional resources make his model come close to the idea of self-determination that he denies (556-57). In contrast to traditional neo-platonic models Metzinger emphasizes that there “is no homunculus in the system” but that the subject’s ability to control itself grew over time with the process of both ontogenetic and phylogenetic evolution. Thus it is the brain and its neurological processes that activate the pilot or subject in charge and not vice versa.

This idea of neurological stimuli that always precede human agency is, however, not very different from Herder’s notion of “Reiz.” In his illustration of an oncoming panic attack Herder also emphasizes that the subject only reacts to sensory stimuli and that sensual perception necessarily happens *before* the I can reflect. Metzinger’s claim that the subject is born into a virtual reality from the beginning and only gradually develops both phylogenetically and ontogenetically into a more complex system that is capable of self-reflection resonates with Herder’s idea that life evolves from simple organic plant life to more complex processes in animals to the human organism as the highest form of existence.

Metzinger’s assertion that “[subjectivity] is not a *thing*, but a property of complex representational processes” finds a parallel in Herder’s description of the oncoming panic attack that also presents the human organism as a dynamic, constantly changing system that responds to its ceaseless exposure to sensual stimuli. As mentioned earlier, the historical and developmental dynamics in Herder’s historical and anthropological writings are counterbalanced by an underlying ideal human nature that is in agreement with the eternal laws of nature (HW 6:628-36). As Herder states in book 15 of his *Ideen*, human beings have access to these laws through their god-given, natural predisposition to be reasonable and fair. It is against the metaphysics of such universal laws that Metzinger launches his posthumanist theory.

Metzinger attributes the attraction of “the integrity and stability of the self-model” to the fact that humans like to view

themselves as independent of their physical bodies and able to overcome death (597). Herder certainly suggests the possibility of a continuing existence after death or so-called palingenesis, in his religiously informed *Ideen*, which was one of Kant's major criticisms in his review.⁶⁹ Metzinger concedes that the belief in a stable inner self is most likely beneficial for an individual's mental health. He attributes the human awareness of mortality to a relatively recent transformation in human evolution, an awareness that he considers responsible for the continuing dependence on "essentialist fantasies" (Metzinger 597). However, Metzinger's goal is to minimize the "lack of introspective self-knowledge" by destroying such fantasies (564). He expects that the realization of the self's fictitious nature will liberate human beings from their neoplatonic dungeon and open the path to higher forms of consciousness and to a new ethics. This new ethics will "dissolve any form of autoepistemic closure" and not shrink "from violating the adaptivity constraint that Mother Nature has so cruelly imposed on our biological ancestors" (632). In other words, this new type of ethics would be bold enough to make use of neuroscience in order to transcend the limitations biological evolution has prescribed for us.

The ethical problem arises when the quest for self-knowledge is in conflict with the drive for self-preservation; for instance, if scientific investigation would threaten the very existence of the human being as we know it. Metzinger's call on the human subject to emancipate itself from the false assumption that the phenomenal self as such is a knowable entity—or in Metzinger's words, "an epistemically justified form of mental content"—culminates in an emphatic plea to mankind to "wake up from biological history" in order "to define its own goals, and become autonomous" (634). Here Metzinger positions himself squarely in the Enlightenment tradition by attempting to achieve domination over nature and to transform both the self and eventually the entire universe according to the laws of reason. He could not deviate further from Herder in this regard, who wants to restore the lost connection to nature by integrating the rational faculties with the irrational nature of man. One may wonder, however, whether Metzinger reintroduces a transcendentalist aspect to his model

⁶⁹ Kant, *Schriften zur Geschichtsphilosophie* 50.

by assuming that it is possible to overcome the human dependence on biological nature? After all, Metzinger's reliance on neuroscientific research, which serves to refute the human acceptance of selfhood as a natural given, resembles Herder's integration of empirical scientific knowledge to minimize the dependence on transcendental assumptions promoted by the so-called *Schulphilosophie*.

Although Herder's model is less differentiated than that of Metzinger, one could argue that it is both sensuously more comprehensible and human(e) than Metzinger's. While Herder's model reveals the fundamental contradiction of a human being that is both whole and yet divided, both spiritually stable and yet subject to constant transformation, it respects biological history of the human species as an integral part of human progress toward humanism. Metzinger, on the other hand, rejects Herder's belief in a sensory-cognitive continuum or in knowledge that can be immediately obtained through the senses. Yet his denial of any "epistemically immediate contact to reality" (599) comes at the price of suppressing the rationally unknowable, sensual side of human nature. Metzinger is aware of this and concedes "that there may be *phenomenal immediacy*" at particular moments, such as when two individuals are "catching each other in the act of falling in love" (603). Yet his explanation that such events have only "phenomenal content" and lack "a nonconceptual form of intentional content" seems to evade the problem that there are sensual experiences that cannot be adequately represented by a scientific discourse (603). Metzinger declares sensory perceptions as invalid because the unconsciously selective processes that render them provide an incomplete picture of the complex nature of human consciousness. In other words, the very idea of a first-person perspective or personhood is in Metzinger's view a construct that prevents self-knowledge. Metzinger's suggestion "that there are no such things as selves" poses a phenomenological dilemma: it cannot account for the fact that someone must act as agent and someone as recipient (627-28). Who is coming up with Metzinger's idea and who is its recipient if it is not a particular human subject? Although Metzinger is aware of this problem, he still defends the radical dismantling of human subjectivity in the service of a "higher

Metzinger's denial of selves poses a phenomenological dilemma: it cannot account for existence of agents and recipients.

degree of consciousness,” which humans will in his view inevitably arrive at if they pursue the path of reason (630). This categorical appeal in favor of progress poses the ethical question whether the striving for such an allegedly “higher degree of consciousness” could result in a new hierarchical taxonomy of knowledge that would devalue all forms of experience that are considered inferior—a possibility that Metzinger neglects to discuss. Even though Metzinger bases his research on concrete physiological evidence, the trajectory of his philosophy aims at overcoming bodily constraints. His model therefore seems to replicate the “erasure of embodiment” that is typical of Enlightenment constructions of subjectivity, which Katherine Hayles has also detected in the “cybernetic construction of the posthuman” (Hayles 4). Herder, on the other hand, did not view the body simply as an object for control and mastery but integrated it very effectively in his holistic philosophy and aesthetics, as the discussion of the textual passage “Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele” has shown. In this respect Herder’s philosophy can serve as a model that provides an “opportunity to put back into the picture the flesh that continues to be erased in contemporary discussions about cybernetic subjects” (Hayles 5).

Undoubtedly posthumanist approaches like Metzinger’s are useful in accounting for recent scientific and epistemic developments that address the question of what it means to be human today. These approaches are invaluable for revealing the ideological biases and historicity of normative premises, modeled in accordance with the core values of male Western Enlightenment thinkers. Even though Herder’s philosophy still follows the eighteenth-century premise of individual autonomy, it anticipates the significance of historical, local, social factors as well as the significance of language for the constitution of identity.

Is it fair to say that Herder’s depictions of sensory experience from a first-person, inside perspective do not yield any valid insights into human nature and possibly even prevent self-knowledge? Should we not consider the possibility that poetic and literary depictions of human nature may yield knowledge about certain aspects of human consciousness that scientific discourse is unable to render adequately?

For philosopher Manfred Frank, scientific discourses are unable to explain how conscious mental states of mind are connected to physical processes. According to Frank, they will never be able to explain the mind or soul “because the lived world is too diverse and neural processes are too complex.”⁷⁰ Scientific discourses are only capable of treating human conditions “objectively,” that is from an external perspective. The description of emotional states, however, requires a different vocabulary. As my analysis has shown, it is one of Herder’s major accomplishments to translate scientific processes into a vocabulary that is capable of describing the subjective effects of these processes on a human being’s mental and emotional states. Herder’s language is ripe with images and metaphors that can evoke and recall universal human experiences and human emotions as well as illustrate inner processes. Such appeals to the senses are inspirational because the subjective experience of mental and emotional states is of a different quality from “objective” observations. Love, fear, and joy, for instance, can be expressed and perceived in more diverse and meaningful ways in poetic language than in scientific descriptions. A philosophy that tries to render the subjective experience in purely scientific discourse would be reductive and ignore the evocative qualities of the human imagination. The fact that the language of Herder, Goethe, and other late eighteenth-century writers had such a long-lasting and profound impact on the development of German literature can be attributed to their ability to mediate subjective experiences.

Scientific descriptions of inner experience are reductive: they ignore the evocative qualities of the human imagination.

Humanism and its focus on the human subject have remained of such importance over the past two hundred years because they deal with ethical issues and discuss how individuals can contribute to a better humanity. Such ethical questions would not be addressed in a philosophy that explains all humans in terms of genetic dispositions or neuronal processes. Just as the emerging empirical sciences were inadequate for providing ethical guidance in Herder’s age, so is today’s brain research neurobiology unfit to answer questions that deal with moral issues. By connecting poetic imagery with the anthropological discourse of his day and age, Herder went beyond

⁷⁰ Frank, “Der Mensch bleibt sich ein Rätsel.” Interview. *Die Zeit*, 27 Aug 2009. The translation is mine.

The humanities can shed light on the meaning of existence by relating scientific queries to subjective human experience.

particularist approaches in the sciences that contributed to establishing disciplinary boundaries. His essay “Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele” provides an example of how the humanities could capitalize on the question about the meaning of human existence by relating all scientific queries to subjective human experience. By trying to integrate the particularities of scientific discoveries with his anthropocentric philosophy, he builds the case for a humanist mission in its own right. Herder’s emphatic endorsement of human unity—a unity that nevertheless does not deny its contradictions and utopian outlook—could inspire today’s humanists to refocus the humanities on their original mission of exploring the self from a human point of view that is open to new discoveries about human nature and capable of engaging in the negotiation of a common ground.