

Sonia Sikka

Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism.

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Sonia Sikka's book includes many thoughtful reflections on the implications of Johann Gottfried Herder's ideas for how we think about history, culture, race, language, art, and much more. Her primary focus, though, is given in the title of the book, explicated thoroughly in its first chapter, and then re-occurs throughout the rest of the text: namely, that Herder should be understood as a thinker who was both a universalist and a relativist, some who, on the one hand, could hold that there is "a minimally common human nature" which makes possible definitive cross-cultural and historical judgments of "practices, behaviors, and social arrangements that appear to damage the well-being of individuals" (22), and on the other hand, affirm a "relativism about happiness [which] implies a deep form of evaluative incommensurability entailing that forms of happiness possible among these different societies... cannot be ranked" (37).

It is not surprising that Sikka makes this the heart of her consideration of Herder's contributions to philosophy. Herder's writings reveal an obsession with respecting both historical distinctions and natural commonalities, with the notion, one might say, of finding unity in difference. This is especially true in connection with the argument over how to situate Herder in regards to the universalism of the Enlightenment: was he wholly opposed to it, only partly so, or best described as articulating some parallel "counter-Enlightenment" at the same time? This historical question is one which Sikka treats extensively, making thoughtful contributions to the debate over Herder's intellectual relationship with Kant. While those scholars who have become interested in Herder through the ways he has been employed in recent years by scholars of culture, nationality, and community to explore the nature of belonging may not find the general orientation of this book especially helpful to them, Sikka's overarching interpretation of Herder is a strong one, and as she persuasively connects it to most of the other issues addressed throughout the book's chapters, I think anyone who is curious about the man's work – including political theorists, historians, literary scholars, and anthropologists, not just philosophers – would benefit from giving it some time.

The essence of Sikka's thesis is that Herder's universalism and relativism find their connection through his insistence on employing an anthropological and empirical – and thus, in a Kantian sense, thoroughly "pre-critical" – lens through which to ask questions about happiness, identity, morality, or any other such quality about which we might be called to make judgments. For Herder, a study of history, more than any reflection upon the categories of thought, is the best way to get clear on how human beings construct the notion of "happiness" and other similar concepts in their lives. A study of history is therefore also the only appropriate way for one who has recognized the great diversity which exists in the world to interact with it respectfully and ethically.

The importance of feelings like happiness for Herder is fairly obvious to those familiar with his voluminous writings on human culture and history. As he wrote in his relatively short

monograph *Yet Another Philosophy of History of the Formation of Humankind*: “Each nation has its center of happiness in itself, like every sphere has its own center of gravity!” In other words, according to Herder one can’t take a critical position and make judgments about what will result in the happiness or progress or authenticity of others; only those actually living in the culture or community in question, with its own history and character, can make that judgment. Absent Kant’s elevation of the question of judgment into categorical realms, one simply has to take seriously the anthropological, empirical “facts on the ground,” and thus also take seriously the language and perspective of those who belong to each particular place and time. Hence, for Herder there is, as Sikka presents it, a genuine relativism, not merely a “pluralism”, to the study of the world and its history.

How does Sikka see this same “pre-critical” lens as bringing some universalism into Herder’s philosophy, and thus giving his relativism an “Enlightened” aspect? By treating Herder’s key moral ideal of *Humanität* in a similarly anthropological fashion. She acknowledges that it conveys true moral import, but sees the nature of that importance as being tied to the shared “aptitudes and predispositions” of ordinary human existence. *Humanität*, as Sikka sees it, is fundamentally Herder’s expression for “the ideal essence of the species”, something which exists within the “general nature of man” itself (20–21, 75). So human beings carry within themselves a common capacity, rooted in our basic physicality and sociality, and on that basis one can authentically assess whether real progress towards moral betterment – that is, a fuller realization of that capacity – is taking place within the life of another person (or, more relevantly to Herder’s interests, within the history of a nation or people). That this realization will take multiple forms Herder assumes as given: hence, for Sikka, the primary ethical imperative when it comes to achieving Herder’s ideal is freedom. One should allow as many people and peoples as possible to develop their humanity in their own ways – linguistically, religiously, and politically.

This reading of Herder’s central philosophical concerns is convincing. Clearly, Herder’s whole vision of the world was in a very real sense anthropological and empirical: he was a philosophical realist, convinced that the best metaphors for understanding the world were sensuous and organic ones, reflecting his belief that all which was worth knowing or even was capable of being known about it had its roots in natural, knowable processes. Sikka correctly notes this realism in his philosophy (105, 206–207) and thus makes a good case for seeing Herder as a thinker who has a very material conception of both humanity’s diversity and our shared anthropology (a phenomenon most clearly revealed in our expressive propensity for language, and its constitutive cultural consequences). But while convincing, it is not complete, mostly due to the insufficient attention she gives to Herder’s explicitly religious writings.

Sikka does not leave this part of Herder’s oeuvre completely unexamined, as the book includes a long and thoughtful consideration of Herder’s major theological work, *God: Some Conversations*. But focusing on that work while bypassing essays like *On National Religions* and the many other religious writings Herder produced over his long career (during which he was, it must be remembered, primarily a Lutheran pastor and educator) can lead to missing some of the deeper paradoxes of Herder’s thought. Sikka argues that “Herder’s position on religious diversity blends a species of relativism – in this case an appreciation of the cultural relativity of symbolic forms – with a universalism projecting a broad ideal of human flourishing” (241). While this is mostly correct, it still fails to address Herder’s clear prioritizing of the Christian value of some

specific types of human attachment to those symbolic forms over others. Sikka does note Herder's "privileging" of Christianity, but tends to understand this as part of Herder's imagining of Christianity "as exclusively a moral code, stripped of ritual, ceremony, symbol, and arguably all that makes it a particular religion" (219–220). But actually it was Herder's argument that religious truth was best realized through the specific and organic development of a purified (though at least nominally Christian) religion, one connected to the expressive development of a particular people (his primary example this being the development of Lutheranism in Germany).

The complicated truth is that Herder's relativism reflected not only the Enlightenment but also a kind of Protestant teleology, one which consisted of a multiplicity of divine revelations to be worked out in diverse times and places, yet all of which Herder believed shared a connection to true convictions about God and humanity. As he put it in *Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Humankind*: "O benevolent God, you did not leave your creation to murderous chance; you engraved your image, religion, and humanity on the human soul. The outline of the statue lies there, hidden in dark, deep marble, but this outline cannot hew or fashion itself. Tradition and teaching, reason and experience must do this; and yet, you have sufficiently supplied the means for obtaining them." While Sikka is clearly familiar with *Ideas*, she may not have fully grasped the complex way in which Herder saw this very Christian, metaphysical hope of his buried in the culture and history of humankind.

Sikka's book is well-written, comprehensive, and makes a strong argument for its overall thesis, one that should be taken seriously by any student of Herder's philosophy. It has important things to say to those approaching Herder with an eye to his historical, literary, political, and anthropological contributions as well. The absence from Sikka's argument of a fuller engagement with Herder's own treatment of his Protestant faith makes for a gap in her ultimate conclusions about Herder's universalism, but it does not take away from the convincing way in which she connects the deep relativism in his thinking to how he approached a great many non-philosophical subjects. This text is to be recommended to any Herder scholar, whatever their area of specialization.

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