



Philosophy of Education

## Herder, Gadamer, and 21st Century Humanities

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the anticipations of this Congress, namely, that of all the world's philosophical traditions address the 'problems of human life, civilization, and residence on earth,' cannot be accomplished by insisting upon the means and prescriptions of any one tradition. In this paper I address the theme of the Congress by considering the views of Johann Gottfried Herder and Hans-Georg Gadamer on education and history. In spite of attacks on his religious loyalties, Herder supported what may today be called pluralism. Having studied history and having watched history in the making of one of its darkest moments, Gadamer also saw the future of the humanities in the global conversation. To educate humanity, I conclude, philosophy should first attempt to understand the existential conditions of human life.

*Ideen* is a curious and in some ways contradictory work. Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) respects the humanistic ideals of freedom and social improvement and recognizes the teleological and progressive notions of historical development. But he does not confine himself to European history and sources like most others in his time and even after did. He rejected the then prevailing view that there exist some invariant laws or standards of consciousness and behavior that are applicable to all humans at all periods and in terms of which even the past should be judged. On the contrary, he argued that every historical age and culture has its own character and its own value. In Book 14, chapter 6 of *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind, 1784-91), he likens societies to organisms as they develop in distinctive manner and in response to the combination of environmental conditions presented by its particular time and place.

Human history is not a linear progression, but a succession of distinct and heterogeneous civilizations, some of which influenced each other, but could, nevertheless, be seen to possess an inner unity and be intelligible in their own right. The idea that the proper subject of the historical sciences is the life of communities and not exploits of individuals was not new to Herder. Hume, Voltaire, Montesquieu, and even Vico had already spoken of this. Further the idea that great poets expressed the mind and experience of their societies has also been advocated by them.

What is of interest to us is what Herder derived out of these well known ideas. For him the life of the communities is not political but is anti-political and opposed to nationalism. He wrote on the folly and cruelties of imperialism all his life. From his first essay on the philosophy of history, *Auch Eine Philosophie*, of 1774, where he speaks of the greed and

lust of the Roman conquerors to his *Letters on the Advancement of Mankind* (1793-97), where he speaks of the arrogance and greed of the European colonizers, Herder denounces the inhumanity of judging foreign people 'in terms of customs unknown to them.' In 1802, in his periodical, *Adrastea*, he imagines a conversation between an Asian and a European in which the Asian asks the European what the latter would think if one of the oppressed foreigners came to Europe and with an insolent air pronounced absurd all that is most sacred to the Europeans — their laws, religions, wisdom, and institutions. The response of the European in this imaginary conversation is: "Oh, but that is quite a different matter, we have power, ships, money, cannon, *culture*." (1) For him human relations must rest upon consent, which in the last analysis turns out to be yielding to strength, not on utilitarian calculations, but rather on respect, affection, kinship, and equality.

Such understanding cannot start with the assumption of one universal standard by which to judge all human communities. Herder opposed uniformity as the enemy of life and freedom. Since the time of Plato, one of the central doctrines of the Western tradition has maintained that good is one while evil has many faces and that there is one true answer to every real question. [Compare this to the attitude of the Upanishads where the claim is still for truth to be one but that truth is called by different names by various wise people: "*Ekam sath vipra bahudha vadanthi*."] Herder does not want to return to the past, but, at the same time, anticipating the many writers of the nineteenth-century, is convinced that if one lives on the inventions (i.e., arts and sciences) of others, one becomes mechanical and dehumanized. Though he was concerned about foreign, especially French, culture devitalizing the German arts and sciences, he applied this concern to other nations and cultures as well. For him nation (*die Nation*) is not a political entity. His celebration of German beginnings only exemplifies his attitude: "I am able to stammer with immense effort in the words of a foreign language; its spirit will evade me." (2) Nationality for him is purely and strictly a cultural attribute. He attacks both political centralization and intellectual polarization. For him all understanding is necessarily historical. One cannot understand the Hebrew scriptures by calling it a sublime work of art and compare its beauties with that of Homer. To understand it is to grasp what is meant to those who expressed it in the works through which we try to read it. One must enter the time, the place, the entire history of a people and one must "feel oneself [*sich einfühlen*] into everything." (3)

This goes against one of the central assumptions of the then Western tradition that problems of value were in principle soluble with finality. But there could not exist one universal ideal for all humans if each civilization has to be infused with different *Einfühlen*. Herder writes in his *Journal* in 1769: "Not a man, not a country, not a people, not a natural history, not a state, are like one another. Hence the Truth, the Good, the Beautiful in them are not similar either." (4) Herder is not a subjectivist. He believes in objective standards of judgment that are derived from sympathetic understanding of life and purposes of individual societies and are themselves objective historical structures that require wide and scrupulous scholarship. This may be what philosophy can contribute to *paideia* of the twenty-first-century.

Turning to our own times, in his "Reflections on My Philosophical Journey," Gadamer, speaking of Plato, says 'To philosophize *with* Plato, not just to criticize Plato, that is the task. To criticize Plato is perhaps just as simple-minded as to reproach Sophocles for not being Shakespeare.' (5) In a larger context both Habermas and Gadamer place Europe and its world role in its intellectual traditions fostering conversations among a variety of communities. Especially Gadamer's *paideia* and/or *Bildung* is 'one tied to the recognition of difference and the need for, and worthwhileness of, open and nonmanipulative communication.' (6) His hermeneutics, like rhetoric, can designate a natural capacity of humans, the capacity for intelligent interchange with one another. Like Aristotle's practical philosophy, this type of hermeneutics is not just learning certain crafts and skills and

mastering techniques but has to do with raising the awareness of each individual's due as a member of the society in an excellent manner. As Gadamer puts it: ". . . no learned and mastered technique can spare us the task of deliberation and decision." (7)

Hermeneutics has to do with a theoretical attitude toward the practice of interpretation, the interpretation of texts, but also in relation to the experiences interpreted in them and in our communicatively unfolded orientations in the world. Interpretation refers not only to the explication of the actual intention of a difficult text. Interpretation becomes an expression for getting behind the surface phenomena and data. During the nineteenth-century this method was constantly compared with the methodology of the natural sciences. Its objects, the transmitted texts, were treated like the observational data in the scientific investigation of nature. Thus on a February day in the winter of 1870, a Max Müller could deliver a public lecture at London's Royal Institution to promote something he called the science of religion. His lectures were later published as *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873). He reminded his listeners what Goethe wrote about human language could be applied to religion: "He who knows one, knows none." Today we can also say the same about philosophy as well. But precisely this 'scientific' approach also pointed to the possibility of a variety of standards in religion and philosophy by which different cultures made their judgments about life and expressed their ideas. Thus, again, to understand these expressions one has to recognize the historical, linguistic, and social circumstances of the people expressing those ideas.

In writing about the future of the European humanities, Gadamer predicts a standard language for the natural sciences in the future. "But for the humanities it will probably be different." (8) One of the historical and fundamental characteristics of Europe and its American reproduction is the differentiation of philosophy, religion, art, and science. Combined with the Greek Sophists' legacy of linear thinking and argumentation, this differentiation and competition among them to establish primacy and to claims of *a priori* foundations, one may say for the most part, forms the history of the Western intellectual tradition. Despite such competing claims to priority among these fragmented fields of study, the goal seems to have been the establishment of absolute standards by which to judge everything else. Ironically we cannot understand the claims of philosophy, religion, art, and science unless we approach them in their own historical context, with a historical consciousness. It is such historical consciousness that we will need to base our current and future studies in the humanities.

European Enlightenment created certain goals for Europe and the world: by continuing the industrial revolution leading to a leveling of the cultural articulation of Europe and the spreading of 'a standardized world civilization, in which the history of the planet stands still in the ideal state of a rational world bureaucracy.' (9) Kantian enlightenment insisted upon the acceptance of the primacy of practical reason and human freedom as postulates of reason without any explanatory requirements. But such standardization has remained elusive so far, be it the attempt to establish the true universals of language or a unified science. In this the tendency toward unification has been countered by a tendency toward differentiation and articulation of new and old distinctions.

But any call for pluralism (as has been done very often) and for tolerance based upon strength of one's own existential certainty would remain empty unless such a call is based on mutual understanding and sharpened awareness of the basic forces that enable a community or culture to *live*, not just exist. It is here that humanities education or *paideia* or *Bildung* can and should provide the proper foundation. Unlike the academic philosophy of European and American variety that has increasingly isolated itself from a consideration of the whole human by dissociating itself increasingly from religion, art, and science, the humanities — of which philosophy is but a part — is better equipped to bring these diverse

fields of knowledge together in understanding a community and its life in its historical, linguistic, and social context. Using the methods developed by and in the sciences, especially the social sciences, the humanities acquire better descriptions of the cultural contexts of the ideas and philosophies we are trying to understand. We cannot fully appreciate, let alone understand, the philosophy of Sartre by ignoring the artful novels and plays. In the same way, we cannot understand other cultures and philosophies if we ignore the inter-relatedness of art, religion, philosophy and science. Academic programs in philosophy that do not require and provide exposure to the art, religion, and science of one's own culture and that of others at least in a rudimentary way do a disservice to their students. The distinctive methodologies developed by and used in these four faculties of knowledge can and should be used in understanding each other and thus understanding the community.

The historico-philological and analytical methods successfully used in philosophy enable us to appreciate the concepts in art, science, and religion. In the same way the intuitive and the non-linear approaches of religion and art can provide philosophers the insights needed to understand other communities. Both Herder and Gadamer have argued how a better understanding of a community is gained through the study of poetry or other creative works or by studying religious rituals along with the standard texts.

The historico-philological and analytical method of European-American philosophy is embraced by other academic philosophers elsewhere in the world, some more enthusiastically than others. The seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob (1599-1692) uses reason, or what he calls the 'light of our heart,' to criticize the ethical prescriptions of various religions. (10) For him such reason serves as a foundation for morality and as a test for religious beliefs. The Akans of Ghana put this intellectual reasoning in the context of the welfare of the individual *and* the society. (11) The philosophy of this community can be understood not through textual analysis alone, but by also studying the arts, and what is given as religious requirements. Despite all that has been argued for and against ethnophilosophies and 'genuine' philosophies, (12) philosophy, as part of humanities, ought to acknowledge and incorporate in its studies the differing approaches in understanding the human life in its social and cultural setting.

The goal of all the world's traditions of philosophy addressing 'the problems of human life, civilization and residence on the Earth' cannot be accomplished by insisting upon the means and prescriptions of any one tradition. The Chinese idea of 'doing without doing' (*wei wu wei*) or the Akan conception that morality applies to human *actions* and not *beings*, the Greek virtue ethics, the Buddhist idea of nothingness, the Hindu idea of *maya*, the Kantian idea of the thing-in-itself, Sartrean Being-for itself, James' will to believe, and a host of other ideas from different traditions can be understood in their own existential contexts and in terms of how they manifest themselves and get modified in the everyday existence of people in different cultures. At a time of increased communication and clamor for globalizing every issue and problem, humanities ought to philosophize in the sense in which Gadamer, as quoted earlier, suggests: philosophize *with* others in the world. A student of such philosophy would not limit oneself to studying and analyzing the texts of academic philosophers, present and past, but would try to glean the message coming through the arts, religion, and science of any community/culture. Such a philosophy would be mindful of the changes in expectations in life and values brought about by the impact of science and technologies in different cultures.

In spite of attacks on his religious loyalty, Herder supported what may today be called pluralism. Having studied history and having watched history in the making in his own life, Gadamer also sees the future of the humanities in the global conversation. To educate

humanity then, first philosophy should try to understand the existential conditions of humanity.

## Notes

(1) As quoted in Isaiah Berlin. *Vico and Herder*. London: The Hogarth Press, 1976, p. 161. The nineteenth-century English poet Hilaire Belloc described a similar effect on the "primitives" encountered during nineteenth-century European colonial expansion: "The plain fact is that we have got / The Gatling gun and they have not."

(2) Herder. *Collected Works*, IV, p. 388

(3) Herder. *Collected Works*, V, p.502

(4) Herder. *Collected Works*, IV, p.472

(5) Lewis Hahn (Ed.). *The Philosophy of Hans-George Gadamer*, Library of Living Philosophers, Chicago: Open Court, 1997, p. 32

(6) Misgeld and Nicholson (ed.). *Hans-Georg Gadamer on Education, Poetry, and History*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1992, p. xvii

(7) Gadamer. *Reason in the Age of Science*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press, 198. p. 92

(8) "Aber für die Geisteswissenschaften dürfte es anders aussehen"—*Das Erbe Europas*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1989, P.35

(9) *Das Erbe Europas*, p. 52: '... einer standardisierten weltzivilisation heraufführen, in der sich die Geschichte des Planeten gleichsam in Idealstatus einer rationalen Weltverwaltung stillstellt -'

(10) See: Claude Sumner. *The Source of African Philosophy: The Ethiopian Philosophy of Man*. Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1986.

(11) See: Kwame Gyekye. *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987

(12) See: Paulin Hountondji. *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983.