

## **“The Most Natural State”: Herder and Nationalism**

**Alan Patten, Department of Politics, Princeton University**

**June 2010 final revised version**

### Abstract

Herder is often considered a cultural nationalist rather than a political nationalist. Although there is a measure of truth in this assessment, it overlooks the important passages in Herder’s writings where he did make political claims about the nation. The paper explores the basis of these claims, and tries to articulate what is theoretically interesting and plausible in Herder’s account. Herder defended the *nationally bounded state* (as opposed to the nation-state) with an argument that rests on an *individuality* principle and a *nationality* principle. Together these principles inform a variant of nationalism that is liberal and democratic in orientation and that remains relevant for contemporary normative theorists working on a range of problems.

### Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank audiences at Harvard, Columbia, Oxford, University College London, and Princeton for comments on earlier drafts of this paper, as well as Jan-Werner Müller, Sankar Muthu, Andy Sabl and Hans Aarsleff for written comments. Thanks also to Christopher Ro and Javier Hidalgo for their research assistance.

Almost everyone who writes about Herder recognizes his important place in the history of nationalist thought. He was one of the earliest theorists to treat the nation as a major unit of social analysis and to argue that individuals find value and meaning in their national culture. He implored his fellow Germans not to slavishly imitate the French and urged them to develop their own language and culture. And he was even the first political theorist to use the word “nationalism” [*Nationalism*], identifying it with a strong attachment to one’s own nation that spills over into prejudice against other nations (PW 297).<sup>1</sup> The story has often been recounted of Herder’s influence on later nationalist thinkers and leaders, including Fichte, Mazzini, and Mazaryk.<sup>2</sup>

In the view of many scholars, however, there is a fundamental divide between the form of nationalism espoused by Herder and the nationalism embraced by later thinkers and movements. The difference is not merely that Herder defended the rights of *all* nations (and not just his own) and condemned various forms of nationalist aggression and chauvinism, although these certainly are distinctive features of his position compared with some later expressions of nationalism.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Parenthetical references to “PW” refer to J.G. Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge, 2002), which collects together in English translation a number of key writings by Herder.

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Robert Reinhold Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism* (New York, 1931), ch. 8; F.M. Barnard, *Herder’s Social & Political Thought* (Oxford, 1965), ch. 9; and F.M. Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History* (McGill-Queen’s University Press, Montreal, 2003), p. 86.

<sup>3</sup> The anti-chauvinist features of Herder’s nationalism are emphasized by Isaiah Berlin, ‘Vico and Herder’ in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton, 2000 [1976]), p. 181; Frederick Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), p. 212; Forster, ‘Introduction’ to Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, pp. xxxi-xxxii;; and Vicki Spencer,

Instead, the key difference, according to a number of scholars, is that Herder was concerned to promote the “cultural nation”, not the “political nation”.<sup>4</sup> Rather than aim for political unity or the sovereignty of the German people, he sought to energize the spiritual, linguistic, and aesthetic formation of the German nation.

The most prominent English-language proponent of this interpretation has been Isaiah Berlin. According to Berlin, “it is important to realize that Herder’s nationalism was never political”.<sup>5</sup> Herder was a populist who believed that a people can and should determine its own *cultural* path, but he steadfastly refused to draw any *political* implications from this commitment. Berlin attributes this refusal to Herder’s denunciation of every form of centralization, coercion, and conquest, and to his almost anarchistic dislike of the state.<sup>6</sup>

Berlin and others are right to notice the relatively apolitical character of Herder’s nationalism compared with later forms of nationalism. However, a singular emphasis on the non-political character of Herder’s nationalism risks pushing into the shadows the important passages where he *does* make political claims relating to the nation. Berlin exaggerates when he writes that

---

‘Herder and Nationalism. Reclaiming the Principle of Cultural Respect’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, 43 (1) (1997) pp. 1-13, pp. 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State*, trans. Robert B. Kimber (Princeton, 1970), ch.1 and p. 29; John Hutchinson, ‘Cultural Nationalism and Moral Regeneration’, in *Nationalism*, eds. John Hutchinson and Anthony Smith (Oxford, 1994), pp. 122-31.

<sup>5</sup> Berlin, ‘Vico and Herder’, p. 205; see also p. 180; and Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History*, p. 9-10; Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, p. 189; and Hans Reiss, ‘Introduction to *Reviews of Herder’s Philosophy of the History of Mankind*’, in Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 192-200, p. 199.

<sup>6</sup> Berlin, ‘Vico and Herder’, p. 181.

Herder's nationalism was "never" political. In volume two of *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Mankind*, Herder argued that "the most natural state [*Staat*] is ... *one* people [*Volk*], with one national character" (I 249/337).<sup>7</sup> In the subsequent volume (published two years later), he reiterated this claim, asserting that "an empire consisting of one nation [*Das Reich Eines Volks*] is a family, a well-ordered household: it reposes on itself, for it is founded on nature, and stands and falls by time alone. An empire forcing together a hundred peoples and a hundred-twenty provinces is a monstrosity and no body of state" (I 325/436; see also 350/467-8, 483-4/642-3, 575/759, and PW 377).

To be sure, Herder did not claim in these passages (or elsewhere) that every nation as such must have its own state. A single nation could be spread across several states (as with the city-states of ancient Greece (I 372/496), and Germany in the eighteenth century) or it might manage to flourish without *any* state (I 223/304). In this sense, Herder did not advocate the nation-state or make political claims on behalf of the nation.<sup>8</sup> But the passages cited above *do* object to any state whose authority extends over more than one nation. This call for a *nationally bounded state* is nothing if not a political claim. Since Herder's time, it has fuelled demands for the break-up of empires along national lines, provoked skepticism about the viability and

---

<sup>7</sup> Parenthetical references to "I" refer to Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy of History of Mankind*.

Two page references are given: the first to the English translation in J.G. Herder, *Outlines of a philosophy of the history of man*, trans. T. Churchill (New York, 1966 [1800]); the second to the German original in J.G. Herder, *Werke, Volume III/1: Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, ed. Wolfgang Pross (Carl Hanser Verlag, München, 2002). I have sometimes amended the translation and have frequently relied on translations from *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, ed. and trans. F.M. Barnard (Cambridge, 1969).

<sup>8</sup> Dominic Eggel, Andre Liebich, and Deborah Mancini-Griffoli, 'Was Herder a Nationalist?', *The Review of Politics*, 69 (2007) pp. 48-78.

desirability of multinational forms of political community, and supported claims that the people should be guided by leaders coming from their own ranks rather than from a culturally separate elite.

My aim in the present paper is to recover and reconstruct this marginalized, politically nationalist strand of Herder's thought. It turns out that Herder had a rather theoretically interesting justification for his political claim about the nation, and the main focus of the paper will be on uncovering the normative structure of this justification. Although I will focus on reconstructing Herder's position rather than defending it, I do think that there is something attractive about where he ends up, especially when his claims about the nationally bounded state are read alongside the passages excoriating despotism and celebrating individuality. Indeed, to put it provocatively, I think that one can find in Herder the resources for an account of nationalism that is liberal and democratic in character.

Rather than offering a mainly descriptive treatment of Herder's position, then, I want to illuminate some of the theoretical and philosophical issues that he engaged with and that led him to the conclusions he reached. This orientation to the philosophical issues reflects my presupposition that Herder's subject is still highly relevant today. One of the chief puzzles confronting contemporary normative theorists concerns what weight, if any, to accord to collective self-government and the self-determination of peoples when thinking about a range of problems. These include the making and unmaking of states and political communities, federalism, and a whole series of questions relating to international justice and governance, where the theorization of cultural diversity is a perennial challenge. I will not settle any of these questions here, but I do hope to draw attention to some resources offered by the history of political thought.

### ***1. The mind's itinerary***

The gist of my argument can be stated right off the bat. Herder believed that, to a considerable degree, the conditions of happiness for each individual human being are unique (I will occasionally refer to this as the *individuality principle*). Notwithstanding this principle, he also believed there to be a certain amount of clustering of these conditions for individuals belonging to the same nation. Even if not identical, the conditions of happiness for co-nationals are, on the whole, more similar than they are for members of different nations (the *nationality principle*).

On the basis of these commitments, Herder affirmed both the “rights of nations and of man” (I 569/752). The individuality principle lends support to the liberal and democratic tendencies in Herder’s thought. Not only is the individual best motivated to pursue his or her own happiness, but, even for well-motivated people, deciding for others is psychologically and epistemically more difficult under the individuality principle than it would be in a world where people faced basically identical conditions of happiness. This kind of consideration pushed Herder to adopt a skeptical, minimalist view of the state, but it did not lead him to outright anarchism. To the extent that the state is a useful and necessary instrument, the assumptions about individual uniqueness and about motivation support a democratic view of collective decision-making. All else being equal, ordinary people are better motivated, and better situated psychologically and epistemically (given the individuality principle), to advance their own interests in happiness than would be any elite purporting to work on their behalf.

The nationality principle, in turn, pointed Herder in the direction of a political form of nationalism. To the extent that collective decisions ought to be made and there ought to be a state, the boundaries of the state should not exceed those of the nation. By its very nature, collective decision-making means deciding for others. This is less likely to lead to mistakes when the decision-makers – the citizens of the state – are well disposed towards one another and when they share similar conditions of individual happiness. These conditions are more likely to be satisfied under the nationally bounded state than they would be under alternative arrangements.

In this section and the next, I will take up the first part of this argument, and look at some of Herder's reasons for endorsing the individuality and nationality principles. These two principles rest on several more fundamental ideas:

- (a) What conduces to individual happiness depends on various particular facts about the individual, including his or her ideas, developed capacities, and circumstances.
- (b1) To a considerable degree, the relevant particular facts for each individual are unique.
- (b2) The relevant particular facts for co-nationals are more similar than they are for people of different nationalities.

The conjunction of (a) and (b1) entails the individuality principle, and that of (a) and (b2) yields the nationality principle. I shall examine (a) in more detail in the subsequent section. This section explores (b1) and (b2).

Both (b1) and (b2) receive fairly explicit endorsement in Herder's texts. That there are nationally generated differences in individual ideas, circumstances, and so on, was one of Herder's most familiar claims. He wrote, for instance, of "distinctive national inclinations for a distinctive national happiness" (PW 297) and described nations as having their own "character" and "way of life" (I 199/273). Nations, he claimed, have "their own mode of representing things...because it is adapted to themselves, is suitable to their own earth and sky, springs from their way of life, and has been handed down to them from father to son" (I 197/270).

It is tempting to be lulled by statements like these into thinking that Herder failed to acknowledge differences *within* nations and thus was guilty of a kind of essentialism.<sup>9</sup> However, an inspection of Herder's writings does reveal a recognition of individual-level variations and

---

<sup>9</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory* (Cambridge, MA, 2000), pp. 77-9. Writing from a different perspective than Parekh, Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism*, ch. 3, also underestimates the significance of individuality for Herder.

thus a commitment, not just to (b2), but to (b1) as well.<sup>10</sup> In his 1774 essay, “This Too a Philosophy of History”, he went out of his way to warn readers that his analysis of national differences should not be taken as implying that there are no differences within nations (PW 291-2). He talked of the “distinctive individuality of a human being” (PW 291) and said that “each human perfection” is not only “national” and “generational” but “considered most exactly, individual” (PW 294). The themes of individuality and individual uniqueness are also emphasized in the *Ideas*. In one characteristic passage, for instance, Herder wrote,

“no two leaves on a tree are perfectly alike; and still less two human faces or constitutions... If the eye of the anatomist can perceive this infinite variety, what about the possibly even greater variety that may characterize the invisible powers in so intricate an organization? Is not every man, in spite of his external resemblance to other men, in the last analysis (because of his uniquely individual internal structure) a cosmos in himself and, as such, a wholly incomparable being” (*I* 163/227-8).<sup>11</sup>

To some extent, Herder’s attachment to (b1) and (b2) does not raise any special theoretical or interpretive issues. It seems a pretty obvious fact that different individuals face different circumstances. The external circumstances of individuals vary according to time, place, climate, social institutions, parents, friends, peers, economic position, and so on, and their personal circumstances vary insofar as they have different in-born capacities and characteristics. It should be an equally obvious fact that these circumstances cluster to some extent in different environments (I shall introduce the vocabulary of “nationality” later). Some of the circumstances

---

<sup>10</sup> This point is also emphasized in Forster, ‘Introduction’ to Herder, *Philosophical Writings* and Vicki Spencer, ‘In Defense of Herder on Cultural Diversity and Interaction’, *The Review of Politics*, 69 (2007) pp. 79-105.

<sup>11</sup> Translation from *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, ed. F.M. Barnard (Cambridge, 1969), p. 282.



just referred to are encompassing variables that affect many people at once in a given environment: this is true, for instance, of climate, economy and social institutions. Herder also argued quite straightforwardly that different people will develop capacities, depending not only on the capacities for which they have potential, but also, crucially, on the nature of the challenges that they face as they struggle for survival and strive for well-being (PW 294).

Ideas are also amongst the relevant particular facts referred to in (b1) and (b2) and here again Herder's claims are, to some extent, quite routine. Herder accepted the fundamental claim of Lockean empiricism that experience is the source of all of our ideas.<sup>12</sup> Herder wrote that the intellect relies on a "sea of inflowing sensuality which stirs the soul, which supplies it with materials" (PW 210; see also 209). "All our thinking", he added, "arose from and through sensation, and also still bears, despite all distillation, rich traces of it" (PW 242).

Just as Locke thought that the empiricist principle could explain the "endless variety" of ideas found amongst different individuals and peoples,<sup>13</sup> Herder could rely on the same point to justify (b1). People go about their lives in different natural and social environments, and thus it is hardly surprising that they will be supplied by their senses with what both Locke and Herder called different "materials" of thought. But, equally, the same empiricist principle would predict a fair amount of clustering, corresponding with the various different environments in which individuals live and are raised. The fact that there are different social and natural environments in the world provides a good reason to think that there will be significant differences between individuals in the data that they gather through their senses. But this fact is also a good reason to think that the individuals who *share* a common environment (e.g. a common climate, culture, set of social institutions, etc) will be more alike in the sorts of data they receive than would be individuals connected with different environments.

---

<sup>12</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford, 1975), sec. 2.1.2

<sup>13</sup> Locke, *Essay*, sec. 2.1.2

The common-sense considerations relating to circumstances and capacities, and the “Lockean” traces in Herder’s understanding of mind, all help to motivate Herder’s attachment to (b1) and (b2). As we shall now see, Herder’s own distinctive theories of mind and language further reinforced his commitment to these claims. A general problem facing all empiricists is to account for the unity and orderliness of the ideas people form about the world. An infinitely deep and diverse flood of data washes through individuals via their senses and yet somehow they manage to form reasonably coherent and well-defined ideas of the world. Emphasizing this problem, Herder argued that thought involves an “image” (*Bild*) possessing a certain “shape”, “unity”, “focus” and “order” that cannot be attributed to the raw materials and “specks of light” presented by sensation (PW 87, 127-31, 208-13; *I* 118-9/168-9). The puzzle is what could account for these features of thought.

Herder’s basic answer is that, even if “we have cognition only through sensation”, it is also the case that “our sensation is always accompanied with a sort of cognition” (PW 178). We arrive at our ideas, not merely through sensation, but through an intellectual (*geistiges*) process that brings forth a “configuration” (*Gestalt*) out of the “chaos of things”, a “unity out of multiplicity” (*I* 118/168). As the mind becomes aware of particular data brought to it by sensation, its active powers (*Kräfte*) spontaneously insert the data into an organizing framework of thought. Herder saw an analogy between this power of integrating sense perceptions into a pre-existing framework of ideas and the “organic” process by which the body absorbs its food (*I* 119/169; 78/116). In the same way that the body breaks down food into digestible nutrients that can then be supplied to the various parts of the body, the intellect makes the raw material of sensation conform to a framework of concepts and thereby brings it into relation with other ideas in the mind, allowing comparison, measurement, contradiction, and so on.

Two further features of Herder’s account of cognition are especially distinctive and help to generate the specific set of claims about diversity and uniformity with which we are concerned. The first is that the conceptual framework brought to bear by the mind in forming experience

should not, in Herder's view, be regarded as *a priori*. Whereas Kant famously sought to outfit human experience with a conceptual framework derived from the *a priori* conditions of possible judgment, Herder insisted that the conceptual frameworks in which people formulate their thoughts are themselves formed through experience. The application of certain concepts and categories in thought is not a universal function of reason, nor an "innate" part of the mind's apparatus, but a contingent "accumulation or product of the impressions that are received" (I 91/134).

Consistent with this claim, Herder laid great stress on socialization as the source of the mind's "organic" powers of thought. The child undergoes an "*artificial formation (künstliche Bildung) of ideas from childhood on*", in which he "*learns to see*" and "to measure, to compare and to feel mentally through the senses" (I 118-9/169). "Every individual", according to Herder, "becomes man only by means of education (*Erziehung*)" (I 226/307). Like the idea of *Bildung*, Herder's term *Erziehung* involves a kind of education, but one that should be understood in the broadest possible sense. Herder did not have in mind formal schooling – at most, this would be one component of education – but all of the processes of socialization that a person undergoes as a result of interactions with his fellows in a particular natural and social environment.

Analytically, this formative process involves both (1) a transmission or "tradition" (*Tradition*) of certain ideas and forms of thought by a community to a new generation, and (2) a certain receptivity, or capacity for imitation, of each member of the new generation, which Herder again associates with an "organic power" to "receive and convert into his own nature what has been transmitted to him" (I 227-8/309).<sup>14</sup> It is other people – one's elders and fellows – who do the transmitting, and thus the development of thought and reason is necessarily a social process. And they do so in a particular natural and social environment, which imparts a distinctive color and character to a given process of socialization. This environment includes a particular climate and terrain, a set of political and administrative institutions, as well as a set of

---

<sup>14</sup> Translation from Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 313.

practices that we might group today under the term “culture”. Under this last heading, Herder mentions food and drink, economic occupations, styles of clothing, habitual attitudes, arts and amusements, and all the things that “by their vital interactions have a great effect on men’s lives” (*I* 174/241). Thus, for Herder, “the whole structure of man’s humanity is connected by a spiritual genesis – education (*Erziehung*) – with his parents, teachers and friends, with all the circumstances of his life, and hence with his countrymen and forefathers” (*I* 227/308).<sup>15</sup>

So the first distinctive feature of Herder’s account of cognition is its strongly contingent and a posteriori character. The framework of thought that organizes our experience, and gives focus and unity to our ideas, is not generated by an innate faculty of reason or judgment but is the accumulated, empirical product of a process of socialization occurring in a specific natural and social environment. The second distinctive feature of Herder’s account is the fundamental importance it attaches to language. Language, Herder argued, is the medium in which the process of thought compares, measures and combines the materials of sensation: it is the “medium of our self-feeling and mental consciousness” (PW 211). Speech provides the “heavenly spark” that unites all the senses to make thought possible and to awaken “slumbering reason” into a vital power (*I* 87/128).

The basic insight behind these claims, which are repeated in all of Herder’s major philosophical works, is that thought organizes experience by naming it. Through “inner language” the mind marks certain salient pieces of data from experience in ways that allow it to return to those data to perform various operations of thought, such as comparison, measurement, subordination, contradiction, abstraction, generalization, and the like. “The liveliest perception remains a vague feeling until the soul finds a characteristic mark (*Merkmal*) for it, and with a word incorporates it into memory, recollection, understanding, indeed finally into the understanding and tradition of men” (*I* 233/316-7). The ordered, focused, and potentially

---

<sup>15</sup> Translation from Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, pp. 312-3.

generalizable character of experience, as well as its idiosyncracies and irregularities, derive in part from the same features in the “ready-made thought-formulas” (PW 212) of language.

An individual’s inner language, in turn, is based on the external language spoken in his or her language community, which is acquired through imitation and other forms of learning (PW 211). A language is itself based on a whole host of contingent environmental factors, including the history, culture and way of life of its speakers, the climate in which they live (or lived during key moments of language development), innovations in usage by poets and writers, patterns of contact with other peoples and languages, and so on. Herder placed special emphasis on language’s function as a transmission mechanism for the intergenerational transfer of ideas: “the whole soul, the whole manner of thinking, of [a person’s] begetters gets communicated to him with the language” (PW 142; see also *I* 232/314-5).

We are now in a good position to see why Herder affirmed (b1) and (b2). As I argued earlier, both of these propositions find support in common-sense generalizations about the circumstances people face and the capacities they possess. In addition, Herder’s commitments to (b1) and (b2) partly reflect his attachment to a basic principle of Lockean empiricism. We have now been seeing how they also draw on certain more specific features of his account of thought relating to the role of the cognitive process in organizing and focusing the mind’s ideas. This cognitive process is itself seen as irreducibly empirical in character and as relying heavily on language.

By emphasizing the empirical character of the thought process, Herder’s account further reinforces the tendency to diversity that we already saw predicted by the basic empiricist principle. An account of the cognitive process that organizes and unifies the sensations into coherent experience might be expected to constrain the diversity associated with empiricism somewhat, but the effect of Herder’s position is just the opposite. It introduces instead a further dimension of diversification, beyond mere variety in the materials brought by sensation, arising from differences in the processing apparatus of the mind. It opens the possibility that two

individuals receiving identical sense data could form different ideas because their different life histories have left them with different conceptual frameworks into which to integrate the data.<sup>16</sup>

The fundamental rationale for (b1), then, is that, to a considerable degree, each individual has a unique itinerary in life. Each individual is exposed to a somewhat different set of environmental factors, subject to a somewhat different set of influences, embroiled in a somewhat different set of projects, circumstances, and so on. As a result, people develop different capacities and receive different sensations – the raw material of experience. Moreover, these sensations will be integrated into each individual’s existing framework of ideas and concepts in a unique way, because that framework is itself the product of the previous life history and accrued experiences of the individual. To some extent, every individual’s experience consists of a continuous compounding of idiosyncrasies, unconstrained by any natural or a priori conceptual framework shared in common with all human beings. As Herder put it, “Every living being absorbs all the external influences in a manner peculiar to itself and organically modifies them” (*I* 179/248).

At the same time, the account also leaves space for (b2), once we recall that amongst the formative influences on an individual’s thought are a series of important macro-level variables that simultaneously exert an influence on many individuals. Every individual has a unique physiological make-up, and has his or her own distinctive family history, circle of friends, and contingent life narrative. But individuals are also exposed to the encompassing influences of climate, terrain, economy, culture, and so on, that affect many people at once. So one should expect a certain amount of clustering of circumstances, capacities, and ideas, though not perfect uniformity since the macro-level variables are not fully determinative (*I* 173-6/240-4).

Language is at the heart of this account of clustering. According to Herder, language is an essential part of the cognitive process and thus is crucial to the development and formation of the

---

<sup>16</sup> Herder’s example here is painters who gaze at the same object but end up representing it in different ways (*I* 189/260).

individual mind. At the same time, language is a macro-level variable; individuals acquire and use their particular languages through linguistic communities. Again this is consistent with a fairly significant amount of individual idiosyncrasy and uniqueness, since there are obviously many different things that an individual can do in and with a particular language (PW 148).

To complete our consideration of (b2), we need finally to say something about the term “nationality”. Herder explained the clustering of circumstances, capacities, and ideas amongst certain individuals by reference to shared social and natural environments. But what has this got to do with “nations” and “nationalities”?

Although Herder attached considerable theoretical significance to nations, he never supplied a proper definition of the concept, nor of the closely related term “people” (*Volk*). It is not always obvious how he would disentangle the essential, defining properties of these concepts from their contingent characteristics and relations. Some educated guesswork here is unavoidable. We have to look for ideas that are used in constant conjunction with nation and people, and we also have to look at how these terms get used theoretically. Surveying some of the relevant passages from throughout Herder’s writings, one can find the terms “nation” and “people” connected with five main ideas:

1. *Language*. A frequently repeated association is with language. Thus in a passage written in the 1760s Herder treated language as the quintessential characteristic of nationhood, saying that “truth, beauty, and virtue – became as national as language was” (PW 50). In the *Ideas* he wrote that every people has its language (*I* 166/231), and added that nations have been separated from one another by language (*I* 224/305). And in a 1795 text appended to the *Letters on the Advancement of Humanity*, he declared that “whoever was raised in the same language,

who poured his heart into it, and learned to express his soul in it, he belongs to the nation (*Volk*) of this language”.<sup>17</sup>

2. *Character*. With equal frequency, Herder associated nations and peoples with a particular “character”, “formation” (*Bildung*), “manner of thought”, or “structure of thought” (e.g. *I* 249/337; see also 224/305; PW 219-20, 290, 294, 328-9). A number of passages mention both language and character as important properties of nations and peoples (e.g. *I* 166/231). This tendency is, of course, consistent with Herder’s more general view of language and thought. As we have seen, he believed that thought is fundamentally dependent on language<sup>18</sup>, and he also held that specific characteristics of a particular language are conditioned by the sensibility and manner of thought of the people that speaks it.

3. *Territory*. Herder also associated nations and peoples with a particular territory, marked by a certain climate and topography. He referred, for instance, to a single humankind that had “nationalized itself into so many little types specific to a land” (PW 158; see also 149-50). He is clear, though, that the territory associated with a nation need not be the one where the nation is presently living (*I* 184/254-5; 334-5/448-9). Peoples migrate or get dispersed by forces outside of their control, and yet, Herder believed, they continue to be identified, in part, by their original homeland. The characteristics of a people’s original territory imprint themselves on the people’s early sensibility, thought, and language, and these in turn get passed on from generation to generation even if the people has long departed from its original abode (*I* 348-9/465-6).

4. *Political agency*. Herder occasionally referred to nations and peoples as having politically relevant attitudes or as taking actions on the political stage. He spoke of national

---

<sup>17</sup> J.G. Herder, *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität* (Berlin and Weimar, 1971), Vol. 1, pp. 294-5; but compare pp. 267-8.

<sup>18</sup> Michael N. Forster, ‘Herder’s Philosophy of Language, Interpretation, and Translation: Three Fundamental Principles’, *Review of Metaphysics*, 56 (2) (2002) pp. 323-56, p. 324.



“hatreds” and “prejudices”, and of nations as taking “noble pride” in running their own affairs (PW 151-3, 297, 377). He anticipated that European imperialism would awaken national feelings of resentment amongst subjugated peoples and hoped that national feeling could be a tool of resistance to tyranny. For the most part, these claims are couched in a language of contingency, suggesting that not all nations need to be politically self-conscious or active. The nation, for Herder, is not by definition a “daily plebiscite”, nor is it defined (as it would be, in part, for Mill) by a desire for self-government.<sup>19</sup> Herder has been called a “cultural nationalist” and one valid reason for this is that he understood nationality in primarily cultural terms.<sup>20</sup>

5. *Formative influence.* Finally, Herder believed that nations and peoples are contexts of socialization and education for their members. When he says that every people “has its national-formation (*National-Bildung*), as it has its language” (I 166/231), the term *National-Bildung* refers both to an existing character or manner of thought *and* to a process of development and formation that operates at the national level (see also PW 294). Nations are units of what Herder called “tradition”: the passing on of a language, a character, a manner of thought, a set of myths, and so on.

This fifth point is key for my interpretation and fits neatly with the cultural-linguistic conception of nation emerging from the previous points, as well as with the earlier account of “clustering”. Nations are cultural-linguistic entities, and culture and (especially) language are crucial macro-variables influencing the socialization of individuals. Indeed, one might, in Herder’s vocabulary, regard “nation” and “people” as shorthand terms for a set of cultural,

---

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Renan, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?’, in *Nationalism*, eds. Hutchinson and Smith, pp. 17-8 (translation amended). John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty and Other Essays* (Oxford, 1991), p. 427.

<sup>20</sup> Carlton Hayes, ‘Contributions of Herder to the Doctrine of Nationalism’, *American Historical Review* XXXII (1927), pp. 719-36, p. 734; John Hutchinson, ‘Cultural Nationalism and Moral Regeneration’, in *Nationalism*, eds. Hutchinson and Smith, pp. 122-31, p. 122.

linguistic, and geographical contexts that generate the clustering of circumstances, capacities, and ideas amongst different individuals. It is for this reason that (b2) uses the term “nationality”.

## ***2. Individual Happiness***

The individuality and nationality principles refer not just to uniqueness and clustering in the circumstances, capacities and ideas of individuals, but to these tendencies in the conditions of individual *happiness*. What then were Herder’s views on the nature of happiness? To refer to the earlier discussion, we need to reconstruct Herder’s rationale for proposition (a), which, in conjunction with (b1) and (b2), entails the individuality and nationality principles respectively.

At first glance, it might seem as if there is not very much to be said about these issues. Herder sometimes seemed to argue from, (i), the fact of different formative circumstances to, (ii), the fact of different ideas and sensibilities to, (iii), the fact that individuals and peoples have different standards of perfection and well-being. Since standards of perfection and well-being are ideas in the broad sense that I have been using this term, the move from (ii) to (iii) seems trivial.

But this argument moves too quickly, since it trades on an ambiguity in (iii). If (iii) literally means that individuals have different *beliefs about* standards of perfection and well-being, then it does indeed seem to follow trivially from (i) and (ii). But if (iii) is taken to mean that there really *are* different standards of perfection and well-being, then there is a gap to be bridged in the move from (ii) to (iii). The argument only seems to go through because of equivocation between descriptive and evaluative meanings of (iii). Even the staunchest monist would grant the pluralist that there are different beliefs about value. The conclusion that Herder wanted was evaluative in form – that there really are different standards – but once it is allowed that people might be mistaken in their beliefs about value this conclusion no longer follows.

A second shortcut to Herder’s claims about happiness might attribute to him a purely subjectivist view of happiness. Herder seemed to suggest such a view in a parenthetical remark in his 1774 essay “This Too a Philosophy of History”, when he asserted that, in general, happiness

involves the “*satisfactions of wishes, achievements of purposes, and gentle overcoming of needs*” (PW 296). Since different people will have different ideas, and wishes, purposes, and (felt) needs are amongst a person’s ideas, the individuality and nationality principles seem to follow quite straightforwardly.

Again, however, I think that this argument moves too quickly. The problem is that people may end up with wishes, purposes, and needs that are worthless, or at least more or less worthwhile. Herder recognized this possibility. In general, he emphasized the fallibility of individual and collective judgments (e.g. *I 92-3/135-6; 234-5/317-8; 440/582-3*), and in some passages he even seemed to suggest that individuals could suffer from a kind of false consciousness: man can, “against his very nature, come to love the chains which fetter him, and even adorn them with flowers” (*I 92/135; 248/335-6*).<sup>21</sup> Once the possibilities of error and false consciousness are admitted, the pluralism proclaimed by the individuality principle no longer seems so obvious. Different people will obviously have many very different goals and desires, but it may be that only very few of them are genuinely worthwhile and hence genuinely productive of happiness.

So what did Herder mean by happiness and how would he complete the argument for the individuality and nationality principles? Herder’s most sustained discussion of what has come to be called his “pluralism” occurs in a crucial passage of “This Too a Philosophy” (PW 294).<sup>22</sup> There he argued that human nature assumes a concrete form through a process of “*gradual struggle*” against a given set of conditions and circumstances. Naturally, he argued, “it is formed *most or only* on those *sides* where it has such *occasions* for virtue, for struggle, for progression”. Since there are a variety of environments facing different people, there are a variety of challenges

---

<sup>21</sup> Translation from Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 266.

<sup>22</sup> On Herder’s “pluralism,” see Berlin, ‘Vico and Herder’; Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, 2003) ch. 6; and Damon Linker, ‘The Reluctant Pluralism of J.G. Herder’, *Review of Politics*, 62 (2) (2000) pp. 267-93.

to be met and thus people will develop different virtues, excellences, sensibilities, and so on. “In a certain respect”, as Herder continued, “each human perfection is *national*, *generational*, and, considered most exactly, *individual*. People form to greater fullness only what *time*, *clime*, *need*, *world*, *fate* gives occasion for”.

The significance of these remarks is that they hint at a non-subjectivist understanding of a happy or valuable life that, at the same time, also predicts considerable pluralism with respect to happiness and value. A worthwhile life involves the development and exercise of valuable human capacities in struggle with a given set of challenges. Herder thought that this general conception of happiness led to pluralism, since there are a great many *potential* human capacities – he talks of a “thousand forms” of goodness (PW 298) – but no individual or people can develop all of them together: developing them requires sustained effort and thus people only develop the specific ones that are occasioned by the local circumstances.

This picture of happiness and value is filled in further in the *Ideas*, which Herder began publishing a decade later. As is well known, the major new concept introduced by Herder in the later text was *Humanität*. Although no short discussion can do justice to all of the different nuances that Herder associated with this concept, and Berlin was probably right to complain about its vagueness, a few general remarks are possible.<sup>23</sup> *Humanität* is meant to be descriptive of human nature: it designates the central capacities for freedom, reason, and feeling that make all human beings what they are. And it sometimes refers to an ideal that all human beings have the potential to attain but that only very few manage to approach. Roughly speaking, this is the ideal of freely and rationally exerting one’s powers and capacities in response to the challenges that one faces, and of experiencing a sense of joy and contentment in the process (see, e.g., I 92-3/135-6, 98/142-3, 123/174, 215/293-4, 255/345-6, 439-40/581-3, 453-5/599-602).

---

<sup>23</sup> Berlin, ‘Vico and Herder’; but see Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* and Spencer, ‘In Defense of Herder on Cultural Diversity and Interaction’.

The key point once again is that even fully realized *Humanität* will take a great variety of different forms. The same basic powers and capacities lie dormant in all of us. But since we face different environments, we will develop different ones, and find ourselves measuring up to different standards of excellence and experiencing different joys and sorrows. This tendency to pluralization is reinforced by the fact that *Humanität* involves a *free* adaptation of one's powers to a given set of challenges (*I* 94/137-8, 440/582-3). Just as creative artists facing the same material will make different choices, and produce different works of value, the same is true of human beings realizing their *Humanität*.<sup>24</sup>

*Ideas* 8.5 begins with a resounding statement of Herder's pluralist understanding of happiness: "the country, the time, the total constellation of [man's] circumstances *happen* to decide both his capacity of enjoyment and the manner and measure of his joys and sorrows" (*I* 219/298). "Happiness is an internal condition", the passage continues, "its standard and determination are not outside ourselves but rather within the breast of every individual." The same claim is reiterated at the close of the chapter. At first glance, then, it seems mysterious and inconsistent that Herder spent most of the rest of 8.5 extolling what looks like a highly specific conception of a happy life. In Herder's judgment, a happy person avoids too much "refinement" of his "mental powers" and instead employs his senses, and his active powers. "Well-being" consists of a "quiet feeling rather than a brilliant thought". "Our lives are far more enriched with love and joy caused by the feelings of the heart rather than by the profound deliberations of reason": happiness, as Rousseau would agree, is a "simple, deep-rooted feeling of existence" (*I* 219-223/298-304; 193/264-5; 206-7/282).<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Herder suggested that man's creative powers of *Humanität* are an echo of God's supreme creative power (*I* 94/137, 110/158).

<sup>25</sup> Translation from Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 308.

The apparent incoherence in Herder's account of happiness here is related to a broader tension in his thought between universalist and historicist, or relativist, tendencies.<sup>26</sup> But the incoherence is lessened if, as I am suggesting, we interpret Herder's pluralism as a corollary of his conception of *Humanität* rather than as a competing principle.<sup>27</sup> Most of the specifics associated by Herder with happiness in 8.5 are identifiable with the ideal of *Humanität*: they identify as happy the person who finds contentment in the free, rational, creative, and passionate deployment of his powers in response to the challenges posed by time, climate, and circumstance. Herder's point, in effect, is that if we accept this rather appealing (in his view) account of well-being, then we are forced also to accept the individuality principle, since it is implicit in the former that a worthwhile life will take a variety of concrete shapes depending on the varying circumstances, capacities, and ideas of different individuals and peoples.

Herder returned to this argument one final time in Book 15 of the *Ideas*, this time insisting that human reason is the principle of all human endeavor and proceeding to analogize from aesthetic to ethical pluralism (I 452-3/598-9). From the Egyptian pyramids, to the artworks of Greece and Rome, to Chinese garden ornaments, the world's great works of art can all be seen as "simple solutions of certain problems of the understanding". Each one can be seen as perfect, insofar as there is no simpler, fuller, or more beautiful solution to the problem being addressed. In the same way, Herder continued, the nations of the world have developed culturally in extremely divergent ways. Just as we would reach problematic conclusions about Egyptian architecture were we to apply Greek or Chinese aesthetic standards, we should not "reason from one perfection of any nation concerning another" or be too quick to suppose that the ideal form of government in one context would also be ideal in another. Herder's analogy here only makes sense if the values and perfections of a given nation are seen as the maximally best solution

---

<sup>26</sup> Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, p. 190.

<sup>27</sup> Compare Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge, 1999) 229-33.

arrived at by human beings using their reason to the distinctive problems and challenges faced by that nation.

Herder took it for granted that the most basic purpose of social and political institutions is to promote the happiness of individual human beings and avoid causing unhappiness (*I* v/10, 223-9/304-11; 464/613-4). Having said something about his conception of happiness, it is worth taking a moment to spell out what causes of *unhappiness* he identified.

Several possible forms of unhappiness are easily extractable from the account of well-being that has just been sketched. An individual who is denied freedom will not be able freely to deploy her capacities and powers in response to the challenges she faces. People who single-mindedly devote themselves to refining their mental powers will risk enfeebling their other vital powers and energies. As Rousseau had argued a generation earlier, people who, through a distorted sense of amour-propre, let their wants and needs multiply uncontrollably, will perpetually feel anxious and unsatisfied and will be unable to experience that pure and contented “sentiment of existence” that comes to those who satisfy simple wants through the energetic exercise of their powers.

Less obviously, but no less importantly, Herder also believed that particular forms of well-being come to depend on a certain stability of environmental circumstances. Sudden and radical changes to the environment (social or natural) imposed from outside risk undermining the background conditions against which individuals and peoples have developed their particular forms of well-being (*I* 185-7/255-8). More subtly, individuals can thwart their own pursuit of happiness through wholesale borrowing and imitation of other languages and cultures.<sup>28</sup> When out of a desire for status, or for an appearance of sophistication, people start aping the manners of

---

<sup>28</sup> Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism*, ch. 5, documents Herder’s anxieties about this possibility.

some other nation, or using its language, then they are, in effect, choosing a way of life that is discontinuous with the one in which they have been prepared to flourish by their socialization.

Herder was generally careful not to over-state this concern for environmental stability. He certainly did not oppose all change or development at the individual or national level, nor did he discourage members of different nations from learning about, or from, one another. On the contrary, he emphasized that well-judged cultural borrowings could enrich a nation and stimulate its members to reach for a higher form of *Humanität* (*I* 201/276, 384-5/512, 551/728-9). Herder's point is rather that cultural contact is most likely to produce benefits when it occurs at a slow and natural pace and when those who it affects are able to maintain control over the processes of change to which they are subjected (*I* 186-7/256-8). As we saw in the previous section, Herder compared the human mind to a living organism that can adapt itself to new circumstances and grow in the process. But few organisms will flourish if they are abruptly thrown into a radically new environment: they will have difficulty absorbing all the new influences they face and integrating them into a coherent whole.

### ***3. The Individual and the State***

Let me turn now to Herder's political thought and explore what claims he made about political legitimacy on the basis of the individuality and nationality principles. In this section, I will focus on the implications of individuality, which correspond loosely, I shall suggest, with the liberal and democratic tendencies in Herder's thought. In the section that follows, I will turn to the implications of national clustering and reconstruct Herder's argument for political nationalism.

Throughout his writings, Herder frequently expressed the belief that actions taken or sponsored by government were responsible for rendering great numbers of people miserable. Most conspicuously, he argued that European imperialism (and the associated slave trade) had amounted to a moral catastrophe for the peoples of the non-European world. "Can you name a land", he asked rhetorically, "where Europeans have entered without defiling themselves forever



before defenseless, trusting mankind, by the unjust word, greedy deceit, crushing oppression, diseases, fatal gifts they have brought”.<sup>29</sup> Europeans had, he thought, destroyed the “whole balance of nature” in America and elsewhere, bringing widespread alcoholism, disease, and loss of life (*I* 186-7/256-8).

Herder also thought that European governments had caused grievous harms to their own subjects. In passages reminiscent of Rousseau’s dystopic picture of the state in the *Discourse on Inequality*, Herder suggested that the typical European monarchy was little better than an organized scheme for exploiting and dispossessing the common people. “In some large states”, he wrote, “thousands have to go hungry that one may feast and make merry; thousands are oppressed and hunted to death, that one crowned fool or philosopher may gratify his whims” (*I* 223/304; see also 191/262-3).<sup>30</sup>

Why did Herder think that government was such a bad instrument for promoting human happiness (223/304)? What analysis of the exercise of political power lay behind Herder’s judgments? One point that Herder consistently emphasized was the self-interested motivations of those who exercise power. European imperialism was typically justified by its apologists as a mechanism for bringing civilization to non-European peoples. But Herder denied that improving the lot of the peoples they subjugated was the real motive of the imperial powers. Although Europeans had the instruments in their hands “to confer happiness on nations by humane and decent means”, instead “a proud, insolent love of gain led [them] almost everywhere into a different path” (*I* 187/258).<sup>31</sup> Herder made much the same point about the hereditary states of Europe, mocking the notion that the state somehow set out to improve or civilize its subjects (*I* 249/336-7). The rulers of Europe took what they wanted, and their subjects endured what they could not change.

---

<sup>29</sup> Quoted in Berlin, ‘Vico and Herder’, p. 184; see also PW 328.

<sup>30</sup> Translation from Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 310.

<sup>31</sup> Translation from Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 296.

Herder seems to have regarded self-interest as a fairly basic motive in all human action. “It is impossible”, he noted at one point, “for us to love others more or otherwise than ourselves, for we love them only as part of ourselves, or rather ourselves in them” (*I* 222/303).<sup>32</sup> But this recognition of the importance of self-interest did not lead him to Hobbesian conclusions about the need for a Leviathan (*I* 209/285). In part this was for a reason suggested in the sentence just quoted. Herder did not oppose self-love to concern for others. He regarded sympathy as a fundamental instinct of all living beings (*I* 98/143), and thought of sympathy as an imaginative extension of self-interest, in which we put ourselves in the place of the other (*I* 99/144). He also argued that the “infinite diversity” of men’s desires made it less likely for human pursuits to collide, and that nature had provided an abundance of land and resources, again diminishing the need for conflict (*I* 209/286). There are many examples, Herder thought, of peoples who manage to live very well without a European-style state. It is only “brutal vices” that make having a master necessary (*I* 249/337), and these vices find their greatest opportunities for expression when they are combined with the power of the modern state. All in all, Herder believed that it was too dangerous for ordinary people to entrust substantial power to the state. The state would be more likely to use the power for the benefit of its officials and elites than to advance any interest of the people themselves.

A second and distinct reason why Herder regarded government as a poor instrument for promoting human happiness was founded on the profound importance he attached to individual freedom. As we have seen, freedom is an integral part of *Humanität* and thus closely connected with happiness. The state extinguishes freedom when it substitutes its own will and judgment for that of the individual: through the state, we are “relieved of the exercise of our free and self-determining mind in order to find happiness in functioning as insensible cogs in a perfect

---

<sup>32</sup> Translation from Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 309.

machine” (I 223/304).<sup>33</sup> Even if the state could be relied upon to promote judiciously the other interests of its subjects (or of foreigners) – even if it was a “perfect machine” – the argument suggests there is still one interest that it cannot promote: their interest in being treated as adult human beings who can freely determine their own lives.

It is Herder’s third reason for being suspicious of government power that is most interesting, from our point of view, because it relies on the individuality principle. It is also, arguably, amongst Herder’s most original contributions to political theory and one that was influential on liberal writers such as Humboldt and Mill. Suppose for the sake of argument that state officials genuinely were concerned to promote the happiness of the people affected by their actions and that we bracket for the moment concerns about freedom. There would still be reason to believe that the state would not be an effective promoter of happiness. The fact of individual uniqueness means that even well-intentioned agents of the state are likely to make a mistake when they try to make judgments about what will be conducive to the well-being of another. States will embark on paternalistic projects – e.g. to “civilize” some foreign people – that are predicated on a mistaken set of assumptions about how to promote the good of that people. Or, more subtly, their mistaken notions will mean that they fail to register fully the costs of non-paternalistic policies on the inhabitants of the affected territory.

Thus Herder frequently asserted that Europeans had tried to impose their own idea of happiness onto other peoples. “Although it has for centuries been the aim of European alliances to impose their notion of happiness despotically on all the other nations of the earth”, he wrote in the *Ideas*, “this happiness dispensing deity is still far from having obtained her end...” (I 224/305; see also PW 325, 396)<sup>34</sup> Even if one accepted the European intentions at face value, Herder maintained,

---

<sup>33</sup> Translation from Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 310.

<sup>34</sup> Translation from Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 311.

it would be presumptuous and foolish to imagine that all inhabitants of the world have to be Europeans in order to live happily. Would we ourselves have become what we are outside Europe? He who placed us here, and others there, gave to them as much right to happiness in this life as he gave to us...No other person has the right to constrain me to feel as he does, nor the power to impart to me his mode of perception. No other person can, in short, transform my existence and identity into his. (*I* 219/298)<sup>35</sup>

Deciding for others is inherently difficult, in Herder's view, because of two different limitations that we all face: one psychological, the other epistemic. We are psychologically limited because it is difficult to believe that others really have different conditions of flourishing than we do. Herder's way of putting this was to suggest that our inclinations, needs, and values become something of a 'horizon' to us: our way of viewing of the world seems as if it is all that there is (PW 297). Moreover, he emphasized that there is a certain kind of value in this "prejudice" that people show to their own mental framework. "Prejudice is *good* in its time, for it renders *happy*! It forces people together into their *center*, makes them firmer on their tribal *stem*, more blooming *in their kind*, more passionate and hence also happier in their *inclinations* and *purposes*" (PW 297; see also 414). Another possible explanation hinted at by Herder for our psychological limits has to do with the nature of sympathy. As we saw above, the operation of sympathy, in Herder's view, involves seeing oneself in the other's place. It takes a great leap of imaginative empathy to see oneself in the other and yet not to assume that the other shares a common form of happiness.

The epistemic limitation is more obvious and more basic. The individuality principle stresses the tremendous range of different factors and circumstances that work to form the conditions of happiness for an individual. These include macro-level factors, such as climate, language, social institutions, but also more contingent micro-level ones having to do with the particular itinerary that an individual life takes. This points to a basic epistemic problem: It is

---

<sup>35</sup> Translation from Barnard, *Herder on Social and Political Culture*, p. 308.

difficult for me to know what conduces to your flourishing, because the conditions of your flourishing are dependent, in part, on a complex set of circumstances of which I am likely to be at least partially ignorant.

These, then, are some of the reasons why Herder was suspicious of the exercise of state power. As we have seen, the context of this suspicion is often European imperialism, and here Herder's obvious normative point is that the European powers should desist from conquering, enslaving, dispossessing, and so on, their non-European brothers. The peoples of non-European lands should be left free to manage their own lives in their own ways.

But as we have also seen Herder was generally careful to say that diversity operates not just between peoples, but also at the individual level. He was suspicious of states exercising power against foreign peoples but also of their exercising power against their own people. Here the normative implication of Herder's arguments seems to point to the rights of individuals. As he put it in a passage cited earlier, "no other person has the right to constrain me to feel as he does, nor the power to impart to me his mode of perception". Herder's defense of such rights rests on the claims that: (1) the individual is best motivated to implement the conditions of his happiness; (2) there is dignity and value in the individual deciding for himself how to pursue his own happiness; and (3) the individual is best placed to know and appreciate the conditions of his own happiness.

One of the enduring questions in Herder scholarship is how far Herder's defense of the individual and suspicion of state power led him to reject the state altogether. A key reason why commentators have read Herder as a non-political nationalist is that they have made him out to be a kind of anarchist.<sup>36</sup> Since Herder did not believe in the state, he could not have believed in the

---

<sup>36</sup> Berlin, 'Vico and Herder', p. 206; Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History*, p.

nationally bounded state, and thus his nationalism, whatever it amounts to, was not a claim about the proper organization or boundaries of the state.

The suggestion that Herder was some kind of anarchist requires major qualification, however.<sup>37</sup> It is true that Herder was a bitter and uncompromising critic of all hereditary states. He was also critical of Kant's dictum that "man is an animal who needs a master", arguing against Kant that there is nothing intrinsically natural or necessary about government or the state (*I* 249/336-7). But these claims do not add up to anarchism.<sup>38</sup> They are perfectly consistent with what might be called a "remedial" view of the state, a view that the state is a useful instrument to the extent that it corrects, or keeps in check, various human vices, which are themselves contingent and alterable features of the human condition. Many of Herder's comments on the state suggest that he held just such a view. He wrote, for instance, that "all human governments arose from necessity, and exist only in consequence of its continuance" (*I* 249/337) and he often discussed the state in instrumental terms (*I* 223-4/304-5).

The kernel of truth in the anarchist reading lies in Herder's hope that the long-run tendency of history would be to the abolition of the conditions that, on the remedial view, make the state necessary. The important point, however, is that nowhere did Herder suppose that human beings (in Europe especially) were anywhere near this imagined historical endpoint where they could dispense with the state. Herder held a progressive view of history, in which humanity learns from its earlier mistakes, but he was nowhere so optimistic as to anticipate the imminent eradication of all relevant vice and error. Herder was also aware of the perils of eschewing organized political systems in a geo-political context in which others are not doing the same. He faulted the "savages of America" for having states that were too small to "secure the whole people from ruin", and claimed that "the defective politics of the neighboring nations alone gave

---

<sup>37</sup> For a balanced discussion, see Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, ch. 8.

<sup>38</sup> Eggel, Liebich, and Mancini-Griffoli, 'Was Herder a Nationalist?', p. 76.

Rome her advantage: separately they were attacked; separately they were conquered” (*I* 449/594).<sup>39</sup> In general, Herder was quite open to pragmatic rationales for the utility of the state, so long as the state really was promoting the happiness of the “whole people” and was not a scheme for preserving the privileges of an inherited elite.

As we have seen, an implication of Herder’s understanding of happiness is that a state committed to promoting the happiness of all its citizens would be loosely “liberal” in character. For the various reasons sketched above, such a state would recognize a fairly robust right on the part of individuals to pursue their own conceptions of happiness. The same considerations suggest that Herder would also have favored a “democratic” or “republican” conception of political authority. Without their participation in collective decision-making, the common people cannot feel confident that their own interests are being taken into account by the ruling elite. They would not enjoy the freedom of deciding their own collective fate. And, because of the epistemic and psychological limits discussed earlier, they would risk having an alien conception of happiness foisted on them by even a well-meaning ruling elite.

To be sure, one searches in vain in the *Ideas* for explicit endorsements of republicanism, but this is hardly surprising given the political circumstances under which Herder wrote the book and, in particular, his personal dependence on the court in Weimar.<sup>40</sup> In Book 9, which Herder revised a number of times under political pressure, he provided a typology of governments, which strangely did not mention republics at all, the form of regime that was favored by many writers of

---

<sup>39</sup> Herder did not necessarily intend this as an argument for large states. He recognized a range of political systems, speaking admiringly of the ancient Greek confederations (*I* 449/594) and of the old German military league (481-2/640). There is, at best, scant evidence that Herder favored the unification of Germany into a single state: Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism*, pp. 245-6.

<sup>40</sup> Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism*, pp. 210, 216.

the day (including Kant, who Herder unfairly accused of defending despotism (*I* 249/337)). Of the three forms of government he did mention, his preferred was clearly the second. He argued that the first – patriarchal government – is sufficient only for tribes that have little need of mutual assistance, whereas the third form, hereditary government, cannot be relied on to promote the general welfare. Herder’s second form of government, however, is clearly proto-republican in character. Its key features are the authorization of leaders through consent and election, and the limitation of the prerogatives of leaders to certain specific tasks (*I* 244/331).

Later in the *Ideas*, Herder praised the democratic cities of ancient Greece (*I* 373/497) and complained that the use of Latin in official contexts had excluded the common people from participating in collective self-government (*I* 575/759). His republican inclinations were made even more explicit in *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity*. Writing in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Herder now explicitly distinguished despotism, which he associated with monarchy, from republic, or a “*system common to all*” (PW 366; see also 406). He not only opted decisively for the latter form of government but went on to express the hope that “*this common system, contrary to the usual theory, [could] also occur in such a large territory of lands and former provinces as France is*” (PW 366).

Democracy was not, therefore, merely an implication of Herder’s principles but was the form of government that Herder himself preferred to the main alternatives. It is important not to over-state Herder’s democratic commitments, however, since he was no radical or populist democrat.<sup>41</sup> In the *Ideas*, he remarked that Greek democracy had always been “guided” by certain

---

<sup>41</sup> Herder also qualified his preference for republicanism by insisting that any form of government has to fit in with other aspects of the society over which it stands – there has to be a supportive “political culture”, as we might put it (*I* 453/599). As a consequence, he cautioned European proponents of any “so-called *best form of government*” against imposing that government on



leaders drawn from the elite class (*I* 372-3/496-7, 385/513), and in the *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* he talked of educated “aristodemocrats”, who could lead the development of the political culture of the people (PW 364).<sup>42</sup> As we shall see in a moment, the interests in happiness of the common people are most secure when these leaders at least share with them a common nationality.

#### **4. Political nationalism**

Suppose, then, that we were to follow Herder in accepting the utility (under some circumstances) of the state, preferably, as he thought, the liberal democratic state. The question then arises: Can anything in general be said about what the appropriate unit of state power should be? Herder’s answer, as we know, was “yes”: the best, or “most natural”, state, he maintained, is the nationally bounded state. Why did Herder believe this?

In a sense, we already began to answer this question when we examined Herder’s reasons for opposing imperialism in all its forms. As we saw, he did not trust that an imperial power would even *attempt* to advance the interests of the people it is subjugating rather than simply pursuing its own economic or political interests. In addition, even if the imperial power did make a good faith effort in this respect, it is likely to fail. It will have difficulty appreciating that the subjugated people have a genuinely different set of conditions of happiness (psychological limit), and even if it does manage to appreciate this it will have difficulty identifying, from afar, the precise content of these conditions (epistemic limit). Finally, even if all these problems could be avoided, Herder thought there to be something in foreign intervention that is insulting to the

---

other peoples without regard to circumstances or to legitimate variations. By struggling for its own freedom, Herder added, a people will develop the appropriate political culture. (PW 413).

<sup>42</sup> Barnard, *Herder’s Social & Political Thought*, pp 76-83.

dignity of the targeted people: it is treating them as children who cannot manage to organize themselves in a satisfactory way according to their own values (PW 377).

To some extent, at least, it would seem that these same considerations would tell against the sprawling multi-nation states that constitute the principal alternative to the nationally bounded state. In multi-nation states, members of one people are likely to face the same motivational, psychological, and epistemic obstacles to promoting the well-being of other peoples belonging to their state as one finds in the case of imperialism. The problem, however, is that this argument against the multination state would seem to prove too much. For, as we have seen, the same set of considerations that are adduced against imperialism, and that might be applied to the multi-nation state, are also marshaled by Herder against the state itself and in favor of the individual: the individual is best motivated to pursue his own happiness; he does not face the psychological and epistemic limitations that arise because of his individuality; and he enjoys the dignity of freely determining his own life.

At the same time, I argued that Herder did not rule out the legitimacy of the state altogether. So the puzzle is why the line should be drawn between the nationally bounded state and the multi-nation-state. If the various considerations that have been adduced do not rule the nation-state out definitely, then why *do* they rule out the multi-nation state (as well as interventions in the affairs of foreign peoples)?<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Barnard notices this puzzle but then tries to dismiss it on the grounds that Herder did not really mean it when he called the nation-state “natural”: “states based on national cultures are no more natural than other states. Nationalists and others misread Herder if they think that he said, or implied, that nation-states, unlike multi-national states, are natural. For, in point of fact, Herder was hostile to *all* states, and merely conceded that, though they were also artifacts, nation-states could be considered the least unnatural”. I see two problems with this solution to the puzzle. One is that there is still the lingering idea that the nation-state is “least unnatural”: why should we

A parallel problem arises for Herder in thinking about leadership in republican government. On the one hand, *any* form of government seems to give rise to the problems associated with one group of people deciding for others. On the other hand, as we have seen, Herder suggests that some form of guided democracy might not be too bad, so long as the leaders, or “guides”, are drawn from the same nation as those they are leading (*I* 249/337). But, again, why draw the line here? Is there some general reason why non-democracies, and democracies guided by non-fellow-nationals, are frowned upon, but not democracies guided by fellow nationals?

It is in answering these questions that the nationality principle turns out to be crucial. Once it has been accepted that individual liberty will be compromised, and thus that some people will be involved in deciding for others, an immediately important question is how to minimize the danger to individuality. Consider the issue first from the standpoint of the psychological and epistemic limitations that make deciding for others so fraught with risk. The nationality principle offers a reason for thinking that these limitations will, in general, be less severe for co-nationals than they are for members of different nations. Even though the individuality principle reminds us that members of the same nation will not have identical conditions of flourishing, the nationality principle insists that fellow nationals are at least exposed to a shared set of formative conditions – to the common encompassing influences of language, culture, social institutions, climate, and so on. This common socialization experience leaves fellow nationals in a better position to decide for one another than non-members of the nation would be. Fellow nationals will tend to have *connected* forms of happiness, ones that are marked in some way by their common formative

---

believe this? Second, Barnard’s denial that Herder regarded the nation-state (or, in my terminology, the “nationally-bounded” state) as natural goes against Herder’s explicit claims to the contrary at *I* 249/337 and 325/436. See Barnard, *Herder on Nationality, Humanity, and History*, pp. 9-10.

experience: they will often find happiness in ways of life that are instantiations of, variations on, or reactions against the “normal” ways of living associated with the national model in which they were all socialized. This should leave them better able to appreciate the different forms of happiness found amongst their fellow nationals, and also better able to identify the conditions of happiness (and to avoid the conditions of misery) for their fellows, than non-members of the nation would be.<sup>44</sup>

To see this from a different perspective, think of the problem from the point of view of an individual. She has entered into arrangements in which some group of people will make important decisions that will affect her life. Given the dangers that *any* such scheme presents to her well-being, she should prefer the particular scheme that minimizes the chance that her well-being will be harmed, while at the same time realizing the purposes for which the scheme is there in the first place. Such a scheme should be liberal and democratic, but there is also reason to think that, in general, it should be national (rather than supra-national, or “guided” by non-nationals) in scope. She should prefer that the people making the decisions at least have shared a common socialization experience with her, so that they are more likely to have some appreciation of her form of happiness and to be able to identify the conditions that do promote her happiness and avoid those that do not.

The same conclusion finds further support if we turn to the considerations relating to self-interest to which Herder sometimes appealed. A general reason for me to avoid entrusting decision-making authority to others is that the others may abuse that authority by pursuing their

---

<sup>44</sup> It might be objected that sub-groups from different nations (e.g. miners, gays, gay miners, etc.) could have more in common with one another than they do with fellow nationals. This may be true, but these putative transnational groups are not viable candidates for performing the instrumental functions of the state, which are connected in various ways with exercising control over a contiguous territory. I’m grateful to Annie Stilz for pressing me on this point.

own interests rather than mine. This abuse is less likely to occur, however, if those in authority feel some sentiment of sympathy towards me. Herder believed that the bonds of sympathy are formed through shared socialization experiences in a common language and culture: nations, in short, are communities of sympathy.

In elaborating this view of sympathy and nationality, Herder laid special emphasis on the significance of language. Sympathy, he maintained, is very often triggered through the sense of hearing: we hear plaintive cries and moans of suffering and are moved to project ourselves into the place of the sufferer (*I* 100/145-6). Most of the human-made sounds we hear do not take such an elemental form, however, but are expressed in language: “voice and language are the principal sources of sympathy (*Mitgeföhls*)”. At their earliest stages, Herder believed, languages were the expressions of feeling and thus were particularly well suited for attracting and conveying sympathy. As languages developed, and were codified in written form, some of this vitality disappeared, but their conductivity as media of feeling and sensibility was never lost completely. According to Herder, every new generation of children learns a language by imitating the expressions of feeling of their parents. As a result, one’s mother-tongue is particularly expressive of feeling and thus is an ideal medium for stirring up sympathy (PW 142).

At *Ideas* 9.4 Herder explicitly argued that a problem with the multi-nation-state is that it could not rest on sympathy. “A human scepter is much too weak and slender for such incongruous parts [i.e. various nations] to be engrafted upon it: glued together they become, therefore, a fragile machine, termed a ‘state-machine’, without internal vitality or sympathy (*Sympathie*) between the parts” (*I* 249/337-8). Herder thought it better for a state to be held together (as far as possible) by the spontaneous loyalty of its citizens rather than by coercion. Not only is the former kind of state more stable in the long run, but its lesser reliance on coercion means that it more closely approximates the ideal of treating individuals as free and dignified agents rather than as “inanimate bodies”.

The preceding part of this same passage in 9.4 lays out Herder's case for the nationally-bounded state in more general terms. The argument is somewhat obscure, and easily misinterpreted, so it is worth setting out in some detail:

Nature educates [*erzieht*] families; the most natural state is also, therefore, *one* people [*Volk*], with one national character. This it retains for ages and develops most naturally when its leaders come from the people and are dedicated to it. For a people is as natural a plant as a family, only with more branches. Nothing therefore is more manifestly contrary to the purpose of government than the unnatural enlargement of states, the wild mixing of various races [*Menschen-Gattungen*] and nations [*Nationen*] under one scepter. (I 249/337)

Herder's argument seems to go as follows:

- P1. The family is natural;
- P2. A people/nation is also natural;
- P3. An important purpose of government is to maintain and develop naturally the national character of the people over which it has power.
- P4. Government is most likely to fulfill its purpose when its leaders come from the people.
- C. Therefore, all else being equal, the boundaries of the state should not exceed those of the people: the uniting of several nations into a single state should be avoided.

Some initial questions about the argument concern P1 and P2. What did Herder mean by calling something – the family, the nation – “natural”? In addition, it is not clear what, if any, work P1 and P2 are doing. How are they supposed to help the argument?

An obvious way to read “natural” here is as referring to some kind of biological or “blood” relationship.<sup>45</sup> This would explain why the family is natural, and perhaps the naturalness of the nation too, since it could be read as representing the nation as a kind of kinship group. It is

---

<sup>45</sup> Paul Gilbert, *The Philosophy of Nationalism* (Boulder, 1998), pp. 46-9; Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire*, p. 248-9.

an extension of the family in the fairly literal sense that all the members of the nation can trace their origins back to some common original family or group of families. This reading seems to find support in the plant analogy and in the passage's association of "nations" with "*Menschen-Gattungen*" (literally "human-kinds"), a term that is sometimes translated as "races".

There are several significant difficulties with this interpretation, however. The first is that it attributes a meaning to "nation" that conflicts with Herder's normal usage of the term. As we saw in section 1, Herder normally associated nation with language, territory, the potential for political agency, and with national character – and, indeed, this passage itself invokes national character as a defining characteristic of people. Moreover, Herder had earlier gone out of his way to distinguish nations and races [*Racen*]. Whereas the term race does refer to some commonality of origin [*Abstammung*], nations, in his view, involve a common culture and language and are typically comprised of the most diverse races (*I* 166/231).<sup>46</sup> A second difficulty is that the "biological" reading of natural in this passage does a poor job of explaining why P1 and P2 even appear as part of the argument. Why would blood-ties as such make a government more likely to fulfill its responsibilities towards its citizens?

In any case, the interpretation of nation just discussed rests on the assumption that Herder at least understood the *family* to be natural in the biological sense. But, in fact, in the very paragraph preceding our passage, Herder had characterized the family as natural in a rather different sense: "The wife requires a husband; the husband, a wife; the untutored child has need of instructing [*erziehender*] parents; the sick, of a physician; the disputer of a judge; the herd, of a leader. These are natural relations..." The suggestion here is that a relation such as the family should be regarded as natural to the extent that it responds to some need that itself arises in the normal course of things. A number of other passages repeat this point, with particular reference to

---

<sup>46</sup> Hayes, 'Contributions of Herder to the Doctrine of Nationalism', p. 723; Barnard, *Herder's Social & Political Thought*, pp. 70-1; and Berlin, 'Vico and Herder', p. 186.

the naturalness of the family as a locus for the education of children (*I* 101/146-7, 251/340, 439/581; PW 141, 155). On the one hand, Herder argued, it is normal for infants and children to be extremely vulnerable and to be unable to subsist or develop without the assistance of others. On the other hand, it is also normal for parents to love their children and to have a willingness to undertake their upbringing.

This interpretation helps to make sense of why our passage begins with a reference to education. It can also explain the quick jump from the naturalness of the family to that of the people. The family, for Herder, is not the only, or even the principal, locus of upbringing for the individual. As we know, the formative influences of culture, language, climate, and so on – in short, of nation or people – are also crucial. Thus, family and nation are both natural for Herder in a sense that does not involve claims about blood-ties: they both represent crucial contexts of socialization without which the individual would not develop into a healthy adult human being capable of enjoying happiness and striving for *Humanität* (*I* 244/330-1).

Once P1 and P2 have been interpreted in this way, it becomes clearer what work they are doing in the argument as a whole. P3 suggests that a properly constituted government would not adopt policies that conflict with the national character of the people, or at least would promote changes (e.g. democratization) only in a gradual and measured fashion. Given the formative influence on individuals of national character, policies that sharply conflicted with national character would be unlikely, at best, to conduce to individual happiness. P4 then finds support from P1 and P2. For who better to guarantee that government adheres to national character than members of that group of people – the nation – that has been socialized in part by that character?

The key point that Herder is making in this passage, then, is that, all else being equal, individuals are better off being governed by people with whom they shared a significant socialization experience than by a larger population, many of whom were socialized under different conditions, or by a small, culturally separated elite. As I argued above, this is a coherent and plausible view if one accepts the assumption that the psychological, epistemic, and



motivational obstacles are less severe for fellow nationals than they are for members of different nations.

### **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, I consider how Herder might respond to some of the standard objections that are raised against political nationalism. I shall briefly discuss four in particular.

(i) *Nationalism creates nations, not the other way around.* According to Ernest Gellner's influential argument, nationalists are given to talking as if nations were always there, "in the very nature of things, only waiting to be 'awakened' ... from their regrettable slumber, by the nationalist 'awakener'".<sup>47</sup> In Gellner's view, however, this gets things precisely backwards: "It is nationalism which engenders nations, and not the other way round".<sup>48</sup> It might seem as though Gellner's argument could have devastating implications for Herder's theory. As we have seen, Herder claimed that the nation is as natural as the family, and he suggested that nations are sometimes roused from their slumbers in reaction to foreign oppressors. Moreover, there is little in his theory to suggest that he regarded nationalism as an especially salient cause of the formation of nations.

The implications of Gellner's argument seem less devastating for Herder, however, when we recall what, exactly, Herder meant when he called the nation "natural". As we have seen, the nation is natural, in Herder's view, because it responds to a need of human beings for a cultural-linguistic formative context in which their powers and capacities for *Humanität* are developed. It is not natural in the way that a mountain or river is, which has always been there, independent of human actions. Even if Herder did not identify nationalism per se as a source of the development

---

<sup>47</sup> Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983), p. 48.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 55.

of nations, his writings do draw attention to the many contingencies that contribute to the rise and fall of nations, some of which include deliberate political and administrative actions and policies.

Moreover, some commitments that we have identified in Herder's thought positively require the development of nations through consciously pursued nation-building projects. Nations that are too small or culturally underdeveloped are at risk of being swamped by more powerful neighbors. Herder found his fellow Germans to be too enthralled with the French language and culture and claimed that they needed to foster their own cultural and linguistic development. In 1788, he circulated a plan for "the first patriotic institute to foster a common spirit in Germany" in which he called for the establishment of a German academy that would be charged with caring for the German language, studying the history of Germany, and encouraging national development.<sup>49</sup> Unless culturally subordinated languages like German are deliberately fostered by poets, educators, and statesmen, people would continue to turn to dominant languages for important purposes. Herder opposed nation-building efforts that involved the coercive imposition of some alien form of happiness onto an unwilling population, but it is compatible with his basic outlook to think that educating people into a larger, national consciousness could be a legitimate undertaking (*I* 351/468), so long as there is some continuity, or organic relationship, between the constructed nation and the various pre-nation-building cultural commitments of the people.<sup>50</sup> For similar reasons it does not strike me as a major embarrassment to Herder's view that this process

---

<sup>49</sup> The plan is translated in abridged form in Ergang, *Herder and the Foundations of German Nationalism*, pp. 129-33. The plan shows the influence, not only of Herder's theoretical writings, but also of an older "humanist" tradition of linguistic nationalism that was consequential for the founding of earlier national academies such as the Academie Francaise. On this older tradition, see Alan Patten, "The Humanist Roots of Linguistic Nationalism," *History of Political Thought* XXVI: 2 (2006).

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

could, in the end, produce new, encompassing nations that did not exist at an earlier moment in history but that could none the less see themselves as organic outgrowths of earlier cultural groups and formations.<sup>51</sup>

(ii) *Herder-style nationalism rests on an untenable ideal of “authenticity”*. Herder’s name is often associated with an ethical principle of authenticity, which says that individuals and nations have unique ways of life, or “identities”, and that well-being consists in “being true” to these identities.<sup>52</sup> Authenticity is further taken to imply that a person’s or group’s identity is pre-given: although distorting social conditions may make it hard to see or realize one’s identity, it is “always already there”, waiting to be discovered and pursued.<sup>53</sup> For critics, however, this conception of authenticity is seriously defective, as it ignores the contingent and dialogical features of identity and well-being. Identity is not something fixed from the start for an individual or group; it is something that is worked out by individuals and groups in an open-ended process that could lead in many possible directions.

Although there may be theorists who defend this problematic conception of authenticity, Herder was not one of them. As we saw in section 1, Herder developed a radically a posteriori picture of the individual mind and the conditions of its flourishing. He did not believe there to be some fixed, a priori nature in all of us that we have to discover buried deep within or to which we have to be true. Rather, his point is that, since any given individual life has followed some contingent path, there are likely, now, to be some conditions that conduce to that individual’s

---

<sup>51</sup> Compare E.J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780* (Cambridge, 1990), ch. 2.

<sup>52</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition’, in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, 1994), pp. 30-2.

<sup>53</sup> Patchen Markell, *Bound by Recognition* (Princeton, 2003), ch. 2; Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, 2005), pp. 17-21, 106-7; and Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism*, pp. 77-8.

happiness and others that do not. On this picture, oppressive social conditions are oppressive not because they prevent us from being true to some essential identity that we always had, but because they block our route to the forms of value that happen to lie before us as a consequence of the particular itinerary that our life has taken.

(iii) *What about illiberal/undemocratic nations and nationalisms?* On my reading of Herder, his skepticism about the state, and especially about hereditary government, led him to endorse liberal and democratic arrangements. At the same time, he vehemently opposed all forms of imperialism and thought that the nation was the most appropriate – the most “natural” – unit of state power. What happens when these commitments pull in different directions? Consider the case of a nation whose prevailing political culture is illiberal and anti-democratic (see, e.g., Herder on India, *I* 308-9/415-7). The liberal democratic tendencies in Herder’s thought might seem to encourage some kind of outside intervention in the name of liberalism and democracy, whereas the nationalist and anti-imperialist tendencies would suggest just the opposite. Herder’s “liberal nationalism” may, in short, have been an unstable compound.

Herder sought to avoid the dilemma by denying that outside interveners would be able to liberate an oppressed people. “The roses for the wreath of freedom must be picked by a people’s own hands and grow happily out of its own needs, out of its own desire and love...[W]ith the yoke of badly imported freedom from abroad a foreign people would be incommoded in the worst possible way” (PW 413).<sup>54</sup> This solution has a certain amount of independent appeal, and it certainly seems continuous with Herder’s notion that, like organisms suddenly thrown into a new environment, people will have trouble adapting positively to a dramatically different environment that is suddenly imposed on them from outside. Herder’s solution to the dilemma may seem unsatisfactory, however, to the extent that it relies on an empirical generalization about the inefficacy of intervention that seems unlikely to hold in every case. What is more interesting

---

<sup>54</sup> Herder also seemed confident that, eventually, “abuse will correct itself” (*I* 466/616).

about Herder's approach is how it points to a broader framework for thinking about the problem. For Herder, individual well-being is potentially threatened by *both* foreign interveners *and* by illiberal and undemocratic arrangements at home. Even if Herder himself discounted the possibility on empirical grounds, it seems conceivable that there would be cases in which the latter sort of risk was sufficiently grave, and the probability that intervention would make a positive difference sufficiently high, that intervention might be legitimate. On the other hand, Herder's approach reminds us of the great motivational, psychological, and epistemic risks involved in any intervention. These are all reasons why a liberal should proceed extremely cautiously in attempting to promote liberalism or democracy for other nations.

(iv) *Nations do not neatly correspond with territories, nor is everyone exclusively attached to a single nation.* Peoples spill over boundaries and many individuals feel an attachment to more than one nation (e.g. to Quebec and Canada, to Scotland and Britain, etc). People professing to have different national identities and attachments are territorially intermingled, and there is often no feasible way of subdividing particular territories along national lines. These simple facts throw arguments for the nationally bounded state into a certain amount of disarray. They suggest that the presence of national minorities is inevitable, and thus that it is unclear, in many cases, how the idea of a nationally-bounded state could possibly be realized.

Herder was generally sensitive to the various factors that underlie the imperfect alignment of state and nation, including the contingencies of war and conquest that determine where boundaries fall and the tremendous migrations of peoples that have occurred throughout human history. But he never grappled with the implications of these factors for his belief in the nationally-bounded state. How could a city like Riga, where Herder lived part of his life, and which was home to Latvian, Russian, German and Jewish populations, avoid the "wild mixing of various races and nations under one scepter"? Arguably, only a "multination-state" could do adequate justice to the various nationalities in this kind of case.

There is, in fact, one passage in Herder's writings where he seemed to show some openness to the multi-nation state. In a fascinating assessment of Joseph II's rule over the Austro-Hungarian empire, Herder seemed to call for just such an arrangement.<sup>55</sup> After praising Joseph for various enlightened policies, Herder criticized the monarch for failing to tolerate and respect the multilingual and multi-national character of his empire. In Herder's view, Joseph should not have elevated German (alone) to the official language of state, nor should he have sought to bring all of his states and provinces under a single system of laws. Since Herder did not call for the dismantling of the empire into component nation-states (and perhaps recognized the difficulties with doing so), it seems that here at least he accepted the validity of the multi-nation state.

Whatever Herder's actual views on this question might have been, it is worth closing with the observation that the impossibility of a world neatly divided into nationally bounded states means that his principles ought to have made him open to a special kind of multi-nation state, one that seeks to establish at least some meaningful structures of self-government for its different national groups. A multination-state could constitute itself in such a way that there are several levels of governance, thus maintaining greater flexibility than the nation-state to respond to heterogeneities in national belonging amongst citizens of the state, without wholly abandoning the nationalist idea of identifying the nation and the unit of politics.<sup>56</sup> The multination-state (even in this specialized form) was not Herder's usual declared preference, but, given the messy realities of the real world, it may be the conclusion most compatible with his normative theory of political nationalism.

---

<sup>55</sup> Herder, *Briefe zu Beförderung der Humanität*, Vol. 1, pp. 60-1.

<sup>56</sup> Will Kymlicka, *Finding Our Way* (Toronto, 1998), chs. 9-10; David Miller, *Citizenship and National Identity* (Cambridge, 2000), chs. 7-8; and Alan Patten, 'Democratic Secession from a Multinational State', *Ethics* 112 (2002), pp. 558-86.