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Learning and Vision: Johann Gottfried Herder on Memory

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Abstract

A consistent thread throughout Johann Gottfried Herder's thought is his interest in human knowledge and in its origins. Although he never formulated a systematic theory of knowledge, elements of one are disseminated in his writings, from the early manuscript *Plato sagte* (1766–68) to one of his last works, the periodical *Adrastea* (1801–3). Herder assigned a very special function to memory and to the related idea of a recollection of “images,” as they play a pivotal role in the formation of personal identity. He provided an original description of the Platonic theory of recollection, trying to merge ancient and modern metaphysical views and to interpret them from a less metaphysical and more psychological point of view. I then analyze Herder's notion of memory via another research line, which is basically founded upon the analogy between the childhood of an individual and the infancy of the human race. Finally, I explore Herder's view that memory and imagination, as “forces” of the soul, can have negative effects on an individual when they are not equally balanced.

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1. “Just Remembering”

Plato sagte (Plato Said), an early manuscript by Johann Gottfried Herder (1766–68), exemplifies the author’s early commitments to the problem of the origins of knowledge and of mnemonic processes.¹ A few years beforehand, in 1764, Moses Mendelssohn had published his *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in Metaphysischen Wissenschaften (Treatise on the Evidence of Mathematical Sciences)*.² In this book, Mendelssohn analyzed the meaning of Plato’s theory of recollection, paying special attention to the dialogue *Meno* and mathematical thought. In *Meno*, as it is well known, we find a definition of learning as “mere recollection,” which Plato also invoked in his passages in the *Phaedo* to support his theory of the immortality of the soul.³ Mendelssohn’s purpose was—so to say—to “actualize” Plato’s philosophy and his theory of the soul by means of modern thought, especially deriving from the Leibnitian and Wolffian tradition. As Herder noticed, Mendelssohn frequently used Wolff’s terminology; he also referred quite often to Alexander Baumgarten, another relevant author from the Wolffian school who was a pivotal figure for him throughout his life.⁴ Baumgarten’s *Metaphysics* was also a key reference for Kant during the preparation of his lectures on metaphysics and rational psychology, which

¹ The manuscript has recently been published as an attachment in Marion Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus: Untersuchungen zur Erkenntnistheorie und Metaphysik des jungen Herder, 1763–1778 (Sensualistic Idealism: Researches on young Herder’s Theory of Knowledge and Metaphysics)* (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1994), 175–82. Heinz also referred to another, even earlier writing by Herder, the philosophical *Versuch über das Sein* (1763), in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Werke in zehn Bände: Frühe Schriften 1764–1772*, ed. (Work in Ten Volumes: Early Writings) Ulrich Gaier (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassiker, 1985), 9–21. Cf. Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, 1–25.

² Moses Mendelssohn, *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in Metaphysischen Wissenschaften* (Berlin: Aude und Spener, 1764).

³ A few years later, Mendelssohn published one of his most popular writings, his German version of Plato’s *Phaedo: Phädon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele, in drey Gesprächen* (Berlin: F. Nicolai, 1767); see also the English translation, *Phädon; or, On the Immortality of the Soul* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007). This book became very popular in Germany and started quite an animated debate on Plato’s philosophy and, in particular, on the problem of the immortality of the soul, during the second half of the eighteenth century. I quote Plato from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato: Including the Letters*, ed. Edith Hamilton (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

⁴ In the first paragraph of his manuscript, Herder wrote that Mendelssohn, in his “Preisschrift” *On Evidence*, explained the meaning of the Platonic theory of reminiscence with “Wolffian terminology.” See Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, 45, 175. Cf. Moses Mendelssohn, *On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences*, in *Philosophical Writings*, ed. Daniel O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 251–306. Cf. Johann Gottfried Herder, “A Monument to Baumgarten,” in *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, ed. Gregory Moore (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 41–50.

Herder attended during the years 1762–64 (as we know from his annotations).⁵ According to Baumgarten, the human soul preserves its personality and its memory after the death of the body, and this allows it to be responsible for its eternal salvation or damnation.⁶ Kant discussed these topics in his lectures, which serve as the basis of Herder’s reflection on psychology and the mind, with a special interest in memory.

One of the main aspects of Herder’s interpretation of Plato’s theory of recollection also returned in his later writings as a characteristic of his thought: the transposition of topics and argumentations from a metaphysical level to a more concrete, human, and historical plane. He took some theoretical elements that he considered relevant from metaphysical theories, detaching them from the metaphysical frame. While Plato necessarily set the foundations of memory in the Hyperuranion, the world of ideal forms, Herder maintained that we are unable to know anything about what exists outside of this world, and, most importantly, human nature does not require a similar premise. Actually, to Plato, the link between the “true” world of ideas and the world of sensory experience provides the grounds for our only possible way of knowing something, in an objective sense, as a truth.⁷ For Plato, no real knowledge would have been possible if we just relied on the world of senses, of shadows, of illusions: no science, no eternal truths. Recollection is, from this perspective, the means by which we reactivate the connection between the “two worlds.” We remember what our soul already learned in another life, and we do this by seeing: what we recognize, what we “see” in this life, is something similar to what we (or, our soul) already “saw” in a previous, purely spiritual life before descending to earth.⁸ It is interesting here to consider one of the Platonic definitions of recollection from *Phaedo*, 73 e: “What happens to lovers when they see a musical instrument or a piece of clothing or any other private property of the person whom they love, when they recognize the thing, their minds conjure a picture of its own. This is recollection.” The process of learning begins with sensitivity, insofar as this represents just the start-

⁵ Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Metaphysik* [1783] (Jena: Schleglmann, 2004). See Kant’s *Lectures on Metaphysics*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁶ Cf. Baumgarten, *Metaphysik*, § 782 ff; and Tino Markworth, *Unsterblichkeit und Identität beim frühen Herder (Immortality and Identity in the Early Herder)* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2005), 78.

⁷ On the Platonic theory of memory see, e.g., Paul Pritchard, *Plato’s Philosophy of Mathematics* (Sankt Augustin: Academia, 1995), especially 163–76; and Klein Jakob, *A Commentary on Plato’s Meno* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁸ Through the thesis of learning as recollection, Plato provided one of his demonstrations of the immortality of the soul. See *Meno*, 72 e: “Surely what we recollect now we must have learned at some time before, which is impossible unless our souls existed somewhere before they entered this human shape. So—Cebeus concludes—in that way it seems likely that the soul is immortal.”

ing point to activate the mnemonic process of what the soul saw in the world of ideas, and then forgot by passing through the river Lethe. Many German authors during the eighteenth century, such as Leibniz,⁹ Wolff, Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, and even Kant (especially in his lectures on metaphysics),¹⁰ were fascinated by this topic and by the entanglement of the theories of the preexistence of the soul, the forgetting of truth, and the recollection as well as the possibilities of a new future life. The concept of a reminiscence of something we learned in another life, in a previous state of the soul, is strictly connected with the idea that our soul is born with innate knowledge and ideas (although they might be unconscious or obscure). Moreover, especially during the Enlightenment, theories of knowledge often referred to the sense of sight (and of light), and, for this reason, the Platonic definition of knowledge as recollection of what the soul “saw” in a metaphysical world received special attention.¹¹

⁹ Leibniz, in his *Discours de métaphysique*, quoted Plato’s doctrine of reminiscence on page 87 of the English translation “Discourse on Metaphysics,” in *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Writings*, ed. Peter Loftson (Peterborough, ON: Broadview, 2012), 57–101: “This is what Plato has excellently brought out in his doctrine of reminiscence, a doctrine that contains a great deal of truth, provided that it is properly understood and purged of the error of pre-existence, and provided that one does not conceive of the soul as having already known and thought at some other time what it learns and thinks now. Plato has also confirmed his position by a beautiful experiment. He introduces [in the *Meno*] a small boy, whom he leads by short steps to extremely difficult truths of geometry bearing on incommensurables, all this without teaching the boy anything, merely drawing out replies by a well-arranged series of questions. This shows that the soul virtually knows those things and needs only to be reminded to recognize the truths. Consequently it possesses at least the idea upon which those truths depend. We may even say that it possesses those truths, if we consider them as the relations of the ideas.” Herder surely knew Leibniz’s opinion on Plato’s theory of recollection, if not at the time he wrote his *Plato sagte* (1766–68), at least during the following decade. He owned Leibniz’s writings in his private library, e.g., Leibniz, *Oevres philosophiques*, ed. R. E. Raspe (Amsterdam-Leipzig 1765), and he did not necessarily know this author through the intermediation of Wolff. Another source of Herder’s acquaintance with Leibniz’s thought is Carl Günther Ludovici and his works on the history of Leibniz’s philosophy, which Herder also owned in his library.

¹⁰ See the annotations of Herder (1762–64), Mrongovius (1782–83), Volckmann (1785–85), and Dohna (1792–93) on Kant’s *Lectures on Metaphysics* (2001 edition). In a passage from Mrongovius’s notes, we read that Kant was interested in the explanation of a possibility of life “without a body”: “Life is animal in interaction with the body, and spiritual without interaction. The animal life can clearly end, therefore, but not the spiritual. The life of the thinking being consists in personality, that it is conscious of itself. Immortality will be the necessary survival of this personality, not brute life. If the soul loses its personality or becomes another person, then it would no longer be the same and one could not say that it continued its life. So, e.g., migration of the soul is such an interruption where personality is altered. Immortality will thus be continuous life. It must connect the following state with the previous and know that it is the same as it previously was. If the soul in the next world were to be conscious of nothing that had happened with it here, then its substance would surely survive, but not its person” (Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, 278).

¹¹ Cf. Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung (The Philosophy of the Enlightenment)* (Tübingen:

The first lines of Herder's manuscript, "Plato said that our learning is just remembering," show clearly that he placed at the center of his interest both human understanding (how knowledge is possible) and mnemonic processes (which role the memory plays in the process of knowledge).¹² Without a doubt, he shared Plato's definition of learning as deriving from mnemonic processes, but on the other hand, he did not agree with the idea that memory could be the bridge to another life in another world and in another body. Moreover, he did not accept the existence of any innate knowledge.¹³ How can we affirm that our soul already lived another life? And, much more importantly: how could the soul have existed—and then kept a memory—without a body? This was to Herder—though a theologian—unacceptable, as the soul to him was inconceivable without its "instrument," the body. Soul and body were to him so intimately connected that no soul existed without a body; they were parts of a whole, and, for this reason, they could only develop together. According to this idea, the mutual interaction between body and soul is the basis of any possible knowledge. Then, if knowledge does not derive from a previous life

Mohr, 1973).

¹² Cf. Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, 175. It is clear from this beginning—and also from the terminology—that Herder was facing Plato's theory through the mediation of modern interpreters (Leibniz, Wolff, and Mendelssohn), in whose writings we also find this statement. In particular, in his writing *On Evidence*, Mendelssohn wrote: "It is still inconceivable how this infinite amount of concepts can be drummed into the soul all at once by a momentary intuiting. To eliminate this difficulty, Plato hits upon a strange idea: our soul has previously, in some other state, learned and come to know everything that it experiences in this life, and the sensuous impressions are only the occasions or the opportunities for the soul to recall what was forgotten. . . . This is in keeping with a certain mystical doctrine of oriental wise men who likewise maintain that the soul grasped the entire world prior to this life but then forgot everything when it entered this world. . . . As strange as this doctrine sound to our ears, there is nevertheless some truth to it. . . . Moderns [Mendelssohn means here Leibniz, first of all] have, in fact, retained it and even introduced it into their system; they have merely removed the mystical aspect that lends it so absurd an appearance. They say that, since the power of representation constitutes the essence and the inner possibility of the soul, a soul that is present and has absolutely no representations is an obvious contradiction. For it is as little possible for a power to exist without having an effect as it is for a triangle to have four sides" (259). See also M. Heinz's analysis of the relation between the young Herder and other German authors such as Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, Mendelssohn, Sulzer, and Abbt; cf. Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, 45–46, 64–66.

¹³ This was already clear from the publication of his *Versuch über das Sein* (1763), where he refers to Aristotle and Locke's definition of the mind as a *tabula rasa*. He wrote: "*Es ist eine bekannte Wahrheit, die dem grauen Aristoteles ehemals unversehens vom Bart floß, und die seitdem sie Locke erhob überall nachgebetet wurde: daß alle unsere Begriffe sinnlich wären, wiederholte überall die leere Tafel, der unsere Seele bei der Geburt gliche und die Philosophen winkten sich unter einander Ehrengrüße zu, daß ihre vor dem Pöbel mit so hübsch bunten Charaktern bemalt ware. Es ist vielleicht eine andre Frage, ob unsre Begriffe nicht anders als sinnlich sein können, obs zu unserm innern Sinn keinen andern Weg, als durch die Schlupfwinkel der äußern gebe*" (Herder, *Versuch über das Sein*, 9–10).

in another world, where does it come from? Marion Heinz, who edited the manuscript *Plato sagte* for the first time in the early 1990s, defined Herder as a “sensualist” and, at the same time, an “idealist.”¹⁴ He was neither an empiricist—in the sense that we perceive information, as material data, from the outside through our senses—nor a rationalist or an innatist, but rather defended a very particular position. The cooperation between the inner forces of the soul and their “instrument,” the body, which is responsible for their external manifestation, is a fundamental requirement for knowledge, considered a result of a complex process. During the 1770s, it became ever clearer to Herder that the soul was originally a combination of many forces of different kinds and degrees that could not exist or operate apart from each other, that is, perception, imagination, memory, apperception, intellect, and reason:

People are in the habit of according to the soul a mass of subordinate forces, *imagination* and *foresight*, *poetic talent* and *memory*, but many experiences show that what in them is not *apperception*, *consciousness* of *self-feeling* and of *self-activity*, belongs only to the sea of inflowing sensuality which stirs the soul, which supplies it with materials, but not to the soul itself. One will never get deeply to the bottom of these forces if one merely treats them superficially as ideas that dwell in the soul, or, worse still, separates them from one another as walled compartments and considers them individually in independence.¹⁵

Herder expressed these ideas in one of his main writings from this period, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele* (*On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*, 1778), where he mainly established the principles of his “theory of knowledge”: the soul must reveal itself not only in “consciousness” and “apperception,” but also “in *imagination* and *memory*, *recollection* and *foresight*.”

2. Children’s Visual Thinking

Herder’s refusal of the theory of a preexistence of the soul did not prevent him from giving special attention to the idea that learning depends on recollection. What is that, then, which we call “recollection”? Where do these memories come from? In a series of dialogues from the early 1780s, *Gespräche über die Seelenwanderung* (*Conversations on*

¹⁴ Cf. He in 2, *Sensualistischer Idealismus* XV, XVIII. On the relationship between Herder and the tradition of German Idealism, see also *Herder und die klassische deutsche Philosophie: Festschrift für Marion Heinz*, ed. Dieter Hüning (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2016).

¹⁵ Johann Gottfried Herder, *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seele: Bemerkungen und Träume* (Riga: Hartknoch, 1778); English translation “On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul,” in Johann Gottfried Herder, *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 187–243. The quoted passage is from page 210 of the English translation.

the Transmigration of Souls, 1782), Herder considered this question more closely.¹⁶ At the beginning of the first dialogue, he goes through the different doctrines of *transmigration*, which affirm the passage of the soul from one body to another according to three—so believed Herder—different directions: from downward to upward, from upward to downward, and in a circle. To him, the first had a kernel of truth, while the last two versions of the theory of metempsychosis could easily be proved wrong. At this point in the dialogue, Herder criticized the Platonic theory of a preexistence of the soul, in order to show which parts of it might be “saved” and adapted for a more plausible theory: that of learning as the recollection of knowledge that comes from this—and no other—life.

If our learning depends on a “previous state,” this state should not be in another world or in another body, because no connection between two different worlds or two different bodies would be possible (no memory, no recollection). Charicles, one of the two characters in the dialogue, says to his interlocutor:

I beg you to be candid, and not to deny thoughts and reminiscences of your youth, especially of your early, unsophisticated childhood. Have you never had remembrances of a former state, which you could find no place for in this life? In that beautiful period, when the soul is yet a half-closed bud, have you not seen persons, been in places, of which you were ready to swear that you had seen those persons, or had been in those places before? And yet it could not have been in this life, as you can satisfy yourself on reflection. Whence they are those reminiscences? Whence can they be, but from some former state? Therefore are they so sweet, so elevating! The most blessed moments, the grandest thoughts, are from that source. In our more ordinary seasons, we look back with astonishment on ourselves, we do not comprehend ourselves. And such are *we*; we who, from a hundred causes, have sunk so deep and are so wedded to matter, that but few reminiscences of so pure a character remain to us.¹⁷

This “previous state” is, according to Herder, the childhood, a period of our life in which our soul is particularly active and in which the imagination and “thinking in images” works with great intensity. Herder affirmed the great importance of this period of our life for the formation of our personality and, in general, for our future learning. He maintained that our learning depends on the unconscious sources of images, of memories

¹⁶ Johann Gottfried Herder, “Über die Seelenwanderung. Drei Gespräche,” *Der Teutsche Merkur* 1 (1782): 12–54, 96–123, translated in English as “Metempsychosis,” in *Prose Writers of Germany*, ed. Frederic Henry Hedge (Philadelphia: A. Hart, 1852), 348–362.

¹⁷ Herder, “On Metempsychosis,” 250.

we collected during our life and especially during our childhood.¹⁸ “We must study our children,” says the other character in the dialogue, Theages, with the purpose of “studying ourselves.” In this way, we will be able

to notice their first impressions, the manner in which their souls are affected by them, the secret ideas and images with which they entertain themselves, which they spin and spin, like a fine invisible web, according to their own will and pleasure. Have you never observed that children will sometimes, on a sudden, give utterance to ideas which makes us wonder how they got possession of them, which presuppose a long series of other ideas and secret self-communings, which break forth like a full stream, out of the earth, an infallible sign that the stream was not produced in a moment from a few rain-drops, but had a long been flowing concealed beneath the ground, and, it may be, had broken through many a cave, had carried away many a rock, and contracted many defilements?¹⁹

Children—as said Herder in his *On Metempsychosis*—live as though in a “dream full of images.” These images are so strong, so impressive, that they are bound to lie in the deepest part of our interiority for the rest of our life, and, at some point, they can also come back to memory. These memories continually influence our life, even if we are not aware of them, and this is the reason why, to Herder, we should be mindful of the first impressions our children receive. These impressions flow from a “dark side” of us, from which we draw fully during our life:

If the souls of our children are dear to us, and we are as deeply convinced as I am, of the power of first impressions, ought we not imperceptibly to guide and to determine these first impressions, so far as they are in our power? I say, imperceptibly, for else it is all in vain. The soul, in its most secret operations, bears no restraint, no mechanical law; it works freely out of its own nature; and these first efforts contain the emblem of all its future workings through the

¹⁸ Since his early work as a teacher, Herder was deeply concerned with the issue of childhood learning and education. In one of his most important works, *Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769* (*Journal of My Travels in the Year 1769*) in *Werke in zehn Bänden: Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769. Pädagogische Schriften*, ed. Rainer Wisbert and Martin Bollacher (Frankfurt am Main: Deutsche Klassik, 1997), he sketched a plan for school reform, paying special attention to the different kinds of learning, in correspondence with the different ages of a child. On Herder’s work as a pedagogue and a “school-reformist,” see, e.g., Rainer Wisbert, *Das Bildungsdenken des jungen Herder: Interpretation der Schrift Journal meiner Reise im Jahr 1769* (*The Thought on Education of the young Herder: Interpretation of the Writing Journal of My Travels in the Year 1769*) (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1987), 255–376.

¹⁹ Herder, “On Metempsychosis,” 251.

whole course of its life. To watch it, therefore, and, when in pleasant wilds and agreeable labyrinths it wanders and loses its way, to guide it in the shape of a bright star, or like Minerva in Homer, in the form of a foreign traveller,—not teacher or overseer,—in short, as a certain philosopher desired for his daily portion, to supply our children joyful morning images and youthful pictures, that hereafter at evening and in old age, they may have glad reminiscences from the Platonic kingdom of spirits and may acquire no debasing and terrible ideas of metempsychosis—that I think we can and ought to do; although, of course, subject to the power of fate.²⁰

In this way, Herder was able to retain Plato’s (and Mendelssohn’s) doctrine of recollection, by stripping it of its metaphysical premise and defining knowledge and learning as a combination of activities, among which mnemonic processes are also a fundamental factor.

How did Herder conceive of this idea? It becomes clearer if we more generally take into account his theory of knowledge. He believed that “what we know we know only through analogy, from the creation to us and from us to the Creator,” and especially through an analogy with ourselves.²¹ We do not see the world, he said; we create it: we create our personal image of it (*Weltbild*), and, in so doing, our memory and our imagination are two inescapable forces of the soul.²² Memory, in particular, and the incredible number of images that we collect from the time we are children, play a primary role in the constitution of this *Weltbild*. In this sense, scientists and poets are similar, as they create “beautiful images” of the world by using their capacity for “thinking in images” and associating images.²³

3. The Childhood of Mankind: Herder’s Concept of Tradition

²⁰ Herder, “On Metempsychosis,” 252.

²¹ See Herder, “On Cognition,” 188. On the importance of the analysis in Herder’s theory of knowledge, see Ernst Cassirer, “Thorild und Herder,” *Theoria: A Swedish Journal for Philosophy and Psychology* 6 (1941): 77–92.

²² See Herder, “On Image, Poetry, and Fable,” in *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*: “Our whole life, then, is to a certain extent poetics: we do not see images but rather create them. The Divinity has sketched them for us on a great panel of light, from which we trace their outlines and paint the images in the soul using a finer brush than that of the rays of light. For the image that is projected on the retina of your eye is not the idea that you derive from its object; it is merely a product of your inner sense, a work of art created by your soul’s faculty of perception” (358).

²³ Herder, “On Cognition,” 188.

The importance of the analogy in Herder's thought leads us to another relevant aspect of his theory of memory, as he argued that the childhood of an individual corresponded to the infancy of the human race. In this way, it could be possible to survey the notion of memory in Herder's work through another lens, that of the philosophy of the history of humankind. The memory of humankind is, in this connotation, a synonym for "cultural inheritance," but the latter notion also has a particular meaning in Herder's works. In his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Outlines of a Philosophy of History of Man*, 1784–91), he was especially concerned with the origins of culture and tried to explain it as a result of a combination of inner and external factors, in just the same way he did for human knowledge from the psychological point of view.²⁴ To Herder, tradition is neither merely transmitted organically from one generation to another nor taught as if it could result from the mnemonic learning of established, prepackaged knowledge. What a person conveys to their successor is mainly the ability to learn, which is the most typical feature of the human race. Then, every memory, every cultural inheritance, is not a simple repetition but re-creation, a reformulation of the old ideas and images of the previous cultures.²⁵ From this perspective, Herder's interpretation of the role of memory is clearly connected to his analysis of language as a characteristic of human nature. In the second part of the *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772), Herder stated that "animals connect their thoughts obscurely or clearly but not *distinctly*. Just as, to be sure, the kinds which are the closest to the human being in manner of life and nerve structure, the animals of the field, often display much *memory*, much *recollection*, and in some cases a *stronger* recollection than the human being, but it is still only *sensuous* recollection."²⁶ None of these animals "can illuminate for itself a *general reflection*" or, in other words, can connect "*through reflection*."²⁷ And what distinguishes human beings from animals is exactly this ability to learn: "[He is] the most ignorant creature when he comes into the world, but immediately he becomes nature's apprentice in a way that no animal does;

²⁴ Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 4 vols. (Riga: Hartknoch, 1784–91); English translation, *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (London: L. Hansard, 1803).

²⁵ See *Outlines*, book IX, chapter 1, 409–10: "Hence the principles of this philosophy become as evident, simple, and indubitable, as the natural history of man itself is: they are called *tradition* and *organic powers*. All education must spring from imitation and exercise, by means of which the model passes into the copy; and how can this be more aptly expressed than by the term tradition? But the imitator must have powers to receive what is communicated or communicable, and convert it into his own nature, as the food by means of which he lives. Accordingly, what and how much he receives, whence he derives it, and how he uses, applies it, and makes it his own, must depend on his own, the receptive powers."

²⁶ Herder, *Abhandlung über die Ursprung der Sprache* [1772], English translation, *Treatise on the Origin of Language*, in *Philosophical Writings*, 129.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 120–30.

not only does each day teach the next, but each minute of the day teaches the next, each thought the next.”²⁸ Memory relies not only on images and feeling, but also on language, the medium between the outside world and the inner world of the human, between perception and reflection, and both memory and language have a special meaning in the process of learning, as the soul “takes into account the store which it has already collected or still intends to collect. And in this way the soul becomes *a force of steadily collecting*.” In this way, the human being is “always in development, in progression, in process of perfection.” In this very sense, one soul “builds on the other, one develops out of the other,” as in a chain.²⁹

Special attention is given then to the infancy of humankind, which is not, as it was common to think during the eighteenth century, a primitive phase of the progressive development of mankind. Herder compared this stage in the development of human history to the childhood of a single individual (*Lebensalternanalogie*).³⁰ He maintained the infancy of an individual as a fundamental phase within the development of human identity, and conferred similar importance to the childhood of the human race as a very “fruitful period from the point of view of ‘cultural productions.’” “Poetic knowledge” or “poetic wisdom”—as Giambattista Vico would call it—characterized the culture of the infancy of mankind.³¹ During this stage of history, the imagination is a dominant faculty.

²⁸ Ibid., 130.

²⁹ Ibid. These passages are connected with a very peculiar and problematic reflection in Herder’s work on the idea of progress. On this topic, see John Kenneth Noyes, *Herder: Aesthetics against Imperialism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015). On Herder’s idea that “progress is neither linear nor total, and it is always accompanied by forms of loss, see Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 250.

³⁰ We find this metaphor of the infancy of the human race in the *Outlines*, as well as in Herder’s *The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry*, 2 vols. (Burlington, VT: Smith, 1833). Cf. Hans Dietrich Irmscher, “Beobachtungen zur Funktion der Analogie im Denken Herders,” (*Considerations on the Function of Analogy in Herder’s Thought*) *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift zur Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 55 (1981): 64–97; and Michael Maurer, “Die Geschichtsphilosophie des jungen Herder in ihrem Verhältnis zur Aufklärung,” (*Language, History and Humankind in Vico and in Herder*) in *Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803)*, ed. Gerhard Sauder (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1987), 141–55.

³¹ Correlation between Vico’s and Herder’s ideas on the origins of mankind has been suggested by Isaiah Berlin in his classical study *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* (London: Hogarth, 1976), as well as by Valerio Verra, “Linguaggio, storia e umanità in Vico e in Herder,” in *Omaggio a Vico* (Napoli: Morano, 1968), 333–62; Antonio Verri, *Vico e Herder nella Francia della Restaurazione* (Ravenna: Longo, 1984); and Wolfgang Proß, “Herder und Vico: Wissenssoziologische Voraussetzungen des historischen Denkens,” (*Herder and Vico: Sociologic Preconditions of the Historical Thought*) in *Johann Gottfried Herder*, ed. Gerhard Sauder (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1987), 88–113.

However, that does not entail the absence of intelligence and truths; fantasies, myths, dreams, strong impressions, and emotions dominate but represent, at the same time, a way of seeing and understanding the world that has, in itself, the same importance as modern and more prosaic scientific and philosophical knowledge. In the same way, the dreams full of images from our childhood are as meaningful to us, and to our identity, as our later “rational” ideas.

Moreover, these images of the childhood of mankind constitute a background upon which all later knowledge of a civilization will depend. This means that later cultures bring a kind of memory of these images, of this poetic view and connection with nature, even if they are not aware of this inheritance. The loss of the awareness of this memory was clearly explained by Herder in *Origins of Languages*. There, he described language as a result of a process and, again, relied not only on intellect, but also on memory and imagination as two other important forces of the soul. The statement that “we are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants” (attributed to Bertrand Chartres, 12th century) does not mean that we inherited all the knowledge from past cultures by means of a sort of accumulation process. It means, from Herder’s perspective, that we are in a continuous dialogue with past cultures, learning from them in the same way that we continually learn from the child who still lives—with all their images and dreams—in each of us. Herder rejected the idea of progress as an accumulative process in its more simplistic form and imagined the development of human culture as multilayered and multidirectional, as in a labyrinth. Each culture—as well as each single individual—follows its own particular path, in which many different internal and external factors intervene. Nevertheless, Herder placed different cultures in a mutual relationship, in a way that is similar, or analogical, to that of members of the same family and from generation to generation.³² All different cultures are members of a large family—the human race—and belong to a unique “chain” of tradition (*Kette der Tradition*), each one expressing with its own individuality this belonging.³³ The unity of this multiplicity, provided by Herder’s notion of tradition, is clearly expressed in his *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*: “All education must spring from imitation and exercise, by means of which the model passes into the copy; and how can this be more aptly expressed than by the term tradition?”³⁴

³² On the meaning of family as the type and the model of a community of men, cf. Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 66; and Catherine Wilson, “Savagery and the Supersensible: Kant’s Universalism in Historical Context,” *History of European Ideas* 24 (1998): 4–5, 319–20.

³³ On the notion of human understanding as a “son of tradition” and the definition of “chain of culture,” see, in particular, Herder’s *Outlines*, part II, book 8 (1786). And, on the idea of an “invisible chain” of all powers in nature, see especially Herder, *Outlines*, 191–92.

³⁴ Herder, *Outlines*, 409. Herder also sought to find a model in order to explain this unity in multiplicity by

Also, in this perspective, Herder ascribed to the culture of the past a kind of regenerative role, which could be very useful for the abstract, prosaic, arid culture of modern times.³⁵

4. Memory as a “Source of Vision”

If memory, in both the psychological and cultural-historical perspectives, plays—together with the imagination—such a relevant role in the development of personal and cultural identity, it would then be interesting, from the perspective of Herder, to analyse this function under the particular conditions of the soul, as, for example, during pathological processes. In 1802, a year before his death, Herder published a short essay called “Emanuel Swedenborg: der größte Geisterseher des achtzehnten Jahrhunderts” (“Emanuel Swedenborg: The Greatest Spirit-Seer of the Eighteenth Century”) in the sixth issue of the periodical *Adrastea*.³⁶ About forty years after Kant’s writing on Swedenborg, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, Herder tried to explain the Swedenborg case study and his visions from a psychological-anthropological point of view.³⁷ In preparing this essay, Herder thoroughly analyzed, step by step, Swedenborg’s life from his childhood to his religious turn, and read many sources to avoid Kant’s error of taking into account only anecdotes and curious stories about him. In this essay, Herder discussed, in a very explicit way, the notion of “thinking in images,” a way of thinking that differs from logical and conceptual thinking, as it is based on the association and combination of images and all products of imagination. This form of thinking characterizes all human beings, especially children (as we have seen in the previous sections) and artists, such as painters, musicians, and especially poets:

1. From youth on we think in *pictures*; words bring forms before our eyes. We call this picture-awakening power *imagination*, without which the understanding

means of comparing his ideas with those of his contemporaries (e.g., Voltaire, Rousseau, Kant); cf. Noyes, *Aesthetics*, 169, which explained the difficulty for Herder of finding this model.

³⁵ Herder’s notion of “palingenesis” is, in this sense, very interesting, because it is connected, as other scholars have noticed, with Baumgarten’s interpretation of it as “regeneration.” Cf. Markworth, *Unsterblichkeit*, 77; and Baumgarten, *Metaphysik*, § 784–86.

³⁶ Herder, “Emanuel Swedenborg: The Greatest Spirit-Seer of the Eighteenth Century,” *Studia Swedenborgiana* 14 (2005): 2.

³⁷ See Herder’s review of Kant’s *Träume eines Geistersehers*, in *Königsbergischen Gelehrten und Politischen Zeitungen auf das Jahr 1766*, 18 (1766): 3. Cf. Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, 27 and Nigel DeSouza, “On the Relation between Herder’s Idealism and His Theory of the Soul-Body Relationship,” in *Herder und die Klassische Deutsche Philosophie*, ed. Dieter Hüning, Gideon Stiening, and Violetta Stolz (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2016), 281–304; see also *Herder Handbuch*, ed. Heinrich Clairmont, Stefan Greif, and Marion Heinz (Paderborn: W. Fink, 2015).

is ineffective. It is fortunate when *true* forms impress themselves early and continually, not phantoms, not words that evoke false mental pictures. 2. We have a peculiar ability *to set in play* the picture-creating power in us and in others. Poets do it, as do painters, composers, storytellers. Their art leads to and develops from it. He who cannot bring forth images is no poet, we say. The easier he brings them forth, often with only a word, the longer, more naturally and charmingly they linger with us, as once they did with him, the more is he in possession of the *magic wand*. Artists of all kinds give us true, beautiful images!³⁸

This essay on Swedenborg represented to Herder the chance to warn the reader against the “bad”—or, more accurately, disproportionate and unbalanced, use—of imagination, which can lead to “pathological” situations, such as that experienced by the Swedish visionary. Swedenborg was, for most of his life, a meticulous scientist, a scholar of inorganic and organic nature, who decided, at the age of fifty, to set aside his studies and his philosophical investigations to devote himself entirely to the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures and to his “conversations with spirits.” From these dialogues, which he defined as real experiences, *audita et visa* (listened and sought), he believed he had gained extraordinary concrete knowledge of another world, the “world of spirits,” which already existed in this earthly world as its inmost and spiritual essence, and which was, for this reason, inaccessible to our “rude” external senses. Swedenborg thought that “the Lord” had opened to him his “inner sense” and that, for this reason, he was able to see (and to hear) the spiritual world. For about thirty years, he described his travels in the spiritual world in a very detailed and precise way, as if he had really been there.

The explanation Herder gave of this bizarre phenomenon is based on the notion of “thinking in images” and is connected with Herder’s theory of memory. During his life as a natural scientist and philosopher, Swedenborg collected a great number of “images”; he deeply analyzed nature in its manifold features, and what he learned in this first part of his life shaped his vision of the world, his *Weltbild*. With these images, he was then able to give a concrete, visible form to his moral values, to his religious creed, to his metaphysics: the images, captured by the memory of a scientist, came back again in his mature age and, assembled in new forms, grounded his later speculations. Memory is here, again, not a source of information that is recollected as such, but a source of images, ideas, and impressions that are combined, modified, and developed later in life. The processual similarity of both individual and collective development is the distinctive feature of Herder’s theory of memory.

³⁸ Herder, “Emanuel Swedenborg,” 2.

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