



## HERDER'S PHILOSOPHY AND HIS CONTRIBUTION TO THE IDEA OF HISTORY

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### ABSTRACT

*The knowledge and study of history is significant in predicting and guiding the future course of humanity. Philosophers of eighteenth century Germany contributed greatly to the philosophy of history. Some of the philosophers such as Gottfried Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Hegel and Martin Heidegger are well recognized and researched. However there are others like Johann Gottfried Von Herder, whose works have remained obscure for long time. This paper discusses Johann Gottfried Von Herder life, his contribution to idea of history with emphasis on subjectivity and his works which include the concept of 'Volksgeist' and 'Bildung'. The paper also enumerates the impact of society on his works. Due to Herder's immense work including posthumous work, his concepts are being analyzed, studied and considered relevant to the present times.*

**KEYWORDS : Johann Gottfried Von Herder, Philosophy of History, Volksgeist, Bildung.**

### Introduction

The knowledge and study of history is significant in predicting and guiding the future course of humanity. The eighteenth century was the century of change in the subjects of philosophy and history. Voltaire coined the term 'philosophy of history'. History got rid of its infatuation with military and political history and got replaced by social and cultural history. This was also the century of enlightenment with an emphasis on the discovery of truth. Philosophy of history applied the philosophical theories of metaphysics, epistemology and ethics to the study of history. Some of the philosophers such as Gottfried Leibniz, Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Hegel and Martin Heidegger are well recognized and researched. However there are others like Johann Gottfried Von Herder, whose works have remained obscure for long time. However in recent times his works have evoked great interest due to the relevance of their concepts of philosophy in understanding history and its importance in present times

### Herder's Life and works

Johann Gottfried von Herder was a multifaceted personality being a philosopher, historian, poet, political thinker, linguist literary critic, Biblical scholar, and translator (Barnard, 1969). Being a prolific author in many different fields like comparative philology and linguistics, religion, mythology, philosophy of history, metaphysics, psychology or philosophy of mind, art, aesthetics and political philosophy, it is difficult for any historian to completely analyze his work (Adler & Kopke, 2009). He was born in 1744 in Mohrunge in East Prussia to a family of limited means (Clark, 1969). His early education was influenced by the economic position of his family, his father Gottfried's mentoring, his mother Anna Elisabeth's religious inclination and Lutheran worship services. His initial upbringing was in a religious and strict atmosphere (Lewis, 1995).

After initial schooling at a local Latin school, he joined the University of Königsberg where he developed an inclination towards the study of theology. During his time there, he was greatly influenced by Immanuel Kant, Johann Georg Hamann and the humanistic and humanitarian society, called the Deutsche Gesellschaft of Königsberg (Clark, 1969). Hamann helped him learn English and get a position as instructor at Domschule in Riga. Inspired by *Brief, die neueste Literatur betreffend* (Letters Concerning the Most Recent Literature), Herder published his first major work *Über die neuere deutsche Literatur Fragmente* (Fragments on the Most Recent German Literature). Herder left Riga and travelled to France. At the port city of Nantes, he wrote major portion of his *Journal Meiner Reise im Jahr 1769* (Journal of My Voyage in the Year 1769). He married Caroline Flachsland, in 1773, who later edited and published his works after his death. In 1776 he came to Weimar and took charge as senior pastor to the court, general superintendent, Councilor of churches. His most im-

portant work *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind, (1784-91) was written at Weimar. In 1789 he travelled to Italy and returned to Weimar. Herder died on 18 December 1803 after suffering several strokes (Martinson, 2009).

### Herder's contribution to the idea of history

Herder is described as someone who made history a science of cause and effect by giving meaning to the events and facts of the past. He metamorphosed association of historian to his epoch, to that of a tree to the earth. The views of a historian are adapted by the needs of his society and his thinking is influenced by his society (Zammito, 2009).

### Herder's emphasis on subjectivity

Herder emphasized that every individual is unique. Herder in the book 'Yet another philosophy of history' expressed dissatisfaction with generalizations in history. "No one in the world feels the weakness of general characterization more than I do. If one depicts a whole people, an age, an area, whom has one depicted? ..... How great the ease of misunderstanding!" (Barnard, 1969).

His concept of historical understanding emphasized on situatedness and particularity. For complete understanding every action has to be viewed in its historical context. Herder propounded the concept of 'einfühlen' for study of history with empathy differing from prevalent universal enlightenment (Marwick, 1981).

### History and nature

Herder's historicity is developed from the developments in the natural sciences of his time. He applied naturalism to the origin of mankind. He visualized a type of history which would combine cultural history with geography and natural history to produce natural history of mankind. This concept of history of people is evident in his book *Ideen*. Herder had a solid belief that there is no divide between nature and human (Zammito, 2009).

### Herder's concept of *volksgeist*

Herder propounded the theory of the *volksgeist*, the spirit of the folk. He gave the concept of national character (Marwick, 1981). Everyone including the king and the masses belong to the same class (Brass, 2014). This concept originated at a time of rapid change in political institution, The Holy Roman Empire was on decline and new model of state came into being in England, Prussia, United States and France. *Volk* envisaged by Herder was an organic whole by virtue of interrelationship of its members. They are interconnected not due to any external forces but realization of shared culture and historical tradition (Barnard, 1969).

Herder attracted criticism due to closeness of Herder's concept of *volksgeist* to race (Dover, 1952). Herder gave the concept of *volk* applicable to all cultural and ethnic groupings and did not favor any particular *volk*. The main source of its origin and continuance is language. His concept of common shared culture renders the concept of sovereignty irrelevant. Herder could not accept the concept of dynastic rule meaning someone is destined to rule merely by virtue of birth or financial resources (Barnard, 1969). Herder conceived states demarcated by natural boundaries of forests, mountains, seas and cultural characteristics (Barnard, 1969). Terming nation as the basic unit of humanity, Herder emphasized that individual identity is culture dependent (White, 2005). Culture and nation are interwoven as culture is national and nationality has a culture of its own (Hayes, 1927). Concept of *volk* influenced the society as different ethnic groups made a demand for separate nation state (Bohm, 2009). Herder began his 'Idea for a philosophy of history' underlining the unity of human beings. "In spite of considerable differences between men in different parts of the world, there is but one and the same human species." Herder expressed clear views against war, violence and imperialism. Herder considered exploitation and domination over others to be inhuman (Barnard, 1969).

### Impact of society on Herder's writings

In his writings influence of his religious background was evident. Herder expressed his religious concerns about questions of life after death, spirituality and reincarnation. Herder views on *volk* and culture were influenced by the prevalent German society, which was a politically under developed country and not a political nation (Barnard, 1969).

In view of the prevailing situation in 18<sup>th</sup> Century Germany, where people were without any political experience and sense of common identity, Herder emphasized on self determination and considered political leaders to be a transitional necessity required to facilitate improvement of education in the society, relinquishing power on achievement of this goal. Herder applied the term *Bildung* to this process of education dissemination. Herder opposed Kant for his elitist ideas advocating necessity of control and rule (Hillebrand, 1873). Herder favored co-ordination rather than subordination postulating high degree of horizontal differentiation where everyone controls some area of functioning (Barnard, 1969). Herder advocated abolition of authority envisaging equality and freedom to think and act (Adler & Köpke, 2009).

### Conclusion

Herder was a German scholar of eighteenth century belonging to a family of average income. He had great oratorical skills and adopted oratorical and polemic style of writing. Herder was influenced by Kant's pre-critical philosophy. Freedom, equality, abolition of centralized authority, development of people through education and emphasis on philosophy of history are features of his works, relevant to present times.

Herder's concept of individual happiness is close to the concept of welfare state. Concept of separation of powers, checks and balances amongst legislature, executive and judiciary find their genesis in his dictum that all should control some area and none should control all areas of functioning. Self determination as advocated by Herder is equivalent to modern day democracy. Herder concept of *Bildung* is equally important today as intelligent and politically aware citizens are must for success of any democracy. Herder argued for reduced role of state and today's world is for liberalization. Freedom of thought and action considered to be hallmark of any advanced democracy was expressed by Herder two centuries ago. Herder also opposed inequality and imperialism. Herder contributed to the concept of philosophy of history by emphasizing the importance of studying history taking into account the context of the historical events as well as the peculiarities of society in which historian lives. Due to Herder's immense work including posthumous work, he is a philosopher whose works though not recognized during his times are being analyzed, studied and considered relevant to the present times.

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