

Kant on Language and the (Self-)Development of Reason

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Abstract

The origin of languages was a hotly debated topic in the eighteenth century. This paper reconstructs a distinctively Kantian account according to which the origination, progression, and diversification of languages is at bottom reason's self-development under certain a priori constraints and external environments. The reconstruction builds on three sets of materials. The first is Herder's famous prize essay on the origin of languages. The second includes Kant's explicit remarks about language—especially his notion of “transcendental grammar,” his argument that language cannot be innate, his contrast of “Oriental” symbolic (intuitive) and “Occidental” discursive languages, and his treatment of the latter as a *sine qua non* of humanity's cultural and moral progress. The third includes the concepts that we need to make sense of those remarks, such as Kant's epigenetic theory of biological formation and his account of categories as originally acquired.

1. Introduction

Investigating language was a German “philosophical pastime” for much of the eighteenth century. So concludes Avi Lifschitz after a comprehensive study of the eighteenth-century debates on language (2012, 193). The Berlin Academy fostered those debates through a series of prize contests about language from the 1750s through the 1790s. Johann Gottfried Herder, Kant's most talented student, won the 1771 contest (Lifschitz 2012, 165-87). Johann Georg Hamann, a close friend to both Kant and Herder, was also a leading voice in the debates.¹ Against this backdrop, one may expect Kant, who was typically responsive to major philosophical controversies around him, to make a concerted effort to address the debated questions himself.

¹ In 1774, Kant exchanged letters with Hamann to discuss Herder's theory of language, mainly to understand the latter without commenting on its merit (Br 10, 153-61). In one of the letters Kant also referred to Johann Michaelis, who won the Berlin Academy's first (1759) prize contest about the origin of language (Lifschitz 2012, 95-142).

On the surface, Kant made no such effort. Some commentators have found this “notorious silence ... puzzling in the light of the intensity of the philosophical interest in language and cognition at his time” (Dascal and Senderowicz 1992, 129). Others see Kant as having nevertheless offered “seductive hints concerning the use and nature of language, if only on the rarest occasions,” and find it worthwhile to divine those hints (Schalow and Velkley 2014, 3). In the latter case, some are interested in whether “the attempt to work the systematic unity of [Kant’s] thought necessarily arrives at language as the final linchpin of his system” (Schalow and Velkley 2014, 20).² Others take a more historical approach. For example, one may interrogate Kant’s scattered remarks about language against the relevant works by his contemporaries including Herder and Hamann, to see if one can construct a philosophy of language on his behalf. Michael Forster takes this approach in “Kant’s Philosophy of Language?” The question mark in the title points to an ambivalent answer: *yes*, Kant had a philosophy of language insofar as he espoused some of the “most distinctive doctrines of the modern philosophy of language,” particularly the doctrine that “thought is essentially dependent on and bounded by ... language”; but *no*, he did not really have a philosophy of language of his own, because in espousing those doctrines he was just following the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition, especially as it was developed by Herder and Hamann (Forster 2014, 81, 98).

In this paper, I make a firmer push to construct a *distinctively Kantian* philosophy of language.³ Let me introduce my thesis by way of three questions. To begin with the most basic one, what is “language” according to Kant? This question will immediately lead us to a pivotal difference between Kant and a Leibnizian or Wolffian. The difference, as I shall explain in section 2, comes down to two parallel distinctions. One is between *intuitive* and *discursive* modes of cognition. The other is between *symbols* and *words*. In these terms, Kant teases apart a merely *symbolic* (qua intuitive) language and a *discursive* one made of words. He attributes these to the “Oriental” and “Occidental” peoples respectively, on which basis he assigns them different places in the history of human progress: only

² For varied answers to this question, see Wood (2014); Surprenant (2014); Schalow (2014).

³ This proposition is compatible with Forster’s conclusion that there was nothing special to Kant’s claim about language being constitutive of thought. Forster and I are simply asking different questions. His guiding question is whether Kant viewed language as constitutive of thought. I agree that Kant held this view (I will provide some evidence for it in section 2). The main question for me, though, is how Kant would then account for the *origin* of language. This question, as Lifschitz (2012) has shown, was at the very core of the eighteenth-century debates about language.

the Westerners have the linguistic wherewithal—an advanced discursive language—to go further in culture and morality.

This observation takes me to my second question. Why *should* Kant say more about language than he actually did? It is not enough to point out that his contemporaries debated about it for decades. The question is whether he has any internal reason, or pressure from within his own philosophical system, to address some of the debated issues. This will require us to look beyond Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, which have been the go-to texts for commentators interested in figuring out “the linguistic dimension of Kant's thought” (Schalow and Velkley 2014). We should also consider his writings and teachings on anthropology and philosophy of history. These materials, as we shall see in section 2, contain important clues about why and how language *matters* according to Kant. It matters not just because respected thinkers from Leibniz to Hamann have all argued that, generally speaking, language is constitutive of thought but specifically because, in Kant's view, a particular kind of language (discursive language) is essential to humanity's *progress* toward its cultural and moral destinies. This was a controversial claim.⁴ It demands justification.

Meanwhile, Kant claims that human language is not innate but acquired, not divinely given but manmade. This claim, besides the justificatory demand just mentioned, puts pressure on him to give a positive account of what enables humanity to make a language for itself, especially a discursive one. Kant would thereby be in direct conversation with the ongoing eighteenth-century debate on the origin of human languages. Now I ask my third question: what *conceptual resources* could he use to construct the requisite account (if he wanted to), and what would the resulting account look like? I will tease out an answer to this question by drawing on Kant's philosophy of biology and his theory of the original acquisition of pure concepts of the understanding, respectively. His disagreement with Herder on issues of biology (section 3.1) will give us additional clues as to how his positive account of the origin and development of human languages (section 3.3) will differ from Herder's (section 3.2).

⁴ Rousseau, by contrast, gives the impression that the trajectory toward more analytic modern (European) languages is a process of regrettable *losses* (2017, 249, 265). As Lifschitz puts it, Rousseau “lament[s] the loss of an early, innocent immersion in the senses” and the development whereby “man became deaf to nature and to moral sentiments” (2012, 35-6). In Rousseau's own words, what “civilized men” at the same time “ruined Mankind,” so much so that “all subsequent progress [beyond the state of nature or Savagery] has been so many steps in appearance toward the perfection of the individual, and in effect toward the decrepitude of the species” (2017, 166, 168).

The result will be a characteristically Kantian “philosophical history” of human languages, which boils down to a history of reason’s self-development in various material conditions under the constraints of what Kant calls a “transcendental grammar” (sections 3.1 and 3.3).

In sum, Kant does have an original philosophy of language to offer. Although establishing this thesis will be my main focus in this paper, I also intend my interpretative work to be generative by raising questions for further investigation (section 4).

2. Kant on (discursive) language, or why he needs to explain its possibility

Language, Kant says, consists of *words* as its matter and grammar as its form.⁵ But what makes a “word”? This question will turn out to be really important. Kant distinguishes words from *symbols*, the latter being sensible images or pictures.⁶ Cognitions through symbols are therefore *intuitive* as opposed to *discursive*.⁷ In holding this view, Kant knowingly distances himself from the Leibnizian-Wolffian tradition of treating symbolic and intuitive cognitions as diametrically opposed.⁸

⁵ Log (9, 12-13); V-Lo/Wiener (24, 790-91). In the logic lectures, Kant is chiefly concerned with comparing logic and grammar as the forms of thought and language respectively (V-Lo/Blomberg 24, 24; V-Lo/Dohna 24, 693-95; V-Lo/Wiener 24, 790-92; Log 9, 11-13). Clearly, in this paper I am bringing together various types of texts, including Kant’s personal *Reflexionen* and student notes of his lectures as well as his own published writings and works published in his name with his authorization (e.g., the *Logik*). For sure, only Kant’s own publications can definitively represent his considered position. We should not discount the other texts, however, unless Kant clearly contradicts them in his published writings. My methodology is to triangulate the sources drawn from different parts of Kant’s philosophical corpus, which corroborate or complement one another. This approach is similar to the one developed in Lu-Adler (2018a, 9-27).

⁶ V-Anth/Mron (25, 1293-94); V-Anth/Fried (25, 536); V-Met/Mron (29, 757-58); V-Met-L₁/Pölitz (28, 238); R1486 (15, 709-10).

⁷ KU (5, 351-53); Anth (7, 191).

⁸ Leibniz (1989, 23, 25); Wolff (1752, 173-81). Another standard Leibnizian-Wolffian treatment of symbolic (or figurative) versus intuitive cognitions can be found in §§619-23 and §669 of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s *Metaphysica* (1757, the version Kant used for his lectures on metaphysics). The sections in question are reproduced in Kant’s *Gesammelte Schriften* (15, 32-4, 46). On symbolic cognition in the German tradition following Leibniz, see Lifschitz (2012, 39-64); Kaitaro (2022, 41-50).

Meanwhile, Kant takes “thinking,” which characterizes the faculty of *human* understanding, to be essentially discursive (A131/B170).⁹ In his view, as is well known, a cognition is discursive (as opposed to intuitive) if it is possible only through concepts.¹⁰ What is lesser known is the fact that Kant also characterizes discursivity in terms of the need for “words” (V-Lo/Wiener 24, 893). This may explain why he holds that “without [words] one simply could not judge at all” (Log 9, 109; see V-Lo/Wiener 24, 934). Provided thinking is judging (A68-9/B93-4), it follows that “without words one cannot think at all” (V-Lo/Pölitz 24, 588). That is, thinking is impossible without a *language made of words*, which I shall refer to as *discursive language*. Kant presumably has this kind of language in mind when he claims that “only through [language] are we in a position to make concepts for ourselves” (V-Anth/Pillau 25, 845), hence to *think*.

Besides this restrictive notion of language, Kant also has a broader, generic notion that treats language simply as means of representation. This notion encompasses both discursive language and what he calls “symbolic language” (V-Anth/Fried 25, 536). Kant’s prioritization of the former is connected with his conception of language as a historically contingent and evolving phenomenon. If language in general must be acquired (V-Anth/Mron 25, 1417), discursive language in particular—the language through which alone we can “make concepts for ourselves”—must be “something that arises gradually” (V-Anth/Pillau 25, 845). And humanity’s *progress* is fundamentally tied to this type of language. Kant suggests this connection in the “Conjectural Beginning of Human History” (1786), where he distinguishes mere speaking and discursive discourse. If the former is just a matter of uttering sounds to make one’s existence known to other creatures,¹¹ to discourse (*reden*) is to speak according to connected concepts; only then can one think (*denken*). Kant attributes this discursive skill to the human being not in the natural state of complete crudity (*Robigkei*t) but “in his *fully formed state* [*ausgebildeten Größe*],” that is, “after [he] has already taken a mighty step in the skill of making use of [his] powers [*Kräfte*].” Only with this assumption of a linguistically and thereby cognitively skilled

⁹ To Kant, an intuitive understanding—such as the “divine understanding”—“cannot be taken for a power to think.” For the capacity to think, strictly speaking, is a “discursive power of presentation . . . and is thus impossible without a limitation of the subject” (VT 8, 400n.).

¹⁰ A68-9/B93-4; A230/B283; Anth (7, 191); V-Lo/Dohna (24, 703); Log (9, 58, 91).

¹¹ Speaking in this minimal sense has to do with sociability. “The *drive to communicate* must have been what first moved him,” Kant says in a footnote on the notion of mere speaking as uttering of sounds, “to make his existence known toward living beings outside him” (MAM 8, 110n.).

human being, Kant submits, can we “consider the development of what is moral in his doing and refraining, which necessarily presupposes that skill” (MAM 8, 110-11).

This last remark suggests that Kant sees discursive language as a prerequisite for the further development of humanity. According to his teleology, the human being is “destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings and in it to *cultivate* himself, to *civilize* himself, and to *moralize* himself by means of the arts and sciences” (Anth 7, 324-25).¹² In short, the human species is bound to progress from the state of nature, via culture (cultivation and civilization), to the condition of freedom (moralization).¹³ Discursive language is integral to this continued human progress. Without it there can be no true sciences or arts, the means by which humanity improves and perfects itself. I call this Kant’s constitutive view of discursive language.

We can find further evidence for this constitutive view in Kant’s remarks about the “Orientals,” who according to him have only a symbolic or pictorial language and *therefore* are incapable of either advanced culture—including genuine arts—or true morality. “The cognitions of all oriental nations are symbolic,” Kant claims, insofar as they are “produced through an analogy of sensible cognition” (V-Met-L₁/Pölitz 28, 238). This means that the “Orient” is still in “the childhood of the understanding” (R1486, 15, 710), marked by “a child’s language of humanity” (V-Anth/Mron 25, 1233). To Kant, this characterizes “a large part of the human race,” in whose case “nature has failed them with regard to the faculty of judging from concepts” (V-Anth/Fried 25, 552).¹⁴ The situation is completely different for Occidental peoples. If the East is “the land of sensation,” the West is that “of sound and pure reason,” where people “judge determinately through concepts” (V-Anth/Fried 25, 552). That is, “the Westerners abandoned sensibility much sooner and have raised themselves up to the concepts of the understanding” (V-Anth/Mron 25, 1233).¹⁵ In particular, ancient Greeks were the first to free

¹² Also see V-Anth/Fried (25, 471-72); V-Anth/Pillau (25, 735); V-Anth/Mron (25, 1211, 1367-68). Kant typically uses ‘the human being’ to denote human species (*Menschengattung*) in contrast to non-rational animals. He refers to this species as “human race [*Rasse*]” when contrasting it with the “rational beings on other planets, as a multitude of creatures arising from one demiurge” (Anth 7, 331).

¹³ See Marwah (2012) on the mediating role of culture between nature and (moral) freedom.

¹⁴ Kant attributes a merely symbolic or intuitive mode of cognition also to the so-called “savages” (Anth 7, 191; Log 9, 33).

¹⁵ Kant reaches this conclusion after a “short survey of the history of human languages” (V-Anth/Mron 25, 1233).

themselves “from the jumble of images [*Bildern*]” and to “speak [*reden*] by means of concepts” (V-Anth/Fried 25, 536). In other words, they first discovered that “rational cognition is not to be cultivated by the guiding thread of images, but rather abstractly” (V-Met-L₂/Pölitz 28, 535; see Log 9, 27).

This supposed linguistic divergence between the East and the West has immense downstream effects as far as Kant is concerned.

It is a big difference to judge a matter according to shape [*Gestalt*], appearance, and intuition, and to judge [it] according to concepts. ... He who is only capable of representing something for himself according to shape and intuition, is completely incapable of ... being able to have insight into something through concepts. (V-Anth/Fried 25, 655)

This alleged inability to have conceptual insights means that “with [the Orientals] the whole of morality cannot be pure, because it must be cognized from concepts.” If they seek honor, they do so not from the concept of honor but rather from “authority, thus from sensibility.” Nor are they capable of the taste that defines *true* art, insofar as taste still presupposes a concept. Thus, while they have glittering buildings, for instance, these do not count as “architecture” because “they do not originate from any idea, any plan of the whole” (V-Anth/Fried 25, 552).¹⁶ Kant therefore conjectures that the East represented by “China and Hindustan” has “come to the bounds of its destiny” and “will not proceed further.” By contrast, the Greeks “were a nation that came ever nearer to its vocation”; and it is to this ancient nation that Kant traces Germany’s cultural lineage (V-Anth/Pillau 25, 840-41).

All these claims about the constitutive role of discursive language in cultural and moral progress begs the question about the origin of such a language. Kant must know that this was a hotly debated question. In the “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men” (first published in 1755), Rousseau had famously posed the following “difficult problem” to anyone who favored a purely human or natural, as opposed to divine, origin of languages: “which is the more necessary, an already united Society for the institution of Languages, or already invented Languages

¹⁶ At R840 (15, 374), Kant claims that the “Orientals” have no taste due to their enthusiasm whereas taste presupposes refined concepts of morality. At R1372 (15, 598), he claims that the “Orientals” lack the *Geist* of beauty due to their inability for *Idee*.

for the establishment of Society?” (2017, 149) Following Avi Lifschitz, I will refer to this question as “Rousseau’s conundrum” for the naturalists.¹⁷

Kant is evidently aware of the conundrum. In the “Conjectural Beginning,” he explains why he assumes the Biblical first couple as already endowed with the linguistic skills needed for the development of their moral predispositions.

Unless one is to enthuse in conjectures, *the beginning must be made from that which is capable of no derivation by human reason from previous natural causes*; thus I do not begin with the completely crude state of [the first couple’s] nature, for *if I undertook to fill up that gap*, which presumably comprises a long duration, the conjectures would become too many for the reader, but *their probabilities too few*. [Speaking, discoursing, and thinking as well as standing and walking] are all skills which [the first human being] had to acquire for himself . . . ; but I assume him now already provisioned with them. (MAM 8, 110-11, emphasis added)¹⁸

The italicized parts of this passage suggest a recognition of the futility of one kind of naturalist inquiry about the origin of language. It is the kind that requires the theorist to show how human beings in a completely crude state of nature could eventually acquire a language. Innatism or divine origin not being a viable option, one would have to identify certain *natural causes* to account for this transition. But one cannot show, by the logic of human reason, how a linguistic state of human existence could possibly transition from a prelinguistic one by way of natural causation. Attempts to account for this transition, Kant suggests, could only produce unverifiable conjectures.

Notably, Herder has already pointed out the futility of this line of naturalist inquiry in his winning essay for the Berlin Academy’s 1771 contest. Here is the contest question.

¹⁷ As Lifschitz sees it, this conundrum would more or less shape how subsequent thinkers—including Herder—would talk about the origin of language (2012, 78-87, 165-87).

¹⁸ According to Kant, the ability to stand and walk is no small feat: it has to do with the human being as an animal endowed with the germ (*Keim*) of reason. On this point, Kant is indebted to Pietro Moscati’s work (V-Anth/Fried 25, 676-77; RezMoscati 2, 421–25). On the nature and extent of this influence, see Baumeister (2022, 49-70).

Abandoned to their natural capacities, would human beings be in a condition to invent language? And by what means could they achieve this invention on their own? We require a *hypothesis* explaining the matter clearly and *satisfying all the difficulties*. (cited and translated in Lifschitz 2012, 178, emphasis added)

The italicized phrases reflect the influence of Rousseau’s challenge to anyone wishing to offer a conjectural history that explains how human beings could have invented language on their own in a sheer state of nature. Herder questions the very premise of this challenge, namely the possibility of imagining humanity without language. So, he ends his essay with the apology that he “has transgressed the command of the Academy and *supplied no hypothesis*” but has sought instead to establish “philosophical truth” about the origin of language. To him, a proper philosophical approach to this issue must preserve the “efficacy of the human soul” by establishing language as its *self-made* product, as opposed to tracing it to God or to mere nature for that matter (2002, 163-64).

Kant would agree with Herder that tracing human language to God is “unphilosophical” (V-Met-L₁/Pölitz 28, 233), a manifestation of “lazy reason” (A772-73/B800-1). It is also “lazy,” he might add, to claim that humans acquired languages as a “blind accident,” whereby one avoids the “trouble in scouting for the grounds of the events” (V-Met/Mron 29, 925), or simply to declare that the origin of human language is “beyond our horizon” or entirely unintelligible to the human reason (V-Lo/Blomberg 24, 68). Yet Kant gives no positive philosophical account of the origin of (discursive) language as an acquired skill, an acquisition that cannot just be chalked up to natural causation either. Meanwhile, it is only fair to press him for such an account. After all, as we saw above, he treats discursive language as a *sine qua non* of true arts, sciences, and morality. What, if neither divine origin nor brute natural force, explains its own possibility?

I will try to tease out an answer to this question on Kant’s behalf, first by identifying the relevant conceptual resources within his own philosophical system (section 3.1). I will then use Herder’s account in the 1771 prize essay as the baseline (section 3.2) to build up a distinctively Kantian account (section 3.3).¹⁹

¹⁹ It is possible to reconstruct Kant’s account of the possibility of language in other ways. See Nawrath (2010) for instance, an alternative reconstruction that builds on Kant’s three *Critique*’s plus the influences of David Hume and Johann Heinrich Lambert. My criterion for a successful reconstruction also includes, however, its ability to account for the phenomenon of linguistic diversity that is evidently

3. A Kantian account of the origin and development of languages

3.1. Some Kantian recourses

I pointed out earlier that on Kant's account thinking, understood as an act of judging by means of concepts, presupposes a discursive language. The presupposition can also go the other way, though, as Kant suggests in the following passages.

If we posit that we had no such pure concepts of the understanding, then we could not think or speak at all. (V-Met/Mron 29, 804)

Were we to so dissect the transcendental concepts [namely, pure concepts of the understanding], then this would be a *transcendental grammar*, which contains the ground of human language; e.g., how the present <*praesens*>, perfect <*perfeaum*>, past perfect <*plus quam perfectum*>, lies in our understanding, what adverbs <*adverbia*> are, etc. If one thought this through, then one would have a transcendental grammar. (V-Met-L₂/Pölitz 28, 576-77)

Because the human being was to have reason, he was thus destined to go on two feet, since [reason] is thereby best cultivated, and because language is cultivated [*excolirt*] by reason, the human being must thus indeed be so constituted, that he could make [such language] himself, for even if the first language were revealed, the human being could still thus get into such circumstances where he would forget it. (V-Anth/Fried 25, 676, modified translation)

Thus, there appears to be a circle in Kant's views on the relation between human language and reason or understanding,²⁰ as the possibility of each presupposes the other. One may therefore see something analogous to Rousseau's conundrum: which is the more necessary, an already functioning—that is, thinking or discursively cognizing—reason for the invention of a (discursive) language, or an already

significant to Kant as well as to his contemporaries. To my knowledge, commentators on Kant and language have paid little attention to this phenomenon so far.

²⁰ I treat “understanding” and “reason” as equivalent in the context of this paper. While there is a crucial distinction between them in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (as faculties of *concepts* and *ideas* respectively), it is negligible in the present context.

invented (discursive) language for the use of reason?²¹ But Kant may reject this question of primacy. He may see reason and language as co-developing instead. If “the human being, as an animal endowed with the *capacity of reason (animal rationabile)*, can make out of himself a *rational animal (animal rationale)*” (Anth 7, 321), he can presumably acquire a language originally, in much the same way that pure concepts of the understanding must be originally acquired (to be explained below). Kant may see the acquisition of both as a matter of human reason’s self-development and self-realization.

But how? What do we have to assume about the human being qua *animal rationabile* in order to explain the possibility of a self-made language? Consider the last of the three passages I just quoted. Besides suggesting that language must be self-made partly thanks to how the human being is constituted, the passage also indicates what model Kant could use to substantiate this suggestion. The clue lies in *excoliren*, a concept that can be traced to the Latin *excolō*. The latter in turn comes from *colō*, which has a literal agricultural sense of tilling (soil) and tending (crops).²² Now, for the agricultural work to be productive, it requires not only deliberate and sustained effort on the part of the laboring subject but also certain natural potentials in the materials being labored on. If we take this agricultural metaphor seriously, then reason’s work in *excolere* (cultivating, improving, or perfecting) comes down to a process of self-development. That is, reason labors on its own naturally endowed capacities under appropriate external conditions, refines them through continued practice, and eventually produces something for which those initial endowments were destined. This may be what Kant means in claiming that the human being must have made the first language himself.²³

²¹ It is unclear whether Kant believes that those who purportedly “all speak with pictures [*Bildern*] and do not have ... abstract words such as [the Occidentals] have” (V-Anth/Mron 25, 1232) actually *think* (as he uses this notion in his critical philosophy). Do they merely sense or intuit the world? Although I suspect the answer is yes, I shall leave the question open. From this point on, I will be mostly referring to *discursive* language when I talk about Kant’s philosophy of language.

²² On these two Latin terms, see Lewis (1890, 141, 293). Kant often contrasts what is *excolirten* with what is merely natural. See, for instance, R1161 (15, 514). For a brief account of how Kant uses “*excoliren*” to talk about reason’s *self-cultivation*, see Lu-Adler (2018a, 113-14).

²³ While I, following Kant, use the singular term ‘the human being’ in this context, the term does not refer to exactly one human being. Nor does the use of masculine pronoun imply a gendered reference. Rather, Kant often uses ‘the human being’ to denote human *species* or human race (see note 12 above). That being said, I shall set aside the controversial question of whether language is essentially social or

Kant has conceptual tools to flesh out this account (if he wanted to). We can draw them from two ultimately connected sources. One is Kant’s account of the origin of pure concepts of the understanding (“intellectual concepts” for short). The other is his philosophy of biology. To begin with the former, Kant seeks to explain the possibility of intellectual concepts without treating them as innate or deriving them from experience. As he puts it in his Inaugural Dissertation (“On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and the Intelligible World,” 1770), concepts like cause and necessity “are not to be sought in the senses but in the very nature of the pure understanding” and “not as *innate* concepts but as ... *acquired* concepts” (MSI 2, 395). More precisely, Kant argues that intellectual concepts are not “implanted or inborn *representations*,” but products of “original acquisition,” whereby “our cognitive faculty ... brings them about, *a priori*, out of itself” (ÜE 8, 221). He characterizes this original acquisition in biological terms, as “a system of the *epigenesis* of pure reason” (B167). By contrast, the empiricist account is like the biological theory of *generatio aequivoca* (B167), the view that an organic being can be generated “through the mechanism of crude, unorganized matter” (KU 5, 419n.). As for innatism, it is “a kind of *preformation-system* of pure reason,” which reduces intellectual concepts to “subjective predispositions for thinking, implanted in us along with our existence by our author” (B167).²⁴

Crucially, though, Kant’s theory of epigenesis still incorporates some sense of preformation. “There must indeed be a ground for [the original acquisition of intellectual concepts] in the subject,” he admits, “and this ground at least is *innate*” (ÜE 8, 221). More specifically,

the pure concepts [are to be traced] into their first germs [*Keime*] and predispositions [*Anlagen*] in the human understanding, where they lie ready, until with the occasion of experience they are finally developed [*entwickelt*] and presented in their clarity by the very same understanding. (A66/B91, modified translation)

whether its invention already presupposes the existence of a society (this would lead us right back to Rousseau’s conundrum). Herder, for one, has already argued that the human being could or would, “inevitably,” *invent* a language without needing to communicate with another creature (2002, 89-90), although one can progressively form or *grow* one’s language only in society (139-47, 154-61).

²⁴ For some expositions of Kant’s use of biological analogies in explaining the possibility of intellectual concepts, see Zöllner (1989); Ingensiep (1994); Sloan (2002); Lu-Adler (2018b); Vanzo (2018).

In Kant's philosophy of biology, *Keime* and natural *Anlagen* constitute the preformed ground that antecedently determines the specific development of an organic being under certain occasioning conditions (VvRM 2, 435-36; BBM 8, 96-9, 101-3).²⁵

Clarifying this assumption of a preformed ground will prove key to sorting out Kant's philosophy of language vis-à-vis Herder's. Kant presents epigenesis as "the system of *generic preformation*" and contrasts it with "evolution" or "individual preformation," which "excepts every individual [organism] from the formative power of nature in order to allow it to come immediately from the hand of the creator." What makes epigenesis philosophically appealing is that, in explaining the possibility of organic formation, it makes "the least possible appeal to the supernatural" and "leaves everything that follows from the first beginning to nature." Just as important, though, it lets nature play its role only under the "inscrutable *principle* of an original *organization*" (KU 5, 423-24). That is, if an organism must have a "self-propagating formative power [*Kraft*]" (5, 374), this power will be more like a "formative drive" (*Bildungstrieb*) that operates, "as it were, under the guidance and direction" of the aforementioned principle of an original organization (5, 424).²⁶

This last point sets Kant's philosophy of biology apart from Herder's. Kant foregrounds their difference while reviewing Herder's *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784-85). He takes issue with the latter's notion of a "genetic force [*genetische Kraft*]" as the supposed "cause of the climatic difference of human beings." The two philosophers reportedly agree on the need to reject both "the system of evolution and ... the mere mechanical influences of external causes as providing unworkable grounds of elucidation" and instead to posit "a principle of life, which appropriately modifies *itself* internally in accordance with differences of the external circumstances" (RezHerder 8, 62). However, Kant adds,

if the cause organizing itself *from within* were limited by its nature ..., then one could call this natural vocation [*Naturbestimmung*] of the forming nature also "germs" or "original predispositions,"

²⁵ For Kant's definitions of *Keime* and (natural) *Anlagen*, see VvRM (2, 434). I will set aside their distinction and focus mainly on *Keime*.

²⁶ Kant is referring to Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's influential theory of *Bildungstrieb*. But the added qualification that this drive must operate under the *constraint* of an original formation marks an important departure from Blumenbach's own position, who was absolutely opposed to preformation (Zammito 2012).

without thereby regarding the former as primordially implanted machines and buds that unfold themselves only when occasioned (as in the system of evolution), but merely as limitations, not further explicable, of a self-forming faculty [*sich selbst bildenden Vermögen*]. (8, 62-3)

According to John Zammito, Kant has thus taken two steps to distance himself from Herder's position. The first is to "insist that even epigenesis implied preformation": at the beginning there must be some inscrutable endowment, which places determinate restrictions on subsequent developments of an organism under various material conditions. The second is to clarify that the claim about the original endowment—in the form of "germs" and "predispositions"—is only a regulative (as opposed to constitutive) principle that reason needs to make intelligible the specific developments of organisms in response to different external circumstances (Zammito 2007, 59-60).²⁷

This contrast between Kant's and Herder's theories of biology will prove key to reconstructing a distinctively Kantian account of the origin and development of human languages vis-à-vis Herder's. Now let's briefly consider the latter.

3.2. Herder on the origin and development of human languages

"Language was born," Herder states, "with the whole unfolding [*Entwicklung*] of the human forces [*Kräfte*]" (2002, 138). On his account, the character of the human being (rationality) consists not in having additional forces than other animals but in "a quite different sort of *orientation* [*Richtung*] and unfolding of all forces," namely "the total determination [*Bestimmung*] of his thinking force [*denkenden Kraft*] in relation to his sensuality [*Sinnlichkeit*] and drives [*Triebe*]" (83-4; see 86-7).²⁸ In short, reason is

²⁷ For Kant's distinction between regulative and constative principles of reason, see A508-15/B536-44, A619-20/B647-48, A642-68/B670-96. To treat the supposition of "germs" or "original predispositions" as a merely regulative principle is to say that reason, subjectively, needs it to make sense of certain biological phenomena, without thereby claiming to have any objective cognition of the original constitution of any organism. The same, mutandis mutatis, may be said about the original constitution that enables the human being to make a language (as I shall explain in section 3.3).

²⁸ Herder argues against attributing to humans a "language-creating ability," which amounts to an "arbitrary *qualitas occulta*" (2002, 81). I have de-italicized much of the translation of Herder's essay (2002), except for the purpose of emphasis. The German text consulted is Herder's original essay (1772).

but “an orientation of all forces that is distinctive to [the human] species.” The human being “must have it in the first condition in which he is a human being.” His growth from infancy to adulthood is a matter of the *development* of reason, “a more or less cultivated [*gebildeten*] use of the forces of the soul.” That is, “if [a child] thinks in a human way, then *awareness* [*Besonnenheit*], that is, the accommodation of all its forces in this central direction, is already *in the first moment its fate*” (85).²⁹

The question for Herder, then, was not how the human being, abandoned to himself, could possibly invent a language. In his view, the human soul was destined to invent a language for itself from the get go (90).

The human being, put in the condition of awareness which is his very own, with this awareness (reflection) operating freely for the first time, invented language.

The invention of language is hence as natural for him as is his being a human being! (87)

How so? The key lies in the act of reflection. This takes place when,

out of the whole hovering dream of images which proceed before his senses, he can collect himself into a moment of alertness, freely dwell on a single image, pay it clear, more leisurely heed, and separate off characteristic marks [*Merkmale*] for the fact that this is that object and no other. Thus he ... can in his own mind *acknowledge* [*anerkennen*] one or several as distinguishing properties. (87)

Herder calls the *Merkmale* that have been separated off in this way characteristic marks of “taking-awareness [*Besinnung*].” The first such mark, he submits, is “a word [*Wort*] of the soul.” With it, human language is invented (88). For “the whole of human language [is] but a collection of such words” (89).

If this accounts for the initial creation of human language, Herder’s view on its development is just as notable. The same creative forces are at play in both cases, albeit under different

²⁹ Herder defines *Besonnenheit* (alternative translation: reflection) as the “whole disposition” of the human being as a creature “whose positive force expressed itself in a larger space, in accordance with finer organization, more clearly, and which, separated and free, not only cognizes, wills, and effects, but also knows that it cognizes, wills, and effects” (2002, 84). This notion and “taking-awareness” (*Besonnenheit*) and “sphere” mentioned below are key to Herder’s philosophy of language. For some expositions, see Sikka (2011, 160-91); DeSouza (2012); Forster (2018, 16-73); Kaitaro (2022, 148–72).

circumstances. Overall, Herder states, humanity naturally creates and develops languages because the human soul is endowed with a force that, by the principle “Nature gives no forces in vain,” must be “living [*lebend*]” and “effective [*wirken*]” in its sphere of operation. If the human being thus “entered the world with the immediate disposition to form language for himself,” he is also destined constantly to *develop* and refine language as his sphere of activities evolves and expands. That is, the human being is through and through a “creature of language” on account of being “a freely thinking, active being, whose forces operate forth progressively [*in Progression fortwirken*]” (127). The first word sets in motion a “progressive formation of language” (132). This ongoing development “becomes natural, essential, necessary” because the human being is *also* “in his destiny a creature of the herd, of society” (139). And, to the extent that “the whole human species could not possibly remain a single herd,” there eventually “arises a formation of different national languages”—under the influence of climate among other factors (147-48).

Underlying this historical account is linguistic monogenism, the view that all human languages go back to a single common origin. Herder says:

Just as in all probability the human species constitutes a single progressive whole with a single origin in a single great household economy, likewise all languages too, and with them the whole chain of civilization [*Bildung*]. (154)

Within this monogenetic framework, Herder holds that “The Eastern alphabets are at bottom one; the Greek, the Latin, the Runic, the German, etc. are derivatives [*Ableitungen*].” To illustrate this point, he notes that “the German still has letters in common with the Coptic,” a derivative of the Egyptian language (158). Herder attributes this progressive chain to the ever-expanding sphere of human existence.

We Germans would still, like the Americans, live quietly in our forests, or rather still roughly war and be heroes in them, if the chain of foreign culture had not pressed so near to us and compelled us with the force [*Gewalt*] of whole centuries to participate in it. The Roman got his culture [*Bildung*] from Greece in this way, the Greek received it from Asia and Egypt, Egypt from Asia, China perhaps from Egypt—thus the chain proceeds on from a first ring and will perhaps some day stretch over the earth. (160-61)

For Herder, the direction of this cultural progression is also that of perfection, including linguistic perfection. “Is the dwarf on the shoulders of the giant not always taller than the giant himself?” he asks rhetorically (161). The implication of European cultural and linguistic superiority is palpable here: if language and, with it, culture, *began* in the East, the East also represents stagnation and “old ruins” of the past (161), whereas the modern Europe represents the more advanced stage of development.

3.3. A Kantian “philosophical history” of languages

Now, suppose we use Herder’s account sketched above as the *terminus a quo* from which to construct a Kantian account. What would the latter look like? Given what Kant has said about the “Oriental” symbolic versus “Occidental” discursive languages and the cultural and moral implications of this distinction, he and Herder seem to agree about the trajectory of humanity’s linguistic and, relatedly, cultural progress.³⁰ Their shared global-cum-historical perspective also reflects the practical upshot of the whole European Enlightenment debate about language. Investigating the origin and development of human languages was not just an idle intellectual exercise in conjectural history, but the European man’s anxious attempt to understand his own place in the history of humanity: to what *past* does he owe his culture (broadly construed to include linguistic achievements)? How does his culture compare with other *present* cultures, particularly the “Oriental” cultures?³¹ And what kind of *future* is he destined for? Answers to these questions cannot simply be gleaned from empirical data (e.g., ethnographies and travel reports about the “Orient”). Rather, some sort of philosophical framework must lead the reflection.³² Herder suggested this much in his concluding reflection on the Berlin Academy’s 1771 prize question. He intended to prove “philosophical truth” about the origin of language (2002, 164). As we have seen, he did so primarily by working with such philosophical ideas as reason qua a living,

³⁰ On Herder’s complex view of the relation between cultural differences and human progress, see Sikka (2011, 84-125—especially 106-16, on Herder’s view of China as culturally immature or childish, a view shared by Kant).

³¹ Kant finds it “ridiculous for us, who have a more masculine language, to exchange this for the child’s language of the Oriental peoples and also to start speaking in sheer pictures” (V-Anth/Mron 25: 1233). This claim about masculinity is a central feature of German Orientalism (Germana 2017). On the eighteenth-century Orientalism more generally, see Aravamudan (2011); Kaul (2019). For focused studies of Kant’s Orientalism, see Battersby (2007, 68-84); Almond (2009, 29-52).

³² A paradigm example of this approach is Kant’s use of travel literature (see Lu-Adler 2022a).

regulating, and effective “force” (*Kraft*) of the human soul, its “sphere” of operation, and its characteristic activities of *Besinnung* and *Besonnenheit* or *Reflexion*. Only after he has worked out a *philosophical history* of human language in those terms and established linguistic monogenism, for instance, can he make assured empirical claims about, say, the relation between Eastern and Western languages and the Eurocentric direction of linguistic and cultural perfections.

There is circumstantial evidence that Kant would endorse this methodology. In the context of theorizing about human differences as effects of nature, Kant draws a key distinction between two concepts of history. One is “the Greek *historia* (narrative, description)”; the other is *Geschichte* as “the investigation of origin in nature” (ÜGTP 8, 162-63). What is distinctive about the latter is that a principle must be established in advance “to guide the investigator of nature even in *searching* and *observing*” (ÜGTP 8, 161). The requisite principle must be determined a priori. In studying human differences, for instance, one needs “an idea of the way in which the greatest degree of manifoldness in the [biological] generation can be united by reason with the greatest unity of phyletic origin” (namely, an idea of monogenesis). The investigator must be guided by this idea, Kant claims, “merely in order to *observe*, i.e., to pay attention to that which could indicate the phyletic origin” (8, 164).

Kant adopts a similar approach when he considers the history of philosophy.³³ This history is either a descriptive-narrative *historia*, or a *Geschichte* told in accordance with an idea or principle of reason that has been established a priori. A proper philosophical history (*Geschichte*) of philosophy, Kant contends, is such that “nothing can be told therein of what has happened, without knowing beforehand what should have happened, and also what can happen.” It is a history “not of the opinions which have chanced to arise here or there, but of reason developing [*entwickelnden*] itself from concepts.” To construct a history of philosophy is then to bring it “into a system of reason, which requires the derivation of the happenings from a principle” (FM 20, 342-43). Admittedly, this kind of philosophical *Geschichte* cannot “displace the treatment of history [*historie*], that is written merely *empirically*.” On the contrary, the “philosophical mind” still has to be “very well versed in [the empirical]

³³ On the eighteenth-century debate about the history of philosophy (especially regarding its origin), Kant’s and some of his followers’ fateful intervention in the debate, and the resulting exclusion of the East (particularly India and Egypt), see Park (2013).

history” (IaG 8, 30).³⁴ Thus, a philosophical historian of philosophy would still have to consult an empirical *historia* to identify a Leibniz and a Wolff, for instance. It is just that he would treat such thinkers primarily as the means by which *reason* gradually develops itself in accordance with its own ends. Accordingly, he would have to use the idea of philosophy proper—as “the system of all philosophical cognition” organized in accordance with an architectonic principle of reason—as “the archetype for the assessment of all attempts to philosophize” (A838/B866).

The Kantian *Geschichte* of philosophy is essentially a history of reason unfolding purposively, “like an animal body,” in accordance with “a single supreme and inner end” of reason (A833/B861). The various attempts to philosophize recorded in a *historie* are but phenomenal manifestations of the “self-development of reason,” analogous to the development of an organism. Just as the latter development presupposes certain original germs (*Keime*) within the organism, so is there an idea lying in reason like a *Keim* “all of whose parts still lie very involuted [*eingewickelt*].”³⁵ Accordingly, past attempts to philosophize must be “explained and determined . . . in accordance with the idea, grounded in reason itself, of the natural unity of the parts that have been brought together” (A834/B862). It is only in reference to such an idea that a “philosophical history of philosophy is possible . . . *a priori*.” Such a history “does not borrow [facts of reason] from historical narrative, but draws them from the nature of human reason” (FM 20, 341). It is in these terms that Kant approaches the final section of the *Critique*, “The History of Pure Reason,” where he casts “a cursory glance from a merely transcendental point of view, namely that of the nature of pure reason, on the whole of its labors hitherto” (A852/B880; see V-Lo/Wiener 24, 804).

This account of the *Geschichte* of philosophy as an organic self-development of reason on account of its nature bears a striking resemblance to Herder’s history of language. Kant could offer a philosophical history of language in the same manner. The resulting account would differ from Herder’s in important respects, however. Philosophically speaking, the most profound difference would be this: whereas in Herder’s case the active force (*Kraft*) of the human soul that unfolds and necessarily creates a language for itself is completely unlimited, Kant might add a limiting condition

³⁴ On Kant’s conception of philosophical history, see Cohen (2009, 109-42—specially 110-22, on the relation between a teleological notion of the philosophical history and the empirical history). On the relevant distinction between *historie* and *Geschichte*, see Klein (2018).

³⁵ In Kant’s vocabulary, involution is associated with preformation. On his analogization of reason as an organism, see Mensch (2013, 92-109, 125-45).

much as he did to Herder's biological notion of "a principle of life, which appropriately modifies *itself* internally in accordance with differences of the external circumstances" (RezHerder 8, 62; see section 3.1 above). The limitation, insofar as it still lies within reason itself, is again like certain "germs"—a sort of generic preformation—that determine the purposive orientation of reason's continuous unfolding.

We already saw Kant using this biological model of generic preformation to illustrate the original acquisition of intellectual concepts (section 3.1). Those concepts, although they cannot be innate qua representations, must be derivable from within the mind "by attending to its actions on the occasion of an experience," that is, from "the laws inherent in the mind" (MSI 2, 395).³⁶ To that extent, they are ultimately "nothing other than actions of reflection" (V-Met/Mron 29, 762). As Kant puts it while talking about the human mind's formative power,

If this formative power [*bildende Kraft*] is in the abstract (*in abstracto*), then it is the understanding. The conditions and actions [*Handlungen*] of the formative power, taken in the abstract (*in abstracto*), are pure concepts of the understanding. (V-Met-L₁/Pölitz 28, 239)

In short, intellectual concepts can be seen "merely as actions of pure thinking" (A57/B81; see B105). Thus, if reflection plays the pivotal role in the invention of language according to Herder, Kant would add that it can play this role only under the constraints of intellectual concepts qua actions or laws of the mind.³⁷

³⁶ It is not immediately clear whether the laws in question are ultimately the same as intellectual concepts or are certain logical rules that are distinct from and more fundamental than the latter. On the latter possibility, which in turn raises the question about the origin of those logical rules, see Lu-Adler (2018b). For the purpose of this paper, I will treat intellectual concepts as inherent laws of the mind in cases where they function as transcendental grammar à la Kant.

³⁷ Although categories (e.g., *cause* and *effect*) are common examples of intellectual concepts, Kant may include many other concepts in this list as well, particularly what he calls "concepts of reflection" such as *identity* and *difference* (A260-68/B316-24). Reflection, along with comparison and abstraction, plays a central role in concept formation. If a concept is "always made" regarding its "form" as a "discursive representation" (Log 9, 93n.), namely as a representation of what's common to several objects (9, 91), it is only by reflection that "one cognizes that which many things have in common" (V-Lo/Blomberg

This takes us back to Kant’s remarks about “transcendental grammar” that I quoted at the beginning of section 3.1. Recall his claim that the human being must be so “constituted” that he could make a language for himself. Looking at the requisite constitution from a transcendental viewpoint, namely in terms of the necessary and universal (hence a priori knowable) conditions that make the original acquisition of a human language possible, Kant arrives at a “transcendental grammar.” This grammar, which “contains the ground of human language,” consists in none other than intellectual concepts. Thus, if “language is cultivated [*excolitur*] by reason,” reason is capable of this purposive cultivation—recall the agricultural meaning of ‘excoliren’—only in virtue of possessing those concepts as the inherent laws that regulate its formative power (V-Anth/Fried 25, 676; V-Met-L₂/Pölitz 28, 576-77; V-Met/Mron 29, 804). In this way, the history of language boils down to a history of reason’s self-development under the innate constraints of its formative power (along with such external conditions as sensory stimuli).

The supposition of transcendental grammar points to another way in which Kant’s philosophy of language might differ from Herder’s: Kant would conceptualize linguistic monogenism quite differently from Herder. Generally speaking, Kantian monogenism does not entail any empirical claim about common ancestry. This is evident in Kant’s theory of race, which “assumes certain original *germs* in the first and common human phylum” (shared by the entire human species) and yet claims to show how four principal races—differentiated by skin color—can be developed separately in different climates. Kant thereby rejects the theory that posits a “first parental phylum [*Elternstamm*]” (as white), from which human differences are derived through the mechanisms of climate (BBM 8, 101; see 8, 105-6). Similarly, while claiming that all members of the human species have the same *Keime* which are “innate to human nature” and which “can achieve the perfection for which they are determined” (V-Anth/Fried 25, 694), Kant also holds that those same germs will remain underdeveloped in some races due to, say, their allegedly diminished “life power [*Lebenskraft*]” (VvRM 2, 437–38).³⁸ Thus, within the Kantian framework, a transcendental supposition of innate *Keime* in the generic human being is compatible with empirical claims about their racially differentiated unfolding under various conditions.

24, 909; see 9, 93-5). In fact, a concept is by definition “a universal ... or *reflected* representation (*repraesentatio discursiva*)” (9, 91). On Kant’s theory of reflection, see Merritt (2015).

³⁸ In making this claim, Kant is referring to Amerindians, his go-to example of “savages.” For discussion, see Lu-Adler (2022b).

Kant may explain linguistic diversity in similar terms.³⁹ On the one hand, all humans qua members of a single species share the same transcendental grammar, akin to the preformed *Keime* that human reason must have in order for its formative power to unfold in a purposive manner. On account of having this inherently structured capacity,⁴⁰ a human being anywhere on earth could invent a language for himself on the occasion of sensory interactions with his environment. On the other hand, the extent to which those *Keime* would develop in a given population depends on other conditions, especially the strength of their drive (*Trieb*) or driving force (*Triebfeder*). For strong drives are, according to Kant, what “set into play the sleeping powers [*Kräfte*] of humanity and compel it to develop [*entwickeln*] all its talents and to come nearer to the perfection of their destiny” (VvRM 2, 431). The strength of one’s drive in turn depends on the climate in which one has been formed biologically. Kant claims, for instance, that “Negroes” lack any immediate inner drive for sustained activity due to the far lesser needs in the tropical climate where their race took shape and that this characteristic, once established, “extinguishes just as little as the externally visible [black skin]” even in another entirely different climate (ÜGTP 8, 174n.).⁴¹ By contrast, the white race contains all driving forces and talents in itself, wherefore it alone can keep developing and perfecting the *Keime* innate to the human nature (V-Anth/Mensch 25, 1187; R1520, 15, 877-78).

Accordingly, Kant might say: just as the races were formed independently of one another in different climate zones, so were separate languages invented and developed as different manifestations of the *unfolding of reason*. In other words, various languages emerged as reason strove, little by little, to

³⁹ Kant uses the fact of linguistic diversity to show that language cannot be innate for the human being, “for if it were there would have to be only one language now” (V-Anth/Mron 25, 1417).

⁴⁰ I say “structured” capacity to indicate yet another likely difference between Kant’s and Herder’s accounts. While Herder focused on the invention of *words*—the matter of language—and had little to say about what enabled the human being to connect words to form a proper language, Kant could fill in the gap with the idea of transcendental grammar, to account for the *formal* aspect of language. In this respect, one may liken Kant’s transcendental grammar to Noam Chomsky’s “universal grammar,” roughly construed as the innate categories and structural constraints on language acquisition across all varieties of human languages. For a critical discussion of Chomsky’s controversial but extremely influential concept, with a special attention to the question of innateness, see Cowie (2017).

⁴¹ To understand this claim and its practical implications in the larger context of Kant’s theory of race and philosophy of history, see Lu-Adler (2022c).

assert its freedom in relation to sensory environments. From the perspective of the Kantian-philosophical historian, only two basic types of language would result. The white race, having all the *Triebfedern* needed to awaken the *Kräfte* of humanity and thereby develop all of its innate *Keime*, might begin with a merely symbolic (intuitive) language but would eventually invent discursive language. Only with this language does reason begin to free itself entirely from the confines of sensibility and think *in abstracto*. By contrast, non-whites could only invent symbolic language and become stuck with it. For they lack a strong enough life force and so the faculty of reason, which they admittedly have, will remain underdeveloped and tied down at the level of sensibility (recall what Kant said about “Occidental” discursive versus “Oriental” symbolic languages).⁴²

Thus, Kant would reject Herder’s claim about the derivative relation between Western and Eastern languages. This rejection would be consistent with his approach to the history of philosophy. While the dominant view in the eighteenth century was that philosophy originated in the East (India or Egypt), Kant argued for the Greek origin.⁴³ In the same vein, he would claim that discursive language, which alone befits the destiny of human reason, could only have originated with the Greeks.⁴⁴ I quoted him earlier as saying that the Greeks were the first to free themselves “from the jumble of images” and to speak discursively (V-Anth/Fried 25, 536). Now he would add that this discursive language must be a completely *original* Greek invention, without any genealogical connection to Eastern languages. He would make such a claim not because it follows from empirical data, but

⁴² There is a complication here: Kant’s fourfold racial classification intersects with his East-West binary. While “all of Europe, the Turks, and the Kalmucks belong to the white race,” he divides them into “the Oriental and Occidental kinds [*Schlägesi*]” (V-Anth/Mensch 25, 1188). That being said, there is a shared logic in his claims about the inability of all non-whites and all Easterners for cultural and moral progress: in both cases, he traces the supposed inability to certain fixed inner hindrance. “If a people in no way improves itself over centuries,” he claims, “then one may assume that there already exists in it a certain natural predisposition [*Naturanlage*], which it is not capable of exceeding.” His examples include “all Oriental peoples,” such as “the Hindus, the Persians, the Chinese, the Turks” (V-Anth/Mensch 25, 1181; see V-Anth/Pillau 25, 843).

⁴³ Log (9, 27); V-Lo/Wiener (24, 800-1). For discussion, see Park (2013, 69-95).

⁴⁴ For Kant’s view of the relation between the development of philosophy and that of (discursive) language, see Log (9, 28); V-Lo/Dohna (24, 698-99); V-Lo/Wiener (24, 801); V-Anth/Mron (25, 1232-33); V-Met-L₂/Pölitz (28, 535-37); V-Met/Mron (29, 757-58).

because it is a corollary of his transcendental account of human cognition combined with his theory of race and teleological conception of human history. For this reason, I call the account outlined in this section his “philosophical history” of language, which is in essence a history of reason’s self-development.

4. Conclusion

I have reconstructed Kant’s response to the extensively debated eighteenth-century question about the origin of human language(s). I have utilized two kinds of materials. One is Herder’s famous response to the same question, which I used as the baseline to tease out a distinctively Kantian position. The other consists in two sets of Kantian texts. On the one hand, we have Kant’s explicit remarks about language—especially his notion of “transcendental grammar,” his claim that language cannot be innate or divinely given, his contrast of “Oriental” symbolic (intuitive) and “Occidental” discursive languages, and his treatment of the latter as a *sine qua non* of cultural and moral progress. On the other hand, to make sense of those remarks, we draw on Kant philosophy of biology, broadly construed to include his theory of race (as a biological category), and his view that intellectual concepts cannot be innate qua representations but must be originally acquired. The result is a Kantian version of linguistic monogenism that includes three basic propositions.

First, there are certain germs (*Keime*) innate to the nature of the human being as an *animal rationabile*, which allow him to create a language for himself when the occasion arises. These germs determine the general direction of the unfolding of human reason over time. The germs correspond to what Kant calls “transcendental grammar,” which consists in certain intellectual concepts qua inherent laws of the mind. These laws regulate the reflection that is key to the making of language.

Second, the development of a language is at bottom reason’s self-development on account of its formative power, under the constraints of the transcendental grammar just mentioned.

Third, this development manifests differently in various peoples, depending on the particular environment in which the characteristics of a people are formed, especially regarding the strength of their drives. This results in linguistic diversity, which boils down to a basic distinction between discursive and symbolic languages.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ This reconstruction may also help to shed further light on Kant’s influence on Wilhelm von Humboldt’s philosophy of language (see Humboldt 1999, especially the editor’s overview of its basic

In spelling out this theory of language on Kant’s behalf, my goal is not just to show, contrary to the common assumption, that he has something original to say about language. Rather, I intend my work in this paper to be the beginning of a new sort of inquiries about Kant and language, with a heightened sensitivity to the historical context in which he talked about language and a broadened scope of textual analysis that foregrounds previously unsuspected or under-explored connections. Let me conclude by posing three questions as an invitation for further research. How does Kant’s distinction between “Oriental” symbolic and “Occidental” discursive languages fit into the broader debate about language and culture in the eighteenth century?⁴⁶ How should we understand Kant’s idea of “public use of reason,”⁴⁷ given his claims about linguistic diversity and about the Western Europeans’ linguistic—and hence cultural and moral—superiority? And what does his association of discursive language with the capacity for true morality say about candidacy for moral agency or the constitution of Kantian moral community? I hope interested readers will look into these questions and/or explore new ones.

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themes at xi-xxiv). For an analysis of the latter that highlights Kant’s (as well as Herder’s) influence, see Mensch (2018, especially 104-6).

⁴⁶ Assuming the “Occidental talent” has the advantage of judging things discursively (by means of concepts), Kant warns that this advantage “must not be ruined by analogies and images, for it would otherwise be the degeneration of Occidental taste” (V-Anth/Fried (25, 552). He is thereby implicitly criticizing some of his contemporaries who held the opposite view. He suggests this much at V-Anth/Mron (25, 1233) and Anth (7, 191), where he rebukes some (unnamed) authors’ admiration for the “Oriental” and “savage” manners of speaking. A prominent contrast here is Leibniz, who takes Chinese characters—*caractères*, also rendered as “symbols”—to indicate the possibility of a “Universal Symbolism” that would allow all peoples on earth to communicate with one another (1996, 398).

⁴⁷ The most relevant piece of secondary literature on the Kantian publicity is O’Neill (1986). For an illuminating study that focuses on Rousseau as a contrast to the Kantian view, see James (2011).

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