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Gjesdal, Kristin: *Herder's Hermeneutics: History, Poetry, Enlightenment*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2017.

Kristin Gjesdal's *Herder's Hermeneutics* positions itself against readings of Herder as part of the "Counter-Enlightenment" (Berlin 1976), and highlights the proximity of some of Herder's main aims to those of his more celebrated (later) contemporaries like Kant and Hegel. Gjesdal distinguishes between *Enlightenment* with a capital E – the historical period – and *enlightenment* with a lower case e – a project of education and emancipation that is still relevant today. She reads Herder as an enlightenment thinker in the latter sense, who, different from many of his contemporaries, spelled out an enlightenment vision in non-formal, non-abstract, and non-aprioristic terms. Gjesdal's core thesis is that "with Herder that a historically sensitive, *Bildung*-oriented program of enlightenment gets its full philosophical articulation" (6).

The study adds to the recent reappraisal of Herder's anthropology as an internal critique of Enlightenment philosophy (Beiser 1992, 204; Zammito 2002). But Gjesdal brings a novel interpretative perspective to this task. She argues that Herder's contribution to enlightenment philosophy can only be properly appreciated if his reflections on taste, history, and literature are understood as a hermeneutic project. Gjesdal distills from Herder's interpretive practice his methodological guidelines, and works out the hermeneutic structure of his thinking. In seven chapters, each focusing on a specific aspect of Herder's early works – from his normative account of philosophy to his reading of Shakespeare – she finds a large repertoire of original and timely hermeneutic maxims. In this way, she reveals that the early Herder's diverse and multifaceted oeuvre was united by a consistent hermeneutic position.

But Herder's hermeneutics must not be understood in the narrow sense of textual interpretation. Rather, it amounts to a general philosophy of understanding that, at the same time, spells out a radical program of *Bildung*. Gjesdal brings to light how Herder's reflections on historicity and historical diversity targeted the period's blind spots and unacknowledged

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prejudices – prejudices which stemmed from the failure to properly reflect on one’s own historical situatedness. In this context, it becomes evident that Herder regards the understanding of historical and cultural “others” as a means for fostering self-reflection and the gradual dismantling of prejudices. Historical hermeneutics emerges as Herder’s chief vehicle for “enlightening the Enlightenment” (169-171).

Gjesdal builds a convincing case for her interpretation, covering the full spectrum of Herder’s concerns in the 1760s. The book sets off with an account of Herder’s normative approach (chapter one). For Herder, philosophy should contribute to *Bildung* – to the formation of autonomous citizens with the capacity for independent, critical thinking. To achieve this task, philosophy must not fortify itself in abstract and supposedly ahistorical systems. Quite to the contrary: it needs to acknowledge the historicity of human life, and by consequence, its own historical standpoint.

Gjesdal develops this point in more detail in the context of Herder’s reflections on aesthetics and taste (chapters two and three, respectively). Rather than founding aesthetic judgment on predetermined standards, Herder takes the problem of taste as the starting-point for “an investigation into human nature as it realizes itself across cultures”. As a consequence, “diversity is no longer a threat to be countered (by reference to a standard), but a most fundamental condition of human existence” (89). Diversity should hence be treated as the prime resource for self-understanding, as well as for the understanding of others.

In the next step, Gjesdal centers on Herder’s hermeneutic methodology and analyzes the interplay of sympathy and critique that is at its core (chapter four). On the one hand, this interplay is founded on “an organic relationship between the individual and humanity”, on the other hand, it also involves a relation “between an individual and his or her concrete historical context” (103). While the former relationship provides the commonalities which link human beings through sympathy, the latter allows for the recognition of difference and historical otherness. Furthermore, while sympathy prevents the interpreter from dismissing foreign viewpoints out of hand, the recognition of difference should prevent “overextending sympathy to those who are similar to him or her” (119).

Gjesdal then returns to the question as to how Herder’s hermeneutics can improve aesthetics and philosophy. She reads Herder’s *Shakespeare and This Too A Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity* as different efforts to uncover the prejudices that have kept philosophers from truly understanding past epochs and works of art (chapters five and six). In both cases, the underlying problem is a philosophy that is not in contact with its own

time; either because it appeals to an idealized past, or to abstract and supposedly timeless standards. As a result, philosophy bars itself from what should be its key quality, namely, self-reflection. Gjesdal decidedly agrees with Herder that “the most dangerous of all prejudices is the idea that one’s own point of view is untainted by the historical and cultural context in which it originated” (147). By failing to understand its own historicity, philosophy fails to understand itself. And by failing to understand itself, it becomes incapable of accomplishing a reflective role in the service of *Bildung*.

Herder emerges as an advocate of immanent, yet ongoing critique: only by reflectively understanding its own historical nature can human reason take responsibility of itself. But the realization of reason consists neither in the application of predetermined rules, nor does it teleologically proceed towards a fixed goal. Gjesdal’s Herder thinks of reason as a method and a means for fostering education and self-emancipation in an open-ended process. To satisfy this demand, reason needs to respond to ever changing historical contexts.

Although Gjesdal’s study focusses on Herder’s early works, it also highlights the continuities in his oeuvre as a whole (chapter seven). Gjesdal acknowledges that in his later works, Herder’s conception of reason becomes more static. She also discusses the un-reflected prejudices that Herder now voices more frequently. And yet, Gjesdal insists that even Herder’s later writings are shaped by a “basic interpretive mode [...] to recognize humanity as realized through an infinite number of cultures, each of which is subject to change and development” (204).

Herder’s Hermeneutics stands out for many reasons. Gjesdal manages to carve out the common themes that run through the early works of Herder with verve and precision. She builds a convincing case for reading Herder as a champion of a historicist and hermeneutic enlightenment project. Her historiography is informed by a rich philosophical background – Gjesdal writes as an expert on Gadamer and on the legacy of German Idealism, but also as an interpreter of Shakespeare and a historian of the concept of *Bildung* – yet her theoretical approach never seems forced or artificially imposed on the works that she analyzes.

With her emphasis on Herder’s strategies for dismantling prejudices, Gjesdal also brings to light the continuing relevance of Herder’s work – not just for technical debates within philosophical hermeneutics, but also for our modern self-understanding. While questions concerning the origins of language, or the issue of aesthetic taste seem remote from present-day political and philosophical concerns, Gjesdal finds in Herder’s engagement with these issues a broader project that is still relevant today. In particular, she sheds light on the

hermeneutic *challenge* of balancing sympathy with an acknowledgement of genuine otherness and distance. She highlights that here Herder already exemplified the nuance and complexity that would be the hallmark of later hermeneutic approaches, such as Dilthey's and Gadamer's. She thus presents an attractive alternative to common readings of Herder as an advocate of a naïve and psychologistic doctrine of *Einfühlung*.

On the other hand, Gjesdal also seeks to liberate Herder from his appropriation by Gadamer, and by doing so introduces Herder as a critical voice against Gadamer's all too favorable assessment of tradition and prejudice. She acknowledges that Gadamer might have taken up some of Herder's insights regarding the inseparability of understanding and judgment and the perspectival character of historical knowledge. Nonetheless, Gjesdal insists that *critique* remained a key notion for Herder: while he recognized the enabling character of tradition, Herder was *also* acutely aware of how bias and prejudice hamper interpretation and cloud judgment. Against the Gadamerian understanding of tradition, Gjesdal posits the need for "an inquiry into individual and cultural diversity, the possibility of inter-personal and inter-cultural understanding, and the effort to understand traditions as evolving through interaction with other cultures" (211). In this context, Herder's political pluralism and his *modesty* about the human capacity for understanding receive a convincing defense by Gjesdal.

Methodologically, Gjesdal's interpretations fulfill some of the hermeneutic principles that she identifies in Herder's philosophy. Although she does not compare Herder to other Eighteenth-Century academic forerunners of hermeneutics (such as Chladenius, Meier, Semler and Michaelis), she places Herder in the context of a broader philosophical movement (including Hume, Abbt and Lessing) that explored the relevance of history for human understanding. Her assessments of the authors that Herder employed and whom he criticized are always charitable and well balanced. For example, when discussing Herder's relation to Winckelmann and Lessing on the topic of Greek art (124-126), she uncovers the real strengths of their works, as well as the ways in which Herder went beyond them. Herder's relation to his own historical context – in particular his relation to other enlightenment philosophies – is displayed as complex, yet organic.

Overall, *Herder's Hermeneutics* achieves a difficult task: it manages to construct a convincing general narrative about an author whose writings often seem unsystematic, intricate and tension-ridden. On Gjesdal's reading, the various treatises, prize essays and fragments that Herder had written in his early years – including texts that remain philosophically under-appreciated – indeed form a whole: a consistent, and compelling philosophical project. By highlighting this project, the book provides a valuable contribution

to recent Herder scholarship and adds to current debates on Herder's pluralism and relativism (Sikka 2011; Spencer 2012), his aesthetics (Noyes 2015; Zuckert 2015), his anthropology, and his relation to the Enlightenment (Zammito 2002; Beiser 1992).

And yet, the consistency of Gjesdal's interpretation is not only a strength of her study. It is also its central, though perhaps only, weakness. Reading through *Herder's Hermeneutics*, one sometimes gets the impression that those elements in Herder's thinking that do not sit well with Gjesdal's overall interpretation are skimmed over, or that they are relegated to the footnotes. As a result, some of the contrasts and tensions that make Herder's early writings not just promising, but also difficult and challenging, become invisible. In particular, we want to highlight three tensions in Herder's early work that could receive a more thorough discussion: the tension between historicist and metaphysical elements in Herder's philosophy of history, that between understanding and critique in his hermeneutics, and that between his general humanist commitments and his own prejudices.

First, Gjesdal plays down the theological dimension of Herder's philosophy of history, as well as his sometimes critical, sometimes affirmative appeal to metahistorical narratives and historical laws. Gjesdal reads *This Too a Philosophy of History* not as a metaphysically grounded philosophy of history, but as "a propaedeutic to historical scholarship", a proto-Kantian critique of all previous philosophy of history (176). This reading has some advantages: it illuminates Herder's criticisms of his contemporaries, and highlights the continuities between Herder's early works and those from the Bückeberg period. And Gjesdal is certainly right to caution against a premature judgment of the 1774 treatise as "a metaphysical contribution and, by implication, therefore also a failed historical – and historicist treatise" (152). And yet, in deeming the "religious undertones" (ibid.) of this text devoid of systematic significance, Gjesdal goes to the other extreme. She reads Herder's awareness of human finitude as strictly referring to epistemic limitations, and disregards his faith in a divine perspective on the totality of world history and, correspondingly, in a God who is present in all nature and history (see Schmidt 2017, 187). But surely, Herder did not develop his account of "constitutive historical finitude" (157) independent of his conception of the infinite. Hence a persisting challenge for Herder scholarship – his puzzling combination of empiricism and metaphysics, of historicism and theology – remains unaddressed (see Zammito 2016).

Second, Gjesdal mutes the relativist overtones in Herder's philosophy of understanding. Her reading of Herder's concept of understanding is decidedly non-relativist,

and carefully delimits the role of tolerance in the enquiry of cultural and moral diversity. On Gjesdal's interpretation, the process of understanding enables critique and the assessment of both past and present cultures. As Gjesdal puts it, "the solution to the problem of relativism cannot be found by transcending the diversity of cultures, but must be disclosed within the sphere of culture itself" (89-90). And yet, it remains unclear what this solution looks like in detail. Gjesdal minimizes the extent to which Herder's doctrine of historical understanding rested on a notion of equal validity: according to Herder, each culture was valuable in and for itself and different cultures could not be ranked hierarchically. Recent debates on incommensurability, pluralism, and relativism in Herder's political thought answer to this basic idea (Sikka 2011; Spencer 2012). Because Gjesdal does not engage with these issues in detail, she fails to explicate how exactly the critical functions of historical understanding can be sustained in the face of, or even built from, relativizing dimensions of the very same concept.

Thirdly, a crucial tension in Herder's thought concerns *prejudices*. Gjesdal discusses Herder's remarks about the positive function of prejudices in helping to center a people around itself, thus strengthening its identity. On her reading, these remarks are factual observations that do not express a normative endorsement of prejudices (83). But Gjesdal also provides a more detailed treatment of Herder's sometimes shocking comments about Jews and non-European peoples. As she explains, Herder's hermeneutic philosophy is processual rather than static, and hence leaves room for the coexistence of enlightened and reactionary attitudes. Crucially, Gjesdal applies Herder's hermeneutic principles to himself, diagnosing in Herder's prejudices an "internal failure to live up to his own standards of interpretation and historical and intercultural understanding" (200). Gjesdal subjects Herder to internal criticism, moving beyond the dichotomy between "historical" and "systematic" interests in the study of the history of philosophy.

Nevertheless, Gjesdal's interpretative strategy is too charitable. While it does not absolve Herder from having held prejudiced beliefs, it ends up isolating the problematic aspects of Herder's thinking from his hermeneutic philosophy. According to Gjesdal, Herder's prejudices were "unreflected" and "pre-methodological" (197): they did no philosophical work. This interpretative position not only purifies Herder's philosophical thought, it also leaves unexplained why Herder even held such problematic beliefs.

Perhaps Herder's hermeneutic program offers promising strategies for resolving the tensions that we have just discussed. But for this to become plausible, the tensions need to be highlighted, rather than minimized. It would have been interesting – and perhaps more within

the spirit of hermeneutic reflection – to learn not just of Herder’s successes, but also of his failures when striving to overcome these tensions. This would also have aided a systematic assessment of Herder’s philosophy from the standpoint of contemporary philosophical hermeneutics.

Despite our critical remarks we do not wish to diminish the profound insights of Gjesdal’s study. With its succinct style, its clear argumentation, and the broad material that it draws upon, *Herder’s Hermeneutics* offers a rich source for future Herder readers. The book puts the focus on a range of texts and issues which previously have not received sufficiently detailed philosophical attention and provides new impulses for Herder scholarship under the banner of hermeneutics. Most importantly, Gjesdal’s Herder is able to stand his ground with respect to more famous Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century hermeneuticists like Dilthey and Gadamer, as well as their successors.

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