

Hieroglyphic Historicism: Herder's and Ranke's Theology of History

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Introduction

Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803) and Leopold Ranke (1795–1886) are often considered to be among the founding fathers of the tradition of German historicism. Authors like Wilhelm Dilthey (1901), Friedrich Meinecke (1936) and Georg Iggers (1968) have identified in Herder and Ranke's thought central ideas that connect them to later historicist positions. For example, for both authors, historical phenomena have intrinsic value due to their *individuality*; the good in the human-historical world is necessarily *plural*; strong normative implications attach to *diversity*; and while all values depend on broad historical processes, it is necessarily illegitimate and suspect to endeavor determining *a priori* standards of truth and historical progress. The historicist interpretation generally concludes that, because of these claims, Herder and Ranke must have been committed to historical relativism.

In this paper I explain why this conclusion is incorrect. Crucial to my argument is Herder and Ranke's "theology of history" (Löwith 1949). In the literature defending historicist interpretations, its systematic importance has not been properly documented. I claim that it was only within their theology of history that Herder and Ranke appreciated the historical, individual, and diverse.¹ Their theology of history ensured that Herder and Ranke approached the diverse and particular from a monist starting-point and with the intent to point out the ultimate harmony of history.

In the first two sections, I start from the theological foundations that Herder and Ranke took to confer upon history its intrinsic value and existential significance. In the third section, I sketch how they sought to order historical material in larger harmonious wholes with the aim of providing a structure for universal history. In this way I aim to establish that Herder and Ranke

were not guilty of some of the crudest versions of the “problem of relativism” or the “crisis of historicism.” In the final section, I explore in more detail the views of Herder and Ranke on themes that are often considered relativistic. It is indeed remarkable how many of the relativistic themes identified by Maria Baghramian (in the history of philosophy) and Martin Kusch (in contemporary debates) seem present in Herder and Ranke (Baghramian 2004, 50–82; Kusch 2016, 107–108).ⁱⁱ Nevertheless, I aim to show that even regarding these themes, the positions of Herder and Ranke strongly diverged from later historicist positions. I conclude that Herder and Ranke should not be interpreted as relativists.ⁱⁱⁱ

1. Herder on Revelation, History, and Faith

Herder’s *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity: Contribution to the Many Contributions of the Century* (hereafter *TTPH*) was published in 1774 (PW 272–358). This short treatise with its fierce polemic against contemporaneous philosophy of history^{iv} has often been considered a foundational text of German historicism (e.g. Beiser 2011, 132). In the same year, Herder published two other works, both of a theological character: a collection of letters *An Prediger (To Preachers)*, and an exegesis of the Old Testament, *Älteste Urkunde des Menschengeschlechts (Oldest Document of the Human Race)* (FHA 9/1, 67–138, FHA 5, 179–660; Menze 2000, 11). In the latter, Herder puts forward the thesis that an original revelation pervades all of creation. The former presents religious faith as a universal psychological capacity and as part of the human condition. Taken together, these texts provide the foundation on which Herder relied in his 1774 attempt at presenting a unified vision of universal history.

In *TTPH*, Herder confronts the epistemological difficulties relating to this attempt (FHA 4, 32–42, 81–89). Furthermore, he relentlessly criticizes the tendency of his Enlightenment contemporaries to see their own historical standpoints as absolutely privileged, and to consider their value-terms as universal tools fit for measuring historical progress.^v In order to properly assess this intervention by Herder into eighteenth-century philosophy of history, it is crucial to also take into sufficient account his own *alternative* to a one-sided progressivism. Herder’s alternative is a providential model according to which history is unified as one development. Herder claims that this development should be understood “in a higher sense than people have imagined it,” and that it is extremely difficult to pin down (PW 298, FHA 4, 41^{vi}). Nonetheless, he is confident that history will appear as “*God’s course through the nations*” once it is approached from the right perspective (PW 349, FHA 4, 88). For Herder, identifying this

perspective is a religious task. In this section, I show how Herder's philosophy of history builds on his theology.

In *Älteste Urkunde*, Herder puts forward the thesis that God is omnipresent in nature and history (FHA 5, 298). Accordingly, he understands positive religions as ways of capturing a primordial revelation from different historical or geographical standpoints (305 ff.; cf. Gaier 1988, 73–74). This revelation is connected to God's act of creation and handed down to humanity in the form of what Herder calls the "*Schöpfungshieroglyphe*" (hieroglyph of creation). According to Herder, this hieroglyph is God's primordial revelation to humanity in a seven-step symbol or "*Denkbild*" (FHA 5, 281; cf. Häfner 1995, 216–221). This *Denkbild* communicates God's act of creation in a form that prefigures the first written religious documents (FHA 5, 267–282). The hieroglyph structures the seven days of creation in the following way (see fig. 1).

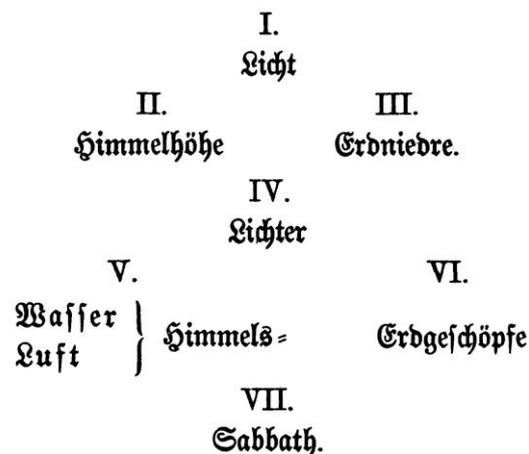


Figure 1: The seven positions of the *Schöpfungshieroglyphe* (Graczyk 2014, 74; SWS 6, 292, FHA 5, 271).

The first book of Genesis is the paradigmatic example of how this *Denkbild* is conserved in narrative form. Positive and natural religion thus coincide. But Herder attempts to establish at length that the hieroglyph informs all other ancient religions as well (305–476). Furthermore, traces of the *Schöpfungshieroglyphe* can be recognized in literary traditions, in nature, and in world history.

One implication of the hieroglyph-theory is that the Biblical period takes central stage as the origin of human culture (FHA 4, 14; Hinrichs 1954, 61). God instructed humanity in its childhood; the hieroglyph's primordial revelation contained the seeds out of which all of humanity's history, culture, and education developed (FHA 5, 297–301, FHA 4, 89). Historical

explanation thus exhibits how a thing developed out of its holy origin.^{vii} This development is dynamic and may present revelation in a variety of shapes: “God is revealed to the human race at many times and in various ways ... God’s revelations ... were *seeds*, concealed and sown in various ways, which contained much that was to develop only with the passing of time and with the extensive passing of time. The Bible consists of the *unfolding of developing times*” (Herder 1993, 213, FHA 9/1, 83). Because of this world-historical significance of the Bible, the *history of religion* becomes Herder’s prime pedagogical antidote to theological rationalism (84, 131–132). The Bible’s images and examples convey the infinite in the particular, whereas general philosophical concepts merely present abstractions (104).

Another implication of the hieroglyph-theory is that a divine perspective exists in which the *totality* of world history is grasped (FHA 4, 35, 83). In this life, this perspective can never be ours. And God only reveals himself in forms adjusted to particular historical contexts (18, 48 f.). Furthermore, God does not *intervene* in history directly or supernaturally. God acts through all of nature, and it is the natural development of history which shows that “deity ... takes effect so entirely poured forth, uniform, and invisible *through all its works*” (PW 305, FHA 4, 48). Herder’s God is immanent in all of nature and history and organizes its interconnectedness.

Due to the presence of God in history, an imaginative and engaged perspective on all of the experiences of the human soul throughout history can provide us with hints of providence. The senses and feelings may be our guides here: for Herder, the education of the child functions as a model for God’s instruction of humanity (FHA 5, 250, FHA 9/1, 102). Faith is related to the senses and to feeling. In Herder’s psychology, feeling is a vital aspect of human cognition (FHA 9/1, 84–86, FHA 5, 246–257). Herder thus expounds in *An Prediger* that sensuous faith should be cultured in the right way—through *images* and *history*—rather than dismissed as unphilosophical (FHA 9/1, 100–104, 131; cf. Crowe 2009, 268–269). Furthermore, Herder is convinced that history will appear to the devoted historian as “*the stage of a guiding intention on earth!*, even if we should not be able to see the final intention, the stage of the deity, even if only through *openings* and *ruins of individual scenes*” (PW 299, FHA 4, 42). Herder appreciates the historicity of every individual because he is determined to find hints of this guiding intention in all of history. It is only within this image of creation that individual historical periods have an intrinsic worth. As Herder insists: “Only the *height of revelation offers sight*” (FHA 9/1, 127).

While the difficulty of decipherment is an important connotation of “hieroglyph,” the *Schöpfungshieroglyphe* clearly does not solely refer to the *limits* of human knowledge. In *TTPH*, the seven-step structure of the hieroglyph actually informs the structure of the world-historical development (Pfaff 1983, 409, 415–416). The clearest example is how Herder presents the succession of ancient peoples: the oriental patriarchs occupy the first of the seven positions of the hieroglyph (see fig. 1); the historical development then splits up into an Egyptian (2.) and a Phoenician (3.) position, and returns to one position (4.) with the Greek. Herder is less clear, however, how the more recent periods of world history fit into the second run of the hieroglyph. Furthermore, in *TTPH*, Herder refrains from confirming explicitly that the course of world history is hieroglyphic. Apart from the epistemological restrictions on philosophy of history, theological limitations also play a role here: the course of history should exhibit its intelligibility by itself; Herder is careful that his theology of history does not appear “fanatic.”^{viii} Still, principally the hieroglyph provides Herder with a logic for

binding together the most disparate scenes without *confusing* them ... showing how they *relate* to one another, *grow* out of one another, *lose* themselves in one another, all of them taken individually only moments, only through the progression *means to purposes*—what a *sight!*, what a noble *application of human history!*, what *encouragement to hope*, to *act*, to *believe*, even where one sees *nothing* or *not everything*. (PW 299, FHA 4, 42)

These objectives are not merely important for a theory of history. Rather, they directly inform religious practice (65). Furthermore, the seven-step structure of the hieroglyph provides a principle of divine organization that is qualitatively different from the imposition of abstract categories of moral progress. This is because Herder sees the hieroglyph as a divine *image*; a *Denkbild* for human sensuousness and imagination which connects different elements into an organic whole (FHA 5, 281, 297–298; Graczyk 2014, 74–76). To sum up, Herder bases his alternative model of history in *TTPH* on a sensualistic conception of faith combined with the view that revelation permeates all of history.

Finally, the hieroglyph-theory also helps to understand Herder’s assessment of the present, and thus of the task of the historian. Herder states in *Älteste Urkunde* that on the seventh day, Sabbath, God provided humanity with the education on which all its “*Bildung*” and happiness depends (FHA 5, 285, 289). The seventh step in *TTPH*’s structure of world history most

probably represents Herder's enlightened present (Pfaff 1983, 416). Herder concludes that it is time that humanity turns towards history in order to educate itself and intimate its fate:

If our age is nobly useful in any respect at all then it is “its *lateness*, its *height*, its *prospect!*” ... Philosopher, if you want to honor and benefit your century's situation—the *book of preceding history* lies before you!, *locked* with seven seals, *a miracle book full of prophecy*—the *end of days* has reached you!, read! (PW 337, FHA 4, 85)

2. Ranke's Theological Legitimation of History

Almost sixty years later, Leopold Ranke aimed to liberate the study of history from idealistic philosophy, and to legitimate it as an autonomous “*Wissenschaft*.” He searched for a principle that would explain the tendency of history to oppose the aspirations of philosophy. He summarized it as follows: “History turns with sympathy to the individual ... it likes to attach itself to the conditions of appearance ... it insists on the validity of particular interest. It recognizes the beneficent, the existing, and opposes change which negates the existing. It recognizes even in error its share in truth” (TP 11, AWN 4, 77). Ranke was straightforward about what legitimates this tendency: “It is not necessary for us to prove at length that the eternal dwells in the individual. This is the religious foundation on which our efforts rest. We believe that there is nothing without God, and nothing lives except through God” (TP 11, AWN 4, 77). No further external motivation is necessary for studying history (79). An independent value is ascribed to all historical material.

History can be studied on its own terms because it manifests divine benevolence all by itself (Meinecke 1942, 129–130). The individual appearance has worth because it contains higher principles; the finite because it contains the infinite; the concrete because it contains the abstract (AWN 4, 77). Therefore, universal history is significant not just as the scientific ideal of reaching complete truth but also as a religious accomplishment. The ultimate aim of the historian is to aid humankind in its quest for redemption by uncovering history's hidden meaning (Berding 2005, 43; Gadamer 1960, 215; Hinrichs 1954, 141). Ranke too presents this aim by referring to a divine hieroglyph:

In all of history God dwells, lives and can be recognized. Every deed gives testimony of Him, every moment preaches His name; but most of all ... His presence is plain in the connection of history in the large. God stands there like a holy hieroglyph whose most outer form is apprehended and preserved, perhaps so that He is not lost to more perceptive future centuries ... No matter how it goes and succeeds, let us do our part to unveil this holy hieroglyph! In this way too we serve God, in this way we are also priests and teachers. (TP 4^{ix}, Ranke 1949, 18)

For Ranke, any historical appearance has its own relation to the divine. In this way, the infinite can be found in its individual character. Thus the historical particular is autonomous from philosophical speculation about timeless ideas and linear progress. For Ranke the infinite is also captured, however, in the connections between all ages. In this case, the individual carries value to the extent that it delivers a contribution to the whole. Hence the value of the individual is determined only indirectly: the historian attempts to situate the individual in the totality of world history (AWN 4, 297; Krieger 1977, 15-19; Meinecke 1942, 131–132). But this totality itself remains an ideal: “God alone knows world history. We recognize the contradictions—‘the harmonies,’ as an Indian poet says, ‘known to the Gods, but unknown to men;’ we can only divine, only approach from a distance” (TP 15, AWN 4, 83).

Ranke’s general organization of world history seems structured along a vertical and a horizontal plane. On the vertical plane, there is an immediate relation between God and every individual epoch (TP 2, AWN 4, 60). That is to say, in every epoch, there is a direct “upwards” relation towards God, and God looks down upon every epoch, and sees that it is good. On the horizontal plane, the epochs stand in various relations to each other. Ranke assumes that the succession of historical periods is identical with the divine order of creation (Ranke 1949, 102, 519; Meinecke 1942, 149). Thus Ranke too posits a providential course of world history.

Herder frames the relationship between *individuality* and *development* in a similar way when he states that “no thing in the whole of God’s realm ... is *only* a means—everything is *means* and *end* simultaneously” (PW 310, FHA 4, 54). Whereas it is legitimate to assess the function of individual periods, all periods preserve an intrinsic purposefulness. Historical periods are situated in immediate relation to God vertically, and ordered in a providential sequence horizontally. Furthermore, Herder likewise identifies the providential sequence with the general divine order of creation:

If the *residential house* reveals a “*divine image*” ... how not the *history of its resident*? The former only decoration!, picture in a *single act, view*! The latter an “*endless drama of scenes*!, an *epic of God’s through all millennia, parts of the world, and human races, a thousand-formed fable full of a great meaning!*” (PW 336, translation modified, FHA 4, 82–83)

In this endless drama, scenes carry meaning both in themselves and in relation to each other. But in addition, they *also* all together strive for a final and transcendent end. The individuality of phenomena is always the product of specific historical *developments*. Yet the notion of development invariably points beyond the individual phenomenon, and allows one to assess its value in terms of its effect, its *contribution* (32). Ultimately, historical significance is defined in terms of outcome (Gadamer 1960, 207). And in their visions of history and salvation, Herder and Ranke formulate expectations regarding the future that lie outside of history (*contra* Koselleck 1975, 674–675; Sikka 2011, 116–125; cf. Löwith 1949, 5–6).

Another way to frame the relation between individuality and development, therefore, is with reference to two onto-theological positions: the panentheism according to which God is present everywhere in creation, and the more traditional Christian position that places salvation (and hence the ultimate meaning of history) beyond history. Both Herder and Ranke relied on versions of panentheism in their arguments for individuality. But regarding the future, the principle of *development* demands a thicker metaphysics: a final end must remain unreached, so that the future may preserve a certain promise. This results in a tension between evaluating the particular from the perspective of the divine and from the perspective of a final end. Pointing at the unknown nature of the latter relieves this tension to some extent. In the next section, I sketch some of the concrete structures of world history that Herder and Ranke relied on in their attempts at reconciling these conflicting tendencies.

3. Individuals and Analogies in World History

Previous research has observed that Ranke “applied to history the antinomy characteristic of his romantic age: the idea of an individual reality which was at one and the same time unique in itself and, like other individuals, a manifestation of a universal principle” (Krieger 1977, 16). This “antinomy” had played a major role in German Enlightenment thought ever since Leibniz

had put forward his conception of the monad, and already Ernst Cassirer examined how Herder incorporated Leibniz' idea of individuality in his philosophy of history (Cassirer 1916, 116–121). In this section I will indicate how Herder and Ranke dealt with the antinomy of individual and totality in their accounts of universal history.

Key to their theorizing is that the “universal principle” is not *abstract* but a holistic whole, a “higher-order individual” (Cassirer 1916, 119; Heinz 1994, 83). This is because the historian's attempt to find unity in history is supposed to be distinct from the philosopher's projection of linear progress onto history. Thus, the universal must not be deduced out of higher principles and projected onto history. Rather, the universal is expressed in the particular, and presents itself to the historian who approaches the particulars of history from the right stance (FHA 4, 32–33; AWN 4, 78, 83, 87–88). Furthermore, the historian, in connecting different ages or nations, must not rely on unifying notions that are specific and local. Instead, the interconnectedness and meaning of world history is *revealed* to the historian by pious faith and divination. It follows that the organization of history can merely be *indicated* by analogies, and not be demonstrated from principles. After all, God is present in history (only) in the form of a hieroglyph. Herder and Ranke both attempted to intimate God's plan and stressed its ultimate indiscernibility.

Only by analogies can the *direction* of history's providential development be hypothetically identified. Both Herder and Ranke use the image of a river to convey that the course of history does not depend on predetermined principles; history is “moving more like a river which in its own way determines its course” (TP 22, AWN 2, 62). Other aspects that play a role in this analogy involve the source and the mouth of the river of history. Ranke, for instance, assumes that this river flows from an “active source of life,” an “existence kindred to God,” and that it searches for “the world-sea” (Ranke 1949, 110). And Herder describes “how it sprang forth from a little source, grows, breaks off there, begins here, ever meanders, and bores further and deeper—but always remains *water!*, *river current!*, drop always only drop, until it plunges into the ocean” (PW 299, FHA 4, 41). In this depiction, too, the image of the river suggests that history started with a *Fall* from a source and is ultimately directed at salvation. Of course, this future “end” is far removed from the present and closed off from philosophical speculation (101). But it does not leave the future entirely *open* either.

According to the tree-analogy, history grows out of a seed which, after falling in the earth, first develops in its depths (11). In Herder's *TTPH*, ancient history proceeds from Patriarchal roots along an Egyptian, Phoenician, and Greek stem, and then branches out due to Roman expansion politics (31). As already became apparent in the context of how the *Schöpfungshieroglyphe* guides world history, Herder remains ambiguous about (early) modernity. Still, the tree-analogy implies that the *present's* high and thin branches allow for a better view of the whole (70, 84, 95). It also suggests that new human processes of development may start from the tree's seeds, and that cyclical movements in history co-exist with natural development (42–43; Meinecke 1936, 410). When Ranke speaks of history as a tree, he stresses that the leaves are all interconnected through their common root (Hinrichs 1954, 145; but cf. FHA 4, 56). The tree represents the beauty of diversity; the plurality of nations that are isolated and still ultimately all connected. In *TTPH*, the image of the tree appears in tandem with the “*Lebensalter*” (life-stages) of humanity (41). This analogy, between how one human being and humanity as a whole develop, shows paradigmatically how individuality and totality are reconciled (16, FHA 9/1, 84). The *Lebensalter* of the “macro-Anthropos” provide a concrete way of conceptualizing humanity's historical development (Heinz 1994, 83). History as described by the analogy is thus progressive—humanity matures, ages, and produces offspring—but the standards for measuring such progress differ with each life-stage.

4. Relativistic Themes

In *Der Historismus und seine Probleme (Historicism and its Problems)* Ernst Troeltsch claims that Ranke managed to avoid pessimism only “by holding on to admittedly pretty obscure left-overs of the Christian faith concerning revelation and salvation” (Troeltsch 1922, 123). In his assessment of the foundational status of Herder's 1774 *TTPH* for German historicism, Frederick Beiser similarly adds the following caveat:

There is also a shadowy side to Herder's legacy, which bestowed upon the historicist tradition not only central themes but also basic problems. The worst problem was relativism, i.e., how there could be universal standards if all values are cultural and historical. While Herder clearly sees this problem and struggles to avoid it, he offers nothing toward its solution but religious faith, an appeal to providence. It was a desperate strategy; but also the precedent for Humboldt, Ranke and Droysen. (Beiser 2011, 132)

Beiser and Troeltsch exemplify a general pattern of theorizing about relativism and historicism. According to this pattern, historicists inevitably face the problem of relativism; and every historicist needs to adopt strategies for *countering* this relativism.^x

This paper defends two connected claims regarding this supposedly necessary connection between historicism and the problem of relativism. First, Herder and Ranke's theology of history provides the monist basis which underlies their view of history. Thus Herder and Ranke were no relativists. Second, it is misleading to interpret their theology of history as a "counter-strategy" against relativism. Because of Herder and Ranke's theology of history the problem of relativism never became pressing in the first place.

As I have emphasized in the above sections, Herder and Ranke were strongly optimistic about the worth of all human history. This optimism was inspired by their theology of history. It may have come to appear as a "desperate strategy" to us. But rather than being "left-overs of the Christian faith concerning revelation and salvation," this theology of history was essential to Herder's and Ranke's conceptions of history. In the remainder of this chapter, I will explain how Herder's and Ranke's theses on prima-facie relativistic themes—*historicity*, *individuality*, *equal validity*, and *impartiality*—are best understood as *expressions of* religious faith rather than as problems that need to be *countered by* faith. These theses strikingly diverge from what most historical relativists would later claim.^{xi}

Historicity

While, according to Herder and Ranke, events and societies should indeed be approached as the products of history, still, all historical phenomena are primordially the products of God. And although this dependence upon God's provenience should not lead to strict determinism, and God does not directly interfere in history, it does not leave historical phenomena merely contingent either (cf. FHA 4, 48; Ranke 1828, 198). Rather, concrete historical phenomena express the infinite.

For Herder, the history of human culture is a history of God's education of humanity. Every moral character, no matter how different from ours, expresses a stage in this education, and is thus *human* and *moral*. And when the character of a certain people does appear immoral to us, *theodicy* steps in: Herder praises God's *diverse methods* for the education of the human soul

and reprimands his contemporaries' shortsightedness (FHA 4, 15, 51). Furthermore, Herder defends practices that were perceived as immoral by his contemporaries in at least three ways, all of which refer to the divine dimension of world history. First, he places practices within their historical context, and explains why they appear *less unethical* when appropriately situated (53). This move involves a critique of Herder's contemporaries' tendency to rely exclusively on their own value-system. Herder instead claims that God's wisdom is reflected in the immensely diverse field of human-historical possibilities (106). Second, Herder states that some evils are necessary for historical development, or to make room for virtues that would otherwise not have been possible (36, 87–88). Finally, Herder refers to our cognitive limitations with respect to "contingency, fate, divinity": we are ultimately incapable of evaluating God's ways regarding world history in its entirety. This is why it happens that frequently we cannot, from our perspective, see beyond the *seeming* contingency of events (58).^{xii}

More generally, in their theodicies, Herder and Ranke unequivocally adhere to certain permanent core values. The history of humanity has a stable human subject across historical changes; it is this subject which takes on diverse human shapes.^{xiii} Ranke even allows "certain unchangeable eternal main ideas, for instance those of morality"—even though he denies that we can use these ideas to measure moral progress (TP 21–22, AWN 2, 61).

Individuality and Incommensurability

According to Herder and Ranke, the historian's task is to trace the development of human practices, and to understand them in their own context as well as in comparison with others. As a result of this genetic and comparative procedure, some aspects of these practices appear completely individual and in fact extremely difficult to compare with anything else.^{xiv} An important implication of this undertaking seems to be that cultures are understood as isolated wholes and that their values are centered on their "core." This would make intercultural understanding very difficult at best.

And yet, according to Herder and Ranke's theology of history, God thinks of all individualities as forming an ultimate harmony. The historian in turn emulates this ideal in searching for the interconnectedness of universal history, and by attempting to delineate a unified world-historical process. Thus Herder confidently asserts, against Voltaire's critique of the Middle Ages, that this period was simultaneously "*only like itself*," an "*individual condition of the world!*" as well as striving "towards a *greater whole*" (PW 207, FHA 4, 51). And Ranke states:

“The historian must ... perceive the difference between the individual epochs, in order to observe the inner necessity of the sequence” (TP 22, AWN 2, 62). Herder and Ranke were confident that the sequence of history, just like the course of nature, can ultimately be justified in terms of theodicy. History’s providential organization is visible to the same extent as the order of nature is visible: like the book of nature, history is hieroglyphic, but (ultimately) readable. The historian’s task is to connect letters and words into a meaningful sequence where “everything occurs in its proper place” (PW 342, FHA 4, 90). The ideal historian would “learn to see the value of ages that we now despise”; “show us a *plan* where we formerly found *confusion*”; and present “prospects of a higher than *human this-worldly existence*” (PW 342, translation modified, FHA 4, 89–90).

Equal Value and Equal Rights

Probably the most notorious aspect of relativism is the idea that all cultural frames are of equal value. This idea can take many forms; here it is useful to distinguish between the metaphysical claim that all value-systems are (in fact) equal, and the methodological imperative to treat them *as if* they were all of equal value.^{xv} Generally, the idea is considered to be motivated by the relativistic reasoning that since there is no absolute standpoint from which cultures can be ranked, they are all of equal worth. To this reasoning, anti-relativists respond with the “self-refutation argument,” which takes the form of the question: if there is no absolute standpoint, then from which perspective could we possibly assert that all cultures are equal?

Ranke would have no problems at all in answering this question. But this is because he does not share one of the relativist’s premises: “I picture the deity—since no time lies before it—as surveying all of historic mankind in its totality and finding it everywhere of equal value” (TP 22, AWN 2, 62–63). For Ranke, God’s perspective is the standpoint from which equal value is distributed. In modern epistemological terms, this is an absolutist move. In theological terms, it refers to the limitations of our finite condition and to the belief that, unlike us, God is able to appreciate every aspect of creation. Nonetheless, from his theological claim involving an absolute standpoint, Ranke does infer the methodological imperative to treat all of historical humanity in the same manner. For he says in the same passage: “Before God all generations of men appear endowed with equal rights, and this is how the historian should view matters” (TP 22, AWN 2, 63). These “equal rights” do not demand that the historian actually *sees* all generations as of equal value—for Ranke, this is humanly impossible: human knowers will

always have their own standpoint as well. What is more, Ranke himself clearly ranked nations, and even denied some the status of culture (85).

Herder's view is slightly different: He dismisses the idea of a state of nature, and claims that every human way of life is cultural. Moreover, he does not adhere to the idea of the *equal* value of cultures (Spencer 2012, 110). But like Ranke, he does consider all human cultures to have an autonomous value, and to deserve equal rights in historical research. And these assertions are made from God's point of view.

Impartiality and Empathy

The methodological implications of the notion of "equal rights" deserve separate treatment. Ranke's principle of *impartiality* has come to stand for the idea that historians should "extinguish" themselves so that the objects of historical enquiry can "speak for themselves" (Beiser 2011, 277).^{xvi} Ranke intended to make historiography more objective. Yet in the debates on historicism and relativism, this ideal of objectivity has been identified with the inability to make any value judgments. Due to the attempt to eclipse all subjective elements of judgment, critical judgment becomes impossible. Herder's notion of "*Einfühlung*" (empathy) has been criticized for the same reason. By fully entering the other's perspective, the historian would become interminably tolerant.^{xvii} Nothing seems left to say except that every party is right according to their own standards.

In reality, Herder and Ranke did consider it possible for historians to evaluate their material. It is useful to distinguish between two forms of moral judgment that are important in interpreting Herder and Ranke. The first form consists of the regular human capacity to criticize injustice. In Herder's case this happens according to the core values derived from human nature; in Ranke's case according to the "eternal main ideas of morality." The second form of moral judgment is of a higher sort. Here the historian recognizes the divine nature of human historical existence. These two forms can both be found in Herder's historiographical practice (e.g. FHA 4, 53). Furthermore, Ranke states that the impartial historian approaches any conflict by viewing both sides "on their own ground, in their own environment, so to speak, in their own particular inner state. We must understand them before we judge them" (TP 14, AWN 4, 81). Impartiality thus stands explicitly in the service of evaluation (Beiser 2011, 278–279). Furthermore, complete impartiality has to remain an ideal (Berding 2005, 49). Nevertheless, the historian is meant to emulate a higher ideal of passing judgment. Ranke asks: "We can

identify error, but where is there no error? This will not lead us to condemn what exists. Next to the good we recognize evil; but this evil is human too” (AWN 4, 81).

To sum up, Herder and Ranke both identify the following steps in the historian’s judgment. First, they recognize that we are all situated and prejudiced. Impartiality and empathy are consequently meant to broaden our horizon so that we expand our understanding beyond the received opinions. Yet this methodological ideal does not lead *us* to grasping the equal validity of all of historical humanity. We do pass moral judgment after our investigations. Nevertheless, in the end, we have to attempt to recognize the human character and the function in history’s providential course even of amoral practices. Thus ultimately Ranke and Herder both seek to treat worldly evil in a merciful way. This ideal of mercy stems from the belief that God will forgive. For God, the whole of humanity has (equal) value, even if certain periods are obviously less virtuous or pious than others. The historian will never be able to forgive perceived wrongs as mercifully as does God. Still, Herder and Ranke show tolerance towards historical and cultural others precisely because they expect to find absolute value spread out across different forms of human life.

5. Conclusion

In their philosophies of history, Herder and Ranke share a providential conception of world history, and a view of redemption as the uncertain or open telos for humanity. This theology of history informs many aspects of their work. It provides historical individualities with an autonomous significance. And it simultaneously promises that the providential character of universal history can at least be intimated. Finally, it makes the task of the historian akin to that of the priest.

As a result, the starting-points from which Herder and Ranke approached themes like historicity, individuality, (equal) validity, and impartiality were different from how philosophers around 1900 assessed historicist theses.^{xviii} Accordingly, I interpret the positions of Herder and Ranke on these themes not as aspects of a relativistic position, nor as strategies for countering a slide into relativism. Herder and Ranke’s philosophy of history had a monist foundation in theology, and their theses on the value of history show that they were no relativists. Rather, when Herder and Ranke searched the value of *all* of history, and to judge mercifully, they performed a religious task. This task was to uncover the ultimate meaning of

history, and to preserve partial hints of the divine for future generations. It was a project that “we” later abandoned. But for Herder and Ranke, it was not a “desperate strategy” against relativism, and it was based on more than mere “obscure left-overs of Christian faith.”

Abbreviations

References to Herder are to FHA: *Frankfurter Herder-Ausgabe* (Herder 1985–2000), referring to volumes and pages; translations are from PW: *Philosophical Writings* (Herder 2002). Unless indicated otherwise, references to Ranke are to AWN: *Aus Werk und Nachlass* (Ranke 1964–1975), also referring to volumes and pages; translations are from TP: *The Theory and Practice of History* (Ranke 2011).

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ⁱ For other interpretations that highlight the importance of theology in Herder and Ranke, see Pfaff (1983); Menze (2000); Hinrichs (1954); Krieger (1977); Berding (2005).

ⁱⁱ On Baghrarian’s list are: empiricism, diversity, respect and tolerance, the identification of reason with practices and language-use, tradition and incommensurability. Relevant aspects

on Kusch's list are: dependence, plurality, exclusiveness, (some form of) equal validity, contingency, and tolerance.

ⁱⁱⁱ In this paper I will restrict myself to the relevant texts of the early Herder (up till 1774), and I will focus on the methodological reflections in the introductions of Ranke's lecture courses. My comparison of their works is chiefly instrumental to the systematic aim of this paper. It necessarily glosses over important differences.

^{iv} The genre of 'philosophy of history' was still very young, the term being coined in 1765 with Voltaire's "*La Philosophie de l'Histoire*." Speculation about history in its totality was of course much older, reaching back to the Bible. It was heavily practiced by Enlightenment historians and philosophers alike; Herder considered *This Too a Philosophy of History* a response to a current fad (Koselleck 1975, 658–678; Kondylis 1981, 421–468).

^v These criticisms have been analyzed in great detail by Gjesdal (2017, 151–178) and Sikka (2011, 84–125).

^{vi} References to English translations will be amended with a reference to the corresponding German editions. All other translations are my own.

^{vii} Hence I think that in Herder's case, 'genetic explanation' should be differentiated more sharply from the more general notion of 'historicization' (see Beiser 1987, 141–2).

^{viii} The difficulties in converging on an interpretation are hence unsurprising: see Bengtson (2010, 284), Gaier (1988, 73), and Pfaff (1983, 415–417), whose accounts of how the hieroglyph functions as an ordering principle look very different.

^{ix} I modified the translation after consulting Beiser (2011, 281) and Krieger (1977, 13).

^x Cf. Iggers on Herder (1983, 36) and Ranke (78). See also Kinzel's paper in this volume for how Wilhelm Windelband and Wilhelm Dilthey equated historicism with relativism.

^{xi} I cannot provide the ultimate comprehensive definition of historical relativism and so I cannot exclude the possibility that connections to *some* form of historical relativism remain. But the following discussion of various relativistic themes does aim to distinguish Herder and Ranke's theses from a fairly wide net of relativist positions.

^{xii} The providential course of the development does not demand evil as such. It merely demands a general dynamic in history. Hence even events which seem counter-productive to us must be considered good in some indiscernible way. This doctrine would come to be known as the "*Heterogonie der Zwecke*" (heterogony of ends) (Meinecke 1936/1946, 414; Kondylis 1981/2002, 631).

^{xiii} For a more detailed analysis of how Herder thinks humanity shifts shape throughout history and nonetheless remains the same, see Wildschut (2018).

^{xiv} At least this is how I interpret Herder's method, see Wildschut (under review). Ranke seems to posit "individuality" more straightforwardly as a principle of history that opposes the principles of philosophy (AWN 4, 76–77).

^{xv} For a taxonomy of other possible versions see Kusch (2016, 107).

^{xvi} See Kusch's contribution to this volume for Simmel's critique of Ranke on this point.

^{xvii} Gjesdal recently presented an extensive critique of this interpretation (2017, esp. 154–166).

^{xviii} See Kondylis (1981, 615–636) for a convincing explanation of how Herder embraced the empirical and historical with "*umgekehrten Vorzeichen*" because of his radically optimistic ontology.