

This is the penultimate draft of a paper that is forthcoming in *Herder Yearbook XIV*

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Proteus and the Pyrrhonists. Historical Change and Continuity in Herder's Early Philosophy of History¹

In seinen frühen Arbeiten setzt Herder regelmäßig die Proteusfigur ein, um die geschichtlichen Verwandlungen des Menschen und der Produkte des menschlichen Geistes zu schildern. Die Figur scheint zunächst in eine skeptische oder auch relativistische Richtung zu weisen (und wurde in Interpretationen von Herders Frühwerk oft so gedeutet). Eine textnahe Lektüre der Herderschen Verwendung der Figur und eine Analyse seiner Anknüpfungen an die Rezeptionsgeschichte des Proteus-Mythos ergeben aber ein anderes Bild. Sich auf Nebenbedeutungen der Proteusfigur wie die ‚Urmaterie‘ und die ‚Divination‘ stützend, verweist Herder gerade mit dieser Figur auf die Einheit in der Vielheit.

In dieser Arbeit werden, nach einer kurzen historischen Darstellung der verschiedenen Deutungen der Proteusfigur, drei Methoden identifiziert und analysiert, die Herder anwendet, um anhand von Proteus die Einheit in der Vielheit einsichtig zu machen. Erstens geht es um den Versuch, anhand von Analogien die *Verbindung* aller historischen Gestalten der Menschheit aufzudecken. Zweitens wird erklärt, wie Herder durch die genetische Erklärung der Ursachen der historischen Verwandlung von menschlichen Sprachen und Kulturformen sich ihrer gegenwärtigen Form verstehend annähert. Drittens spielt Proteus eine wichtige Rolle in Herders Verständnis der Endlichkeit und Plastizität der menschlichen Natur sowie ihrer providentiellen *Bildung* durch die ganze Weltgeschichte hindurch. Gemeinsam ist den drei Strategien, dass Herder stets eine doppelte Polemik, sowohl gegen den Pyrrhonismus als auch gegen den Ethnozentrismus, führt. Die Hauptthese dieser Arbeit lautet, dass Proteus für Herder eine geeignete Denkfigur darstellt, um die Fehler beider Positionen zu vermeiden. Dabei ist es wichtig festzuhalten, dass nicht nur die Einheit und die Vielheit, sondern auch die anthropologischen und theologischen Aspekte von Herders Frühwerk auf diese Weise zusammengedacht werden können.

I call upon Proteus,
key-holding master of the sea,
first-born, who showed
the beginnings of all nature,
changing matter
into a great variety of forms.
Honored by all, he is wise,
and he knows what is now,
what was before,
and what will be in the future.
He has all at his disposal,
transformed far beyond
all other immortals
who dwell on snowy Olympos
and fly through the air
and over land and sea,
for Physis was the first to place
everything in Proteus.
Orphic Hymns, 0-400 AD
(Athanasakis, Wolkow 2013, 23)

The highest spiritual beings were, from the very moment of creation, or soon thereafter, fixed in the mode of being which would be theirs through measureless eternities. But upon man, at

¹ This work was supported by the European Research Council (Project: The Emergence of Relativism, Grant No: 339382).

the moment of his creation, God bestowed seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him [...] Who then will not look with awe upon this our chameleon, or who, at least, will look with greater admiration on any other being? This creature, man, whom Asclepius the Athenian, by reason of this very mutability, this nature capable of transforming itself, quite rightly said was symbolized in the mysteries by the figure of Proteus.
Pico, *Oration on the Dignity of Man* (1487) (Pico 1956, 8-9)

Proteus was a Homeric god of the sea who could prophecy about past and future to those who caught him, but who changed shape in order to escape from his pursuers. The idea of Protean shape-changing pulls strongly in two opposite directions: on the one hand, it can be used to read Johann Gottfried Herder's early texts as a prototype of post-modern analyses that "question the very category of the 'subject' as the locus of representation" due to the inescapability of change and *difference* (Leventhal 1994, 165). On the other hand, the myth of Proteus presents a god whose identity is preserved despite the constant change of shape – the identity of a god who could be forced to use his power of prophecy.

In this paper, I aim to show that Herder's repeated invocations of Proteus in his early works (1765-1774) did not merely point in the first direction, but very much relied on a web of positive connotations drawn from Proteus' illustrious nature. Undeniably, 'Protean change' fits well into the arsenal of concepts describing the ontological and/or anthropological state of Heraclitean flux, difference and historicity employed by philosophers like Foucault and Derrida. In scholarship on Johann Gottfried Herder's historical thought, his references to the mythical figure of Proteus have mainly been interpreted as referring to this, or more specifically to the advent of historicism and the announcement of the problem of relativism.² My aim is to provide a more balanced understanding of the function of Proteus in Herder's early philosophy of history in the following way. First, I provide the relevant historical context necessary to assess the significance and the different connotations of the myth. Second, and in order to distinguish the different shapes that Proteus takes on in Herder's works, I trace Herder's use of the metaphor of Proteus through his early writings. In my analysis, I identify three different manners in which Herder uses the positive identity underlying Proteus' changes in order to reconcile the One and the Many, and I connect them to different aspects of the historical tradition.

² I will discuss some of these accounts in more detail below. Herder's references to Proteus are mentioned (but seldom discussed in any detail) here: Gjesdal 2017, 51-52; Noyes 2015, 32, 56; Sikka 2011, 38, 250; Beiser 2011, 106-107; Irmischer 2009, 23-24; Herz 1996, 227; Leventhal 1994, 167; Norton 1991, 72, 80; Morton 1989, 41; Heizmann 1981, 42; Meinecke 1946, 395.

The problem of this paper can be set out along the lines of *two topoi* of Herder's early philosophy of history: on the one hand the doubting philosophers known as *Pyrrhonists*, and on the other the mythological figure of Proteus. According to Herder, the Pyrrhonists take plain historical phenomena to absurd conclusions that bring complete disillusionment regarding truth, beauty, and the good. Proteus, by contrast, exemplifies Herder's own *non-skeptical* manner of accommodating the mentioned historical phenomena: Proteus represents both the radical change and the absolute unity of humanity. My main theses will thus be that there is an identity underlying Proteus' very different shapes and that it is because of his trust in this identity that Herder sees no merit in philosophical skepticism.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, I will introduce the tension that arises from Herder's various criticisms of misguided universalisms on the one hand, and his anti-skepticism on the other. I will show that for Herder, skepticism is a principally flawed mode of philosophizing that diverts the necessary analysis of our natural (and historical) certainties into a fruitless search for metaphysical demonstrations of particular doctrines. Second, a brief history of the antique and early modern uses of the Proteus figure will show that the proverb of Protean mutability traditionally had both very pejorative and pristine connotations, drawn from, for example, various myths and from alchemy. In the third section, I will examine Herder's use of the metaphor of Proteus from his 1764 *Essay on a History of Lyrical Poetry* up till his 1774 treatise *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity*. My analysis in this section is divided into three subsections that each single out a distinctive strategy for reconciling unity and diversity in Herder's texts. This examination is meant to facilitate a discussion of those passages in Herder's early works where he brings out the tension between the universal and the particular most forcefully and seeks to preclude its skeptical implications.

I The Problem: Situatedness and Anti-skepticism

Observations concerning historical diversity were already gathered by Herder in the 1766 fragment *On the Change of Taste*. Traditionally, it was the Pyrrhonists who relied on these observations to raise philosophical problems, paradigmatically concerning the general possibility of truth and morality. In his text, Herder mentioned them by name: "Among the ancients, the Pyrrhonists and the Academic sect" and "[a]mong the moderns, La Mothe le

Vayer, Montaigne, and Hume” (Herder 2002, 248; FHA 1, 151³). The argumentative “modes” of Pyrrhonism, aimed at inducing “suspension of judgment”, included for example “one based on the differences among human beings”; “based on the differences in constitution of the sense organs”; “on the circumstances”; “on positions, distances and locations”; and “on ways of life, customs and laws, mythic beliefs and dogmatic opinions” (Sextus Empiricus 1996, 94). Like the Pyrrhonists, Herder wanted philosophy to be guided by the insights of history (FHA 1, 159; Imscher 2009, 41-42; Gaier 1988, 42-33). He thus relied on the same observations of diversity and change as they did in their argumentative modes against dogmatism. Nevertheless, Herder’s own intention from the beginning was to think through the implications of historical change without allowing skeptical conclusions. He emphasizes in his introduction:

I do not believe that I am writing this page for doubters: so I shall let all the aforementioned men rest in peace. I merely want to gather historical examples of how far the diversity of human beings can extend, to bring it into categories, and then to try to explain it. (Herder 2002, 248-249; FHA 1, 151)

Contrary to the Pyrrhonist mode of taking *difference* as signaling the need to suspend judgment, then, Herder interprets the diversity of phenomena as an *invitation* to collect, order and evaluate them all.

Rather than being an issue of whether the skeptics can ultimately be refuted philosophically, Herder’s anti-skepticism was unequivocally moral and meta-philosophical.⁴ Hence my interpretation is at odds with Sonia Sikka’s assessment that “while Herder occasionally expresses some concern about the possibility of an evaluative ‘skepticism’ that ‘would almost confuse us into not trusting our own tastes and sensibilities,’ the real danger in his society is not such skepticism, but ethnocentrism. It is against this danger that his remarks are most often directed” (Sikka 2011, 27). Sikka is right in saying that Herder combated various intellectual and also ethical sins of his contemporaries that can be summarized under the label of ‘ethnocentrism’.⁵ And yet I will argue that Herder showed an *equally strong* anti-skepticism.⁶ In this section, I first set out the *tension* between Herder’s anti-skepticism and his

³ References to English translations will be amended with a reference to the corresponding German editions.

⁴ My approach is thus slightly different from interpretations of Herder’s philosophy of history venturing to assess whether certain arguments suffice to systematically *refute* the skeptic (e.g. Beiser 1987, 144; Beiser 2011, 139; Jacobs 1994, 65, 68). I focus on the meta-philosophical reasons Herder had to preclude skepticism as a viable way to do philosophy (cf. Kondylis 2002, 635; Spencer 2012, 104; Gjesdal 2017, 88-89).

⁵ Note that ‘ethnocentrism’ here is a pejorative analysts’ concept. Furthermore, despite affirmation of this label by Richard Rorty, I take Sikka and others to be correct in their interpretation of Herder’s anti-ethnocentrism from the angle of anthropological theory (Sikka 2011, 42; Spencer 2012, 71, 101).

⁶ In this paper I use ‘skepticism’ and ‘Pyrrhonism’ interchangeably and thus ignore the wide *variety* of (historical and contemporary) skeptical and Pyrrhonist positions. For the purposes of the historical reconstruction of

critique of ethnocentrism. Subsequently, I will argue in the rest of this paper that, in fact, Herder's arguments were always directed against *both* ethnocentrism and skepticism and that this is because he considered the two to be closely *related*.⁷

Basic aspects of the misguided attitude that would later be known as ethnocentrism are presented by Herder as follows: unaware of how far historical diversity actually extends, people tend to respond to differences in taste and manner of thought with disbelief and dismissal (FHA 1, 149-150). The mistaken belief that there are no real sensible alternatives leads them to think their own viewpoint is necessary and universal (ibid., 159). Yet unfortunately, “[t]wo looks at history dissolve this prejudice”, and show that actually people around the world have the same tendency to dismiss out of hand anything that is foreign to their own very diverse beliefs (Herder 2002, 255; FHA 1, 159). So Herder concludes, “thus do we see among nations and private individuals a contention of viewpoints which perplexes a wise man and makes him uncertain whether, then, all these fanatical people know what they are contending about” (ibid., 248; 150).

The task of history, for Herder, is to battle the tendency to fanaticism through acknowledgment of the omnipresence of prejudice and intolerance and a better understanding of their respective mechanisms. Herder considers his own century to be in a special situation, since so much more information about distant nations and ages has become available than was before. But he finds that his contemporaries still lack a properly reflective attitude towards all these new discoveries inscribed in historical documents and travelogues (FHA 4, 88-91; Gjesdal 2017, 166-168). A first step towards achieving this is identifying the precise point of contention between all different viewpoints. This point consists in the *alleged universality and necessity* of one's own perspective. Herder suggests that the conflict of viewpoints can be resolved once people understand that they are contending about an allegedly exclusive universal validity of their own viewpoints that does not really exist in this form.

Herder's criticisms show there are different ways in which this error can be made. We might simply take our own manner of thought to represent the *triad* of the true, beautiful and good, or we take one that is actually foreign to us as universally representative and hence as ideal for us (the paradigmatic case for this was of course the treatment of the Greek in the

Herder's anti-skepticism, I consider this permissible, because Herder brings them all together under the heading of 'doubting'.

⁷ My interpretation draws on Panajotis Kondylis' correct assessment that it was precisely in order to remove skeptical doubt about the meaning of history that Herder criticized Enlightenment progressivism and ethnocentrism (Kondylis 2002, 635).

Querelle).⁸ Or we might insist that the unchanging *triad* is the product of a purely philosophical demonstration, or of fundamental feelings, or that it has a divine origin.⁹ Or we assume that our national language represents a metaphysical ordering of concepts; or that our alphabet is a divine invention.¹⁰ Some of these assertions are generalizations from empirical data, while others look like *a priori* deductions. Herder's point is, in fact, that all are empirical overgeneralizations made from our own historical standpoint. To uncover the error, Herder attempts to exhibit how manners of thought have, during their development, gone through a range of shapes (cf. Noyes 2015, 34; Gjesdal 2017, 89-91).

At the same time, however, Herder aims to counter the skeptical conclusions which Pyrrhonist philosophers have drawn from the conflict and alteration of perspectives. Philosophically, these conclusions consist of the denial of universal norms for the true, beautiful, and good (FHA 1, 147). For Herder, such skeptical conclusions, qua philosophical theses, are as abstract and ineffective as their positive dogmatic counterparts. Skeptical *Verzweiflung* is a misguided attitude in dealing with the historical facts of cultural diversity (ibid., 19; FHA 4, 40). That is, Herder distinguishes between an observed situation, that of historical change, and the skeptic, who “tied all these scruples together into a knot which they have taken to be beyond untying” (Herder 2002, 248; FHA 1, 150). Herder does not intend to explain away the mentioned phenomena themselves, but neither does he take the tying and untying of Gordian knots to be the right task for philosophy. One year earlier, in *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People*, Herder criticized that “philosophical reason [...] ties knots in order to be able to untie them” (ibid., 11; 113-114). And against the use of school logic in philosophy, Herder argued, “since our times no longer arm themselves with Sorites paradoxes and enthymemes [...] it is just as fruitless a task to concern oneself with the tying and untying of such knots as it is to toss lentils through the eye of a needle” (ibid., 9; 111).

Herder's early works on metaphysics and aesthetics attest that he considered skeptical doubt to be the product of a false conception of what the human mind can achieve in

⁸ These two options are criticized by Herder in e.g. in *On the Change of Taste* and in the *Older Critical Grove*.

⁹ Herder discusses these claims in *How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People*, and in the *Fourth Grove, On Riedel's Theory of the Beaux Arts*, respectively. For the case of divine origins, Herder's critique is concerned with human inventions like e.g. poetry and language, and with morality, but not with beauty and truth. (And also on these themes Herder switches back and forth throughout his career.) Cf. *Essay on a History of Lyrical Poetry*. I will return to this later; the general tension results from the fact that for Herder, we human beings, and the world, are of divine origin.

¹⁰ Criticized in the first collection of *Fragments*, second edition, section seven, and the *Treatise on the Origin of Language*.

philosophy, and, specifically in metaphysics.¹¹ Against the idea of an insulation of philosophy from everyday life, Herder claimed that while our natural certainties keep us on track, unrestrained curiosity and skepticism necessarily set us on an errant path (FHA 1, 11, 19). Just like psychology and ethics should not be the battlefields of the metaphysicians versus the skeptics, so should aesthetics steer clear from an all-or-nothing conception of beauty. Instead, aesthetics should collect, order and explain the products of the healthy human understanding (i.e. its judgments concerning taste), so as to improve its natural strength, and more generally, to educate the public via the study of man (cf. FHA 2, 270-271). In this way, aesthetics can be a vital contribution to the general anthropology that Herder urged philosophy to provide (FHA 1, 134; cf. also 665).

In his *Essay on a History of Lyrical Poetry*, Herder argues against the assumption that the *poetic form* of the Bible is of divine origin because after disproving this “the doubter could stray upon the errant path to assume that the content itself is the product of a passionate imagination” (HWP 1, 23; Herder 1992, 80). In this passage, the religious import of a *doubting* “auf den Irrweg geraten” is manifest: Herder’s anti-skepticism is directly connected to protecting individual souls, and society at large, from irreligion. Herder also depicts the skeptical result in very concrete terms: “Is, then, even what I take to be true true, since hundreds who have an equally good human understanding take it to be false? Is, then, even that beautiful which I imagine so? Can I trust myself?” (Herder 2002, 248; FHA 1, 151). In Herder’s psychology this trust that we have in our natural and sensuous certainties is of the uppermost importance to our lives, and should not be disrupted by philosophical doubt. What’s more, Herder’s defense of these certainties in many passages overlaps with explanations of the positive functions of prejudice – at least during certain periods in the past, and for certain uses, such as developing a national literature – and at some points even with direct defenses of prejudice.

Herder’s anti-skepticism would culminate in *This Too a Philosophy*, where he diagnoses it as a cultural disease of the eighteenth century.¹² Immanuel Kant’s famous nautical depiction in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, of navigating the ship of philosophy away from David Hume’s sands of skepticism, is here prefigured: “Doubt in a hundred *forms*, but all with the dazzling title ‘*based on the history of the world.*’ Contradictions and ocean waves – one suffers shipwreck, or what of

¹¹ Apart from *How Philosophy*, I am thinking here of the *Essay on Being* and the *Fourth Grove* in particular.

¹² Herder mentions by name Michel Montaigne, Pierre Bayle, Voltaire, David Hume and Denis Diderot (FHA 4, 41).

morality and philosophy one saves from the shipwreck is hardly worth talking about” (Herder 2002, 298; FHA 4, 41). Herder’s response to this situation was different from Kant’s: he did not take the threat of skepticism to necessitate a critique of reason in order to establish metaphysics as a science (like Kant did, for example cf. B22 in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant 1998, 147-148). Yet like Kant, he saw skepticism as arising out of a form of dogmatism, namely, out of the ethnocentric assumption that if certain values differ from ours, they are no values at all. Herder endeavored to explain genetically how skepticism arose as a cultural phenomenon out of expectations about philosophy that were both too high and unhistorical. But this does not yet address the problem raised in the introduction: how does Herder nonetheless positively identify the identity of Proteus, which underlies his different shapes? In the following, I intend to establish that Herder’s very conceptions of *change* and diversity are themselves decidedly anti-skeptical.

II Shapes of Proteus

The Proteus metaphor is only one among many analogies adopted by Herder to delineate the *dynamics* of nature and history.¹³ Yet its significance for the issue of unity and diversity has not yet been fully appreciated or analyzed.¹⁴ Herder adopts the metaphor in at least ten texts within the first ten years of his authorship.¹⁵ The figure consistently appears where Herder is most adamant about the radical nature of the effects of historical change. At the same time, I agree with Ulrich Gaier when he states in his commentary to the Frankfurt edition that Proteus represents the changes of a “substantially identical object”, and that it is because of the postulated substantial identity of Proteus that Herder could block skepticism (FHA 1, 1002). I will briefly discuss the main motifs attached to the figure of Proteus that are of importance

¹³ Herder’s use of tropes has been studied extensively (e.g., cf. recently Allert 2016; Simon 2014). A classic analysis was undertaken by Irmscher (1981); metaphorical organicism was studied by Schick (1971); an overview of metaphors used by Herder can be found in Albus (2001, 288-399).

¹⁴ Albus (2001, 374-375) merely lists the different phenomena which Herder called a Proteus; Irmscher (2009, 23-24) does not integrate Herder’s use of the metaphor in his systematic interpretation; a range of interpretations (cf. note 1 above) exclusively connects Proteus to radical change.

¹⁵ Namely: *On Dilligence in the Study of Several Learned Languages, How Philosophy Can Become More Universal and Useful for the Benefit of the People, Fragment of a Treatise on the Ode, On the Change of Taste*, the second edition of the *First Collection of Fragments on Recent German Literature, Critical Forests: Second, Third, and Fourth Grove, Treatise on the Origin of Language*, and *This Too a Philosophy*. Surprisingly, the indexes of the complete edition of Herder’s letters (section “Mythology”) as well as of the *Herder Handbuch* do not mention Proteus.

here, and suggest how they inform Herder's use of the metaphor. Subsequently, I will assess the different ways in which Herder incorporates Proteus in his philosophy of history.

Proteus was a Greek sea-god who appeared in the writings of Homer, Virgil, Euripides, and Ovid. Two important qualities of Proteus are *metamorphosis* and *divination*: "He [...] possessed the gift of prophecy, but was unwilling to disclose what he knew and tried to escape questioners by assuming a variety of shapes, including fire and water and the forms of wild beasts" (Grant 2001, 450-451). Although he was *unwilling* to use his power of prophecy to help human beings, Proteus was not evil, nor completely unreachable: he could be *forced to help*, if tricked in the right way. Furthermore, his shape-shifting only started in response to being approached by human beings who had already recognized him as the sea-god he really was. Menelaus was able to capture him in his sleep after disguising himself as a seal; Aristaeus caught him at noontide (*ibid.*). This is a *Greek manner* of relating to the gods, which Herder would not want unreflectively applied in modern times. Still, as a Homeric metaphor, Proteus has the characteristic of being within reach, despite his shape-changing, as long as he is approached in the right way; and of being able to divine to us the past and the future.

A less positive portrayal of Proteus appeared in Plato's writings, as a characterization of the *sophists* in *Euthydemus* for example. In accordance with the Homeric narrative, it was Socrates' job to bind the Protean sophists and put an end to their deceitful shape-shifting. Yet contrary to the fortune-telling of Homer's Proteus, in Plato's representation the end result was merely negative: "Proteus was an appropriate opponent for the seeker of knowledge because his very nature was opposed to truth" (Burns 2001, 971). Likewise, Socrates accuses the rhapsodist *Ion*: "You literally assume as many forms as Proteus, twisting and turning up and down, until at last you slip away from me" (Plato 1925, 542; cited in Giamatti 1968, 463).

In the reception of this ancient myth from the Renaissance onwards – in discourses on art, science and religion – the following three figures are of central significance. The first was Pico della Mirandola's use of Proteus for his humanistic thesis that "upon man, at the moment of his creation, God bestowed seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him" (Pico 1956, 8). Here, Pico used the figure of Proteus to symbolize the *mutability* that humanity acquired thanks to its position in the center of creation. Furthermore, Pico's syncretic approach to the history of philosophy expressed how humanity should find the One in and through the Many (Giamatti 1968, 440). However, it was crucial for Pico that man's power of self-transformation was not meant to be used for the sake of shape-shifting itself.

Rather, it was the *task* of humanity to use its freedom to choose the highest form of life (and not assume in the great chain of being the position of a plant or an animal).

In a second figure, early modern literary critics and theologians protested against the power of transformation precisely because it violated the stable and lawful order of things. According to a metaphysical conception of life on earth as stably ordered in a chain of being, Protean change was considered (sinfully) transgressive (Zámbóné Kocic 2011, 49-50; Burns 2001, 977-978). Furthermore, as a characterization of human behavior, ‘Protean’ and ‘Proteus’ were used to refer to deceit, hypocrisy, and to an unlawful stepping out of one’s (societal, moral) role – to plagiarism, as well as to perversions of the passions, even rape (Zámbóné Kocic 2011, 53-58; Giamatti 1968, 460, 467).

The third strand of figures turns the negative connotations of Proteus’ mutability back into their opposite. It was derived from alchemy and natural science, where Proteus stood for the ‘first matter’ of nature (Zámbóné Kocic 2011, 59-61). This matter was denominated *first* matter precisely because of its variety of appearances; for remaining the same in all differences. Francis Bacon used this understanding of Proteus to argue for the necessity of scientific experiment – the willful *manipulation* of nature – to decipher nature’s secrets (Burns 2001, 973-974). And John Milton referred to Proteus as first matter in *Paradise Lost* to describe the sun: “That stone, or like to that which here below/ Philosophers in vain so long have sought,/ In vain, though by their powerful art they bind/ Volatile Hermes, and call up unbound/ In various shapes old Proteus from the sea,/ Drained through a limbeck to his native form” (Milton 2005, 96). This passage suggested that Proteus’ ‘native form’ is conserved in his different shapes, in the sense of being “[n]ot all parts like, but all alike informed/ With radiant light” (ibid.). The chemical process of draining through a limbeck (a device for distilling) was aimed to retrieve this original form. Zámbóné Kocic suggests in her dissertation *Protean Vicissitude and Milton’s Paradise Lost* that this passage from Milton can be connected to Pico’s “neoplatonic sentiment” according to which the variety of Proteus’ shapes must be engaged *exhaustively* in order to learn about its essence. That is, another Greek god must be invoked here: “Pan representing the sum of all (‘pan’ being the Greek word for ‘all’), and Proteus, bound and vexed to extremes unfolding the many ‘passages and variations of nature’ (Bacon 1854, 189), are linked in this tradition as embodiments of the unity and multiplicity of nature respectively” (Zámbóné Kocic 2011, 61; cf. Burns 2001, 972). In this way, the discussion of Proteus indirectly points to the metaphysical theme that became so important for Herder especially after Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi had criticized Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s alleged Spinozism: *hen kai pan* (FHA 5, 282-294). Furthermore, the myth

leaves open conceptually whether it is Pan who “transforms himself into a Proteus” in a top-down manner, or Proteus who through his mutations approximates the totality of possible shapes.¹⁶

Finally, it was suggested in seventeenth-century natural philosophy that Proteus’ shape-shifting “paralleled the natural philosopher’s ability to imagine himself in the situation of different natural substances and phenomena” (Burns 2001, 976). This idea would later prove very fruitful for historicist conceptions of historical understanding: as a metaphor for humanity, Proteus may in the end represent both the object of enquiry – distant and diverse human forms – as well as the knower, who feels her way into historical realities.¹⁷

Johann Georg Hamann had (as always) all the exciting references to start off a spirited appropriation of the myth of Proteus in German Enlightenment debates: in his 1761 *Clouds*, he defended his *Socratic Memorabilia* against a review by presenting *himself* as Proteus, hunted down by his reviewer (Hamann 1950, 107). Hamann (in some copies of this work intended for friends) added references to the *Odyssey*, to Plato’s *Euthydemus* and *Ion*, as well as to an ancient version of Proteus as first matter in the so-called *Orphic Hymns* (Rudolph 2008, 409-411). The result is highly elusive, yet two aspects stand out. First, Hamann considered Protean shape-shifting a necessary aspect of his authorship, and he certainly connected this to the *topoi* of Proteus as a poet and a *seer* in his own influential conception of the *genius*.¹⁸ Second, Hamann integrated the figure of Proteus (as well as of Socrates) into a Christology, according to which all of nature and history (including all world literature) can be read as prophetic signs of divine revelation. For Hamann, Proteus is an emblem of God’s capacity to show Himself in creation in various shapes – and one transformation of course stands out: His *Menschwerdung*.¹⁹ It is no accident that Proteus appears again in a quote from Horace one year later, at the climax of the *Aesthetica in Nuce*, in a series of apocalyptic indications of (an ancient version of) the myth of the Flood (Hamann 1950, 216).

¹⁶ The quote is from the Welsh seventeenth-century alchemist Thomas Vaughan (quoted in Burns 2001, 972). Pico is quoted in the same context as having a very explicit opinion on the matter: “He who cannot attract Pan approaches Proteus in vain”.

¹⁷ Cf. Gjesdal (2017, 114-115) on the connection between the methods of *divination* and sympathy in Herder’s hermeneutics. I will expound on this below, yet it may already be noted that Herder used the Latin loanword “*Divination*” in 1768 and 1778 to denote a special kind of feeling and “living reading” (FHA 2, 605; FHA 4, 366).

¹⁸ Rudolph has some difficulty in his interpretation to explain how Hamann appropriated the Plato passages in a positive way. Proteus’ capacity of divination (which Rudolph does not explicitly address) makes this a bit easier (Rudolph 2008, 409-410; cf. Giamatti 1968, 445-450).

¹⁹ In his *Faust* Johann Wolfgang Goethe would let the *homunculus* be sent to Proteus in order to give this mere spirit a human form. I will return to this below.

It is impossible to precisely identify the sources on which Herder relied for his understanding of the Proteus myth. Apart from the aforementioned classical ancient sources, which he undoubtedly knew by heart, in 1764 Herder had discussed the character of the *Orphic Hymns* (HWP 1, 32, 38), and had praised Orpheus in 1774 as the genius poet in which “the whole spirit of nature lives” (FHA 3, 63, my translation). Furthermore, in 1763 and 1769 Herder had also written notes on Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning* (Irmischer, Adler 1979, 197). He had also taken notes from Plato’s *Euthydemus*, where Socrates goes after the Protean sophists.²⁰ In addition, Milton’s *Paradise Lost* was an exemplar for Herder from his first Königsberg commentary on Hamann’s *Aesthetica in Nuce* onwards (FHA 1, 34, 240, 284, 295). Finally, William Shakespeare’s *Two Gentlemen of Verona* and Alexander Pope’s *The Dunciad* may have given examples to Herder of treacherous Proteus figures, who transgressed the natural and/or moral order and misused language to cause confusion (Giamatti 1968, 459-460, 472-474).²¹

In Herder’s own use of the figure, however, a notion is added that (as far as I have been able to determine) was never part of any version of the Proteus myth: a ‘*Zauberspiegel*’. The ancient Hellenistic and Judaistic ritual usage of such a mirror, known as ‘catoptromancy’, was carried out for the purpose of *divination* (Herz 1996, 18). In Herder’s writings, it is either us who attempt to divine Proteus in his different shapes via this magic mirror, or it is Proteus himself who relies on it to take on different shapes. That is, Proteus either appears in constantly changing shapes by way of a mirror, or the mirror is used to catch the identity of Proteus that underlies these different shapes.

The history of the metaphor of mirroring (and of the *image* and the faculty of *reflection*) is far too rich and complicated to recount here. Hopefully it suffices to recall key motifs like the *imago Dei* doctrine, Plato’s distinction between ideas and the phenomena reflecting them, and Leibniz’ idea that the monad reflects all of the universe from its particular perspective.²² The latter idea was particularly pregnant for Herder because it depicted the human soul as an individual *living* mirror – full of particular minute perceptions and simultaneously reflecting

²⁰ They are from a notebook with other notes from 1769, although the Plato editions in the *Bibliotheca Herderiana* are all from the 1780’s (Irmischer, Adler 1979, 201; *Bibliotheca Herderiana* 1979, 1666-1673, 1677, 1685, 1697).

²¹ In a passage of less significance for my over-all interpretation, Herder questions Christian Adolf Klotz’ integrity by claiming that “like a Proteus, he speaks in more than one tongue and language” (Herder 1990, 2 / 1, 444, my translation).

²² Cf. Herz (1996, 13-19, 23-33) for a well-informed discussion of these and various other motifs relevant for interpreting Herder. Cf. also Konersmann (1991, 75-173) for a more comprehensive history in which Herder plays an important role in the formation of modern subjectivity. Again Rorty has a different narrative I cannot confront here, of the *epistemological* use of the mirror metaphor, but cf. Herz (1996, 22-23, 41) for helpful suggestions.

all. Notably, Leibniz' monadology was an effort to combine the greatest unity with the greatest diversity; a reconciliation of Pan and Proteus, so to speak. Relying on the *imago Dei* doctrine, one could subsequently make the inference that just like one God mirrors Himself in all of creation, so does Proteus (humanity) have the ability to mirror itself in different places *and times* (cf. Konersmann 1991, 148-154).²³

Incidentally, mirroring is a distinctive trait of human nature both in Herder's anthropological and in his theological writings. First, Herder's 1769 interpretation of *Genesis* 1, day six, makes it clear that according to a primordial act of mirroring, man was created in God's image (FHA 5, 61; Bellmann 2016, 52-54). Second, (and contrary to traditionally stronger interpretations of the Fall), the *Treatise on the Origin of Language* places humanity's creative capacity of *reflection* in the center in the following way: the human being "becomes free-standing, can seek for himself a sphere for self-mirroring, can mirror himself within himself. No longer an infallible machine in the hands of nature, he becomes his own end and goal of refinement" (Herder 2002, 82; FHA 1, 717). Thus Herder's conception of *humanity* combines Protean shape-shifting with mirroring. In compensation for their lack of animal instinct, human beings have the power and freedom to give their own existence a specific shape. The ultimate purpose of humanity is self-refinement through recognizing oneself in a "*Sphäre der Bespiegelung*", a "*sich in sich bespiegeln*" (ibid.). As a result, the figure of Proteus may, in natural as well as historical enquiry, refer both to the knowing subject and to the object of investigation. And in the case of historical understanding of human practices, this yields a crucial insight: any hermeneutic engagement with historical others is in fact a practice of *self*-mirroring of human beings in different shapes.

Finally, in contrast to Hamann, and like Pico, Herder's Proteus marks the condition of *finitude*, and of all things *human*. The notion of the mirror, too, expresses a theological conception of finitude: finite human beings are never capable of reaching behind reflections and appearances into the essential nature of things. Proteus reflects, in every single shape he takes on, humanity, be it always from a different and particular standpoint. Very much like Pico, then, Herder adopts the metaphor to express the openness of man to many possibilities. The shape-shifting of Proteus represents the historical change of a single human species.

²³ Goethe's *Werther* would write in his fourth letter how human and divine mirroring should mutually reflect each other in the apprehension of sublime nature: "could you breathe onto the paper what lives so fully, so warmly within you, so that it would become the mirror of your soul, as your soul is the mirror of the infinite God!" (Goethe 1774, 9-10, my translation; also cf. Konersmann 1991, 116-121, 152).

III Herder's Metaphysics of Proteus

In this section, I will outline how Proteus could, in Herder's early work, refer to both radical change and continuity. Subsequently, I will, in three subsections, identify three different reconciliatory strategies which Herder adopted in order to provide world history with a stable *subject* in the guise of (malleable) humanity. The first two strategies can be found in Herder's works written before he moved to Bückeburg (1771); the third is most forcefully expressed in his 1774 *This Too a Philosophy*.

Concerning Herder's earliest works (1764-1766), commentators Gaier and Wolfgang Pross notice a tension and then a *shift*, from an "Enlightenment universalist science of man" to a more "historically differentiated approach" (FHA 1, 929; HWP 1, 694-695). This tension was certainly there – but nowhere did Herder fully give up on a universalist science of man. Rather than identifying a specific moment when Herder was forced to appreciate the absolute individuality of historical particulars, then, I find it more useful to make explicit the different strategies adopted by Herder to face the "problem of the relation between anthropological uniformities and historical change" (Irmscher 2009, 149; cf. also Norton 1991, 165, 172). In this context the image of Proteus appears as an instrument, used to reconcile a universalist anthropology with the full recognition of historical change, and shows that precisely because Herder never gave up on the first, he was able to fully appreciate the second. By consequence, I interpret the function of Proteus in Herder's texts as both anti-skeptical and anti-ethnocentric.

Recall the problem I set out on the basis of *On the Change of Taste*, the problem of how to productively face the fact of historical change without allowing the Pyrrhonist modes of argumentation to induce skeptical conclusions. Herder's question is how we can do full justice to the fact that we are historically situated, and still hold on to some metahistorical stability. To encapsulate the philosophical "knot" which the Pyrrhonists presented as beyond untying, Herder refers to the classic triad as a true Proteus:

As soon as it is shown that what I, based on reasons, consider to be true, beautiful, good, pleasant can likewise on the basis of reasons be regarded by another as false, ugly, bad, unpleasant, then truth, beauty, and moral value is a phantom that appears to each person in a different way, in a different shape: a true *Proteus* who by means of a magic mirror ever changes, and never shows himself as the same. (Herder 2002, 247, translation modified; FHA 1, 149)

Apart from the issue of ethnocentrism discussed above, Herder examines how a range of factors, like time, clime, physiological constitution, custom and tradition, cause diversity in taste and manner of thought (FHA 1, 152-156). Herder concludes: "Time has changed

everything so much that one often needs a magic mirror in order to recognize the same creature beneath such diverse forms” (Herder 2002, 255; FHA 1, 159). This passage perhaps pulls most strongly into the direction of a use of the metaphor which expresses the extreme difficulty, if not impossibility, of still recognizing some similarity between historical forms. If Proteus never shows himself as the same, he is more like the deceitful sophists, who hide their untruthfulness by constantly changing shape. But recall that unlike the Pyrrhonists, Herder aims in this text to show “how in the valley and on the plain creatures stray about that are so diverse that they hardly have a common name left; however, they are our fellow brothers, and their history is the history of our nature” (ibid., 249; 150). In my interpretation, the magic mirror refers not merely to the difficulty, but also the possibility of recognizing that common names to describe the human nature of our fellow brothers do exist (cf. Irmscher 2009, 23; Beiser 2011, 107). This might sound far-fetched as an interpretation of the passage quoted above. In the following, I hope to make this hypothesis appear more plausible. Herder’s other very early invocation of Proteus gives a first indication of how this might be done.

In Herder’s 1765 *On Dilligence in the Study of Several Learned Languages*, it is language which is Protean. The historical adaptation of languages on different continents is the reason for Herder to state about language: “So this plant transformed itself according to the soil that nourished it and heaven’s breeze, that quenched its thirst: it became a Proteus among nations” (Herder 1992, 30; FHA 1, 23). Michael Morton has already pointed out in his close-reading of this text the extra connotation in addition to Proteus’ mutability: since Herder will describe in the essay the proper relationship towards foreign languages as one of appropriation and adaptation of other languages to the condition of our mother tongue, it is suggested we hold on to this Proteus through its various transformations, and bind him, so that he may divine to us the distinctive riches of different languages (Morton 1989, 41). Moreover, the identification of language with a plant suggests an organic continuity between different environments which underlies Herder’s claim in the essay “I transplant myself into it [...] expand my soul into every clime” as well as the idea that we need our native language as a guiding thread through the labyrinth of languages (Herder 1992, 32-33; FHA 1, 26-28). It provides fertile soil for transplantation, and suggests (rather than argues) that translation of foreign concepts into our native language can be productive. I now start with the first reconciliatory strategy which Herder built on this continuity.

III.1 Protean Universals

In the *Fragments of a Treatise on the Ode* Proteus appears under the heading “On the metempsychosis of the ode with respect to sensation”. Here as before, Herder’s starting-point is the historical diversity between different nations, which arises not just in the area of custom or second nature, but also, before that, physiologically and unconsciously (FHA 1, 79-83, 152-155). He depicts the effects for the range of products of the human mind that he calls “ode” as follows:

If any genre of poetic art has become a Proteus among nations, judged on the basis of sensibility, subject matter, and language, the ode has so altered its spirit and content and expression and pace, that perhaps only the aesthetician’s magic mirror will recognize the same living essence [*dasselbe Lebendige*] in so many shapes. Nevertheless, there still is a certain general unity of sensibility, of expression, and of harmony, which makes it possible to draw a parallel among them all. (Herder 1992, 36-37, translation modified; FHA 1, 79)

Herder aimed to revise and complete the Baumgartian project of aesthetics as a science of the human soul. In Herder’s view, this science was meant to empirically and historically collect *all* the different instances of human cognition and artistic production. Furthermore, the science of aesthetics must explain their genesis out of a sensuous core of human feeling – out of what Alexander Baumgarten had called the “*fundus animae*” or “*Grund der Seele*” (Baumgarten 2011, 270-271).²⁴ In this way, it is “*der Ästhetiker*” who has to place all the different poetic arts from different nations and times in front of a magic mirror, in order to still recognize the unity of sensibility, of expression, and of harmony between different works, and be able to discuss them historically under the general heading of ‘ode’ (Gjesdal 2017, 51-52). Clearly, the Protean metempsychosis²⁵ of the ode expresses the difficulty of tracing the unity of sensibility. Nonetheless, these notions, “*dasselbe Lebendige*” and “*ein gewisses allgemeines Eins der Empfindung, des Ausdrucks und der Harmonie*” are of crucial importance as preconditions for finding *analogies* (cf. Norton 1991, 72-73). By explaining their functions, I will now demarcate the first of Herder’s strategies to reconcile unity and difference. I shall argue that these unifying notions – or *Protean universals* – indeed infuse the aesthetician’s *Zauberspiegel* with systematic significance. This is because they allow us to see how wide varieties of individuals stand in complex relations of *mirroring* each other, and how they together compose a general “*Analogie der Natur*” as well as an “*Analogie aller menschlichen Seelenkräfte*” (FHA 1, 715, 743).

²⁴ For compelling interpretations of Herder’s psychology and aesthetics cf. Noyes 2015; Adler 1990; Norton 1991; and Menke 2017.

²⁵ The Greek term for the transmigration of the soul – itself a significant phrasing due to the connotation of infinite subsistence of the object undergoing change.

In Herder's philosophy of history, the *allgemeines Eins der Empfindung* was drawn from a basic human sensuousness which was most present in the early stages of history, yet could be regenerated (or mirrored) via various cyclical historical developments.²⁶ On this basis of human psychology Herder grounded a process of analogical understanding (cf. Irmischer 1981). This becomes clear from the works written shortly after the work on the ode, such as the *Fragments on Recent German Literature* and the *Older Critical Grove*: by finding analogies between different cultural forms, Herder intends to point at transfer and appropriation, and eventually at a "Kette der Mitteilung" between all the life-stages of humanity (FHA 2, 25, 32, 39). For Herder this results in ways to legitimately *order* the whole of world history, for example with reference to the sequence of ages of poetry, prose, and of science, and to a development from sensuous beginnings towards an increasingly more rationality and complexity. Interpreted charitably, this lawfulness of history may be seen to be generalized from historical particulars and the similarities between them (HWP 1, 16; cf. Norton 1991, 74; FHA 1, 996). Yet however this may be, it is Proteus' living essence which safeguards the possibility of finding similarities. If we move a few years ahead, from the Riga works to Strasbourg at the end of 1769, the reason for this may become apparent.

In the *Treatise on the Origin* Herder argues from analogies between Proteus' different forms to a chain which links different peoples together in a progressive whole. In the treatise's second part, Herder distinguishes four "main laws of the human being's nature and of his species" under which he collects the factors which explain how humanity has been able to autonomously invent language, and how language had to develop historically (Herder 2002, 127; FHA 1, 769). While the first two laws discuss features of human nature that promote the invention and development of language in general, the third law explains how a diversity of national languages had to arise. This law centers on those aspects of human group behavior which explain why a continuous unity of language was principally impossible (cf. *ibid.*, 791-799). Central factors discussed by Herder are adaptation to different natural environments, the importance of language to community-forming, and the competition and conflict between different communities (cf. Piirimäe 2015; Spencer 2012, 73-84, 146).

Proteus is used to put the problem – recall: situatedness, and the imperative to preclude skepticism – in the following way:

"Human beings should live everywhere on the earth, while each animal species merely has its land and its narrower sphere"; *the earth-dweller* becomes apparent. And if this is so, his language becomes *language of the*

²⁶ Examples of such cycles and regenerations of origins would be the analogies between the childhood of humanity, of nations and of individual human beings, and between the *Morgenröthe* of the world and of each day (cf. also Heizmann 1981; and Gaier 1988, 35-40, 49-50).

earth as well. A new language in every new world, national language in every nation – I cannot repeat all the aforementioned determining causes of the change – *language becomes a Proteus on the round surface of the earth*. Some recent fashionable philosophers have been so unable to bind this Proteus and see him in his true form that it has seemed to them more probable that nature was as well able to create for each large region of the earth a pair of human beings to found tribes as it was to create special animals for each clime. (Herder 2002, 150, translation modified; FHA 1, 794)

Herder accuses the “*Modephilosophen*” of letting go of Proteus, and allowing him to keep changing shape. This leads these philosophers to polygenism concerning the human species and its language ability: they use observations about the radical differences of languages, even within the same geographical region, to draw the conclusion that there actually is no similarity whatsoever between different languages, and that different human races do not have a common origin: “here, these doubters conclude, all human investigation comes to an end” (ibid., 151; 795). In contrast to this Pyrrhonist argumentation, Herder aims to show Proteus’ true form: “because these people merely doubt, I want to attempt to show that the investigation does not come to an end here, but that this ‘*difference [between peoples] right next to each other*’ can be explained just as naturally as the *unity of the familial language in one nation*” (ibid.). In its true form, language can be seen to have been originally shared by all of the human “*Erbewohnern*”, despite its Protean change later on. And ultimately, the fourth law states, the human species at large can be recognized as “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*]” (ibid., 154; 799).

To explain the disproportionate level of difference between nations that, geographically, are very close to one another Herder points towards the phenomenon of what he calls “*reciprocal familial and national hatred*” (ibid., 151; 796). In short, Herder relies on this phenomenon to interpret diversity as a product of conflict, and conflict as arising from the factor that nations take each other seriously as competitors. Thus the same ethnocentric attitude problematized by Herder in many of his earlier texts he now adopts for explaining general historical developments (cf. Irmischer 2009, 204). This explanation *presupposes* that originally all nations were in contact with each other, and became separated only later, through conflict. How Herder affirms the kernel of truth to the myth of Babel (“only as a poetic fragment for the archaeology of the history of peoples”) attests to the idea that world history must be understood as a continuous development of transfer and conflict (Herder 2002, 153; FHA 1, 798). This presupposition is, in turn, based on an empirical generalization that relies in its turn on the *Analogie aller menschlichen Seelenkräfte* in the following way.

Defending the fourth law of human nature, the issue between Herder and the skeptic regarding monogenism is whether the chain of cultural transfer, which can be observed within

individual nations, can be extended to the species at large. That is, the question is whether the sequence of Proteus' different shapes can be recognized as forming a "*Kette der Bildung*" of the human species as a whole (FHA 1, 799). To the skeptic's contention that this chain could not possibly reach beyond the first "Stammvater eines Landes" in various geographical areas, Herder responds: "I cannot see why it should only reach that far and not further, why these fathers of lands could not in turn have had among them a father of the earth, since 'the whole continuing similarity of the household-economy of this species demands that this be so'" (Herder 2002, 156-157; FHA 1, 802). The requirement which, as Herder states here, emanates from a "*fortgehende Ähnlichkeit der Haushaltung dieses Geschlechts*" is crucial, because it is a precondition for identifying both differences and similarities between peoples, and of recognizing cultural transfer. In this way, Herder relies on analogy – i.e., on a certain degree of *mirroring* – to connect different human shapes in a *Kette der Bildung*. Thus Herder binds together Proteus' different shapes into a world-historical development.

In this argument, Proteus appears not to signify incommensurable difference, but rather '*dasselbe Lebendige*', the general unity which allows analogical understanding. By binding this Proteus, and aiming at a comparative synthesis of all the historical forms of human language, the secrets of the history of human language might be divined, including the forms of human life that language reflects (Spencer 2012, 78). The strength of this argument lies in its positive attribution of value to all of Proteus' transformations. The only way to reach the universal, according to this construal, is via a collection of all particulars, and by appreciation of individualities as well as of analogies that, in a continuous chain, point at their connection. Furthermore, this role of Proteus in the philosophy of history Herder would later institute in work informed by a more explicitly worked out philosophy of nature, according to which all of nature is "formed according to one prototype and at the same time infinitely varied" (FHA 6, 73; quoted in Nassar 2017, 116). The *Hauptform* and *Haupttypus* functioned as "a third, hidden and informing agent that was, in effect, the ground upon which all reality rested", and guaranteed both the necessity and the efficacy of analogical inferences – in natural as much as in historical science (Reill 1996, 17-19; Nassar 2017, 116-117).

However, it is important to recognize that Herder already practiced this form of understanding before he preached about the pantheistic unity of nature (mainly in *God: Some Conversations* and in the *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity*). Throughout *This Too a Philosophy*, for example, Herder's conception of world history is infused with *menschliche Kräfte*, which connect seemingly disparate phenomena, and allow analogical understanding. Besides the *Lebensalter* of humanity, it is Proteus who personifies this

mediating force, and thus functions as the “concrete general” which embodies the whole of human history in the form of individuality (Heinz 1994, 83). The Proteus metaphor signifies the mutual *reflection* of the individual and totality, while none of their commonalities can be pinned down in abstraction. Instead, unifying notions must remain concrete and comparative images; they necessarily never exhaust the range of possible diversity, nor do they reduce the particulars to a (universal) generality. Such notions could be dubbed ‘Protean universals’. Furthermore, Proteus’ Homeric capacity of *divination* here receives a meaning previously analyzed by Peter Hanns Reill as particular to eighteenth-century natural history, but which was already explicit in early modern natural history as the dynamic between Proteus and Pan: grasping the unity of nature in its complexity by a constant dialectic between the individual and totality (Reill 1996, 17; Gjesdal 2017, 114). Thus upon the seizure of Proteus, his true identity becomes visible as this unity in diversity.

Moreover, this argument is in keeping with one of the central uses of Proteus in a tradition which spans from “Pico’s use of him as a symbol for man’s enormous potentiality”, to Renaissance accounts of Proteus and *Pan*, all the way to Goethe’s use of Proteus in *Faust*, “as the vehicle for Homunculus in his quest for form and life” (Giamatti 1968, 443). That is, the potential to take on *different* shapes is itself the instance which gives form to *all*. Herder thus lends Leibniz’ *principium individuationis* a mythological shape, which transfers the problem of how to combine the greatest unity with the greatest diversity to the stage of the history of humanity.²⁷ Its stable subject is the human being, or: ‘*homo proteus*’.

Finally, the argument set out in this subsection explains why the skeptic is wrong: the diversity of human shapes should not be interpreted as material for Pyrrhonist arguments and as posing skeptical threats to feignedly static universals. Rather, it should be seen as constitutive to taking on human shape in the first place. Diversity hence does not principally threaten our capacity to recognize “our fellow brothers” – on the contrary, it first makes it possible (Herder 2002, 249; FHA 1, 150). According to Herder, the observations that inform argumentative modes of Pyrrhonism are *resources* for human self-understanding rather than philosophical scruples that together form a Gordian knot. So, Herder is able to deny the Pyrrhonist’s skeptical conclusions *because* Herder holds on to an identity underlying Proteus’ shape-shifting.

Yet Herder’s argument also explains why ethnocentrism is wrong. For it elucidates why taking our own viewpoint to be universal is a false response to perceiving difference: it makes

²⁷ This transfer was already analyzed in 1916 by Ernst Cassirer (1975, 115-121).

us blind to “the whole *continuing similarity of the household-economy of this species*” (Herder 2002, 156-157; FHA 1, 802). Thus, ethnocentrism blocks our recognition of the fact that history does not merely separate different nations, but also ties them together. It makes us mirror to ourself only one form of humanity, rather than letting us use our mirroring capacity to engage with new shapes and recognize them as human analogues. That is why Herder’s anti-skeptical argument is simultaneously anti-ethnocentric: the skeptic was misguided in assuming the necessity of static universals to begin with.²⁸

III.2 Genetic Explanation of Diversity

The harmonious picture of Proteus does not exhaust Herder’s approaches to history. A central method of Herder in aesthetics, psychology, and philosophy of history, is to trace the genesis of concepts back to their origin – as far as possible, of course, and with shifting conceptions of the nature and attainability of origins. This genetic method is based on the assumption that, in the face of bewildering diversity and seeming chaos, understanding a thing’s development will help to make the proper distinctions and to avoid evaluating phenomena according to one-sided criteria (FHA 1, 601-603). Herder himself advocated this method by saying that since no two nations are the same, an extensive “Universalismus” is necessary to view and classify them *all* (HWP 1, 469; cf. Herz 1996, 179). Here I sketch the expectations connected by Herder to this “*Entwicklungsgedanke*” and explain how he intended to reconcile it with the individuality of human shapes (Meinecke 1946, 396).

In his discussions of the potential of this method, especially when executed on the macroscopic level as a “*Geschichte des menschlichen Verstandes*”, Herder frequently refers to the “*verschiednen Wanderungen und Verwandlungen*” of the products of the human spirit, as well as to their Ovidian *metamorphoses* (FHA 1, 373, 601). The figure of Proteus in this context seems to refer mainly to chaos:

The literature of foreign peoples and languages is often imported among other nations as a foreign colony; and because of this mixing together of ideas, of ethics, of manners of thinking and seeing, of languages, and of sciences, everything has necessarily had to take on such a different shape that literature seems to be a true Proteus when one pursues it through peoples and times and languages. Borrowed viewpoints got shifted to a new manner [of thinking and seeing], inherited truths got remolded to the point of unrecognizability, [...]. (Herder 2002, 50-51, translation modified; FHA 1, 559)

²⁸ I explain in section III.3 why this symmetry between skepticism and ethnocentrism works the other way round as well.

This passage from the second edition of the first collection of *Fragments* deals with the close intertwining of language and thought. Herder hence draws the corresponding conclusion concerning ideas and knowledge: “The three goddesses of human cognition – truth, beauty, and virtue – became as national as language was” (ibid. 50; 559). However, Herder did not go on to conclude from this that we should suspend judgment about truth, beauty, and virtue. Rather, their Protean character invites a more active response on the part of the knower: a chase through all different shapes, which should lead to an insight into the intelligible character of Proteus’ transformations. For a key aspect of Herder’s genetic method is to identify the causes which explain why “everything has necessarily had to take on such a different shape”. The *necessity* of change in this passage at the same time signifies its intelligibility. It should be possible to locate some fundamental principles which organize historical change, as well as world history at large (cf. Norton 1991, 72-75).²⁹ That is, historical events can be traced back to “*profound, universal causes*” which, Herder states in a 1773 essay, allow explanations of historical change to “be put to use at a later date” (Herder 2006, 308; FHA 4, 112).

In applying this method, one tendency in Herder’s writings is to suggest that disputes can be solved by causally explaining and disentangling apparently conflicting claims. Skeptical conclusions (drawn from unending dispute) are thus prevented by uncovering the actual plurality of criteria to which phenomena ought to be referred (FHA 1, 555-556; cf. also 181). In this context, Herder praises the ideal of a fully catalogued “encyclopedia and history of the sciences” in which “every field of wisdom shows itself in its own light, [...] own color, own borders” (ibid., 556, my translation). Another, related tendency is to take the causal explanation of historical developments to a higher level, and establish general laws of historical change and metahistorical narratives. This was already the case in the *Fragments*’ theory of the life-stages of languages, where the sequence of stages has its own intelligibility (Irmscher 2009, 25-30). Herder defended this “comparison” against accusations of coming up with a “*Roman*” by stressing the inseparability of a phenomenon’s nature and its *development* (FHA 1, 600-601). In fact, Herder stated, many ethnocentric fallacies (listed above in section one) arise due to the hypostatizing of one particular shape of the phenomenon’s Protean

²⁹ In this respect Herder did not fundamentally depart from the Enlightenment tradition of pragmatic history, but rather intended to take it to greater heights. Cf. Herder’s letter to Gatterer (Herder 1990, 2 / 1, 684-691), the *Older Critical Grove* (FHA 2, 11-15, 21-23) and the review of Schlözer (SWS 5, 439), and cf. accounts of Zammito 2002; Leventhal 1990; Norton 1991; Beiser 2011.

development (ibid., 602). Herder had already formulated the desideratum to block such fallacies via genetic explanation in 1764³⁰:

Since my subject is constantly changing, I do not know where I shall find oneness; as often as I place the creature into the field of the magnifying glass, it appears in another shape. Should I take account of only *one* stage, my observations would doubtless be too fragmented and incomplete; should I take one after the other, but miss the first one, I would indeed miss the clew from which I may unravel those that follow. (Herder 1992, 79; HWP 1, 10)

The Protean character of the subject matter demands of the knower an extra flexibility to chase historical change and bind the underlying subject. That is, since the magnifying glass does not on its own get hold of Proteus because of his shape-shifting, the knower must follow Proteus through all his different shapes – starting from the very first.

Herder's expectations regarding the positive outcome of insight into the causes of change were still higher in the *Fourth Grove, On Riedel's Theory of the Beaux Arts*. There, Herder intended an analysis of the range of factors that make human judgments on matters of taste *individual* and context-dependent to *prevent* the skeptical conclusion “that there are no certain rules whatsoever relating to these qualities in the objects themselves [...] that everything in Nature is a chaos of individual, disharmonious temperaments that cannot be accorded” (Herder 2006, 200; FHA 2, 283). For according to Herder's method, what needs to be explained are the psychological, historical, geographical, and cultural causes of diversity. The aim of this method is to trace the shared core of basic human sensuousness, or the common principle of taste, which underlies all of its alterations. Admittedly, the Protean character of humanity makes it impossible to delineate concrete and stable features of such a core. Yet it is undeniably Herder's aim to trace back all concepts to their origin: the human being and the “Analogie aller menschlichen Seelenkräfte” (Noyes 2015, 33-34; Sikka 2011, 21; Irmscher 2009, 201; Herz 1996, 200-201, 211; Beiser 1987, 142-143).

Homo proteus is a historical being, full of potential that can only take on specific shapes in particular historical contexts (Muthu 2003, 238). Hence even prominent features of Herder's psychology, such as immediate feeling, unanalyzable sensuous concepts, and the human *sensus communis* are not themselves exempted from historical change (FHA 2, 280, 284; Irmscher 2009, 148-149; Norton 1991, 50). However, I do not find an ironical dismissal of origins and unities in Herder's texts (cf. Leventhal 1994, 150). Rather, Herder's zeal to get

³⁰ In fact the 1768 defense of the life-stages in the *Fragments* is a revision of the passage from the 1764 *Essay on a History of Lyrical Poetry* – yet Herder's 1768 way of reformulating the passage in rhetorical questions obscures the point, and the self-reflexive character of his observation gets lost in the polemics against contemporaries.

at the origins of things, and to reveal the intelligibility of their development, is informed by the belief that it is principally possible to bind Proteus, and that in the *chain* of his transformations, the One is reflected.³¹ Herder makes this explicit in the conclusion of the same passage of the *Fourth Grove*:

The Greek, the Gothic, the Moorish taste in architecture and sculpture, in mythology and poetry— is it the same? And is this taste not to be explained by the times, manners, and peoples? And does it not in each case have a first principle that has just not been understood well enough, just not felt with the same intensity, just not applied in the right proportion? And does not even this Proteus of taste, which transforms itself under every new sky, in every foreign clime wherein it draws breath, does not this diversity of taste itself prove, by the causes of its transformation, [*beweiset er nicht selbst mit den Ursachen seiner Verwandlung*] that beauty is one, just like perfection, just like truth? (Herder 2006, 202; FHA 2, 286)

The context of this passage is very polemical (an attack on Justus Riedel's conception of the "relative nature" of beauty) and the text is highly rhetorical (and was withheld by Herder from being published in a very late stage of its composition).³² However, of interest here is the suggestion that the *causes* of Proteus' transformations *prove* that beauty is one. Herder's point is that "the ground and order of everything" can be recognized as long as we take historical change as a natural phenomenon which can be made sense of in causal fashion (*ibid.*, 199; 282). Rather than treating change as a threat to the order of nature, the *dynamic* of the natural order adds to its splendor. For it is Proteus who himself proves "*mit den Ursachen seiner Verwandlung*" that there is one ideal of beauty. Some normative implications follow from this: Herder suggests in the same passage that we can recognize certain natural and cultural factors as 'corrupting' the level of a nation's "Ästhetischen Bildung"; we can identify some phenomena that are considered beautiful everywhere around the globe; a basic universal psychological constitution underlies the diversity of human shapes; and principles can be distinguished according to which we can evaluate how well human beings are adapted to their (natural, historical) environment (FHA 2, 284-285; cf. Norton 1991, 165). By consequence, the genetic explanation of the diversity of taste has to rely on physiology, psychology and natural history as much as on philology.

Furthermore, in this argument the Proteus of Bacon and Pico appears, who thought that the variety of Proteus' shapes must be engaged *exhaustively* in order to learn about its

³¹ I take this analysis of the role of Proteus to be one way to go a bit further where Robert Norton's very insightful interpretation of Herder stops: Herder did not only couple passionate empiricism with a belief in the power of origins; he also had metaphysical reasons why it would be possible to get close to a universal science of man, and approximate history in its totality (Norton 1991, 50, 156-157, 184).

³² Herder stresses the *diversity* in taste in order to show that Riedel's theory (of "fundamental feelings" for the true, good and beautiful) is unable to account for the phenomena. And he stresses the *objectivity* and ultimate unity of beauty in order to deny Riedel's own skeptical conclusion. Herder's conclusion then reverts to a universalistic ideal of a singular and "pure" beauty which is at odds with both earlier and later accounts (FHA 2, 286-287).

essence, because *all* of nature (Pan) is Protean. The historian here also emulates Bacon's ideal of natural science: to pursue Proteus through all his different shapes, because it is only in forcing nature to go through different passages that its true nature may be revealed (Burns 2001, 973-974). The Protean character of truth, goodness, and beauty *necessitates* a historical approach to the study of man. This is because everything

evolves from a single fundamental faculty of the soul to obtain ideas and in doing so, through this unfolding of its activity, to feel itself become ever more perfect and to take pleasure in doing so. How beautiful the human soul thereby becomes! Unity in its foundation, thousand-fold diversity in its development, perfection in the totality! (Herder 2006, 198; FHA 2, 280)

Thus the human soul's activity provides the *origin* of taste. Here we find the identity which, while it evades us at any particular moment in time, grounds the individuality of the human feeling of beauty.

III.3. The Providential *Bildung* of Proteus

In this final subsection I outline the additions and adjustments which Herder made to his Protean conception of humanity from a more affirmative religious perspective in his 1774 *This Too a Philosophy*. His use of the Proteus metaphor in this text highlights the continuity of the *anthropological* presuppositions which inform Herder's philosophy of history. But his references to the motif of a *mirror* now add a religiously inspired emphasis on the *limitations* to what is reflected to finite human beings. The text's final motto encapsulates this emphasis in the phrase: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face [...]" (1 Cor 13:12; FHA 4, 107).³³ This mirror may reflect images of divine revelation; but Herder now questions the adequacy and/or attainability of this reflecting. Herder's references to a magic mirror are now balanced by the idea that human cognition relies on a *dark* mirror: the human soul at every single moment in time and space reflects only a fragment of creation (FHA 9 / 2, 86; cf. Herz 1996, 14-19). Nevertheless, I will show that this gives rise to a third strategy for reconciling change and continuity and for countering the Pyrrhonist tendency to infer skeptical conclusions from historical change.

³³ I quote the New Revised Standard Version. In the Authorized Version it says "now we see through a glass, darkly" (Herder 2002, 358). Both a modern German version and the Luther Bible translate "ἑσώπτρου" as "Spiegel" (see Herz 1996, 16).

In Herder's criticisms of the various ethnocentric universalizations of happiness and virtues, the familiar Protean model appears:

Is not the good on the earth *strewn about*? Because one shape of humanity and one region of the earth could not grasp it, it got distributed into a thousand shapes, it roams forth [*wandelt*] – an eternal Proteus! – through all parts of the world and all centuries. Also, as he roams and roams further, it is not for greater *virtue* or *happiness of the individual* that he strives – humanity ever remains only humanity – and yet a *plan of striving further* becomes visible – my great theme! (Herder 2002, 298, translation modified; FHA 4, 40)

Herder pitches a Protean transforming and striving forth (*wandeln*) of humanity against both the skeptics and the Enlightenment universalists. He explicitly positions himself between these two positions, which could for example be identified with the works of Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet and Voltaire.³⁴ Bossuet's universal history represented the naïve faith in the linear and providential progress of a universal morality. Voltaire attempted to present a universal history of human virtues and vices on the basis of the progression of a universal and natural human rationality – but announced chaos and catastrophe when diving into the actual events of history (Kondylis 1981, 444-451). Voltaire's observation of human passion and folly lead to skepticism about all morality and philosophy, Herder contends (FHA 4, 41, 104). For Herder, the positions of Bossuet and Voltaire are two sides of the same coin: the search for a straight line of progress in history leads to catastrophe theory.³⁵ The projection of ideals onto history that are too general and abstract necessarily leads to disillusionment about the meaning of history. This is why Herder's anti-skepticism is not, as Sikka suggests, less predominant than his anti-ethnocentrism. Herder considers the skeptical *philosophes* in Paris and the optimistic German and Swiss *Aufklärer* united by sharing the same mistaken assumptions. I will now elucidate why Herder thinks they are wrong in the way they approach both Proteus and the mirroring quality of creation, before I present Herder's alternative approach.

Herder accuses his contemporaries of having presented their own shape of humanity as a new divinity, allegedly capable of the absolute freedom of taking on any shape at will. Herder considers this blasphemous, and he portrays his contemporaries like fraudulent alchemists who manipulate human nature according to their own self-indulgent ideals (*ibid.*, 83-84). He formulates the danger residing in this perverse misinterpretation of the human condition in

³⁴ Frederick Beiser is right that Herder's critique was leveled at work of many of his contemporaries, not just two specific authors (Beiser 2011, 133). But it is nonetheless relevant to concretely identify the two *groups* of opponents at which Herder directed his criticisms.

³⁵ This "double polemic" has been identified before by Kondylis and Beiser (Kondylis 2002, 635; Beiser 1992, 208). This is in line with Herder's general polemic against metaphysicians and skeptics, and supported by the text's motto, taken from Epictetus: "It is not things that disquiet human beings but dogmas concerning things" (Herder 2002, 272; FHA 4, 9).

terms familiar from Pico: “[T]he philosopher is most an *animal* when he would wish to be most reliably a *God*” (Herder 2002, 334; FHA 4, 81). The philosophers Herder has in mind attempt to present a *particular* shape of Proteus as if it were a *general* form, which would be exactly contrary to Proteus’ nature. In more recent terms, their gesture is to cast *homo proteus* as a super-human, or: as *homo deus* (cf. Harari 2016). What’s more, the philosopher’s ideal of a completely general and pure humanity or reason serves other interests, which Herder ironically describes as another divinity, namely *pecunia* personified: “How we know to *seize* the single god of all gods, *Mammon*, as a second Proteus!, and how to *change* him!, and how to *extort* everything from him that ever we want!” (Herder 2002, 326; FHA 4, 71-72). Those who chase this Proteus do not respect his or their integrity. Rather, they torture and plunder under the false assumption that they hear Proteus divine, and present *themselves* as the “*mirror of all the past and representative of the purpose of the composition in all its scenes!* The precocious child slanders and blasphemes” (ibid., 336; 84).

Herder’s alternative Protean conception of humanity aligns mutability with finitude, and with the destiny which human beings help fulfill as a tiny element of historical development. The way Herder relies on Proteus’ identity here is consistent with his earlier works in insisting that “*human being always remains human being, in accordance with the analogy of all things nothing but human being!*”, and that “inside beneath the manyfold transformed husk the same *kernel of essential nature and of capacity for happiness* can still be preserved” (ibid., 334-335; 81-82). This organic core is “invisible”, and “differently developed, indeed appears in different forms, but inwardly only one measure and mixture of forces” (ibid.). Its *development*, however, proceeds according to intentions which, from “*the right viewpoint*”, could be intimated (ibid., 335; 82). Although God’s intentions mostly lie beyond the historian’s grasp, the notion of a providential formation of humanity should capture both the conviction that all of history is meaningfully interconnected and in development, and that there is no uniform set of standards along which this development can be measured (SWS 5, 589). In fact, it is crucial to Herder’s position that God’s plan is mostly unknown to us. Herder’s philosophy of history is teleological, but it is so in an “open” manner (cf. Spencer 2012, 118, 122; Sikka 2011, 118-121). Herder does not subsume historical periods as means to a fixed and final end: the conditions that endow certain periods with value change as well (FHA 4, 54, 87). Furthermore, out of our lack of insight into providence a further key feature can be explained, which would later be known as the “cunning of reason” (Hegel), or

“heterogony of ends” (Wundt).³⁶ The crucial feature of any successful theodicy is that it manages to interpret the appearance of evil in the world as contributing to the good despite itself (cf. *ibid.*, 53-54, 83, 98). The indiscernibility of God’s ways has stood the test of time as a method for achieving this.

The religious acceptance of human finitude – and the trust in the way God has tied all of history together – provides a distinct perspective on the reconciliation of human diversity and unity. In contrast to the *Treatise*’s “*progressive unity of all conditions of life*”, achieved through human *reflection*, Herder’s 1774 picture of world history introduces a faith in fate that is crucial especially in those instances where the turns of history appear arbitrary and even cruel (Herder 2002, 155; FHA 1, 800). The chain which links together the many phases of Proteus’ *Bildung* depends on a divine instance in which finite creatures should put their trust and hope.³⁷ However, this perspective is not systematically at odds with the strategies lined out in the previous subsections. It is still a manner to accept situatedness, to bypass the Pyrrhonist argumentative modes by pluralizing value-terms, and to grasp the intelligible order of this plurality as well as of every single of its individual elements. According to this larger vision, Herder allows the historian to assert or recognize the value of each of Proteus’ individual shapes, as well as the contribution that these forms make to one large world-historical development.

The identity which underlies Proteus’ changes is the concept of ‘humanity’, and the providential development of its *Bildung* is its telos. Thus Herder finishes an early introduction to *This Too a Philosophy*: “I would only wish for myself as guide and Muse of my observations that *genius* who was the genius of the human species in all its conditions and invisibly guided, still guides, and alone completely surveys the thread of the development of its forces and inclinations” (Herder 2002, 271; SWS 5, 589-590). Essential to this conception of unity in diversity is the notion of world history in its totality. Next to the transcendence of the divine perspective, this totality receives a normative function which is immanent in history, yet transcends any particular historical inquiry. This totality is an infinite task and an object of faith, but it is Herder’s way of holding on to the value of any and all particular.

Furthermore, the analogies and harmonies that we are able to recognize from our finite perspective (as discussed above); the attempts to explain historical change; and recognizing

³⁶ Kondylis has analyzed the history of this strategy in Enlightenment philosophy of history (Kondylis 2002, 433, 467-468).

³⁷ Yet the argument from finitude was not absent from the earlier texts either. In the *Fragments*, for example, Herder distinguished between human language and divine thought, and concluded that language was a Proteus on earth (FHA 1, 557-559).

different forms of the good as good all do help to intimate world history in its totality. At least it is Herder's attempt to reveal the meaning of the *Bildung* of humanity: “*God's course through the nations! Spirit of the laws, ages, ethics, and arts – how they have followed!, prepared!, developed, and displaced! one another.*’ If only we had such a *mirror* of the *human species* in all faithfulness, fullness, and feeling of *God's revelation*” (Herder 2002, 340; FHA 4, 88). Herder's 1774 philosophy of history thus attempts to synthesize the particulars of world history into a *mirror*. It should show how the human species' course through history everywhere reflects the human spirit in different shapes. It is now an issue of religious intimation whether it is possible to find the right viewpoint for attaining such a reflection of humanity. Still, already in 1766, Herder had demanded such a mirror for the purpose of recognizing the same humanity beneath diverse shapes. In 1774 as in 1766 Proteus appears as a symbol of the synthesis of radical difference and unity and as an alternative both to forms of skepticism and of abstract universalism. Moreover, the structural relation between Proteus' shape-changing and his power of divination is remarkably similar and allows for harmony through analogy in much the same way as exhibited in the *Treatise on the Origin*:

Great must be the whole where already in every individuality there appears such a *whole!*, but in every individuality there also still only reveals itself such an *indeterminate One*, solely for the whole! Where *little* connections already yield great *meaning*, and yet centuries are only *syllables*, nations only *letters* and perhaps *interpunctuations*, which mean nothing in themselves but *so much* for the easier meaning of the whole! (Ibid., 356-357; 105-106)

IV Conclusion

In this paper, I have distinguished three strategies all referring to the figure of Proteus and adopted by Herder to argue for a unity in diversity. Contrary to what is often suggested in Herder scholarship, the three strategies have in common that Proteus does not merely signify instability, untruthfulness, chaos or the violation of the order of things. Quite the opposite: in Herder's philosophy of history, Protean mutability is an essential aspect of the natural-historical *order*. What's more, in this dynamic order, many of the positive connotations traditionally attached to Proteus are expressed. Thus the Homeric connotation of a capacity to *divine* to the knower who manages to bind Proteus about the true nature of things is explicit in Herder's use of the metaphor. And the humanist conception of an essential mutability of human nature and the responsibility to cultivate (*bilden*) humanity in the right way are also inherent in Herder's Protean conception of humanity. Furthermore, the Baconian activity on the part of the knower in chasing Proteus through all different shapes and the intimate

connection between Proteus and Pan (nature, All) both play crucial roles in Herder's aim to approach world history as a harmonious totality. This totality, which can only be found in all of Proteus' different shapes, was expressed already in the late-ancient *Orphic Hymns* to which Hamann had referred in his *Clouds*: "He has all at his disposal,/ transformed far beyond/ all other immortals/ [...] for Physis was the first to place everything in Proteus" (Athanasakis, Wolkow 2013, 23).

However, the three discussed strategies are also distinct: the 1774 providential model of *This Too a Philosophy* (strategy three) focuses more on the finitude of individual human beings than the 1769 *Treatise on the Origin* (strategy one) in order to arrive at a conception of the history of humanity as interconnected in a great chain of *Bildung*. And the causal-genetic pursuit of Proteus' different shapes (strategy two) tends to block skepticism in a manner distinct from the picture of harmonious unity suggested in both strategies one and three. For the pursuit of Proteus' changes strives towards either an absolute origin or core, or to multiple *individual* fields or forms, rather than towards analogical connections. Nonetheless, I consider both their procedure (recognizing analogies) as well as their result (a world-historical "*Kette der Bildung*") unite strategies one and three. Moreover, both the results of causal-genetic explanation (individualities as well as the Origin/One) would themselves again be candidates for the procedure of forming connections on the basis of recognized analogies.

Finally, I have argued in this paper that all three strategies are part of the same effort of Herder to deny that any skeptical conclusions can be drawn from the phenomena of natural and historical diversity. Herder's (ontological and theological) trust in the ultimate unity of all of Proteus' forms facilitates the engagement of their diversity. It must hence be concluded that Proteus appears as an anti-skeptical device in Herder's texts rather than as an emblem of mere flux and difference. Contrary to the Pyrrhonist mode of taking *difference* as signaling the need to suspend judgment, Herder takes the diversity of Proteus' shapes as an *invitation* to collect, order and evaluate them all. The ontological trust underlying Herder's approach to diversity may not satisfy the modern reader who expects a more technical and charitable engagement with skeptical challenges. Yet it does make Proteus into a figure signifying in Herder's writings an anti-skeptical as much as an anti-ethnocentric program: it proves human diversity to be constitutive to any general anthropology and explains why universalizing our own standpoint is a non-starter in the field of human history.

This brings me to the conclusion that a coherent philosophy of history can be found scattered throughout the early works of Herder. That is to say: to rely on analogies in the search of differences and larger harmonies; to trace the causes of change in order to improve

the understanding of diversity; to hold on to very broad notions of stable truth, goodness, beauty and humanity; and to combine these with a religious intimation of the providential development of humanity are efforts that can be made into a consistent philosophy of history. In fact, Herder's treatment of happiness and virtue in *This Too a Philosophy* hint at ways of reconciling the claims that we only have access to Proteus' particular shapes, and that we nonetheless should hold on to a notion of the good that is stable and yet "verteilt in tausend Gestalten" (FHA 4, 40). However, it has been observed before that it is difficult to recognize such a consistent philosophy of history in the 1774 treatise. Rather, this text contains a partial sketch of how an account of world history could look as a meaningful development in which each phase expresses the good in a particular form. Hence the conclusion of this study of the Proteus figure in Herder's early writings is a different one.

I hope to have shown in this paper that Herder's repeated invocation of the mythological figure of Proteus expresses the continuous effort of thinking through (in both a more radical and constructive way than his predecessors) the implications of historical change. My analysis has displayed that in order to achieve this, and to make historical diversity potent for a positive anthropology, Herder relies on myth, metaphysics, and theology. Herder's use of metaphors like the one discussed here shows the influence of mythological thinking on systematic issues even in those texts like the *Fourth Grove* and *On the Change of Taste*, which in other respects come closest to a "thoroughgoing naturalism" on Herder's part (Zammito 2016, 21). Hence it is essential that interpretation of Herder's anthropology does not present seemingly incommensurable fields in "a blunt either / or" manner, but indeed attempts to "think them together" (ibid., 21-22). Attending to the context of these metaphors, and working out the different conceptual possibilities they open, helps to explain how Herder integrated the results of thoroughgoing historical and natural science into a theology of humanity.

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