The study of national communal feeling is often limited by the reluctance many theorists have to consider the manifest, affective meaning which so many discover and embrace through their nations. The writings of Johann Gottfried Herder suggest a way to theorize about that affectivity without treating it as either incidental to the real nature of national communities, or as a threat to the individuals who inhabit them. Herder’s approach is based on language, and involves a metaphysical assumption about the aesthetic operation of human thought and collective belonging. Herder’s linking of the history and nature of nation-building with a vision of linguistic revelation through one’s Volk presents a fairly original take on the question of nationality, one which approaches communal affections with a moral (and ultimately theological) seriousness, but is also flexible enough to recognize (and even anticipate) contemporary critiques of metaphysics which have complicated our traditional assumptions about national identity.

Over the last twenty years, communitarian political theory and scholarship on national identity have both flourished. While these inquiries encompass many diverse methodological presumptions and normative orientations, there is a fair amount of overlap between them, and it is in this area of overlap that I situate the present essay. At issue is the question of communal attachment—the “ties that bind” us to our communities, particularly nations. That nationalism did not die with the end of the Cold War is now granted by all; what the relationship of twenty-first-century nationalism is to our continuing contretemps over identity politics and globalization, however, and whether any moral argument can be made on behalf of national affection in such a context, is far from resolved. My hope is not to settle these debates, but merely to add an additional element to them: that of Johann Gottfried Herder’s Sprachphilosophie, or philosophy of language, which among its many other contributions to the history of thought points us toward a rethinking of the nature and meaning of a linguistically constituted people, or Volk. Herder’s place in discussions about identity and nationality seems to have at last become secure in English-language political theory, but that does
not mean all his claims are well understood.¹ This is unfortunate, for when it comes to accounting for the cultural ties which bind us to particular national communities, the applicability and merit of Herder’s philosophy is, I think, undeniable.

**Community Attachment and Affectivity**

The dominant interpretation of communal attachment today is probably the “liberal culturalism” position developed by Will Kymlicka. Kymlicka has long argued that what is truly valuable about national communities—and what thus establishes the justifiable parameters of the social unity they presumably embody and strive to preserve—is the “cultural structure” which they provide preference-motivated individuals like ourselves. Autonomy, Kymlicka claims, depends upon the existence of a medium by which “we can come to an awareness of the options available to us”; “for meaningful individual choice to be possible, individuals . . . need access to a societal culture.”² This leads him to oppose the easy cosmopolitanism of those who think national or communal attachments are passé in an era of globalization, but also to insist that a wide range of basically liberal individual options are always present in any given national context.

Kymlicka sees this position as the consensus view of those who study the intersections of liberalism and community (particularly of the national variety), and he is certainly correct that his “liberal

1. Isaiah Berlin’s studies of Herder were very influential here; in publications like “Herder and the Enlightenment” (in Berlin, *Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas* [New York: Viking Press, 1976], pp. 145-216), he explained the role Herder’s romantic appreciation of diverse histories and folkways played in the rise of cultural pluralism as a challenge to Enlightenment doctrines. Since then, Herder’s contributions to political and social matters have been examined by Frederick Beiser (in *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought*, 1790-1800 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992], pp. 189-221), Charles Taylor (in “The Politics of Recognition,” in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed, Amy Gutmann [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994], pp. 25-73), and many others. The study of Herder’s political ideas in English-language scholarship has gone beyond Berlin’s original work, which is appropriate; for all his insights, Berlin never examined the ontological roots of Herder’s appreciation of history and the *Volk*, and hence left many of Herder’s religious and philosophical writings unexplored. Berlin’s pluralist reading of Herder has been productively criticized of late (see Damon Linker, “The Reluctant Pluralism of J.G. Herder,” *Review of Politics* 62 [Spring 2000]: 268 n.2 and passim), but much work remains to be done.

communitarianism," with its focus upon an individual's potential engagement with his own received cultural context and community, has wide appeal in the realm of policy. But as Charles Taylor notes, this position provides no succor to those who feel that the communal medium itself has value apart from the structure it provides those who move through it. This is not to deny that one's membership in a community has a subjective component: following Ernst Renan's classic description of nationality as a "daily plebiscite" by the people on the topic of belonging, serious scholars over the years have regularly acknowledged that a community's existence is "contingent upon its members sustaining a certain image of it based on their perceptions and feelings." But the question is, are those feelings themselves so clearly related to a sense of what is received from them? That is, what if the love one has for a community or nation is not dependent upon the (conscious or unconscious) results of one's present preference for it, but rather because it is taken to embody that which is preferable in itself? "For the people concerned," Taylor writes, "their way of life [may be] ... something invaluable and irreplaceable, not just in the absence of an alternative, but even if alternatives are available." To suggest that "plausible communitarian political intuitions" (among which Taylor includes, in a reference to the aims of Québécois like himself, the ideal of survirnce, which he understands as implying the continuation of a culture for its own and future generations' sake) should be rendered in terms of specifiable choices is, he concludes, narrow-minded and morally reductive.

This is, I believe, a valid and challenging problem. Must the ties that bind ultimately be assessed in reference to who they bind and how they bind them? What about the binding—or better, the belonging—itself? This, of course, turns the matter away from liberal choice,


6. Ibid., pp. 260, 262.
broadly speaking, and toward what might be considered an aesthetic awareness or sensibility. What I have in mind here are impressions of beauty, right order or appropriateness: such impressions affect us in an immediate, intuitive way. To look at social bonds in light of their "affectivity"—their power to elicit from us an unchosen response, like delight or sympathy or awe—leads us to consider the issue of belonging as something more than a cognitive declaration about the "reality" of one's attachments; those same attachments may be also said to "engender a certain sensibility toward that reality." The idea here is that the way in which identities are developed by those persons who affirm them is central to the meaning those identities have for those same people: thus, one would say that to be an American is not only to be conscious of holding American citizenship but also to have feelings about the world appropriate to one's life as an American.

Only the most severe of contractualists would deny the presence of this aesthetic process in everyday life; the surge in patriotic expression which dominated public life in the United States for months following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, cannot be accounted for in any other way. But is this process actually helpful in describing, assessing, and critiquing those ties which exist within larger cultural bodies like nations? For some theorists, it is not: arguments which reject the national body as a defensible community of affection have been made from a variety of religious, republican, and democratic perspectives. More common, however, are those defend-

7. See Stephen K. White, Sustaining Affirmation: The Strengths of Weak Ontology in Political Theory (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 10. White is discussing here what he calls "weak ontological reflection," not anything associated with human attachments per se. But his exploration of this topic is helpful in understanding the aesthetic-affective dimension; and moreover, as White notes, the issues raised by certain varieties of communitarianism (in particular Taylor's) have been an important source for recent challenges to traditional ontological assumptions regarding the preference-motivated self. See ibid., p. 5, and chap. 3.

8. I acknowledge that I am dismissing here without argument the claim that the post-September 11th patriotism expressed by the great majority of Americans, far from revealing a spontaneous sense of awareness and attachment, in fact reflected nothing more than media-induced (and politically manipulated) groupthink. I find such claims completely unpersuasive, not to mention condescending.

ers of liberalism who reluctantly grant a place for national affection, but who believe that any communal action premised upon an aesthetic conviction, upon the sense "that [one's] society's rituals and procedures, customs and practices, and institutions and arrangements ... are shapely or well-formed, and ... comprise a way of life," constitutes a threat to "basic morality." This response is perhaps a fair one. After all, if you accept the egalitarian principle of "simple justice practiced reciprocally," you may suspect that those who define and affirm their national community—and thus acquiesce to, given the massive inequities which exist on a global scale, the unavoidably "inegalitarian practices of really existing liberal states"—simply on the basis of their affection for it, have introduced a false conventionalism into the normative argument. By assuming the appropriateness of their place in the world, they "seem to equate what is 'strongly felt' with what is right." There appears, therefore, to be only two real options for those who cannot reasonably account for and evaluate national feeling solely by light of the structure of choices it makes available to us: either defend the aesthetics of one's country entirely on the basis of its subjective (perhaps psychological) claim on us, without any reference to egalitarian reciprocity whatsoever, or argue that the sensibilities which our national communities aesthetically give rise to do, in fact, incorporate reciprocal possibilities, since they reflect not simply subjective preference, but a kind of affective (perhaps metaphysical) reality as well.

To ask about the metaphysics of nations no doubt strikes a good many theorists as either ludicrous or alarming. Ludicrous because it has become common in recent scholarship to assume that while there may be enduring ethnic communities in the world, the nation itself is nothing more than an intangible "abstraction, something that nationalists, and elites in general, have 'constructed' to serve their partisan ends." Alarming, because it may sound like an attempt to pry open the door behind which G.W.F. Hegel's logic lurks.

I agree that the second worry has some force. Hegel's argument


that "what is rational is actual" may be taken to mean that, insofar as a community acquits itself rationally, it has a reality which logically binds one's sentiments to it; by this way of thinking, patriotic affectivity is simply a condition of consciousness: the "spirit of the people" made objective and identified with concrete political arrangements. But I would suggest that invoking Hegelian fears at any sign that credence is being given to one's feelings for communal realities forces the discussion onto the wrong terrain. There are, after all, other possible modalities for such felt realities besides rational transparency—such as language, for example.

**Herder’s Sprachphilosophie and Communal Identity**

The link between language and nationality is frequently noted in sociolinguistics, and of course is never far from the news. Yet when it comes to theorizing about the nature of national communities and identities, language has often been seen as simply one of many cultural attachments. The presumption is that patriotism reflects one's affection for a linguistically conveyed matrix of particularities, not the existence of a particular, linguistically realized affective sense as such. Even those sympathetic to the unique role of language often find the idea that sharing a language might have something to do with "a definition of the good life," a ground for real attachment, simply unsupportable. Yet language, the public mode of human connection, is also the aesthetic field wherein all such definitions, grounds, and connections are discovered. The suggestion is that the meaning of a community need not be tied to a Hegelian unfolding of rationality, but rather to a romantic impression of appropriate realization: to the feeling that something—a social arrangement, a cultural judgment, a way of life—makes (linguistic) sense. It may be, of course, that this process is not amenable


 HERDER’S THEORY OF LANGUAGE  

...to individual demonstration; as George Fletcher observed, "the constitutive impact of language ... is intuitively obviously but empirically elusive." Nonetheless, language—especially in Herder’s writings—presents us with an important entrance point into the aesthetic-affective roots of communal feeling.

To be sure, it must be noted that much current work in linguistics lends no support whatsoever to the idea of an essential connection between language and identity. Many scholars view language as a hard-wired aspect of human interaction, the evolutionary development of certain rules universal to human cognition and reference. According to this argument, aesthetic connections and descriptions are simply cultural residue attached to an original “Mentalese” which we “speak” inside our heads. The consequence of such an argument is that affective ties to a linguistically constituted way of life can never be seen as intrinsic; while strong and perhaps admirable, they are basically only an idiosyncrasy. I would not aspire to mount a full reply to this challenge to Sprachphilosophie in this essay; suffice to say that I believe it unwise to too quickly discount those theories which grant language a “strange and paradoxical ontological status,” as Charles Taylor put it—theories that develop from the claim that “thought is essentially dependent upon and bounded by language,” and which, far from being exclusive to Herder, amounts to a full-fledged “counter-paradigm” to the empiricism and idealism of so many students of language both past and present. It is worth noting, moreover, that dismissing the idea of language as a communally affective aesthetic field depends to a degree upon bracketing the sensual practice of language in favor of attention to the structural cognition of words and rules inside the brain. The reminder which this “structure/practice principle” poses has led to some important work in cognitive linguistics as well as philosophy; at least one recent work suggests that a wide range of (invariably communal) aesthetic operations, particularly involving narrative projection and par-

able, are more central to human mental states than grammar or reference itself.\textsuperscript{19}

Herder’s romantic Sprachphilosophie is an especially intriguing example of this counter-paradigm, as his worldview allows for a truly deep and intertwined exploration of the themes of community and connection. Herder’s philosophy centered on the affective \textit{Kräfte} (forces) which he believed human beings experience and make manifest as a \textit{Volk}; his ontology posited the aesthetic force of language as an organic reality. He thus used the concepts of \textit{Volk} and nation as part of interrelated (ultimately theological) schemes, showing how the development of one involves the other. A close reading of Herder’s work further suggests the idea that \textit{Völker} are best understood as groups of people identifiable through a particular linguistic context: namely, the ongoing activity of expression (that is, speaking a language, and speaking it consciously to and with others). Nations, on the other hand, may be seen as products of the expressed linguistic content which historically and naturally develops within and through each particular group (that is, the literary and folk heritage which grounds whatever the \textit{Volk} has spoken and continues to speak about). Thus Herder presents us with a different way of understanding affective attachment, one which assumes a relationship between two ideal communities: first, the linguistic space or field of communal self-realization, an aesthetic context within which identities are revealed and recognized; second, a historically cultivated national community, an affecting collectivity whose cultural particularities are inseparable from one’s experience of the world. Both \textit{Volk} and nation may be thus understood as aspects of a process by which language binds us to what we truly are.

This broadly Herderian argument is not wholly unknown in studies of nationalism. While the majority of the literature basically takes the constructed origin of communal attachment for granted, at least a few recent works have argued that the aesthetic force of vernacular languages began their “nationalizing” work far earlier than is often recognized; and that the oral medium (particu-

larly the communication of religious concepts and stories) was crucial to the realization of national community.20 Herder's philosophy goes even further than this, however; when he wrote about the linguistic Bildung (formation) of a Volk, he presented the aesthetic identification with nations as the revelation of an immanent reality—that is, he held that a natural history of nations would, through the conduit of language, reveal their metaphysical worth as well. Such an overtly religious reading of Herder may appear to run counter not only to historicist interpretations of his philosophy but also recent scholarship on his embrace of anthropology as a way to refute certain religious orthodoxies.21 But as one scholar argues, "notwithstanding the striking historicity and self-generated particularities with which Herder endowed his emerging nations, he does not hesitate to return to the element that is common to all ... '[God's speaking, exemplary model in all works]."22 The real wonder of language for Herder, therefore, and the moral point of its affective power, is the role it plays as an aesthetic linking of divine nature and human history.

Consider Herder's argument in On Diligence in Several Learned Languages, a short essay he wrote while still a student. It supposedly addresses the pedagogical importance of language study, but as Michael Morton observes, Herder's real aim was to consider "a still larger field of issues regarding the status of human beings."23 Among these is the collective perception of human meaning, which Herder saw as a process of aesthetic "enlistment" into an always developing linguistic context. Leaning on the biblical story of the Tower of Ba-

22. Ernest A. Menze, "Gang Gottes über die Nationen": The Religious Roots of Herder's Auch eine Philosophie Revisited," Monatshefte für deutschsprachige Literatur und Kultur 92 (2000): 17; Menze is citing Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit [Yet Another Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humankind], in Werke in zehn Bänden, vol. 4, Jürgen Brunnmack and Martin Bollacher, eds. (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1994), p. 41, hereafter cited as "Auch eine Philosophie" / Philosophical Writings, ed. and trans. Michael N. Forster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 299, hereafter cited as "Forster." In this paper, citations from Herder will be followed, after a slash, by the primary source for the given English translation. I have often slightly altered translations when my reading appeared to support such changes. When there is no slash, the translation is mainly my own.
bel, Herder saw this context as having been first manifest in a "golden age," which had existed before the building of the tower:

That flourishing age is gone in which the small circle of our earliest ancestors dwelt round the patriarchs, like children round their parents; that age in which, according to the simple and noble word of scripture, all the world was of one tongue and one language. ... But why do I sketch a lost portrait of irreplaceable charms? It is no more, this golden age. As the children of dust undertook thatedifice that threatened the clouds, the chalice of confusion was poured over all of them: their families and dialects transplanted themselves to various points of the compass, and a thousand languages created themselves in tune with the climates and mores of a thousand nations. ... This plant transformed itself according to the soil that nourished it and heaven's breeze, which quenched its thirst: it became a Proteus among nations.  

Herder uses the reflexive voice in his description of linguistic change: verpflanzten sich, schuf schufen sich and verwandelte sich—"transplanted themselves," "created themselves," "transformed itself." Yet the referent is to the "thousand languages" as a singular entity—"this plant." Herder's thinking here has both substantive and structural implications:

On the one hand, [Herder] stops short of attributing to languages qualities of personal agency, yet at the same time he avoids having to say that they then arise simply as a result of the application of external forces to a given, in itself inert, material. The suggestion is rather that languages possess an internal principle of development, a kind of organic entelechy, that impels their emergence. ... Notwithstanding the emphasis on the diversity and particularity of languages and peoples that is the dominant strain in the argument at this point, the very expression of [an immanently operating plurality of entities] thus also contains an implicit suggestion that human language, and, by extension, the human race at large, is in some ultimate sense a unitary phenomenon.

As described here, Herder's thought involves a determination to read the self-creating expressive activity of language as a force operative in the nature and history of a people. Herder believed that in speaking so to understand our situation, we are working out its meaning as well: a fairly standard hermeneutic observation.


25. Morton, Herder and the Poetics of Thought, pp. 36, 42.
But Herder deepens his hermeneutics by attributing to that working out an immanent substance—that what is taking place is not a purely subjective ordering, but an alignment of our thinking with truths that are there to be understood. And if finding forms of expression is, therefore, a way of relating to reality, then the national self-realization of a Volk takes on a very different light. Patriotism and peoplehood becomes part of the larger question of one’s place and direction in the world. Indeed, Herder’s ideas suggest that we must see the awareness and affection which grounds a people in their language as both aesthetic and moral; as he saw it, no real sense can be made of being with others (politically or otherwise), whether intimately or internationally, if one is not simultaneously with that communal space which through language has been embodied as one’s own.

My study from this point will proceed in two steps: first, to explain in greater detail Herder’s vision of the organic development of peoples and their language, and then to work out some of the implications of his arguments for our thinking about national feeling. As a conclusion, I will suggest that this Herderian contribution to our concepts of language, affective identity, and national community finds support in the work of Martin Heidegger, whose writings on language and being continue to enrich (and trouble) our sense of modern belonging.

Language and Volk

The key to Herder’s Sprachphilosophie is his affirmation of the “reflexivity” of language: that is, the idea that language is in some sense constitutive of those who speak it. It does not precede the Volk, but it is the use of language by which a people becomes cognizant of itself:

I think every Volk has its identity through their language. Speech is a divine organ of teaching, chastisement and instruction for all peoples who have an ear and desire for it. This union of tongue and ears ties one into a public; in this way we hear thoughts and advice, seize resolutions, and share amongst ourselves teaching, tragedy, and joy. Whoever has been educated in the same language, whoever has poured their heart into it and learned to express their soul in it, belongs to a Volk.²⁶

The central theoretical component of this process of “self-constitution” is humanity’s capacity for reflection, which Herder

captured in the complex term Besonnenheit. Herder presents Besonnenheit as a function of an inherent and natural law of human expression, and hence human thought itself; it is, in essence, the intellectual tool which all human beings used to "work on"—to feel, reflect upon, and thus construct and aesthetically reveal—the morally and sensually real Kräfte which are the root of our sense of being. Herder most fully elaborated upon the term in his essay Treatise on the Origin of Language, but the principle of the concept is present in almost all his works, even if the term itself is not. For instance, near the end of his life, Herder summed up his views on language in Letters on the Advancement of Humanity:

Speech possesses something eternal. It creates deep impressions, and poetry intensifies them through its harmonic art. ... Speech paints the object that it depicts or represents on an intellectual, moral and eternal background right into one's very being, right into one's soul. Is not progress inevitable in this succession of poetry throughout history, just as it is in every succession of the continual workings of nature? I do not doubt it at all (if progress is understood properly). ... Even in the times of the worst forms of bad taste we can say, in accordance with the great natural law: Tendimus in Arcadiam, tendimus! Our way proceeds toward the realm of simplicity, truth, morality.

Herder usually wrote about "language" using the word Sprache, but his use of "speech" (Rede) here is not unusual, as he clearly prioritized the exchange of spoken language over the written one. Indeed, the initial form of all languages, he believed, was the instinctually spoken and heard "poetic" word. In our primordial condition, an "ocean of sensations" crash down on us daily and bring forth reactions: anger, delight, hurt, wonder, and so forth. Through Besonnenheit, our rational capacities—"the force of our souls"—can "so to speak, separate off, stop, and pay attention to a single wave, and be conscious of our own attentiveness." In performing this act, we give a name to this sensation, a name which reflects the reactive sound which animates our impression, but also the ineluctable form that the occurrence of the event at hand con-

27. Herder described his concept of Besonnenheit as "the whole disposition of human nature" and "the accommodation of all human forces in this central, fated direction" (Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache [Treatise on the Origin of Language], in Werke in zehn Bänden, vol. 1, ed. Ulrich Gaier [Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1985], pp. 719, 720, hereafter cited as Abhandlung / Forster, pp. 84, 85).


veys. Herder equated this naming with the rational discernment of what he called a "characteristic mark." This "first characteristic mark of taking-awareness," Herder concluded, "was a word of the soul. With it, human language is invented."30

As Michael Forster notes, the "language" which Herder presents in these passages as fundamental to human beings is hardly what we usually understand the term to mean; it is more a matter, at this point in Herder’s reasoning, of "general-concept-possession" than anything clearly expressive.31 But Herder built upon these arguments, all while holding to his basic linking of reflexivity and affectivity. Language for Herder means a creative process of hearing and marking the power of specific impressions: "only speech has rendered people human, by setting bounds to the vast flood of their passions and giving them rational characteristic marks by means of words."32 Such marking is an essential part of reflection—it is the initial step in making connections across space; and hence is concomitant with storytelling and community-building (or binding). As an example of this process, Herder considers the word sheep. To encounter a sheep is to be presented with numerous sensate possibilities. What stands out: whiteness, softness, woolliness? Herder suggested that we lock in on the sound of the sheep: it is "that which bleats." It is a unique sound, one that is, in a sense, rightly the sheep’s own: we would not say a lion or a wolf "bleats," even though the very idea of "bleating" had only just come to be articulated. "The sound of bleating," he wrote, "perceived by a human soul as the distinguishing sign of the sheep, became, thanks to this determination to which it was destined, the name of the sheep, even if one’s tongue had never before tried to stammer it. ... This was the grasped sign on the occasion of which the soul distinctly recalled to awareness an idea."33 While one may dismiss this account as just Herder’s way of getting at the principle of cognitive reference, a thorough examination of his writings will show the point of this example to be Herder’s conviction that human language does not reflect mental acts of signification so much as involve using words whose right
meaning is manifest in our relationship to a continuing context of perceptual or affective sensations.\textsuperscript{34}

The intuitive "rightness" of this naming is important; by entering into a continuum of distinguishing and connecting, we acknowledge the sensate form which was always there, yet it is we who, in a hermeneutic fashion, give it its appropriate structure and content.\textsuperscript{35} In coming up with the word "sheep," as with every identification of distinguishing marks and articulation of meaningful symbols, we enter into a state of what Herder called \textit{Einverständnis}, "the common-understanding of the human soul with itself." Arguably, this is an entirely subjective, rational, and internal process, not a communal one: as Herder suggests, not even the most uncivilized human being living in total isolation could avoid it.\textsuperscript{36} Yet this idea of "agreement" introduces the condition of mutuality to the whole process of cognition and recognition. Something which is part of us is already present in those marks which we discern from out of the midst of brute sensations and elaborate upon; something which unavoidably invites us into connection with (certain) others:

I cannot think the first human thought, cannot set up the first judgment of awareness, without engaging in dialogue, or striving to engage in dialogue, in my soul. Hence the first human thought by its very nature prepares one to be able to engage in dialogue with others! The first characteristic mark that I grasp is a characteristic word for me and a communication word for others!\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{34}. This does not mean that Herder was a straightforward empiricist in his understanding of language and thought, along the lines of Locke and other British thinkers. On the contrary, from very early on in his career Herder argued that material principles and sensations are not reflected by us, but rather have their "locus of connection in us" (see \textit{Versuch über das Sein} [Essay on Being], in \textit{Werke in zehn Bänden}, 1: 20). Forster, linking these two aspects of Herder's philosophy (that is, that meanings or concepts may be essentially equated with usages of words, and that those usages themselves have a sensate nature), writes that for Herder "the sensations which ground concepts inevitably undergo a transformation as the concepts are acquired [and hence spoken and further acquired and transformed], their final required nature being one that they can only have along with concepts" (see Forster, "Herder's Philosophy of Language," p. 352 and passim).


\textsuperscript{36}. \textit{Abhandlung}, p. 725 / Forster, p. 90; see also Robert E. Norton, \textit{Herder's Aesthetics and the European Enlightenment} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 115 and passim, for a fine consideration of \textit{Einverständnis}, an important concept which has unfortunately passed mostly uninvestigated in many other studies of Herder.

\textsuperscript{37}. \textit{Abhandlung}, p. 733 / Forster, p. 97.
Herder here frames the origin of language in terms of Kraft and aesthetic—or poetic—self-constitution, a communal and affective self-revelation of facts which are sensibly real but which nonetheless must be immanently expressed. “For what was this first language but a collection of elements of poetry?” Herder asked. “The natural language of all creatures, poetized by human reason into sounds ... a vocabulary of the soul which is simultaneously a mythology and a wonderful epic of the actions and speech of all beings! A constant poetic creation of fable with passion and interest: what else could poetry be?” Herder’s belief in the naturalness of this whole aesthetic process cannot be overemphasized: one of his goals in writing the Treatise was to challenge the idea that language was merely supernatural in origin. His philosophy of language might be best understood as an attempt to clarify both the metaphysical context of natural expression (which Herder once described as “organic Kräfte”) as well as the ongoing historical production of cultural content (or “tradition”).

Herder was wary of traditional metaphysical claims, seeing them as restrictions of human freedom; his metaphysics of communal revelation instead moved philosophy in the direction of poetry and anthropology, which was exactly the direction he thought it needed to go anyway.

In sum, Herder believed that when we mark off and hermeneutically open up, through language, an understanding of the given historical and natural context which informs all our thinking, we are situating ourselves into communities which share a grasp of things that is fundamentally right. The discovery of words both commits and privileges a people, revealing a meaningful way of understanding and being which affects their ethics, politics, art, and all other aspects of life. In many ways, this is an obvious observation; examples from the experience of English-speaking peoples alone are too numerous to list, ranging from the sacred (such as the impact of the King James Bible in shaping modern mores) to the banal (such as the role of the schoolyard concept of “fair play” in

38. Abhandlung, p. 740 / Forster, p. 103.
40. See Wie die Philosophie zum Besten des Volks allgemeiner und nützlicher werden kann [How Philosophy can become more General and Useful for the Good of the People], in Werke in zehn Bänden, 1: 134 / Forster, p. 29; Vom Erkennen Und Empfinden der Menschlichen Seele [On the Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul], in Werke in zehn Bänden, 4: 331, hereafter cited as “Vom Erkennen” / Forster, p. 189 and passim.
And politically speaking, what could possibly be more affecting (and mobilizing) than for Volk to come to realize itself, in and through its language, as having a received a real purchase on the nature of the world?

**Volk and Nation**

One obvious political reason why Herder's romantic vision of linguistic and communal revelation is rarely taken seriously is that his organic perspective runs counter to the whole modern preference for choice over belonging. Is this a fair charge—does Herder's philosophy, in fact, make one's Volk one's destiny? While he would not put it in such an extreme manner, there is a fair amount of truth in this description: Herder did hold the Volk to be enduring, and the affectivity felt by those who speak its language to be something not easily ignored. In this sense, Herder saw a people grounded in their language as functioning with almost familial intimacy, suggesting that "the most natural state is the Volk with its one national character."\(^42\)

Herder believed that the thinking of every linguistically realized people is marked by a Denkart: a "secret bond" with all that is felt out and responded to by particular human beings in their encounters with the world and each other; through its manifestation, "one's thinking is given its whole shape and direction." Each specific Denkart is the by-product of the aforementioned laws by which a people comes to speak its language; without the continuation of "thought-formulas" which impress themselves upon us even as we articulate them, "we would, regardless of all seeing and hearing and inflow from outside, grope around in deep night and blindness."\(^43\) To deny one's active connection to the course of one's own communal perception and expression would be, therefore, not im-

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42. *Ideen zur Philosophie*, p. 369 / Barnard, p. 324.

43. *Vom Erkennen*, p. 358 / Forster, p. 212. It should be noted that this idea plays an important role in filling out Herder's whole philosophy of language, and that in presenting the bond of language as something which sustains and contributes to humanity's essential reflexivity or "inner plasticity," Herder to a degree partially supplants—or better, supplements, without necessarily changing any key arguments—the pure (perhaps almost too psychological) "marking" operation of Besonnenheit which he described in the Treatise. (*Vom Erkennen*, p. 357 / Forster, p. 211 and passim; see also Forster, "Herder's Philosophy of Language," p. 340.)
possible, but nonetheless quite difficult; thankfully, few human beings delude themselves into believing they can make sense of the world without reference to their attachment to a national sensibility. "We think only in the language in which we are educated," he wrote; "a person who loses this disposition has lost themselves and the world around them."44

A people should thus want to affirm themselves nationally, and hold to the chain of beliefs which gave them a ground upon which to stand. Herder's advice to all peoples was to cultivate their national Bildung: "neither leave this chain nor rise above it; rather, embrace it!"45 Noting that certain Enlightenment thinkers labeled the passions which distinguished nations from each other as simple "prejudice, mob-thinking, and limited nationalism," Herder responded that "prejudice is good in its time," for it "attaches people together into their center, makes them firmer on their tribal stem, more blooming in their kind, more passionate and hence also happier in their inclinations and purposes."46 But what are these purposes? In going so far as to speak of embracing "prejudices" as at times an essential part of our aesthetic-affective sense of the world, it becomes tempting to see in Herder a defense of all the xenophobic tropes so often associated with nationalism. But this is not the case. Herder believed that the content of particular aesthetic-affective connections were and should be limited; however he never believed that a natural national realization could be all-encompassing or internally exclusive.

For instance, Herder dismissed the idea that racial distinctions had a legitimate role to play in the national realization of any Volk. Indeed, Herder found the whole idea of race useless, writing "I see no reason for employing this term." He felt that, absent social interference (meaning coercion arising from interested groups either within or without the given spatial boundaries of a people), the identity cultivated by any Volk over the course of history would naturally preserve itself, regardless of whatever physical transitions take place:

Every distinct people is a nation, having its own national culture as it has its own language. The climate, it is true, may imprint on each its peculiar stamp, or it may spread over it a slight veil, but still without destroying its original character. This originality of character extends to families, and its transitions are as variable as they are imperceptible. In short, there are

45. Ideen zur Philosophie, p. 342 / Bunge, p. 53.
neither four nor five races, nor exclusive varieties, on this earth. Complexions run into each other; forms follow genetic character; and they are all, in the end, simply different shades of the same great picture which extends through all the ages and all the parts of the globe.  

Consequently, Herder did not oppose immigration or interracial association; he held to no notion of maintaining the "purity" of the nation in the face of change. Uniformity is not really central to the Volk; any community, Herder wrote, will include diverse components, and the welfare of a people in fact reflects (and requires sustaining) those various components. One of the keys to understanding Herder's emphasis on the nation as a vehicle of meaning is thus the fact that he did not appear to care too much who was bound to the community; rather, he cared about the binding they shared and how they shared it.

Does this mean linguistic affectivity is the only necessary component of nationhood? If so, the consequences for those who think normatively about cultural claims will be immense; there are perhaps 5000 (or more) languages spoken in the world today; while many of those are fairly restricted ritual dialects, a good percentage of the remainder do have a Volk that identifies through them. But Herder's point is not to describe a sufficient requirement for statehood as such. In truth, Herder was not really concerned with questions of state, and to the extent those questions could not be avoided, he doubted that sharing a language would end contestation over the legal characteristics of any sovereign nation any more than submitting to a common government or sharing a territory might. Rather, he saw the give and take of language as the key to the realization of a people in a "public" sense. There can be no revealed way of life without it, and consequently, no good moral argument for the maintenance of those communal bonds which make us fully national and fully human. He made this point in many

contexts, but returned again and again to emphasizing it for his own divided people:

Sometimes it is incomprehensible to me, that we seem to so misunderstand the importance of German as a language of our nation. The bulk of our people still think of it as something that only concerns the grammarian. To see language as the font of our reason and cooperation, as the tool of instruction for every culture, as the union of sociality and good customs, as the authentic vehicle of the advancement of humanity in every class of humans, this is something of which most of us have only the slightest notion. ... Language is the union of souls ... which binds parents to their children, social orders to one other, the teacher to his pupils, his friends, to his fellow citizens, all as human beings.52

By constructing a sense of "publicness," language brings the affective feelings of identity with the Volk into national life. But this devotion is not one-way; it is not simply a matter of genuflecting to an existing linguistic canon. Immigrants, for instance, while obliged to accept the linguistic world of their new Volk, could not become participants in a new communal articulation without also transforming it (as they also transform themselves). Such transformations would have inevitable repercussions on public identity; Vicki Spencer points out that Herder revealed his openness to new national and linguistic realizations by, among other things, acknowledging the Dutch as a distinct Volk, a position which many early German nationalists denied.53

Obviously, a Herderian reading of the relationship between language and nationality is "conservative" in some ways: contrary to the claims (or wishes) of many, it assumes that national communities have enduring place in the moral structure of the world and argues that said nations should acknowledge the necessity of maintaining a dominant linguistic field, for the sake of perpetuating the meaning which a people may culturally realize within their group. Herder's communitarian vision thus suggests that a choice-driven policy of bi- or multilingualism is greatly limited in its ability to transform or shape the realization of a people's affective identity, because it ignores or distorts the context by which we are aesthetically brought into a sense of belonging, into having, in Richard Rodriguez's phrase, a "public individuality."54

52. Über die Fähigkeit zu sprechen und zu hören [On the Ability to Speak and Hear], in Werke in zehn Bänden, 9/2: 707.
standing of language and identity would also seem to have "progressive" elements as well, in that it denies the value of specific linguistic forms apart from their always fluid use and adaptation by the people who discover the content of their identity through them. One might conclude on solid Herderian grounds that national realization is in no way affected when social evolution or immigration introduces widely divergent or "foreign" ways of discourse to a people; the idea that changes in language will lead to the "demoralization" of a nation is far removed from Herder's philosophy. Moreover, it views enduring—or emerging—national communities not in terms of rights but in terms of Volk: rather than attempting to balance one (majority) linguistic "interest" versus another (minority) one, it would look to reciprocally recognize the refinement and inter-relationship of both peoples, perhaps on a confederal basis, both within and between different states.

Of course, all these normative implications are premised upon distinguishing between the national affections of distinct linguistic Volk, an act which some, pointing to the example of multilingual states which nonetheless appear to have developed strong national attachments, might call either unnecessary or counterproductive. Indeed, one might argue that the very existence of such states challenges the idea that language is ineliminable from the self-realization of a people. In response, I would suggest that the relative paucity of successful examples of such states should perhaps in fact be taken to argue the reverse; and that in any case, attention should be paid to how language actually functions in the lives of those who express their connectedness to the national community, rather than the role officially deemed it by governing elites. This same con-

55. For an example of this kind of traditionalist claim, see the preface of the facsimile publication of Noah Webster's First Edition of an American Dictionary of the English Language, 1828 (San Francisco: Foundation for American Christian Education, 1967), p. 10 and passim.


57. Is the multilingual Canadian federation, for instance, a success or not? Certainly Canada has a stable civil society and at least a certain degree of national affectivity. But has that been achieved because of a truly translingual, felt attachment, or because fortuitous historical circumstances have rendered Canada's "binational" federation palatable almost in spite of itself? This is a complex argument, one made more difficult by the (often buried but still very strong) animosities generated by the efforts of Pierre Trudeau to force Canada to embrace a single, multilingual identity: see Pierre A. Coulombe, "Citizenship and Official Bilingualism in Canada," in Citizenship in Diverse Societies, ed. Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 273-93; Guy Laforest, "The True Nature of
sideration also offers a response to a related objection, which suggests that the widespread use of certain languages across state borders minimizes any sense of a distinct national revelation which might be helpful in evaluating community attachments. But as similar as the linguistic context of the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and English-speaking Canada may be, in actual practice the affective content of these undisputedly distinct national groups plainly and necessarily works upon and is elaborated by their diverse populations differently—or at least ought to be, insofar as the various inhabitants of these nations are not denied, through either imperialist rule or the delusion of cosmopolitan ideologies, continued historical and natural contact with that context from which they realized themselves (and continue to realize themselves) in the first place.

Herder scorned all cosmopolitanism: he mocked those who aspired to be “citizens of the world” as “human shadows” who love “a whole world of shadows”; “the saturated heart of the idle cosmopolitan,” he wrote, “offers shelter to nobody.” A world community—a single global nationality—was a perverse concept to Herder; what he affirmed instead was the fundamental complementarity of languages and communities. No linguistic Volk could ever, he believed, properly conceive their own national community as uniquely triumphant or endowed—there could be no “favorite Volk,” nor a favorite language. Thus could Herder discuss the preservation of languages and peoples in both reciprocally egalitarian and national communitarian terms—which is arguably a far more reasonable perspective than that of those linguists and activists who, committed to thinking about language use as an individual economic choice or human right, find themselves obliged.

Sovereignty: Reply to my Critics Concerning Trudeau and the End of the Canadian Dream,” in Canadian Political Philosophy: Contemporary Reflections, ed. Ronald Beiner and Wayne Norman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 298-310; and "Pierre Elliot Trudeau: Quebec’s Best Friend,” in Trudeau’s Shadow: The Life and Legacy of Pierre Elliot Trudeau, ed. Andrew Cohen and J.L. Granatstein (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 1999), pp. 367-92. Answering these questions also requires research into actual language practice, which is rarely as multilingual as the documents which give nations their legal embodiment seem to imply. For example, it is interesting to note that in Switzerland, which is both multilingual and famously patriotic, communities are overwhelmingly monolingual: “there is no official bilingualism at the local level … living in Switzerland means living entirely in German, in French or in Italian” (Francois Grin, ”Language Policy in Multilingual Switzerland,” cited in Kymlicka, “From Enlightenment Cosmopolitanism,” p. 213 n.7).

to attack all national embodiments of linguistic space (that is, mono-
lingual communities) as the unnatural result of colonialism, whether
internal or external.\textsuperscript{61} Within the context of national and linguistic
self-revelation, human beings have an obvious need to attend to
that language wherein they have public embodiment, but that does
not render meaningless an international awareness. Indeed, the
essential point of \textit{On Diligence} was that while the creation of nu-
merous languages at the Tower of Babel may have been a “necessary
evil,” it was also an “actual good,” for it was only by encountering
other languages (once grounded in one’s own) and forming a “bond
of knowledge” with them that human beings found wisdom.\textsuperscript{62} These
and other examples throughout Herder’s writings reinforce his in-
sistence that the organic diversity of national expression remain
untrammeled, and he did not spare his own tongue from this analy-
sis. He strongly criticized the effort of Emperor Joseph II to impose
the German language across the Austro-Hungarian empire in the
1780s. Herder opposed the decree because it involved coercion
rather than natural development, and because it threatened the lan-
guage and identity of the nations within that imperial state,
including the Slavic and Magyar \textit{Völker}. The imagined exchange
Herder wrote on this topic is revealing:

A: Which innocent prejudices of the people did [Joseph] insult?
B: Of many I mention only a few; first the prejudice of language. Is it
likely that any people ... hold to anything more dearly than the language
of their fathers? In it resides their whole rich tradition of thought, history,
religion and principles of living; all its heart and soul. To belittle their
language is to take away what may be called the only immortal property
of such a people, both elders and children.
A: And Joseph could do this to several peoples, personally and exactly.
B: It is surprising he did not anticipate their reaction, as he intervened
into their most intimate rights. To me, whoever drives out my language
... also wants to rob me of my reason and my way of life, the honor and
laws of my \textit{Volk}. Truly, just as God tolerates all languages of this world, so
too should a ruler tolerate, nay, treasure, the diverse languages of his subject
nations.\textsuperscript{63}

Herder’s invocation of the divine approval which attends \textit{all} “di-
verse languages” and “subject nations” is an appropriate conclusion:
according to his understanding of the aesthetics of communal realiza-
tion, it is entirely reasonable to see God in the affective poetry of nations.
Of course, to those who are hostile to this kind of metaphysics, Herder’s

\textsuperscript{61} See Nettle and Romaine, \textit{Vanishing Voices}, pp. 172-75 and passim.
\textsuperscript{62} \textit{Über den Fleiß}, pp. 3, 7 / Menze and Palma, pp. 31, 33.
\textsuperscript{63} \textit{Brief zu Beförderung}, pp. 65-66.
account of community and affectivity is likely to only make patriotism even seem more dangerous, exactly because he posits a spiritual understanding of the world—and a hermeneutic investment in that understanding—as invariably at its core. It is true that, should Herder’s ideas be taken seriously, it would suggest that the communal articulation of nations can never be free of a supporting context which centers the realization of a people in an aesthetic apprehension of the divine. But in contemporary philosophy, is such anticipation of revelation truly so unusual, or such a cause of concern?

Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Nations

When Martin Heidegger commented in his famous interview with Der Spiegel that “only a god can save us,” he plainly did not have God as Herder thought of Him in mind. And yet Heidegger’s invocation of the divine has come to haunt modernity. Many, of course, do not feel the power of Heidegger’s challenge; but many others do, and in so doing, they subject their situation in the world to critique. These critiques often prompt reflections on the theme of attachment, though Heidegger’s use in understanding matters relating to nationality is debatable. Heidegger’s late philosophy especially appears hostile to notions of national community; in 1946 he wrote that any kind of nationalism was “metaphysically an anthropologism, and as such subjectivism,” suggesting that all collectivities were simply extensions of the same unthinking individualism which posits the subjective “I think” as the font of legitimate action. Still, Heidegger’s critique of metaphysics arises from many of the same concerns as did Herder’s vision of language and the Volk; one recent study even suggests that Heidegger’s engagement with Herder’s work was of great significance, providing the catalyst for much of Heidegger’s postwar thinking.


case, the connection between Heidegger’s focus on language and his ultimate turn to the divine quality of communal expression may not be surprising at all.

In 1939, Heidegger taught a seminar on Herder’s _Treatise_. During that class he pointed to what he saw as limitations of Herder’s attribution of language to the human manifestation of immanent _Kräfte_. Such conceptualizations had the same consequence, in Heidegger’s view, as traditional metaphysics in general: they objectify that which is appropriate to the human into “something at hand” for human beings. Responding to Herder’s claims, Heidegger saw the ground of language not in human (communal) realization, which he considered a humanistic idealism, but in the wonder of what is unrealized, the “silent beckoning” of one’s encounter with the world. From this analysis, it is not difficult to see the emergence of some of Heidegger’s most obscure and profound reflections, such as his claim that “language speaks ... it is language that first brings man about, brings him into existence”—or, perhaps even more succinctly, “Being comes to language.” These statements should not be taken to mean that Heidegger felt that language, and the aesthetic affectivity it makes manifest, is utterly inhuman: while he is often far from clear, Heidegger does not necessarily forget that “existence is dialogical; it is being in the world with others,” meaning that “language belongs to [the] ‘to-be’ (to be-ing) as well as to [the] ‘to-be-with.'” But it does suggest that the attachments we feel to our language and community are not what we suppose them to be. For Heidegger, Herder’s insight is correct, but takes too seriously the idea that we must come into our own understanding so as to build a proper sense of affection. It is not we, Heidegger insists, that speak so to clarify and reveal the world, but rather our language which speaks us for the sake of the world: “‘German’ is not spoken to the world so that the world might be reformed through the German essence; rather, it is spoken to the Germans so that from a fateful belongingness to the nations they might become world-historical along with them.”

The relief that some may feel in reading that Heidegger refused to grant communities of language the role of reforming the world is likely to be entirely offset by his subsequent comment that such

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67. Ibid., pp. 57-61.
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communities are to become "world-historical." No one, especially in light of the political causes which Heidegger turned his ideas to, would want to ignore the illiberality that Heidegger invests linguistic revelation with in that sentence; it provides some substance to the accusation that a Heideggerian community would be one enraptured by antinomianism, a "community of saints who have been transfigured by the revelation of the word that is the meaning of being."71 And yet, the real key in that statement is probably "fateful belongingness." This suggests not a status but an unresolved state of aspiration. For a Volk to realize itself with other nations of the world requires, Heidegger appears to have argued, a cognizance of the incompleteness inherent in every accomplishment, every description or conversation. The affectivity is always there, but never completely there; the bond is real, but never fully revealed. To turn to expectation as the condition of human belonging, rather than as functions of it, may be seen as inviting desperation, but it may also be seen as involving a change in political rhetoric on a profound scale:

For Heidegger, the overcoming of metaphysics also implies the overcoming of "the people" or "folk" as a unitary metaphysical category. Repeatedly and emphatically, Heidegger speaks of the indeterminancy of talk about folk. "How does a people become a people?" he asks. "Does a people or folk only become what it already 'is' [as empirical entity]? If so, what is it then and how can this be known?" ... In his words, "The nature of folk can be grasped only from the vantage of Dasein—which means that the existing folk can never be a goal or a program."

This is seemingly very far from Herder, and to the degree to which Heidegger insisted on "overcoming" the sensate, and therefore natural and historical, metaphysical possibilities of a Volk, then it truly is incompatible with Herder's Sprachphilosophie. But still, there are some parallels here. In Herder's ontology, the protean power of language is often treated, exactly because of its inexhaustibility, as something ambiguous, pulling the nations forward in its speaking at least as much as nations might speak to better understand themselves. Language is a phenomenon that Herder believed to be beyond our full comprehension: "a completely philosophical language," he wrote, "would have to be the discourse of the gods."73 So even a Herderian

72. Dallmayr, The Other Heidegger, p. 103.
affectivity is always incomplete, as is the Volk itself, which while realizing itself as a nation with an “ontological reality of its own,” would nonetheless ever remain more “a relational event, a historical and cultural continuum” rather than a definitive state.\(^7\) Language, and therefore patriotic feeling as well, cannot be apprehended in terms of a social goal or agenda; it must be manifest organically. This may be small comfort to those who would prefer to see national communities and our affective attachments to them fully accounted for by the dynamics of liberal choice. But it does suggest that the critique of metaphysics, so central to Heidegger’s thought and so common to modern discourse, does not necessarily undermine those communitarian intuitions which drive us to make sense of the aesthetic meanings we find in our nations, meanings which I believe Herder’s philosophy of linguistic revelation and affective national development accounts for very well.

Herder’s vision aspired to include within it the poetic context and historical content of all nations; it aimed to help us realize and value our national feelings as neither an accident of nature nor an (easily critiqued) metaphysical projection. It is a resourceful vision, one that I see as enabling the debate over the propriety and defensible limits of patriotism and nationality to encompass aspects of human existence often passed over by the dominant approaches to peoplehood and the constitution of communities. Obviously Herder is not the only thinker whose ideas can contribute to such a project—yet it is perhaps primarily the religious seriousness with which Herder accepted the naturalness of language and nation that allows his philosophy to provide such a deep framework for communitarian reflection. That Herder’s framework is a kind of metaphysical one is true, but that should not be an obstacle in itself, especially given that Herder’s arguments about language, Volk, and nation are not entirely unreflective of the critique of humanism which Heidegger made. As Michael Perry has argued, no theorizing about human rights can escape the religious; when we theorize normatively about the power and worth of language and national communities, it behooves us to lay aside Hegelian fears and accept the same.\(^7\)
