

Kant, Herder, and the Limits of Developmental Explanation: Language and Human Formation in the 1785 Reviews

Memetniyaz Osman

Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University

Ghenijan Memet

ainijiang2023@163.com

Guangdong Polytechnic Normal University

Article

Keywords: Kant, Herder, philosophy of language, origin of language, human formation, history of linguistics

Posted Date: October 12th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10960510/v1>

License: © ⓘ This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
[Read Full License](#)

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Abstract

The eighteenth-century debate over the origin and development of language marked a decisive moment in the transformation of European reflections on humanity, nature, and culture. This article examines Immanuel Kant's two 1785 reviews of Johann Gottfried Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* and argues that Kant's criticism should not be understood simply as a rejection of Herder's natural-historical and developmental account of humanity. Rather, Kant challenged the explanatory scope of Herder's developmental philosophy: whether processes of organic formation, linguistic development, and historical transmission could provide sufficient grounds for human rationality and normative agency.

Herder understood language as a historically formed human capacity emerging from the interaction among natural organization, reflection, and cultural inheritance. His developmental perspective later influenced Humboldtian linguistics and broader traditions emphasizing the historical and cultural dimensions of language. Kant, while acknowledging the importance of natural and historical conditions, insisted that the emergence of human capacities should be distinguished from the rational principles that give those capacities their normative significance.

By reconstructing the disagreement between Kant and Herder, this article identifies two enduring dimensions of the philosophy of language: language as a product of historical formation and language as a medium of rational agency. The Kant–Herder controversy therefore represents not merely a chapter in the history of linguistic thought but a continuing framework for examining the relationship between language, culture, and humanity in contemporary contexts.

Introduction

The eighteenth-century controversy over the origin of language was also a controversy over the formation of the human being. Questions concerning how articulated language could emerge from natural cries, sensory experience, social interaction, or divine instruction were inseparable from broader questions about the emergence of reflection, self-consciousness, society, and culture. As Avi Lifschitz has shown, the Berlin debates on language developed around precisely this conjunction of linguistic, cognitive, and social problems: the emergence of language was repeatedly considered alongside the emergence of mind and civilization rather than as an isolated problem in linguistic history (Lifschitz 2012). The debates therefore formed part of a wider eighteenth-century effort to explain how distinctively human capacities could arise within, or out of, nature.

Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772) occupies a decisive place in this intellectual context. The first part of the treatise asks whether human beings, if left to their natural abilities, could invent language for themselves (Herder 2002, 65–164). Herder rejects both the necessity of divine instruction and the reduction of human language to animal cries or sensory association. His concept of *Besonnenheit* identifies a specifically human form of reflective awareness through which a perceptual feature becomes recognized, distinguished, and linguistically articulated. Yet this reflective capacity

does not represent a separation from embodiment. As Ilit Ferber emphasizes, Herder's account of sensation, pain, expression, and reflection maintains an intimate connection between corporeal-affective experience and the emergence of human language (Ferber 2010). Michael Forster similarly argues that Herder's natural account of language belongs to a broader philosophical project in which thought, linguistic articulation, sensation, and sociality are mutually connected (Forster 2018).

Herder's position is therefore better understood as developmental rather than merely naturalistic. He does not reduce language or rationality to mechanical physiological processes; rather, he seeks to explain how specifically human capacities emerge through the interaction of natural organization, reflection, and historical conditions. This developmental framework extends beyond linguistic origins. In the *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, Herder situates human beings within a wider account of bodily form, climate, inherited practices, cultural transmission, political institutions, and historical difference. Language becomes one moment within a larger inquiry into the formation of humanity. Studies of Herder's philosophy have accordingly emphasized the interdependence of language, culture, and historically acquired forms of consciousness rather than treating language as an isolated faculty (Sikka 2011; Forster 2018).

This expansion of developmental explanation provides the crucial background for understanding Kant's intervention in 1785. Kant did not publish a direct response to the Berlin Academy's language-origin debate, nor did he offer a competing account comparable to Herder's *Treatise*. His sustained published engagement with Herder instead appeared in two reviews of the first parts of the *Ideas*. These reviews addressed not only particular claims concerning human characteristics and natural history but also the broader methodological status of Herder's developmental reconstruction of humanity. The Cambridge edition notes that Kant's first review, written at the invitation of Christian Gottfried Schütz, criticized Herder's derivation of human characteristics from upright posture as well as his use of natural analogies in arguments concerning the spirituality and immortality of the soul (Kant 2007, 121–42). Kant's concerns therefore extended beyond language itself to the explanatory reach of a comprehensive account of human development.

Dalia Nassar's analysis is especially important for understanding this methodological dimension. She argues that Kant's objections concern not only specific claims about nature but also Herder's use of analogy as a mode of empirical and philosophical explanation. At the same time, Nassar cautions against interpreting Kant's criticism as a simple exposure of an illegitimate method: Herder's analogical reasoning posed a substantive challenge to Kant's own understanding of how natural history could proceed without turning heuristic connections into determinate claims about nature (Nassar 2015). The controversy thus concerns not a straightforward opposition between a critical Kant and a speculative Herder, but rather the question of what developmental and analogical explanations are entitled to establish.

Recent scholarship has also revised the familiar assumption that Kant and Herder should be contrasted as a language-centered thinker and a language-indifferent rationalist. Kurt Mosser challenges the claim

that Kant neglected natural language, arguing that Kant's concern lies in the logical and grammatical conditions of judgment rather than in the contingent diversity of particular languages (Mosser 2001). More recently, Huaping Lu-Adler has reconstructed a Kantian account of the origin, development, and diversification of languages, showing how linguistic development may be understood in relation to the self-development of reason under both a priori constraints and empirical conditions (Lu-Adler 2023). Marvin Triteschler further argues that neither Kant nor Herder accepts a strict separation between thought and linguistic expression; the deeper disagreement concerns how the linguistic character of rational activity relates to reason's claims beyond the limits of possible experience (Triteschler 2024). These studies make clear that the Kant–Herder controversy cannot be reduced to an opposition between “reason” and “language.”

Building on these insights, this article approaches the controversy from a different perspective. Rather than reconstructing a complete Kantian philosophy of language or presenting Kantian rationalism as the opposite of Herderian linguistic historicism, it examines how the problem of linguistic genesis changed once Herder incorporated it into a broader account of human natural and historical development. Existing scholarship has examined the Berlin language debates, Herder's philosophy of language, Kant and Herder's disagreement in anthropology and natural history, and Kant's relation to linguistic questions (Lifschitz 2012; Zammito 2002; Nassar 2015; Lu-Adler 2023; Triteschler 2024). Less attention, however, has been paid to the methodological connection between the language-origin controversy and Kant's two 1785 reviews of the *Ideas*: namely, the question of how far developmental accounts of human capacities can explain what is distinctively human.

This article argues that Kant's reviews should be understood not as a rejection of developmental explanation itself, but as a critique of its explanatory limits. Herder's trajectory from the *Treatise* to the *Ideas* expands the scope of developmental explanation: what begins as an account of how reflective human beings generate language becomes a broader history linking natural organization, human capacities, cultural inheritance, and the development of humanity. Kant's objections arise at precisely those points where, in his view, developmental or analogical relations are asked to support conclusions that exceed their explanatory basis. His criticisms of upright posture, organic analogies concerning the soul, and Herder's broader historical account are not identical arguments, but they share a methodological concern: explaining the conditions under which a capacity emerges does not automatically determine the philosophical status of that capacity or justify every conclusion drawn from its development.

The distinction proposed here is therefore interpretive rather than historical. It does not claim that Kant explicitly formulated, in the 1785 reviews, a systematic distinction between empirical genesis and philosophical validity. Rather, this distinction serves as a framework for identifying a recurring structure in Kant's objections. Within a broader Kantian context, the point becomes clearer: empirical accounts may describe the emergence and historical exercise of human capacities without thereby providing the ultimate grounds for claims concerning rationality, morality, or purposiveness.

1. Herder's Account of Linguistic Genesis: Nature, Besonnenheit, and Human Formation

Herder's *Treatise on the Origin of Language* (1772) emerged from a debate in which the origin of language had already become inseparable from the question of human nature. The Berlin Academy's prize question asked whether human beings, if left to their natural capacities, would be capable of inventing language for themselves. As Lifschitz has shown, this question belonged to a wider eighteenth-century investigation into the interconnected emergence of language, cognition, society, and culture. The issue was therefore not simply when the first words appeared, but whether distinctively human capacities could be explained without appealing to a special act of divine intervention (Lifschitz 2012, 165–87).

Herder accepts the premise that the origin of language must be explained through human capacities themselves, but he reformulates what such a “natural” explanation requires. The first part of the *Treatise* explicitly asks whether human beings, “left to their natural abilities,” could invent language for themselves (Herder 2002, 65). His answer is directed both against theories that make divine instruction necessary for the emergence of language and against accounts that fail to distinguish human language adequately from animal expression. Lifschitz accordingly describes Herder's prize essay as an attempt to preserve the human origin of language from both its critics and what Herder regarded as inadequate naturalistic defenses of it (Lifschitz 2012, 165–87). Herder's position should therefore not be reduced to a simple choice of “nature” over “divinity.” The central philosophical problem is how nature can give rise to a form of linguistic activity that remains specifically human. ()

The distinction between animal expression and human language is crucial to Herder's solution. The *Treatise* famously begins by observing that the human being, “already as an animal,” possesses a language of sensations: pain, fear, and passion express themselves immediately in cries, groans, and other unarticulated sounds (Herder 2002, 65–66). Such expression does not by itself constitute specifically human language. Animals too express affective states through sounds, and Herder does not attempt to deny the continuity of this expressive dimension across human and animal life. The question is instead how a creature whose embodied life remains continuous with animal sensibility can nevertheless develop a qualitatively distinctive form of linguistic awareness.

Herder answers this question through the concept of *Besonnenheit*. The term is difficult to capture with a single English equivalent. It has been rendered through expressions such as reflection, awareness, and reflective awareness, but none should be understood as referring to an abstract faculty of reason detached from sensation. Herder describes *Besonnenheit* as belonging to the “whole disposition of human nature” and to the organization of human powers as a whole (Herder 2002, 84–85). It names a specifically human capacity to attend to and distinguish features within the manifold of perception, so that a feature of an encountered object can function as a recognizable mark (*Merkmal*).

The importance of this point becomes especially clear in Herder's familiar example of the sheep. What distinguishes human linguistic cognition is not merely hearing the animal's sound but recognizing a characteristic feature as a mark by which the object can subsequently be identified. The emergence of language is thus inseparable from a transformation in attention: a sensory feature becomes cognitively salient in a way that permits recognition and retention. Herder's explanation does not begin with an already completed conceptual system to which words are subsequently attached. Rather, linguistic marking participates in the very process by which experience becomes articulated for a human subject. Forster therefore emphasizes that Herder's theory of linguistic origins forms part of a much broader position concerning the dependence of thought on language and the grounding of concepts in sensation (Forster 2018, 16–73).

This account also explains why *Besonnenheit* should not be interpreted as the victory of disembodied reason over corporeal sensation. Ferber has persuasively argued that Herder locates the emergence of human language precisely in the continuing relation among feeling, bodily expression, attention, and reflection. On this interpretation, the transition from the "language of sensations" to distinctly human language does not occur because rationality severs its connection with embodied affectivity. *Besonnenheit* instead reorganizes this relation: human linguistic activity remains rooted in sensation even when it acquires the reflective structure that differentiates it from immediate animal expression (Ferber 2010, 205–23).

This also complicates the frequently repeated claim that Herder simply derives reason from language or language from reason. In the *Treatise*, the emergence of reflective awareness and the emergence of linguistic articulation are internally connected. Human reflection becomes determinate through the identification of marks, while such marking already has a linguistic dimension. The relationship is therefore not well represented as a linear sequence in which a fully constituted faculty of reason first appears and subsequently "invents" language as an external instrument. Nor is language presented as an independent force that subsequently produces rationality. What Herder attempts to describe is a mutually articulated process in which the distinctively human exercise of attention, recognition, and linguistic marking emerges together. Ferber's later analysis of *Besonnenheit* similarly stresses attention and listening as central to Herder's account of the transition from natural expression to specifically human linguistic orientation (Ferber 2019, 54–93).

The *Treatise* nevertheless does not offer a theory of an isolated individual producing a complete language independently of others. Herder's philosophy of language increasingly emphasizes the social and historical character of linguistic life. Forster identifies the fundamentally social character of language as one of the further principles developed within Herder's philosophy, alongside the dependence of thought on language and the sensory rootedness of concepts (Forster 2018, 16–73). This social dimension becomes increasingly important once the question moves from the first possibility of linguistic articulation to the formation and transmission of actual human cultures.

This distinction between the origin of linguistic capacity and the historical formation of languages and cultures is essential for interpreting Herder's subsequent development. His rejection of a divine explanation of linguistic origins in 1772 should not be conflated with his later emphasis on education, inheritance, tradition, and the intergenerational transmission of culture. The former addresses how language is possible for human beings at all; the latter concerns how human beings who possess linguistic capacities become historically formed members of particular communities. Treating these as two versions of the same question creates the false impression that Herder later abandoned his natural account of language in favor of a theory of divine instruction.

The significance of the 1772 Treatise for the present argument therefore lies less in any single thesis about the first appearance of speech than in the explanatory model it develops. Herder attempts to locate a specifically human achievement within a developmental relation between natural endowment, embodied sensation, reflective awareness, and linguistic articulation. He thereby seeks to explain human distinctiveness without removing the human being from nature. In the *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, this explanatory ambition expands far beyond the origin of language. Natural organization, bodily form, cultural transmission, and historical difference increasingly become elements of a more comprehensive account of human formation. It is this expansion—from an account of linguistic genesis to a broader developmental explanation of humanity—that provides the immediate background against which Kant's 1785 criticism must be reconsidered.

2. From Linguistic Genesis to Human Formation: Herder's Developmental Project in the *Ideas*

2.1 From the Origin of Language to the Formation of Humanity

The *Ideas* retains this developmental concern but places it within a much broader philosophy of human formation. Rather than asking only how language becomes possible, Herder investigates how humanity itself develops through the interaction of natural organization, historical circumstances, social transmission, and cultural inheritance. The work moves across questions concerning the formation of the earth, the organization of living beings, human bodily structure, reason, language, freedom, religion, political institutions, and the historical development of peoples. The resulting project is not merely a philosophy of history in the narrow sense, but an attempt to construct a comprehensive account of human formation within nature and history (Herder 2024).

This expansion explains why language occupies a different position in the *Ideas* from that in the earlier Treatise. In 1772, language was primarily considered as a problem of emergence: what distinguishes human linguistic activity from animal expression? In the later work, language becomes one of the central mechanisms through which human capacities acquire historical form. Human beings are not simply equipped with certain faculties by nature; those faculties are developed, transmitted, and transformed

within linguistic and cultural communities. Language thus serves as the connection between natural predisposition and historical formation.

Herder's concept of formation (*Bildung*) is crucial for understanding this transition. The term does not refer exclusively to education or cultural refinement in the later modern sense. It describes a broader process through which capacities acquire determinate forms. Human beings possess natural dispositions, but these dispositions become fully articulated only through interaction with their environment, social relations, language, and inherited practices. In this respect, Herder extends the logic already present in the *Treatise*: human capacities are neither imposed externally nor generated independently of natural conditions; they emerge through a developmental process in which nature and history remain interconnected.

The philosophical ambition of the *Ideas* therefore lies in its attempt to overcome two opposing explanations of humanity. On one side, Herder rejects accounts that separate human beings from nature by treating reason and language as entirely independent of embodied existence. On the other side, he rejects explanations that reduce humanity to biological organization alone. Human beings belong to nature, but they also transform natural capacities into historical forms of life. The problem for Herder is not whether humanity has a natural basis or a historical dimension, but how these two dimensions are related.

2.2 Organic Organization and the Conditions of Human Distinctiveness

The developmental framework of the *Ideas* becomes especially visible in Herder's discussion of organic organization. In Book 3 and Book 4, Herder examines the relationship between living forms and the capacities that emerge from them. Human beings occupy a distinctive position within this developmental sequence because their organization provides the conditions for reason, language, freedom, and humanity. Herder's formulations are revealing: the human being is described as "organized for" reason, for refined senses, for art and language, for freedom, and for humanity (Herder 2024).

The phrase "organized for" is important because it indicates that Herder's argument is not simply a mechanical derivation from anatomy. Human bodily structure does not function as a machine that produces reason in the same way that a physical mechanism produces movement. Rather, organization establishes a configuration of capacities within which specifically human forms of activity can emerge. The body is therefore neither irrelevant to reason nor sufficient to explain it completely.

Herder's discussion of upright posture illustrates this position. He regards the erect human form as a fundamental feature of human organization. Upright posture changes the relation between the head, senses, hands, and environment; it creates conditions favorable to manual activity, observation, communication, and linguistic expression. The human body is not merely an animal body with additional abilities added afterward. Its organization creates a distinctive mode of engagement with the world.

Nevertheless, interpreting Herder as claiming that upright posture directly produces reason would misrepresent his argument. The significance of bodily organization lies in the possibilities it opens rather than in a simple causal chain from anatomy to rationality. Herder's concern is developmental: certain forms of organization make certain capacities possible and allow them to unfold. Reason, language, and freedom belong to the overall structure of human formation rather than to a single physiological cause.

The same issue appears in Herder's theory of organic forces. Herder understands living organization through formative powers rather than through purely external mechanical relations. Organic beings are not passive arrangements of matter; they possess internal principles of formation through which their structures and capacities develop. The concept of organic force allows Herder to connect different levels of existence—from biological organization to human capacities—within a continuous developmental picture (Herder 2024; DeSouza 2018).

DeSouza's analysis is particularly important because it shows that Herder's organicism did not emerge in complete opposition to Kant. Herder's theory of formative forces developed partly from intellectual resources shared with Kant's earlier philosophical work. The disagreement between the two thinkers therefore did not concern whether nature could be understood dynamically, but rather how far such dynamic explanations could legitimately extend. Herder assigned greater explanatory authority to organic forces, whereas Kant became increasingly cautious about drawing conclusions from principles that could not be directly determined through experience (DeSouza 2018).

The concept of organic force thus represents both the strength and vulnerability of Herder's philosophy. It enables him to provide a unified account of nature and humanity, avoiding a sharp separation between the physical and the spiritual. At the same time, it encourages movement from observed developmental relations toward broader claims about human destiny, rationality, and even immortality. The methodological tension identified by Kant in 1785 emerges precisely from this expansion of explanatory scope.

2.3 Language, Bildung, and Historical Transmission

The later sections of the *Ideas* further develop Herder's understanding of language by placing it within the historical formation of human beings. Language is no longer considered only as the capacity that distinguishes humans from animals; it becomes the primary medium through which human capacities are cultivated, preserved, and transmitted across generations.

Herder's discussion in Book 9 is particularly significant. After examining human dependence on others for the development of their faculties, he identifies language as the "particular means" through which human beings are formed. Human beings do not enter history as fully developed rational agents. Their abilities emerge through interaction with previous generations, through education, imitation, and participation in linguistic communities (Herder 2024). Language provides the mechanism through which individual experience can become collective memory and through which cultural achievements can exceed the limits of individual lives.

This argument extends rather than replaces the position developed in the 1772 Treatise. In the earlier work, Herder argued that human beings possess the capacity to form language because of their distinctive organization of perception and reflection. In the Ideas, he investigates how linguistic beings become historical beings. The first question concerns the possibility of language; the second concerns the historical realization of human capacities through language.

Forster's interpretation of Herder's philosophy of language is helpful in this respect. He emphasizes that Herder rejects the separation of thought from language and regards linguistic activity as fundamentally connected with human cognition and social life. Language is not merely an instrument that individuals use after thought has already been formed. It participates in the formation of thought itself and provides the historical medium through which human communities develop shared forms of understanding (Forster 2018).

Herder's account of cultural transmission therefore avoids two opposite extremes. On the one hand, human beings are not isolated rational individuals who independently construct culture from nothing. Every individual inherits linguistic and cultural resources that precede them. On the other hand, inherited forms are not simply repeated unchanged. Human beings transform what they receive through reflection, creativity, and new historical circumstances. Tradition is therefore not the opposite of human agency; it is one of the conditions through which human agency becomes possible.

Sikka's analysis of Herder's language philosophy further clarifies this point. For Herder, languages embody distinctive ways of organizing experience and preserving the historical perspectives of communities. A language is not merely a collection of signs but a repository of collective experience. Through language, particular forms of perception and interpretation are carried across generations, allowing cultures to maintain continuity while also undergoing transformation (Sikka 2011).

This understanding of language explains why Herder places linguistic development at the center of human history. Science, art, political institutions, and religious traditions do not emerge from isolated acts of individual intelligence. They develop within linguistic worlds that provide concepts, memories, and practices through which human beings interpret themselves and their surroundings. Language is therefore the condition that allows natural capacities to become historical achievements.

2.4 Tradition, Religion, and the Question of Continuity

The role of tradition in the Ideas creates one of the most difficult interpretive problems in Herder scholarship. Herder strongly emphasizes inherited traditions, ancient narratives, and religious memory, especially in the later books of the work. At first glance, this emphasis appears to create tension with his earlier rejection of divine explanations for the origin of language. A careful reading, however, suggests that the two positions address different explanatory questions.

The 1772 Treatise examined whether human beings require external assistance in order to possess the capacity for language. Herder's answer was negative: language belongs to the natural development of human capacities. The Ideas, by contrast, examines how historically existing human communities

preserve and transmit forms of life. Tradition answers the question of historical continuity, not the question of whether language originally required supernatural creation.

This distinction is particularly important in relation to Herder's discussion of religion. In Book 9, religion is described as one of humanity's oldest and most significant traditions. In Book 10, Herder turns to ancient accounts of creation, early human origins, and inherited narratives concerning the beginnings of humanity (Herder 2024). These discussions show that Herder treats religious traditions as historically meaningful expressions of early human attempts to understand existence.

However, the presence of religious traditions in the Ideas should not be interpreted as a simple return to Süßmilch's theory that language itself was directly created and taught by God. Such an interpretation would collapse two different levels of analysis. Herder can regard religious narratives as historically important while still maintaining that human linguistic capacity belongs to human nature.

The distinction also helps explain why Herder's account of tradition differs from a passive theory of transmission. Traditions preserve accumulated human experience, but they remain subject to reinterpretation and transformation. A language, a custom, or a religious idea survives historically because later generations actively appropriate and reshape it. Historical continuity therefore involves both inheritance and creativity.

3. Kant's First Review of Herder: Developmental Explanation and Its Limits

3.1 Upright Posture and the Explanation of Human Capacities

Kant's first review of Herder's Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind, published in January 1785, represents one of his most sustained engagements with a contemporary philosophical account of human development. The review is often described as a rejection of Herder's naturalistic anthropology, but such a characterization obscures the more precise issue at stake. Kant does not deny that human capacities emerge within a natural organization or that bodily conditions contribute to human development. His concern is whether relations discovered within natural development can provide a sufficient explanation of those capacities that define humanity as a rational and moral being.

The question becomes particularly clear in Kant's criticism of Herder's discussion of upright posture. Herder treats the human form as a distinctive organization in which bodily structure, sensory orientation, manual activity, and linguistic capacity are connected. Upright posture is not merely an anatomical characteristic; it represents a transformation in the human relation to the surrounding world. The liberation of the hands, the altered position of the head, and the predominance of vision over other senses all contribute to a form of activity unavailable to other animals (Herder 2024).

Kant does not reject the empirical observation that human organization differs from that of other animals. His objection concerns the explanatory conclusion drawn from such observations. In the first review, Kant criticizes Herder for attempting to derive specifically human capacities from the organization of the body, particularly when bodily structure is treated as the ground from which reason and humanity themselves emerge (Kant 2007). For Kant, a bodily condition may explain how a capacity becomes exercisable, but it does not necessarily explain what gives that capacity its distinctive philosophical status.

The distinction between condition and ground is essential here. A particular bodily organization may make language possible by providing appropriate organs for speech. It may support forms of perception, manipulation, and social interaction that are necessary for cultural development. Yet the existence of such conditions does not by itself explain why human beings possess rational capacities or why those capacities have normative authority. Kant's criticism therefore does not target anthropology as such; it targets the assumption that anthropological description can exhaust the philosophical meaning of humanity.

Herder's own position is more complex than Kant's reconstruction sometimes suggests. The Idea does not present upright posture as a mechanical cause from which reason automatically follows. Herder repeatedly describes the human being as "organized for" reason, language, freedom, and humanity. The language of organization indicates a developmental relationship rather than a simple physical determination. Human capacities arise within a specific natural configuration, but they are not reducible to isolated anatomical features.

This concern reflects a broader feature of Kant's anthropology. Kant himself investigates human beings as natural creatures shaped by predispositions, social circumstances, and historical development. His disagreement with Herder cannot therefore be described as a conflict between a historical-natural view and a purely transcendental view detached from experience. Rather, Kant distinguishes between the empirical conditions through which human capacities appear and the rational principles through which those capacities acquire normative meaning.

The criticism of upright posture thus introduces the methodological problem that structures the entire review. Developmental explanations are valuable because they reveal relations among natural conditions, bodily organization, and human capacities. They become problematic when those relations are asked to establish conclusions that belong to a different level of inquiry.

3.2 Organic Forces and the Problem of Analogical Extension

The same methodological concern appears more clearly in Kant's discussion of Herder's theory of organic forces. Herder's account of nature depends on the idea that living beings cannot be understood adequately through mechanical relations alone. Organic forms express internal principles of formation,

and the development of living beings reveals a continuity of formative powers across different levels of nature.

The concept of organic force was central to Herder's attempt to overcome the opposition between matter and spirit. Rather than treating nature as a collection of passive materials governed only by external laws, Herder interpreted natural organization as an active process of formation. The same developmental language that explains biological organization also becomes relevant to his account of human capacities, culture, and historical progress.

As DeSouza has demonstrated, Herder's theory of organic forces cannot simply be regarded as an anti-Kantian doctrine. It developed partly from themes present in Kant's own earlier reflections on natural organization and force. The disagreement emerged because Herder assigned a much broader explanatory role to such forces. For Herder, formative powers could provide a unifying account connecting different stages of natural and human development. Kant became increasingly cautious about allowing such principles to function as explanations of realities beyond possible experience (DeSouza 2018).

Kant's criticism is therefore not directed against the idea that nature contains forms of organization that cannot be reduced immediately to mechanical description. His concern is methodological: what kind of inference is justified when moving from observed organization to the invisible principles presumed to explain it?

Herder's use of analogy is central to this question. Developmental similarities across nature invite the idea that different forms belong to a larger process of formation. Such analogies can be philosophically productive. They allow investigators to search for connections where direct observation of causes is impossible. Kant himself does not reject analogy as a legitimate tool of inquiry. The problem arises when analogy is transformed from a guide for investigation into a proof of conclusions that cannot be established empirically.

Nassar's analysis of Kant's criticism is useful in this regard. Kant's objection to Herder concerns not simply the content of Herder's claims but the method through which those claims are justified. Herder's analogical reasoning attempts to extend patterns observed within nature into domains where experience cannot provide confirmation. Kant's concern is that such movement risks replacing critical explanation with speculative construction (Nassar 2015).

The disagreement can therefore be stated more precisely. Herder asks how far developmental continuity can illuminate the unity of nature and humanity. Kant asks what epistemic authority such continuity possesses. A developmental relation may reveal a meaningful connection without providing a determinate explanation of the ultimate ground of that connection.

This issue explains why Kant's criticism should not be interpreted as a rejection of developmental thinking itself. Kant accepts that human beings have natural predispositions, that history involves

development, and that nature can be investigated through purposive reflection. His objection concerns the transition from developmental patterns within experience to metaphysical claims about underlying forces that cannot themselves become objects of experience.

The controversy over organic forces therefore represents a deeper disagreement about philosophical method. Herder seeks a comprehensive developmental account capable of connecting nature, life, mind, and history. Kant insists that such connections must remain within the limits of the kind of knowledge they can actually support.

3.3 From Organic Continuity to Immortality: The Boundary between Nature and Metaphysics

The most controversial consequence of Herder's developmental framework appears in his discussion of immortality. After tracing a progressive organization of natural forms and emphasizing the continuity of formative forces throughout nature, Herder suggests that the destruction of bodily organs does not necessarily imply the disappearance of the active principle expressed through them. The organization of nature appears to point toward a higher order in which the powers manifested in human beings may continue beyond bodily existence (Herder 2024).

Kant's response focuses on the inferential movement involved in this argument. He does not reject the possibility of immortality as a philosophical question. His objection is that natural development, however extensive and coherent, cannot establish the continued existence of an individual rational being after death. The persistence of forces within natural processes and the survival of personal identity are fundamentally different claims.

This distinction is central to Kant's criticism. Natural observation can reveal patterns of transformation, reproduction, and continuity among living beings. It can show that individual organisms participate in processes through which life persists across generations. Yet such observations concern the continuation of forms, species, or natural processes rather than the continuation of an individual subject. The analogy between biological continuity and personal immortality therefore exceeds what the original evidence can support.

Kant's criticism is directed at the movement from one type of continuity to another. A natural process may exhibit continuity without implying the persistence of the same subject across a transition that cannot be experienced. The continuation of a species after the death of individuals does not demonstrate the continuation of individual consciousness. Likewise, the preservation of an organic power within nature does not establish the survival of a personal rational self.

The importance of this argument extends beyond the specific question of immortality. It reveals Kant's broader concern with explanatory boundaries. Herder's developmental philosophy gains much of its persuasive force from identifying meaningful continuities across different levels of nature. The same strategy, however, becomes problematic when continuity within one domain is used to justify

conclusions belonging to another. The transition from natural development to metaphysical claims requires a different kind of argument.

This distinction also clarifies the relationship between Kant and Herder regarding the human place within nature. Herder seeks to preserve human continuity with the natural world. Human beings are not an isolated exception but the highest expression of a broader developmental process. Kant accepts the importance of humanity's natural conditions but insists that the philosophical significance of humanity cannot be exhausted by locating humans within a natural sequence. The question of what human beings are and the question of how human beings develop are related but not identical.

4. Kant's Second Review of Herder: History, Tradition, and the Development of Humanity

4.1 From Natural Organization to Historical Development

Kant's second review of Herder's *Ideas*, published in November 1785, shifts the focus from the organization of human beings in nature to the historical processes through which humanity develops. Whereas the first review examined Herder's attempt to explain human capacities through organic development, the second addresses questions concerning culture, tradition, political institutions, religion, and the historical direction of humanity. The continuity between the two reviews lies not in their subject matter but in the methodological concern that guides Kant's criticism: how far can developmental explanations legitimately account for the meaning and purpose of human existence?

Herder's historical philosophy begins from the premise that humanity cannot be understood outside the conditions in which human beings actually live. Climate, geography, social practices, inherited customs, language, and historical circumstances all contribute to the formation of peoples and cultures. Human beings are not abstract rational agents placed outside history; they are formed within particular environments and traditions. The diversity of human cultures therefore reflects different historical pathways through which common human capacities acquire concrete expression (Herder 2024; Sikka 2011).

Kant does not deny the importance of these historical conditions. His own writings on anthropology and history repeatedly emphasize education, social development, and the role of human interaction in the cultivation of capacities. The disagreement concerns the philosophical interpretation of these conditions. Herder tends to understand historical development through processes of formation in which inherited circumstances shape the character of human communities. Kant asks whether such historical processes alone can explain the direction and normative significance of humanity's development.

The difference becomes visible in their accounts of human perfection. For Herder, humanity is realized through the unfolding of capacities within particular historical contexts. Different peoples contribute different expressions of human possibility, and no single culture can simply be treated as the exclusive

measure of humanity. Kant, while acknowledging historical diversity, argues that the development of humanity must ultimately be evaluated according to rational principles that transcend particular historical circumstances.

The second review therefore continues the methodological concern already present in the first. In the natural domain, Kant questioned whether organic continuity could explain the grounds of reason. In the historical domain, he questions whether cultural continuity and inherited tradition can provide the basis for humanity's ultimate vocation. The issue is not whether history forms human beings; both thinkers agree that it does. The issue is whether historical formation itself provides the standard by which human development should be understood.

4.2 Climate, Culture, and the Problem of Historical Explanation

One of the central themes of Herder's historical philosophy is the relationship between environmental conditions and cultural diversity. Herder rejects theories that divide humanity into fundamentally separate races or that explain cultural differences through fixed biological hierarchies. Instead, he emphasizes the interaction between human organization and environmental circumstances. Climate influences bodily characteristics, habits, forms of imagination, and social practices, while human capacities respond creatively to different conditions (Herder 2024).

This environmental approach reflects Herder's broader commitment to understanding humanity historically. Human differences are not accidental deviations from a single universal model; they represent different formations of shared human capacities under diverse circumstances. Languages, customs, institutions, and forms of life develop through interactions between human beings and their environments.

Kant's criticism does not simply reject environmental influence. Such an interpretation would be inconsistent with Kant's own attention to natural conditions in his anthropological writings. His concern is instead directed toward the explanatory status of climate and circumstance. Environmental conditions can help explain why different forms of life emerge in different places, but they cannot by themselves explain the rational principles through which human beings evaluate and transform those forms of life.

The distinction parallels Kant's earlier criticism of bodily organization. In both cases, Kant accepts conditions while questioning whether conditions can serve as ultimate grounds. Climate may influence the development of customs and institutions, just as bodily organization may influence the emergence of linguistic capacities. Yet neither climate nor bodily structure alone explains why human beings possess rational capacities that allow them to criticize, reform, or transcend their given circumstances.

Herder's account remains philosophically significant because it challenges abstract conceptions of humanity detached from historical reality. Human beings always appear as particular beings situated within languages, communities, and traditions. The development of reason itself occurs through these

historical contexts. Kant's concern, however, is that historical situatedness should not eliminate the possibility of universal evaluation.

The disagreement therefore concerns the relation between particularity and universality. Herder emphasizes that humanity exists only through historically specific forms of life. Kant emphasizes that these forms of life must remain open to rational assessment according to principles that are not reducible to any particular historical situation.

4.3 Tradition and the Formation of Human Capacities

The role of tradition represents one of the most significant points of disagreement between Kant and Herder. For Herder, tradition is not merely a collection of inherited beliefs or practices. It is the historical medium through which human capacities become possible. Individuals enter a world already shaped by language, customs, knowledge, and institutions. Without these inherited resources, human beings could not develop the capacities that distinguish them as historical and cultural beings.

This argument follows directly from Herder's philosophy of language. Because language preserves the experiences and judgments of previous generations, it allows human beings to participate in a historical process that extends beyond individual existence. A person does not create thought, morality, or culture from nothing. Human formation depends on participation in a linguistic and cultural world that precedes the individual (Herder 2002; Forster 2018).

Herder's emphasis on tradition should therefore not be interpreted as a defense of passive obedience to inherited authority. Tradition is productive because it provides the materials through which later generations create new forms of life. Languages change, concepts are transformed, and institutions develop because human beings actively reinterpret what they inherit. Historical continuity involves transformation rather than simple preservation.

Kant recognizes the importance of education, social interaction, and historical transmission in human development. His criticism is directed at a different issue: whether tradition itself can provide the foundation of rational validity. A practice may be historically inherited and socially powerful without therefore possessing unconditional legitimacy. For Kant, human beings must ultimately evaluate inherited forms of life through rational principles rather than accept them merely because they belong to a historical tradition.

The disagreement is therefore not between a defender of tradition and an opponent of tradition. Both thinkers acknowledge that human beings are historically formed. The difference concerns the status of inherited forms. Herder emphasizes tradition as the condition through which humanity becomes historically concrete. Kant emphasizes the capacity of reason to examine and transform those traditions.

This distinction also clarifies Kant's concern with Herder's treatment of ancient traditions and religious narratives. Kant does not deny that such traditions play important historical roles. His concern is that

historical origin and rational justification should not be confused. The fact that a belief or institution emerges from a long historical process does not by itself establish its truth or moral authority.

Herder's historical philosophy thus presents a challenge to purely abstract accounts of reason. Human rationality is not developed outside history; it emerges through linguistic, social, and cultural processes. Kant's response is that historical emergence and rational validity belong to different dimensions. The first concerns how human capacities develop; the second concerns how those capacities can claim normative authority.

4.4 The Education of the Human Species and Kant's Alternative Historical Model

Kant's alternative account of human development is most clearly expressed through the idea that humanity, rather than individual human beings alone, undergoes a process of education and gradual improvement. In his historical writings, Kant argues that nature's purpose is not realized through the happiness of particular individuals but through the development of human capacities across the species as a whole (Kant 2007).

This conception differs significantly from Herder's model of historical formation. Herder emphasizes the diversity of human development across cultures and historical contexts. Kant focuses on the long-term emergence of rational and moral capacities within humanity as a collective subject. Individual lives are limited, but the species participates in a broader historical process through which human predispositions gradually unfold.

The concept of the human species (*Gattung*) is central to Kant's argument. Humanity's complete realization cannot be achieved within the lifespan of any single individual. Each generation inherits achievements and problems from previous generations and contributes to a process extending beyond itself. Historical progress therefore concerns the gradual cultivation of capacities that belong to humanity as a whole.

This perspective does not imply that Kant ignores cultural diversity. Rather, Kant interprets diversity within a larger framework of human development. Different historical circumstances may represent different stages or conditions within the broader process through which humanity develops its rational capacities. The ultimate measure of progress, however, is not simply the preservation of particular ways of life but the realization of conditions under which freedom and moral autonomy become possible.

The political dimension of this argument appears in Kant's discussion of the state and law. Human beings possess what Kant calls an "unsocial sociability": they are driven both toward social cooperation and toward conflict arising from their desire for independence. This tension becomes productive because it forces humanity to create institutions capable of regulating interaction through principles of right (Kant 2007).

Here Kant departs sharply from Herder's emphasis on organic historical development. For Herder, political and cultural forms arise through the historical experience of peoples. For Kant, political institutions represent humanity's attempt to rationally organize social life according to principles that cannot be reduced to historical inheritance. The state is not merely a continuation of tradition; it is a rational achievement responding to the conflicts inherent in human social existence.

The difference again concerns the relationship between development and normativity. Herder explains how human communities become what they are through historical processes. Kant asks how those processes should be directed toward the realization of freedom. Historical development requires not only formation but also rational orientation.

5. From Kant and Herder to Modern Linguistic Thought: The Dual Legacy of the Debate

5.1 Herder's Legacy: Language as Historical Formation

The long-term influence of the Kant–Herder controversy was not determined by the victory of one position over the other. Rather, the debate established two different philosophical orientations toward language. Herder's approach proved particularly influential for traditions that treated language as a historical, cultural, and creative phenomenon. Kant's concerns, by contrast, remained influential in approaches emphasizing rational structure, universality, and the normative conditions of communication.

Herder's influence became most visible through the nineteenth-century development of historical and comparative linguistics. The central idea inherited from Herder was that language should not be understood merely as a collection of arbitrary signs used to communicate already existing thoughts. Language participates in the formation of thought itself and develops together with the historical life of communities.

Wilhelm von Humboldt became the most important mediator of this inheritance. Humboldt transformed Herder's emphasis on language, culture, and historical development into a systematic philosophy of language. In his account, language is not a finished product (*Ergon*) but an ongoing activity (*Energie*). Every language embodies a distinctive mode of organizing experience, and linguistic diversity reflects different ways in which human beings engage with the world (Humboldt 1988).

Humboldt's position does not simply repeat Herder. He avoids reducing languages to fixed expressions of national character and instead emphasizes the creative activity through which speakers continually generate new meanings. Nevertheless, the central Humboldtian insight—that language is inseparable from historical communities and forms of thought—clearly develops within the Herderian tradition.

The influence of this tradition continued into twentieth-century theories of linguistic relativity. Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf developed the claim that linguistic categories influence the ways in which

speakers organize and interpret experience. Although Sapir and Whorf did not simply reproduce Herder's arguments, historians of linguistic thought have frequently identified the Humboldt–Herder tradition as an important intellectual background for linguistic relativity (Sikka 2011).

The importance of Herder's legacy lies not in the claim that language completely determines thought. Modern linguistics has largely rejected strong linguistic determinism. Rather, Herder's enduring contribution is the recognition that languages are historically formed systems through which human beings interpret, categorize, and transmit experience. Language is not merely an external instrument of thought; it is one of the conditions through which human worlds become intelligible.

5.2 Kant's Legacy: Language, Rationality, and the Conditions of Universality

Although Kant's direct influence on historical linguistics was less extensive than Herder's, his critique raised questions that continued to shape later philosophy of language. Kant's central concern was not linguistic diversity itself but the conditions under which human beings can achieve rational understanding despite their historical and empirical differences.

The problem identified by Kant remains fundamental: if human cognition and communication are entirely explained through particular historical and cultural formations, how is shared rationality possible? Kant's response was to distinguish between the empirical development of human capacities and the rational conditions that make knowledge, judgment, and moral communication possible.

Later philosophical approaches to language continued to engage with this question. The search for universal structures underlying linguistic diversity, although very different from Kant's own project, reflects a related concern with identifying features of human rationality that transcend particular languages and cultures. In this broader sense, Kant's legacy appears less in empirical linguistics than in philosophical investigations of universality, meaning, and normativity.

This influence can be seen especially in twentieth-century approaches that examine the relationship between language and rational communication. The question is not only how languages differ but also how speakers using different linguistic systems can achieve mutual understanding, justification, and agreement. Kant's insistence that reason requires principles beyond mere historical inheritance continues to inform debates concerning the foundations of communication and normativity.

Kant therefore represents a different legacy from Herder. Whereas Herder emphasizes how language forms human beings within historical worlds, Kant emphasizes the rational capacities through which human beings can evaluate and transform those worlds. The two approaches address different dimensions of linguistic existence.

6. Conclusion

The controversy between Kant and Herder in 1785 was not simply a disagreement over the origin of language or the interpretation of human history. At a deeper level, it concerned the philosophical status of developmental explanation: how far can natural and historical processes explain what human beings are, and where do questions of rationality and normative validity require a different form of justification? Herder's developmental philosophy sought to understand humanity through the continuous interaction of organic organization, language, culture, and history. Kant's criticism did not reject development itself, but questioned whether developmental relations could provide sufficient grounds for the rational and normative capacities that distinguish human beings.

Herder's lasting contribution lies in his recognition that language cannot be separated from the historical conditions through which human beings become what they are. Language is not merely an external instrument for expressing already formed thoughts; it is a medium through which experience is organized, transmitted, and transformed across generations. This perspective became an important intellectual source for later traditions of linguistic thought, particularly the Humboldtian conception of language and approaches emphasizing the historical and cultural embeddedness of meaning. Kant's legacy lies in a different but complementary concern. Human beings are not only formed through natural and historical processes; they are also capable of reflecting upon, evaluating, and transforming the conditions through which they have been formed. The tension between these two perspectives has remained central to philosophical debates concerning language, culture, and rational agency.

The continuing significance of the Kant–Herder controversy lies precisely in the fact that neither perspective can simply replace the other. An exclusively developmental explanation may risk treating the emergence of human capacities as sufficient to account for their rational or normative significance, whereas an exclusively rationalist account may overlook the linguistic, embodied, and historical conditions through which those capacities develop. Language must therefore be understood both as a medium of historical formation and as a practice through which human beings interpret, evaluate, and reshape the worlds they inherit.

Contemporary artificial intelligence makes this tension newly visible. Large language models demonstrate that sophisticated linguistic production can be reproduced computationally without thereby settling questions about cultural formation, judgment, autonomy, or rational agency. From a Herderian perspective, this raises questions about the relation between linguistic performance and the embodied, social, and historical processes through which human meaning develops; from a Kantian perspective, it raises the question of whether linguistic competence alone is sufficient for rational agency. Artificial intelligence therefore does not resolve the eighteenth-century controversy but renews the philosophical problem at its center: how language relates simultaneously to historical formation and to the conditions of rational agency.

The Kant–Herder debate should therefore be understood not merely as an episode in the history of linguistic thought, but as an enduring dispute about the limits of developmental explanation. Herder demonstrates why humanity cannot be understood apart from nature, language, and history; Kant

demonstrates why an account of how human capacities develop does not necessarily establish the grounds of their rational and normative authority. Their disagreement remains significant because an adequate philosophy of language must confront both dimensions.

Declarations

Author Contribution

Memetniaz Osman: Conceptualization, supervision, investigation, literature review, writing – original draft, and revision of the manuscript. Ghenijan Memet: Conceptualization, critical review, intellectual contribution, and writing – review and editing. Both authors contributed to the development of the argument, approved the final version of the manuscript, and agreed to be accountable for the work.

References

1. Beiser FC (1987) *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA
2. DeSouza N (2018) Herder's Theory of Organic Forces and Its Kantian Origins. In *Kant and His German Contemporaries*, vol. 2, *Aesthetics, History, Politics, and Religion*, edited by Daniel O. Dahlstrom, 109–128. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
3. Ferber I (2010) Herder: On Pain and the Origin of Language. *Germanic Review: Literature Cult Theory* 85(3):205–223
4. Forster MN (2018) *Herder's Philosophy*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
5. Herder JG (2002) *Philosophical Writings*. Edited and translated by Michael N. Forster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
6. Herder JG (2024) *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*. Translated and edited by Gregory Martin Moore. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press
7. Humboldt Wvon (1999) *On Language: On the Diversity of Human Language Construction and Its Influence on the Mental Development of the Human Species*. Edited by Michael Losonsky. Translated by Peter Heath. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
8. Kant I (2007) *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Edited and translated by Robert B. Louden and Günter Zöller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
9. Lifschitz A (2012) *Language and Enlightenment: The Berlin Debates of the Eighteenth Century*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
10. Lu-Adler H (2023) Kant on Language and the (Self-)Development of Reason. *Kant Yearbook* 15(1):109–134
11. Mosser K (2001) Why Doesn't Kant Care about Natural Language? *Dialogue: Can Philosophical Rev / Revue canadienne de philosophie* 40(1):25–52

12. Nassar D (2015) Analogy, Natural History and the Philosophy of Nature: Kant, Herder and the Problem of Empirical Science. *J Philos History* 9(2):240–257
13. Sapir E (1929) The Status of Linguistics as a Science. *Language* 5(4):207–214
14. Sikka S (2011) Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
15. Tritschler M (2024) Kant and Herder on Reason's Relation to Language. *Kantian Rev* 29(4):589–605
16. Whorf BL (1956) *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*. Edited by John B. Carroll. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
17. Zammito JH (2002) Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology. University of Chicago Press, Chicago