

# Climate Change Context in the Herder's Philosophy of History

ŽILVINAS VAREIKIS

Lithuanian Culture Research Institute

[zilvinasvareikis@yahoo.fr](mailto:zilvinasvareikis@yahoo.fr)

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7009-1150>

The reflection of climatic phenomena in the philosophy of German Romanticism arises from the aesthetic reception of natural phenomena. In turn, this reception is transformed into a reflection on different cultural phenomena. This is precisely what happened in Herder's philosophy of history. Having begun to explore the aspects of different civilizations and the cultures that compose them, the thinker noticed the influence of natural processes, namely climatic phenomena, on the way of life of different peoples and its interpretation in the art symbols of specific cultures. The author of the article explores some philosophical aspects of climate change and human nature. He draws on the ideas of the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder's position on this subject is quite debatable. On the one hand, he advocates for the inherent value of both nature and humanity. On the other hand, he maintains a concept of progress that prioritizes humanity. Additionally, his philosophical viewpoint can be seen as Eurocentric. He suggests that regions with more established philosophical and linguistic traditions associated with the "Old World" have superior climates and more attractive people. This implies that countries lacking famous thinkers or significant ideas are characterized by harsher climate.

**Keywords:** Herder, philosophy of history, climate, climate change, nature, humanity.

From its very inception, philosophical inquiry has been driven by the pursuit of understanding fundamental aspects of the human condition, as reflected in the works of individual thinkers. Throughout history, the nature of philosophical knowledge and the role of the philosopher have undergone significant transformations, mirroring the broader intellectual and cultural shifts of each era.

In the era of Ancient Greece, philosophers like the Pre-Socratics, Plato, and Aristotle grappled with the task of synthe-

sizing the burgeoning knowledge of their time, which lacked a clear disciplinary structure. They "sought to establish fundamental concepts, delineate the relationship between science and religion, and explore the nature of reality and existence"<sup>1</sup>.

During the Middle Ages, philosophers engaged in a profound dialogue with the

---

<sup>1</sup> Böttcher, Winfried. 2014. *Klassiker des europäischen Denkens: Friedens und Europavorstellungen aus 700 Jahren europäischer Kulturgeschichte*. Baden – Baden: Nomos, p. 514.

rich intellectual heritage of antiquity, particularly the insights of Christianity. They aimed to reconcile faith and reason, drawing upon both sources to acquire wisdom and understanding. The Renaissance and Enlightenment witnessed the flourishing of various fields of science, each striving to establish its own autonomy and expand its domain of knowledge. This led to a gradual shift in the perception of the philosopher, who no longer embodied the image of the universal sage but rather became a specialized scholar, focusing on a particular area of study, such as ethics, politics, logic, epistemology, aesthetics, or cultural studies.

Despite the influence of positivism in modern science, which tends to compartmentalize knowledge and to limit holistic thinking, the individuality of the philosopher and the insights derived from their unique perspectives remain essential elements in addressing contemporary issues. Regardless of the prevailing zeitgeist or political climate, these qualities have been characteristic of all great philosophers. Among this distinguished group, Johann Gottfried Herder, the German philosopher, stands out for his rich imagination, profound thought, and personal charisma. The evolution of philosophical knowledge and the changing role of the philosopher reflect the dynamic nature of human inquiry and the ongoing quest for understanding our place in the world. As we continue to grapple with complex questions and navigate an ever-changing world, the contributions of philosophers remain indispensable in illuminating the human experience and guiding our collective pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.

## Herder and the Issue of Climate Change

At the juncture of Classicism and Romanticism, Johann Gottfried Herder shaped the foundations of German national literature, pondered the role of poetry and pedagogy in individual development, and explored the European roots of German culture, drawing upon linguistics and anthropology from Western countries. Alongside Herder's contributions to his nation's aesthetics and overall cultural development, scholars across various fields consider his work "Ideas for a Philosophy of the History of Mankind" to be his most significant achievement.

At first glance, this treatise delves into the philosophy of culture and history. However, these thematic threads are far from the only ones in this scholarly work. In his endeavor to substantiate the origins of ideas that transform urban structures and individual behaviour, Herder abandons the traditional Platonic view that they emanate from the transcendent realm. "The thinker finds more appealing not a religious but rather a material explanation of humanity's relationship with the products of individual imagination"<sup>2</sup>. The most evident foundation for any kind of reflection is the very nature of the individual. In considering this question, once formulated in Immanuel Kant's pragmatic anthropology, Herder draws upon the sources of human development of his time.

On this basis, the philosopher lays out

<sup>2</sup> Hurlebusch, Klaus. 2018. *Klopstock, Hamann und Herder als Wegbereiter autorzentrischen Schreibens*. Berlin: De Gruyter, p. 19.

his reasoning on the emergence of life on Earth, the separation of individual human tribes from the common human stock, the processes of nation formation, the manifestations of different ethnic self-awareness and its symbolic expression reflected in language, art, and science. Reading Herder's reasoning that develops these thoughts, one gets the impression that in this work he follows the ancient distinction between nature and culture. He expands the ancient concept of agriculture in the class of the concept of culture to the perception of various types of human activity, and then peacefully postulates the reciprocity of the relationship between nature and culture.

The concept of nature in Herder's philosophy is multifaceted. First of all, it is "about the climate that determines the conditions of the human race on the planet, as well as about the flora and fauna: the whole human race enjoys the fruits of the diverse gifts of earthly life"<sup>3</sup>. This is followed by the mysterious laws of genetics, which determine the strange twists and turns of the fate of individual nations, into whose whirlpool ethnic groups do not always survive when they encounter unfriendly or even very aggressive neighbours. However, unlike Oswald Spengler's philosophy of history, which bows before the lordship of blind instinctive force and both nature and man, Herder's thinking has a genuine faith in the possibility of the coexistence of at first glance different principles of being,

but in fact the same unity. The disclosure of the climatic context, interwoven into the theme of the genesis of various world peoples, confirms this idea.

### Coexistence on Planet Earth

From the earliest times, art and science have treated the diverse natural environments and their contents as raw materials, complementing human activities in unique ways. The most precious minerals, the most delicate plant essences, and the furs of the largest or rarest animals shaped the aesthetic tastes of the world's powerful, while also contributing to the income of lower strata or simply allowing ordinary people to survive.

As eras change, the form of urban structures varies, and the consumption of the human race, depending on natural and social cataclysms – wars, ice ages, volcanic eruptions – differs in intensity. From the perspective of the present, it seems to billions of individuals around the globe that in this dynamic, nature plays the role of a kind of ridden horse for the human race. When man depletes its resources too much, nature tightens the reins, causing pain to the human irritant, splashing from the emptiness of emotions caused by pride and loss of measure. The horse, resisting the rider's guidance, eventually calms down, for a while causing no trouble either to itself or to the environment, until a new passion, awakened by the thinking substance *animal rationalis*, returns back and forces the rider to be thrown from the saddle. In modern times, it is difficult to understand whether we are truly living in the

<sup>3</sup> Bernd, Fischer. 1995. *Das Eigene und das Eigentliche: Klopstock, Herder, Fichte, Kleist*. Berlin: De Gruyter, p. 199.

final times for the human race or whether the horse in the earth's stable is still trotting obediently. This contradiction arises when looking at climate change conferences in different countries of the world.

The impressive speeches of world leaders make one gasp at the diversity of environmental strategies, while the reality, alas, is often different. The largest world powers, which use the Earth's resources most abundantly and do not hesitate to throw their waste into the oceans and into living nature, talk a lot but do too little to change the situation. At the same time, there remains a doubt, perhaps people will still think and start acting together. After all, from this movement of thought it is only a few steps to the realization that the existential situation is actually the opposite, that man is only the rider, and nature, the horse, carrying the unruly one on the path of his destruction. A much deeper understanding of the relationship between man and climate, going beyond the discourse of power, which causes more fear than productive reflection, is found in Herder's thinking. The peculiarity of his interpretation of this relationship is based on the principle of philosophical analogy.

### **The Human – Climate Analogy**

The comparison of the similarity of different things is found already in Plato's thinking. In one dialogue, Socrates talks to Glaucon about goodness. In the reasoning examined by the Athenian stranger, the eye sees the sun – a shining object visible to all, sharing heat with both living and non-living nature from the heights

of the celestial vault. In the same way, the mind, looking at the manifestations of goodness observed in this world, concludes that there are primordial forms beyond the world perceptible to the eyes. The logic of such a comparison, examining things that are observable, allows one to move on to the analysis of metaphysical, theological statements. The results of such an examination are very obvious – abstract things turn into concreteness, acquiring a sensory basis simply from the very bosom of everyday life.

Is it possible to understand the meaning of different empirical reality phenomena and things in the same way using the principle of analogy? As if wanting to confirm the correctness of the answer to a similar question, Herder, like Plato, shifts his gaze from the being of things observed from the outside to the thinking that arises within him. Considering the diversity of life forms in various natural environments, he comes to the conclusion that this earthly diversity of species is related to the adaptation of flora and fauna to climate. Based on the similarity of the biological structure characteristic of animals and humans, he also states the constant change of the human body. Otherwise than with this "analogy of nature", it would be a miracle if he remained unchanged"<sup>4</sup>. With this thought, Herder in a peculiar way supplements the thinking of the New Age, which is too focused on the immanence of the cogito (the knowing I) to even be able to look with a

<sup>4</sup> Herder, Johann Gottlob. 2017. *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, p. 73.

loving gaze at the surrounding reality. Such global thinking, which combines the romantic impulse with a holistic view, is more important than ever now, when the needs of the individual and the desperate desire to satisfy them are considered the dominant goal of creating the well-being of a prosperous society. In this way, Herder indirectly reminds us of the need to seek an existential connection with Mother Earth, on which we stand.

Another important perspective of perception, opened up by Herder's analogy developed here, is the reality of empirical reality, which contradicts an overly simplified Christian worldview in which man feels like the ruler of earthly reality. The findings of 20<sup>th</sup>-century medical anthropologists and paleontologists confirm the change in the human body, affected by environmental and climatic transformations. This realization is another thorn in the side of man who thinks that he determines natural processes, and she is powerless to resist his greed and selfishness.

### **The Importance of Sympathy for the Perception of Nature**

In everyday life, the concept of sympathy is generally used in a rather vulgar way. Favorable feelings are felt towards someone and a friendly relationship is maintained with that person. Conversely, when there is a lack of knowledge of another person, it is possible to draw erroneous conclusions about that individual's inner world and their social expression. This sows antipathy – a false perception of another based on a hazy image. However, alongside so-

cio-cultural circumstances that complement the interpretation of concepts with new contexts, there exist primary meanings that mainly satisfy the curiosity of philologists, but in rare cases reveal the connection of fundamental things to the issue under discussion.

The problem of climate change, which most burdens our minds in modern times, traces its roots back to consumption and the setting of its limits. The ancient Greeks believed that by practicing *sophrosyne* (Gr. moderation) they would be able to tame the unquenchable human appetite for creation and destruction. The confidence in sound reason, taming *hybris* (Gr. arrogance) that lay in the cultivation of this virtue, should have led to the individual's discernment, allowing him to reconcile his own needs with the interests of a particular community. It is obvious that if this ideal of the Old World had been achieved, there would not be so much discussion about climate change or other pressing social problems today.

We find a different, more individualistic than collective value perspective on solving similar issues of general relevance in Herder's reasoning about sympathy. Like the thinkers of antiquity, Herder understands that a healthy human being needs a consciously cultivated inner awareness that allows him to see himself and others from the outside, as well as a harmonious relationship with the living environment based on peaceful communication. Further, Herder's and the Old World's paths diverge in this regard. The Greeks believed that the world could only be brought within the limits of moderation by reason, which had a vision of realizing a goal and a plan for

its implementation. Essentially, current climate change conferences are based on a similar paradigm of rational thinking inherited from antiquity and reinforced by the negotiation strategies of recent times. World leaders gather at a certain point on the globe, have their own agenda, discuss problems and discuss possible solutions. Everything is very rational, pre-grounded. In the meantime, it seemed to Herder that the main catalyst for ideas in society should arise from human experiences. Diverse experiences arise from the senses of the human body, its experiences. Seeing the consequences of a problem, the individual decides on an auto-reflective basis how much he himself needs to get involved, what form of personal participation would be most acceptable in this particular situation of my life.

Sympathy plays a huge role in such different forms of social dynamism. Renouncing the vulgar everyday use, which leads to the antagonism of love and hatred for someone, sympathy for Herder is compassion. For him, “a man, as an analogy of an all-feeling deity, can empathize with almost every creature and to the extent that he feels with him, as much as the creature needs it and as much as he as a whole can empathize without disturbing himself, even if such a danger exists”<sup>5</sup>. This is about a common expression of sympathy both for nature and for culture. Herder complements the universality of the named attitudes of emotional perception with the grain of individual experience, which would not exist without

the action of this specific emotional ability. Ultimately, “sympathy for another person or nature inextricably links the individual’s interest in certain issues with the general social interest”<sup>6</sup>. This idea is confirmed by Herder’s examples, which seem a little naive at first glance: a tree that is broken hurts like a tortured person, body parts that are prepared for medical purposes cause not only disgust, but also pity, which is a companion of compassion. The use of these examples is based on Herder’s pedagogical intention: to educate society so that its members pay attention not only to their own needs, but also to take care of nature, to be personally responsible for the processes taking place in the living environment, instead of accompanying with an indifferent gaze the injustice taking place in it: the unbridled consumption of natural resources.

### The Concept of Progress and Nature

The current view of nature as a field for meeting human needs stems from the Enlightenment tradition. The desire to educate the citizens of a particular country to be as conscious as possible in both the private and public spheres of life arises from the primary ideal, the essence of which is the belief that knowledge, an attractive presentation of morality and the competencies acquired in the learning process will allow instincts to be controlled and lead humanity to reason. The result – everyone will be better than they were before. In reality, unfortunately, this is rarely the case. The

5 Herder, Johann Gottlob. 2017. *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, p. 169.

6 Schmetkamp, Susanne. 2019. *Theorien Empathie zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius Verlag, p. 43.

constantly postponed programmatic goals of green initiatives, the constant repetition of the same truths that are poorly reflected in reality, that industrial capacity, car and production pollution must be reduced, and that lagging countries of the world must be helped to improve their transport and social infrastructure, show that in practice this ideal works only in part.

In a sense, the catalyst of the essence of the named Enlightenment spirit is to blame for this – an exaggerated (self) belief in scientific and technological progress. Over-reliance on human inventions and discoveries creates the temptation to believe that the world is a human factory, in which a specific mechanism can be repaired if it breaks down, and then calmly continue to be on duty as a guardian of world order. Guided by such a perception, one can even wait for the end of the world, because the essence of nature's operation is simply ignored: nature follows its own laws, which do not necessarily have to coincide with human desires. In a sense, criticism of the concept of unstoppable progress can be directed at Herder himself. He takes over from his teacher Immanuel Kant the concept of progress. Kant tried to correct human sensory nature by transferring the ethics of the Holy Scriptures to his philosophical ethics in the "Critique of Practical Reason": "Relying on the infinite progress of its maxims and their immutability in constant forward motion, i.e. virtue, is the highest thing that a finite practical reason can achieve..."<sup>7</sup> In order for a person to obey the moral law and to act virtuously

in everything, he encouraged the person to fulfil his duties to himself, nature and society. In this way, it was hoped that by doing what is beneficial to many, the individual would understand the consequences of selfish behaviour and respect the common good. In his philosophy, Herder preserves Kant's characteristic belief in the improvement of the individual and humanity. On this path, sound reason is the main guide. In human history, everything is hoped to be explained by delving into the logic of the consequences of events and the behaviour of personalities.

Based on a very similar linear sequence of explanation of causes and effects, it is sought to understand the purposefulness of natural processes: "the future state probably grows out of the present one, as this one does out of the state of lower organisms, and the demands of future existence are undoubtedly more closely related to our present state than we think"<sup>8</sup>. In natural phenomena, it is indeed possible to discern dimensions of the present, past and future. However, they are more likely related to recurring natural cycles than to the rational representations of individual subjects. But what Herder wants to say is that the order of the human world reflects the structure of nature. The correlation of reciprocity (nature-man-man-nature) can hardly arise here due to the predominance of the anthropocentric approach and the progress concept stemming from it: the development of any phenomenon under

---

*tique of Practical Reason*). Vilnius: Margi Raštai, p. 51.

8 Herder, Johann Gottlob. 2017. *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, p. 205.

7 Kant, Immanuel. 2015. *Praktinio proto kritika* (Cri-



investigation is ultimately associated with current relevance and human interests. For this reason, the autoregulatory discussion of nature's operation remains on the periphery of developing thought. The results of this marginalized phenomenon, I believe, are quite painful. Such a position of Herder indirectly shapes the policy of excessive depletion of natural resources and increasing the pace of consumption: these trends in the context of today lead to faster climate change.

### Herder's Eurocentrism and Climate

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as the colonial system disintegrated, there was an increasing focus on the manifestations of this way of thinking in the social life, economy, and culture of the inhabitants of former colonies. A larger part of the underdeveloped world – Africa, Latin America, and a considerable number of different Asian regions – belonged to this system. Outdated production, agriculture, and industrial activity models, obsolete motor vehicles, and active contribution to global warming processes are still applied there. In my opinion, the still-living feature of the colonial mentality that a certain metropolis, a specific rich Western organization, will provide support, and the difficult situation will begin to change in a positive direction, also contributes to the very slow resolution of these problems.

“This feature is cultivated equally by the underestimation of some countries, namely the colonies, and the exaltation of other states, both Eastern and Western colonizers, inherited from the aforementioned

era”<sup>9</sup> Such a disposition of thought can be called Eurocentrism, although depending on the world region, it can take the form of Asiacentrism, negritude ideology, or extreme nationalism of a particular nation, as well as the characteristics typical of that region. Herder's Eurocentrism permeates his reasoning about the interaction of climate and culture in different countries. For this reason, in this regard, I would like to dwell on this issue in general terms.

During the Romantic period, when people began to think about the proto-language of humanity and, accordingly, about the genesis of different peoples, classical philology and Indology studies flourished. The philosopher I am discussing was an inquisitive scientist who wrote more than one treatise on the canon of literature and its formation, so undoubtedly these areas of knowledge also shaped his philosophical reasoning. Therefore, it is not by chance that when telling about different parts of the world, Herder most of all extols the Greeks and Indians. For him, these peoples live in the most favorable climate, so the inhabitants are more beautiful than the inhabitants of many other peoples or tribes. Ultimately, a good climate, according to the philosopher, shapes, and sometimes even tempers the character of a nation and helps to generate mature aesthetic and moral ideas: “Moderation and tranquillity, gentle feelings and unshakeable depth of soul are characteristic of their works and pleasures, their morality and mythology,

9 Brolsma, Marjet, 2019. *Eurocentrism in European History and Memory*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, p. 203.



arts and even the tolerance with which they endure the greatest oppression”<sup>10</sup>.

Further developing Herder’s thought, it becomes clear that those peoples who do not live in such favorable climatic conditions, their inhabitants are not endowed with a noble stature and graceful manners, and their refined thoughts had little to do with the thinking of Herder and his environment, so they do not deserve such epithets. At the foot of the European Olympus, the North American Indian remains, barely surrendering to the acculturation of Western civilization and preferring to stay under the shelter of the great forests rather than in the salon of a Western aristocrat or bourgeois, as well as the African Negro, who, in general, according to Herder, is alien to “the tormented feeling that there are higher pleasures for which he is not created”<sup>11</sup>.

The importance of personal beliefs for the given point of view is reflected in the discrepancy between the philosopher’s cherished ideal and reality. Despite the subjective understanding of goodness or beauty, citizens of different countries demonstrate outstanding achievements in various fields of science, art, and sports. For this reason, the developed correlation of climate, the innate talents of an individual or a nation, is not only false, but ultimately lowers other nations. A similar approach was applied and, as far as I know, is still used by current or former colonizers, using such attitudes for propaganda purposes, as well as for the

entire war machine. Even before the war in Ukraine, the Russian Academy of Sciences’ historians’ guild had put forward the hypothesis that the aforementioned North American Indians were Russians who later moved to America. The Russians are now sorry that the Blitzkrieg in Ukraine failed, and the new edition of the Barbarossa plan is being postponed to the distant future.

### Postscript

Herder’s philosophical reflections are full of vital joy in human achievements and the world as a whole. This is why he attaches such importance to images of admiration for land, sea, human relationships, and moments of human progress. Often in everyday life, a person is tempted to consider their own views as unique characteristics inherent only to them. Thus, it is forgotten that each individual is influenced by the socio-cultural environment surrounding him, customs, traditions that obey academic or other social conventions. The understanding of the beauty of the material provided by the senses, as well as other views, is conditioned by an intellectual decision.

Due to the existence of this anthropological universality, even Herder himself did not escape subjective evaluation. For him, the most beautiful are those peoples who have in one way or another contributed to the formation of the image of Europe, the cradle of world culture. Moving away from understanding the origins of the wisdom of the Old Continent, all other peoples lack both beauty and wisdom. Accordingly, the perception of cli-

10 Herder, Johann Gottlob. 2017. *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, p. 238–239.

11 Herder, Johann Gottlob. 2017. *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, p. 255.

mate also depends on this culturally conditioned point of view. Where more ideas important to the thinker are created, there the climate is better and, on the contrary, where the climate is worse, less thoughtful and less beautiful people live. Probably intuitively feeling this contrast inherent

in Herder's thought, modern very wealthy people acquire real estate where the consequences of climate change are less terrible, and thus become not only more beautiful and wiser, but also safer in relation to the rest who have less financial capital or do not have it at all.

## References

- Bernd, Fischer. 1995. *Das Eigene und das Eigentliche: Klopstock, Herder, Fichte, Kleist*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Brolsma, Marjet. 2019. *Eurocentrism in European History and Memory*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.
- Böttcher, Winfried. 2014. *Klassiker des europäischen Denkens: Friedens und Europavorstellungen aus 700 Jahren europäischer Kulturgeschichte*. Baden – Baden: Nomos.
- Herder, Johann Gottlob. 2017. *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*. California: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.
- Hurlebusch, Klaus. 2018. *Klopstock, Hamann und Herder als Wegbereiter autorzentrischen Schreibens*. Berlin: De Gruyter.
- Kant, Immanuel. 2015. *Praktinio proto kritika (Critique of Practical Reason)*. Translated from German by Romanas Plečkaitis. Vilnius: Margi raštai.
- Schmetkamp, Susanne. 2019. *Theorien Empathie zur Einführung*. Hamburg: Junius Verlag.