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Genealogies and Challenges of Transcultural Studies

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Abstract: My introductory essay discusses some of transculturalism's enduring conceptual challenges from the perspective of the history of German cultural and political theory. I am particularly interested in the discursive space between Immanuel Kant's individualism and Johann Gottfried Herder's and Moses Mendelssohn's concepts of cultural identity. My hope is that such a discussion can enrich some of our current questions, such as: Have culture studies placed too much emphasis on difference, rather than on commonality? Can a renewed interest in the cosmopolitan individual surpass the privileged position of academic or upper-class internationalism? Can concepts of transculturality avoid the pitfalls of homogenizing politics or overstretched individualism? After mentioning a few challenges to current conceptions of transculturalism that may arise in the wake of recent developments in the natural sciences, I end my remarks with a brief example of a possible intersection of literary studies and science. The essay engages three topics: (a) the question of culture; (b) transcultural participation; and (c) transcultural empathy and the sciences.

Keywords: political philosophy; transculturalism; empathy; Foucault; Kant; Herder; Mendelssohn

1. The Question of Culture: Kant, Mendelssohn, and Herder

When Immanuel Kant presented in his *Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment* (1784) the notion of a self-enlightening public, he was notably battling the specific political constrictions of late 18th-century absolutism. Although his concerns about a functioning public sphere would soon be eclipsed by the muddy realities of radically different power politics—i.e., the distinctly unenlightening media campaigns for and against the French Revolution, followed by wickedly deceptive strategies within the pro- and anti-Napoleonic propaganda wars, and, of course, the censorship decrees after the Congress of Vienna—, the idealistic passion of Kant's account has survived to this day.

Michel Foucault proposes that the ongoing appeal of Kant's brief essay can, in part, be explained by its curious status within Kant's oeuvre. In Foucault's reading, the essay is not embedded in a one-dimensional historical teleology; rather, it is concerned with finding ways out of the misery of enslaving immaturity at any stage of history and articulates the use of individual reasoning as a shift in attitude. By asking for a new arrangement of the relations between will, authority, and the use of reason, Kant is no longer content with the right to freedom of thoughts, but rather insists on the freedom of the public word. With this demand, the Enlightenment becomes a political problem for any authority. Foucault uses a Kantian term for this new attitude, "räsonnieren" (public reasoning), and contends that it holds a central position in Kant's philosophical project in that it is ultimately responsible for his decision to take on the tremendous task of writing the three *Critiques*. If public reasoning is to serve as an ongoing critical commentary on all of society's affairs, the need arises for an accurate account of its inner workings, its preconditions, and its limits. Foucault goes so far as to suggest that Kant's introduction of the new attitude of public reasoning marks a starting point of modernity, which, in turn, should also be understood as a shift in attitude: "a mode of relating to contemporary reality, a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and

feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task" [1]. This choice amounts to a new "philosophical ethos that could be described as a permanent critique of our historical era" [1]. This ethos is in part negatively defined as the rejection of all teleological master discourses—"of another society, of another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world," which would only lead "to the return of the most dangerous traditions" [1].¹ Rather, modernity's attitude of public reasoning is to be historio-critical and experimental in the face of contemporary questions and problems. Foucault's conceptions of archeology and genealogy have replaced Kant's transcendentalism. This is not the place to debate how successful Foucault is in explaining his philosophical attitude from a Kantian tradition; important for my topic is, however, that he (perhaps even more so than Kant) is concerned with the primacy of critical philosophy, its methodology, potential, and limits. Foucault presents the program of historio-critical enlightenment as a guide for the individual philosopher. There is no room for culture; the one time its name appears, we find it in a list of things that we should not do, namely falling for master discourses of 'a new way of thinking, a culture, a vision of the world'; for that would imply a 'return to the most dangerous traditions'. Foucault's interpretation of Kant's use of reason stresses its most ambitious feature: its advocacy of permanent public critique without the ideological backing of an alternative vision of a new political power. (It is in this sense somewhat reminiscent of Mendelssohn's approach, as we can hopefully see below.)

How does culture fare in Kant's essay? We may begin by looking at his specific explanation of the Enlightenment's historical foil: What or who—in addition to the cowardice and laziness of individuals, who are equipped to use their powers of reason, but avoid employing it whenever it is convenient—, is responsible for mankind's proclivity for submissive immaturity? The first two items Kant mentions are books that think for us and priests that display a conscience for us. They serve as examples of all those guardians ("Vormünder") that are empowered to do the thinking and feeling for us. They coerce and exploit us with methods that Kant describes as follows: "Having first infatuated their domesticated animals, and carefully prevented the docile creatures from daring to take a single step without the leading-strings to which they are tied, they next show them the danger which threatens them if they try to walk unaided." ([2], p. 35)² This "Gängelwagen" (as Kant calls it) constitutes a predominant tradition for the majority of the population. It describes its habitual culture, notwithstanding the observation that, depending on their geographical and historical circumstances, people have developed various cultural formations that entail different degrees of habitual immaturity. If Kant proposes public self-enlightenment as an "attitude" that searches for a "way out", then the out-of-what question can (even in the most advanced societies) be answered with: out of habitual culture. In this sense, Kant's essay may indeed prepare the way for the kind of a radical individualism that Foucault finds in modernist art. His prime example is the extreme self-stylization that he observes in Baudelaire's figure of the dandy, i.e., the retreat of culture to the individual body.³ Both, Kant and Baudelaire, seek, in Foucault's words, "the autonomy of the modern subject in the context of the present" and attempt "to free individuals from the normative and materialist chains of society, as well as from religion, moralism and tradition" [1,3]. What is really at stake in the modern approach to the

¹ I will not address the problem that Foucault too cannot fully avoid presenting a latent master discourse, as the word choices in Catherine Porter's translation give away easily. Foucault seems to differentiate between new ways of thinking that are bound to (teleologically structured) philosophical, political, and/or cultural master discourses and a new mode of reasoning that gains its energy from a keen awareness of the ideological pitfalls of all master discourses. His 'Kantian' mode of critical reasoning can perhaps best be illustrated as a philosophical analogy to a scientific ethos, in as much as it operates outside of cultural, political, and ideological limitations.

² "Nachdem sie ihr Hausvieh zuerst dumm gemacht haben und sorgfältig verhüteten, daß diese ruhigen Geschöpfe ja keinen Schritt außer dem Gängelwagen, darin sie sie einsperrten, wagen durften, so zeigen sie ihnen nachher die Gefahr, die ihnen droht, wenn sie es versuchen allein zu gehen" ([2], p. 35).

³ We will see in the second part of this essay that Foucault's radical individualism resembles in this sense conceptions of transculturality that locate cultural diversity in an individual's complex net of unique cultural influences, belongings, and enactments.

shackles of culture—“religion, moralism and tradition”—is, above all, the matter-of-course character of cultural practices, unexamined cultural institutions and performances and unquestioned habitual observances. This describes not only aspects of everyday life and philosophical attitude, but it may, if we follow Foucault, also explain a radical shift within modern culture itself—for instance, modern art’s and literature’s emphasis on stylized idiosyncratic eccentricity, the lone cry against the customary cruelty of society’s overt or hidden norms, and so on.

In Foucault’s conception, the modern attitude of “*räsonnieren*” comes primarily and most notably into its own in philosophy. It demands a cultural shift in philosophy itself. Kant, on the other hand, does not expose the philosopher as public intellectual, and his methodological demands seem somewhat less stringent. Although he suggests that reasoning in the public sphere should operate similar to scholarly thought, the grammatical logic of the analogical structure leaves little doubt that he aims beyond the academic discourse of philosophy and science. Kant’s public sphere leads us, in my way of reading the essay, out of culture, but not necessarily into political philosophy; in other words, the essay’s reach does not end with a new academic attitude, as Foucault’s interpretation suggests, but rather prepares the ground for what becomes more explicit ten years later in Kant’s essay “On Perpetual Peace”, namely civic discourse in a constitutional republic; a critical discursive attitude that is to become part of a life-style that Kant labels unsocial sociability (“*ungesellige Geselligkeit*”).

Kant’s design of the public sphere and his political vision are closely interconnected and circle essentially around the same center: the conditions for the possibility of autonomous individuality in a thusly structured conception of civic society. It should not come as a surprise that culture raises its (still) ugly head again, when Kant proposes political principles (‘definitive articles’) that could put Europe (and eventually the world) onto a track towards the ultimate political hope: perpetual peace. In Kant’s conception, such a peace can only be secured through the rule of constitutional law that governs both the relations of autonomous individuals in each country and the relations between autonomous countries. Both are considered autonomous or free, as long as they submit consciously and willfully to the rule of constitutional law. It is again quite difficult to locate the place of culture in this scenario, as Kant offers only one sentence to concede its presence.⁴ Yet, this half-hearted concession is capable of tearing down the beautiful design that Kant had projected in previous political essays, namely, the republic of republics (or world republic).

By the time Kant writes *On Perpetual Peace* (1795), he feels the need to concede that his audience does not prioritize the benefits of the republic of republics for the following reason. People insist on their cultural differences, and striving for (national) cultural recognition is more important to them than equality, political representation, or even peace. Reluctantly, Kant replaces the logic of a world republic with the less stringent idea of an alliance or federation of states (“*Völkerbund*”). The second “definitive article” reads: “The Right of Nations shall be founded on a Federation of Free States” ([4], p. 42).⁵ The downside of a mere federation or alliance, rather than a federal republic, lies in its inability to guarantee and enforce the law between its member states, and Kant has good reason to doubt that a mere federation can guarantee a lasting peace between nations.

For states viewed in relation to each other, there can be only one way, according to reason, of emerging from that lawless condition which contains nothing but occasions of war. Just as in the case of individual men, reason would drive them to give up their savage lawless freedom, to accommodate themselves to public coercive laws, and thus to form an ever-growing state of nations, which would at last embrace all the nations of the earth. But as the nations, according to their ideas of international law won’t have this under any circumstances and therefore reject *in hypothesi* what is right *in thesi*, the place of the positive

⁴ Tellingly, Kant’s acknowledgement of culture is accompanied by a footnote that immediately challenges its reasonability.

⁵ I have occasionally clarified or modernized W. Hastie’s translation. “Das Völkerrecht soll auf einen Föderalismus freier Staaten gegründet sein” ([5], p. 354).

idea of a *world-republic*—if all is not to be lost—can only be replaced with the *negative* surrogate of an ever growing *alliance*. ([4], pp. 43–44)⁶

Nations that prefer such an alliance may believe that they can protect their autonomy, but they also remain quite dangerous. Kant uses a quote from Virgil's *Aeneid* to describe them: "Imprisoned fury roars with bloody mouth" ("Furor impius intus—fremet horridus ore cruento.") ([4], p. 20). For Kant, history has shown that the character of autonomous states is best understood as evil: "The depravity of human nature is exhibited without disguise in the unrestrained relations of the nations to each other [. . .]" ([4], p. 42).⁷

Why then do we have to accept that nations are more inclined to seek cultural recognition, rather than adhere to political reason? Notwithstanding his critique of Herder's philosophy of culture, Kant gives the battle for cultural recognition a positive spin, by providing a logical place for cultural identity that is still all too familiar to us: Although the desire for cultural recognition complicates the project of a federal republic of republics to the breaking point, it guards against homogeneity, an implicit danger of any world state. The price of international peace, so it seems, is diversity, that is, freedom. After all, even the tyrannical rule of absolutistic empires can provide for peace, albeit the peace of a graveyard. (Kant expresses the duplicity of 'universal and perpetual peace' by employing the name of a graveyard inn—"Zum ewigen Frieden"—for the title of his essay.) Nature resists enslavement through homogenization by employing "two means to prevent the peoples from intermingling, and to keep them apart: the differences of *languages* and *religions*" ([4], p. 48). The back side is that these cultural differences bring with them "a tendency for mutual hatred and furnish pretexts for war" ([4], p. 48).⁸ The upshot is that Kant is fully aware that the non-constitutional federation of autonomous states, which he feels compelled to propose, suffers from a major inherent contradiction. On the one hand, peaceful states can only exist in a constitutional relationship with each other that mirrors the constitutional relationship of citizens within the state ("Surrogat des bürgerlichen Gesellschaftsbundes" ([5], p. 356)). On the other hand, this cannot

take the form of a state made up of these nations. For that would involve a contradiction, since every state, properly so called, contains the relation of a superior as the lawgiver to an inferior as the people subject to their laws. Many nations, however, in one state, would constitute only one nation, which is contradictory to the principle assumed, as we are here

⁶ "Für Staaten im Verhältnisse unter einander kann es nach der Vernunft keine andere Art geben, aus dem gesetzlosen Zustande, der lauter Krieg enthält, herauszukommen, als daß sie eben so wie einzelne Menschen ihre wilde (gesetzlose) Freiheit aufgeben, sich zu öffentlichen Zwangsgesetzen bequemen und so einen (freilich immer wachsenden) Völkerstaat (*civitas gentium*), der zuletzt alle Völker der Erde befassen würde, bilden. Da sie dieses aber nach ihrer Idee vom Völkerrecht durchaus nicht wollen, mithin, was *in thesi* richtig ist, *in hypothesi* verwerfen, so kann an die Stelle der positiven Idee einer Weltrepublik (wenn nicht alles verloren werden soll) nur das negative Surrogat eines den Krieg abwehrenden, bestehenden und sich immer ausbreitenden Bundes den Strom der rechtscheuenden, feindseligen Neigung aufhalten, doch mit beständiger Gefahr ihres Ausbruchs (*Furor impius intus—fremet horridus ore cruento*. Virgil)" ([5], p. 357). The same rule that applies to the constitutional state must also apply to an alliance of states: its laws must be public ("öffentlich"). Kant elevates this rule to a transcendental status (*transzendente Formel*). In the second addendum, "Of the Accordance of Politics with Morals according to the Transcendental Conception of Public Right," he writes: "Abstraction being thus made from everything empirical that is contained in the conceptions of national and international right, (such as the evil disposition of human nature which makes coercion necessary) the following proposition arises, and it may be called the transcendental formula of Public Right. 'All actions relating to the rights of other men are wrong, if their maxim is not compatible with publicity'" ([4], p. 56). "Nach einer solchen Abstraction von allem Empirischen, was der Begriff des Staats- und Völkerrechts enthält (dergleichen das Bösartige der menschlichen Natur ist, welches den Zwang nothwendig macht), kann man folgenden Satz die transscendentale Formel des öffentlichen Rechts nennen: „Alle auf das Recht anderer Menschen bezogene Handlungen, deren Maxime sich nicht mit der Publizität verträgt, sind unrecht'" ([5], p. 381).

⁷ "Bei der Bösartigkeit der menschlichen Natur, die sich im freien Verhältnis der Völker unverhohlen blicken läßt [. . .]" ([5], p. 355).

⁸ "Aber die *Natur* will es anders.—Sie bedient sich zweier Mittel, um Völker von der Vermischung abzuhalten und sie abzusondern, der Verschiedenheit der *Sprachen* und der *Religionen*, die [. . .] den Hang zum wechselseitigen Hasse und Vorwand zum Kriege bei sich führt [. . .]" ([5], p. 367). Kant's ambiguity finds an expression in the accompanying footnote on the impossibility of different religions. While he acknowledges different religious histories that rely on variations of mythological and literary traditions and may constitute different belief systems, he insists that there can ultimately only be one moral religion—just like it is unthinkable to him that there could be more than one ethics.

considering the right of nations in relation to each other, in so far as they constitute different states and are not to be fused into one. ([4], p. 42)⁹

If the aggressive nature of national cultures (with a small c) is the price to be paid for avoiding the compulsory homogeneity of a world state, Kant's hope for peace rests, in part, on a specific aspect of Culture (with a capitalized "C")—that is, in the expectation that the latently dangerous cultural differences between nations can be somewhat diffused through a common culture of reciprocal recognition, which for Kant develops primarily as a side effect of international commerce. This kind of transcultural understanding

is effected by the commercial spirit which cannot exist along with war, and which sooner or later takes hold of every people. Among all the means of power under state rule, the power of money is the most reliable, and thus the states find themselves driven to further the noble interest of peace, although not directly from motives of morality. ([4], p. 48)¹⁰

Economic globalization will bring about new perspectives on a common humanity, which will eventually reach into the far corners of the world.

However, as civilization increases, there is a gradual approach of men to greater unanimity in principles, and to a mutual understanding of the conditions of peace even in view of these differences. This pacific spirit, unlike that despotism which revels upon the grave of liberty, is developed and secured, not by the weakening of all the separate powers of the states, but by an equilibrium which is brought forth and guaranteed through their rivalry with each other. ([4], p. 48)¹¹

If there is anywhere in Kant's political essays space for a constructive role of culture, it can most likely be located in the vicinity of his ideas about transcultural understanding, reciprocal recognition, and the promotion of a set of judicial and civic principles, which lie at the core of his design of a society that is to enable competitive personal growth and individual autonomy. His brand of transculturalism stands in dynamic friction with two contemporaneous conceptions of culture that are also still with us: (a) culture as an expression of a people's identity, which exists primarily as a new subject and methodology of scholarly inquiry and has in the 18th century become part of the academic public sphere; and (b) cultural politics—the construction of a people as an audience (Publikum) through language-bound definitions and delineations of a national public sphere that would latently be engaged on the opposing side of Kant's transcultural project. The two conceptions of culture are interrelated and are both most prominently presented in Herder's writings—although, I believe, the case could be made that the transcultural approach is also within the theoretical reach of Herder's notion of culture studies and cultural history.

I would like to interject a word about a possible place for Kant's critique of aesthetic judgment within the political struggle about culture. Kant's analysis of aesthetic judgments as "subjective universal verdicts"—a search for commonality that emerges from a deeply personal experience—shows structural analogies with the political weight that he puts on the autonomy or freedom of an

⁹ "Darin aber wäre ein Widerspruch: weil ein jeder Staat das Verhältniß eines Oberen (Gesetzgebenden) zu einem Unteren (Gehorchenden, nämlich dem Volk) enthält, viele Völker aber in einem Staate nur ein Volk ausmachen würden, welches (da wir hier das Recht der Völker gegen einander zu erwägen haben, so fern sie so viel verschiedene Staaten ausmachen und nicht in einem Staat zusammenschmelzen sollen) der Voraussetzung widerspricht" ([5], p. 354).

¹⁰ "Es ist der Handelsgeist, der mit dem Kriege nicht zusammen bestehen kann, und der früher oder später sich jedes Volks bemächtigt. Weil nämlich unter allen der Staatsmacht untergeordneten Mächten (Mitteln) die Geldmacht wohl die zuverlässigste sein möchte, so sehen sich Staaten (freilich wohl nicht eben durch Triebfedern der Moralität) gedrungen, den edlen Frieden zu befördern [. . .]" ([5], p. 368).

¹¹ "[. . .] aber doch bei anwachsender Cultur und der allmählichen Annäherung der Menschen zu größerer Einstimmung in Principien zum Einverständnis in einem Frieden leitet, der nicht wie jener Despotism (auf dem Kirchhofe der Freiheit) durch Schwächung aller Kräfte, sondern durch ihr Gleichgewicht im lebhaftesten Wetteifer derselben hervorgebracht und gesichert wird" ([5], p. 367).

individual's rational acceptance of constitutional rule. Aesthetic reconciliations that come about in the "free play" between the cognitive faculties of imagination and understanding can, from this political perspective, be seen as guide posts in the individual's quest for unknown universals (Kant's definition of a class of reflective judgments that includes aesthetic judgments). The political nature of this search for unknown territories of subjective/objective normativity is inherent in the public discourse about taste, namely, its exploratory examination of the possibility of an aesthetic *sensus communis*, a community of taste (Hannah Arendt). Aesthetic judgments must be pure and deeply personal, but carry, coinstantaneously, a strong desire for social recognition; an individual's taste stands in this sense, in no small measure, for both her expression of autonomy and her longing for community. One cannot argue about taste, and yet that is precisely what one feels compelled to do—another aspect of Kant's notion of modernity's 'unsocial sociability' and a formulary that carries his conception of public reasoning into a public discourse of aesthetic criticism. To put it into a more modest perspective (that can also serve as a transition to Mendelssohn), aesthetic judgments allow us to sense something about who we are and perhaps even more about how and with whom (in what kind of a community) we would like to live.

In his essay "On the Question: What Does It Mean to Enlighten" (1784), Moses Mendelssohn attempts to bring the three perspectives on culture that we have discussed (transcultural impetus, cultural history, and cultural politics) into a systematic structure that is anchored by a concept of "Bildung" (a term that famously connects individual education and character building with identity construction). Mendelssohn understands "Bildung" as a synthetic concept that requires both enlightenment (understood as theoretical progress) and culture (understood as practical improvement). With regard to public reasoning, Mendelssohn agrees with Kant's call for an autonomous public sphere. A state that, by censoring the public use of reason, admits that it cannot provide for the essential conditions for humanity's self-improvement (in Mendelssohn's version, the harmonization of humans as humans with their role as citizens); that is, a state that cannot allow for enlightenment to spread into all estates for fear that it will collapse, is philosophy's ultimate challenge and confronts it with its inherent limits. Living under such rule, philosophy has no choice, Mendelssohn suggests, but to cover its mouth. It should not become complicit with the politics of such a state, but it should also be aware of its own political limitations and dangers (herein lies the foreshadowing of Foucault's anti-ideological stand). In particular, it must take into account its potential for inadvertently wrecking established cultures and societies when it confronts them abruptly with a bout of enlightened thought, rather than painstakingly preparing the road for developing a higher degree of 'Bildung'. For Mendelssohn, enlightenment and culture must develop in lockstep. But even if things seem to work out perfectly, there is ultimately a limit to 'Bildung', that is, a 'Bildung' that assumes it has accomplished all that can be accomplished and is ready to leave enlightenment and culture behind. Nations that approach the pinnacle of 'Bildung', Mendelssohn cautions, are in danger of falling ill from an overdose of national intemperance and overindulgence. Healthy nations, Mendelssohn seems to imply, need the spike of an ongoing inner strife of divergent particularities, as well as a continuing struggle between theory and practice (enlightenment and culture). For Mendelssohn, particularity (culture with a small c) is there to stay and his enlightened reasoning occurs in two differentiated public spheres—most clearly demonstrated by his separate publishing venues (for instance, the Hebrew literary monthly he founded [*Ha-Me'assef*—The Collector] and the German monthly he co-edited [*Briefe die neueste Literatur betreffend*]). The particular cultural sphere of his personal belonging (language and religion) constitutes a cultural *sensus communis* that is, in no small measure, defined by its struggle for recognition and inspires him to become the premier advocate for improving his culture's 'Bildung'—linguistic and religious reform. The cosmopolitan (or transcultural) public sphere of scholarly and aesthetic reasoning allows him to establish himself as a leading philosophical player on the grand stage of 18th-century Europe. In Mendelssohn's conception, neither the national nor the transcultural push of 'Bildung' has an end point (no utopian notion of a universal republic or a unified culture), and the struggle for the recognition of cultural particularities remains as essential as the struggle for the recognition of an

individual's place in society. A particular culture can and should become more refined, but it cannot end, as it is for Mendelssohn as much (or perhaps even more so) a part of society's engine of progress, as the competitive striving of autonomous individuals is for Kant.

2. Transcultural Participation

In contrast to Mendelssohn, Kant's political philosophy (much like his moral philosophy) envisions an immensely autonomous individual, which Charles Taylor has interpreted as a marker for the emergence of modernity. This vision of a modern self disrupted late medieval notions of strictly regimented and regulated castes, estates, and guilds and replaced them with an emphasis on individual authenticity and ethical integrity—traits that became ever more important for the meritocratic and flexible labor force that the economic and administrative policies of Europe's absolutist states demanded ([6], pp. 25–73). However, Taylor has also shown that individual authenticity proved to be a tall order and was soon supplemented with new notions of collective identities, this time primarily fashioned by an emerging discourse on cultural and regional traditions [6–8]. In his *Ideas for a Philosophy of Human History* (1784–1791), Herder elaborated a formula for this complex development that is still of significance today. In his brand of historicism, every human carries a unique measure of his own humanity within him/herself—so to speak, a peculiar attunement of all his sensuous experiences and feelings [9]. But Herder also stresses that, just like every individual self, each people (Volk) holds its own unique measure within itself and carries its own unique demands for an authentic self—in Taylor's words:

Just like individuals, a *Volk* should be true to itself, that is, its own culture. Germans shouldn't try to be derivative and (inevitably) second-rate Frenchmen [. . .]. And European colonialism ought to be rolled back to give the peoples of what we now call the Third World their chance to be themselves unimpeded. We can recognize here the seminal idea of modern nationalism, in both benign and malignant forms ([6], p. 31).

For Herder, humans should not only be recognized as authentic individuals, but also as culturally determined beings, as members and representatives of a culture. As such, they demand respect for the authenticity claims of their culture, whereby assertions of one's culture and one's selfhood can easily stand in for each other in a kind of circular argument. It seems that by the beginning of the 19th century the modern individual was willing and interested—far more than, for instance, Kant could foresee—to delegate claims of authenticity to stories of cultural heritage and belonging, which soon morphed (not the least because of the impact of anti-Napoleonic politics) into the political claims of cultural nationalism [10].

With this historical backdrop, Taylor draws a line between the politics of equal dignity (principally theorized within a constitutional frame of equal rights) and the politics of difference.

With the politics of equal dignity, what is established is meant to be universally the same, an identical basket of rights and immunities; with the politics of difference, what we are asked to recognize is the unique identity of this individual or group, their distinctness from everyone else. The idea is that it is precisely this distinctness that has been ignored, glossed over, assimilated to a dominant or majority identity. And this assimilation is the cardinal sin against the ideal of authenticity ([6], p. 38).

In the face of radical culturalism, it may be appropriate to point to historical indications that the dignity of difference, nevertheless, tends to fare best in democratic republics, whose concepts of national identity rest primarily on constitutional (rather than cultural) histories so that anxieties about the authenticity of a unified national culture tend to play a lesser role, while autocratically run countries tend to fear and suppress cultural difference to a higher degree. This holds also true for the homogenizing pressure that a culture fighting for the dignity of difference puts on the individual designs of its own members—its children, in particular. It is perhaps one of the least

examined presumptions (a somewhat hidden culturalist bias) that pressures to adhere to homogeneous judgments, preferences, education, and life styles are somehow mitigated in communities that assert an ethnically or culturally defined particularity in order to gain a political voice (that is power). Furthermore, equating cultural (national) authenticity with freedom (a common intellectual automatism) tends to discount a core problem of Herder's brand of cultural criticism, namely the contradictory interplay of universality and particularity—i.e., Enlightenment's universal demand to recognize a culture's right to its unique particularity, even if the cultural entity at question may itself not be ready to return the favor of granting such rights to other cultures.

Wolfgang Welsch's Theory of Transculturalism

Since the 1990s, Wolfgang Welsch has attempted to confront some of these theoretical dilemmas by complementing traditional notions of cosmopolitanism with a theory of transculturalism. The hope is that a proper concept of transculturality can describe today's pervasiveness of cosmopolitan identities. For Welsch, transculturalism characterizes a growing number of real life stories in a globalized world, biographies that entail both new possibilities and new problems. For others, such as Kwame Anthony Appiah, their cosmopolitan potentials are of decisively political and ethical importance [11].

Welsch has developed his theory of transculturalism as a response to theoretical and political difficulties that he attributes to concepts of interculturalism and multiculturalism [12]. The basic problem of interculturalism lies for Welsch in its culturalist heritage, in that it continues to emphasize and celebrate cultures as separated and closed units. Although one should consider here that intercultural theories have stressed the historical variability of cultural markers and made problems of cultural lineages, borders, and overlap important topics of discussion, these refinements cannot really disqualify Welsch's observation that intercultural concepts remain fixed on the importance of the cultural authenticity of difference between peoples and nations. At the very least, transculturalism and interculturalism diverge in political temper and sensibility—to borrow a term from William Connolly ([13], p. XI). One highlights potential commonalities of richly differentiated individuals and aims for their political recognition; the other advocates the recognition of national or subnational differences that ought to be protected.

The term multiculturalism shows, from Welsch's point of view, a similar structure and attempts to navigate conflicts that arise with the confrontation of cultures or subcultures within a given society. To be sure, both interculturalism and multiculturalism have been influential in developing strategies for peaceful collaborations among cultures, for instance, by attempting to integrate the outside view into the view of oneself so that a buffer of cultural understanding can allow for a tolerant mode of living with each other.¹² However, from a transcultural perspective, they stick to the premise that identity-relevant cultural markers are principally exhausted by identifying and explaining the specificities of their ethnic and national heritage. Interculturalism and multiculturalism remain in this sense indebted to the colonial paradigm of cultural (rather than political) notions of nationhood. Whatever one may think of Welsch's attacks on intercultural hermeneutics ([15], p. 18), one can easily concede that the goal can indeed not be to institutionalize problems of cultural understanding as insurmountably fixed, and that recognizing transcultural life stories and personality designs can offer new strategies for cultural connectivity, intersection, and transition ([15], pp. 22–30).

Furthermore, Welsch's notion of transculturalism offers a unique answer to the fear of global homogenization. He argues that his understanding of transculturality does not destroy diversification, but rather modifies it in specific ways. "What changes is the type of cultural variety. Differences no longer emerge between different kinds of monolithic identities, but between identity configurations that have some elements in common while differing in other elements, in their arrangement as a whole, and often in their complexity" ([16], p. 6). In addition, Welsch contends that the term national culture

¹² This strategy has, for instance, been elaborated in *Intercultural Literary Studies* [14].

as used by today's adherents of interculturalism has become misleading: "what we really have in mind when speaking this way are *political* or *linguistic* communities, not truly *cultural* formations" ([16], p. 4). While differences between culturally defined societies may indeed be deemphasized in transcultural studies, new diversification arises in the individual self, in its network of particular and peculiar modes of life, heritage, education, tastes, and participations that latently portray a much greater abundance of cultural variability than closed-off cultures. "So difference is not vanishing, but its *mode* is changing. Difference, as traditionally provided by single cultures, certainly is diminishing. Instead differences between transcultural networks arise. These networks, however, also have some elements in common while differing in others. So there is always some overlap between them—'family resemblances', as Wittgenstein put it" ([16], p. 8).

At least at an abstract level, Welsch's notion of transcultural individuality offers an innovative approach to the antinomy of a political enlightenment that is simultaneously directed at universality and particularity, which we encounter in Kant's unease with his retreat from the republic of republics, as well as in the paradoxical structure of the Enlightenment's particular demand for the universal recognition of particular cultures (Herder)—a position that also falls short of circumventing the political drive to extend the reach of its own particularity (the universalism of human rights). In a way, individuality and diversity collapse in Welsch's concept of transculturality—to the degree that the individual's unique authenticity lies in evolving networks of cultural participation and not in static belongings. It is, once again, the individual self that can, in this model, insist on claims for individual integrity and authenticity and no longer her assigned cultural heritage for which she can no more stand in as it can stand in for her. Perhaps most importantly, transculturality offers room for individual cultural specifications without having to limit the demands of universal values in improper ways. A transcultural conception of society assumes accordingly that humans reach their specific individuality through a lifetime of dynamic participations in ancestral and educational, particular and universal, local and cosmopolitan, and immediate and mediated formations of belonging.

The consequences that the reintroduction of the individual as cultural agent could have for intercultural hermeneutics can hardly be overestimated. Horst Steinmetz, for instance, warns against the pervasive de-aestheticization in current intercultural literary studies and laments that, in spite of its inflated theoretical superstructure, truly intercultural text explication happens, if at all, intuitively and sporadically, and by no means methodically and systematically ([17], p. 467). Implicitly, he closes the circle back to Herder's concept of knowledgeable intuition and interpretative sensibility. It stands to reason that this is no accident, as it is indeed important to acknowledge that a transcultural orientation can be traced back to the very beginning of culture studies in the late 18th century, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere in regard to Herder [18].

Transcultural studies—and this is not to be taken lightly—have always been a quite elitist scholarly undertaking. Herder's scholar, for instance, reaches a "transcultural" understanding because of raw talent and, equally important, exhaustive studies and endless reading, which allow him (as Herder puts it) to feel himself into another culture, without having to live or even witness it. Even though more and more men and women may today live transcultural lives, there is reason to suspect that transcultural studies remain, nevertheless, dominated by modes of highly educated, aesthetic participation.¹³ On the other hand, it seems quite preposterous, as Welsch puts it, when contemporary cultural studies surround themselves with a nimbus of liberation, while their micro-analytical studies have, in Welsch's view, nothing to offer than the choice between "different cells of a prison and by no means freedom" ([19], p. 7). For Welsch, intercultural hermeneutics is in this sense the latest garb of radical historicism ([19], p. 3).

¹³ While the term "participation" offers, in my view, a realistic and politically desirable description of transculturality, its elitist genealogy may pose a level of concern.

With all this, transculturalism—understood as a description of individually diversified modes of life beyond the limitations of particular cultural frameworks—cannot forego reaching for a level of understanding that extends beyond individual cultures and latently touches all known cultures. For me, one of the more interesting questions is, if Herder’s strategy to fill this space with his (already tautologically structured) concept of humanity (“Humanität”) can perhaps turn into a new direction in culture studies that take the open-ended quality of “trans” at heart. For the impetus of transcultural scholarship is bound to envision a public sphere of universal and inclusive participation, that is, a scholarly culture of fair communication and interaction. Such participatory cosmopolitan cultures have historically been available primarily for two groups: economic and political elites (high aristocracy, high finance, and international business and trade) and, secondly, scholars and artists. There are no principal reasons that would preclude this level of transcultural (cosmopolitan) participation from becoming available to the populations at large—of all communities and in all corners of the world. There are, however, some preconditions for such a level of universally extended transcultural participation in a kind of world culture that can hold its own in the midst of (and while recognizing) all the particular cultures and subcultures. One has already been pointed out as Herder’s paradox of universal particularity. Taken as a condition for a (world) culture of transculturality (if the paradoxical structure makes sense at this point), it demands that no culture can claim exclusivity and insist on incompatibility. In other words, it stands to reason that, in addition, to our individual cultural and subcultural participations and inclinations, we need to develop and defend an inclusive culture of universality, cosmopolitanism, and internationalism (to name some of the traditional theories that aim at such a world-cultural level). I trust that the possibility of such an inclusive transcultural culture is a worthwhile guide post for scholarship in the humanities—if we are inclined to battle current forces of xenophobic and nationalistic demagoguery and power politics that threaten to carry the day.

In recent years, Welsch has complemented his theory of transculturalism by incorporating popular developments in evolutionary anthropology and other ‘hard’ human sciences (cf. also [20]).

For there *is* another type of commonalities, one *preceding* cultural difference. We tend to overlook the amount of commonalities humans already share before cultural differences get off the ground. What I have in mind here, is roughly what was formerly referred to as universals: determinants common to all cultures. [. . .] My current picture is that transculturality—the existence of cross-cultural commonalities—is fostered by two quite different factors operating at very different levels (though there is, as I will show, also some connection). One is the current process of the permeation of cultures—a process creating commonalities by *overcoming* differences. The other is much older and related to the human condition as such. It *underlies* all formations of difference.—If we take *both* aspects into account, then we might, I suspect, arrive at a more complete picture of transculturality altogether. ([16], p. 2)

Welsch knows, of course, that deep structures of transcultural commonalities that can be expounded in the terminology of evolutionary theory have been met with suspicion and unease. “Reference to cultural universals must reckon with resistance. In the realm of cultural studies an extreme form of difference thinking is today dominant. Under its auspices cultural studies flourish. To refer to universals there seems almost to be a sacrilege” ([16], p. 9). For him, culture studies that refuse to engage in a critical debate with other sciences operate in untenable isolation. “The dogma of radical cultural relativism broke down in anthropology (it has survived only in cultural studies in America and Europe)” ([16], p. 14).

Better known examples of the kind of proto-cultural commonalities that Welsch has in mind include, for instance, facial expressions, gestures, aesthetic preferences of certain designs and images (as well as face and body shapes), logical structures, and linguistic deep structures [21]. To the degree that such proto-cultural commonalities can be explained as results of biological feedback effects (cf. [16], p. 16), Welsh implores the humanities “to take the entire origin of humanity into account—not only the historical development of humans, but also their proto-historical and evolutionary origin. For human

cognition and sensation is not a free (merely historically formed) construction of objectivity, but, at a fundamental level, also a reflex of the world in and through which we became what we are" ([19], pp. 108–9). In the last five years, Welsch has even attempted to offer a comprehensive grounding of philosophy that questions the anthropomorphic basis of our thought in radical ways [22,23].

This is, of course, not the place to engage Welsch's anti-anthropomorphism; rather, I would like to point to a few scientific contexts that might eventually challenge some of our assumptions. The most obvious concern stems from the possible impact of advances in reproductive selection, high-cost medicine, and genetic engineering for privileged populations. Some go as far as to speculate that the top one percent of the world's population will put part of its vast resources into transforming itself into a new (arguably superior) human species [24]. Other concerns involve, for instance, studies of stress hormones in the presence of strangers or microbial research that suggests evolutionary explanations for both the primary importance of human individuality and communal tastes and mentalities [25]. Further discussions of proto-cultural universals that can potentially invite a range of unpredictable political interpretations could eventually arise from genetic discoveries of cross-species breeding. As it turns out, genetically pure samples of the species *Homo sapiens* can primarily be found on the African continent. On the other continents, the genome was supplemented with genetic material from *Homo neanderthalensis* and (at least in East Asia) from *Homo denisova* (perhaps *Homo floresiensis*)—and it remains to be seen what additional genetic traces of the apparently quite variegated human genus might still be found. Traces of genetic material from other species do not necessarily imply a higher degree of genetic diversity. Quite to the contrary, the human genome is on the African continent more varied than on the European or Asian continents.

Of more immediate consequences for our understanding of human diversity could be the not impossible inference that, just like bodily traits, emotional potentials can be epigenetically actuated so that they can, in part, be understood as response patterns that were initially stimulated by specific environmental and societal circumstances that may no longer be relevant. If such epigenetic information can be inherited by up to four generations (as has been observed in medical studies), then epigenetics may perhaps contribute to a scientific explanation of phenomena that we tend to bundle under an undefined notion of ethnic traits and differences [26,27].

3. Transcultural Empathy and Literary Imagination

Cultural studies have a long history of engaging social and psychological approaches to questions of phylogenetic developments of emotional potentials (from family settings and educational institutions to psychoanalysis). However, these too can appear in a different light when seen from current scientific perspectives. Consider, for instance, the role of fiction.

(1) Fiction in brain science: Neuronal connections that accompany and enable the development of a child's basic cognitive abilities (such as hearing, seeing, feeling) develop during distinct windows of time. During these developmental stages, the brain makes a very large number of neurons available for the structural formation of a specific network. Only those neurons and neuronal structures that the child uses over and over again in active interactions with its environment have a chance for survival. Neurons that are not being used for specific skill related connections (30 to 40 percent) remain forever unused. Only those that fire together wire together [28]. Play (and this means, to a large extent, fictional play) is of central importance during these developmental stages. This holds, of course, true for the essential ability to comprehend other humans as beings with sovereign emotions and, through a mirror of reciprocity, for the acquisition of a sense of self. The child imagines the inner condition of another person and is guided by (often exaggerated and in this sense fictional) facial expressions, body movements, voice intonations, etc. This triggers processes of learning that lead (if everything goes right) to ever more accurate and intimate processes of empathetic emotions, sympathetic thoughts,

and the emergence of a social self.¹⁴ It is not unreasonable to assume that abilities for emotional and intellectual empathy can already at this stage develop in different ways or to different degrees. Irrespective of the question if the assumption of specific “mirror” neurons is needed for the reflection of the other in the self (and vice versa), it seems to hold true that the same regions of the brain are active when we experience a specific emotional situation, observe someone who experiences this situation, or hear (or read) a story of someone who experiences it [31]. In this context, it is important to consider the brain’s astonishing potential for autopoietic input/response patterns.¹⁵ We cannot remember the endless training sessions that contributed to the hardwiring of our fundamental neuronal structures, because they happen primarily in the first two years of our lives, before the structures for a declarative memory have been completed.

Consequently, adults are, so to speak, confronted with two levels of unquestionable factuality (a priori); one emerged over millions of years as the result of evolution and has found an expression in the architectonic structure of the brain; the other emerges as individual neuronal structures in the first years of childhood. This second level of a priori facticity is bound to the child’s high level of neuronal plasticity, in order to allow for adaptations to specific cultural (historically and socially variable) environments. It is influenced by sensory stimulations that may be differently weighted in different cultural and social settings. In this sense, the brain contains already within its developed neuronal structures a level of socio-cultural information, which the individual, however, experiences to a large extent as natural (a priori) facts of her world. It is not unreasonable to assume that this neurologically anchored level of socio-cultural difference does extend to variations of empathic inclinations.¹⁶

(2) Fiction in literature: The drastically reduced plasticity of an adult brain does not mean that adults cannot acquire, exercise, and improve behaviors, preferences, mentalities, emotions, skills, and logical structures; it may mean, however, that these later acquisitions lack the same level of unquestionable facticity, which characterizes neuronal structures that formed, so to speak, pre-consciously during earlier years. The function of empathetic imagination is also not limited to the child’s formative processes of self and other. To the contrary, empathy, imagination, and autopoietic fiction describe fundamental ways of being, which accompany us for the rest of our lives. Fictional literature, in particular, has the advantage that it can actuate, mediate, and relate (communicate) basal, cultural, psychological, societal, political, and many more markers and aspects of empathetic potentials in complex, comprehensive, and yet very immediate ways (on cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic levels)—which can easily exceed the limitations of other experimental settings (in particular, those that have to adhere to scientific norms). What kind of relations can we assume between the early neurological formation of empathetic potentials and the potentials and functions of imaginary or fictional experiences of empathy that adults seek in plays, movies, and novels? Of particular interest is, from my point of view, the question if adult strategies for improving, refining, or testing their empathetic potentials can only be achieved second hand by way of intellectual understanding—i.e., through rational processes, which quickly drift into the domains of duty and ethical self-awareness—, or if aesthetic sensations (that is their potentially trans-intellectual dimension of social experience) can still offer an immediate approach to empathic emotions and considerations at any age.¹⁷ If so, what kind of role could aesthetic experiences continue to play for processes of identity construction? I can

¹⁴ The model jibes in some ways the model of intersubjective identity construction that was proposed as early as 1797 in J. G. Fichte’s *Foundation of Natural Law* and has, via its Hegelian adaptation, been developed into a modern social theory by Axel Honneth and others [29,30].

¹⁵ Most of our experiences feed to a large extent on autopoietic information. The more complex the neuronal architecture is in the animal kingdom, the more importance is put on internal computations, i.e., more areas of the brain process information that is initiated within the brain itself, while relatively little energy is expended on processing sensory data.

¹⁶ There is, of course, also the possibility that sensoric deprivation, due to biological or social irregularities or catastrophes, can lead to insufficient formations of empathetic capacities (such as Autism, Asperger Syndrome, or sociopathic behavior).

¹⁷ Theodor Lipps’ strategies to link aesthetics and empathy in a comprehensive (phenomenological and psychological) model are, in this context, still of interest today [32–34]. For narrative settings of cultures of empathy cf. [35].

only propose a rather simple idea borrowed from the historical fundus of literary culture that brings us back to the first part of this essay.

It seems to be no coincidence that popular genres that developed around aesthetics of empathy, such as sentimental comedies and bourgeois tragedies (prevalent in today's mass media), tend to accompany the economic, ethical, and political aspirations of an emerging bourgeoisie. It is certainly no historical accident that at the height of enlightened cosmopolitanism (within the confines of colonialism and anti-colonial counter thought) an elaborated cultural theory took center stage that was directed at recognizing and empathizing with the human in foreign cultural settings via aesthetic immersion.¹⁸ I believe that this aspect of the Enlightenment project—a kind of sympathetic sense for recognizing cultural difference that relies, in the end, on the assumption of and trust in a common humanity—must itself be understood as a cultural achievement, from which we feed to this day. In that sense, it remains indispensable that we keep in mind that the priority of aesthetic empathy within the Enlightenment project and the discovery of the humanity of difference are not understood, when we ignore their political foundations and conditions. Kant's first 'definitive article' in his essay *On Perpetual Peace* is also in this sense as true as it ever was.

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¹⁸ The hypothesis cannot entirely be dismissed that the cultural evolution of empathetic formations was, in various historical periods, bound to transcultural (cosmopolitical) ideas of humanity; in which case the formation of empathy and transculturality can be understood as a reciprocal relation.

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