

*Contributi/3*

## «Paradise of Childhood»

### Herder's Theory of Memory between Plato and Leibniz

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This article examines J. G. Herder's original doctrine of memory, as expressed in *Über die Seelenwanderung* (1782), where the author questioned the link between the theory of transmigration of souls and mnemonic processes. The first part of the paper focuses on the premises underlying Herder's reflection on memory by means of an analysis of his early writings (such as the manuscript, written around 1767, known as *Plato sagte*) concerning Plato's theory of recollection as interpreted by modern philosophers including Leibniz and Mendelssohn. These latter thinkers reappraise Plato's theory of recollection, and 'correct' certain errors, such as the theory of a previous life in the hyperuranion as a premise of true knowledge. Herder reconsiders both Plato's and Leibniz's doctrines of recollection, attempting to eliminate their metaphysical implications and explain memory from a more anthropological and psychological perspective.

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#### Introduction

In the final part of *The Education of the Human Race* (*Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, 1780), Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) posed a series of challenging questions concerning the possibility of human beings returning to earth several times after their death<sup>1</sup>. While ancient philosophers had hypothesised that a soul might come back after death and live many subsequent lives, this idea appeared naïve, if not absurd, to modern thinkers in the eighteenth century<sup>2</sup>. Provocatively, Lessing insisted on the necessity of «acquir[ing] new knowledge and new accomplishments» in a second life, due to the impossibility of accomplishing everything within a single lifetime<sup>3</sup>. These questions led to an additional problem regarding the continuity between a

<sup>1</sup> G. E. Lessing, *The Education of the Human Race*, in *Philosophical and Theological Writings*, edited by H. B. Nisbet, Cambridge 2005, pp. 217-240: 239, § 94.

<sup>2</sup> Ivi, p. 239, § 95: «Is this hypothesis so ridiculous just because it is the oldest one?».

<sup>3</sup> Ivi, p. 240, § 98.

previous and a subsequent life – the crucial problem, that is, of the preservation of individual memory, which modern philosophers were unable to avoid. Perhaps, reflected Lessing, the reason we are not aware of our past lives is due to the fact that we do not remember that, as he put it, «I have been here before», and that the «memory of my previous states» has been provisionally or permanently erased<sup>4</sup>.

The issues raised by Lessing in his famous work initiated a broad debate in Germany at the beginning of the 1780s. Immediately after *The Education of the Human Race*, Johann Georg Schlosser published a dialogue in response to Lessing's provocations entitled *Über die Seelen-wanderung*, 1781. As noted by Robert T. Clark, Schlosser defended the idea of the transmigration of the soul via a «theory of progressive movement of human souls, from the most unmoral to the most moral plane»<sup>5</sup>. An additional handling of the topic, written specifically in response to Schlosser, was Johann Gottfried Herder's *On the transmigration of souls (Über die Seelenwanderung*, 1782), a collection of three dialogues published in Wieland's periodical *Teutsche Merkur*<sup>6</sup>. The link between the theory of transmigration of souls and the mnemonic process plays a central role in Herder's response to Lessing's and Schlosser's writings, making the case once again for the study of 'modern' reinterpretations of ancient philosophical thought. In particular, the *Seelenwanderung* dialogue expresses Herder's highly original stance on memory, which arises from his bringing together of ancient (Plato) and modern (Leibniz, Mendelssohn) thought, with the purpose of selecting arguments he viewed as valid and discarding what was ill-founded or unacceptable (namely, the metaphysical premises that lay the foundations for the recollection theories of Plato and Leibniz). This paper investigates how Herder comes both to formulate an original theory of recollection and to affirm the role of memory for the formation of the self, by means of an analysis extending from his early writings (1767, where a connection between memory and childhood is first established) up to the dialogue on transmigration of souls (1782), and taking into account his critique of ancient and modern philosophies<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Ivi, p. 240, § 99.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. R. T. Clark, *Herder. His Life and Thought*, Berkeley 1955, p. 286.

<sup>6</sup> Herder referred to Lessing in several of his works before finally opening his treatise *J. G. Herder, Palingenesis: On Return of Human Souls (Palingenesis: Vom Wiederkommen menschlicher Seelen*, 1797) with a quotation of the final seven paragraphs of *The Education of the Human Race* and continuing Lessing's investigation. Cf. J. G. Herder, *Werke. In zehn Bände* (from now on *FHA*), edited by J. Brummack and M. Bollacher, Frankfurt am Main 1994, VIII, pp. 257–258. During the same year, Schlosser published a second dialogue in response to Herder's. On the notion of 'palingenesis' see also K. Barry, *Natural Palingenesis: Childhood, Memory, and Self-experience in Herder and Jean Paul*, «Goethe Yearbook», XIV, 2007, pp. 1-25.

<sup>7</sup> One of the very few studies on Herder's theory of memory is R. Simon, *Das Gedächtnis der Interpretation: Gedächtnistheorie als Fundament für Hermeneutik, Ästhetik und Interpretation bei Johann Gottfried Herder*, Hamburg 1998. Simon, however, considers the problem from a different point of view (the importance of Herder's theory of memory for his hermeneutics and his aesthetics), and does not focus on the importance of childhood and the notion of 'thinking in images' which represents, as I seek to show, the core of Herder's recollection theory. As far as I know there are no other studies that take into account the relation between Herder and Plato,

## 1. «Plato said...»: Knowledge As Recollection

In one of his earliest manuscripts, written around 1767, Herder stated: «Plato said that our learning is merely recollection, and Moses (in his *Preisschrift*) explained in Wolffian terms how this statement could be possible, how thought is the innermost capacity of the soul, and how the soul represents the whole world in a single thought»<sup>8</sup>. The core of Herder's interest, at the moment he was working on the manuscript, was not Plato, but Moses Mendelssohn and his *On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences* (*Abhandlung über die Evidenz in Metaphysischen Wissenschaften*, 1763). Mendelssohn begins his treatise with a discussion of the infallibility (*Untrüglichkeit*) of mathematical knowledge by recourse to the ancient notion of «undeniable truths» (*unleugbare Wahrheiten*)<sup>9</sup>. Referring to Plato's *Meno* and its argumentation on mathematical knowledge in the *Meno*, he writes:

[...] it is still inconceivable how this infinite amount of concepts can be drummed into the soul all at once by a momentary intuiting. To eliminate this difficulty, Plato hits upon a strange idea: our soul has previously, in some other state, learned and come to know everything that it experiences in this life, and sensuous impressions are only the occasions or the opportunities for the soul to recall what was forgotten<sup>10</sup>.

Here, Mendelssohn aligns Plato's theory of recollection with a «certain mystical doctrine of oriental wise men who likewise maintain that the soul has grasped the entire world prior to this life but then forgot everything when it entered this world»<sup>11</sup>. This ancient Eastern doctrine influenced both Pythagoreans and Platonists, but sounded unnatural to the ears of a modern philosopher. However, Mendelssohn recognized that the doctrine contained some truth, and that certain modern philosophers, beginning with Leibniz, appreciated its value:

Moderns have, in fact, retained it and even introduced it into their system; they have merely removed the mystical aspect that lends it so absurd an appearance. They say that, since the power of representation constitutes the essence and the inner possibility of the soul, a soul that is present and has absolutely no representations is an obvious

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or Herder and Leibniz, from the point of view of their recollection theory. For Herder's doctrine of individual and collective memory, see also a recent study of mine, L. Follesa, *Learning and Vision: Johann Gottfried Herder on Memory*, «Essays in Philosophy», ed. by I. O'Loughlin and S. Robins, XIX, 2018, pp. 1-17.

<sup>8</sup> See M. Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus: Untersuchungen zur Erkenntnistheorie des jungen Herder (1763–1778)*, Hamburg 1994, pp. 41-79 and pp. 175-182. Cf. at p. 175: «Plato sagte, dass unsern Lernen bloß Erinnerung sei und Moses (in seiner *Preisschrift*) bestimmt nach der Wolfschen Terminologie, wie dieser Satz möglich sey, wie das Denken die innere Möglichkeit der Seele sey, und diese sich in einem Gedanken die ganze Welt vorstellt, implicit – explicit einen Theil der Welt nach der Lage».

<sup>9</sup> M. Mendelssohn, *On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences*, in *Philosophical Writings*, edited by D. O. Dahlstrom, Cambridge 1997, repr. 2016, pp. 251-306: 254.

<sup>10</sup> Ivi, p. 259.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

contradiction. For it is as little possible for a power to exist without having an effect as it is for a triangle to have four sides<sup>12</sup>.

According to Herder, Mendelssohn's *On Evidence* was strongly influenced both by Christian Wolff's system of thought and terminology, and by Leibniz, whose writings, for Mendelssohn, went beyond Wolff's perspective<sup>13</sup>. In Leibniz's *Discourse of Metaphysics* (*Discours de métaphysique*, 1686) there is indeed a similar statement concerning the author's desire to 'cleanse' the Platonic doctrine of recollection of 'errors' deriving from the theory of a pre-existence of the soul:

This is what Plato has excellently brought out in his doctrine of reminiscence, a doctrine that contains a great deal of truth provided that is properly understood and purged of the error of the pre-existence, and provided that one does not conceive of the soul as having already known and thought at some other time what it learns and thinks now<sup>14</sup>.

Both Leibniz and Mendelssohn accepted the theory of reminiscence as worthy of note, although they considered the Platonic theory of pre-existence as mistaken (Leibniz) and absurd (Mendelssohn). Leibniz criticised this doctrine as lacking in foundation and even being self-contradictory<sup>15</sup>. Aside from this 'error', Leibniz was entirely in agreement with Plato concerning the idea that a (true) knowledge could not derive from sensitivity. Our learning, according to Leibniz, stems from what is already within us:

This position [the Platonic one] is in accord with my principles that naturally nothing enters into our minds from outside. It is a bad habit we have of thinking as though our minds received certain messages, as it were, or as if they had doors or windows. We have in our minds all those forms for all periods of time because the mind at every moment expresses all its future thoughts and already thinks confusedly of everything that it will ever think distinctly. Nothing can be taught us of which we have not already in our minds the idea. This idea is, as it were, the material out of which the thought will form itself<sup>16</sup>.

As Heinz observed, the manuscript *Plato sagte* attests to Herder's first acquaintance (*Aneignung*) with Leibnizian thought, albeit mediated through

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<sup>12</sup> M. Mendelssohn, *On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences*, cit., p. 259.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. A. Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohns Frühschriften zu Metaphysik*, Tübingen 1969, p. 272; M. Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, cit., p. 45.

<sup>14</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, in *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Writings*, edited by P. Loptson, Peterborough 2012, pp. 57-101: 87.

<sup>15</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophische Werke in vier Bänden*, edited by E. Cassirer, Hamburg 1996, III, p. 41: «Meinung ist ohne Grund, und es ist leicht einzusehen, daß die Seele (ihre Präexistenz einmal vorausgesetzt) schon in ihrem früheren Zustand, so weit er auch zurückliegen möge, ganz wie jetzt eingeborene Erkenntnisse besessen haben muß, die sich also selbst wieder aus einem noch früheren Zustand herschreiben müßten, dem sie schließlich eingeboren oder wenigstens mit anerschaffen sein würden».

<sup>16</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, cit., p. 87.

his reading of Mendelssohn's *On Evidence*<sup>17</sup>. It is worth noting, however, that Herder's statements on Plato's recollection at the beginning of the manuscript («Plato sagte, dass unser Lernen bloß Erinnerung sey») are similar not only to Mendelssohn's in *On Evidence*, but also to Leibniz's pronouncements in his *Nouveaux Essais*, a work which appeared only posthumously in 1765<sup>18</sup>. Mendelssohn, who might well have had Leibniz's words in mind, makes the point slightly differently:

Plato relates the story of this episode to conclude from it that our learning is nothing but a remembering. For Socrates, indeed, imparted nothing new to the boy and taught him profound truths merely by arousing his attention or, as Plato calls it, his *power of remembering*. This means, in the language of modern philosophers, that no new concepts enter into the soul through learning that were not supposed to have been in it already<sup>19</sup>.

It is difficult here to ascertain whether Herder had been directly inspired by Leibniz's *Essays* or indirectly by Mendelssohn<sup>20</sup>. Like Mendelssohn, Herder replaced the word «knowledge» (*Erkenntnisse*) with the word «learning» (*Lernen*), which may well indicate the influence of Mendelssohn's writing.

However, Leibniz's desire to 'cleanse' Plato's doctrine of recollection and eliminate its erroneous reliance on the theory of the pre-existence of the soul had a relevance, since Leibniz occupied an intermediate position between Plato's theory of reminiscence and its re-interpretation by Herder. According to Leibniz, the soul is already in possession of all the knowledge acquirable in its lifetime and comes into being endowed with innate ideas, although it does not perceive them clearly. A kind of 'memory' of the whole universe is contained within each monad – a memory, that is, which exists only as a potential, since the monad does not completely and clearly perceive it as it is.

Where do these innate ideas (or memories) come from? According to Plato, they are born out of the contemplation of pure ideas and essences in the hyperuranion: Leibniz, however, deemed this explanation unsatisfying, affirming instead that souls, or monads, are eternal and eternally in God – the real source of all knowledge. Each monad is a mirror of God, and each in itself mirrors the

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<sup>17</sup> See footnote 103 in M Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, cit., p. 24.

<sup>18</sup> Leibniz's *Nouveaux Essais* were written in 1704, but published later by R. E. Raspe in 1765. Hamann informed Herder of the publication of this work in a letter dated 21 January 1765. According to B. M. Dreike, this fact does not prove that Herder had already begun reading this or other of Leibniz's works by 1765; she argues, instead, that the first direct reading of Leibniz by Herder was not until 1769, when he wrote *Wahrheiten über Leibniz*, containing quotations from the *New Essays* and from *Über Leibniz Grundsätze von der Natur und Gnade*. Cf. B. M. Dreike, *Herders Naturauffassung in ihrer Beeinflussung durch Leibniz' Philosophie*, Wiesbaden 1973, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> M. Mendelssohn, *On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences*, cit., p. 258.

<sup>20</sup> Herder declared, in his later works, that he had read Leibniz during his time in Königsberg. Cf. B. M. Dreike, *Herders Naturauffassung*, cit., pp. 9-10, and M. Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, cit., p. 49.



whole universe; it is through this activity of reflection or representation that all knowledge is possible within each soul, having been contained within it since the very beginning of time<sup>21</sup>. Once the Platonic theory of recollection has been ‘purged’ from the metaphysical idea of a pre-existence in another world, what remains is the idea that knowledge derives neither from the hyperuranion nor from experience, but from the innermost representational activity of the soul – from, that is, a kind of inner memory of which the soul is not completely aware. Moreover, the soul is independent of the body and of sensitivity; any cooperation between body and soul depends on a pre-established harmony that has existed in God since eternity, and no exchange between monads takes place. In *On Evidence*, Mendelssohn alludes to these arguments and, following Leibniz, refutes the idea that all knowledge of mathematical truths depends on the contemplation of mathematical ideas or forms existing in a separate hyperuranion world.

## 2. The «Obscure Abyss» of the Soul: Herder and Leibniz

Almost a decade after the manuscript *Plato sagte*, Herder published a treatise *On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul* (*Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seelen*, 1778) investigating the relationship between the soul and corporeality<sup>22</sup>. In this treatise, he expounds on the role of sensitivity in the cognitive process and describes the body as a direct manifestation of the innermost forces of the soul. The body, moreover, is seen as contributing to the development (*Bildung*) of the soul itself. The human soul, defined as an «interior man», is simultaneously one and many, both a unitary force and an ensemble of forces. These forces are connected by an invisible bond and act in unison, even when we are not aware of them. Remaining, in part, «obscure» and inaccessible, a «deep abyss» is formed by the ensemble of forces that, though imperceptible, plays a pivotal role in the development of personality<sup>23</sup>. Herder considers this obscure abyss the most fundamental source of all spiritual activity and the basis for all knowledge, since it derives from a mutual cooperation between the internal and external realms of the organism.

Based on such premises, Herder’s theory of knowledge stands in clear contrast to that of both Plato and Leibniz. For Herder, human knowledge is based on an interaction between inner forces and external perception, between soul and body – an idea that both Plato and Leibniz reject, along with any possibility that sensitivity could provide true or precise knowledge.

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<sup>21</sup> See G. W. Leibniz, *Monadology*, in *Discourse on Metaphysics and Other Writings*, cit., pp. 115–134, esp. §§ 83–84 on the soul as mirror or copy of Deity, pp. 132–133, as well as *The Principles of Nature and of Grace, Based on Reason*, in *ivi*, pp. 103–113, esp. §§ 14–15, pp. 111–112.

<sup>22</sup> Three versions of the work were edited by Herder. The first was the *Preisschrift*, presented in 1773 to the Berlin Academy. Under consideration here is the third, modified edition, published in 1778 in Riga by Hartknoch under the title *Vom Erkennen und Empfinden der menschlichen Seelen*.

<sup>23</sup> J. G. Herder, *On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*, in *Philosophical Writings*, edited by M. N. Forster, Cambridge 2004, pp. 187–243: 195–196.

Herder's model of knowledge sought to mediate between Platonic or Leibnitian theories of innate knowledge on the one hand, and empiricist doctrines of the mind as a *tabula rasa*, as described by Aristotle or John Locke, on the other. At one level, Herder remains in agreement with Leibniz, who declared: «Aristotle preferred to compare our souls to blank tables prepared for writing, and he maintained that nothing is in the understanding that does not come through the senses» (according to Leibniz, Plato was more profound than Aristotle, whose ideas merely revived certain «popular conceptions»)<sup>24</sup>. Herder similarly criticises Locke's definition in his *Essay on Being (Versuch über das Seyn, 1762)* of the soul as a *tabula rasa*<sup>25</sup>. Herder, however, eliminates any conflict between innate ideas and sensible knowledge. Experience, in his view, is necessary for the soul, as it helps to clarify the inner representations and to create new knowledge. Without any sensual experience, and without memory and habit that rely on it, we would not be able to perceive – that is, give a determinate form to – our obscure representations<sup>26</sup>.

The reference to the Leibnitian-Wolffian tradition is unavoidable here for Herder, especially regarding the notion of «representation» (*Vorstellung*). «Obscure» and «confused» representations within the human soul are indeed one of the most salient concepts in Leibniz's theory of mind. Herder had Leibniz in mind when in 1778 he described the activity of the soul as a 'representational force', and 'representations' as the effects of this force<sup>27</sup>. However, he also refers ironically to a «bright and clear philosophy» – namely, rational philosophy from Leibniz to Baumgarten – that, haunted by «obscure forces», offers little beyond a «few empty words and classifications about *obscure* and *clear*, *distinct* and *confused* ideas»<sup>28</sup>. According to Herder, empty words and void concepts emerge when the forces of the soul (sensibility, imagination, memory, foresight, poetic talent, self-knowledge, and apperception) are considered as separate entities. To him, they act in mutual cooperation, and are all required for knowledge. For Herder, Leibniz failed to recognise the role of perception and that of the so-called «lower forces» of the soul (imagination, dreams, memory) in both the cognitive process and the attendant development of human identity<sup>29</sup>. His re-evaluation of the «lower forces» of the soul – in particular, the sensitive character of memory – determines Herder's specific understanding of knowledge, which goes beyond

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<sup>24</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Discourse on Metaphysics*, cit., p. 88.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. B. M. Dreike, *Herders Naturauffassung*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Heinz states that Herder may have derived his idea of *Gewohnheit* from Hume, although it is also found in the *Nouveaux Essais* of Leibniz. See M. Heinz, *Sensualistischer Idealismus*, cit., p. 180.

<sup>27</sup> J. G. Herder, *On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*, cit., p. 195. For the relationship between Herder and Leibniz, especially concerning the notion of representational force and the mind-body relation, see also J. G. Herder, *Über Leibnizens Grundsätze von der Natur und Gnade* (1769), which has been examined by N. DeSouza, *Leibniz in the Eighteenth century: Herder's critical reflections on the Principles de la nature et de la grace*, «British Journal for the History of Philosophy», XX, 2012, pp. 1-23.

<sup>28</sup> J. G. Herder, *On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*, cit., p. 196.

<sup>29</sup> *Ivi*, p. 210.

mere rationalism or empiricism. It deals with the metaphysical problem of the relationship between body and soul, to which Herder attempted to provide a non-metaphysical answer, that is, to realise all issues connected to the soul, with knowledge, to memory, to identity from an anthropological perspective. His approach began by refuting Leibniz's doctrine of a pre-established harmony.

In his *Monadology*, Leibniz posits the absolute identity of souls and bodies from a metaphysical point of view; comprised of one and only one substance – namely, monads – they differ only from the point of view of their inner activity of representation<sup>30</sup>. Since bodies are the aggregates of innumerable monads, their inner activities remain unclear, obscure and confused. Each single monad is unable to communicate with the others (they have no doors or windows, as Leibniz famously puts it); interaction between soul and body is therefore impossible<sup>31</sup>. Any originary accordance between them (pre-established harmony) can only be guaranteed by God<sup>32</sup> according to a principle of convenience or design<sup>33</sup>. This so-called pre-established harmony confers a metaphysical unity and stability both to the universe as a whole, as well as to a single organism<sup>34</sup>.

According to Herder, however, this explanation remains unsatisfactory, since it does not address the problem from an anthropological point of view. For, given that the human soul has no existence prior to its relationship with its body, the body and soul must therefore originate as a single substance. Herder considers the soul as a sum of forces (it cannot be spoken of as a 'metaphysical' substance in and of itself) and the body as nothing but a physical and tangible manifestation of those forces. As such, it cannot be said to exist independently, as it forms a unity with the soul: there is no force without formations, no body without an inner principle. Every inner change is accompanied by an exterior change – not by virtue of a pre-established agreement, but as a consequence of a mutual interaction. Despite this important disagreement, Herder nevertheless makes use of Leibniz's definition of the soul as a «representative force», which becomes fundamental for his understanding of both the body and its relationship with the mind. Herder places great value on Leibnizian thought, while avoiding all the metaphysical presuppositions of his doctrine of the monads (*Monadologie*): «The system of pre-established harmony», he affirms, «ought to have been alien to the great inventor of the monad-poem, for, it seems to me, the two do not hold well together»<sup>35</sup>.

Herder's ironic attitude towards Leibnizian pre-established harmony is reiterated in 1778 in his *On Cognition and Sensation*, in which he again criticises the theory of a pre-existence of the soul:

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<sup>30</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, edited by C. J. Gerhardt, Hildesheim - New York 1978, VI, p. 608, §§ 8-9, 11.

<sup>31</sup> Ivi, p. 607, §§ 1-7.

<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p. 613, § 40.

<sup>33</sup> Ivi, p. 614, § 46.

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, p. 620, § 78.

<sup>35</sup> J. G. Herder, *On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*, cit., p. 195.



They [namely, the souls] lay formed in the moon, in limbo, and waited, doubtless naked and cold, for their pre-established sheaths, or clocks, or clothes, the not-yet-formed bodies: now the housing, garment, clock is ready, and the poor, so-long-idle inhabitant gets added to it mechanically, that he may – by the body!, not affect it, but only in pre-established harmony with it spin thoughts out of himself, just as he spun them there in limbo too, and that it, the clock of the body, may strike in agreement with him<sup>36</sup>.

Herder refers to the famous image of the clock used by Leibniz in, for instance, the *Principles of Nature and of Grace*, where he argues that the organic body «forms a sort of automaton or natural machine, which is a machine not only in its entirety, but also in its smallest perceptible parts»<sup>37</sup>. In *Essai de Theodicee* (*Essay of Theodicy*, 1710), too, Leibniz defines the soul as a kind of «spiritual automaton» (*automate spirituel*)<sup>38</sup>.

According to Herder, metaphysical theories such as the Platonic doctrine of a pre-existence in the hyperuranion or the Leibnizian theory of pre-established harmony do not solve body-soul dualism and are not able to explain the real complexity that characterises human beings.

### 3. Recollection and Childhood: Herder Beyond Plato

So far, I have been considering Herder's stance towards both Plato's and, especially, Leibniz's metaphysics in order to explain his efforts to provide, at the beginning of the first *Seelenwanderung* dialogue, a new interpretation of the theory of reminiscence and memory. Herder did not, however, reject metaphysical discourses outright; on the contrary, he tried, especially in his early writings, to distinguish the ways in which philosophers had been able to describe human nature in its deep complexity and address problems related to knowledge, memory, and identity. At the beginning of the *Seelenwanderung*, he considers three different models of the doctrine of metempsychosis, defined according to the means by which the reincarnation process develops: an 'ascending' metempsychosis, described as «the refining of lower germs of life into higher; as if, for example, the soul of a plant should become an animal, the soul of an animal a man»; a 'descending' metempsychosis, namely «the Brahminical hypothesis; that good men are rewarded by being changed into cows, sheep, and white elephants, and the wicked punished by becoming tigers and swine»; and a 'circular' metempsychosis – the idea, that is, of an eternal return. Herder's

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<sup>36</sup> Ivi, p. 193, Cf. Herder, *FHA*, IV, p. 336: «Sie lagen geformt im Monde, im Limbus und warteten, ohne Zweifel nackt und kalt, auf ihre prästabilierte Scheiden, oder Uhren, oder Kleider, die noch ungebildeten Leiber; nun ist Gehäuse, Kleid, Uhr fertig und der arme, so lang müßige Einwohner, wird mechanisch hinzugeführt, daß er – bei Leibe! Nicht in sie würke, sondern nur mit ihr prästabiliert harmonisch, Gedanken aus sich spinne, wie er sie auch dort im Limbus spann, und sie, die Uhr des Körpers, ihm gleich schlage».

<sup>37</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *The Principles of Nature and of Grace*, cit., pp. 105-106.

<sup>38</sup> G. W. Leibniz, *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*, cit., p. 131.

arguments against the second and the third form of metempsychosis are essentially based on the assumption that only the first kind of metempsychosis is valid – or, at least, feasible – since it can be observed in natural processes. As Theages states in the dialogue: «if the upward course is the law of Nature with all living things, then nothing can move backward or in a perpetual circle»<sup>39</sup>. The discussion of the transmigration of the soul contains allusions to the Pythagorean doctrine of recollection, since it is based on the idea that a human being may live on this earth more than once. The Platonic version of this idea, in dialogues such as *Phaedo* or *Meno*, is essentially held as proof of the theory of the immortality of the soul.

In *Seelenwanderung*, Herder gives the doctrine of recollection a new, psychological meaning considered neither in Pythagorean nor Platonic philosophy. In *Phaedo*, we read that «learning is really just recollection», and again, in *Meno* 81 d, that «seeking and learning are in fact nothing but recollection»<sup>40</sup>. This is possible, explains Cebes in *Phaedo* 72 e, because we recollect what «we must have learned at some time before, which is impossible unless our souls existed somewhere before they entered this human shape»; thus, he concludes, «it seems likely that the soul is immortal»<sup>41</sup>. From a Platonic point of view, therefore, the soul can be summarised as immortal, existing before and after the body, and capable of learning (or contemplating) the truth in a previous life; knowledge, in contrast, requires a ‘human shape’, a body – a kind of vehicle of transmission between the material world and the intelligible forms. This last element is key to understanding Herder’s rethinking of the Platonic doctrine.

In another relevant passage in Plato’s *Phaedo* 73, recollection appears only possible by means of an ‘association’ of images and feelings – a non-rational, non-logical form of thought, equated with a kind of ‘sensible thinking’ or ‘thinking in images’. It belongs, according to Platonic criteria, to a ‘lower’ level of thinking and knowing linked to sensitivity, to the passionate, non-rational soul: «What happens to lovers when they see a musical instrument or a piece of clothing or any other private property of the person whom they love, when they recognize the thing, their minds conjure a picture of its own. This is recollection»<sup>42</sup>. In this sense, recollection resembles a state of dreaming. Yet, at the same time, it

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<sup>39</sup> J. G. Herder, *Metempsychosis*, in *Prose Writers of Germany*, edited by F. H. Hedge, Philadelphia 1852, pp. 348-262: 248. Cf. Herder, *FHA*, IV, p. 427: «Wir müssen uns erst erklären, was die Seelenwanderung sei? Es gibt eine *von unten herauf*; Eine andre *von oben hinab, rückwärts*, eine dritte geht wie das blinde Mühlenpferd, in *die Runde umher* [...] Die *von unten hinauf* ist, wenn etwa niedrigere Keime von Leben zu höhern verfeinert werden, wenn z. E. die Seele der Pflanze Tier, die Seele des Tiers Mensch würde u. s. f. *Von oben hinab rückwärts*, ist die Braminen-Hypothese: daß gute Menschen zur Belohnung, kühe, Schläfe und weiße Elephanten, die Bösen zur Strafe Tiger und Schweine werden. Die dritte *in die Runde umher*, ist – die in die Runde».

<sup>40</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 81 d, quoted from *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, edited by E. Hamilton and H. Cairns, Princeton: 1961. See also Plato, *Theaetetus*, 191 c – 196 c for a description of the functioning of memory.

<sup>41</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 72e.

<sup>42</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 73 d.

remains a fundamental step in the process of learning, despite offering no 'true' knowledge. In distinguishing between «true opinions» and real knowledge, Plato, in *Meno* 97 e – 98, defines «true opinions» as things that «do all sorts of good as long as they stay in their place». The problem with these kinds of truths is that «they will not stay long», because of their tendency to «run away from a man's mind». Their value, that is, is limited «until you tether them by working out the reason». Only when true beliefs are «tied down, [do] they become knowledge, and are stable»<sup>43</sup>.

It is this particular aspect that, along with the continual dream-like evocation of images, characterises the phenomenon of recollection – not only for Plato, but also in Herder's analysis. Indeed, Herder attempts to incorporate the Platonic theory of recollection within his own account, without necessarily accepting Plato's metaphysical theory of a pre-existence of the soul before its 'fall' into a body. Thus, in the first of Herder's dialogues on metempsychosis, Theages says to Charicles:

You are a true Pythagorean, my friend, and worthy to attain to the deepest well of bygone time (*Vorzeit*); yes! to the original fountain of truth itself, if men ever arrive there. I will freely confess to you, that those sweet dreams of memory are known to me also, among the experiences of my childhood and youth. I have been in places and circumstances of which I could have sworn that I had been in them before. I have seen persons with whom I seemed to have lived before; with whom I was, as it were, on the footing of an old acquaintance<sup>44</sup>.

This sense of having already been somewhere or having already met someone appears to require, for both Plato as well as Herder, a «prior state» («*vorigen Zustand*») out of which the images of the recollection can be said to arise. The core of Herder's argument is aimed at accounting for such a state in non-metaphysical terms. Theages, channelling the author's ideas on the topic, argues that this remembrance does not belong to a life beyond this one on earth, nor to another body. For if it did, we would not be able to remember anything; memories and mental images are, after all, necessarily connected to life experiences, perception and the body. Passing from one body to another, they could not be maintained, and would surely disappear.

The presence of a body is, for Herder, an essential requirement for having «a memory of a corporeal object», and the soul alone, deprived of a body, is

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<sup>43</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 97 e – 98 a.

<sup>44</sup> J. G. Herder, *Metempsychosis*, cit., p. 250 (I made here a slight modification of the English translation provided by Hedge). Cf. Herder, *FHA*, IV, p. 434: «Sie sind ein wahrer Pythagoräer, mein Freund, und würdig, daß Sie bis zum tiefsten Brunnen der Vorzeit, ja bis zum Urquell der Wahrheit kämen, wenn Menschen dahin kommen können. Ich gestehe Ihnen frei: auch mir sind dergleichen süße Träume der Rückerinnerung aus meiner Kindheit und Jugend bekannt. Ich kam in Örter und Umstände, wo ich hätte schwören mögen, schon gewesen zu sein: ich sah Personen, wo es mich dünkte, mit ihnen gelebt zu haben gegen die ich gleichsam auf alte Bekanntschaft fußte».

incapable of holding on to any recollection. This memory – says Theages – remains in the «waves of the river Lethe, and could never come back in another body»<sup>45</sup>.

How, then, from a different perspective, might that «deep abyss of Platonic recollection» be explained?<sup>46</sup> If this ‘acquaintance’ does not originate, as it did for Plato, in a previous life, nor can be understood, following Leibniz, as innate knowledge granted to the soul in agreement with a pre-established harmony, then how can it be accounted for? If we are indeed able to remember what we have already experienced, where does this prior experience come from? For Herder, the answer is clear: recollection comes from our childhood, which he describes as a dreamy world made up of images and often confused, non-rational, associative thoughts.

This idea was not new for Herder, who had already expressed it in his manuscript *Plato sagte* (sections 2.6 and 2.7), in which he refers to ‘first ideas’ that remain in our soul for our entire lifetime and to first impressions (*Anstöße*) that influence the development of our personality<sup>47</sup>. Again, in *Vierte kritische Wäldchen*, written in 1769, Herder takes up various themes from the earlier manuscripts, referring once again to childhood, memory, learning and the construction of the self:

The soul leaves the state in which everything was to it mere sensation; it gets accustomed to recognizing one thing before another by virtue of its ‘inner clarity’; it finds itself on the obscure path leading toward *fancy* and *memory*. [...] A child will still frequently confuse this distinction, for only through much practice does he achieve certainty; but this certainty lasts forever, and with that the first mighty, eternal forms of memory and fancy have emerged<sup>48</sup>.

Concerning the parallels between childhood and the state of dreaming, he explains that «often a child cannot distinguish between dreams and waking images» because «he dreams while he is awake», and a dream «permeated with images continues»<sup>49</sup>.

Certain passages in *Seelenwandlung* reiterate what had already been made clear in *On Cognition and Sensation* – the crucial role assigned to imagination, memory and perceptions within Herder’s theory of knowledge. Moreover, they

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<sup>45</sup> J. G. Herder, *Metempsychosis*, cit., p. 250. Cf. Herder, *FHA*, IV, p. 434. Since part of the text is missing in the English translation, the original passage is quoted here: «Wäre die Erfahrung in diesem geschehen, so wäre di Erinnerung körperlicher Gegenstände, auch wahrlich in einer Welle des Stroms Lethe geblieben, und käme uns jetzt nicht in einem andern Körper wieder».

<sup>46</sup> J. G. Herder, *On Cognition and Sensation of the Human Soul*, cit., p. 197. Cf. Herder, *FHA*, IV, p. 341: «In den tiefen Abgrund Platonischer Erinnerung».

<sup>47</sup> I would like to thank here N. DeSouza for his precious suggestions concerning Herder’s early manuscript, *Plato sagte*, an English translation of which will be shortly published by DeSouza for Cambridge University Press.

<sup>48</sup> J. G. Herder, *Critical Forests: Fourth Grove*, in *Selected Writings on Aesthetics*, ed. by G. Moore, Princeton-Oxford 2006, p. 196.

<sup>49</sup> Ivi, p. 197.

confirm the attentiveness with which Herder observes and describes children's behaviour, witnessed for instance, in Theages remarks in the dialogue:

Have you never watched yourself, and observed how the soul is always occupied in secret? How, especially, in childhood, it makes plans, combines thoughts, builds bridges, meditates romances, and repeats all this in dreams, with the magic colours of the dream-world? Look at that child playing and entertaining itself in silence. He talks with himself; he is in a dream made of vivid images. These images and thoughts will some time return to him, at a time when he does not expect it, and no longer remembers whence they are<sup>50</sup>.

This dreamy recollection, this world of images, which had already been noted by both Plato and Leibniz, is nothing but the result of our childhood experiences; it constitutes a deep and obscure – in other words, unconscious – source of our self. Although Plato considered recollection the foundation of our knowledge, his search for eternal truths and his refusal of experience did not allow him to confer much importance on childhood. Herder, in contrast, emphasised the role of childhood dreams and images as fundamental for the formation (*Bildung*) of human identity and personality. The crux of Herder's argument is that without childhood it would be impossible to know anything, to attain abstract or pure knowledge. This was already clear in the *Fourth Critical Forest*, where he maintains, elegantly and perhaps with an allusion to Plato's recollection, that:

Certain waking dreams that we experience in later life, when the soul is not yet spent – obscure recollection, as if we had already seen, experienced, and enjoyed the novel, rare, beautiful, or surprising qualities of a particular place, person, area, beauty, and so forth – are without doubt the patchwork of these earliest fancies. Such obscure ideas lie within us in their thousands; they constitute what is rare, peculiar, and often singular in our concepts and forms of beauty and pleasure; [...] they are the obscure ground within us that all too often modifies and shades the images and colours of our soul that are later laid down on it<sup>51</sup>.

What we might call a 'thinking in images', a sensible thinking that dominates the thought of children, is a necessary basis for rational-logical thought, which, moreover, plays a pivotal role in the formation of the self over the course of our lives. It is worth noting here that this pleasant 'dream-world' of infancy, defined by Herder as a «paradise», is not a 'lost world' to the adult that has disappeared forever, only to be recalled nostalgically. Rather, for Herder, it continues to exert

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<sup>50</sup> J. G. Herder, *Metempsychosis*, cit., p. 250 (again, English translation with small changes of my own). Cf. Herder, *FHA*, IV, pp. 434-435: «Haben Sie aber nicht auf sich Acht gegeben, wie sich die Seele immer in geheim beschäftigt: wie sie insonderheit in der Kindheit und Jugend Plane macht, Gedanken vereinigt, Brücken baut, Romane aussinnet, und im Traume alles mit Zauberfarben des Traums wiederholet? Sehen Sie jenes Kind stille spielen und sich mit sich unterhalten. Es spricht mit sich selbst: es ist in einem Traum lebhafter Bilder. Diese Bilder und Gedanken werden ihm einst *wiederkommen*, zu einer Zeit, wenn es sie nicht vermutet, und nicht mehr weiß, woher sie sind».

<sup>51</sup> J. G. Herder, *Critical Forests*, cit., p. 196 (engl. trans. with a small change).



an influence on the adult's life, returning naturally with all its imagery. In a passage of exquisite beauty, he concludes:

The situation will create a pleasant delusion, as every retrospect which brings agreeable images before the mind deludes us. It will be taken for an inspiration because it actually comes like an inspiration from another world; that is, rich in images and without pains. A single trait of the *present* picture will recall it; a single sound which now touches the soul, awakens all the slumbering tones of former times. These are moments of the sweetest rapture, especially in beautiful, wild, romantic spots, in moments of pleasant intercourse with persons who, with an agreeable illusion, unexpectedly create in us, or we in them, the feeling, as it were, of an earlier acquaintance: reminiscences of paradise, but not of a previous human life; the paradise, rather, of youth, of childhood, or of pleasant dreams which we dreamt either sleeping or waking, and which, in fact, are the true paradise<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup>J. G. Herder, *Metempsychosis*, cit., p. 250 (engl. transl. with slight changes of my own). Cf. Herder *FHA*, IV, p. 435: «Die Situation wird die Seele angenehm *täuschen*, wie jede leichte und Ideenbringende Zurückerinnerung täuscht: man wird sie für eine *Eingebung* ansehen, weil sie wirklich wie Eingebung aus einer andern Welt, d. i. reich an Bildern und ohne Mühe kommt. Ein *einzig*er Zug des jetzigen Gemäldes bringt sie: ein einziger Klang, der jetzt die Seele berührt, macht alle schlafende Töne aus ältern Zeiten beben. Das sind also Augenblicke der süßesten Schwärmerei insonderheit bei schönen, wilden Lustörtern, bei angenehmen Augenblicken des Umgangs mit Personen, die wir unvermutet und sanftgetäuscht *in uns* oder *uns in ihnen*, gleichsam aus einer frühern Bekanntschaft fühlen: Erinnerungen aus dem Paradiese aber nicht eines schon einmal genossenen Menschenlebens, sondern aus dem Paradiese der *Jugend*, der *Kindheit*, angenehmer *Träume*, die wir schlafend oder wachend träumten, und die ja eigentlich das wahre Paradies sind».