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978-0-521-81741-7 - Johann Georg Hamann: Writings on Philosophy and Language

Edited by Kenneth Haynes

Excerpt

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Writings on philosophy and language

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Socratic
Memorabilia

Collected
for the
Boredom¹ of the
Public by a
Lover of
Boredom

With
a Double Dedication
to Nobody and to Two

O curas hominum! o quantum est in rebus inane!
Quis leget haec? --- Min' tu istud ais?
Nemo hercule --Nemo? --
Vel DVO vel NEMO ---

Persius²

Amsterdam, 1759³

¹ That is, as a specific against boredom, “for whiling away the time.”

² Persius, *Satire* 1.1–3: “O the cares of mankind! the emptiness in things!” “Who will read these things?” “Are you talking to me? No one, by Hercules.” “No one?” “Either TWO or NO ONE.” (Hamann’s capitals).

³ The book was published in Königsberg; the fictitious place of publication seems to have been added at the whim of the publisher (permission for publication had been obtained from the government, and so there was no need to suppress the genuine location).

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To the Public,
or
Nobody, the Well-Known

— ὄδ' ὈΥΤΙΣ, ποῦ ὅστις; —

Euripides, *Κύκλωψ*⁴

You bear a name and need no proof of your existence, you find faith and do no miracles⁵ to earn it, you get honor and have neither concept nor feeling thereof. We know that there is no idol in the world.⁶ Neither are you human, yet you must be a human image which superstition has made a god. You lack nor eyes nor ears, which nonetheless do not see, do not hear;⁷ and the artificial eye you form, the artificial ear you plant,⁸ is like your own, blind and deaf. You must know everything, and you learn nothing;⁹ you must judge everything, and you understand nothing, ever learning,

^a Proverbs 9:13 [“A foolish woman is clamorous: she is simple, and knoweth nothing.”]

⁴ Euripides, *Cyclops* 675: “this No one, where is he?”

⁵ John 3:2: “Rabbi, we know that thou art a teacher come from God: for no man can do these miracles that thou doest, except God be with him.” Luther and Hamann have *Zeichen* (“signs”) for “miracles.”

⁶ Cf. 1 Corinthians 8:4: “we know that an idol is nothing in the world.”

⁷ Cf. Psalms 115:5–6, Jeremiah 5:21, Matthew 13:13.

⁸ Psalm 94:9: “He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? he that formed the eye, shall he not see?”

⁹ Proverbs 9:13 does not seem relevant; cf. Proverbs 14:7: “Go from the presence of a foolish man, when thou perceivest not in him the lips of knowledge.” For “perceivest not . . . the lips of knowledge” Luther and Hamann have *lernst nichts* (“learn nothing”).

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and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth,^b you are talking, or you are pursuing, you are on a journey, or peradventure you sleep,¹⁰ while your priests lift up their voice, and you should answer them and their mockery with fire.¹¹ Offerings are offered you every day, which others consume at your expense, in order that, on the grounds of your hearty meals, your existence seem probable.¹² For all your fastidiousness, you nonetheless welcome all, if only they do not appear before you empty.¹³ I throw myself, like the philosopher, at the hearing feet of a tyrant.¹⁴ My gift is in nothing but the lumps by which a god, like you, once burst in sunder.¹⁵ So let them be given to a pair of your worshipers, whom I wish to purge with these pills from devotion to your vanity.¹⁶

Because you wear the features of human ignorance and curiosity on your face, I will confess to you the identity of the two on whom I intend to perform, through your hands, this pious fraud. The first¹⁷ works on the philosopher's stone like a friend of mankind who views it as a means to promote industry, bourgeois virtues, and the welfare of the commonwealth. I wrote for him in the mystical language of a sophist, because wisdom will always be the most hidden secret of political economy, even if alchemy succeeds in its goal to make all men rich, who by means of the fertile maxims of the Marquis de Mirabeau¹⁸ must soon (!) populate

^b 2 Timothy 3:7 ["Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth"]

¹⁰ 1 Kings 18:27: "either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth." More literally, Hamann (following Luther) writes, "you are musing, have work to do, are afield, or perhaps asleep."

¹¹ In 1 Kings 18, Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to a contest. They and he each prepared a sacrifice, one to Baal and one to God, and each prayed for fire to consume the sacrifice.

¹² In *Bel and the Dragon* 1:3–22, Daniel exposes the fraud whereby the priests of Bel had convinced the king that Bel was a living god because he consumed so much food and wine every day.

¹³ Exodus 23:15: "none shall appear before me empty."

¹⁴ The philosopher Aristippus threw himself at the feet of the tyrant Dionysius. He defended himself by saying, "It is not I who am to blame, but Dionysius who has ears in his feet" (Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 2.8.79, tr. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library).

¹⁵ *Bel and the Dragon* 1:27: "Then Daniel took pitch, and fat, and hair, and did seethe them together, and made lumps thereof: this he put in the dragon's mouth, and so the dragon burst in sunder: and Daniel said, Lo, these are the gods ye worship."

¹⁶ The phrase "devotion to vanity" appears in a cantata by Bach, BWV 204; the libretto was adapted from poems by Christian Friedrich Hunold.

¹⁷ Johann Christoph Berens (1729–92), merchant in Riga, friend (and patron) of Hamann, and friend of Kant.

¹⁸ Victor de Riqueti, marquis de Mirabeau (1715–89), physiocrat and disciple of Quesnay, author of *L'Ami des hommes, ou, traité de la population* (1756–8; "The friend of mankind, or, treatise on population").

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France. According to today's plan of the world, the art of making gold remains, justly, the highest project and highest good of our statesmen.

The other¹⁹ would like to be as universal a philosopher and as good a Warden of the Mint as Newton was.²⁰ No aspect of critical analysis is more certain than that which has been devised for gold and silver. Therefore, the confusion in Germany's coinage cannot be as large as the confusion which has stolen into the textbooks that are quite ordinarily found among us. We are lacking accurate conversion tables to determine how much of the prescribed intrinsic value²¹ an idea must have if it is to pass as a truth, etc.^c

Since these lumps must not be chewed, but swallowed, like those the Cosmic family in Florence adopted on their coat of arms,²² they are not made for their taste. As far as their effects are concerned, it was because of a feeling similar to what they produce that Vespasian first learned to recognize the good fortune of your name and is said to have cried out on a stool that was not his throne: VTI PVTO, DEVS FIO!²³

c

ὦ Ζεῦ, τί δὴ χρυσοῦ μὲν ὄς κίβδηλος ἦ,
τεκμήρι' ἀνθρώποισιν ὄπασσας σαφῆ·
ἀνδρῶν δ' ὄτω χρή τὸν κακὸν διειδέναί
οὔδεις χαρακτήρ ἐμπέφυκε σώματι·
Euripides, *Medea*

[Euripides, *Medea* 516–19. “O Zeus, why, when you gave to men sure signs of gold that is counterfeit, is there no mark on the human body by which one could identify base men” (tr. Kovacs, Loeb Classical Library)].

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant.

²⁰ Isaac Newton became Master of the Mint in 1699, retaining the office until his death in 1727.

²¹ In German, “an Korn und Schrot.” *Korn* is the amount of precious metal in a coin (that is, its intrinsic value), and *Schrot* is the gross weight of a coin. Hamann plays on the expression “von echtem Schrot und Korn,” as in a man “of sterling qualities.”

²² The emblem of the Medici family (the political dynasty was founded by Cosimo) consisted of a number of red balls on a gold shield; these were variously interpreted, including as medicinal pills, an allusion to the family name, “doctors.”

²³ “I think I'm becoming a god.” Hamann's source is the Latin translation of Bacon's essay “On Death,” which conflates Vespasian's words (from Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars* 8.23) with the manner of his death (an attack of diarrhea, 8.24).

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To the Two

—σμικρὰ μὲν τάδ', ἀλλ' ὁμῶς
ἄ' ἔχω

Sophocles, in *Electra*²⁴

The public in Greece read the memorabilia of Aristotle on the natural history of animals, and Alexander understood them.²⁵ Where an ordinary reader may see nothing but mold, the feeling of friendship will perhaps reveal to you, gentlemen, a microscopic forest in these pages.

I have written about Socrates in a Socratic way. Analogy^d was the soul of his reasoning, and he gave it irony for a body. Let ignorance and confidence be as characteristic of me as they may; they must nonetheless be regarded here as aesthetic imitations.

In the works of Xenophon a superstitious devotion predominates, and in Plato's works, an enthusiast's devotion; a vein of similar feelings runs

^d "Analogy, man's surest guide below," Edward Young, *Night Thoughts* 6. [Edward Young (1683–1765) wrote his most famous work, the long poem *The Complaint, or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, and Immortality* in 1742–6; Hamann quotes from l. 734 of Night 6.]

²⁴ Sophocles, *Electra* 450: "They are small things but nonetheless that which I have."

²⁵ In chap. 7 of book 1 of the *Advancement of Learning* (1605), Francis Bacon writes that when Alexander the Great read Aristotle's books on nature, he wrote a letter to the philosopher "wherein he expostulateth with him for publishing the secrets or mysteries of philosophy." Hamann's source was Bacon's *De augmentis scientiarum* (1623); see p. 157 of vol. II of Bacon's *Works* (1857–74), ed. Spedding, Ellis, and Heath. Bacon's source was Plutarch's life of Alexander (7.4).

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therefore through all parts of this mimetic labor. The easiest thing here would have been for me to be more like the heathens in their frankness; I have had, however, to make the effort of lending my religion the veil which a patriotic St. John²⁶ and a platonic Shaftesbury²⁷ wove for their respective unbelief and misbelief.

Socrates, gentlemen, was no mean critic. In the works of Heraclitus he distinguished what he did not understand from what he did understand in them, and he made a very equitable and modest inference from the comprehensible to the incomprehensible.²⁸ On this occasion Socrates talked of readers who could swim.^c A confluence of ideas and feelings in that living elegy of the philosopher perhaps turned his sentences into a group of small islands which lack the bridges and ferries of method necessary for their close association.

As you are both my friends, your biased praise and your biased blame will be equally welcome to me. I am, etc.

^c “Atque hic tam docilis ad cetera, natare nesciit.” Suetonius, *Caligula*. [“And yet as varied as were his accomplishments, the man could not swim.” Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, 4.54, tr. Rolfe, Loeb Classical Library].

²⁶ Henry St. John, Viscount Bolingbroke (1678–1751), politician and author, published (privately) *The Idea of a Patriot King* and *A Letter on the Spirit of Patriotism* in 1739. In *Letters on the Study and Use of History* (privately printed, 1738), Bolingbroke treated with skepticism the Jewish history of the Old Testament and in particular the chronology of Scripture.

²⁷ Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), wrote his most famous work, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, in 1711. Shaftesbury was skeptical of many aspects of traditional Christianity, and in particular he ridiculed religious enthusiasts; at the same time, he defended a Platonic notion of enthusiasm.

²⁸ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 2.22: “Euripides gave [Socrates] the treatise of Heraclitus and asked his opinion upon it, and that reply was, ‘The part I understand is excellent, and so too is, I dare say, the part I do not understand; but it needs a Delian diver to get to the bottom of it’” (tr. Hicks, Loeb Classical Library). The story is also told in François Charpentier, *La Vie de Socrate* (1650); one of Hamann’s chief sources for the *Socratic Memorabilia* was the German translation of Charpentier published in 1720.

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Essay on an Academic Question¹

by
Aristobulus²

Horatius

— nos proelia virginum
sectis in iuvenes unguibus acrium
cantamus vacui, sive quid urimur,
non praeter solitum leves.³

¹ In 1759, the Berlin Academy set as the topic for its essay contest of that year the question of the mutual influence of language and opinions. Johann David Michaelis won the competition, and his essay was published in 1760.

² In the preface to *Crusades of a Philologist* (1762), Hamann identifies “Aristobulus” as the figure from 2 Maccabees 1:10, the “schoolmaster” of King Ptolemy; see *Werke*, vol. II, p. 115.

³ Horace, Ode 1.6.17–20: “. . . we sing the contests of maidens, who with sharp nails are fierce against the youths, either fancy-free or, if we are at all fired by love, cheerfully as usual.”

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משל⁴:

FORTVNAMPRIAMICANTABOTNOBILEBELLVM

Scriptor cyclicus olim⁵

⁴ “Proverb.”

⁵ Horace, *Ars poetica* 136–7: “[nor will you begin as] the writer of epic cycles in times past: ‘I shall sing the fortune of Priam and noble war’ [fortunam Priami cantabo [e]t nobile bellum].”

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The title of this short essay is so problematic that I cannot think any of my readers capable of guessing what it means. I will therefore declare myself that I wish to put on paper some thoughts about the topic that had been issued by the Berlin Academy for the year 1759. This celebrated society thought it worthwhile to communicate to the world the prize essay together with six of its competitors under the following title: *Dissertation qui a remporté le prix proposé par l'Academie royale des sciences et belles lettres de Prusse, sur l'influence réciproque du langage sur les opinions, et des opinions sur le langage; avec les pieces qui ont concouru, à Berlin, MDCCLX, 4.*⁶

In my view it would be easier to survey the answer to the question of the mutual influence of opinions and language if this topic had been clarified prior to proceeding on to its solution.^a However,

^a περί παντός, ὦ παῖ, μία ἀρχὴ τοῖς μέλλουσι καλῶς βουλευέσθαι, εἰδέναι δεῖ περί οὗ ἂν ἢ ἡ βουλή, ἢ ἄπαντος ἀμαρτάνειν ἀνάγκη. τοὺς δὲ πολλοὺς λήθηθεν ὅτι οὐκ ἴσασι τὴν οὐσίαν ἐκάστου. ὡς οὖν εἰδότες οὐ διομολογοῦνται ἐν ἀρχῇ τῆς σκέψεως, προελθόντες δὲ τὸ εἰκὸς ἀποδιδόασιν· οὔτε γὰρ ἑαυτοῖς οὔτε ἀλλήλοις ὁμολογοῦσιν. ἐγὼ οὖν καὶ σὺ μὴ πάθωμεν ὁ ἄλλοις ἐπιτιμῶμεν . . . ὁμολογία θέμενοι ὄρον, εἰς τοῦτο ἀποβλέποντες καὶ ἀναφέροντες τὴν σκέψιν ποιῶμεθα. Socrates in Plato's *Phaedrus*. ["There is only one way, dear boy, for those to begin to take counsel wisely about anything. One must know what the counsel is about, or it is sure to be utterly futile, but most people are ignorant of the fact that they do not know the nature of things. So, supposing that they do know it, they come to no agreement in the beginning of their enquiry, and as they go on they reach the natural result – they agree neither with themselves nor

⁶ "Dissertation which won the prize set by the Royal Academy of Sciences and Literature of Prussia, on the reciprocal influence of language on opinions, and of opinions on language; with essays which also competed, in Berlin, 1760, quarto." Michaelis' essay was published in German in this collection; it was translated into French in 1762 and from French into English in 1769 (reprinted in 1771 and 1973).