

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03764-8 - Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy

Edited by Brigitte Sassen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Major Trends in the Early Empiricist Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy

There can be no doubt that the initial reception of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was quite different from what Kant had expected and hoped for. His correspondence from 1781 and 1782 clearly demonstrates that he had hoped, perhaps expected, that certain of his contemporaries, particularly Mendelssohn and Tetens, would subject the work to serious study and that they would ultimately endorse it.¹ Nothing, however, was to be heard from Johann Tetens, and Moses Mendelssohn soon “put the book aside,” citing age and ill health.² Even worse, not only was there no word from Mendelssohn and Tetens, in 1781 there was no word from anyone, aside, that is, from the obligatory announcements and short summaries gleaned mostly from the Table of Contents, certainly not from serious study.³ And although 1782 did bring the first review, this was, as is well known, the Göttingen or Feder/Garve review,⁴ hardly the sort of assessment that Kant had hoped for. His bitter disappointment is evident in his efforts to involve others, notably Johann Schultz⁵ and even Mendelssohn,⁶ in the review and evaluation of the work, as it is evident also in his very public reaction to the Göttingen review in the *Prolegomena* Appendix.

But Kant's disappointment was premature. For after the initial, perhaps stunned, silence, reviews of and even commentaries on the critical philosophy began to appear in ever increasing numbers, so much so that by the mid 1780s Kant criticism had become a striving concern. Even the major review journals had become involved. Friedrich Nicolai's *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* was soon known as the forum for Kant criticism, and the newly published *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* was committed to the defense of the critical philosophy.⁷ Still, initially at least, the reaction was negative. Kant's contemporaries could for the most part simply not understand a philosophy according to which the understanding, as Kant's first reviewer, Johann Feder, states in amazement, “makes objects.”⁸ This is still evident in the reviews of the *Prolegomena* in 1783 and 1784,⁹ but public assessment began to shift in 1785, with the publication of the pro-Kantian *Allgemeine Literatur-*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03764-8 - Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy

Edited by Brigitte Sassen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

Zeitung, and by 1786, when Karl Leonhard Reinhold's *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* began to appear (in installments) in the *Teutsche Merkur*, it came to be firmly on Kant's side, at least for a time.¹⁰

Notice, however, that the eventual endorsement of the critical philosophy did not amount to an acceptance of the theoretical philosophy. Reinhold's *Briefe* had a broad impact on early Kant reception because they spoke to the pantheism controversy. By demonstrating that it is practical, not theoretical, reason that functions as the arbitrator in religious matters, Reinhold showed the relevance of Kant's critique of reason to a then vehemently argued debate (the question of the proof of the existence of God) and in this way managed to popularize Kant's philosophy. But this also came somewhat at the expense of the theoretical philosophy, which Kant's contemporaries had yet to come to terms with. To the extent that they did so at all, this occurred in its transformation into nineteenth century idealism, to which public attention turned in the 1790s. This shift involved first a focus on Reinhold and his *Elementarphilosophie*,¹¹ and, in short order, a turn to Johann Gottlieb Fichte, Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and, with that, to the development of nineteenth century idealism.¹²

A survey of the material that Kant's contemporaries produced between 1782 and 1793 reveals that the early reception of the theoretical philosophy can be divided into three trends. These accord with broader trends in the turbulent period that characterized the late Enlightenment in Germany. The first two trends are backward looking and amount to attempts to valorize different parts of the tradition against what their adherents took to be Kant's attack. First on the scene were those popular philosophers who were influenced by British empiricism, notably John Locke and David Hume, and by Scottish common sense philosophy. They, including Feder, Christian Garve, Hermann Andreas Pistorius, Christian Gottlieb Selle, Dietrich Tiedemann, Gottlob August Tittel, and Adam Weishaupt, constitute the early empiricist reception of the critical philosophy that dominated the scene from 1782 to about 1788. The second wave of early Kant criticism lasted from late 1788, when the first issues of Eberhard's *Philosophisches Magazin* were published, to roughly 1793. It was dominated by the defenders of the Leibnizian/Wolffian philosophy, notably Johann August Eberhard, Johann Gebhard Ehrenreich Maaß, and Johann Christoph Schwab. The "rationalist" reception of the critical philosophy gained prominence, of course, with Kant's response to the first issue of Eberhard's *Philosophisches Magazin* in the *Entdeckung*¹³ just as the "empiri-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03764-8 - Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy

Edited by Brigitte Sassen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

cist" reception had been popularized by Kant's *Prolegomena* response to Feder.

At roughly the same time that the rationalists were taking on the critical philosophy, a third trend of early Kant reception emerged. Strictly speaking this amounted to a complex of trends that are here taken together because they are best described as forward looking. Not concerned with valorizing some aspect of the philosophical tradition, these "critics" sought to develop the critical philosophy further. Interestingly, they initially appeared as disciples who sought to defend Kant against earlier attacks. Kant certainly saw them as supporters and was bitterly disappointed when they began to develop the critical philosophy in ways that he thought unacceptable. This is evident in his reaction to Reinhold whose "completion" of the critical philosophy in the *Elementarphilosophie* might have been undertaken in the spirit of defense, indeed, seems to have been taken as such by other contemporaries,¹⁴ but Reinhold's efforts appeared as a betrayal to Kant. It is evident in his reaction to Fichte, who, in the process of defending Kant against Gottlob Ernst Schulze's skeptical attack in the *Aenesidemus*, articulated the principles that would become the cornerstone of the development of nineteenth century idealism.¹⁵ It is evident also in his reaction to Beck and Maimon, who similarly proceeded to suggest improvements and further developments of the critical philosophy.¹⁶ It is instructive that Kant, when asked in 1797 who his best defender was, named Schultz, his first and overall most faithful expositor, and not either Reinhold, Jakob Sigismund Beck, or even Fichte.¹⁷

This is not to say, of course, that all Kant's early critics could be clearly assigned to one or the other of these trends or that they exhausted all the philosophical movements that governed German philosophy at the end of the eighteenth century. In these divisions, Johann Georg Hamann, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, and Johann Gottfried Herder, are noticeable by their absence, as is the pantheism controversy. It is true that Hamann's "*Metakritik*,"¹⁸ a critique of Kant's philosophy that is based on a philosophy of language, though not published until 1800, was circulated widely in manuscript form and as such was likely known to Kant,¹⁹ and that Kant was at least peripherally involved both in the debate with Herder²⁰ and in the pantheism controversy.²¹ Moreover, the controversy or, as already noted and more to the point, Reinhold's Kantian answer to that controversy in his *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* contributed to the widespread acceptance of the critical philosophy.²² However, these developments had a role to play in the constitution of the context within which the critical philosophy

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03764-8 - Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy

Edited by Brigitte Sassen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

was read, but they had little influence on the development of the theoretical philosophy after its initial formulation in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and were only to a small extent relevant to its reception. In a volume that presents the very early reception of Kant's theoretical philosophy, as this one does, this material is of relatively less importance than the material that speaks directly to the reception of that philosophy is.

The texts translated in this volume were published by Kant's contemporaries between 1782 and 1789. They stem largely from the first (empiricist) wave of early Kant criticisms that began in 1782, with the publication of the Feder/Garve review. Even though the endpoint of this approach to the criticism of Kant's philosophy is not as clearly marked, I selected 1789 in large part because the first complete volume of Eberhard's *Philosophisches Magazin*,²³ the voice piece of the second ("rationalist") wave of early Kant reception, was published in that year. To be sure, the early empiricist criticisms did not magically end in 1789,²⁴ but Kant's and public attention in general did shift for a time to the second-wave, rationalist reception and in short order to the emergence of idealism that began in the early 1790s.

My focus on texts from the early empiricist reception of the critical philosophy was prompted by two considerations. The first had to do with space and representativeness. Quite simply, there is too much material to represent more than one of the three identified approaches to Kant criticism in a single volume. The second point is of greater interest. Although both the rationalist criticisms of Kant's theoretical philosophy and the transition to idealism have been documented to some extent in the English literature – the rationalist critique in Allison's translation of Kant's *Entdeckung* and the transition to idealism in di Giovanni and Harris's *Between Kant and Hegel* – comparatively little information is available on the early empiricist reception. Yet from the point of view of the relevance that the work of Kant's contemporaries had for the development of Kant's philosophy, it is arguably the most significant work in early Kant criticism. It set the tone of early Kant reception, identified the issues that quickly came to dominate it and that are still discussed in contemporary Kant interpretation, and, perhaps most importantly, was instrumental in the additions and revisions that distinguish the second edition of the *Critique* from the first.

Even with the limited focus of this volume, the amount of material produced is much too vast to include more than a representative sample. I made every effort to include texts and portions of texts that are both historically and philosophically interesting. Among these are texts that are "firsts" either in terms of time of publication or in terms of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03764-8 - Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy

Edited by Brigitte Sassen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

criticism. The former includes the first review of the *Critique* (the Göttingen or Feder/Garve review) and Garve's original version of that review; among the latter I count the materials that were the first to raise telling and sometimes persistent objections, such as the neglected alternative argument that views space as both an a priori form of intuition and a property of things in themselves first advanced by Pistorius. I hope in this way to convey a sense of how Kant's theoretical philosophy was read by his empiricist critics, as well as a sense of what they found particularly troubling in his philosophy.²⁵ In addition, I included some representative responses to specific criticisms that Kant's early defenders formulated on his behalf. These are not always the best responses that could be given – Schaumann's response to Feder's idealism charge, for instance, serves to endorse, not dispel, the problem of affection – but they do tell us how Kant was read by his very early disciples and defenders. As it turns out, they tend to endorse the early interpretations of the critical philosophy but reject the objections that early critics associated with these interpretations.

The texts that are included in this collection were assigned to sections that reflect the order of their appearance and their sometimes overlapping major concerns – the Transcendental Aesthetic, the idealist implications of Kant's thought, and the Transcendental Analytic. The very first section contains the Feder/Garve and Garve reviews – the two clear “firsts” in terms of appearance – and the final section is devoted to a text by a defender (Schmid) and one by a critic (Pistorius). Both seek to come to terms with the difference between the empiricist approach to metaphysical and epistemological matters, on the one hand, and what has by this time been identified as Kant's purism on the other, thus neatly summing up the nature of the empiricist critique of Kant's philosophy.

Because it is the aim of this volume to let early critics and defenders speak for themselves, the following introductory remarks are largely limited to background and contexts, and to the major concerns and trends in interpretation that each text presents. Special attention is, however, devoted to the few texts to which Kant responded directly. The introduction ends with a brief account of periodical publication in late eighteenth century Germany, paying particular attention to the two major review journals in which much of the early debate was published.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03764-8 - Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy

Edited by Brigitte Sassen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

FEDER/GARVE AND GARVE

The first two reviews that appeared after the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and that dealt with its content were, as noted, the Göttingen or Feder/Garve review and Garve's much longer and more comprehensive original version of that review.²⁶ Both reviews are interesting for what they say about the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and for what they say is wrong with the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The FGr is interesting, as well, for what Kant says, both about the reviewer's interpretation of his work and about why its objections are misguided. It is an important piece, moreover, because, as the first and long-awaited (by Kant, at any rate) assessment of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, it, along with Kant's public and vitriolic reaction in the *Prolegomena* Appendix,²⁷ set the tone for early Kant reception for some time to come.

Here we might note that it was, in some measure, unfortunate that the Göttingen review was published at all. It set early Kant reception on a combative and contentious course (for which Kant was also to blame). Matters might have been different had Garve's version been the first review of the content of the *Critique* to be published, because it was written much more soberly, very much in the mode of a student who, admiring the teacher, tries to comprehend some new and difficult material. And given that one of Kant's chief objections to the FGr was not that it got his views wrong but that it presented his conclusions in so brief and stark a fashion as to make them appear ridiculous,²⁸ he might well have been much more positively impressed by Garve's thorough exposition of the main points of the *Critique* and the reasons leading Kant to make these points. But we must at least consider the possibility that he might not have been. Although Kant's response to Garve's letter that explains his role in the FGr²⁹ is very generous – he praises Garve's fairness, identifies him as one of the people who, along with Mendelssohn and Tetens, could bring metaphysics to its completion, and takes the questions he raises in his letter³⁰ seriously – he had not at this time read the review.³¹ His reaction might have been different had the original review been available to him and had its publication not been preceded by the Feder fiasco. For Garve is obviously uncomfortable with many of the same things that Feder also claims to be uncomfortable with, for instance, Kant's apparent inability to differentiate dreams from experience,³² and the failure, in their eyes, of the argument of the Fourth Paralogism.³³ Unlike the FGr, his version does not directly accuse the critical philosophy of idealism, but he is clearly suspicious that it not only fails to refute idealism but actually translates into it. It is hard to believe that, in the face of his grave disappointment

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03764-8 - Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy

Edited by Brigitte Sassen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

at the silence that greeted the *Critique*, Kant would not have reacted negatively to this review as well. Hamann's report that Kant "was not satisfied with it [Garve's review] and thought that he had been treated like an imbecile"³⁴ is instructive, though, in the absence of any other evidence, it is hard to confirm whether this was indeed Kant's ultimate sentiment.

Feder

By way of content, the FGr is notorious for its charge that the *Critique* is a system of "higher idealism" and for its comparison of Kant's position with that of Berkeley. But aside from Kant's reaction to those charges in the *Prolegomena* Appendix, there is little reason for this specific notoriety. The review only mentions George Berkeley once, in passing, and the comparison is far from thoroughgoing. It amounts to no more than the remark that "[o]ne basic pillar of the Kantian system rests on these concepts of sensations as mere modifications of ourselves (on which *Berkeley*, too, principally builds his idealism), and of space and time."³⁵ Thus, both space and time and the operations of understanding (presumably, the "other pillar") are implicitly acknowledged as *non-Berkeleyan* elements of Kant's account, and the comparison is restricted to the observation that Kant happened to agree with Berkeley in taking the remaining element, sensation, to be a mere modification of the subject. As for the charge of "higher idealism," that is no more than an insult, one that Kant might have done well to ignore.

Given his focus on the idealism objection, Kant's response pays no attention to the account that the review provides of the *Critique* or, for that matter, to the single substantive objection that remains when it is divested of all insults and rhetorical flourishes. According to the review, the *Critique of Pure Reason* presents all knowledge as arising when understanding constructs a representation of objects by combining sensations, which are "mere modifications of ourselves," in accord with its own laws. The process is a multistage one. First, understanding combines "a multiplicity of small successive alterations of our soul"³⁶ to constitute sensations; then it arranges sensations in time, as cause and effect, and in space, as a world of interacting objects. Both material things and minds are objects that come to be constituted through this process. Because the laws understanding follows in this process of constitution are used to bring experience into being, they cannot be learned from experience but must be *a priori*.

The objection raised here, anticipating what would become a standard empiricist objection in the years to come, is that it is hard to see

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03764-8 - Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy

Edited by Brigitte Sassen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

how we can come to distinguish reality from illusion through the *mere* employment of the understanding, without there being anything in the sensations that might guide this employment and dictate that the combination be carried out in one way in preference to others.³⁷ If the synthetic operations of understanding are not guided by what is given in sensation, then it makes no difference to understanding what particular sensory content is given when it goes on to synthesize that content. It is unclear, then, just what determines understanding to combine sensations in one way rather than another.

Because this became a standard objection, it is unfortunate that Kant did not address it, preferring instead to enumerate the insults he perceived in the review (among them, that the reviewer did not even call him *Mr. Kant*) and to engage in ad hominem attacks on the anonymous reviewer. It is instructive (and perhaps disturbing) that he appeared to let most of the basic picture of his account go unchallenged. He complained not that the review got him wrong but that it presented the main theses of the *Critique* in a long, sketchy list of bald unsupported assertions (which cannot even be understood when so taken out of their context), occasionally interspersing criticisms, but nowhere relating or engaging the arguments for the claims. His comments on the content of the review are limited to the brief critical comments contained in the opening and closing paragraphs (in translation). So he objected to the idealism charge and to the comparison with Berkeley (which he identified as the sole peculiar or noteworthy aspects) but ignored the worry about the role of sensations in the constitution of experience and the assertion that he took sensations to be assigned to locations in space and time by understanding.

Kant responded to the idealism charge by differentiating his idealism from the idealism he took to be Berkeley's. Truth, he claimed, rests on universal and necessary laws, laws that Berkeley, given that experience is only a posteriori for him, could find only in pure understanding and reason. So the kind of idealism advocated by Berkeley is, for Kant, a "mystic and visionary" idealism of the sort originally propounded by the Eleatics. It is really a sort of intellectualism or Platonism, which consists in the assertion that truth can only be known through pure understanding and reason and not through the senses. The *Critique*, by contrast, takes experience to contain a priori elements (space, time, and the pure concepts of understanding), which "prescribe their law to all possible experience a priori"³⁸ and so serve as a foundation for truth. As a consequence, it explodes the sort of "idealism" held by Berkeley.

Of course, the less that is said about the adequacy of this character-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03764-8 - Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy

Edited by Brigitte Sassen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

ization of Berkeley's predicament, the better.³⁹ Berkeley would not accept that truth must rest on universal and necessary laws any more than he would accept Kant's characterization of his position. Nor does the FGr, which recognizes "our strongest and most enduring *sensations*"⁴⁰ as an acceptable, even if not always completely satisfactory, criterion of truth. This is an empiricist commitment that Kant, in light of his challenge to the author of the review to produce "synthetic a priori principles," seems to have missed. Indeed, the review seems quite willing to recognize Kant's characterization of the critical enterprise (namely, the identification of certain a priori elements that "prescribe their law to all possible experience"), though the authors, like later critics, may have been reluctant to accept that it is correct.

In any case, however indignantly Kant's answer might have repudiated the rhetoric and insults of the FGr, it is hard to see how it actually served to dispel the reading of the *Critique* the review proposed and, by implication, offer a satisfactory answer to the one substantive charge that the review made. For if truth is determined by the a priori elements in experience and *is not* in any way guided by sensations (which, being a posteriori, would undermine the "truth" of any principle they determined, according to the underlying premise that truth requires universal and necessary principles), then the FGr is right – Kant took experience to be the product of the imposition of spatiotemporal and categorial form on a kind of indifferent, sensory prime matter. And what determines that this imposition should be carried out in one way rather than another – that this sensation be placed to the left rather than the right of that one? Ironically this raises the problem of the distinction between truth and illusion – between right and wrong ways of constituting experience – in an even more virulent form. Given their interpretation of the critical enterprise and the support that interpretation appears to receive from Kant's *Prolegomena* response, it is not hard to see why Kant's empiricist critics would return to this issue time and again.⁴¹

Garve

Since the *Göttingen* review was fashioned from Garve's original version, it is not surprising that many of the charges the former intimates are in Garve's review as well, albeit more respectfully formulated. Now admittedly, Garve's idealism charge was not by far as explicitly (or insultingly) articulated,⁴² but he still insinuated that the refutation of idealism in the Fourth Paralogism is a failure. Moreover, Garve expressed even more explicitly the view that Kant's position is that sen-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-03764-8 - Kant's Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy

Edited by Brigitte Sassen

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

sations are mere alterations in us, that understanding “makes” objects by a multistage process of synthesis of sensations in accord with its own laws, and that the difference between objective and subjective experience has to do with the fact that in the former case sensations are assigned to locations in space and time.

In addition, in his own evaluation at the close of the review, Garve attacked Kant's a prioriism. He charged that rather than seek to obtain general concepts and laws by abstraction from experience, Kant tried to derive them all from space and time, previously established to be subjective laws of our sensory capacity and criteria for the objectivity of representations. Garve considers it incredible that space and time should be so “fruitful” – in part because our sensations of sound, taste, and touch lead us to know objects even though they are not spatial; in part because dreams and fantasies exhibit spatial structure.⁴³ Though the charges are strained, the general point, that Kant tried to take too much of experience to be constituted a priori, was one that has been repeated in many variants down through the years.⁴⁴

Garve's review also contained early statements of a number of other objections that became classic. He objected to Kant's introduction of a new terminology, which he saw as a kind of sophistical ploy, used to obfuscate claims that, if stated in plain language, would sound too paradoxical.⁴⁵ He was particularly concerned, in this regard, with Kant's description of space and time as subjective “conditions” of sensible intuition – a term that he assumed that Kant used to obfuscate the status he truly gave to them: that of innate dispositions to imprint a certain form on all our impressions.⁴⁶ That Garve expressed particular dissatisfaction with this issue is instructive. It indicates that he, like many of his contemporaries, understood Kant's project to be a psychological, not an epistemic one. That is, he understood the critical project as one that sought to delineate the manner in which the mind actually processes sensations when working them up into representations of objects in space. If he had interpreted the project epistemically, by contrast, he would have seen it as identifying conditions that must be satisfied for knowledge of a certain type to arise, regardless of what particular mechanisms may be involved.⁴⁷

Garve also raised a number of other points concerning objections that later critics treated in more detail. He questioned the basis for the Table of Categories, arguing that rather than being drawn from the nature of understanding they are obtained merely by analogy and association and the kind of hindsight that looks for what it thinks it has a need for,⁴⁸ and complained about what is now called Kant's architectonic – his tendency to impose the structure of the Table of Categories