

[99] First Letter: The need for a Critique of Reason

So you continue to insist on the opinion, dear friend, that the enlightenment of our German fatherland has been waning in Protestant domains ever since it began rising in Catholic domains? Given the comparison you drew, I wonder whether you have, on the one hand, taken into account a truly greater swiftness that has diminished since its initial zeal and, on the other, an apparent slowness that is based on an optical illusion. Has not this slowness become more prominent the further the enlightenment, much like the sun, advances in relation to its horizon?¹ – But, according to your own assurance, you have compared the course of Protestantism only to itself and have found that it is not, for instance, merely moving forward more slowly [100] but rather that it is actually at the point of retreating. Given the perspective in which you were able to arrange them in your letter, the many facts on which you base this claim certainly offer no comforting view of the future; and I confess to you that I have not found one among them I could deny or even call into doubt.² By deriving the plausibility of your claim more from the combined effect of your reasons

¹ The comparison between the Enlightenment and the sun is one of Reinhold's most frequently used images. It is a commonplace of the period, found often in the work of other Masonic figures such as Mozart. See the discussion of Reinhold and his associates in Vienna, in Nicholas Till, ch. 10, "Freemasonry and the Catholic Enlightenment," in *Mozart and the Enlightenment: Truth, Virtue and Beauty in Mozart's Operas* (New York and London, W. W. Norton, 1992).

² The 1790 ed. (pp. 17–18) replaces the following two sentences with: "But I am also refraining from any objections that I could bring against the questionableness of some of these facts because you want to have the plausibility of your opinion judged more by the combined effect of *all* the reasons cited than by the force of *any one* taken individually. In order to show you that I have wholly understood you, I want to take your most essential remarks out of the sequence of facts and inferences that accompany them in your letter and to repeat them here in my own words."

Letters on the Kantian Philosophy

than from the force of any one taken individually, you anticipate the objections I could make against many of the inferences you have drawn. I think, therefore, that those reasons will lose nothing when I take them out of the sequence of facts and remarks that accompany them in your letter and place them here one after another for my own purposes. – You write:³

Ever since the free use of reason in religious matters began to lose for its old defenders the charm of a forbidden fruit, the former zeal for the rights of reason has been displaced by indifference,⁴ which on occasion has already broken out into hate and contempt and threatens to pass over into a universal mistrust. Those who are not already convinced that reason has gone too far in our day do at least fear that it will go too far and are seeking either to restore its old arbitrary [101] limits or to invent new ones. – The exclusive right of reason to decide on the meaning of the Bible – that right with whose recognition the whole of Protestantism either stands or falls – is being attacked even by Protestant theologians with a zeal that has contributed in no small way to the reawakening of the old hopes and institutions of the Roman reunifiers. – The appeals of reason to sensation, to common sense,⁵ to intuitive sense, to a feeling for the divine, etc. are becoming ever louder and more frequent, and from every one of these petty tribunals verdicts are being obtained against the perfectly legitimate claims of reason. – The science from which all the other sciences borrow their principles, the science that from time immemorial constituted the most distinctive and important employment of reason, and through whose development Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten⁶ have rendered such a great service to the true priorities of our age – in a word, metaphysics – is being neglected in a way that contrasts oddly with the claims of our century to the honorary title of “the philosophical.” Like an insignificant and ramshackle fortification, metaphysics is being surrendered to its enemies, against whom it had only recently been serving reason so well. Out of the ruins of this science, hot-headed enthusiasts and cold-hearted sophists are at

³ This is one of several passages that Reinhold puts in quotation marks, sometimes as part of the internal dialogue with the correspondent that he invents for the letters, and sometimes simply to express positions under consideration that were common at the time.

⁴ Cf. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), Preface to *Critique of Pure Reason* (Riga, 1781), AX: “the prevailing mood is that of weariness and complete *indifferentism*.”

⁵ *Gesunder Menschenverstand*. See above, [Note on the texts and translation](#).

⁶ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), Christian Wolff (1679–1754), Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714–62).

First Letter

present busier than ever [102] propping up anew the old systems of superstition and nonbelief.⁷ Far from offsetting⁸ one another, these systems are instead gaining new strength as a result of their mutual struggle, draining the energy of the human spirit with pointless quarreling in the scholarly world, and perpetuating opposition between the understanding and the heart in the moral world. The hopes of the well-meaning who wish to see this unholy feud settled through the mediation of reason are disappearing at the same rate that reason itself is passing the most unprecedented tests of its efficacy and strength in so many other fields of human knowledge. Reason, which has never before been called in as judge so universally and for the most insignificant details, is being accused ever more loudly as a disturber of the peace in the most important affairs of humankind. And while its ostensible triumph over old prejudices is announced with shouts of victory by beardless youths, men take the stand before men and accuse reason of high treason against humanity.⁹ They argue that it demonstrates the opposite of what God reveals, and, without themselves knowing it or wanting to, they sharpen the dulled weapons of superstition and nonbelief alike.^a – [103] Compare, dear friend, our academies of the arts and sciences to the public and private societies that work under all sorts of names and pretexts for the continuation of our immaturity,¹⁰ and whose diversity has the

⁷ *Aberglaube, Unglaube*. Reinhold uses this combination of terms frequently because they have a common root, *Glaube*, but unfortunately this fact is lost in English translation. Moreover, there is no sensible alternative to translating *Glaube* sometimes as “belief” and sometimes as “faith” (and *Unglaube* as “nonbelief” but *unglaubig* as “faithless”). Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819) exploited this ambiguity by making use of David Hume’s (1711–76) nontheist statements that we must rely on “belief” to encourage the view that we must rely on theist faith. See his *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism and Realism, a Dialogue* (Breslau, 1787), translated in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel “Allwill”*, ed. G. di Giovanni (Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994), pp. 253–338.

⁸ *Aufheben*. Reinhold uses this term in many key passages in a way that seems to foreshadow (and may have influenced) the frequent dialectical use of the term by G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). The term is often translated in different ways in different contexts, e.g., as “suspend” or “nullify.” See below, n. 40 and n. 119.

⁹ Cf. 1790 ed., p. 12 (Appendix, section A), where Reinhold cites a related passage from Horace.

^a See *Results of Jacobi’s and Mendelssohn’s Philosophy Critically Assessed, etc.* [This work was written by Thomas Wizenmann [1759–87], a young supporter of Friedrich Jacobi. Its full title is: *Die Resultate der Jacobischen und Mendelssohnschen Philosophie; kritisch untersucht von einem Freywilligen (Results of the Jacobian and Mendelssohnian Philosophy Critically Assessed by an Impartial Observer)* (Leipzig, 1786). On Wizenmann, see Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1986), ch. 4. This footnote is omitted in the 1790 edition.]

¹⁰ Cf. Kant, “An Answer to the Question, What is Enlightenment?” (Berlin, 1784), which begins, “Enlightenment is humanity’s emergence from its self-incurred immaturity” (8: 85).

Letters on the Kantian Philosophy

systematic appearance of driving reason into a corner from several sides simultaneously. Which of these two very opposed kinds of associations is at present more flourishing and active? Which of the two has a larger number of members, more enthusiasm in its endeavors, and a more numerous and receptive public to show for itself? – Finally, granted that priestcraft and despotism have perhaps never before had so many causes for complaint against reason, reason, precisely because of this fact, has also never before had so much cause to fear the worst from both of them. As long as it did nothing more than clear away, as a result of the Reformation, the prejudices in the hierarchical system that opposed the freedom of priestcraft and the absolute power of despotism, reason had nothing but the misunderstood interest of both against itself. But once reason proceeds further and asserts principles that are incompatible with the continuing existence of priestcraft and despotism, then nothing is more certain than that both of them will summon all the strength that their old holdings procure for them in order to suppress the voice of their enemy. Soon they will [104] need no other pretext for this end than the abuses that our writing mobs are committing with their publications and freedom of the press – abuses which are becoming ever more rampant and which might ultimately bring even the better thinking servants of religion and the state to the point of regarding as the lesser evil those well-known remedies which eliminate freedom together with licentiousness.

You have urgently called upon me to write you my opinion concerning the likely outcome of all these phenomena taken collectively. When I now confess to you that my opinion is exactly the opposite of yours, I know that I am claiming something quite paradoxical to you. Yet I also know that for the time being I already have your heart on my side, and thus I hope to come to agreement with your mind all the sooner.

Your letter has portrayed aptly enough the disarray in which the concerns of reason in matters of religion now find themselves among us. And however much the individual features of your portrait must lose some of their determinateness in the sketch that I have drawn up of them, I still believe that every more attentive observer of our age will rediscover even in this sketch the most pertinent recent events, together with their heroes, as well as some of his own observations regarding them. [105] Each individual phenomenon that appears in this sketch would, when taken by itself, make me more or less alarmed; each deserves the attention

First Letter

of every friend of humanity, and most of them have already attracted this attention. But when I view them as a whole in their connection with one another and with the causes and occasions that gave rise to them, I become very inclined to regard them as reliable harbingers of one of the most far-reaching and beneficent revolutions that has ever occurred at one and the same time in the scholarly and moral world.¹¹

If the phenomena that you, my friend, have arranged together in your portrait actually share a common ground,¹² then this ground is none other than the old and still persistent misunderstanding, which today is more lively – or rather, more visible – than ever before, regarding the right and power of reason in matters of religion. It is especially characteristic of our age that the disputing factions are latching directly onto reason itself, which they elevate or degrade depending on whether or not they believe that they have cause to be satisfied with its decisions. Those who are dissatisfied press against reason and storm it for better answers, or [106] they give up all hope and either take up sides with the faction against reason or become indifferent spectators of the conflict. This is roughly the contour shaping the history of the current state of our higher enlightenment regarding speculative religion, which has a much larger influence on the rest of the affairs in our moral world than the indifferent spectators usually care to admit.

The age-old and never-ending dispute over many all-important questions is itself the most convincing proof that the answers reason has so far given to these questions – or rather, the answers that have been given in the name of reason – lack evidence and universal validity. The most striking example of such a question is that which concerns the existence of God. Let us stay with this example.

We shall suppose once and for all that it was reason which, from the first stages of its development, unceasingly raised this question. I know that believers and nonbelievers reject this supposition. Believers claim that reason could never arrive at this question on its own, and nonbelievers claim that reason declares this question to be superfluous. But I know that you, my friend, are neither a believer nor a nonbeliever of this sort, and that

¹¹ See Appendix, sections B and C for the additions that Reinhold inserted at this point in the text in the 1790 edition. After these additions, which include the introduction of a separate letter, the 1790 edition adds further revisions of the *Merkur* text that begin here. See Appendix, section D.

¹² *Gemeinschaftlichen Grund*. See above, n. 5. The search for a common ground can be regarded as what Reinhold always took to be his most fundamental task.

Letters on the Kantian Philosophy

you are in agreement with me that reason [107] not only can raise this question but also must raise it. – Now given this supposition, it had to become impossible for reason to pass by systems or aggregates of its most distinctive concepts or the science of its notions, principles, and basic principles¹³ – in a word, [the science of] metaphysics, which subsequently was so denounced. It turned out that the whole subject matter of the question could be thought in no other way than with concepts that became more metaphysical the more they were purified from the foreign admixtures of fantasy and the sediment of common prejudices, and the more firmly one's eyes were fixed upon them in continual examination. The relation of all other proofs for God's existence to the metaphysical concept of an unconditioned necessary existence became more and more visible. And men appeared who asserted more or less clearly that while natural as well as even supernatural revelation could indeed confirm reason's concepts of the deity, it could not replace them. Even our faith-theologians¹⁴ did not find it superfluous to add the ontological argument to their proofs derived from supernatural sources. And although in their typical compendiums they usually placed this argument last, they still always found themselves compelled to privilege it and to recognize, even against their wills, its first-rank status whenever dealing with nonbelievers [108]. Our modern enemies and despisers of metaphysics ultimately have no other way out (as experience teaches) than to observe a strict silence on the whole question or to roam about in a labyrinth of indeterminate feelings. If one forces the silent to start talking or those in the labyrinth to give an intelligible account of their philosophy of the heart, they will both speak metaphysics just like the nobleman who spoke prose without knowing it or wanting to.¹⁵

But however unavoidable it might have always been, and may now still be, to consult metaphysics about God's existence, all the answers obtained by such questioning to date have been, and still are, ill-suited for universal conviction. This holds not only, for instance, with respect to those classes for whom no scientific proof exists but also among men who have spent the greater part of their lives dealing with the sciences – and indeed, even with metaphysical investigations. Writers whose

¹³ *Notionen, Principien und Grundsätze.*

¹⁴ *Glaubentheologen*, theologians such as the Pietists, who proceed by relying on faith as opposed to reason or tradition.

¹⁵ An allusion to Molière's M. Jourdain, who spoke prose before comprehending the meaning of the term "prose."

First Letter

philosophical spirit one cannot possibly deny without wholly abandoning the philosophical spirit oneself have declared all metaphysical proofs for God's existence to be inadequate. They have either come over to the opinion that reason can decide absolutely nothing in regard to this question, or they have gone so far as to believe that they have established a negative answer already with the premises [109] of those proofs. In truth, the manifold use that skeptics as well as pantheists, etc. have made of their claims about metaphysics has contributed in no small way to the confirmation of the old opinion regarding the hereditary perversion of reason. It has also helped preserve the reputation of those proofs for God's existence which were believed to have been found outside the domain of reason and nature, for had the domain of reason been more soundly expanded, such proofs would have suffered a proportionate loss of reputation. "Hence, despite all previous efforts, we still do not have a metaphysics that can answer this immense and often-raised question with universally illuminating certainty." This is a fact that cannot be denied by any of our present-day philosophical factions no matter how lofty the opinion may otherwise be that each faction entertains regarding the answer it has already found.

But from the fact that we have no such metaphysics, it in no way follows that we cannot have one. Those who claim this impossibility for the benefit of faith – a faith to which they have every right to help themselves in the absence of knowledge – must concede the other equally undeniable fact "that so far they have been just as incapable of procuring universal validity for the very principles of their faith [110]." For it is precisely among the most skilled and astute thinkers that these principles generally find the least acceptance. In the meantime, as long as the possibility has not yet been demonstrated of a metaphysics that could give a universally valid answer to the question of God's existence, the faith-theologians, who declare all heretofore fruitless endeavors of reason to be an argument against that possibility, cannot be dismissed. But these theologians are no more capable of refuting those who cite as an argument for that possibility the persistence of these efforts, the significant interest that humanity must take in a decisive answer, and the ever-growing inadequacy of every answer offered to date.

The doubt that arises from this argument and counterargument is one of the chief conditions under which that new metaphysics, if it indeed should be possible, could become actual and find acceptance. By resisting

Letters on the Kantian Philosophy

dogmatic claims about both the actual possession of such a science and its impossibility, this doubt removes the insurmountable obstacles, inevitably posed by our naturalists and supernaturalists alike, to the seeking out, development, and propagation of the new science. Both types of [111] dogmatists can no longer repress this doubt once it has taken hold, for it robs them of their weapons the very moment it appears. And this doubt has the significant advantage that its two opponents can never make common cause against it but rather will wear one another out amongst themselves the more they lash out against it. The more keenly they insist on their claims, the more the weaknesses of the arguments on both sides come to light and the more it becomes apparent to the impartial spectator how ill-suited for universal conviction their solutions to the immense problem are – solutions that are endlessly repeated by the one side in the name of metaphysical reason and by the other in the name of hyperphysical revelation.^b

That this is presently the case among us seems to me to be indicated by just those signs of our time that appear to you, my friend, to be so alarming. They are the evident effects and distinguishing marks of a universal shaking of all our previous doctrinal structures – a shaking that is assaulting everything with a zeal and strength the likes of which we have never before seen. The incompatibility of these doctrinal structures has become so obvious that their supporters, who in the meantime had learned how to get along better [112], are attempting all for naught to keep themselves from polemics in their presentations. They contradict each other, even against their own wills, as soon as they make arguments, and it turns out in the end that each has merely refuted the other's opinion without having proven his own. In an actual struggle the aggressor always carries the day, provided he is not a blockhead. The deist drives pantheism out from all fortifications, while the pantheist tears down the bastions of deism.¹⁶ The supernaturalists among the

^b *Hyperphysics* is the author's term for every supernatural theory of the supernatural. [This footnote is omitted in the 1790 edition.]

¹⁶ The 1790 ed. (p. 81) replaces this sentence with: "The *theist* believes that he has driven *atheism* out from all fortifications [*Verschanzungen*], while the atheist triumphs over the wrecked bastions [*Bollwerke*] of theism." The 1790 ed. often replaces "deism" with "theism" and "pantheism" with "atheism." Cf. also Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 849/B 877: "although metaphysics cannot be the foundation [*Grundveste*] of religion, it must always continue to be a bulwark [*Bollwerk*] of it." *Verschanzungen* (which can also be translated as "entrenchments") and *Bollwerke*, like *Grundfeste*

First Letter

Protestants have no infallible church and consequently no territory of their own impervious to reason, no territory upon whose ground their doctrinal structures would be safe from attack. As a result they see no other means for themselves than to use the dissension among the philosophers to their advantage and to carry out their construction, wherever possible, atop the ruins of the systems of reason that their opponents have destroyed by themselves. And so they press with all their might to demonstrate from the contradictions of those systems the inadequacy of reason and the indispensability of a supernatural surrogate for it. But as soon as that struggle commences which is supposed to expose the weaknesses of their opponents, it turns out to be impossible for them to remain indifferent thereby. In order to keep the pantheists at bay they must side with the deists; yet in doing so they have to give up the very claims they had made earlier. [113] Hence, the frequent contradictions among the supporters of the supernaturalist faction: while some claim the impossibility for proving God's existence from reason, others claim its indispensability; while some presuppose God's existence in their proof of revelation, others prove it from revelation; while some think that they know in advance what they subsequently believe on the basis of the word,¹⁷ others believe even before they know whom they are supposed to believe.

Depending on the standpoint you want to take, dear friend, you will look upon this general wavering of our accepted systems either as a danger to reason for the philosophers or as a danger to faith for the theologians. While those factions which have been driven into a corner revert to extreme measures, exaggerate their claims in the heat of battle, and leave their defenses wide open – defenses which even their opponents' attack had not exposed – the peaceful spectator sees, not without concern, the defenders of reason fighting for the cause of nonbelief and the guardians of faith fighting for the cause of superstition. And this accounts for the riddle concerning how these two opposing sicknesses progress so violently at the same rate.

In the meantime, dear friend, let us not stop at all the disorder that seems to be seizing our attention because of its noise and sensation [114].

and *Schutzwehr*, are terms from military science that Reinhold and Kant frequently use in explaining epistemological points, especially in religious contexts. *Grundfeste* signifies a constructed foundation and is often used to suggest an offensive intention of launching attacks or building a new foundational philosophical system, whereas *Schutzwehr* literally signifies a defensive instrument for warding off attacks. See also below, n. 147 and n. 148.

¹⁷ I.e., presumably from scripture on a literalist interpretation.

Letters on the Kantian Philosophy

While this fight continues to be waged by a few hotheads, the conviction is spreading ever further among the more rational supporters of each system¹⁸ that there is no hope for gaining universal acceptance of their system. This conviction, which we perhaps have more to thank for today's tolerance and freedom of thought than we imagine, undeniably has no small part in the indifference¹⁹ that is so clearly taking the upper hand against both metaphysics and its supernatural surrogate – an indifference that appears quite strange next to the blustering impetuosity with which one defends metaphysical and hyperphysical results. Most of the modern philosophical and theological writers who feel the energy and the calling to think for themselves have become weary of investigations from which so little approval and so much opposition stand to be expected. The success of many excellent works in which philosophers have studied human beings and physical nature, and theologians the Bible and morality, lies open for the world to see. But just as, on the one hand, the indifference of sound minds to metaphysics and hyperphysics is increasing with this very success, and, on the other, the impossibility of proving previous systems is becoming ever more obvious from the continued struggle between factions, [115] it is likewise bound to become impossible even for philosophers and theologians of this kind to presuppose as found the answer to the question of God's existence. And because they still can neither avoid this question nor leave it unanswered, they too will feel themselves compelled to listen to the aforementioned doubt concerning the possibility of a universally satisfying answer.

This doubt has very little in common with ordinary skepticism, which rests satisfied with mere ignorance, for the more its meaning is grasped, the more it carries with itself a pressing need for its resolution. The all-important and ever-active interest that humanity takes in a conviction regarding God's existence, and that even the unholy followers of superstition and nonbelief so loudly proclaim, makes all indifference impossible here and transforms that doubt into the following specific question: Is a universally satisfying answer to the question of God's existence

¹⁸ The 1790 ed. (p. 82) replaces "While this fight continues to be waged by a few hotheads, the conviction is spreading ever further among the more rational supporters of each system" with "While this fight continues to be waged by fanaticism on both sides, the conviction is becoming ever more rampant among a certain class of cold-blooded naturalists and supernaturalists."

¹⁹ See above, *First Letter*, p. 100.