

# Introduction to Philosophical Reviews in German Territories (1668-1799)

Marco Sgarbi

**Abstract:** The introduction explains the main purpose of the project Philosophical Review in German Territories (1668-1799). It shows why philosophical reviews are not only mere intellectual modes of communication or cultural media, but as an intellectual work with their own philosophical dignity. It shows the importance of the methodology of history of knowledge in order to achieve the major objectives of the projects and the relevance of five transversal and interdisciplinary vectors of study: 1. knowledge management; 2. philosophical transfers; 3. authorities and monopolies; 4. anonymity and authorship; 5. professionalization.

**Keywords:** Reviews, philosophy, German Territories

This book is the first of a number of volumes that will be published in this series with aim to offer the first complete and systematic study of the rise of the philosophical review in German territories between 1668 and 1799, adopting the methodology of the discipline of the history of knowledge. The time span corresponds to two unsuccessful attempts by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Johann Gottlieb Fichte to establish review journals.

The birth of the periodicals in the second half of the seventeenth century – especially with the foundation of the *Journal des Sçavans* and the *Philosophical Transactions* 1665 – has been a watershed in the dissemination of knowledge leading to the establishment of a new literary genre, that of review.<sup>1</sup> Despite the enormous interest of scholarship in the history of journals, philosophical reviews have been considerably neglected. The basic idea of the project is to fill this gap working on the fact that philosophical reviews are not to be considered merely as intellectual modes of communication or cultural media, but have to be credited with their own philosophical dignity; an aspect often neglected by the scholarship. Indeed, the history of philosophical reviews is an uncharted territory and waits to be written.

While there is a large bibliography on journals,<sup>2</sup> counting for instance more than 1,700 titles for France only, reviews as a literary genre have been neglected

<sup>1</sup> See Sgarbi 2024.

<sup>2</sup> See among the many studies Sgard 1968, Fambach 1976; Habel 2007; Gantet-Schock 2014; Csaszar 2018.

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by historians of knowledge so far. Scholars have stressed the role of book reviewing for the rise of literary criticism and for information management,<sup>3</sup> others have shown the peculiarities of review journals in tracking the reception and transmission of books and ideas across borders, but still their focus is on journals, not reviews as such.<sup>4</sup> In general, they complain in particular that reviews have “not been subject to thorough and systematic study.”<sup>5</sup>

Reviews play a secondary role also in the scholarship of the history of philosophy. Indeed, only a handful of specific studies on notable cases has aroused some scholarly interest. Reviews are generally credited a certain role for philosophy in studies on the reception of philosophers like Spinoza in England, Locke in France or Germany, Hume in Germany, Newton in Italy etc.<sup>6</sup> Overall, scholars have not paid due attention to the role of reviews in *shaping* – rather than passively mirroring – the prevailing trends in philosophy. Reviews have been conceived of as mere means of diffusion of ideas, but not as platforms actively promoting new philosophical ideas and discussions. Especially in Germany, in spite of the number of projects on journals in Germany during the period, no research project has been devoted to the impact of reviews in the shaping of philosophy.

The convergence between the history of knowledge and the history of philosophy is a *desideratum*, which will help overcome the usual, superficial view of considering reviews as brief and descriptive reports or summaries, devoid of any philosophical import as scholars tend to assume. The integration of the methodology of the history of knowledge into the practice of writing history of philosophy intercepts five transversal vectors of study (1. knowledge management; 2. philosophical transfers; 3. authorities and monopolies; 4. anonymity and authorship; 5. professionalization), which helps to understand how and why reviews had such an important role in early modern philosophy.

About knowledge management, the early stage of journal was a period of experimentation, and there were different kinds of reviews which reveal different knowledge management systems. Among the various genres of review, it is possible to count critical evaluations, summaries, abstracts, extracts, announcements or advertisements, self-reviews and letters.

Critical evaluations are the most interesting for reconstructing what were the interests, the criticism, the weak and strong points of the work. They are usually either positive or negative, never indifferent, and they reflect review-

<sup>3</sup> See Donoghue 1996; Basker 1997; Blair 2010.

<sup>4</sup> See Munck 2010; Munck 2019.

<sup>5</sup> See Munck 2010, 417. Also the most recent *Information: A Historical Companion*, published by Princeton University Press in January 2021 by eminent scholars mentions albums, bibliographies, sales catalogs, cases, inventories, letters, manuals, maps, memos, petitions, registers, sermons, newspapers, notebooks, newsletters, as literary genres that shaped early modern culture, but not reviews. In this sense our project will constitute a significant contribution to the emerging field of the history of knowledge.

<sup>6</sup> See Mossner 1943; Mossner 1954; Colie 1963; Gawlick-Kreimendahl 1987; Fieser 1996; Schock-Löffler 2018.

ers' position in confrontations to the new ideas. Almost lacking in a critical assessment and indifferent to the doctrines are summaries and abstracts. They provide in very few paragraphs, or at maximum in one page, the content of the book. They are mainly descriptions of the table of contents. Nonetheless also this kind of review is important to establish the interests of reviewers and what readers could know of the work. The extracts were so important that journals were devoted only to them, introducing for the first time in another language works hitherto unknown. Announcements or advertisements are mere strings in which it is declared the publication of the work: these testify the rapidity of the dissemination of a work. While self-reviews resulted to be a common practice of self-promotion or self-criticism, especially when the reviews were anonymous. Letters to the journal are reviews in defence of another bad review or to complain for the absence of a review.

Reviews are extremely important and offers a unique point of view on the early modern philosophy because they promote a bottom-up approach and a pluralistic perspective in determining what was the philosophical culture of the time acknowledging the existence of a plurality of different knowledges that can emerge from the reviews, without supposing any trend or assuming as dominant any philosophy. The pluralistic approach entails that there is no favourite philosophical centre, but the geography of philosophy will be reconstructed by considering situated knowledge in different social, political, religious and intellectual contexts. The polycentrism of the geography of philosophy dismantles the idea that philosophical knowledge is universal, fostering the conception that philosophical knowledge is produced in particular environments, in particular contexts and then it is disseminated. The geography of philosophy of philosophical reviews thus offers a dynamic picture of the circulation of the ideas. The circulation of ideas means first of all that knowledge received is not the same as knowledge sent. For philosophical texts, an appropriate intellectual, political, religious and social context was essential to securing positive receptions. Philosophical reviews allow a new way for understanding the transformation of knowledge and how the dissemination of knowledge was responsive and reactive to introduction of new ideas. In other words, philosophical reviews indicate the levels of awareness of foreign work, either when first published, or when translated.

The philosophical transfer of knowledge takes place not only laterally, spreading across space, but also vertically, moving from philosophers, scholars and other experts to common people and general public, and sometimes viceversa. Philosophical reviews are a good indicator of the level of knowledge people had in the various social strata. Within the German territory, the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen* and *Bibliothek der schönen Wissenschaften* had a narrow science-oriented audience, capable of grasping even the most complex philosophical ideas. Instead, the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* or *Der deutsche Merkur* aimed at a readership with wider cultural and literary interests. Investigating the reviews contained in these journals allows us to understand what people knew or could know and at what level of the new books and philosophical ideas spreading in Europe.

Philosophical reviews show how books were received among different religious and confessional contexts. Most of the time the review journals had peculiar religious attitudes. Friedrich Nicolai – editor of the *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek* – was known to want his reviewers to discuss books on religion with an open frame of mind.

Reviews reveal the authorities and monopolies of philosophy. They have the power of to accept or reject philosophical ideas, to declare ideas to be orthodox or heterodox, useful or useless, reliable or unreliable, indeed to define what counts as philosophy in a particular time and place. Holders of the key of knowledge, reviews established the access and control in the republic of letters, playing an analogous role the early scientific academies had in England, France and Germany. What is not reviewed is virtually unimportant or not philosophically relevant. Reviews were one the first means of intellectual and scientific recognition. This methodology allows us to determine the orders of learning and regimes of truth that those specific societies had.

A clear example of the impact of reviews in shaping the philosophical and scientific culture of the time is the Newton-Leibniz affair. Leibniz understood immediately the power of reviews and in 1668 asked the privilege to publish a review journal with the aim to provide a full account of the books in the catalogs of the Frankfurt fair. The reviews would have assessed the quality of the books and their political and religious orthodoxy. The books not included or not approved in the journal could be confiscated and the publisher prosecuted. Leibniz conceived reviews as a kind of censorship to keep control over knowledge.<sup>7</sup> The Newton-Leibniz affair starts with Leibniz's anonymous review to Wallis' *Opera* in the *Acta eruditorum* (1696), where he proclaimed the originality of his own method for the infinitesimal calculus. In 1700 in the *Acta* Leibniz reviewed N. Fatio de Duillier's work in which he defended the independent discovery of his method. In 1704 Newton published his *Tractatus de quadratura curvarum*, which was positively reviewed by Leibniz in the *Acta* (1705), but in which there is a controversial statement about the use of similar methods for the calculations of fluxions or differences. In 1708 in the *Philosophical Transactions* John Keill emphasized how Newton was the first to discover the method and charged Leibniz for appropriation of Newtonian ideas. Leibniz complained to the president of the Royal Society, at that time Newton himself, asking for a rectification. Newton nominated a commission within the Royal Society to investigate the case of the priority. In 1713 the commission published the *Commercium epistolicum* stating that Keill was right. Newton wrote an anonymous review to the *Commercium* in the *Philosophical Transactions* (1715) in which he was considered himself as the inventor of the infinitesimal calculus. The review had a profound effect on Leibniz's reputation in England, but also in Europe. Reviews play a central role in this affair in shaping the reputation of intellectuals and recent researches have shown how this kind of practices skillfully manipulated the backstage philoso-

<sup>7</sup> See Widmann 1963; Gantet 2018.

phy that supported the overt civility of the republic of letters. The firm authority over knowledge will constitute the Enlightenment as the age of Newton in every discipline from physics to ethics, from metaphysics to anthropology. Furthermore, reviews firmly shaped the public opinion orienting the readers and determining the trends and the tendencies in the society.

Another example is Fichte's failing attempt of founding a review journal in 1799. His aim was to establish a new journal in opposition to the *Allgemeine Literatur Zeitung*, which should include relevant reviews in order to influence the public opinion and the intellectual life of the time. This journal, like that of Leibniz, was related to the book fairs and should include review of all disciplines in connection to philosophy like mathematics, physics, hermeneutics, philology etc. His explicit objective was to create an "habit" in its readers. The attempt involved as editors not only Fichte, but also other philosophers of the calibre of Schlegel and Schelling, providing thus a specific tone to the journal. Like Leibniz, therefore, Fichte believed that reviews could be an effective tool to generate a monopoly of knowledge.

Reviews, in addition, represent a unique standpoint for the reconstructions of the regimes of knowledge and ignorance, in other words what was not known by different kinds of people in certain places or times. Reviews show what books were not read or known in specific countries or cultural contexts, and therefore the developments of specific trends. In Göttingen the acquisition records of the libraries show that librarians relied on the *Monthly* and the *Critical Review* to decide what books order from England, establishing thus the largest archive of English books in Germany and affecting the reception of British thought.<sup>8</sup>

One of the most common characteristics of reviews in the period considered by the project is the lack of a public authorship, that is anonymity of the reviewer. This is a pivotal aspect in order to understand the role reviews played in the making of eighteenth-century philosophy. Review anonymity protected the review from intellectual ostracism in the case of attacks of a famous philosopher and allowed him more freedom for criticism. Review anonymity guarantees a personal defence in case of support of unorthodox ideas. Given the high number of reviews written and the little time to read a book, anonymity protected reviewers in case of misunderstandings. Review anonymity was useful in case of self-review. Anonymity was fundamental also in reaction to possible negative reviews. Authors could publish anonymously, not only because they were afraid of censorship or to be charged with unorthodox doctrines, but also because they could protect themselves, their honour and dignity without revealing their identity. There are also different levels of anonymity, indeed sometimes reviews were signed just with one letter like "H." in the case of Johann Gottfried Herder's collaboration with *Der Teutsche Merkur*.

Anonymity was also important in both passive and active ways in order to avoid criticism based in social conventions. This is for instance the case of wom-

<sup>8</sup> See Basker 1997, 330.

en. Anonymity played a central role in concealing women authorship in the early modern period and this is the case also for the reviews. To Christoph Martin Wieland's *Der Teutsche Merkur* contributed regularly more than 30 women, among whom, concealed under initials, Charlotte Reclam, Johanne Susanne Bohl and Karoline von Brandenstein.

This leads to the question who were the reviewers in a vast range of knowledgeable people. There are exceptional cases in which the activity of the entire intellectual activity was comprised by reviewing books. Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777) in his 31 years of collaboration with the *Göttingische Zeitung von gelehrten Sachen* published more than 9,000 reviews.<sup>9</sup> Von Haller's contributions make Christian Wolff's effort of writing more than 500 reviews for the *Acta eruditorum* as a vain enterprise. If one looks at the reviewers are, of course not always, but most of the times, intellectuals, who scholarship considers as of "second rank." However, these alleged minor figures, almost unknown, wrote severe critical assessments of major philosophers, shaping the philosophical culture of the time. For instance, Christoph Pfautz, the mathematician who wrote the review to Newton's *Principia* in the *Acta eruditorum*, has not even an entry in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* and the only information we have derive from Zedler's *Universal-Lexicon* (1741) and Jöcher *Gelehrten-Lexicon* (1751).<sup>10</sup> Only looking at this professionalization and at the power of the reviews, concealed behind anonymity, it is possible to appreciate the anxiety of philosophers of reading reviews of their works to know his judgment on the book.

Having in mind these considerations, it is essential to determine how the professionalization of the reviewer and the establishment of the review as an intellectual practice led philosophers to change the way in which they wrote about philosophy. Reviews became the chief means of ascertaining their approval or disapproval or the indifference of the philosophical works.

And, it is also important to consider how much time traditionally major philosophers spent in writing reviews since from decade to decade there is an evident increased effort devoted to review. Looking only at Leibniz's contributions to the *Acta*, 40% of his activity for the journal was spent in writing reviews (ca. 41 reviews vs. 60 articles). Lessing at the age of 22 had already written more than 400 reviews for the *Berlinische privilegierte Zeitung* and became famous in Berlin for his activity of fine reviewer and critic, more than as philosopher or a dramatist. While before he wrote only short announcements or reports of new works, from 1751 on he started to write long critical assessments, the first of which was on Rousseau's *Discours sur les sciences et les arts*. Again, he wrote reviews on Montaigne's German translation of the *Essais*, on Rousseau's *Discours sur l'origine et les fondemens de l'inegalité parmi les hommes* or Mendelssohn's *Über die Empfindungen*.

<sup>9</sup> See Gantet-Krämer 2021.

<sup>10</sup> See Brancato's paper in this volume.

This fundamental activity of reviewing has passed unnoticed by scholarship. Therefore, there is room to answer innovative research questions like how were the reviews written? Who were the reviewers? Were the reviewed philosophers influenced by reviews in later editions of the reviewed book or in later books? Were philosophers influenced by the perspective of being reviewed? How do reviews help to reconstruct how philosophical texts were read and understood? How did reviews influence the philosophical works of other authors? What was read? Where was the book read or reviewed? What were the main philosophical interests in the various regions? In what language was a philosophy book read in various countries? How were translations judged? How fast did books circulate? How readily were books and their ideas spread? What was the role of women as authors and readers of reviews? How did reviews establish monopolies of philosophical knowledge? Not all of these questions will be answered in these volumes and not all of the vectors of study will be considered in all their facets. However, we hope that these investigations can highlight the importance of reviews and the activity of reviewing in the formation of early modern thought.

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