

# Reviews of the Pre-Critical Kant

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**Abstract:** This paper deals with the reviews of Kant's pre-critical philosophy before 1770, which involve minor works such as *Gedanken von der wahren Schätzung der lebendigen Kräfte*, *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*, *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes* and the *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*. These reviews involved authors who were protagonists of the philosophical debate of that time such as Johann Georg Hamman, Moses Mendelssohn, and Johann Gottfried Herder, and determined the way in which Kant developed his philosophical thought from an initial approach to natural science to more genuine metaphysical themes.

**Keywords:** Kant, reviews, announcement, critical assessment, pre-critical

## 1. Introduction

Immanuel Kant is one of the philosophers most studied by historians of philosophy for what his thought represented in terms of a break with the past and for the new paths of investigation that he opened. He is studied so much that when reading Kant's endless bibliography one often has the impression of finding very little that is original and one feels that everything has already been written about him. However, new approaches to the history of thought allow us to read even an author as famous as Kant in another light, revealing previously little known and little explored aspects. This is the case with the methodology of the history of knowledge, using the very particular epistemic genre that is the review.

To state that the reviews of Kant and by Kant have not been studied is certainly wrong: No one can deny the extensive bibliography inspired by Christian Garve's review of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* or the various polemical reviews published by Kant in the 1780s. However, work on these reviews, despite some valuable studies, has not been systematic and has been confined above all to the sphere of the so-called *Rezeptionsgeschichte*, certainly a very noble area of investigation, but not exhaustive for reconstructing the meaning that reviews had for the intellectual career of the philosopher from Königsberg.

As a man of his time, Kant was profoundly influenced by the culture of reviews, an influence which, however, is rarely acknowledged to exist, and certain-

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Referee List (DOI 10.36253/fup\_referee\_list)

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup\_best\_practice)

Marco Sgarbi, *Reviews of the Pre-Critical Kant*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0573-3.05, in Marco Sgarbi (edited by), *Philosophical Reviews in German Territories (1668-1799). Volume 1*, pp. 71-89, 2025, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0573-3, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0573-3

ly for good reasons, his philosophical genius. However, there are clues that lead us to suspect that reviews had a notable impact on the construction of Kant's philosophical thought and that Kant's ideas took very specific trajectories from the reading and writing of reviews.

While the reviews received and written by Kant from 1781 onwards, given the philosopher's already acquired notoriety, have at least been taken into consideration by scholars, this paper addresses those of the pre-critical period, which involve minor writings, in respect of which, often no real echo is perceived either in the philosophical panorama of the period, or in Kantian intellectual evolution.

These reviews involve authors who were protagonists of the philosophical debate of those years such as Johann Georg Hamman, Moses Mendelssohn, and Johann Gottfried Herder.<sup>1</sup> However, I do not take into consideration the one most studied by scholars,<sup>2</sup> namely Johann Schultz's review of Kant's dissertation *De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis* published in the *Königsbergische gelehrte und politische Zeitunge* in November 1771. This review was initially published anonymously, but its authorship is made certain by all the clues that emerge from Kant's private correspondence and its impact was immediate as can be seen from the letters to Marcus Herz.<sup>3</sup> This review marks a friendship that remained stable almost until Kant's death, a relationship profoundly marked by reviews of Kantian philosophy that led to significant changes in the second edition of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. However, this review appears at a moment in the development of Kant's "critical period" and deserves a separate investigation and for this reason it is not examined here.

## 2. The Early Reviews of Kant

The first work to have a certain response among critics was also the first work published by Kant in 1749, namely the *Gedanken von der wahren Schätzung der lebendigen Kräfte*, composed, with well-known unfortunate economic vicissitudes, in the period between 1744 and 1747. The work was ambitious and full of original ideas in its attempt to overcome the divisions between the Newtonian, Leibnizian and Cartesian schools. However, not all the ideas were developed systematically and this aspect was immediately captured by reviewers.

The first review was commissioned by Kant himself from his friend Ferdinand Wilhelm Mühlmann, as evidenced by a letter dated 23 August 1749, whose recipient for a long time was thought to be Albrecht von Haller.<sup>4</sup> The review ends with the same words with which Kant closes the letter.

<sup>1</sup> There is no claim to completeness or exhaustiveness in this research on the reviews of Kant.

<sup>2</sup> See Brandt 1981, Bonelli Munegato 1992; Morrison 1995.

<sup>3</sup> KGS, X, 133.

<sup>4</sup> See Fischer 1985a.

Kant's letter<sup>5</sup>

Ich habe noch eine Fortsetzung dieser Gedancken in Bereitschaft die nebst einer fernern Bestätigung derselben andere eben dahin abzielende Betrachtungen in sich begreifen wird.

Review<sup>6</sup>

Der gelehrte Herr Verfasser hat noch eine Fortsetzung dieser Gedacken in Bereitschaft, welche sowohl eine Bestätigung derselben, als auch eine Hinzuthuung noch anderer dahin abzielender Untersuchungen in sich halten wird.

Mühlmann's anonymous review appeared on Friday, 14 November 1749 in the *Franckfurtischer Gelehrten Zeitungen*, a magazine dedicated almost exclusively to book reviews from all over Europe.<sup>7</sup> The review takes up approximately four columns and is significantly longer than the others which were usually limited to the space of half a column or a little more.

The reviewer justifies the length of his review by underlining how the author of the work is worthy of detailed analysis, especially in consideration of his numerous intuitions and the depth of his thought. Kant's ability to clearly explain the concepts of Leibniz's philosophy, as no one had ever managed to do before, is emphasized. The aspect that seems to strike Mühlmann most about the first parts of the work is the total compatibility in the description of forces between Leibnizian physics and Cartesian mathematics. He also notes how in the description of the force, Kant distances himself from Leibniz's conclusions, listing their various points of divergence, all revolving around the adoption of the principles of Newtonian dynamics, which however do not appear explicitly in the text of the review. It is precisely in contrast to Leibniz that Mühlmann tries to show Kant's originality, without however taking on his defense or supporting his thesis, but simply reporting the differences and leaving the judgment to the reader. What emerges clearly from the review is that Kant follows the Leibnizian tradition and tries to improve it.

On the same day as the letter to Mühlmann, that is 23 August 1749, Kant attempted the great coup and wrote to the greatest mathematician of his time, probably the only one to have a complete understanding of the Leibnizian and Newtonian systems, namely Leonhard Euler. Kant tried to stimulate a reaction and judgment from Euler on his work, asking for "a benevolent and detailed examination of these modest thoughts [...] of your most esteemed public or private judgment."<sup>8</sup> What Kant hoped for is evidently a review. Unlike Mühlmann, however, what he got was only silence. We therefore do not know Euler's thoughts on Kant's writing, but perhaps it was not so different from the mockery received by Lessing's review of *Das Neuste aus dem Reiche des Witzes* in July 1751. Calling it a review is perhaps an exaggeration — they are four lapidary lines, a small poem dedicated to Kant's work in which Lessing contemptuously

<sup>5</sup> KGS, X, 2.

<sup>6</sup> *Franckfurtischer Gelehrten Zeitungen*, 91 (1749), 503.

<sup>7</sup> *Franckfurtischer Gelehrten Zeitungen*, 91 (1749), 501–3.

<sup>8</sup> Fischer 1985b, 217–18.

judges as arrogant the Kantian attempt to resolve such a difficult and age-old question. The poem in English sounds like this: “Kant undertook an arduous task, to educate the world. He evaluated the living forces, without first evaluating his own.”<sup>9</sup> In short, we do not know how much Lessing understood about Kant, but he must not have liked what he read, unless he wrote these lines out of mere satirical whim without even opening the book, as Samuel Christian Lappenberg taught in those years in his *Anfangsgründe der Rezensionskunst zum Gebrauch der Vorlesungen* (1778).

On 10 July 1750, the publication of the work by Martin Eberhard Dorn was announced in the *Hamburgische Berichte von den neuesten Gelehrten Sachen*.<sup>10</sup> Another anonymous review appeared in the *Göttingische Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen* in April 1750. The journal was directed by Albrecht von Haller at the time and some have hypothesized that he was the author of the review.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, we know that Haller was one of the few lucky owners of a copy of the *Gedanken*. However, from the list of over 9900 reviews attributed to Haller, this review is excluded.

According to the reviewer, Kant approaches the problem of the evaluation of living forces “with profound erudition” and “with all the respect due to the results obtained by the great Leibniz.”<sup>12</sup> The reviewer decides not to give a critical judgment on Kant’s ideas, but prefers to analytically expose the contents, leaving readers to determine whether Kant’s solution is convincing. Reading this review reveals a more metaphysical than physical interest on the part of the reviewer, who, exactly like Mühlmann, sees in Kant a perfect continuation of the Leibnizian school which tries to apply Cartesian mathematics to the understanding of natural phenomena.

The criticism came in March 1752 with a review of the *Nova Acta Eruditorum*.<sup>13</sup> As Giorgio Tonelli has said, a negative response from the Leipzig newspaper was widely expected given the treatment that Wolff had received in Kant’s writing.<sup>14</sup> The review immediately goes into the merits of Kant’s thesis by analyzing the two main steps which show the weakness, as well as the ineffectiveness of the Kantian solution. The first step is the one in which Kant attempts to derive the origin of movement from the general concept of active force, of which an extensive extract is reported, translated into Latin.<sup>15</sup> The passage is §4, the one in which Kant expresses his first conception of space and time. The reviewer states that all Kantian arguments are nonsense ideas (*omnia haec sine mente soni sunt*) and that experience provides a secure guide to solving the problem. The

<sup>9</sup> Lessing 1998, 168. “K\* unternimmt ein schwer Geschäft/Der Welt zum Unterricht. Er schätzt die lebendigen Kräfte/Nur seine schätzt er nicht.”

<sup>10</sup> *Hamburgische Berichte von den neuesten Gelehrten Sachen*, 19 (10 July 1750), 412.

<sup>11</sup> Grillenzoni 1998, 176; Habel 2007, 392.

<sup>12</sup> *Göttingische Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*, 37 (13 April 1750), 290-94: 291.

<sup>13</sup> *Nova Acta Eruditorum*, 2 (1752), 177-79.

<sup>14</sup> Tonelli 1957.

<sup>15</sup> This is a particularly interesting aspect of the reviews of the period, that is, translating works into other languages by making long extracts.

second step is that of the thesis on the arbitrariness of the three dimensions of space, which for the reviewer is nothing more than raving, an invention like a dream or a delusion. The review ends laconically by stating that these few lines of criticism are already too much time wasted and too much paper wasted for a book of such little value. In short, as often happens with little known authors, Kant's first work did not have the reception he expected.

Not even his second work of a certain consistency, *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*, which in the eyes of Kant, still without a university degree, should have given him fame, had hoped for success. Kant had first tried to affirm his ideas, or rather to make his name known through them, given that the work had been published anonymously and that probably behind his anonymity was the fear that his thoughts would not be taken adequately into consideration due to his academic status.

Success eluded him, not through Kant's own fault, but due to the fact that the publisher, Johann Friedrich Petersen, went bankrupt and all his possessions, including copies of all the books he published and which had already been announced in the *Messkatalog*, including that of Kant, were confiscated.<sup>16</sup> However, we know from the *Wöchentliche Königsbergische Frag- und Anzeigungsnachrichten* of 1 May 1756 that among the "things that are for sale in Königsberg [...] at the printer Johann Friedrich Driest," the one who would later be Kant's publisher from 1756 to 1760, was "available: M. Kants *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*." Despite this immediate block on sales, in 1755 two reviews appeared, probably from copies distributed by Kant himself.

The first was published in the *Jenaische gelehrte Zeitungen* on 14 June 1755.<sup>17</sup> The anonymous reviewer gave a positive review of the anonymous work, treating the author with deference, underlining his ability to expose even the most complex ideas in the easiest way. Ultimately, the reviewer recommended everyone to read this book full of novelties, the only contribution from Huygens' time worthy of being mentioned. The main innovations are the time for Saturn's orbital revolution, the formation of its rings, the thesis of infinite space and time, the formation of nebulae, the continuous rising and setting of the universe, the absence of divine intervention after creation, and the origin of the universe according to mechanical principles. The reviewer realizes that very little can be proven of what the author says and that everything is reduced to the field of conjecture, sometimes taken to extremes, but the hypotheses are nevertheless presented judiciously and with caution. In short, according to the reviewer, Kant provided an original and innovative contribution to the cosmology of time.

If we exclude the first introductory lines, the exact same review was published a month later in the *Freye Urteile und Nachrichten* of Hamburg on 15 July 1755.<sup>18</sup> In the issues of those months, by sampling, there are no other identical

<sup>16</sup> Dreher 1896, 174.

<sup>17</sup> *Jenaische gelehrte Zeitungen*, 45 (1755), 355–59.

<sup>18</sup> *Freye Urteile und Nachrichten*, 12 (1755), 429–32.

or partially identical reviews. The reviewer probably sent the review to both journals.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, neither Kant's letters nor the networks of the collaborators of these two magazines provide further information to reconstruct the genesis of these reviews. The work did not have the desired impact, as Kant himself complained in 1761, Johann Heinrich Lambert arrived independently at similar conclusions without knowing his thoughts and therefore without mentioning *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte*<sup>20</sup> — or at least this is what Johann F. Goldbeck claims, perhaps naively.<sup>21</sup> In any case, Kant felt obliged to summarize the theses of his *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte* in the seventh reflection of the second part of his new writing, *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes* (1763, but probably late 1762).

### 3. The Reviews in the *Briefe*

It is of this writing that we find the subsequent review of Kant in the *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend* of 1764. Indeed, in this journal, in which the reviews were published in the form of letters, two more reviews of two other of Kant's works also appeared in the following year, *Die falsche Spitzfindigkeit der vier syllogistischen Figuren erwiesen* (1762) and *Versuch den Begriff der negativen Größen in die Weltweisheit einzuführen* (1763). All these reviews are anonymous and their attribution is still uncertain.

Manfred Khuen certainly attributes them to the theologian Friedrich Gabriel Resewitz, while Erich Adickes, Karl Vorländer, Giorgio Tonelli, David Walford, and John Zammito attribute them to Moses Mendelssohn. Some biographers, starting from a note by Christian Jacob Kraus to Samuel Gottlieb Wald's *Gedächtnissrede auf Kant* (1804), have handed down the anecdote according to which Kant stated that this review was the one that made him famous in Germany and that this was by Mendelssohn. Kraus' note presents a small margin of ambiguity, as well as imprecision. Correcting Wald, who argued that Kant's success occurred after the *Preisschrift*, Kraus reports:

In reality, Mendelssohn first *presented him to the public* in the *Briefe* through a review of his two writings 1) on the existence of God, and 2) on the false subtlety of syllogistic figures. The highlighted ones are Kant's words, which he said to me once when I spoke to him about the old Hamann, with whom the same thing happened.<sup>22</sup>

The note is imprecise because there are three reviews and certainly all by the same author. The note is also potentially ambiguous because if it is true that the personal anecdote is very strong and refers to Mendelssohn, it is also true

<sup>19</sup> There is no evidence of common collaborators.

<sup>20</sup> Grillenzoni 1998, 200–4.

<sup>21</sup> Goldbeck 1781, 248–49.

<sup>22</sup> Reicke 1860, 21.

that Kant could have been wrong about his past, as we know was often the case, and it can be hypothesized that in the interlocution Kant was thinking of the reviews and not the reviewer. However, these are all hypotheses. To help attribute the authorship of the reviews to Mendelssohn there is also a testimony closer in time, namely a letter from March 1767 from Herder to Johann George Scheffner, in which he says that Kant's writings "have never been reviewed worthily and in detail, and Mendelssohn undoubtedly did not understand Kant in his *Beweisgrund*."<sup>23</sup> Again the note is ambiguous because it cannot be certain whether Mendelssohn did not understand Kant in general, or did not misunderstand him in his review.

In any case, these reviews were included in Mendelssohn's *Jubiläumsausgabe*, in which the co-editors of the critical edition, Michael Albrecht and Eva J. Engel, had opposite opinions on the authorship of these reviews. Albrecht attributed the reviews to Resewitz because Nicolai wrote to Herder in 1768 that all the contributions signed with Q and Tz came from him, while Engel for stylistic reasons states that the author is Mendelssohn and that Nicolai's attribution may not be correct as there had been other cases in which the same letters "FII" have been attributed to two different authors, in this case Mendelssohn and Lessing.<sup>24</sup> The only thing that is certain is that Resewitz's collaboration with the *Briefe* began in January 1764,<sup>25</sup> but this does not mean that Mendelssohn stopped contributing to the development of the journal.

The first review of *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund* is divided into two letters composed of two parts each with a total length of 32 pages and was published between 26 April 1764 and 10 May 1764. The reviewer perfectly captures the danger of the great challenge launched by Kant and wonders whether, after the entire republic of letters used every means to demonstrate the existence of God from the most abstruse algebraic formulas to the lowest worm that lives in the dust, with this writing Kant was not too bold and would not go against all the scholars of his time. The reviewer particularly appreciates the attitude of modesty on the part of Kant, whose work is not intended to be presented as a solution to such a complex problem, but rather as a simple argument for the demonstration of the existence of God. According to the reviewer, the author correctly warns the reader that much evidence will be lacking or that many explanations will be inadequate or that many solutions will be weak and defective. Above all, the reviewer appreciates the way in which Kant seems to be able to accept criticisms and suggestions about his own thinking. "An author who announces himself in this way in his preface" – states the reviewer – "deserves to be read and studied in depth."<sup>26</sup> In this review, the rhetoric of the work is therefore cap-

<sup>23</sup> Herder 1988, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Mendelssohn 2004, 414–35. There is also the possibility of a compromise solution: the reviews were written by Resewitz and stylistically revised by Mendelssohn.

<sup>25</sup> Habel 2007, 376.

<sup>26</sup> *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 26 April (1764), 71.

tured and the work is also written to meet the taste and sensibility of the reader and of the reviewer, unlike previous writings in which Kant claimed to say the definitive word on the subject.

Paul Guyer, who has studied these reviews in depth and who attributes them to Mendelssohn, shows how the reviewer subtly moves between the different Kantian argumentative strategies in such a way as to make the proof of God's existence expounded in Mendelssohn's *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften*, published that year, as most convincing.<sup>27</sup> This could be the most damning proof of the attribution of the review to Mendelssohn. Leaving aside the authorship of the work, the reviewer never presents himself as excessively critical: he complains about some obscure passages or some leaps in reasoning, due to misunderstandings of Kant. According to Guyer, these misunderstandings on the part of the reviewer are deliberate, precisely to leave room for his own thesis which would emerge from this review as the winner, so much so as to force Kant to abandon his formulation of the proof of the existence of God in the later *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.

Indeed, the impression that the reviewer reviews the Kantian work keeping more firmly in mind what he himself knows and is convinced of than what Kant writes is strong. In fact, the reviewer does not seem to grasp the novelty of Kant's work: the fact that we must look more at the origin of the knowledge of the thing, at the fact that existence adds nothing new to the concept of the subject, but what changes is its position; these are all aspects that the reviewer deals with quickly and/or that he does not understand, denouncing their obscurity. The reviewer is unable to follow Kant in his reasoning and is unable to follow him precisely because he asks for clarification on what the absolute position of a thing is: "the author must also clarify what he means by absolute position." However, if this concept is not clearly understood, it is difficult to understand the rest of Kant's argument, so much so that the reviewer is ultimately forced to state that the thesis of scholastic ontology, in particular that of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, according to which existence would be a complement of essence understood as complete internal determination, is still the clearest definition on the matter. But with respect to this point Kant is explicit in highlighting the shortcomings of Baumgarten's definition and indeed Mendelssohn would also partly be so in 1785 in his *Morgenstunden*. However, we know that in 1762 Mendelssohn in his *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in metaphysischen Wissenschaften* (selected 1763, published 1764) argued for a modified version of the Baumgartenian ontological proof.

In short, it is not clear from the review whether and to what extent the reviewer wants to distort the review in favor of his own argument (and obviously this would tilt the authorship towards Mendelssohn) or whether, instead, he did not understand the Kantian text and interpreted it using the filters of the philosophies that he knew better, particularly the Baumgartenian one. We do not know

<sup>27</sup> Guyer 2020, 101.



whether the remarks in this review were the cause that led Kant to change his point of view or whether the change should be attributed to the internal developments of his thought. What is certain is the reviewer's main interest in purely ontological topics; in fact all the other parts of Kant's text are quickly examined with some passages altered. At most the reviewer limits himself to making some notes on the compatibility of mechanism with finalism, but without elaborating detailed comments. The reviewer, however, expresses his desire to review the *Versuch den Begriff der negativen Größen*, whose project appears similar to that of *Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund*.

The *Versuch* was reviewed between 2 and 9 May 1765, therefore it was published almost a year after the *Beweisgrund* review. The review was quite substantial: more than twenty pages, for an essay of about forty pages in total. To the reviewer, the essay seemed to be an original and significant contribution in the reconciliation between metaphysics and mathematics, above all for its ability to use the concepts of the latter in the former, just as had happened at the dawn of the modern era for the philosophy of nature, which later became so dear to Kant in the *Einleitung* of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. The author appreciates the distinction between the logical opposition that leads to a *nihil negativum*, which is irrepresentable, and the real opposition that leads to a *nihil privatitum*, which is representable. This distinction in the metaphysical field is important for the reviewer because it allows us to conceive nothingness in two different ways and shows how opposite predicates can be attributed without contradiction, even if with opposition, to the same subject, in the same respect.

The reviewer appears very impressed by the fruitfulness of Kant's metaphysical reflection and faithfully reports the examples of impenetrability, heat, pleasure and displeasure, and virtue, which together make up a good part of the review. He then comes to the commentary on the last part, in which, according to the reviewer, the author explains through two principles the application of these negative concepts "with a modesty worthy of an expert in profound issues."<sup>28</sup> The two principles that Kant arrives at, namely one which states that in all the natural changes that occur in the world the sum of what is positive neither increases nor decreases, and one which states that all real causes give a result that is equivalent to zero, are extremely fruitful and shed new light in the understanding of both cosmology and psychology in a more in-depth way. As the reviewer explains, however fruitful these considerations are, they do not clarify anything about the nature of divinity, whose difference from all other beings is so immeasurable that it is not possible to transfer these concepts and principles from them to God himself. The concept of divinity, the reviewer reiterates, can only be drawn from us. This is an idea fully in line with the previous review of the *Beweisgrund* and with Mendelssohn's *Abhandlung*.

The reviewer concludes with two personal opinions regarding the work. On the one hand he states that the author concludes his work with a "very strange

<sup>28</sup> *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 9 May (1765), 168.

question, which he asks all philosophers to answer.” The question is declined by the reviewer in three different ways. The first asks “why, since there is something, there is another,” the second asks “how, since one thing exists, can another be cancelled out,” and finally, the reviewer adds, “if I correctly understand what the author means, what makes a cause a cause, a force a force.”<sup>29</sup> For the reviewer, it is a question of reflecting not from a logical point of view, but from a real one, and this is the Kantian novelty. The reviewer concludes the review by stating that: “I do not undertake to contribute in any way to the solution of this question, but I am very anxious to see a correct solution to it, especially since the author promises that he will one day express to the world what he thinks of it.”<sup>30</sup> Finally, the reviewer takes leave of the reader by saying that “if I have entertained you for too long with these little writings and their abstract content, forgive me. My spirit found more nourishment there than in some great systems.”<sup>31</sup> The reference to the small writings is probably not only to the *Versuch*, but to all the reviews of Kant of these two years, the latest of which is to *Die falsche Spitzfindigkeit*.

Unlike the *Beweisgrund* and the *Versuch*, which were works intended for a wide audience, the *Die falsche Spitzfindigkeit* was an *Einladungsschrift* for the winter semester of 1762/1763 written for university students, even if it is clear that the content exceeded their ability to understand the core of his argument.<sup>32</sup> The review consists of 12 pages and appeared on May 2, 1765.<sup>33</sup> This review is less pregnant than the previous two and contains extensive extracts from Kant’s text, quoted directly, but appropriately modified. The reviewer describes Kant as a bold man who wants to fight against the bad practice in German academies and universities of studying logic through a sterile syllogistic. The review is enthusiastic because it praises Kant as an autonomous thinker, capable of penetrating complex topics deeply and with originality, and the reviewer hopes to read many academic writings of such value, instead of useless disputes, just as he hopes that many professors will abandon the syllogistic in favor of this new type of logic.

The reviewer captures the originality of Kant’s essay: that is, the primacy of judgment on concepts to obtain clear and distinct knowledge. Furthermore, he emphasizes as particularly new the conception according to which both understanding and reason are based on the faculty of judging. This faculty of judging would in turn be based on that of internal sense, which elaborates thoughts through a specific representation of an object. Finally, the reviewer appreciates the attempt to reduce all human knowledge to unity. Thus the reviewer concludes “we can see that the author is on the right path to simplify the theory of the human mind in a correct and natural way; which not only facilitates his ap-

<sup>29</sup> *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 9 May (1765), 175.

<sup>30</sup> *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 9 May (1765), 175.

<sup>31</sup> *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 9 May (1765), 176.

<sup>32</sup> Lee, Pozzo, Sgarbi and von Wille 2012.

<sup>33</sup> *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 2 May (1765), 147–58.

plication to the knowledge of truth, but also opens the way to penetrate more deeply and with greater certainty into the nature of the soul.”<sup>34</sup> He then adds a personal note, “while reading it also occurred to me that, by following the author’s path, various obstacles that stand in the way of discovering the *ars characteristic* could be removed.”<sup>35</sup> We do not know whether the reviewer followed up on these ideas: neither Mendelssohn nor Resewitz engaged in such philosophical reflections. It was certainly among Kant’s intentions to develop an innovative logical system that could surpass the attempts of a Leibniz, a Lambert or a Ploucquet.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. The Reviews of Kant’s *Beobachtungen*

In the period in which the reviews in the *Briefe* appeared, Kant published in 1763 the *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*. Of this work the biographer Ludwig Ernst Borowski states that

In the journals people preferred these *Beobachtungen* to similar works by Crousaz, Hutcheson, André and others, and praised [...] the genius with which these pages had been written. In the *Lindauschen Nachrichten* the author was defined as the La Bruyère of Germany. Several reviews observe that this Kantian work should not be missing either in the studies of scholars or in ladies’ dressing tables.<sup>37</sup>

However, no scholar has explored this statement in depth, and it is reasonable to ask which reviews he was referring to. Indeed, *Beobachtungen* is by far Kant’s best-reviewed pre-critical work with at least 11 reviews, including those of later editions. The first known review is the one that appeared in the *Königsbergische gelehrte und politische Zeitungen* on 30 April 1764. Johann Georg Hamann was the author, although the review was published anonymously. It occupied approximately four columns.<sup>38</sup> Hamann frames Kant’s work within the series of works by Crousaz, Hutcheson, André, and Diderot, exactly as Borowski reminds us in his note, exalting the fruitfulness of his ideas. However, the review is not free from criticism and tends to diminish Kant’s value. First of all, Hamann accuses Kant of behaving more like a “philosopher” than an “observer,” contrary to what he promised. Furthermore, he criticizes the length of Kant’s explanations to clarify the meaning of the words, while failing to precisely define the purpose of his observations. Finally, a criticism of Kantian aesthetic subjectivism is implied, because of the emphasis given to feelings that concern the subject rather than with the definition of the object. According to Hamann the very concept of “feeling” appears obscure in the thousand meanings used by

<sup>34</sup> *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 2 May (1765), 157.

<sup>35</sup> *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, 2 May (1765), 157–58.

<sup>36</sup> Sgarbi 2016; Sgarbi 2022.

<sup>37</sup> Borowski 1804, 32.

<sup>38</sup> *Königsbergische gelehrte und politische Zeitungen*, 30 April (1764), 101–3.

the author. Even in the conclusion of the review, which deals with the section on genius, Hamann seems to be ironic about Kant's attempt at an education of sentimentality and taste. Several times the reviewer seems to suggest alternatives to Kant, from Wilkes to Savigny to Edmund Burke, whose identity he did not know since his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) was published anonymously. It was probably this review by Hamann, according to Piero Giordanetti's reconstructions, that introduced Burke to Kant, as can be seen from the *Bemerkungen*.<sup>39</sup>

We know that Herder was not particularly happy with this review by Hamann. After complaining that no reviews had appeared in the *Briefe*, on 21 May 1765 he wrote:

in the latest issue of *Lindau* great praise is given to Kant's *Beauty*, celebrated as La Bruyère of Germany. I am increasingly sharing this writing by my teacher whom I respect more and more and I am now almost of the opinion that your point of view [Hamann] in reviewing it totally diverges from his. However, the secret spring of the praise of the Swiss seems to be his Swiss style and his Rousseauian mentality since Rousseau always remains their God.<sup>40</sup>

Herder and Borowski refer to the same review, of almost fifteen pages, which appeared anonymously in the seventh volume of the *Ausführliche und kritische Nachrichten* in 1764.<sup>41</sup> The reviewer believes that this writing will give the author more fame among the public than many other scholastic writings produced by him and in which some errors have been made. The reviewer, therefore, shows that he knows Kant's other works. This writing is recommended for its content, and for its way of writing (extremely understandable and at the same time refined), not only to philosophers, but also to women and to all readers of any nationality. Like Hamann, the reviewer emphasizes that the aesthetic perspective is sentimental and subjective: the beautiful and the sublime are not about objects, but about the sensations they provoke in subjects. The reviewer considers a conclusion reached by Kant to be fundamental, without giving it the space it deserves. The conclusion is that with respect to nature's intentions, both the higher and the meaner sides of human beings lead to a noble expression, even if we are often too short-sighted to see it. In other words, in the great plan of nature, everything turns, even if not consciously or intentionally, towards the realization of morality in the world. This was a theme that Kant would develop in the 1780s.

In any case, with respect to this conclusion, the reviewer states that it is easy to ask numerous questions of the author, but the overall argument is clear: he does not want to turn human beings into angels or the damned.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Giordanetti 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Herder 1988, 38.

<sup>41</sup> *Ausführliche und kritische Nachrichten*, 7 (1765), 535–51. Most likely the reviewer is Johann Gottlob Lorenz Sembeck, the editor of the journal.

<sup>42</sup> *Ausführliche und kritische Nachrichten*, 7 (1765), 544.

His attempt is to reconcile human freedom with the causality of nature. The author does not always succeed in this attempt, but even in this case, according to the reviewer, we must still thank the author “for having drawn our attention to a truth that is not sufficiently recognized and which is undeniably important, and his attempt could push the deepest minds to better results.”<sup>43</sup> The reviewer then quickly deals with the third and fourth chapters, sharing almost the entire section on the history of taste from its beginnings up to his time. The conclusion of the review is surprising. The reviewer suggests that Kant should put aside his commitment to philosophical writings and use his genius to serve the development of good taste, and provocatively he concludes with a rhetorical question: “would not it be enough for him to become the German La Bruyère?”<sup>44</sup> If we put aside the Kantian ambitions, unlike Hamann’s review which sometimes gives the impression of his not having read the text with due accuracy, this account of the *Beobachtungen* is well informed and captures the salient points of the work.

On 9 October 1766 a new anonymous review of the second edition was published in the *Hallische Neue Gelehrte Zeitungen*.<sup>45</sup> This two-page review was largely laudatory and opened with the statement that “Kant belongs to that small group of German philosophers who thinks not only thoroughly, straightly and neatly, but also in a beautifully clear and natural manner.”<sup>46</sup> The reviewer compares Kant to “Sulzer, Mendelssohn and Abbt.”<sup>47</sup> This reviewer is also familiar with Kant’s other writings, and has respect for them. The reviewer then proceeds to summarize the different parts very briefly, of which he does not particularly appreciate the third due to its slightly more frivolous and trivial ideas.

The *Neue Critische Nachrichten* also published a five-page review of the second edition in 1766.<sup>48</sup> However, it is a synthetic account which, unlike the previous reviews, focuses in particular on the third part of Kant’s writing, on the beautiful and the sublime in men and women, and it dedicates more than a page to this topic, as if the reviewer had a particular interest. The reviewer is probably the editor of the journal itself, that is Johann Carl Dähnert, who had already dealt with the topic in his *Beyträge zum Nutzen und Vergnügen aus der Sittenlehre* (1754). A short announcement to the second edition also appears in the *Wöchentliche Nachrichten von Gelehrten Sachen* in 1766.<sup>49</sup> The work is characterized as refined and after a short list of the titles of the various sections the review focuses in this case on the taste of women and the differences of the different characters. It is not a long account, but it certainly invites the reader to read the book because

<sup>43</sup> *Ausführliche und kritische Nachrichten*, 7 (1765), 545.

<sup>44</sup> *Ausführliche und kritische Nachrichten*, 7 (1765), 551.

<sup>45</sup> *Hallische Neue Gelehrte Zeitungen*, 82 (1766), 651–53.

<sup>46</sup> *Hallische Neue Gelehrte Zeitungen*, 82 (1766), 651.

<sup>47</sup> *Hallische Neue Gelehrte Zeitungen*, 82 (1766), 651.

<sup>48</sup> *Neue Critische Nachrichten*, 44 (1766), 345–49.

<sup>49</sup> *Wöchentliche Nachrichten von Gelehrten Sachen*, 27 (1766), 340–41.

he will not be disappointed. The same review also appeared in the *Neue Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen* on 2 October 1766.<sup>50</sup>

The review that appeared in 1766 in the *Jenaische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen* has a decidedly different tone.<sup>51</sup> He certainly praises the refined rhetoric of the text but accuses Kant of having forgotten to mention all the immediate precedents on which his reflection is based, for example Longinus, Boileau, Huet, Gerard, Home, Meier, Baumgarten and Mendelssohn. The reviewer then explicitly admits that he completely differs from the author's methods of analysis and conclusions: Kant should have looked for the sources of the perception of beauty inherent in the natural laws that govern the soul. He should have compared the feelings of truth, goodness and beauty and should have discussed important topics such as when the sensations deceive and when they allow a reliable judgement, and all the differences and variations in the feeling of beauty in different individuals. Here, says the reviewer, "we find little of this."<sup>52</sup> Kant dwells on extrinsic observations without going into serious philosophical reflections. In short, everything that was exalted in some reviews is blamed by this reviewer, who evidently has more philosophical interests.

In 1767, two announcements of just a few lines appeared in the *Erneuerte Berichte von Gelehrten Sachen* and in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*.<sup>53</sup> Meanwhile, in 1771 the third edition was also published by Hartknoch, which enjoyed two announcements in the *Russische Bibliothek*<sup>54</sup> and the *Gelehrte Zeitung*<sup>55</sup> and two longer reviews in the *Neue Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*<sup>56</sup> and the *Auserlesen Bibliothek der neusten deutschen Litteratur*.<sup>57</sup> The first review in the *Neue Zeitungen* is little more than an announcement, which reiterates Kant's originality as a philosopher and also the importance of his writing. The review published in the *Auserlesen Bibliothek* is much more detailed. Kant's work is framed within the developments of the doctrine on the feeling of the beautiful and the sublime of the eighteenth century, and his contribution not only to the development of the fine arts, but also of psychology. In this sense, Kant's emphasis on feeling leads him to stand out among all his contemporaries. However, the reviewer then examines the different sections of the work without offering any critical insights. In general, therefore, the latest reviews have little informative value and only aim to announce the publication of the volume.

<sup>50</sup> *Neue Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*, 2 October (1766), 626–28.

<sup>51</sup> *Jenaische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen*, 71 (1766), 625–26.

<sup>52</sup> *Jenaische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen*, 71 (1766), 626.

<sup>53</sup> *Erneuerte Berichte von Gelehrten Sachen*, 2 (1767), 128; *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*, 2 (1767), 273.

<sup>54</sup> *Russische Bibliothek*, 1 (1773), 530.

<sup>55</sup> *Gelehrte Zeitung*, 2 (1772), 88.

<sup>56</sup> *Neue Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*, 57 (1771), 793–94.

<sup>57</sup> *Auserlesen Bibliothek der neusten deutschen Litteratur*, 2 (1772), 269–74.

In 1765 a review of *Untersuchung über die Deutlichkeit* was published in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek*.<sup>58</sup> The review, however, was aimed primarily at Mendelssohn's essay *Abhandlung über die Evidenz* with which the *Untersuchung* was published at the behest of the Royal Academy of Berlin. Upon inspection, therefore, the review is not immediately recognizable: Kant's name is never mentioned. The reviewer is anonymous and signed "B.". This initial identifies for sure the author as Resewitz.<sup>59</sup> While the examination of Mendelssohn is decidedly positive, the tone of the review of Kant varies. Resewitz speaks of thoughts that are mainly sketched, but not adequately developed and carried forward. He recognizes the audacity and originality of Kantian thought in detaching itself from the traditional method of doing philosophy and from the ideas brought forward by Mendelssohn. In the short space of four pages that he dedicates to Kant's writing, Resewitz focuses in particular on these new and original aspects that oppose him to the tradition that would associate mathematics with metaphysics in terms of contents and methods. The exposition of the contents is extremely concise, but faithful to the Kantian dictate, especially in showing the differences between mathematics and metaphysics. The point at which Kant asks whether the principles of morality reside in the faculty of knowledge or in feeling remains a little unclear, especially for a less accustomed reader. The reviewer's interest is centered on metaphysics, and he demonstrates his agreement with Kant's argument about its limits. For Resewitz the author already has in mind "a new philosophical system" from which much can be expected in the future: "the few information that have been provided to us so far are very clear and perhaps their connection and the method based on it will be the most correct we've ever had."<sup>60</sup> According to the reviewer, all this can be deduced, "if one has not misunderstood his tone of philosophizing;" also "from other philosophical writings" that have paved the way towards this direction. The mention of "other philosophical writings" is a cryptic reference to the possibility that Resewitz is the author of the reviews in the *Briefe*. This review however, unlike those published in the *Briefe*, has a very different tone. First of all, he does not report the most important Kantian passages, but the text is summarized in a very succinct way and finally the critical judgment is less acute and penetrating: it seems to be very similar to that of the other reviews. Therefore, the phrase "wo wir seinen Ton zu philosophiren nicht ganz misskennen," could mean that Resewitz did not read Kant's other philosophical writings, but that he was still aware of the contents, precisely through the reviews.

The last significant reviews of pre-critical Kant are to the *Träume*. The first was Herder's review which appeared in the *Königsbergsche gelehrte und politische Zeitungen*, on 3 March 1766 and was largely laudatory, so much so that it played

<sup>58</sup> *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 1 (1765), 137–60.

<sup>59</sup> Parthey 1842.

<sup>60</sup> *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 1 (1765), 154.

with the title of the work: a writing about dreams that make you dream.<sup>61</sup> The complimentary tone is accompanied by an exposition of the content, sometimes even emphatic enough to describe Kant's work as a dialogue between the author and a genius of philosophy, like Socrates speaking with his demon. The main interest of the reviewer, whose interventions are interspersed with the summary of the theses of the paper, is on the Kantian solution of the moral unity of the spiritual world acting in the world. The book was announced anonymously in the *Jenaische Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*, on September 15 1766. The review states that in this writing a "mystical jargon that distinguishes a certain school among the Germans" dominates. The first part of the book is considered as original, or at least its sophistication makes the arguments at least appear as if new. The reviewer prefers the second part where the author rejects Swedenborg's false arguments but he never deals with Kantian ideas.<sup>62</sup> A short announcement of the publication of Kant's book is provided by Johann Georg Heinrich Feder in his *Compendium Historiae Litterariae Novissimae*. The review is polemical in stating that the author is as brilliant a philosopher "as he is a witty mocker" so much that "after reading these pages we doubted whether he wrote seriously or in jest."<sup>63</sup> Feder emphasizes how Kant distances himself from the metaphysical positions of the time, from the way of doing philosophy in a systematic manner and how with this writing he wants to make fun of these approaches. Where this might seem like a compliment, in the review, however, it seems like a lack of respect towards a philosophical culture that would have nurtured the author. According to Feder, taking Swedenborg's visions into serious consideration is a mistake. Indeed, for Feder one should protect philosophy from unnecessary questions, prejudices, fraudulent statements, and hasty contradictions of others. Kant's disappointment with the academic tone of philosophizing is excessive and Feder wonders at the conclusion of this review whether the author "would be able to criticize it so astutely if he had not first built a small system that he could then expand, modify, disassemble, and add when his further research found it useful." Feder therefore criticizes Kant's arrogance and his attempt not to find a metaphysics, while still basing himself on a philosophical system equally based on prejudices that only the author himself chose as correct.<sup>64</sup> On August 15 1767, an anonymous long review of five pages, probably written by R.W. Zobel, appeared in the *Neue Critische Nachrichten*. Unlike the other reviews the reviewer found the first part more appealing and amusing, even if sometimes Kant's judgements are considered too severe.<sup>65</sup> The reviewer summarizes pretty fairly the arguments without taking a position in respect of what Kant believes. The review praises Kant's originality in the field of metaphysics:

<sup>61</sup> *Königsbergsche gelehrte und politische Zeitungen*, 18 (1766), 71–73.

<sup>62</sup> *Jenaische Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*, 74 (1766), 650.

<sup>63</sup> *Compendium Historiae Litterariae Novissimae*, 39 (1766), 308.

<sup>64</sup> *Compendium Historiae Litterariae Novissimae*, 39 (1766), 309.

<sup>65</sup> *Neue Critische Nachrichten*, 3 (1767), 257–62.



Our readers will soon notice from this excerpt that the author is not exactly following the path of prevailing systems. He chooses his own path; and this is precisely the way to either make new discoveries in the fields of truth, or to lead other inquiring minds onto new tracks. It never hurts to reveal one's conjectures about the nature of the bodies, the nature of the climate, and the location of the regions, as long as one does not immediately sell them as a safe charter for travelers.<sup>66</sup>

Kant's originality is perceived positively, as is his method, however this perception remains only so long as Kantian philosophy does not want to hastily establish itself as a new system but remain a form of critical attitude towards metaphysics.

In 1767 Mendelssohn wrote a very short announcement of Kant's work. In the review Mendelssohn misspelled Swedenborg's name as 'Schredenberg', but he praised Kant's original thought in establishing a new method of philosophy. The announcement somewhat ambiguously stated:

The witty profundity that the booklet is written with occasionally leaves the reader in doubt about whether Mr Kant wished to ridicule metaphysics or whether he intended to praise clairvoyance. Yet it contains important reflections, some original thoughts on the nature of the soul, as well as several objections to popular systems that would merit a more serious presentation.<sup>67</sup>

Once again, Kant's philosophy is highly regarded as innovative, but unfortunately not yet fully developed enough to create a new philosophical system.

## 5. Conclusion

The reviews of pre-critical Kant demonstrate a poor diffusion of his thought. He was often reviewed only regionally, if not exclusively in the press of his home town of Königsberg or in the periodicals published by the publishers which printed his works. There was no review abroad and this was probably also due to the language in which Kant chose to write his works in the German language.

All reviews agree that Kant's works were the reflection of a system of thought that was not yet complete, but only just sketched out. Kant's arguments were not fully developed or completely convincing and, in any case, had not had the impact that the author expected. What seemed to be missing was a systematic and architectural spirit in his works, a spirit typical of the philosophy fashionable at the time. However, the lack of a system was for almost all reviewers, counterbalanced by a marked originality, which was often also the cause of misunderstandings. This often happened, especially in the linguistic field, where Kant used ancient terms to express unconventional concepts. His thoughts were often confused and unclear, even if some intuitions are understood as flashes of genius. Kant

<sup>66</sup> *Neue Critische Nachrichten*, 3 (1767), 262.

<sup>67</sup> *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 4 (1767), 281.

was represented as an incomplete genius, a radical thinker, closer to the great French and English intellectuals than to the German philosophical tradition.

Finally, it is clear that Kant's scientific works, which occupied him for a good part of his career in the pre-critical period, were not appreciated by critics. The solutions proposed by Kant were mostly considered unviable or in any case hypotheses with little basis in experience. On the contrary, in the same writings, what is always appreciated is the philosophical and metaphysical effort. Such judgments may undoubtedly have been influenced by the fact that the reviewers had more pronounced philosophical interests, but perhaps also because Kant's contributions to those disciplines were not perceived as significant. And indeed, no serious scientist of the time took up Kantian hypotheses. In general, what was interpreted as original in Kant's thought since his very first works was his idea of finding a secure method or path for metaphysics so that it could lead to a knowledge similar to science.

How much did these reviews impact on Kant? Primary sources that would allow us to reconstruct Kant's reactions are scarce. They undoubtedly mark the end of Kant as a scientist and strengthen his conviction that he should proceed towards a metaphysical investigation. Wolffians's criticisms of his works led him to further distance himself from the systematic or scholastic approach in favour of personal and original research into the method of philosophy. With respect to the problem of the relationship between mathematics and metaphysics, Kant would continue to work on the topic without ever finding a real solution, except starting from the *Prolegomena* (1783), and in any case he was unable to provide a convincing alternative at the time. Compared to the primacy of experience over concepts, Kant does not seem to have been understood, and in any case regarding the possible proof for the demonstration of God, his thoughts would change, albeit not radically, and certainly not in favor of the solutions proposed by his reviewers. Despite receiving criticism for his aesthetic subjectivism, Kant would continue to seek an objective path in the subjective and he would still maintain the idea that the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime do not concern objects, up to the *Kritik der Urteilkraft* in which he developed his complete theory. Perhaps also driven by the reviews, Kant continued to elaborate his logic by placing judgment at the center and trying to offer a real alternative to the logical and ontological proposals of the period which tended to focus on objects. In short, these reviews did not bring him the success he had hoped for, and he was ignored by the greats of the time such as Haller and Euler, but they suggested to him some paths on which to continue working and convinced him to abandon others that were perhaps beyond his possibilities, and beyond the development of science in that period, especially in the mathematical field.

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