

Introduction

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This volume presents the collected proceedings and expanded research derived from two conferences held in Rome in 2024 and 2025, dedicated to exploring the manifold functions of the philosophical review genre during the Modern and Enlightenment periods. The conferences and the volume were conceived within the PRIN project “Philosophical Reviews in German Territories (1668-1799)”, led by Marco Sgarbi. Drawing extensively on the German *Gelehrte Journale* (learned Journals), the contributions collectively demonstrate that scholarly reviews were neither mere ancillary summaries nor secondary reflections upon major works, but rather essential instruments of philosophical inquiry and intellectual canon formation. From the late seventeenth century through the early nineteenth century, the intellectual landscape of German territories was profoundly shaped by periodicals. Reviews thus constituted a conceptual *Kampfpplatz* (battlefield) where emerging modernity’s core tensions were contested.

1. The Review as a Site of Epistemological and Methodological Debate

In this respect, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz recognized the strategic value of the review as a tool for scholarly influence, as shown in Oliveri’s article in this volume. Far from viewing them as neutral reports, Leibniz employed reviews—such as his anonymous evaluation of Locke’s *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*—to subtly advance his philosophical stance. His approach was to instill “prejudices”, understood as necessary precognitions, in the readership, thereby inclining them to view Locke’s arguments critically. For instance, by focusing on areas like the association of ideas and enthusiasm, where he seemed to agree with Locke, Leibniz simultaneously highlighted the underlying philo-

FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup_best_practice)

Pasquale Terracciano, Francesco Valerio Tommasi (edited by), *Philosophical Reviews in German Territories (1668-1799)*. Volume 2, © 2026 Author(s), CC BY 4.0, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0999-1, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0999-1

sophical flaws that stemmed from Locke's reliance on Cartesian premises which Locke himself criticized.

One primary function of the philosophical review was to actively shape and interpret major metaphysical and epistemological projects. The complex reception of Immanuel Kant's transcendental idealism, for example, unfolded significantly through critical engagement. Early contemporaries struggled to accurately categorize Kant's philosophy, misinterpreting it as a radical form of idealism similar to Berkeley's, or finding substantial similarities with Leibniz's doctrine of pre-established harmony (see Bucarelli's essay). Kant sought to resolve these issues in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* by describing transcendental philosophy, through a biological metaphor, as an "epigenetic system of pure reason". This concept explicitly countered the interpretation of transcendental philosophy as a mere "preformation" theory—a danger highlighted by his student Schultz's review which appealed to the pre-established harmony guaranteed by a benevolent creator to ensure agreement between intellect and nature. Reviews thereby provided the necessary critical context for Kant to refine and clarify foundational concepts, such as the crucial distinction between "judgments of mere perception" (*Wahrnehmungsurteile*) and objectively valid "judgments of experience" (*Erfahrungsurteile*).

The review genre also served as a laboratory for testing and disseminating terminology crucial for nascent philosophical systems. Christian Wolff, perhaps the most prolific self-reviewer of his time, utilized reviews published in Latin in the *Acta Eruditorum* to introduce and clarify the technical terminology of his German works to an international audience, as Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero shows. These "self-translations" reveal Wolff's profound terminological choices, such as equating the German *Ding* with the scholastic *ens* in his earliest exposition of ontology, or his reluctance to use *perceptiunculae* in German while adopting it in Latin to designate "small perceptions", thereby showing a gap in the German psychological vocabulary. This comparative analysis underscores how reviews functioned not just as summaries but as vital complements to systematic works, helping authors stabilize their conceptual frameworks.

2. The Review in the Political and Ideological Sphere

The philosophical review was fundamentally intertwined with the political struggles of the era, acting as a direct medium for ideological engagement. Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *The Closed Commercial State* (1800), a work born from the conceptual crisis following the French Revolution, immediately became a focal point for controversy, receiving intense scrutiny across the journalistic landscape between 1800 and 1803 (see Gristina's article). Critics quickly framed Fichte's model—which redefined property as a right to productive activity and proposed economic closure to ensure distributive justice—as a dangerous political aberration. Conservative voices, influenced by Burke and Smithian economics, condemned it as stemming from "abstract theoretical constructs" and leading to an unacceptable limitation of personal liberty, labeling it a "vast penitentiary" or a

form of “tyrannical despotism”. The reviews thereby served to neutralize a theoretical position perceived as carrying dangerous Jacobin implications. Christoph Friedrich Nicolai’s review, in particular, utilized this debate to highlight an internal tension in Fichte’s political thought, contrasting the valorization of radical liberty in his earlier *Beitrag* with the prescriptive socio-economic order of the *Closed Commercial State*.

Fichte’s awareness of the review’s decisive influence culminated in his unrealized plan for a “Journal at the Second Power”, a publication dedicated to reviewing other review journals, as clarified in the article that Matteo d’Alfonso and Maurizio Trudu have dedicated to it. Fichte realized that “the general public does not read books; the reviews are its book”, and thus criticism must target the critiques themselves to effectively shape public opinion.

This intellectual scrutiny extended to historical figures. The eighteenth-century German Enlightenment utilized reviews to conduct a measured reassessment of Niccolò Machiavelli, shifting his image from a theological scandal to an object of reasoned philosophical debate (see Terracciano’s article). Reviews provided a forum to debate the conflict between political necessity and moral virtue, notably in the wide discussion surrounding Frederick II’s *Anti-Machiavel* (1740). Furthermore, reviews acted decisively in determining the boundaries of modern philosophy itself. The three major reviews of Johann Franz Budde’s *Introductio ad historiam philosophiae Hebraicae*—an ambitious attempt to integrate the Jewish Kabbalah as the origin of true philosophical knowledge—ultimately served to marginalize the Hebrew tradition. Through strategies ranging from outright rejection (Amsterdam) to selective rewriting (Leipzig), the reviews actively participated in defining philosophy as a tradition that was Greek, rational, and Christian, thereby excluding a revelatory Jewish origin. This conundrum is addressed in this volume by Guido Bartolucci.

3. Genre Hybridity, Communication, and the Democratization of Knowledge

A pivotal moment in the evolution of this genre was the birth of the philosophical history of philosophy, a process essentially linked to the work of Christoph August Heumann, as shown by Roberto Bordoli. In his *Acta philosophorum* (1715–1726), the first periodical specifically dedicated to this field, Heumann established a fundamental distinction between *historia philosophica* (written by historians) and *historia philosophiae* (written by philosophers). For Heumann, the history of philosophy was not a mere branch of history like military or ecclesiastical history, but a new philosophical discipline essential for the search for truth and virtue. Through the *Acta philosophorum*, Heumann promoted Eclecticism as a critical method for independent judgment, emancipated from the “despotism” of traditional sects and authorities. He argued that a philosopher must examine past ideas as an equal, accepting only what is rigorously grounded in reason. This perspective allowed for a radical re-evaluation of the philosophical canon: for instance, Heumann was the first to fully include forbidden figures like Giordano Bruno in the narrative of modern philosophy, treating

even atheism and heresy as legitimate objects of philosophical judgment that help refine human knowledge.

The case of Georg Friedrich Meier illustrates how reviews functioned within these institutional networks. Meier's textbooks were used by Kant for nearly forty years, and his work was extensively discussed in journals such as the *Jenaische gelehrte Zeitungen* and the *Hamburgische Berichte*, as highlighted in Pozzo's paper. Critical reviews by contemporaries like Moses Mendelssohn and Thomas Abbt signal the tensions of the era: Mendelssohn critiqued Meier's "terrifying" productivity and the ambiguity of authorship between him and Baumgarten, while Abbt ironically dissected Meier's habit of using fixed classification schemes—or "basic threads"—for all his writing.

The prominence of the review genre coincided with and propelled significant transformations in the form and accessibility of intellectual discourse. Christian Thomasius stands out as a pioneering figure, transforming the review by integrating it with dialogue and polemics, notably in his periodical *Monats-Gespräche* (1688–1690). The articles of Marco Sgarbi and Riccarda Suitner are focused on him. The use of dialogue in reviews served multiple functions: it allowed different perspectives to be presented *pro & contra*, fostering critical thinking in readers by withholding final, dogmatic judgment. This genre proved highly effective for popularizing knowledge, as it allowed difficult philosophical ideas to reach a wider, less academic readership that included soldiers, merchants, and women, thereby democratizing intellectual debate. Thomasius argued that reviews should eschew elitism and embrace a direct, critical style that would challenge established authorities and pedantry, treating criticism and excerpting as inseparable elements of philosophical practice.

More broadly, the sheer volume, variety, and competitive nature of *Gelehrte Journale* between the late 17th and late 18th centuries demonstrate a radical shift in knowledge dissemination. The shift toward accessible German-language periodicals, often appearing as ephemeral, anonymous, or pseudonymous *Flugschriften* (flyers), fundamentally altered the material conditions and social perception of intellectual work. The commercial nature of reviews meant they played a strategic role in determining what books should be bought, effectively offering themselves as a substitute for the books themselves for a burgeoning bourgeois audience eager for self-cultivation. Reviewers acted as "knowledge actors" as seen in the technical debates over translations of Pseudo-Longinus' *On the Sublime*. The recurring attention to issues of translation in reviews of works like this highlights the crucial role of language in constructing national intellectual identity and making ancient texts accessible to non-specialist readers (see Pizzichemi's paper).

4. Conclusion

The systematic examination of philosophical reviews reveals them as an indispensable source for understanding the intellectual history of the Enlightenment. These sources demonstrate how critical judgment—often embedded

within ostensibly neutral summaries, dialogues, or polemical pamphlets—was essential for disseminating philosophical knowledge, establishing terminological standards, engaging in political combat, and shaping the modern philosophical canon through acts of inclusion and purposeful exclusion. The study of these intricate relationships, bridging the distance between private scholarship and public consumption, between abstract theory and ideological commitment, remains vital for grasping the foundations of modern European thought. This collection illuminates this dynamic intellectual landscape where the philosophical review reigned as the defining genre of its age.

