

# Christian Thomasius and Reviewing as Philosophy

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**Abstract:** Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) was a foundational figure of early Enlightenment philosophy, renowned for his contributions to law, theology, and the development of philosophical journalism. His approach, Eclecticism, emphasized intellectual flexibility, rejecting dogmatism and skepticism in favor of critically synthesizing diverse traditions. Thomasius innovatively used reviews as philosophical tools, blending excerpts, critique, and dialogue to assess and integrate ideas. Through periodicals like *Monats-Gespräche* and *Historia Sapientiae et Stultitiae*, he advanced a unique methodology that democratized intellectual discourse, encouraging readers to engage critically with multiple perspectives. His later journalistic work, such as *Summarischer Nachrichten von auserlesenen Büchern*, balanced historical and contemporary scholarship, underscoring the enduring value of reviews in philosophical inquiry. By situating reviews at the heart of his eclectic philosophy, Thomasius demonstrated their power to challenge rigid systems and foster the pursuit of truth. His contributions remain a cornerstone for understanding the interplay between philosophy, journalism, and Enlightenment ideals.

**Keywords:** Christian Thomasius, Eclecticism, Philosophical Journalism, Enlightenment, Critical Reviews.

## 1. Introduction

Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) stands out as one of the most important and influential figures in German philosophy. His influence is not solely due to the cultural ferment during the early Enlightenment or the rise of Pietism, but also because he revolutionized philosophy by using the German language, so much so that his work is often compared to the power of Lutheran preaching in the sixteenth century. The breadth and depth of his philosophical contributions left a profound mark on generations of intellectuals, including Immanuel Kant, and played a pivotal role in shaping eighteenth-century philosophical discourse (see Schneiders 1989; Vollhardt 1997; Beetz 2003; Tomasoni 2005).

Thomasius has attracted substantial scholarly attention because his impact reached beyond philosophy into law and theology. However, there is one aspect of his career that has received less attention than it deserves—his pioneering role in the development of philosophical reviewing. Thomasius was not only a philosopher and jurist but also a founder of what can be called philosophical journalism.

His periodicals, such as *Monats-Gespräche* (1688–1690), *Historia Sapientiae et Stultitiae* (1693), and *Summarischer Nachrichten von auserlesenen Büchern* (1715–1718), were innovative ventures and began a period of critical experimentation and

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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, *Christian Thomasius and Reviewing as Philosophy*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0999-1.04, in Pasquale Terracciano, Francesco Valerio Tommasi (edited by), *Philosophical Reviews in German Territories (1668-1799)*. Volume 2, pp. 35-48, 2026, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 979-12-215-0999-1, DOI 10.36253/979-12-215-0999-1

innovation of literary genres in the German language. Scholars such as Hanns Freydanck, Thomas Woitkewitsch, Mark Lehmstedt, and Herbert Jaumann have examined Thomasius' contributions, focusing primarily on the role of journalism and literary criticism during this period of intellectual transition. However, one aspect that remains understudied is the influence of reviews on Thomasius' own philosophical outlook (Gierl 2004). Martin Gierl's monumental work *Pietismus und Aufklärung* touches on the importance of Thomasius' activity as a reviewer, linking it to the religious controversies surrounding Pietism. This paper seeks to expand on Gierl's insights by demonstrating how Thomasius' use of reviews was not just a theological tool, but also a vital instrument in his broader philosophical project—namely, the development of Eclecticism. Thomasius believed that reviews were an essential method of philosophical inquiry. Through them, he could critique, analyze, and synthesize various intellectual traditions in order to build a more comprehensive understanding of philosophy. Reviews allowed Thomasius to question established ideas and to search for truth, not just through original works but also by engaging critically with the works of others. Understanding Thomasius' philosophy through the lens of his reviews offers fresh insight into his intellectual contributions (see Mulsow 2003).

## 2. Eclecticism: a Philosophical Approach

Eclecticism, as promoted by Christian Thomasius, is best understood not as a distinct philosophical doctrine but rather as a method of inquiry.<sup>1</sup> Unlike systems of thought that adhere to rigid principles or specific traditions, Eclecticism draws from a variety of sources. It is an approach that rejects dogmatism in favor of intellectual flexibility, allowing philosophers to select the best ideas from different schools of thought and synthesize them into a coherent framework.

This philosophical approach emphasizes the need for critical engagement with the ideas of the past, rather than outright rejection or uncritical acceptance. Thomasius believed that no single philosopher or tradition could lay claim to possessing the ultimate truth. Instead, he argued that truth unfolds over time and is often dispersed among various thinkers and historical contexts. Eclecticism, therefore, is not about creating new dogmatic systems but about discovering truth by examining different philosophical positions and evaluating them critically:<sup>2</sup>

the eclectic sect [...], even if it could be called a new sect, does not elaborate new dogmatic assertions, but *excerpt*s its own from others and orders and collects the flowers of the sects of all philosophers (Thomasius 1688a, 18. Emphasis is mine).

For Thomasius, the purpose of Eclecticism was to avoid the pitfalls of dogmatism and skepticism. Dogmatism, in his view, was an intellectual stance that

<sup>1</sup> To account for the complex philosophical position of Eclecticism is a daunting task that would take us beyond the scope of the current research and for this the reader is referred to Michael Albrecht's extensive monograph. See Albrecht 1994.

<sup>2</sup> For the problematic nature of Thomasius' Eclecticism see Albrecht 1989; Tomasoni 2005, 17–67.

stifled critical inquiry by rigidly adhering to a particular system of thought. Skepticism, on the other hand, denied the possibility of certain knowledge, leading to intellectual paralysis. Thomasius believed that both dogmatism and skepticism were barriers to true philosophical understanding. Eclecticism offered a way to navigate between these two extremes by allowing for the selection and combination of the best aspects of various philosophical traditions.

Eclecticism,

because of the infinite variety of things to be known, is most necessary and most useful for the search for truth, and at the same time it is fair, which is not drawn by the interest of any part, but pursues all with equal affection (Thomasius 1688a, 43).

One of the key features of Eclecticism is the emphasis on intellectual autonomy. Thomasius advocated for independent thought, urging philosophers not to rely on the authority of any single teacher or tradition. Instead, he emphasized the importance of critical reasoning and personal judgment. The eclectic philosopher, in Thomasius' view, must engage deeply with philosophical traditions, but always maintain the freedom to assess their validity based on reason and evidence, rather than on the reputation of the thinker or the school from which they come.

Eclecticism also recognizes the limitations of human reason. Thomasius was acutely aware of the finite nature of human understanding and believed that no individual could grasp the full scope of truth. For this reason, he rejected the idea of constructing grand, all-encompassing philosophical systems. Such systems, in his view, were doomed to failure because they overestimated the capacity of human reason. Instead, Thomasius advocated for a more modest approach to philosophy, one that recognized the partiality of human knowledge and sought to improve it incrementally through critical engagement with the history of thought.

Eclecticism:

enjoins us not to depend on the words of one person, or to swear by the words of one teacher, but from the words and writings of teachers of whomsoever, whatever truth is good, not by the authority of the teacher, but by the weight of the arguments that it has learned, to collect in its storehouses, and therefore from time to time to add, and so to see with its own eyes rather than with those of others (Thomasius 1688a, 43).

With respect to this philosophical attitude, for the present article, the emphasis placed by Thomasius on excerpting, or on gathering the opinions of others, and on the critical examination that must be made of these same opinions, are particularly important. Given Thomasius' commitment to Eclecticism, it is not surprising that he, and his pupils and fellows placed such a high value on the practice of reviewing.<sup>3</sup> Reviews, in his view, were a crucial tool for engaging crit-

<sup>3</sup> His eclectic perspective was shared by authors like Nikolaus Hieronymus Gundling, Johann Gottlieb Heineccius, Johann Jakob Syrbius, Johann Georg Walch, Andreas Rüdiger, August Friedrich Müller, and Adolph Friedrich Hoffmann, so much so that it is possible to charac-

ically with the ideas of others. They allowed philosophers to assess the strengths and weaknesses of various works, select the best insights, and incorporate them into their own thinking. For Thomasius, reviewing was not just an ancillary activity but a central component of his philosophical method.

Thomasius' first major experience with reviewing came through his contributions to the *Acta Eruditorum*, the first learned periodical in Germany. Between 1683 and 1684, Thomasius wrote seven reviews for the *Acta*, primarily focusing on legal texts. These early reviews were characterized by their brevity and lack of critical engagement. Thomasius offered straightforward summaries of the works, without delving into deep analysis or critique. Nevertheless, these reviews represented his initial foray into philosophical journalism and laid the groundwork for his later, more sophisticated approach to reviewing.

Thomasius quickly became dissatisfied with the limitations of the *Acta Eruditorum*. The journal's neutral tone and lack of critical depth did not align with his vision for what philosophical reviewing should be. He believed that reviews should not merely summarize the content of a work but should offer a thorough and critical examination of its arguments. In his view, reviews should serve as a tool for advancing philosophical discourse by helping readers identify both the strengths and weaknesses of the works being reviewed. So, while it is true that Thomasius' first journalistic attempts were not in open opposition to the conception of the *Acta* (see Zedler 1745, XLIII, 1582–1583), as a matter of fact he chose a totally different path, an experimental alternative that would lead him in different directions and that earned him numerous criticisms.

### 3. Review as Dialogue

This dissatisfaction led Thomasius to experiment with new forms of philosophical journalism. His most ambitious project in this regard was the *Monats-Gespräche*, a periodical he founded in 1688 (See Habel 2007, 453–54). The *Monats-Gespräche* had a satirical edge, which added to its appeal and made it more accessible to a broader audience. However, this tone also attracted criticism from some quarters, particularly among theologians in Leipzig such as Valentin Alberti, who attempted to censor the journal.<sup>4</sup> In the second issue Thomasius offers his

terize a Thomasian movement within Eclecticism. See Carboncini 1989; Mühlpfordt 1989; Eskildsen 2008. Not only was Thomasius interested in this philosophical and communicative medium, but intellectuals such as Nikolaus Hieronymus Gundling and Johann Georg Walch were editors of review journals such as the *Neue Bibliothec*, the *Neue Unterredungen* and the *Neue Bücher-Saal der gelehrten Welt*.

<sup>4</sup> See Lehmsstedt 1992. The theologians disapproved of the satirical treatment of serious philosophical and theological issues. The publisher Moritz Georg Weidmann was asked to reveal the identity of the authors of the work. He was unable in “bona conscientia” to name the authors, except broadly that the work had been edited under the supervision of Thomasius. In defense of the journal and the identity of the authors, in a letter to the consistory of 23 January 1688 Thomasius wrote that a group of “illustrious people” asked him to publish a journal in the style of the *Journal de Scavans*, but in German and “cum iudiciis de autoribus,”

views on contemporary journalism, especially regarding how a review journal should be structured. He argues that, unlike the *Acta Eruditorum*, it would be more beneficial to translate excerpts from books written in other languages into German. This would allow Germans who did not understand French, Italian, or English to gain new knowledge. While Otto Mencke and the team behind the *Acta* aimed to establish German scholarly journalism on an international level, Thomasius had a different goal: to spread knowledge to as many Germans as possible. Thomasius valued the use of *excerpta* or extracts, which he considered interchangeable terms,<sup>5</sup> because they provided a significant advantage: they allowed readers to understand the essence of a book “with little effort,” “minimal time loss,” and “without great cost” (Wustmann 1885, 224). This approach, centered on saving time, effort and money, enabled the advancement of knowledge in a practical manner. While Thomasius acknowledged the *Acta*’s contribution to the dissemination of knowledge, he found its purpose overly elitist.

Thomasius admired the *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* more, both because it was managed by a single person and because it operated without significant financial support. What impressed him most about Pierre Bayle’s journal was not just the diversity of topics but also Bayle’s unique writing style, which blended profound thoughts with sharp, subtle humor. Thomasius praised Bayle’s direct style, which was capable of delivering criticism without causing offense. Thomasius sought to emulate this approach in his own journal.<sup>6</sup>

His attitude towards the *Bibliothèque universelle* was quite different. Although Thomasius appreciated the attempt, as stated in the preface to the first issue, to overcome biases and lack of objectivity in reviews, he argued that their method of excerpting certain texts was neither neutral nor historical as they claimed. Instead, it seemed biased, particularly regarding religious and philosophical subjects. Thomasius believed that absolute neutrality and impartiality were impossible to achieve when texts were extracted, and that the extract method often failed to present the full scope of an author’s work, as the logical connection between topics could be lost (Thomasius 1688b, 228–30). Moreover, he pointed out that extracts could encourage laziness in readers, who might be satisfied with reading a few pages rather than the entire work, potentially forming a distorted view of an author’s ideas if no critical commentary accompanied the review. Thomasius stressed that scholars should be free to challenge incorrect teachings in religion or philosophy when they encountered them in texts. If re-

which meant with the assessment of the authors, and not only of their works. (The letter is in Stadtarchiv Leipzig, Akte XLVI 159, 14r–15v.) With limited time to work on the journal, Thomasius informed the consistory that he had found a group of scholars who were willing to collaborate. He added that he would not disclose their names, following the practice of other journals where reviews were published anonymously. See Wustmann 1885, 201.

<sup>5</sup> On extracts and *excerpta* see the special issue of the *Berichte zur Wissenschaftsgeschichte* entitled *Towards a History of Excerpting in Modernity*, Décultot- Krämer- Zedelmaier 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Thomasius would complain about the style of the magazine when Bayle abandoned it in favor of Jacques Basnage, see Thomasius 1688b, 243.

viewers were not allowed to express disagreement, false ideas would spread unchecked, and reviews would become little more than summaries of indexes and prefaces, leaving readers unsatisfied.

For Thomasius, the methodological principles laid out in the *Bibliothèque's* preface were either not applied or had largely been compromised by the editors. His critique of their approach emphasized the partiality and bias that came with the review method, despite thinkers like Le Clerc advocating for the neutrality of extracts. Still, Thomasius considered this reviewing activity important because, regardless of impartiality or objectivity, it could help reveal the truth. The extract could become a powerful investigative tool for Eclecticism when the reviewer sought out what was valuable and refuted what was wrong in the text.

However, the extract must always be accompanied by criticism, even a judgment on the author if necessary. Thomasius believed that reviewers should not be afraid of being criticized for passing judgment on authors; if necessary, the authors' responses could be published in the same journal. For Thomasius, this approach—incorporating both criticism and author responses—meant that the review should take the form of a dialogue:

I therefore thought that it would not be unhelpful if the German journal [i.e. *Monats-Gespräche*] included both the simple and the rational judgements (*iudicia*), and, in order to make things go better, it would not be a bad idea to produce such a journal in the form of a dialogue and introduce one or a couple of silly fellows who would present their simple concerns, while the others would present their opinions with rational reasons, but in such a way that they would mostly express them more through objections (*per modum objectionum*) than definitive judgements (*iudicii decisivi*). For in this way one could not blame the author for standing up in the Republic of Letters, where all scholars are to be treated equally, as judge of them. In this way, even those authors who were rational would not be displeased if they heard that people were reviewing their books for and against (*pro & contra*). Indeed, because it is impossible for an author to maintain two repugnant opinions at the same time, the authors on whose judgements (*iudicia*) are taken would seldom be able to touch the journalist if he had not determined something certain (Thomasius 1688b, 244–45).

The dialogue genre meets Thomasius' speculative desire to promote Eclecticism and the choice is therefore not accidental and certainly not simply rhetorical. Dialogue creates a certain emotional engagement that draws the audience into reading the review, something that sterile summaries or extracts cannot achieve. It allows different perspectives on the same topic to be presented, enabling the reviewer to step outside their personal stance and showcase a wide range of opinions which the reader can actively consider. This approach prevents the formation of the basic prejudices that Eclecticism opposed. Since no biases or final judgments are imposed, the reader is encouraged to think critically for themselves, evaluating which argument is the strongest. In this way, the diverse opinions expressed in the review acknowledge and respect the variety of ideas held by the public at the time, helping to minimize any dissatisfaction. Because of this, the relationship be-

tween reader and reviewer becomes a kind of democratic community, where no single truth is imposed, but all viewpoints are explored with reasoned arguments. For Thomasius, dialogue, as a dialectical tool, is the means to discover the truth through the comparison of many different opinions (Beetz 2003, 46–8).

In 1688 the *Monats-Gespräche*, later published in two volumes, presents registers on three ways of considering the authors: (1) summaries interspersed with more or less long quotations mostly translated or paraphrased; (2) judgments of the authors, where the reviewer expresses his opinion; (3) mere quotations of the authors.<sup>7</sup> The typologies are very flexible and indeed the dialogue itself often does not favor a great distinction, especially between the first two modalities. In any case, more than 65 summaries with quotations and more than 200 judgments of other authors are reported.<sup>8</sup>

An analysis of these reviews inserted in the dialogues clearly shows Thomasius' polemical attitude. For example, the examination of Spinoza's opinions is instrumental in discussing the relationship between theology and philosophy and the possibility of a *libertas philosophandi*. Therefore, he focuses above all on the *Tractatus theologico-politicus*, in which, according to Thomasius, Spinoza:

claimed that in every republic everyone must be allowed the freedom to philosophize, and that this freedom cannot be taken away from them in good conscience. But under the freedom to philosophize he concealed an ungodly freedom to teach what one wants in matters of religion and faith, and in the same treatise he had hidden many dangerous and blasphemous opinions about the Holy Scripture as the foundation of the Christian religion, as well as other general articles of faith (Thomasius 1688b, 338).

Thomasius is convinced that he absolutely must reply to Spinoza's falsehoods.<sup>9</sup> When dealing with Arnauld's theses, Thomasius speaks of "rather absurd opinions," such as "empty thoughts of a stubborn mind that imagined that his words would be given more credence than daily experience" (Thomasius 1688b, 361–62). This tone that Thomasius used in his dialogue-reviews probably did not sit well with many people.

The choice to adopt dialogue as a genre for the review is undoubtedly original, courageous and strategic. In the long run, however, it must have been rath-

<sup>7</sup> The register of the first volume is actually imprecise because it speaks of this latter typology in terms of "excerpta," where, instead, it is clear that the authors are only "citiret," as is correctly stated in the second volume.

<sup>8</sup> Among these, for their contribution to the development of an eclectic perspective, the reflections on Isaac Papin's *La vanité des sciences ou reflexions d'un philosophe chretien sur le veritable bonheur*, Spinoza's *Opera*, Antoine Arnauld's *Dissertation sur le pretendu bonheur des plaisirs des sens* and Tschirnaus' *Medicina mentis* certainly deserve consideration.

<sup>9</sup> For example, with respect to the doctrine of the unity of substance thus exposed, "there is only one substance in the world, which is called God, and that this God of his is none other than all creatures," he replies, "Could anything more reckless have been thought up?". See Thomasius 1688b, 340.

er tiring to express one's thoughts effectively through dialogue. In a short time, he had to commit himself not only on a productive level, that is, to complete the issues, but also scientifically, that is, to say something meaningful on the topic and above all to say it in a very precise style. In the end, adopting the strategy of the other journals, writing short reports, must have been much simpler and easier, but it would not have been equally useful according to his eclectic perspective. However, starting from the year 1689, the form of dialogue was almost abandoned in favor of reviews of a certain length. At the beginning of the volume that collects the twelve issues, there are short accounts of the reviews, that is, summaries of the content of the review with their indexes. Sometimes these summaries collect the accounts of several reviews in a systematic unit. In total, there were 48 reviews in 1689, of which 25 were printed between October and December, thus exponentially increasing the pace of publication.

In this case, the eclectic perspective, applied to the attempt to search for truth in every philosophy and to the fight against pedantry and sterile scholasticism, emerges clearly in his review of the work of Confucius, published by Philippe Couplet in 1687 under the title of *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, sive Scientia Sinensis Latine Exposita*. Thomasius' reading of Confucius's work was born from the curiosity aroused by what he had read in François de La Mothe Le Vayer's *De la vertu des païens* about the analogy between the Chinese philosopher and Socrates. Furthermore, Thomasius' reading of the *Scientia Sinensis* was also largely influenced by other reviews that this work had already received in the *Journal des Scavans*, in the *Acta eruditorum*, in the *Bibliothèque Universelle* and in the *Historie des Ouvrages des Scavans* (on these reviews see Wenchao 2012). The impression he had formed from reading these reviews was of an exhortative and non-scientific work, and for this reason he was not interested in it, believing that he already knew everything about the subject from Greek and Latin philosophy. However, his interest was reawakened by a conversation with a friend who considered the book of Confucius to be one of the best books of philosophy ever written.

The narrative expedient is useful for Thomasius to directly criticize the other reviewers of the work and their methodology. In fact he writes explicitly, "I could not have discerned what he praised so highly from the extracts of various journalists" (Thomasius 1689, 602). So much so that he concludes that "the extractors often, through negligence, or perhaps even for deliberate reasons, leave out the best that a book contains" (Thomasius 1689, 603) and that "a book has not to be judged by its extracts but by the book itself" (Thomasius 1689, 605). These are rather strong words from someone who makes the extract an essential tool for philosophy. However, a more detailed examination of the text makes us understand that Thomasius was arguing against a certain form of journalism.

The overall opinion of the book that emerges from Thomasius's review is that

the books of *Scientiae sinensis* contain many extremely clever and subtle teachings of Confucius, which one would wish to study in high schools or in everyday life [...] however, there are also many unworthy things in them, at which one can hardly refrain from laughing (Thomasius 1689, 606).

Once again, the task of review is to distinguish, as Eclecticism demands, what is important and what is useless in a philosophy. Among the things he appreciates about Confucius is the method of first learning the wisdom of the ancients, then forming one's own perspective on it and then autonomously developing one's own thought that can be taught. In particular, he considers his idea of a philosopher as correct. A philosopher:

examines and judges everything according to the rules of true reason [...] and in this way he never deviates from truth and virtue. [...] This is a lesson for those who are accustomed to asking other truth lovers, who discover common errors and refute false doctrines, what their calling is in this (Thomasius 1689, 612–13).

Along with this, Thomasius takes up the Confucian critique of pedantism: “Confucius also left behind very beautiful teachings concerning the knowledge and difference between hypocrites and pedants and truly creative and virtuous scholars” (Thomasius 1689, 616). So criticism of pedantry and search for truth in the thoughts of the ancients are instrumental for autonomous and critical thinking. However, Thomasius writes:

while I hope that it will be clear from what has been said that Confucius was indeed an honest, clever and sensible man, I still maintain that we have no reason to regard his teachings as anything special among us (Thomasius 1689, 625–26).

Thomasius' review shows an interest in Confucian ideas, but he does not consider them superior to those of other ancient philosophers such as Epicurus and Seneca, with whom Confucius himself is juxtaposed, rather than Socrates. This shows not only how a review was influenced by other reviews, and how an author was influenced by reading many reviews, but also how Eclecticism could be a filter through which to understand an author's thought in a critical and not totally derogatory or laudatory way.

The 1690 volume that collects the issues from January to April changes literary genre again. Here we find announcements of publications, ten very long reviews, often collected in groups around a single topic, and one excerpt. The 1690 issues are no longer edited by Thomasius but by Johann Jakob Ryssel. The new editor, a follower of Thomasius' eclectic perspective, briefly mentions this change in the method of writing reviews:

Dialogues do sometimes provide a pleasant way to pass the time, but in order to make up for the shortcomings in this style of writing, I will have a letterhead put at the beginning of each month in which I will address one or another question from philosophy or a history that belongs to the *historia literaria*. I will save the explanation of these until the end of this year, but I will not be angry if someone wants to rack their brains over them in the meantime or even if they have found the right interpretation of the time (Ryssel 1690, 19–20).

Unfortunately, the issues ended in April and Ryssel never provided a true justification for his choice, but it is clear that the dialogue was abandoned in favor of a perspective that brought the reviews closer to *historia literaria*, a per-

spective substantially not dissimilar from that advanced by other magazines of the time such as the *Historie des Ouvrages des Scavans*.

That the reviews continued to serve Eclecticism even in 1690 is evident from the choices of works and their thematic grouping. The first two reviews, with long extracts, report a passage by Thomasius on pedantism taken from the *Introductio ad philosophiam aulicam* and the oration by Ulrich Huber on pedantism. They occupy almost seventy pages and the entire first issue. In the following issue the topic of the *querelle des anciens et des modernes* is addressed with the review of *Parallele des Anciens & des Modernes* (1688) by Charles Perrault, of the *Histoire poétique de la guerre, nouvellement déclarée entre les Anciens et les Modernes* (1688) by François de Callières, and *La guerre des auteurs anciens et modernes, avec la Requête et arrest en faveur d'Aristote* (1670) by Gabriel Guéret. These reviews, accompanied by extracts translated into German, absorb two issues, February and March.

Thomasius's first journalistic experience therefore ended between the end of 1689 and the beginning of 1690, when he began to be increasingly involved in writing books such as *Einleitung zu der Vernunft-Lehre* (1691), *Ausübung der Vernunft-Lehre* (1691), *Von der Kunst Vernünftig und Tugendhaft zu lieben* (1692), and the *Einleitung zur Sittenlehre* (1692).

#### 4. *Historia*, Extracts, and the Latest Experimentations

Thomasius resumed his journalistic work and experimentation with reviews in 1693, when he published *Historia Sapientiae et Stultitiae* in three volumes, along with its German counterpart *Historie der Weisheit und Thorheit*. The two journals are not translations of each other, but have very different content. The aims of the project are articulated by Thomasius in the academic program "Observationes promiscuas, die Kirschen-Historie und Historiam Philosophica, wie auch sonst allerhand Erfindungen neuer Warheiten und Entdeckungen gemeiner Irrthümer betreffende" (1692) (Thomasius 1693). In this program he explains how the history of philosophy and church history have mostly been neglected in Germany, although they are important for the progress of knowledge. In what is a real plaidoyer of the value of the history of philosophy, Thomasius argues that history shows the way to acquire knowledge but also the many mistakes that have been made. For this reason, history can be called the history of wisdom and folly, in the wake of Erasmus. The historical approach would constitute an antidote against prejudice, ignorance and pedantry precisely because of its ability to reveal the truth that develops in time and the mistakes that are committed by philosophers. Thomasius' approach to reviewing works in this journal is historical, that of the *historia literaria* suggested by his pupil Ryssel. The reviews are mostly long extracts in the philosophical field particularly investigating the life of Abelard, and the lives and doctrines of Democritus and Descartes. Starting from the third volume of the *Historia*, the reviews consist of long extracts taken from Jakob Thomasius's *Schediasma Historicum* (1665) on mystical, Persian, Platonic and scholastic theology. There is nothing original in

these reviews except the selection of passages aimed at seeking an Eclecticism that combines philosophy and religion.

No different is the attempt of the *Summarischer Nachrichten von auserlesenen mehrentheils alten in der Thomasischen Bibliothek* published between 1715 and 1718. In the preface to the first issue Thomasius writes that in Germany, for about thirty years, extracts from new books have been published monthly or otherwise by learned individuals, contributing to the flourishing of the sciences and the improvement of knowledge (Thomasius 1715, 2). This practice continues, following the path he opened twenty-five years before with the *Monats-Gespräche*, although Thomasius is aware that such extracts, valuable in themselves, are not without flaws. Scholars in particular love to be praised and dislike it when their views are challenged, especially if errors are pointed out. Authors criticizing contemporary works, despite striving for impartiality, often find themselves influenced by hidden biases, leading to undeserved praise or unjust criticism. The sheer volume of new books increases every year, with few works failing to merit some form of remembrance, therefore the practice of excerpting, that is of writing extracts, is necessary (see Thomasius 1715, 4–5).

To avoid such problems, some scholars have opted to present new writings briefly without judgment or by offering universal praise, avoiding any potentially critical or negative remarks (Thomasius 1715, 5). This cautious approach, however, has satisfied few people, including Thomasius, and for several valid reasons. Notably, these extracts inadvertently encourage readers to focus only on new books, neglecting the old ones, even though old works are crucial for the development of new ideas in the sciences. Proper judgment is needed when reading older books, because, for Thomasius, many works of the past are widely known not for their quality or for their use in discovering and emending errors, but because they catered to popular tastes in times of profound ignorance (Thomasius 1715, 5–6). Conversely, according to Thomasius, useful books were often undervalued and are now rare, deserving better recognition through extracts. Therefore, it is fundamental to make a choice of the best old books as well as providing information about the newest ones.

In this sense, for Thomasius, Le Clerc's work with the *Bibliothèque choisie* is commendable, for unlike other journals, the French periodical includes extracts and summaries of older books. This approach avoids many of the aforementioned annoyances and shortcomings, and in Thomasius' opinion it is particularly useful because dead scholars cannot resent a lack of praise for their writings, nor can they harm the reviewer for disagreeing with their thoughts (Thomasius 1715, 7–8). Though the errors of these old authors still find defenders in the present, the criticism is less intense than that of contemporary authors. Indeed, judgments of the dead scholars should be framed to acknowledge errors and valuable opinions (Thomasius 1715, 8). Also in this framework Thomasius reveals the reason why making extracts is a practice useful for the purposes of Eclecticism.

Since opinions and assessments of old books are as important as those of new releases, in the *Summarischer Nachrichten*, with the support of several (never acknowledged) fellows, Thomasius decided to excerpt worthy books from his

own library. To inform those interested in joining this endeavor, calling to arms potential contributors to the journal, Thomasius published a list of at least fifty books or documents at the beginning of each issue, in a similar manner to that which other journals did at the end of their publications, including a register of new book releases and possible works to be reviewed. This is a practice still in use today, but in this specific case Thomasius chose what was worthy of review. This practice was maintained for the first two issues, while from the third issue onwards the list of suggested books to be reviewed was published at the end.

Thomasius' selection comprises books on law, philosophy and history, while generally it excludes medicine and theology. The reviewers, called by Thomasius "the excerpters," should add their comments modestly and without offense (Thomasius 1715, 10). If necessary, he might edit their words before publication, but they should not be bound by his opinions, and they were free to arrange their comments according to their own knowledge. Finally, Thomasius claims that if anyone has a rare book, which was not in his own library, the reviewers are free to excerpt it, adding summary information and criticism as appropriate.

What makes this latest experiment particularly interesting is that, in line with Thomasius' eclectic approach, reviewing is seen to be the same as excerpting, meaning reviews are primarily extracts. However, Thomasius' extracts are unique. They aren't just simple portions of text taken from notable works for review; they include critical analysis and contextual information. Unlike other journals of the time that focused on mere extracts, for Thomasius the act of reviewing is closely tied to the act of excerpting.

The *Summarischer Nachrichten* are thus divided into two parts, one consisting of the list of suggested important books to be reviewed and the other the reviews themselves.<sup>10</sup> Reading the reviews, which are often more than thirty pages long, it becomes clear that there is a strong emphasis on understanding philosophy through the lives and histories of authors. This is the case of philosophers like Melanchthon, Hobbes, Theophrastus and Descartes.<sup>11</sup> Additionally, there is a particular focus on ancient philosophy, as well as on Pierre Gassendi and several seventeenth-century British philosophers, who are highlighted for their

<sup>10</sup> The list of suggested books is also very useful for reconstructing Thomasius' library itself and his preferences and taste. There is a clear predilection for ancient authors and for their revivals or criticisms in modern times. He is interested in the works of Diogenes Laertius, Epicurus and Theophrastus. Among the Renaissance authors we find Vives, Machiavelli, Paracelsus, Jean Bodin, Francesco Piccolomini and Petrus Ramus. Among the modern philosophers we find Francis Bacon, Athanasius Kircher, René Descartes, François de la Mothe Le Vayer, Baruch Spinoza, Robert Fludd, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Kenelm Digby, Samuel Parker, Arnold Geulincx and Jean Le Clerc. These are all eclectic authors, or not perfectly catalogable within a philosophical school. What he appreciates is precisely the ability to examine the past and to rework it, presenting new ideas.

<sup>11</sup> For example, we find long reviews of the life of Melanchthon published in 1655 and of the life of Hobbes published in 1681, but among the suggested readings there is the life of Descartes printed in 1693, and that of Theophrastus which appeared in 1688.

skill in analyzing and critiquing ancient philosophical ideas.<sup>12</sup> The *Summarischer Nachrichten*, even more than the *Monats-Gespräche* and *Historia Sapientiae et Stultitiae*, reveal Thomasius' true intellectual interests and how he views the review as a primary tool for practicing philosophy. Throughout his experiments, Thomasius remains committed to an approach that treats reviewing as a form of non-dogmatic, critical philosophizing, allowing him to appreciate history without being constrained by its errors.

For Thomasius, philosophical reviews play a crucial and until his time overlooked role. They are essential tools for philosophizing, without which one cannot properly engage in philosophy. His use of reviews—whether in the form of dialogues, extracts, or summaries—reflects a methodological rather than doctrinal stance. Reviews are not meant to construct a grand philosophical system but to critique and select the most suitable material for philosophical inquiry. Thomasius' Eclecticism revolves around this anti-dogmatic principle, using the review as his primary weapon in the battlefield of competing opinions found in the numerous books published during that time.

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<sup>12</sup> Among the reviews on ancient philosophy, we find the *Philosophia et physiologia stoica* by Justus Lipsius (1644), the *Syntagma philosophiae Epicuri cum refutationibus dogmatum* by Pierre Gassendi (1659), and *De natura et constitutione philosophiae italicae seu pythagoricae* by Johannes Scheffer (1664). More accurate analyses of seventeenth-century philosophy are conducted on Francis Bacon's *Oeuvres morales et politiques* translated by Jean Boaudoin (1626), on Pierre Gassendi's *Exercitationes Paradoxae adversus Aristotelicos* (1649) and on Ralph Cudworth's *The true intellectual system of the universe* (1678).

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