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Hamann

# Writings on Philosophy and Language

Edited by  
Kenneth Haynes



JOHANN GEORG HAMANN

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*Writings on Philosophy  
and Language*

TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY

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CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE  
HISTORY OF PHILOSOPHY



JOHANN GEORG HAMANN  
*Writings on Philosophy and Language*

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## Introduction

Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88) is prominent in the history of German literature, being known above all for an idiosyncratic and sometimes bizarre style that was intransigently at odds with the aesthetics of his time and which fascinated and sometimes influenced writers of the nineteenth century. He is one of the most innovative figures within Lutheran theology and arguably “the most profound Christian thinker of the eighteenth century”;<sup>1</sup> his insistence on the historical truth of the Bible led him to a radical rethinking of the nature of both history and truth. Finally, he is a philosopher who wrote penetrating criticisms of Herder, Jacobi, Kant, and Mendelssohn; who gave philosophical attention to language in a way that, at times, seems strikingly modern; but whose own philosophical positions and arguments remain elusive.

Hamann was a minor civil servant for most of his adult life, working in Königsberg as part of the widely hated tax administration of Frederick the Great. He never attained any sort of significant professional success; friends had to intervene to prevent the sale of his library and to fund the education of his children. On the other hand, he had the freedom of his failure inasmuch as he was not obliged to meet the expectations of any particular audience. He exercised his freedom in several respects: to develop a rebarbative and enigmatic style, to reject basic assumptions of his contemporaries, and to range freely across disciplines.

Hamann, however, was not merely moving across disciplines but finding his deepest themes reiterated in a variety of material: ancient and

<sup>1</sup> Hendrik Kraemer, as quoted by James C. O’Flaherty, “Some Major Emphases of Hamann’s Theology,” *Harvard Theological Review* 51:1 (January 1958), 39.



contemporary; sacred and secular; historical, political, economic, theological, literary, and journalistic; and in a wide range of languages. Some of his most profound writing was composed at the intersection of philology, theology, and philosophy. Often he has been considered from only one of those perspectives, which is not only inadequate but also ironic insofar as his own emphasis was on unity. The powerful criticism which Hamann made in opposition to his age was at once stylistic, theological, and philosophical.

### Hamann and literary style

Hamann formed his style after experiencing a religious crisis. In 1757, while working for a firm run by the family of a friend, he went on a business trip to England, where he was not successful, either professionally or personally. After some months he began to despair of the life he was leading; this led to a religious crisis in which he recovered and radicalized the Christian faith of his childhood. When he returned to Königsberg, his friends Kant and Johann Christoph Berens sought to redirect him toward his previous, more secular and Enlightened, orientation, suggesting that he translate articles from the *Encyclopédie*. After an initial effort, Hamann gave up and began his own writing career in earnest. The style he cultivated was the opposite of that of the *Encyclopédie*, obscure rather than perspicuous, personal and even private rather than disembodied and anonymous, erudite and sometimes obscene rather than polite and complaisant. The style was a reproach to the language used by Enlightenment writers; it was a critique of their language by means of his language.

For example, the first dedication of *Socratic Memorabilia* (1759) is addressed to the “public,” but it is far from ingratiating itself with a potential audience; rather, it presents the public as a phantom and an idol, a fraud perpetuated by the cultured elite and no different from the fraud attempted by the prophets of Baal or the priests of Bel. Throughout his career, Hamann had an extraordinary sensitivity to the keywords of his age – like “public” – which he found evasive, obsequious, and self-contradictory. The word “public” seems to imply the existence of such an entity, but who is the public, and how do the many voices of people become the single voice of the public? After parodying a flattering appeal



to this putative public,<sup>2</sup> which concludes with a scatological classical allusion, Hamann adds a second dedication to two friends. From this book onwards, his style makes use of parody, local referents, biblical quotations, obscenity, and wide-ranging allusions. The style is not polite; Hamann writes that it is not made for taste.

Hamann's parody is motivated by a desire to refuse claims implicit in other ways of writing. He is never happier than when using it to show, or imply, that a reasonable position set out in a reasonable style is actually a fanatical and mystical one – where all three adjectives, “reasonable,” “fanatical,” and “mystical,” were strongly charged keywords of the time. In the dedication to *Socratic Memorabilia*, faith in a public is equated to faith in Baal. When Hamann began, in the last part of his life, to write about philosophical texts directly, he applied an analogous skepticism to philosophical terms. The term “metaphysics,” for example, is a linguistic accident that has infected the whole study.<sup>3</sup> A preposition which should indicate, empirically and spatially, the standard position within his corpus of one book of Aristotle's relative to his *Physics* has come to mean, abstractly and transcendently, that something goes “beyond” physics and is sometimes alleged to secure the valid meaning of the merely physical. For Hamann this “beyond,” like the “public,” has become an object of superstitious veneration disguised as reasonableness.

Kant, for example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, refers to a “transcendental object,” which he glosses as “a something = x, of which we know, and with the present constitution of our understanding can know, nothing whatsoever.” In his *Metacritique on the Purism of Reason* (1784), Hamann responds to Kant's claim by presenting this equation as every bit as mystical and superstitious as the scholastic philosophy condemned by the *philosophe* Helvétius (see p. 210 below):

<sup>2</sup> More sophisticated discussions of public discourse had to wait twenty years; see the essays by Klein, Bahrtdt, Moser, and Fichte on the public use of reason collected in James Schmidt, ed., *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley, CA, 1996), as well as the more famous essays by Kant (on which see especially Onora O'Neill, “The Public Use of Reason,” *Constructions of Reason* (Cambridge, 1999), 28–50). Parodies of dedications to the public continued into the nineteenth century; cf. the dedication to E. T. A. Hoffmann's *Life and Opinions of the Tomcat Murr* (1819).

<sup>3</sup> “The hereditary defect and leprosy of ambiguity adheres to the very name ‘metaphysics’ . . . the birthmark of its name spreads from its brow to the bowels of the whole science” (p. 209).



Through this learned troublemaking it works the honest decency of language into such a meaningless, rutting, unstable, indefinite something = x that nothing is left but a windy sough, a magic shadow play, at most, as the wise Helvétius says, the talisman and rosary of a transcendental superstitious belief in *entia rationis*, their empty sacks and slogans.

Removed from their context and the system in which they make sense, Kant's words invite the scorn which Enlightenment figures had directed against their opponents. Hamann seeks to undercut the ground by which reason and faith are contrasted, so that neither receives a special status. Kant's arguments are not answered by Hamann (and may not have been understood by him). Parody does not make arguments or respect them; it proceeds by exaggeration, ironic juxtaposition, and misapplication. This serves Hamann's purpose since he is not interested in rebutting a philosophical stance with philosophical arguments, but rather in using mockery to deny a philosophical problem its status as a problem, to be freed from its grip.

From the early *Socratic Memorabilia* to the late *Metacritique*, a consistent target of Hamann's parodies is the contrast between reason on the one hand and mysticism, superstition, faith, and prejudice on the other. Another is the contrast between the abstract purity of philosophy and the embodied history of lived experience. In the *Metacritique*, Hamann objects to the threefold purism, as he sees it, of Kant's vain effort to make reason free from history, experience, and language. In the following example, he mocks first the mysticism and then the sexual sterility of the analysis of pure reason (see pp. 214–15 below):

I would open the eyes of the reader that he might perhaps see – hosts of intuitions ascend to the firmament of pure understanding and hosts of concepts descend to the depths of the most perceptible sensibility, on a ladder which no sleeper dreams – and the dance of the Mahanaim or two hosts of reason – the secret and vexing chronicle of their courtship and ravishing – and the whole theogony of all the giant and heroic forms of the Shulamite and muse, in the mythology of light and darkness – to the play in forms of an old Baubo with herself – *inaudita specie solaminis*, as Saint Arnobius says – and of a new immaculate virgin, who may not however be a Mother of God for which Saint Anselm took her – .



The old woman Baubo, according to Arnobius, was able to cheer Demeter after a long period of mourning by exposing herself and causing the goddess to laugh, an “unusual form of consolation,” which Hamann compares to Kant’s philosophy. He then contrasts it with the Virgin Mary, whom Protestants do not believe was immaculately conceived; why should reason be more greatly privileged? Hamann delights in associating Kant with Jewish mysticism and Catholic sexuality. To complain that the mockery is unfair to Kant is to miss Hamann’s point: it is not that particular philosophical arguments need to be refuted but that the motivation behind them (a desire for mathematical certainty, Hamann alleges in Kant’s case) stands in need of scrutiny and exposure.

In the *Metacritique* as in all his parodies, Hamann cultivates a deliberate impurity. If philosophy desires to become independent of history and tradition, he writes with continual references to historical tradition; if it is concerned with truths that are independent of experience, he inserts the body and all its functions; if philosophy is to be reasonable, abstract, and transparent, his style will be obscure, weighted with concrete details, strange; in his prose the fact of language, especially in its non-representational aspects, is centrally obtruded.

Parody is parasitic, dependent on other people’s words to make its points, and so Hamann’s essays quote or allude to other texts with great frequency. In addition to these textual references, however, his essays also introduce many personal and local ones. The *Socratic Memorabilia*, for example, is prefaced by two dedications: the first parodies contemporary appeals to the “public” while the second is addressed to two specific friends, Kant and Berens. The motive for introducing contingent facts of his personal biography has been called “metaschematism” (a word Hamann derived from 1 Corinthians 4:6). James C. O’Flaherty discusses it in this way:<sup>4</sup>

For Hamann to metaschematize meant to substitute a set of objective relationships for an analogous set of personal or existential relationships or the reverse, in order to determine, through the insight born of faith, their common meaning . . . Thus Hamann’s literary method requires *direct* personal involvement and *indirect* communication . . . In the *Memorabilia* Hamann is in effect saying: my relationship to Berens and Kant as typical representatives of the

<sup>4</sup> James C. O’Flaherty, *Hamann’s Socratic Memorabilia* (Baltimore, MD, 1967).



present rationalistic age is essentially the same as that of Socrates to the Sophists of fifth-century Athens. Therefore, I will translate our personal relations into the objective historical relations of Socrates in order to bring my adversaries to a full awareness of their true situation.

Metaschematism is an extension of typology, the practice of reading the Bible in such a way that people and events of the New Testament are foreshadowed or figured by those of the Old. For Hamann, typology did not come to an end with the early Christian Church and is not limited to biblical sources; the present continues to be made legible by reference to the past, and only in this way. Past, present, and future are in this sense bound together and mutually illuminated by prophecy (a theme of *Aesthetica in Nuce* and the second *Cloverleaf*, more fully developed in the conclusion of the first version of *Disrobing and Transfiguration*).

Hamann's writings have a peculiar texture, being made up of sustained and parodic allusions to the particular texts he is investigating, biblical quotations, references to ancient history and literature, as well as items of recent history and personal biography. The style belongs in part to the "tradition of learned wit,"<sup>5</sup> exuberant demonstrations of learning that had characterized prose of the early modern period. By Hamann's time, however, literary aesthetics abandoned the copia of such writing in favor of a transparent and perspicuous style. Literature that valued clarity and impersonal demonstration was not interested in the views of past authorities, and it disdained personal idiosyncrasy. Hamann's response to an aesthetic which made irrelevant the learning of the past, the authority of Scripture, and present biography was to write in a style in which these had continual – although indirect – relevance.

He has often been found obscure. He himself, metaschematically identifying his style with Socrates', described it as a group of islands lacking "the bridges and ferries of method necessary for their close association" (p. 8). The obscurity of the writing is not generally resolved only by providing further information, a necessary but not a sufficient step; to read Hamann means to consider the many possible ways by which this information is related to his text, whether by parody, irony, analogy, typology, or other means.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. D. W. Jefferson, "The Tradition of Learned Wit," *Essays in Criticism* 1:3 (1951), 225–48.



## Hamann and theology

Hamann's style has theological and philosophical implications, just as his theology has stylistic and philosophical ones, and his philosophy stylistic and theological ones. Theology is grammar, according to Hamann, who took the equation from Luther.<sup>6</sup> Two Lutheran emphases in particular are strongly marked in his writing. The first is a theme found in all his writings, kenosis, the self-renunciation, self-emptying of God. This is the paradox in Christianity whereby power manifests itself in powerlessness, as omnipotence in the helplessness of an infant or divinity tortured and killed as a criminal. The biblical support comes mainly from the Sermon on the Mount and other parables ("so the last shall be first, and the first last") and the kenotic hymn, so-called, of Philippians 2, one of Hamann's base-texts. It is one of the main currents of interpretation of Christ's crucifixion and marks especially the Lutheran (and Augustinian) tradition.

Hamann's own style is kenotic insofar as it cultivates despised forms, makes rude references, and places unreasonable demands on readers; at a period when good taste was very highly praised, to write in bad taste could be kenotic. Hamann takes as the preeminent example of a kenotic style that of the New Testament. In the first of the *Cloverleaf of Hellenistic Letters*, he defends the Greek of the New Testament for the same reasons it was a scandal to literary men of his time: its impurity, as in the traces of Aramaic audible in its idiom; its lack of ornament and rhetoric; its lowliness and even degenerate condition relative to Attic standards. In the *New Apology of the Letter h*, Hamann argues even about orthography in these terms, which give him grounds to defend a useless, redundant, and traditional element of spelling.

Moreover, for Hamann kenosis is a principle of critique quite generally. His was a unique voice insisting that Frederick the Great was a tyrant and that the philosophical activity of the Berlin Enlightenment was a way of justifying Frederick's despotism. The contrast between "Fritz in the purple cradle" (Frederick the Great) and "Fritz *in praesepio*" (Fritz, an average German, in a cradle) organizes his essays (see p. 102). *To the Solomon of*

<sup>6</sup> See *Miscellaneous Notes on Word Order in the French Language*, p. 22, below; the quotation from Luther is mediated through an eighteenth-century Lutheran theologian. In a letter to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (*Briefe*, vol. VII, p. 169), Hamann asks, "Do you now understand my language-principle of reason and that with Luther I turn all philosophy into a grammar?" (Fritz Mauthner gives this passage as an epigraph to the first section of his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, 1906).



*Prussia* is an uncompromising indictment, and an occasionally scurrilous one, of Frederick the Great and the culture which supported and was supported by him. The title “Golgotha and Sheblimini!” (Hamann’s rebuttal to Moses Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem*) sets up the same contrast: “Golgotha” is Calvary, where Christ was crucified, and “Sheblimini!,” Hebrew for “Sit thou at my right hand” (see Psalms 110:1 and Hebrews 1:13), is taken as the command by which Christ was exalted. Hamann believes that Mendelssohn’s arguments for religious toleration and natural law were complicit with the machinery of Frederick’s absolutist state – and not just Mendelssohn’s arguments, but those of the Berlin Enlighteners generally, all of whom Hamann suspected of seeking to give a blank check to secular power.

Throughout his career language was Hamann’s great theme. On August 6, 1784, he wrote to Johann Gottfried Herder, “If I were only as eloquent as Demosthenes, I would need to do no more than repeat one phrase three times: reason is language, Λόγος; on this marrowbone I gnaw and will gnaw myself to death over it” (*Briefe*, vol. v, p. 177). Hamann’s understanding of language was always theological. In his earlier writings, he was concerned to emphasize the many and diverse phenomena involving language, denying primacy to its function of communicating propositions. He emphasized language, including the language of nature,<sup>7</sup> as the means of God’s revelation to humankind. In his later writing, he began to understand language in sacramental terms that were closely informed by the Lutheran doctrine sometimes known as “consubstantiation” (though the term is contested). Unlike members of the Catholic and Calvinist confessions, Luther had insisted that both the body and blood of Christ *and* the bread and wine of the elements were present in the Eucharist, not only one or the other.<sup>8</sup> For Hamann, this became a means of distinguishing

<sup>7</sup> “Further underlying the subordination of philosophy to poetry is Hamann’s basic conviction . . . that from the beginnings of humanity ‘every phenomenon of nature was a word,’ a conviction canceling any philosophical pretensions to being able to distinguish between sign (spirit) and signified (nature),” Daniel O. Dahlstrom, “The Aesthetic Holism of Hamann, Herder, and Schiller,” in Karl Ameriks, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge, 2000), 81.

<sup>8</sup> Although there were many gradations among the three positions, Catholics maintained the doctrine of transubstantiation (the substance of the Eucharist was wholly converted to the blood and body of Christ, though the appearance of bread and wine remained), Lutherans subscribed to what is commonly called “consubstantiation,” and Calvinists, at least of the Zwinglian variety, took the Eucharist to be symbolic and memorial. Despite attempts at rapprochement between Lutherans and Calvinists, Luther’s insistence on this position created a rupture between the confessions that was never bridged.



kinds of writing. Letter and spirit must both be present, body and symbol must co-inhere, if an utterance is to be authoritative (that is, a *Machtwort*, which transforms elements into a sacrament).

Hamann is often seen as a proponent of holism,<sup>9</sup> and this is an adequate description so long as it is seen in the appropriate context. At least since Augustine, Christianity has insisted on the value of the letter (in contrast to the allegorizing of the Greeks) and on the value of the spirit (in contrast to the legalism of the Jews). A peculiar richness resulted from the presence of two distinct systems of truth obligation, and Hamann sought to preserve this, insisting on the unity of letter and spirit against what he took to be the impoverishing discourse of Enlightenment philosophy. Furthermore, holism is present above all in the incarnation of Christ, who unites human and divine attributes. Hamann, like Luther, invokes the doctrine of the *communicatio idiomatum*, whereby the attributes of each of the two natures are shared by the other in Christ. Hamann extends the principle, seeing in language the interrelation of human and divine generally.<sup>10</sup>

Hamann's holism, then, has a primary theological orientation which lies behind his rejection of the opposition between, and even the dualism of, faith and reason, idealism and realism, objectivity and subjectivity, body and spirit. By the 1780s, Hamann formulates this rejection of opposites in another way, in "the one important exception to Hamann's general refusal to appeal to a metaphysical principle,"<sup>11</sup> the *coincidentia oppositorum*, the union of opposites (as they are experienced by us) in God. Hamann believes that human knowledge is piecemeal, contradictory, and not resolvable by philosophical analysis.

Holism motivates his attacks on Mendelssohn's and Kant's philosophies. To Mendelssohn's argument that actions and convictions must be treated independently, Hamann replies that "actions without convictions and convictions without actions are a cleaving of complete and living duties into two dead halves" (p. 179), resulting in the dead body of the state and a scarecrow-ghost of a church. Of Kant's distinction of the

<sup>9</sup> In *Poetry and Truth* (1811–22), Goethe influentially characterized Hamann's writings: "The principle underlying all of Hamann's utterances is this: 'Everything a human being sets out to accomplish, whether produced by word or deed or otherwise, must arise from the sum of his combined powers; anything isolated is an abomination.'" In Goethe's account, however, Hamann is interested only in the unity of self, and the theological, political, and social dimensions of unity are overlooked.

<sup>10</sup> Fully discussed in Friedemann Fritsch, *Communicatio Idiomatum: Zur Bedeutung einer christologischen Bestimmung für das Denken Johann Georg Hamanns* (Berlin, 1999).

<sup>11</sup> James C. O'Flaherty, *Johann Georg Hamann* (Boston, MA, 1979), 91.



sensibility and the understanding, Hamann asks, “To what end is such a violent, unjustified, willful divorce of that which nature has joined together! Will not both branches wither and be dried up through a dichotomy and rupture of their common root?” (p. 212).

### Hamann and philosophy

Hamann’s own philosophy has sometimes been called fideist or irrationalist. In particular, older scholarship often represented him as a member of a German Counter-Enlightenment, along with Herder, Jacobi, and sometimes Justus Möser, figures supposed to be united in rejecting the claims of reason and the methods of science.<sup>12</sup> However, as historians have become skeptical about the utility of the phrase “The Enlightenment,” the claims of “The Counter-Enlightenment” to a coherent program have come to seem even more exiguous.<sup>13</sup> Hamann is perhaps the figure most uncompromisingly at odds with the Enlightenment, but even he has been described as radicalizing, rather than rejecting, the Enlightenment.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Hamann could be as absolute in his criticism of Herder or Jacobi as he was in dissenting from Kant or Mendelssohn, as demonstrated by his three essays translated below on Herder’s treatise on the origin of language (*The Last Will and Testament of the Knight of the Rose-Cross*, *Philological Ideas and Doubts*, and *To the Solomon of Prussia*).

The fundamental divide between Hamann and Jacobi makes clear how inadequate it is to regard Hamann as a philosopher of irrationalism or an advocate of faith opposed to reason. In *David Hume on Faith, or Idealism or Realism: A Dialogue* (1787), Jacobi defended himself against the charge of irrationalism by invoking Hume to insist on the necessary primacy of faith (or belief, as the same word in German, *Glaube*, can mean either). In a letter to Jacobi written from April 27 to May 3,

<sup>12</sup> Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 1969), 361–92; Isaiah Berlin, “The Counter-Enlightenment,” in Philip P. Wiener, ed., *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* (New York, 1973), vol. II, pp. 100–12.

<sup>13</sup> “Central elements usually identified with the counter-Enlightenment were in fact fundamental to the Enlightenment itself,” writes Jonathan B. Knudsen, *Justus Möser and the German Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1996), 148. See also J. G. A. Pocock, “Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment, Revolution and Counter-Revolution: A Eurosceptical Enquiry,” *History of Political Thought* 20:1 (Spring 1999), 125–39 and the essays in Joseph Mali and Robert Wokler, eds., *Isaiah Berlin’s Counter-Enlightenment* (Philadelphia, PA, 2003). I have drawn on an unpublished paper of James Schmidt, “The Idea of Counter-Enlightenment: A Critique of Isaiah Berlin.”

<sup>14</sup> See Oswald Bayer, *Zeitgenosse im Widerspruch: Johann Georg Hamann als radikaler Aufklärer* (Munich, 1988).



1787,<sup>15</sup> Hamann is relentless in attacking what he takes to be Jacobi's errors – reducing being to a property or an object rather than understanding it as the general relation in which we are enmeshed prior to cognitive acts; taking faith as a self-evident part of human experience but then attempting to defend it by arguments from Spinoza and Hume; distinguishing faith from reason and realism from idealism although those distinctions have no basis in experience. The irrationalist or fideist philosopher attempts to close the gulf (or, as Lessing called it, the “ugly broad ditch”) that has opened up between faith and reason, while the rationalist or skeptic philosopher is intent on preserving the distance between them, but both recognize the gulf. For Hamann, on the other hand, “it is pure idealism to separate faith and sensation from thought”;<sup>16</sup> no special faculty for faith should be imputed, which could then be found in opposition to the faculty of reason. Jacobi, from Hamann's perspective, has been betrayed by his initial jargon into investing metaphysical wraiths with real substance. It makes no sense to isolate certain features from reality, combine them into a larger abstraction, and then attempt to infer reality from that abstraction. Jacobi's faith then becomes a desperate way out of “the impossible situation of having to retrieve existence in general out of thought in general”<sup>17</sup> instead of a routine and ordinary part of daily existence.

Occasionally Western thinkers have launched linguistic critiques of philosophy (as done by Valla, Lichtenberg, Maimon, Mauthner, and Wittgenstein),<sup>18</sup> and it is possible to see Hamann as such a figure. Yet he rarely engages with the details and implications of a specific vocabulary and is not interested to offer improvements or think through the consequences of an alternative vocabulary. For the most part Hamann prefers to offer a metacritique instead, that is, he seeks to isolate what he considers to

<sup>15</sup> Hamann, *Briefe*, vol. VII, pp. 161–81. <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 174.

<sup>17</sup> George di Giovanni, introduction to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill* (Montreal, 1994), 115. In addition to di Giovanni's valuable discussion of this letter (see especially pp. 103–5 and 115–16 of his introduction), see Renate Knoll, “Hamanns Kritik an Jacobi mit Jacobis Briefen vom 1., 6. und 30. 4. 1787 und Hamanns Briefen vom 17., 22. und 27. 4. 1787,” in Bernhard Gajek, ed., *Johann Georg Hamann, Acta des Internationalen Hamann-Colloquiums in Lüneburg 1976* (Frankfurt, 1979), 214–76.

<sup>18</sup> See Lorenzo Valla's attack on Aristotle in the *Dialecticae disputationes*, discussed for example by Brian P. Copenhaver and Charles B. Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy* (Oxford, 1992), 218–19; the aphorisms by Lichtenberg on language treated by J. P. Stern, *Lichtenberg: A Doctrine of Scattered Occasions* (Bloomington, IN, 1959), 156–68; Solomon Maimon, “The Philosophical Language-Confusion,” in Jere Paul Surber, ed. and tr., *Metacritique: The Linguistic Assault on German Idealism* (Amherst, NY, 2001), 71–84; and Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, discussed for example by Gershon Weiler, *Mauthner's Critique of Language* (Cambridge, 1970).



be the *proton pseudos*, the initial and fundamental error, of a philosopher. He does so by using exaggeration and grotesque parody to render foolish what he takes to be the initial impulse behind a philosophical problem. In the case of Kant, for example, Hamann believes that what motivates the *Critique of Pure Reason* is no more than prejudice in favor of mathematics and a predilection for purity. Mathematics may yield certainty, but to favor it relegates human reason to a position inferior to the “infallible and unerring instinct of insects” (p. 211). Why should philosophy be concerned with certainty?

This linguistic assault on philosophy is carried out in Hamann’s distinctive style of parody. Hamann believes that philosophy deals with unreal problems created by the misapplication of language (“language is the centerpoint of reason’s misunderstanding with itself,” p. 211); his object, therefore, is not to refute a philosophical position but to expose and make ridiculous its pretensions. In this sense, his “metacritique” may have more in common with Aristophanes’ mockery of Socrates than with philosophical texts. It is possible, of course, to imagine fuller rebuttals of Kant and Mendelssohn and others along the lines which Hamann has sketched, by tracing more precisely and systematically the philosophical implications of what he saw as the impurities of human existence – that we speak a language we did not invent, inherit a history we did not make, and live in a body we did not create – and such rebuttals would soon be offered, and these would, in their turn, be subject to further refutations and restatements. However, Hamann always refrained from doing so.

Should Hamann then be considered a philosopher at all? He scarcely develops his suggestive remarks about reason, language, sociability, and history, and nowhere does he demonstrate a talent for consecutive logical thought. However, rather than take him as a confused precursor of philosophical themes and arguments to come, it does more justice to him to respect his antagonism to philosophical abstraction and argumentation. Jacobi, who introduced the term “nihilism” into the European languages, found skepticism<sup>19</sup> philosophically threatening and attempted to rebut it. Hamann had no such anxiety; skepticism did not present worrisome

<sup>19</sup> On eighteenth-century skepticism and its perception, see the essays in Richard H. Popkin, Ezequiel De Olaso, and Giorgio Tonelli, eds., *Scepticism in the Enlightenment* (Dordrecht, 1997). See also John Christian Laursen, “Swiss Anti-skeptics in Berlin,” in Martin Fontius and Helmut Holzhey, eds., *Schweizer im Berlin des 18. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin, 1996), 261–81, and the essay by Richard H. Popkin on skepticism in Knud Haakonssen, ed., *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy* (Cambridge, 2006), 426–50.