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Another 18th-Century German Philosophy? Rethinking German Enlightenment

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Enrico Pasini / Paola Rumore

Foreword / Premessa

**Pre-print version of the Foreword to “Quaestio”, 16/2016,
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Rethinking German Enlightenment*, ed. by E. Pasini/P.
Rumore, p. vii-ix.**

Another 18th-Century German Philosophy?

The papers collected here originated in a research project conducted in the years 2012-2015 at the University of Turin, by the local fMOD Research Group on the history of Early Modern and Modern philosophical and scientific thought (Department of Philosophy and Education Sciences). They were first discussed at a conference organized in the frame of a German-Italian research partnership that was held in Turin in June 2014. The aim of the project was, briefly and somewhat ambitiously stated, a re-interpretation of the development of 18th-century German philosophy.

In the traditional historiography, 18th-century German philosophy has long been considered as a passing phase towards a Kantian and post-Kantian grand finale. Only the latter was seen as a crucial step in the autonomisation of modern speculative philosophy. The revival of interest in pre-Kantian philosophy that has occurred over the past twenty years, unfortunately, has mostly developed on the basis of that same traditional conception. Roughly speaking, the development of 18th-century German philosophy has been seen as the all-inclusive opposition of two (properly 'philosophical') trends: a solid metaphysically-based current (Wolffian philosophy); and a practically oriented philosophy, strongly influenced by both the Aristotelian tradition and British empiricism.

A recent and important widening of perspectives in intellectual history allowed for a much better, more careful way of attending to the complex relationships characterizing this philosophical landscape — that was itself still taken as a given — with the variety of debates and controversies that entangled the German Enlightenment, Pietism, rationalist religious thought (*Neologie*), the early clandestine literature.

Our project aimed to produce a more integrated landscape, by means of the identification of naturalistic and 'scientific' tendencies, which evolved alongside the well-studied mainstream currents. In our view, this long-overshadowed manifold phenomenon has two major traits. First, it involved a more intense dialogue between philosophical thought, mathematics, science and medicine.

Second, it was pervaded, despite the different positions of its major and minor protagonists, by a shared fundamental naturalistic position in metaphysics and epistemology.

The rediscovery of a German ‘scientific philosophy’ – that has been overshadowed so far by the more visible traditional currents – also bears witness to the presence in that cultural scene of many particular, apparently unrelated and secondary aspects of the intellectual production of the time, such as naturalism, medical materialism, or anti-metaphysical scientism. Unexpected alliances in controversies find a rationale, and the seeds of later 19th-century developments become more visible.

The following papers contribute to sketch a more detailed image of the German debate of the time, casting light on some of its more or less concealed episodes. The emerging of an increasingly explicit interest in the scientific explanation of various aspects of human life, on the basis both of the growing inclination towards empiricism or of a strong commitment to a rationalistic mechanical model, contribute to the development of new ideas, often understood as alternative stances or as crucial integrations of the philosophical mainstream. Being the reference point for further philosophical ideas (often not so far from materialist positions), Tschirnhaus’s early idea of philosophy as deeply intertwined with empirical sciences such as experimental physics and medicine, and animated by an anti-metaphysical attitude is here considered the starting point of the process that led to the birth of this manifold new tendency. As Ursula Goldenbaum shows in her contribution, Tschirnhaus’s idea of extending the mathematical method to natural science was one of the main sources of inspiration for Bucher’s early project of a philosophical materialism, which referred much more to the classical rationalistic tradition of Hobbes and Spinoza, than to the empirical orientation of Locke’s *Essay*. Nevertheless Locke’s empiricism not only markedly influenced Wolff’s psychology, but acted also as the very source of inspiration both for a sort of materialistic understanding of human nature – like Rüdiger’s – and for one of the earliest attempts at an empirical anthropology, Krüger’s *Experimental-Seelenlehre* which is discussed in Gideon Stiening’s contribution. Beside his interests in medicine – the philosophical investigation of which, according to Matteo

Favaretti's paper, Wolff had actually contributed to with pioneering works already in the first decades of the 18th century – Krüger's rethinking of Wolff's ideas on the basis of a more 'scientific', experimental method had a deep effect on some central claims of Wolff's metaphysics. But while Krüger only called into question Wolff's idea of mind-body interaction, Falk Wunderlich shows that Hupel's materialistic view led him to reject the very basis of any metaphysical dualism. While managing nonetheless to preserve the immortality of human souls, this form of materialism moved one step further from the danger of a stereotyped image of the man-machine that Wolff and his followers had put at the centre of one of the most violent quarrels within the German debate just 20 years earlier. According to their misunderstanding, La Mettrie's scandalous work seemed to bring back the debate to the point where Hobbes had left it: the denial of spiritual substances, of immortality and free-will in favour of a mechanical system of passive matter were the dangerous grounds of the threat against religion and morality. For obvious reasons the discussion on the nature of matter played a very central role in this debate, and found in Kant one of its most relevant solutions. Referring to this context, the paper by Paolo Pecere indicates that the transition from the monadological to the *continuum* dynamical theory of matter represented, among the rest, Kant's way out of the outgoing controversies about monads and materialism that characterized the philosophical and scientific debate of the time. The variety of these attempts to provide a 'naturalistic' description of human nature led to the generation of 'phantomatic' forms of denunciations and invocations of materialism – such as the 'physiology of the understanding', or the 'mechanics of the soul' – which Charles Wolfe shows to be central topics of the philosophical debate even outside Germany.

We are thus seeking to bring to light the tight interconnection between philosophy and science, the 'naturalistic' roots of the increasing distrust towards metaphysics, and even the materialistic and anti-systematic tendencies of 18th-century German philosophy, integrating them into a better explicative framework. Neither our research, of course, nor the present collection, attempt to force these lines of investigation into the invention of some unitary and homogeneous philosophical phenomenon. Instead of providing a picture in

which Tschirnhaus and Bücher, Krüger and Tetens, Hupel and La Mettrie, can be reconciled under one and the same flag, our intent is rather to show how the *Aufklärungsforschung*, far from being tied to the more familiar, commonly provided homogeneous and monolithic image, can open itself a variety of different research directions, as we have sketched in this introduction – offering in addition a first contribution to opening-up this terrain of historiographical inquiry.

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