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Kant's Philosophy and Its Sources

edited by **MANUEL FIORI**



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Kant's Philosophy and Its Sources

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The Making of a Thought in the Flow of History

Manuel Fiori

Kant verstehen, heiße hinter ihn zurückgehen

Lothar Kreimendhal¹

This monographic issue of «dianoia» comes out on the third centenary of Immanuel Kant's birth. To commemorate the author of the *Critiques*, we have chosen to focus on the relationship between Kantian philosophy and its sources, taking a stand in a *querelle* that has been vividly developing in recent decades.

The importance of the study of sources, and, more generally, of Kant's relationship to the authors and debates of his time, in order to understand his work, has long been questioned within the *Kantforschung*. As asserted in a recent study by Andree Hahmann and Stefan Klingner, especially in the Anglo-American tradition, the «dogma» that «Kant's philosophy should be understood solely from within itself»² – regardless of the cultural context in which it developed – was strongly established. Related to this, in particular, was the idea (or, should we say, the prejudice) that the influence of contemporary thinkers would be essentially irrelevant or at any rate negligible, to the point that none of Kant's albeit numerous and prolific interlocutors could have given a veritable contribution to the extraordinarily innovative enterprise of Critical philosophy.

As Corey Dyck and Falk Wunderlich point out, the heavy underestimation of the post-Leibnizian German philosophical tradition is traceable, at least in part, to the Hegelian interpretation of Wolffism (in his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* Hegel considers Wolff's philosophy as a mere «systematizing of Leibniz»³). Another reason given by the scholars, with reference to the uniqueness of

¹ Lothar Kreimendahl, *Kant – Der Durchbruch von 1769*, Dinter, Köln 1990, p. 266.

² Andree Hahmann, Stefan Klingner, *Kant in the Context of Eighteenth-Century German Philosophy: Some Preliminary Reflections*, in Id., *Kant and Eighteenth-Century German Philosophy: Contexts, Influences and Controversies*, De Gruyter, Berlin-Boston 2023, pp. 1-9: p. 2.

³ Robert F. Brown (ed.), *Hegel: Lectures on the History of Philosophy (1825-6)*, Vol. 3: *Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1990, p. 198.

Kantian revolution, is the fact that its affirmation inaugurated the period of 'classical German philosophy', «a phrase that appears to banish the antecedent tradition into a sort of pre-historical status»⁴.

Kant himself, it might be said, encouraged the idea of his independence from tradition. It is worth noting his proclivity to place himself in relation to other authors in a rather free manner, mostly functional to the achievement of his own theoretical goals. Already in a very early passage, Kant openly demands the freedom «to contradict great men», believing that the time of being afraid of confrontation with authority is over: «now», he says, «one can dare to consider the reputation of Newton and Leibniz as nothing, if it opposes the discovery of truth, and obey no other persuasion than the path of the understanding»⁵.

The same concern emerges in a letter to Johann G. Herder dated May 9, 1768:

As for my own work, since I am committed to nothing and with total indifference to my own and others' opinions, often turn my whole system upside down and observe it from a variety of perspectives, in order finally perhaps to discover one which I can hope to point me in the direction of the truth⁶.

Moreover, Kant not infrequently fails to cite his own sources. This happens not by accident, but intentionally, as the following *Reflexion* shows: «I have not quoted anyone from whose reading I have learned anything. I have seen fit to omit everything extraneous and follow my own idea»⁷.

⁴ Corey W. Dyck, Falk Wunderlich, *Introduction*, in Id., *Kant and his German Contemporaries*, Vol. 1: *Logic, Mind, Epistemology, Science and Ethics*, Cambridge University Press, New York 2017, I, pp. 1-14: p. 2. As early as 1965, after all, Dieter Henrich recognized «a peculiar difficulty» for the historical interpretation of Kant in «the fact that German philosophy after Wolff has long been considered obscure and backward» (Dieter Henrich, *Über Kants Entwicklungsgeschichte*, «Philosophische Rundschau», 13 (1965) 3/4, pp. 252-63: p. 254).

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Gedanken von der wahren Schätzung der lebendigen Kräfte* (1746-49), AA I 7. [All citations and references to Kant's works are located according to *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences (de Gruyter, Berlin 1900-). The Academy Edition is cited hereafter with the German abbreviation AA (Akademie-Ausgabe), followed by the indications of the volume, in Roman numerals, and of the page, in Arabic numerals. Unless otherwise noted, the translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992-)].

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *To Johann Gottfried Herder* (May 9, 1768), in Id., *Correspondence*; Eng. trans. by Arnulf Zweig, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1999, pp. 94-5: p. 94.

⁷ *Refl.* 5019 (1776-78), AA XVIII 62.

Faced with all this, confrontation with sources has been recognized, especially in recent decades, as increasingly necessary, and the *quellengeschichtliche Interpretation* has undergone an important expansion⁸. This process has led to a slow but steady re-evaluation of the authors of the Kantian age and their relations to Kant.

In the wake of Lewis W. Beck's now classic *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors* of 1969, a large number of comprehensive monographs have followed⁹ on the relationship to single authors¹⁰ and the implications of cultural context¹¹. In addition, important translations have appeared¹²: see, in particular, *Kant's Sources In Translation* series (Bloomsbury Academic, London-New York), edited by Pablo Muchnik and Lawrence Pasternack¹³.

Based on this scenario, this volume aims to develop and extend the recent research, documenting how Kant's philosophy was

⁸ On the distinction between *textimmanente* and *quellengeschichtliche Interpretation*, with an attached defense of the latter, see Norbert Hinske, *Che cosa significa e a qual fine si pratica la storia delle fonti? Alcune osservazioni di storia delle fonti sulla antinomia kantiana della libertà*, «Studi kantiani», 19 (2006), pp. 113-20. Also in the text is an attempt at a typology of Kant's sources.

⁹ See, at least, Heiner F. Klemme, *Kants Philosophie des Subjekts*, Meiner, Hamburg 1996; Clemens Schwaiger, *Kategorische und andere Imperative. Zur Entwicklung von Kants praktischer Philosophie bis 1785*, Frommann-Holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1999; John Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2002; Eric Watkins, *Kant and the Metaphysics of Causality*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2005; Falk Wunderlich, *Kant und die Bewußtseinstheorien des 18. Jahrhunderts*, de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2005; Andree Hahmann, *Kritische Metaphysik der Substanz. Kant im Widerspruch zu Leibniz*, de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 2009; Patricia Kitcher, *Kant's Thinker*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2011; Corey W. Dyck, *Kant and Rational Psychology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2014; Stefanie Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics in the German Enlightenment. The Art of Invention and the Invention of Art*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015; Dyck, Wunderlich (eds.), *Kant and his German Contemporaries*; Daniel O. Dahlstrom (ed.), *Kant and his German Contemporaries Kant and his German Contemporaries*, Vol. 2: *Aesthetics, History, Politics, and Religion*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018; Karin de Boer, *Kant's Reform of Metaphysics. The Critique of Pure Reason Reconsidered*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2020.

¹⁰ See, at least, Courtney D. Fugate, John Hymers (eds.), *Baumgarten and Kant on Metaphysics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2018; Brandon Look, *Leibniz and Kant*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2021.

¹¹ See, for example, Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2001; Marco Sgarbi, *Logica e metafisica nel Kant precritico: l'ambiente intellettuale di Königsberg e la formazione della filosofia kantiana*, Peter Lang, New York 2010.

¹² See, for instance, Eric Watkins (ed.), *Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason". Background Source Materials*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2009; Michael Walschots (ed.), *Kant's "Critique of Practical Reason". Background Source Materials*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2024.

¹³ To this date, the following volumes has been published: Alexander G. Baumgarten's *Elements of First Practical Philosophy* (August 2021); Johann A. Eberhard's *Preparation for Natural Theology* (September 2021); Georg F. Meier's *Excerpt from the Doctrine of Reason* (October 2021); *Natural Law* di Gottfried Achenwall (October 2021) and, most recently, Baumgarten's *Philosophical Ethics* (January 2024).

shaped through a continuous engagement with the various intellectual traditions that informed the contemporary context. We have chosen, in this sense, not to restrict our focus to Kant's actual contemporaries, nor to philosophers in the strict sense, opting instead for a broader approach.

As for the subdivision of the issue, it consists of ten essays, each of which explores Kant's relationship with a certain source. Thomas Leinkauf's contribution deals, in particular, with the question of Kant's relationship with ancient thought over the course of his entire production; Gonzalo Serrano Escallon, on the other hand, dwells on the figure of Copernicus as a source of Kant's «Transcendental Deduction»; in Katherine Dunlop's essay, the complex relationship between Kant and Newton's work is brought to light. Marco Sgarbi's contribution focuses on a pupil of Newton himself, John Keill, and the pre-critical Kant's debt to him; Colin McQuillan, instead, considers Wolffian faculty psychology and investigates to what extent Kant employs it throughout his reflection; Manuel Fiori examines the Kantian distinction between voluntary and involuntary imagination, in a path that intersects the figures of Platner, Meier and Tetens; Andrew Ward analyses the concepts of freedom and necessity by comparing Hume and Kant; finally, Jennifer Mensch delves into some lexical variations around the problem of race between Buffon and Kant.

We said earlier that with this choice a position has been taken in the historical and critical discussion around the relevance of sources and philosophical tradition to the development of Kantian thought and the emergence of Critical philosophy. The reader will have a chance to evaluate it as he or she reads these essays. The idea that seems to us to cross them – and which itself inspired the preparation of this issue of «dianoia» – is that there is no contradiction between tradition and creation: that, in this case, appreciating Kant's greatness does not require neglecting the complex set of relationships that bound him to the culture and history of his time.

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