MEIER, GEORG FRIEDRICH
ABOUT LOGIC, AESTHETICS AND RETHORIC IN GERMAN
ENLIGHTENMENT PHILOSOPHY

Riccardo Pozzo
Catholic University of America

Resumen

De acuerdo con la comprensión de la lógica del siglo dieciocho, Vernunftlehre de Georg Friedrich Meier y su síntesis en notas para clases, Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre (ambas aparecidas en 1752), son simultánea y especialmente una introducción a la totalidad de la filosofía. Sus objetivos sistemáticos no consisten exclusivamente en la elaboración de los aspectos formales de la lógica, sino más bien en la individuación de los elementos de pensamiento y lenguaje que hacen posible la comprensión humana. En lugar de limitarse a la verdad formal, Meier investiga exhaustivamente el reino de las verdades históricas, epistemáticas y estéticas. La lógica de Meier es al mismo tiempo retórica y se define al principio de ambos libros como "una ciencia que trata sobre las reglas de la cognición adquirida y del discurso adquirido". Kant empleó tanto Vernunftlehre como Auszug durante cuarenta años en sus propios cursos de lógica (Kant leía en clase una copia de Auszug). Así pues, la lógica de Kant, y también su Kritik der reinen Vernunft, recibieron la influencia de Meier, comenzando por la propia terminología.

Palabras clave: German Enlightenment, Eighteenth-Century Logic, Rethoric, Aesthetics, Wolffianism, History of University, Kant’s Logic Lectures.

Abstract

In accordance with the eighteenth-century’s understanding of logic, Georg Friedrich Meier’s Vernunftlehre and its abridgement for courses, the Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre (both of which appeared in 1752), are at the same time and especially an introduction to the whole of philosophy. Their systematic goal does not consist exclusively in the elaboration of the formal aspects of logic, but rather in the individuation of the elements of thought and language which make human understanding possible. Instead of limiting himself to formal truth, Meier investigates thoroughly the realm of epistemic, aesthetic, and historic truths. Meier’s logic is at the same time rhetoric and is defined at the beginning of both books as “a science dealing with the rules of learned cognition and of learned speech.” Kant used Meier’s Vernunftlehre as well as its Auszug for about forty years in his logic-lectures (Kant read in class an interleaved copy of the Auszug). It happens, thus, that Kant’s logic, and also his Kritik der reinen Vernunft, were influenced by Meier beginning with the terminology.

Key Words: German Enlightenment, Eighteenth-Century Logic, Rethoric, Aesthetics, Wolffianism, History of University, Kant’s Logic Lectures.
Georg Friedrich Meier was born in Merseburg near Halle (Prussia) on March 29, 1718. Because of his fragile health he received his primary education at home. His father, a Lutheran pastor close to Pietism, taught him Latin, German and arithmetics until 1729, when he was able to enter the house of Johann Gottfried Semler, the founder of the first mathematical and mechanical Real-Schule, where he received his secondary education, which he integrated by taking classes since 1730 at the Hallisches Waisenhaus, the institution founded by the founder of Pietism, which at that time was run by Hieronymus Freyer, and since 1732 at the University of Halle. His name appear on the university’s registry as of June 6, 1730, but his actual study years began at Easter 1735 and finished on April 25, 1739. His first publication, Of Several Mathematical Abstractions (De nonnullis abstractis mathematicis), is a disputation coauthored with a comrade, Jakob Heinrich Sprengel, which both of them defended on September 30, 1739 under the presidency of Siegmund Jakob Baumgarten, who together with his brother Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten was his intellectual mentor. He started teaching at Halle, in the Fall of 1739/40. From 1739 to 1746 he taught as a Privatdozent, from 1746 to 1748 as an extraordinary and from 1748 to his death as an ordinary professor. He was highly effective as an academic teacher and counted among his students statesmen such as Christoph Ludwig von Stille, Karl Gottlob von Guichard, Karl Abraham Baron von Zedlitz und Leipe and scholars such as Johann August Noesselt, Johann Salomo Semler, Thomas Abbt, Johann August Eberhard, Christian Gottfried Schütz. Shortly before his promotion to ordinary professor in 1748, Meier refused two offers by the University of Göttingen and by the Duke of Brunswick, who wanted him either for the University of Helmstedt or for Brunswick’s technical university, the Collegium Carolinum. Shortly after his promotion, however, the Oberkuratorium für die preußischen Universitäten (which was then an agency of Berlin’s Etats-Ministerium), made him the object of an investigation on the charge of propagating free-thinking. Meier was meant to have given up the doctrine of the immortality of the soul in his writing of 1746 Thoughts on the Condition of the Soul after Death (Gedanken vom Zustande der Selle nach dem Tode). He was able to prove that he had not and that the misunderstanding was due to the pain he had taken to detail the position of his adversaries. Though Meier never left Halle, he knew the world quite well and the world knew him because of the large number of his publications, of which many appeared in several editions and reprints. He was made a fellow of the academies of sciences at Greifswald, Jena, Berlin and Göttingen. In 1754 he was
requested to appear in front of Frederick William II the Great, then on a state-visit in Halle, which was in itself a great honor. The King ordered him to stop teaching philosophy after unknown textbooks and teach instead after John Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, which Meier promptly did, in the Summer of 1754, being the first to do so at a German university. The experiment did not work. Too few students enrolled, and Meier went back to teaching after Wolff, Baumgarten and himself. He lived the uneventful life of a scholar and managed to be well off thanks to a comparatively high salary and the royalties from his books. He was pro-rector twice, from July 1759 to July 1760 (it happened in the middle of the Seven-Years War, and as the university’s representative he was taken hostage for three days when the town fell in enemy’s hands) and from July 1768 to July 1769. In 1750, he married Johanna Concordia Hermann, like himself the daughter of a Lutheran pastor. Having had no children of their own, the couple adopted a daughter who then married the university secretary. Meier died on June 21, 1777.

Kant read after Meier in his logic lectures for about forty years: from the Summer of 1755 to the Winter of 1755/56 he adopted the *Doctrine of Reason* and from the Summer of 1756 to the Summer of 1796 the *Abstract from the Doctrine of Reason*. It is not at all surprising, then, that Kant’s own logical writings as well as his *Critique of Pure Reason* were influenced by Meier, as is evident already from the terminology. So too, one finds in Kant’s *Reflection on Logic* and *Lectures on Logic* elaborations of the fundamental issues addressed by Meier, such as and the articulation of the conditions for the constitution of an horizon and the analysis of prejudices. Of course, other philosophers of the German Enlightenment also discussed such matters, but it is Meier’s texts that provided the point of departure for Kant. In this context, Locke’s philosophy played an especially important role in this context. In fact, Meier served as mediator between Locke and Kant. Meier helped to introduce Lockean issues such as the ‘extent of human knowledge’ and the ‘degrees of assent’ to the teaching of logic in the German universities; and, most importantly, he made such issues salient for Kant. There was, in any case, no ‘overcoming’ of Meier by Kant, just as there was no ‘double life’ of Kant as a teacher in Königsberg and as a scientist within the *république des lettres*. There was rather a genuine connection of teaching and research. In his consideration of continuities and transformations in Kant’s logical writings, Norbert Hinske has shown that Kant gradually put together a new philosophical language by drawing upon traditional Greek-Latin or Latin terms and recent Germanizations; and both
sorts of terms were available to Kant from Meier in great number. (One thinks first and foremost of ‘egoism’, ‘genius’, ‘horizon’, ‘logic’, ‘logical’, ‘party’, ‘popular’, ‘pure’, ‘doctrine of reason’, and ‘prejudice’). An example may suffice: in moving from an initial adherence to Wolff’s mathematical method to his own critical formulation in the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant passes through his remarks upon Meier’s notion of a system as a connected set of ‘dogmatic truths.’

Meier’s intellectual life can be divided into two periods: the first was dominated by A. G. Baumgarten, whom he first met at the Waisenhaus in 1730, and the second by Locke, whom he helped to introduced in Germany after 1754. Meier is usually considered a follower of Christian Wolff. There is some truth to this view; however, it cannot explain some striking traits, beginning with the division of his logic and aesthetics into inventio, dispositio, elocutio and exercitatio, which used to be part of the rhetorical canon since Cicero’s apocryphal Rhetorica ad Herennium. Thus, Meier was subject to other traditions than Wolffianism. He was influenced by Johann Franz Budde’s eclectic combination of ancient and modern philosophy, but first and foremost, he was influenced by the strong effort toward a most effective application of rhetoric in theology and in the humanities pursued by the Pietists, for which the philosophy of A. G. Baumgarten gave without doubt the most splendid results. In sum, one can trace in Meier’s works a development from rationalism to empiricism. To name just an example, in his first period he maintains (with Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten) that all obscure and confused cognition eventually can become clear and distinct, but in the second period he gives up this claim and rather stresses the fact that the immediate objects of our sensations do not correspond to the objects around us.

During the first of these periods he published a number of works alternating the popular with the academic production. With the exception of natural philosophy, Meier wrote on every part of philosophy, but his most original contributions lie in the fields of logic, metaphysics, aesthetics and philosophy of language. The most important works of this period are Theoretical Doctrine of the Emotions in General (1744), Foundations of All Sciences concerned with Beauty (1748-50, 2nd edn 1754-59), Doctrine of Reason (1752, 2nd edn 1762) and Abstract from the Doctrine of Reason (1752, 2nd edn 1760).

Meier’s second period begins with Program in which He Announces His Decision to Give a Course on Locke’s Essay of the Human Understanding (1754), continues with Observations on the Limits of Human Cognition
(1755), Metaphysics (1755-59, 2nd edn 1765), the Essay on the General Art of Interpretation (1757), Abstract from the Foundations of All Sciences concerned with Beauty (1758), Consideration on the Nature of Scientific Language (1763), Life of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1763), Contributions to the Doctrine of the Prejudices of Mankind (1766), and is concluded by the essays collected in the Investigations of Several Matters pertaining to Philosophy (1768-71).

In the Doctrine of Reason, Meier gives a full theory of the ‘horizon’ of human cognition, which prepares the way for Kant’s new understanding of this concept with respect to the critical task of determining the extent and the limits of philosophical cognition. Meier begins by considering the whole spectrum of the angustia eruditae cognitionis, which originates either from ignorance or from cognitive deficiency of things and their grounds, and continues until the end of philosophical cognition is achieved. Meier considers ignorance, on the one hand, as complete deficiency of cognition and, on the other hand, as mere availability of historical cognition. Against Leibniz’s calculemus! and against the Wolffian principle nullos cognitionis rationum decernimus limites, Meier opposes Locke’s awareness of the limits of human cognition. It is impossible ‘that a man be able to gain a philosophical cognition of every possible thing’ (Doctrine of Reason, § 64, p. 68). This proposition is confirmed by several examples from the practice of natural scientists that were his contemporaries. Relying on Locke, Meier here has in mind exactly the spectrum of experience that, four decades later, Kant would thematize in his ‘Dialectic of Pure Reason.’ The doctrine of horizon, or of the ‘circle of vision’, first appears as an invitation to exercise a certain caution in the sense of adopting a criterion with respect not only to (1) what we cannot know, but also to (2) what we do not need to know. After a closer inspection, though, the rhetorical context of this theory becomes distinct. In fact, the outer reach of one’s horizon has to be in proportion (what the Greeks called prepon and the Latins aptum) with one’s faculties and one’s dignity as a human being. Meier outlines four possible stances one might take with respect to our cognitive horizon. The first stance, above the horizon, refers to the limits of human cognition. However, one should remark that Meier considers the limits of knowledge in general, not the limits of ‘knowledge of experience.’ One should think especially of religion and cosmology. Faced with the paralogisms and antinomies present in both, Meier pleads for a reappropriation of the theory of double truth. On the one side are the truths of philosophical cognition and on the other all other truths that stand above it. Of course, the crucial
instances here were the debates *de coena domini*, which were not forgotten since the time of the Book of Concord (1580). Not only Kant’s distinction between ‘empirical’ and ‘logical illusion’, but also his definition of a ‘transcendental illusion’, which comes out naturally and which, in defiance of ‘all the warnings of criticism, carries us away beyond the empirical use of the categories, and holds out to us the semblance of extending the *pure understanding*’ (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A295/B352) are relevant to the history of the impact of Meier’s theory. The second stance, beneath the horizon, concerns those rules of scientific ethos, nowadays obvious, that direct our mind when setting up a research project. Meier pleads with particular insistence for their respect. He laments the many sins against this rule, the many treatises concerned with trifles. He gives as an imaginative example a philosophical treatise on shoemaking, an enterprise that costs much labor to a scientist and yields little or no practical results. The third stance, beyond the horizon, centers on the knowing subject. This perspective originates from purely pragmatic observations. Granted that not all subjects are equal, the limits of their cognition are likewise unequal. The ‘professional scholar’, as opposed to ordinary citizens such as girls, soldiers and noblemen, are the examples given by Meier. The analysis of the subject’s cognitive ability becomes central in order to determine one’s epistemic range. The fourth stance, within the horizon, is the proper one for a philosopher and its goal consists in the legitimation of the research field chosen by the scientist within the horizon of philosophical cognition (*Doctrine of Reason*, § 66-69, p. 70-74, *Abstract*, § 45-48, pp. 12-14).

Meier tried to answer one fundamental question, namely, what is the ‘plan of the effectiveness of reason’? (*Doctrine of Reason*, § 5, p. 6) He addressed this question in all his works dedicated to speculative philosophy. There are ways of conceiving truth. Locke and Leibniz distinguished between truths ‘in a strict sense’ and ‘moral’ or ‘metaphysical’ truths. Wolff asserted the need to distinguish between a theoretical and a practical part of logic, the former concerned with the objective and systematic foundation of science, the latter with the man’s habits once he knows the causes and the relations of things. By extending the scope of logic beyond dogmatic truths to historical, and aesthetic truths (*Abstract from the Doctrine of Reason*, § 104, §106, p. 26-27). Meier overcame the strict demarcation between logic and rhetoric legitimated by a rigorously formal concept of truth and chose to work extensively on epistemic truths. According to Meier, human beings are sure of the world’s actuality because they live in it. However, they are also conscious of the fact that they know according
to their own forces, i.e., they are aware that they know their own subject worlds. Meier chiefly considered the subjective side of cognition and the construction of certainty as the result of a cognitive process. Only after having gained certainty is one allowed to speak about truth. But it is always a truth affected by its origin: a given truth might be universal and necessary, but it might also be merely probable, doxastic, or even simply a belief. Meier and Kant, however, had different opinions on this issue. Meier considers the illusion that human cognition might be ‘completely false’ as due to the effect of prejudice; this is the case, e.g., with regard to the partiality of people involved in a heated discussion about some doctrinal issue (Doctrine of Reason, § 128, pp. 140-42). Kant argues, contrarily, from a transcendental standpoint, remarking that the assumption of the possibility of a total mistake would put into question the very cognitive capacity of the human being, thus striking back at the legitimation of a transcendental foundation of cognition (Critique of Pure Reason, A294/B350).

While mathematics and metaphysics make possible an exact and correct knowledge of nature (which must be analytical, in the sense of respecting the praedicatum inest subjecto principle), the human being, says Meier, has to behave carefully when confronted with truths achieved in all other fields, which are truths invariably distorted by prejudices (Doctrine of Reason, § 200, p. 273). Eighteenth-century logic deals to a large extent with the set of what Meier calls ‘logical prejudices’, i.e., with those prejudices that find their origin in the general configuration of human thought and speech, independently of their respective objects. The table of logical prejudices outlined by Meier is important not only per se, but also because it is the one Kant commented on in his logic lectures. Meier provides a systematic outline of the praieudicia logica according to one’s readiness to give one’s assent. He considers a first group of prejudices deriving from an excess of confidence. To this group belong: (1) the ‘prejudice of very great reputation’, (2) ‘logical egoism’, (3) the ‘prejudice of antiquity’, (4) the ‘prejudice of novelty’, (5) the ‘prejudice of the presumed system’, (6) the ‘prejudice of laziness’, and (7) the ‘prejudice of shallowness’ (Doctrine of Reason, § 202, p. 276-78). The second group of logical prejudices embraces those that originate from a deficit of confidence, which occur when we consider something as generally false, evil, and imperfect. To this group belong the negative versions of some of the prejudices of the first group: the prejudices of (1) hating antiquity, (2) hating novelty, (3) hating what is generally thought of, and (4) mistrusting one’s own strength (Doctrine of Reason, § 202, p. 279-80).
Meier’s thematization of prejudices entails a reflection on doubt and skepticism. In 1752 Meier maintains that skepticism must be charged of obliterating the distinction between false and erroneous knowledge. One should remark, however, that in 1752, when he published the *Doctrine of Reason* and its *Abstract*, Meier conceived the relation to external objects as a kind of naive realism. We know, insofar as we represent the object to ourselves, but the existence of these objects is proved by common usage. Only consciousness provides a criterion for measuring the degrees of knowledge. Fourteen years later, in his *Contributions to the Doctrine of Prejudices fo Mankind*, in which he problematized the subject-object relation by evidencing the ‘natural necessity’ and the inevitability of prejudices, Meier changed his position. Meier’s later argument finds its justification in the ‘prejudice that experiential cognition is the foundation of all other cognition’. This is an overall prejudice, which unifies all the prejudices of his preceding table dealing with experience. It consists in the assumption ‘that our sensations represent to ourselves the configuration and quantity or an internal determination of the objects of our sensations. Everyone says that a body, which seems to be red in our sensations, is red. In the same way, we name a food sweet or sour. In short, everyone names objects according to the pattern of sensations one has of them’ (*Contributions*, § 15, 31). Meier’s conclusion that the immediate object of our sensation is not identical with the object in front of us and that the world of our sense experience is something different from the world of the objects ‘in and for themselves’ (*Contributions*, § 30, 61), although still consistent with the premises of Leibnizian and Wolffian philosophy, is an important step, as Norbert Hinske has remarked, on the path that leads Kant to set up the laws of sensitive cognition on the basis of the distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal world.

The legacy of Meier’s philosophy is that a reasonable entanglement of logic and rhetoric can take place only in the context of an enlarged concept of truth, embracing all its epistemic nuances. One can say that Meier went beyond his teacher A. G. Baumgarten insofar as he laboriously built into a system of *artes liberales* all theoretical principles and practical rules connected with traditional logic and rhetoric. Nevertheless, it is easy to see where the limits of Meier’s endeavor are, since continuous reference to the canons of the tradition of rhetoric eventually implies that Meier loses sight of the originary intention of elaborating every special art according to a compulsory, embracing legality, and exhausts himself in enumerating concrete instructions for poetizing.
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