

## FIRST LETTER

### Hermias to Aenesidemus

You are mistaken, my dear friend: I have not been unfaithful to philosophy, and neither the business of my office nor the great disagreements that currently dominate the philosophical world have made me indifferent to the study of the first and, with regard to the essential requirements of our reason, the most important of all the sciences. Rather, for the last year I have occupied myself more zealously and more persistently than ever before with this science. You will thus have to beg pardon for your mistrust of the constancy of my tastes in this matter.

Yes, I can only report to you that philosophy interests me far more now than before. Or rather, I can also assure you that I have come much closer to the great purpose that actually underlies all philosophising, that I have come to know the only true principles of all knowledge, and that for the zeal with which I have for some time now studied the queen of the sciences, I have been rewarded in a most agreeable way when it comes to the reassuring and satisfying of my mind.

You will be keen to know: by means of what was this great change in my understanding effected? And which of the many systems that have thus far received the approval of the philosophers satisfies all the demands one is entitled to make of a system of philosophy, according to my present conviction? You need not guess for long. For what indeed could the philosophy of ancient or modern times have to show that could match the results of the critical system for thoroughness and true strength? Yes, yes, my dear friend, I have been completely cured of that scepticism that destroys all philosophy by the writings of the critical philosophers, and in the critique of reason I have found the most reassuring enlightenment concerning the boundaries of human cognition.

Admittedly, this change in my understanding and convictions has come about rather quickly. I am aware, however, of absolutely no overhastiness on my part. That I have been freed in such a short amount of time from that scepticism, proud of its artful ignorance, with which I previously had to make do, for lack of knowledge of anything certain and settled in philosophy, I must simply ascribe in part to the great evidence of the grounds on which the results of the critical philosophy rest, and in part to the nature of the means by the use of which I have become acquainted with the spirit of this philosophy and its highest principles.

But I might perhaps hope that the story of my conversion to the critical philosophy will not be entirely uninteresting to you, and will thus relate its most important parts accordingly.

As you know, I resolved several years ago to study the system of the philosopher from Königsberg. On account of my business, and only that, I kept having to push back the carrying out of this resolution from one time to another, and it was not until summer last year<sup>1</sup> that I was given the necessary leisure.

In order not to be led into error while carrying out this project I thought it necessary first of all to get to know the critique of reason myself. So I began to read that work that, for the last ten years, has caused such turmoil in the world of German philosophy, but, I must admit, I began in a very peculiar frame of mind. Your judgement concerning the critical philosophy already entitled me to expect a great deal from a reading of the critique of reason: that by means of this philosophy the tendency to rave about objects that lie entirely outside of the sphere of experience would, indeed must be reduced, and also that speculation about virtue

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<sup>1</sup> This letter was written at the beginning of the year 1791.

and morality had received from it an entirely new and exalted direction. This sense of expectation was intensified still more by the completely contradictory pronouncements that the most famous of our contemporary philosophical authors have made concerning the value of the *Critique of Pure Reason*; and a multitude of dark forebodings seized me in the moment that I began to read this work which, according to the judgement of some philosophers, presents scepticism and idealism in a new guise, according to the judgements of others, defends and encourages materialism and atheism, but according to the judgement of those who profess to be well-acquainted with the spirit of the work, not only entirely destroys idealism, scepticism, materialism, and atheism, but is also supposed to have provided the most reassuring, uniquely true and most convincing conclusions concerning the ground for our hopes about the next life and concerning our duties and rights in life in the present on the one hand, and concerning the genuine limits of human knowledge on the other. By the way, I had also firmly resolved in advance not to put the critique of reason aside until I was completely finished with reading it, and that I would give up each of my convictions in philosophy as soon as it taught me a better one. So, in this frame of mind I began to read the critique of reason.

Do not expect me to describe to you the impressions made on me by the majority of the passages of this greatest and most original masterwork of the philosophical spirit. Since I was not an adherent of any dogmatic system, the *Critique of Pure Reason* found in me a pupil who was very receptive to all the new truths contained within it, and I was most deeply convinced at once by many of its claims. It produced in me the conviction that true philosophy can only be accomplished after a careful examination of all the branches of the capacity for cognition. It made more precisely known to me the grounds on the basis of which humanity must renounce all cognition of super-sensible objects; and I grasped, after I had read it all the way through, why it is a natural, but thereby no less dangerous error, when what belongs to the representations in us is ascribed as a real attribute to things in themselves. Still, very many of the passages of this masterwork were incomprehensible to me, despite all the effort I made to understand them and explain them to myself; and, in particular, some things still remained obscure to me with regard to the ultimate grounds on which the whole edifice of the critical philosophy should stand, unshakably and unchangingly firm. I did see that this philosophy can claim far more in the way of evidence and certainty for its claims than any other dogmatic system; it was just that, exactly how its doctrines concerning the various components of our cognition could be completely defended against the attacks of that scepticism that crushes all speculation, and that the grounds of these doctrines are beyond all objections; this was not yet clear to me from the critique of reason itself.

However, since this first and actually still rather incomplete acquaintance with the critique of reason had been so exceedingly instructive for me, and since it had straightaway convinced me that the latest philosophy is entirely original, not only in terms of its results but also in terms of the kind of treatment of the philosophical sciences contained within it, so I could legitimately expect from a more accurate and complete acquaintance with the spirit of the critical philosophy very important conclusions concerning the requirements of speculating reason and the demands of scepticism. And it was therefore very important to me to find, among the friends of the critical philosophy, one to provide me with further explanations concerning its essence and principles. But here, too, my decision was soon made. You had already recommended the author of the *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*<sup>2</sup> to me as the one among contemporary philosophers from whom the most important explanations concerning the system

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<sup>2</sup> *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*. By Carl Leonhard Reinhold. Leipzig 1790.

of the critical philosophy were to be expected; and thus I could not be unsure as to which of the many expositors and defenders of Kantian writings I should look to for excellent instruction concerning that which had remained unintelligible in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. And with all my heart I know that I have you to thank for making me aware of this great and perceptive student of the critical philosophy. First, I read his *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*. Of course, I did not find in them what I was really seeking, namely insights concerning the ultimate grounds and principles of the entire Kantian philosophy. The masterful and illuminating presentation in the *Letters* of what has taken place by means of the newest philosophy in the interests of religious convictions and the philosophy of religion only increased my desire to become accurately acquainted with the real meaning and the whole extent of the critical philosophy, and drew my attention to the latest work<sup>3</sup> of this author, who is superior to all my praise, and whom the spirit of philosophy itself seems to have called to the defence of the rights, the demands, and the value of this science. Since I can assume that the most important philosophical product at the last book fair will not have escaped your notice, I presumably need not go over its contents and purpose. But I must still report to you how the victory of the critical philosophy over scepticism was gradually completed for me by means of the Reinholdian *Contributions*. From the fifth essay in these *Contributions* (concerning the possibility of philosophy as a rigorous science), which I read first, according to the instructions of the author, I really, definitively learned the *one thing* necessary for philosophy: many older philosophers guessed at it faintly, certain *edges* of the *Critique of Pure Reason* suggested it, but in this essay it is most clearly and precisely discussed, and its discovery must necessarily destroy scepticism. The second essay (concerning the requirement for, the possibility, and the properties of a universally valid, first, fundamental principle for philosophy) made comprehensible to me that which the grounds upon which my scepticism rested had never before let me comprehend, namely, that a universally valid, first, fundamental principle on which the entire edifice of philosophy would be erected, a consensus in the claims and statements of philosophising reason, and an everlasting peace among the venerators of philosophy – that such a thing is *not* an idea whose realisation can only be hoped for for as long as one completely misunderstands the essence of the human faculty of cognition. I started to study the principal moments of the new presentation of the Elementary Philosophy with a restlessness of the mind that I had never before experienced in the reading of philosophical texts, for my scepticism, as I foresaw, had to engage in the most decisive battle, in which it still had everything to win or everything to lose. And the truth of the highest principles of all philosophising explained in this essay were so lucid and evident to me that, after I had read it several times and also understood it, scepticism entirely lost its dominion over my convictions. I am still unsure as to which is the more worthy of admiration in this essay: the search for the highest source of all fundamental principles of the Elementary Philosophy in consciousness and the derivation of the theory of cognition from an indisputable and universally plausible fact, or the provision of the fundamental articles of the Elementary Philosophy in order to prevent misunderstandings and doubts of all kinds? But I am completely convinced of the following: that in this masterful essay the veil that has until now hidden the innermost workings of representations and concealed the unique properties and value of the effects of the senses, the understanding, and reason from the eyes of the philosophers has been lifted as high as human power allows; that in the same essay the henceforth universally valid and self-determining proposition which

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<sup>3</sup> *Contributions to the Correction of the Previous Misunderstandings of Philosophers*. By C. L. Reinhold. Volume I. Jena 1790.

constitutes the ultimate principle of all philosophy and the highest premise for theoretical and practical philosophy has genuinely been established; that by means of this universally valid proposition the foundation stones have finally been laid atop which a system of philosophy can and will be built that answers those important questions that are of the greatest interest to every self-reflecting person: “*What can I know?*”, “*What should I do?*” and “*What may I hope?*”, in a manner completely satisfying and universally valid for reason, and thereby will not only put an end to all feuds in philosophy, which the previous treatment of this science rendered endless, and unite the powers of all self-thinking minds in a concern for the *one thing that is necessary for humanity*, but will also raise up philosophy as the true queen of all sciences, the conqueror of all superstition and unbelief, and the true nurturer of human welfare. These great hopes for the future state of philosophy do *not* constitute chimeras whose realisation is not to be expected, due in part to the essential nature of human reason and in part to the variety of the circumstances that influence the development of this reason, producing in every member of the human race a particular direction and alteration. Of this I have been completely convinced by the remaining essays in the *Contributions*, but also at the same time by the new theory of the human capacity for representation,<sup>4</sup> (for you may very well suppose that I am no longer unfamiliar both with entire contents of those essays and with this theory). Yes, I even hope myself one day to experience the ushering in of a perfect and perpetual peace in the field of philosophy. For since the preliminary articles of this peace agreement have already been drafted so unimprovably well, it cannot possibly take an additional half a century to complete the instrument of peace. Of course, I am not so bold as to expect that all contemporary professional philosophers will welcome this peace with open arms. The power of the prejudices and the respect for the opinions with which they have grown old seem too strong to allow that they could be freed of them so soon. Had scepticism not maintained in me a sense for and a responsiveness to every new truth; had I not always made it my unbreakable law never to reject a philosophical claim until I had examined it and recognised the grounds for its rejection, then the critical philosophy would probably also have remained for me a forever closed and inaccessible sanctuary. Of course, one cannot expect from those among our contemporary teachers of philosophy who leaf through the writings of the critical philosophers with the intention only of refuting them, or of making jokes about them from the lectern, and concerning whom it has not yet been possible to make them comprehend that one must have understood the doctrines of the critical philosophy before one is permitted to venture a refutation of them, that they will promote the forthcoming peace in the realm of philosophy. Their private interests even entail that they oppose the noble efforts of genuine philosophers to perfect this peace. It is therefore all the more surely to be hoped that the professional philosophers of the future enjoy the blessed consequences of that peace; they who are now just beginning to dedicate themselves to the queen of all the sciences and in whom the noble plant of the critical philosophy finds hospitable soil, withered neither by fantasies about knowledge of super-sensible objects nor by the dreamt-up representability of things in themselves. It is to be hoped that they will tend to the coming of the golden age of philosophy, the actuality of which, according to the previous kind of philosophising, was of course not to be expected.

Yet I have told you enough already about my current convictions concerning philosophy, and about the way in which I came to hold them. But now I must still ask another question, which concerns you, my noble friend. Do you still hold scepticism to be the most consistent among everything that has until now been counted as philosophy, and are you still

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<sup>4</sup> *Essay on a New Theory of the Human Capacity for Representation*. By C.L. Reinhold. Prague and Jean 1789.

as devoted to it as you were previously? Are you still convinced that philosophy has not yet demonstrated any universally valid and unshakeably firm principles, and that nothing at all has yet been established or proven concerning the relation of our representations to certain objects external to them? As far as I know, you have never wanted, by means of scepticism, to bring about that tranquillity and imperturbability of the mind that the sceptics declare the noblest fruit of their unsystematic system, and concerning the possession of which one can only deceive oneself for as long as one completely misunderstands the most essential needs of human reason: You have always rather said that you really only employ scepticism to ensure the responsiveness of your mind to the cognition of the truth and to prevent the weakening of the sight of your reason by unjustified dogmatism, so that, as soon as the realm of the philosophy should one day become enlightened, you too could be granted the beneficial sight of this enlightenment. Now, according to my present conviction, the glimmer of the dawn that heralds the coming of the full light of day in the realm of philosophy has already begun to illuminate the highest regions of this realm; and the path on which the sublime goal of philosophy is to be attained, namely certainty regarding our rights and duties in this life and our hopes in the next life, has already been correctly described; it has already been trodden by men who truly care for philosophy. I therefore can scarcely believe that you should disagree with me on this point, and I do not see which of the demands one is entitled to make of a system philosophy should not be fulfilled in the critical philosophy. But, judging by some of the remarks contained in the latest of your letters, you still do not belong among the number of those who hold that the critical philosophy has been unshakeably firmly grounded. I must fear, then, that we are some way away from fully agreeing with one another when it comes to our insights into this philosophy, and therefore request, if this should be the case, that you make known to me exactly what in the evidence and certainty of the highest grounds of the Kantian-Reinholdian philosophy your scepticism still has to object to. Of course, as I can tell you in advance, you will not find in me an unarmed and easily converted venerator of this philosophy. But whatever your judgement concerning it should be, I shall still honour its communication, because it will be certainly be instructive for me, as a token of your friendship and goodwill.