

THIRD LETTER

Aenesidemus to Hermias

Here, at last, you receive the examination of the foundations of the Reinholdian Elementary Philosophy that was promised. A *Hume*, of course, would not only have subjected those foundations to a much more rigorous critique, but also, by means of the eloquent presentation of his doubts and outlines, he would have denied the opponent an advantage which I am not in a position to deny them. In the meantime, should my objections to the incontrovertible truth and universal validity of the Elementary Philosophy be deemed important and reasonable by you, despite their total lack of any beautiful presentation, then they would have all the more claim to correctness.

As you will find, before presenting my doubts about the truth and universal validity of the foundations of the Elementary Philosophy, I have, in every case, presented the explanations and proofs of these foundations, just like those presented by Professor *Reinhold*. I request, however, that you not merely rely on upon my excerpts from the Elementary Philosophy, but rather consult both the *Contributions to the Correction of Previous Misunderstandings of Philosophers* and the *Essay on a New Theory of the Human Capacity for Representation* concerning the authenticity of the excerpts provided.¹ The sceptics have always been the least guilty when it comes to the sin of first distorting or twisting the opinions of their opponents, thereafter to refute them; and I too abhor such tricks, that only the ignorant can trade in. However, it could well be the case that, despite my efforts to correctly grasp and understand the premises and results of the critical philosophy, I may have attributed to some propositions of that philosophy characteristics that the author did not knowingly intend to connect with them; - in such cases however, and self-evidently, my remarks against that philosophy can say and mean nothing at all – and for this very reason an examination of the authenticity of my presentation of the Elementary Philosophy and the main doctrines of the critique of reason should not be wholly superfluous.

But just as I want to send off my remarks concerning the Reinholdian Elementary Philosophy, another passage from the *Contributions* occurs to me (p.366) according to which I, as a defender of scepticism, seem to belong among those disallowed from evaluating this philosophy.* Despite the fact that Professor *Reinhold*, in that passage, expressly challenges all the friends of philosophy to subject the first, fundamental principle of all philosophy which he established and which, he is convinced, is universally valid, to the most rigorous critique; he also at the same time demands of those who wish to arise as challengers of the highest principle of the Elementary Philosophy that they provide another universally valid proposition, according to which the matter of the fundamental principle of all philosophy that he established can be decided. This demand is most just, and if scepticism consisted in the claim that everything in human cognition is uncertain, and that even this claim – that everything is uncertain – is to be doubted, then the friends of scepticism would have completely forfeited all participation in the disputes of the philosophical world by means of their peculiar claims, and would have to accept the ignominy of having their judgement concerning philosophical disputes given no consideration by any of the remaining philosophical parties, in part simply because of their irrational obstinacy in not following any definite rules when judging matters

¹ In this evaluation of the Elementary Philosophy consideration was also given to the work that has recently appeared, *On the Foundation of Philosophical Knowledge* (Jena 1791).

of philosophy, and in part because of their ignoble conduct in wanting to attack the opponent with unknown weapons. But I have already remarked in my last letter that scepticism has its definite borders, and is nothing so little as it is a system according to which everything is uncertain. The adherents of such as fantastical system, too, have only existed in the overheated imagination of the dogmatists. For nature has already taken care, in the constitution of the human being, to ensure that an indecision that spreads itself across all branches of cognition can never arise in him; and I doubt that even the greatest disruption of the understanding and heart is in a position to so extremely dehumanise a human creature that it could cast doubt on the certainty of *all* judgements. And although scepticism indeed *knows* neither anything positive nor anything negative about things in themselves, although it also claims that philosophising reason has so far proved and established nothing beyond the borders of the human cognitive faculty; it nevertheless knows a great deal about the representations in humans, and is entirely in agreement with the critical and uncritical dogmatists concerning the certainty of everything that occurs immediately in consciousness as a fact. One will therefore not be able to dispute its right to make judgements in matters of philosophy. I submit, then, the following propositions as already agreed upon, and as the basis for the evaluation of the Elementary Philosophy:

- 1) There are representations in us, in which both differences from one another are present, as well as in which certain characteristics are encountered in respect of which the representations agree with one another.
- 2) The touchstone of all truth is general logic; and every rationalising concerning facts can only make a claim to correctness insofar as it agrees with the laws of general logic.

I do not know that any sceptic² or philosopher from some other party would have ever doubted the validity of these propositions, and if I am not entirely mistaken, the truth of the principle of consciousness and the derivation of other propositions from out of it depend on the truth and certainty of the propositions above. I therefore should not fear, then, that by the presupposing of these principles I have assumed something concerning which Mr *Reinhold* could not agree with me.

² If sceptics have doubted the certainty of the syllogistic, then they have really only doubted this: that the syllogistic could help us to a cognition of things in themselves.

* *Translator's Note*: Reinhold's passage reads as follows:

The result of all of your previous disputes was only ever a new *point of contention*. Friends of the critical philosophy! Rightly you hold the dispute between *Leibniz* and *Locke* concerning rationalism and empiricism, as well as the dispute between *Hume* and the *Dogmatists* concerning *scepticism* and *dogmatism*, to be decided by the critique of reason. But is now your philosophy, the result of that decision, any less contested? And has there ever been a more complicated feud than the present one between the defenders and opponents of your philosophy? I regard the *Essay on a New Theory of the Human Capacity for Representation* as the result I have drawn, from out of the points of contention between the *Kantians* and the *Anti-Kantians*, towards the settlement of which I wished to contribute by means of that same essay. My theory has barely been in the hands of the public for a year; and its friends have already taken it up with the *Kantians* and with the *Anti-Kantians*. Every new attempt that does not begin from something really universally valid, which does not, bypassing everything else, concern itself with the discussion of the universally valid property of the first, fundamental principle, must necessarily have just this fate: its happiest success can be nothing other than that it makes an old dispute be forgotten in favour of a new one.

Men who do not find this attempt unworthy of your examination! Do you want to find me receptive to the benefit of your instruction? Then either begin with me from the fundamental principle that I hold to be universally valid, or direct all the acuteness of your critique against this single proposition. But you yourselves must thereby begin from another universally valid proposition, if it is important to you not to be misunderstood by me and your other readers...