

Karl Reinhold, *Elementarphilosophie* and Systematicity

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Abstract

The following essay examines the role of Karl Leonhard Reinhold in the crystallization of post-Kantian idealism philosophy. Although a little-known philosophical figure and seemingly underappreciated, the apostate Roman Catholic priest is an influential thinker in post-Kantian German idealism. He serves as the bridge between Kant and the later and subsequent philosophical discussion. He shapes the nature post-Kantian German idealism would assume. Although initially skeptical of Kant's critical project upon his arrival in Germany from his native Austria and joined the Weimar circle, Reinhold later converted to the critical theory, even as he had his reservations about the physical delivery of Kant's theory. Worried that Kant's theory was not comprehended by the general public, Reinhold set out to explicate Kant's system to the world a task that conferred the realization that the systematicity promised by Kant was no-where present in the theory that he presented to the public. As far he was concerned that systematicity was presupposed by his monistic approach to philosophy. In particular, Reinhold offers to ground philosophy on the principle of principle of consciousness and formulates it as follows: "Representation is that which is distinguished in consciousness by the subject from the object and is referred to both." In this way, Reinhold's contribution seeks to return Kant to a Cartesian model of mind. Reinhold named his original philosophical insight the *Elementarphilosophie*. Although Reinhold continues to insist that his theory is a variant of Kantianism, the author maintains that as an original philosophical insight, Reinhold's position is distinctive and should therefore be evaluated on its own merit.

Keywords: German idealism, *Elementarphilosophie*, Principle of consciousness, monism, and Systematicity,

Introduction

Immanuel Kant's (1724-1804) is an important philosophical figure in the Western philosophical tradition, whose major paradigm shift continues to generate intense conversation in Western

philosophy. Since his intervention in the philosophical debate, it has been virtually impossible to do philosophy without him. In the Preface to Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant announces his intellectual revolution in philosophy that displaces activity from the object and locates it in the subject in his attempt to explain knowledge,¹ even as subjectivity remains an abstract epistemological principle. This paradigm shift contrasted with the hitherto traditional conception of knowledge as the givenness of the object to the subject. Kant believed that philosophical systems earlier than his lacked a system as he understands it, even as he does not acquaint his readers with its exact meaning and import.² Kant utilized the resource of intellectual revolution to move the epistemological discussion beyond reason's ability to comprehend ultimate reality to focus instead on the epistemological capacities of reason: "What and how much can the understanding know apart from all experience?"³

The reaction to Kant's intellectual revolution has been mixed. However, for present for purposes, this essay will rehearse two positions as a way of gaining access to Reinhold's (1758-1823) pioneering role in shaping the reception of Kant's philosophy. The first school of thought developed a dismissive attitude toward Kant's critical philosophy observing that it contributed nothing significant to philosophy. Those who shared this dismissive attitude included Georg Hermann (1730-1788), Friedrich Heinrich (Jacobi 1743-1819) and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744 – 1803). They advocated an abandoning of Kant's position insisting that he had not accompanied anything noteworthy. Another school of thought, however, was persuaded by Kant's system of rational systemization, even as they had their reservations about its physical delivery. Unlike the former school of thought this school of interpretation, this school of thought

^{1.} Kant Immanuel *The Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), Bxvi.

^{2.} Heinrich Dieter, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism* (London: Harvard University Press, 2003), 127.

^{3.} Kant Immanuel *The Critique of Pure Reason*., Axvii.

reasoned that the letter of Kant's theory could be sacrificed in order to save its spirit. Those who adopted this mindset included Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling (1775-1854), and Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel (1770-1831). It is in the latter school of thought that the author locates Reinhold's thought.

A note of caution may be appropriate: Hermeneutically distinguishing between the letter and spirit of a theory may be problematic, and an invitation to arbitrariness. One can develop an appreciation of the letter of a theory in order to develop an appreciation for its spirit.⁴ The discussion assumes a circular dimension because the letter and the spirit are co-implicated in each other. For Breazeale, a whole could be gotten from a theory's individual parts.

The essay will proceed in the following manner. Section one will rehearse Kant's intellectual revolution, the system that precipitated the emergence of Reinhold's intervention in philosophy. It will then consider Reinhold as an expositor of Kant's critical philosophy. Kant did a sloppy job with the presentation of his theory and presented an opaque system of philosophy to the world that not many people understood, needing Reinhold's intervention. Next, it will look at the evolution of his original philosophical system, the *Elementary Philosophy*. Kant set out to explain Kant's critical system to the public, an intention that was only short-lived. Shortly after he started, his intention changed to its reconstruction. We will then draw a conclusion.

Reinhold and the Exposition of Kant's Critical System

Although a little-known figure in the history of Western philosophical tradition, and little read, Reinhold is an important figure in the history of the Western philosophical tradition. It was Reinhold not Kant who popularized the critical philosophy⁵ as

⁴. Breazeale, Daniel. "The Spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre*," *In the Reception of Kant's Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel*. Sally Sedgwick. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 171.

⁵. Beiser, Frederick *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 228

many came to read Kant through him. It was moreover Reinhold that would shape, the direction to be assumed by post-Kantian German idealism. His explication of Kantian philosophy is contained in the *Letters on Kantian Philosophy*. Kant presented a theory that was ordinarily difficult to decipher. Kant is an original philosopher in his own right and hence difficult to understand. Original philosophers do not merely rehearse but “innovate”.⁶ Kant rendered already established philosophical concepts new meaning.

Reinhold was a Catholic priest who spent his formative years in his native Vienna, Austria. His studies in Leibniz and the empiricist approach to philosophy coupled with his Enlightenment advocacy led him to apostasy culminating in his abandoning his priesthood and the Catholic Church. He fled his native Austria for Germany in 1783. Upon his arrival in Germany, he acquired membership in the Weimar circle whose membership also included Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749-1832), Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813), and Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803).⁷ One of the highlights of his membership in this group was his siding with Herder against Kant. Kant criticized Herder's system as lacking rigor and precision, especially his attempt to derive concepts from experience. Reinhold dismissed Kant's comments as misdirected, further accusing him of employing *a prioricriteria* in his evaluation of Herder. Reinhold argued that Kant seemed oblivious to the fact that Herder utilized the empirical method in the evaluation of history, a fluid phenomenon. Therefore, Reinhold claimed that it was unfair of Kant to expect Herder to satisfy the requirement of rigor and precision in a manner that was consistent with metaphysics when that was not necessary in history. Interestingly, as he went to work, his objective changed from that of explication to

⁶. Rockmore, Tom. *Before and After Hegel: A Historical Introduction to Hegel's Thought*. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992), 1.

⁷. Heinrich Dieter, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, 2003.

reconstruction. Reinhold would later abandon the Weimar circle for Kant's critical philosophy.

Although initially opposed to Kant, Reinhold later converted to Kant in 1785. The occasion was his reading the *Critique of Pure Reason*.⁸ The appeal of the first *Critique* was immediate and decisive. Among other things it dissolved the perceived tension between faith and reason.⁹ On the one hand, he was persuaded by Kant's transcendental project; on the other hand, however, like the other post-Kantian idealists, he had suspicions about its physical delivery. For example, Reinhold feared that despite Kant's claim to have brought systematicity to philosophy, raising it to the level of a science there was little evidence to show that he had actually done so. Relationally, Reinhold feared that Kant's theory that he presented to the public was susceptible to a psychological reading.¹⁰ Reinhold's attempt was applauded by Kant. In his correspondence of August 7, 1783 Kant writes:

I admit that I have not counted on an immediately favorable reception of my work. That could not be, since the expression of my ideas-ideas that I have been working painstakingly for twelve years in succession-was not worked out sufficiently to be generally to be understandable. To achieve this, I would have needed a few more years instead of the four or five months I took to complete the book out of fear that such an expensive project would finally become a burden, were I to linger any more, and that my advancing years (I am already sixty) would perhaps make it impossible for me to finish the whole system that I still have in my mind.¹¹

⁸. Ameriks Karl "Introduction" in Karl Ameriks (Ed.) *Karl Leonhard Reinhold: Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), xiii.

⁹. Heinrich Dieter, *Between Kant and Hegel: Lectures on German Idealism*, 97.

¹⁰. Frank Paul. "All or Nothing: Systematicity and Nihilism in Jacobi, Reinhold and Maimon." In Karl Ameriks (Ed) *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 95.

¹¹. Kant Immanuel "To Christian Garve" in Arnulf Zweig (ED.) *Immanuel Kant Philosophical Correspondence, 1759-99* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 101-101.

The *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) took Kant eleven years to complete, fearing at some point that he might not be able to complete the work before his death. Hence its completion was rushed, in the process ending with a sloppy presentation that resisted comprehension even by those who were not vocal with their criticism such as Goethe and Mendelssohn. As Kant himself acknowledges, the stage was set for Reinhold's intervention. On the strength of the *Letters* Reinhold was appointed professor and Chair of philosophy at the University of Jena, where he transformed a little town into an important university center of Kantian philosophy. He provided for many to read Kant through him. His strategy was simple: he avoided the thorny aspects of Kant's system, for example, the transcendental Analytic, and dwelled on the simpler one, for example, the noumena / phenomena distinction.¹²

Reinhold's explication of Kant's theory was contained in his *Letters on Kantian Philosophy*. In the work in question, he made the bold claim that Kant had purged philosophy of the excesses of reason. That Kant was pleased with Reinhold's effort is suggested by his correspondence of December of 28 and 31, 1787. In the correspondence in question, Kant writes:

I am pleased to learn at last that you are the author of excellent *Letters*. ...The little book will sufficiently resolve the many contradictions that the followers of the old guard philosophy imagine they see in my *Critique*, and at the same time the contradictions in which they themselves are unavoidably involved if they if they refuse to abandon their botched job are made perspicuous...¹³

This correspondence is very significant with respect to Kant's relation with the post-Kantian German idealism. For example,

¹² Ameriks, Karl. *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 84.

¹³ Kant Immanuel "Letter to K.L Reinhold" in Arnulf Zweig (ED.) Immanuel Kant Philosophical Correspondence, 1759-99 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 127.

despite Fichte's claim that he is Kant's legitimate successor, it is Reinhold that Kant endorses.

Reinhold's Reconstruction of Kant's Philosophy

To reconstruct Kant's critical philosophy, Reinhold named his system the *Elementary philosophy*. He maintained that even though reason was inadequate philosophy was still better off being anchored on reason. In this way, Kant subscribes to the Cartesian view that philosophy has to begin with self-consciousness, even as his theory it not Cartesian. Reinhold's position is not Cartesian in terms of a strong "unshakable" foundationalist principle.¹⁴ However, unlike Descartes, he does not reduce self-consciousness to the reflection of the ego.¹⁵ Reinhold formulates his principle as follows: "representation is that which is distinguished in consciousness by the subject from the subject and the object and is referred to both."¹⁶ Implicit in this formulation is that the theory of consciousness distinguishes the subject from both from itself and object relates itself to both. His strategy shows an abandoning of the master's transcendental analysis of reason for an examination of the possibility of representation. What is more, he substitutes Kant's analytic deductive method for synthetic one.

Reinhold's reformulation attracted skeptical attacks on the critical philosophy. Writing under the nickname Aenesidemus, the skeptic launched a flurry of attacks of the critical system. Apparently, Aenisidemus was a combination of several factors. As the name of the write-up suggested Schulze drew inspiration from *Aenesidemus*, the first century BC skeptic. But he was also influenced by neo-Human skepticism whose membership

¹⁴. Rockmore, Tom. *Before and After Hegel: A Historical Introduction to Hegel's Thought*, 24.

¹⁵. Di Giovanni, George. "Facts of Consciousness." In *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*. Translated with Introductions by George DiGiovanni and H. S. Harris, 3-50. Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000), viii.

¹⁶. Ameriks, Karl. *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy*, 111.

comprised scholars such as Salomon Maimon, Ernest Platner and A W Rehbeg. Members of the neo-Human skepticism termed Kant a “skeptical idealist,” accusing him of endorsing a view he claims to refute. They contended that his distinction between things-in-themselves and things which appear, and his insistence that things in-themselves unknowable makes Kant skeptic.

His reconstruction attracted skeptical attacks. Cast in the style of an exchange between Hermias someone with an admiration for the critical philosophy and its opponent, *Aenesidemus*, Schulze embarks upon the project of convincing his interlocutor about the impotence of the transcendental idealism as a philosophical system. His primary target was Reinhold, since he was believed to have insulated the critical system against all skepticism, but *Aenesidemus* had also Kant in view. His strategy was to convince his interlocutor that the critical philosophy failed on several fronts. For present purposes we will focus on Reinhold attempt to secure philosophy on a self-evident principle known to be true. The skeptic objects to Reinhold's proposal to erect philosophical inquiry on a unitary principle known to be true, the principle of consciousness. The skeptic accuses Reinhold of reducing everything that goes on in the human mind to representation by relating the representation to the subject and the object to both. *Aenesidemus* rejects Reinhold's proposal to make the principle of consciousness the highest principle of philosophy, insisting that it is subordinate to principle of contradiction. He contends that the principle of consciousness is anything but clear. Contrary to Reinhold's conjecture distinction and relation are open several interpretations, for example, intuition.

For the benefits of emphasis: Reinhold seeks to ground philosophy on a self-evident principle, including Kant's system. Reinhold believed that the first principle was presupposed by all other philosophical principles, the facts of consciousness and the faculties of the mind that formed the ground of Kant's system. For Reinhold this approach transforms Kant's system into a first

philosophy, the *Elementarphilosophie*. Yet one may be mistaken to reduce Reinhold's theory to a variant of Kantianism. While Descartes moves from the indubitability of the ego to prove the existence of external space. Reinhold is a trailblazer, and has a complex relationship with Kant: he is the first philosopher to undertake the explication of critical system, and he elects to proceed by way of monism. His effort was praised by both Kant and Reinhold contemporaries, who believed that Reinhold did indeed furnish the critical system philosophy with a system.¹⁷ He set the stage for the reception of post-Kantian German idealism philosophy.

The responsibility of formulating a response to those skeptical attacks on the critical philosophy rested with Fichte. His credentials as a Kantian were never in doubt. At the time of the appearance of *Aenesidemus*, Fichte was widely believed to be the leading Kantian, sentiments he shared. Although a restatement of earlier criticism leveled against the critical philosophy, for example, Jacobi and Maimon, *Aenesidemus* was well written and therefore caught the attention of all. Fichte and the author of *Aenesidemus* were not new to each other. Their relationship dated back to their school days at Pforta and Wittenberg. Prior to the appearance of *Aenesidemus*, their relationship had turned frosty, perhaps characterized by animosity due to what Fichte considered a mean-spirited review of his *An Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*. Yet the importance of the work, namely a review of *Aenesidemus*, was not lost on Fichte. He was equally aware that a credible response to the skeptic required something better than a mere restatement of loyalty to Kant. *Aenesidemus* had triggered a second intellectual revolution in Fichte. It made him rethink Reinhold's reconstruction effort,

Kant rejects his theory with Cartesianism. We recall that attempts return Kant to a Cartesian model of mind was earlier rejected Kant, who distanced his brand of idealism from that of

¹⁷ Rockmore, Tom. *Before and After Hegel: A Historical Introduction to Hegel's Thought*, 22.

Berkeley and Descartes. As if on second thought Kant rejects being likened to Descartes and Berkeley by naming their theories material:

Idealism (I mean material idealism) is the theory that declares the existence of objects in space outside us to be to be either merely doubtful or indemonstrable; the former is the problematic idealism of Descartes, who declares only the on empirical assertion, namely I am to be indubitable; the latter is the dogmatic idealism of Berkeley, who declares space together with all the things to which it is attached as an inseparable condition, to be something that is merely imaginary.¹⁸

This is intended as a refutation of Descartes rather than Berkeley, and is directed at his brand of idealism and is meant to establish the existence of objects in space independently of us. At this time, it should be pointed out that Kant merely distances his transcendental idealism from those of his contemporaries. Kant had earlier written a rebuttal regarding Fichte's attempt to reconstruct Kant's theory into what he calls the science of knowledge.

Reinhold is "odd" philosopher and his philosophical theory remained a system in evolution: although he initially claimed to have facilitated the critical principle in fulfilling the requirement of systematicity, Reinhold later abandoned his *Elementatphilosophie* for Fichte's *Wissenschaftlehre*, a theory he partially inspired. After a brief stint with Fichte, he switched to the theory of Jacobi before finally becoming a disciple of Bardili.¹⁹ Though momentarily welcoming to Fichte, Reinhold's effort triggered skeptical attacks on the critical system. Although published in 1792 anonymously under the title "*Aenesidemus, oder über die fundamente der von dem Professor Reinhold in Jena gelieferten Elementar philosophienebsteiner Verteidigung gegen die aenaeasungen der vernunftkritik*" (Concerning

^{18.} Kant Immanuel *The Critique of Pure Reason*., B274.

^{19.} Rockmore, Tom. *Before and After Hegel: A Historical Introduction to Hegel's Thought*, 22.

the Foundations of the Elementary Philosophie Propounded in Jena by Professor Reinhold, including a Defense of Skepticism Against the Pretensions of the Critique of Pure Reason), Aenisidemus was identified as the work of Gottlob Ernst Schulze (1761-1833), the Professor of Philosophy at the University of Helmstadt and after the disbanding, the University of Gottingen.

Conclusion

The study examined Karl Reinhold's philosophical theory against the Kantian background. He began as an explicator of Kant's critical theory which Kant did a poor with its presentation. Set to explain Kant's system to the public, his objective changed when he got immersed in Kant's philosophy. Concerned with the letter of the presentation of Kant's system, he offered to secure Kant's theory on a self-evident principle known to be true. Although his system differed significantly from Kant's Kant was appreciative of Reinhold's effort. Though Reinhold believed his theory was consistent with Kant, which Kant endorsed his theory remains his own and should be evaluated on its own merit.

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