



PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY. PART 2: JOHANN GEORG HAMANN, ON THE IDOLATRY OF FAITH IN REASON

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Part 1 and Part 3

There is a great irony in Hume's fate in so far as the very probabilism which he used against religious faith was taken up in Germany by [Friedrich Jacobi](#) and [Johann Georg Hamann](#), not only to provide an argument for the inescapable role of faith in life, but also, especially in Hamann's case, for mounting an argument about the value of the Christian life. So impressed was Hamann by Hume that he translated his [Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion](#) into German.

The religious Hamann had no delusions about where Hume stood on matters of religion—and in this respect, Hume was on the side of the enlightened, i.e., the enemy who were substituting their metaphysically derived ideas, which is to say, their bloodless version of life, for life itself. Nevertheless, as he would confide to [Herder](#): *"Hume lover against Kant! is always my man because he at least honored the principium of faith and took it up in his system."* And to [J. Lindner](#) he picks up on Hume's statement in the [Enquiry](#) that because the Christian religion *"was at first attended with miracles... even at this day [it] cannot be believed by any reasonable person,"* commenting: *"Hume may have said this with a scornful or wistful attitude, nevertheless it is orthodoxy and a witness to the truth in the mouth of an enemy and persecutor of the same—all his doubts are proof of his proposition."*

The sceptical Hume, for Hamann, therefore veers into the doubtful territory of faith. Had Hume been a little less prejudiced when roaming around in that territory, he would have had to concede that in it are to be found men and women, like Hamann, every bit as capable of using their reason, and yet also sceptical of reason's overreach, whose faith, nevertheless, leads them to live the lives they do. In this respect, W.M. Alexander (whose book [Johann Georg Hamann: Philosophy and Faith](#) is, in my opinion, the best book, among some seriously good books, on Hamann) observes "Hamann's problem" is,

the philosophy of his age and how his own thought as a Christian relates to it. How does the Christian exist (and more specifically—in his "authorship"—how does he think authentically as a Christian) in genuine contact with the world. Hamann was one of the first Christian thinkers to recognize that he lived—as did the early Church Fathers -in a non-Christian world—the Church was no longer communicating to "Jews" but to "Greeks."

The essentially Christian character of Hamann's thinking stands in striking contrast to what remained an essentially metaphysical position advanced by his friend Jacobi, who had become very famous in

Germany with his [*Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn*](#). Jacobi had detected the Spinozian (deterministic) influence upon the age, and had countered that faith is an ontological given and a foundation of reason. Furthermore, it was not just, as Kant had argued, a rational element within the moral sphere of life. While an ally of Jacobi with respect to emphasising the inescapable condition of faith in the larger scheme of reason, Hamann was also critical of the latter's metaphysical philosophizing. Thus, Hamann would pointedly say to Jacobi of his [*David Hume on Faith*](#): *"In the absence of your book I can say nothing further, dear Jonathan [Jacobi!], except to speak of the relation of both of the objects of your authorship to mine: 'Idealism' and 'Realism' versus Christianity and Lutheranism. Both of the former are, in my eyes, ideal; the latter real."*

While Jacobi, then, wished to 'demonstrate' where faith stood in the greater schema of reason and, indeed, philosophy itself, Hamann's faith was not the result of any philosophical question, but the result of a personal crisis. As a talented young man with prospects, he had been assigned to represent a Riga merchant on diplomatic business. That had proven to be a dead end and after squandering his and the firm's money on drinking and carousing, and trying to make ends meet as a lutenist, he entered into what was probably a sexual friendship with another young man, whom he subsequently discovered to have received money for sexual favours by a wealthy patron.

Appalled, broke, and solitary he started reading the Bible, and like so many Jews and Christians he came to the realization that it was no ordinary book—but a book that expressed the immediacy of his circumstance and experience, and God's responsiveness to humanity's despair and cry. The truths that the book contained, then, were inseparable from the needs and longings and willingness of the reader to respond in kind to God's love and majesty, which he saw depicted everywhere throughout this book which was part historical chronicle, part testimony, part instruction, part description, and so much else beside. But also, and most importantly, the record of an encounter between the one true loving God and His people, which opened up the believing heart to also encounter the living God, and take up a new life based upon that encounter.

In other words, what Hamann grasped was the *fact* of faith, and the fact of his faith being tied in with a tradition of experiences and stories and history, and an encounter of exactly the sort that he had experienced. This is obviously a million miles away from what Jacobi was doing, let alone what Kant did when he tackled the problems of God and the soul, and came to the conclusion they were the product of reason's own dialectical transcendence of our cognitive conditions, a transcendence which is really an illusion, in so far as the conditions only have validity as truth conditions about the things of our world

when they apply to the world. This is what Kant called appearances because the things of our world must appear in space and time in order to be experienced. Kant and Hamann had for some time at least been on friendly terms, and Hamann even helped find a publisher for the [*Critique of Pure Reason*](#) (a work, as we see below, he thought completely wrong-headed). For his part, Kant thought Hamann was a *Schwärmer*, a rapid “enthusiast,” which is, to say, what the British call “a nutter.”

Generally, Hamann's philosophical contemporaries saw the bible as either a superstitious attempt to make sense of their experiences or a mythic rendering of moral laws—a position which one can only hold until one reads the Bible. Kant read it like this and had to morally reproach Abraham. For Hamann this was missing the whole point, as was the kind of discussion around faith that had involved Jacobi, Kant, and later Hegel: Hamann did not just believe something he read, he experienced his faith completely changing his life. The book made him a different man. Thus, it was not merely a cerebral matter, but a matter of soul, and thus to treat the Bible along the usual lines of scholarly or philosophical interrogation is really to miss what is most essential about it: it would be like saying one had been swimming but one just had not gone into any water.

Note also, that while the enlightened philosophers would question the reality of the object of faith—God—they would treat God as if He were an object, or, as in Kant, once it is conceded that God is not an object like a natural object, as a “mere idea of reason.” Hamann, as with so many of the faithful, does not see God as an object (or idea of reason) at all; God is no more an idea than He is a thing. But, if we are to stay with philosophical language, God is, nevertheless, a condition of reality, not a “logical condition,” but a creator of whom we can only make sense through encounter and engagement. From Hamann's Lutheran perspective, when we speak *of* or *about* God rather than to Him, at least if we are not disposing ourselves as a vehicle of the Holy Spirit, we are already losing sight of Him. This is also why, for Hamann, *“if they are fools who in their hearts deny the existence of God, it strikes me as yet more foolish to want to prove him first.”*

To repeat, Hamann has invoked God in a completely different manner from the philosophers—for the purpose of the philosophers' inquiries, God cannot be divorced from the subjects forming their narrative (the philosophers). For philosophers, what Hamann has done by insisting on taking seriously what the book actually does as opposed to what it merely says is to open-up the floodgates that threaten reason (and philosophy) itself. This, as far as Hamann is concerned, not his problem, but their problem, and it stems from their wanting to only look so far at what is going on in our lives and in world. That is, they want to deny God to be as God: what they know is what is—the entire philosophical attempt from

Descartes to Kant to lay down what constitutes experience (the laws of nature) is, from Hamann's point of view, a confirmation of this.

Hamann overturns what he sees as the self-delusion that motivates the enlightenment project—and his thinking returns us to the pre-philosophical disposition. Ancient people did not come to their gods through their powers of reason—because reason, imagination, and world were all intertwined. Thus, too they knew that their gods existed because they were implicated in a world of mutual dependency: sacrifices are as necessary for the gods as for the gods' responsive beneficence. One might venture that this is as true of the Jews as of every ancient people, as evident in Yahweh's jealousy and commandment against false gods.

This kind of anthropological understanding renders the kind of clear-cut distinctions of philosophical ideation irrelevant. The kind of truth that this hermeneutical community is engaging with is the truth of their very own existence, which would have no existence apart from the very parables, commands, bonds, and common orientation that is both the content of their faith as well as its condition. Hamann's faith is, then, indeed the kind of faith to be found in what Hume had called "common-life," but "common life" as a whole is no longer understood in the abstract as something that can be analytically dissected into the enlightened and superstitious parts; it forms a unity, which is not to say that things people do is beyond criticism—but the pitch of the criticism is always going to come from some human place, and not some ideational "heaven" that can be found by talking and thinking a certain way.

In this respect, Hamann thinks philosophers are victims of their own superstitions. For Hamann, truths that are abstractly constructed, that have not developed within time, literally have no life. Likewise, metaphysical "truths" are at best conjectures, and typically spurious. Only what has life can be true. As Alexander rightly says: "Truth," for Hamann, "is not primarily and most authentically an *idea* or text of *written words* but a concrete historical life." Likewise, "truth is not an academic possession: it unfolds only in the transition of a *lifetime*... 'Truths are metals which develop under the earth.'"

The notion that truth is something that is revealed over time—"by their fruits you shall know them"—requires taking our temporality and historicity seriously. This, in turn, requires conceding that we do not engage with eternal "ideas," for such an engagement is purely beyond our ken. We and our ideas grow, and hence reveal themselves for what they are in and through and over time—our climbing high to espy the "all" is sand-castle-in-the-air stuff that brings us crashing down to earth. From this perspective, the Platonic cast of mind shares with the metaphysics of modernity a view of the cosmos

in which the eternal order of mathematics takes a particular pride of place, but for all that way of thinking can achieve by way of construction and contrivance with merely material "substances," when it comes to what we hold important in our lives, what we believe in, then, at best, it may be an ancillary, but at worst, it is an elimination of who and what we are. The elective affinity between mathematical and metaphysical thinking is an affinity that draws us away from what we sense and feel, and want.

What we find in Hamann and ultimately makes his legacy so powerful and fecund, is the combination of a resolutely anti-metaphysical disposition with a great sensitivity for the kinds of problems (if not the answers) that are genuinely philosophical. Moreover, because, for Hamann, "All of our knowing is piece-work and all human rational foundations consist either in *faith* in the *truth* and *doubt* of the *untruth*, or *faith* in the *untruth* and *doubt* of the *truth*," we cannot simply divide the world into what conforms to faith and what conforms to reason, as if this kind of bifurcation somehow conforms to some kind of objective disjunction.

Hamann's antipathy to bifurcation makes him an important influence upon figures such as Herder, Hegel and Schelling for whom dualism was always the source of a more fundamental philosophical problem than a genuine solution. Moreover, for Hamann: *"faith is no work of reason, and therefore is subject to no attack by the same, because faith as little happens through reasons as taste and sight."*

The question of the relationship between faith and knowledge and/or reason, and the nature of the relationship between the two would become a key one of the age. Kant would argue that freedom was a matter of rational faith, and that the reason behind identifying the limits of knowledge was primarily to enable that faith so that our sense of moral duty would preside over what merely is by nature. Hegel saw the problem as a symptom of the divided nature of the modern self, which sought knowledge, but could not bear to reconcile itself with the conditions of its own actual achievements of freedom, seeking solace in a beyond accessible to faith, but ultimately a mere empty "should," ever out of reach and unrealizable.

Hegel's brilliant critique of the antithesis between faith and knowledge/reason in [Faith and Knowledge](#) and tirelessly repeated throughout his corpus makes perfect sense when directed at Kant, Jacobi, [Fichte](#), [Schleiermacher](#), and even [Schelling](#) (in so far as he commences with the Absolute's being and (un-, or dark) ground). For they are indeed operating with conceptual dualisms within a system, and hence too each was seeking some ground or rationally defensible starting point for what was always a metaphysics. But it does not touch Hamann. For Hamann has no interest in providing a rational basis for

faith; he has no system. Christianity is not a philosophical system, even if theologians may wish to bring rationality to it for coherence.

The unity of a life is more akin to the kind of unity a body of faith displays (with members in division) than a philosophical system which, from the outset, requires conceptual or ideational consistency. Hamann commences with the fact of his faith and then clarifies how it shapes his life, and the lives of others who live in their faith communities. This is an anthropological move that differs from the neo-Hegelian anthropology of Feuerbach and the young Marx, insofar as the neo-Hegelian appeal to community, freedom, equality is always to an ideational end that motivates the anthropological aspect of their thinking. Hamann, however, emphasises the common anthropological condition, and then compares different bodies with their different faiths (most specifically philosophers and Christians like him).

Just as Hamann's discussion of faith and reason is distinctly un-metaphysical, his observations about reason is not itself dependent upon an adequate logic of demonstration: reasons come after the fact. As he would write to Kant: *"I must almost laugh over the choice of a philosopher for the purpose of bringing about in me a change of mind. I look upon the best demonstration as a reasonable girl does a love-letter."*

While, then, Hamann's insight about faith and common life is far closer in spirit to anthropology than philosophy, it nevertheless has implications for philosophy, implications which would "rein in" its rationalist tendencies. This is well brought out in a letter to J.G. Lindner, where Hamann would paraphrase (or slightly misquote) Hume and critically compare the enlightened faith in reason with Jewish faith in the Law, and both with Paul:

"The final fruit of all philosophy is the noting of human ignorance and weakness." This same function, which is related to our powers of understanding and knowledge, shows us how ignorant we are just as the moral shows us how evil and shallow is our virtue. This cornerstone at the same time is a millstone which shatters to pieces all his sophistries. Our reason therefore is just that which Paul calls the Law—and the Law of the Reason is holy, just and good. But is it given to us to make us wise? Just as little as the Law was given to the Jews to justify them, but to convince us of the opposite: how unreasonable is our reason, and that our errors are to be increased by it, just as sin increased by the Law. If everywhere Paul speaks of the Law one puts "reason" (this "law" of our century and the watchword of our clever heads and scribes), Paul will

Speak to our contemporaries.

For Hamann, when it comes to the kind of knowledge we most need, he wrote to Jacobi: *"Sense and history are the foundations and ground—be the former ever so deceptive and the latter ever so simple, I still prefer them to all castles in the air."* Our circumstance is such that what we can think is always either revealed, fragmented, or abstracted: *"A reason which acknowledges itself as a daughter of the senses and the material, behold! this is our religion."*

To make thought something more real than the senses is itself to commence a train of abstraction that can all too swiftly leave our language and traditions which have been the means by which collective sense is formed. It is philosophy that, according to Hamann makes "castles in the air." Or as he put it in another letter to Jacobi—philosophy carries on with *"empty shadow-boxing with ideas and speculations against data and facts, with theoretical deceptions against historical truths, with plausible probabilities against witnesses and documents."*

Although all the most reputable Hamann scholars recognize that dismissing Hamann as an "irrationalist" is nonsense, if by that we mean that he does not think reason has any role to play in a life. Beiser puts the matter succinctly when he points out that *"The stumbling block of all irrationalist interpretations of Hamann is therefore nothing less than the central thesis" of Hamann's [Socratic Memorabilia](#): that faith is neither rational nor irrational since reason cannot either prove or disprove it."*

What Hamann does is something that no serious philosopher should, or even can, simply dismiss: he identifies reason's limits as deriving from its dependency upon existence itself, community, history and language. He is not arguing that we should deny what we know or what can be known—but reason is an activity or operation taking place within our lives (a point taken up by Kierkegaard and existentialism more generally): to hypostatize it is to beguile ourselves into thinking that we really know all we would need about what is going on in life, and that we are not surrounded by genuine mysteries, which in Hamann's case are given meaning through his faith in God and revelation.

For Hamann, one of the more persistent errors of philosophy is to treat reason as "real being," which it is not, rather than as an activity which we undertake. As he wrote to Jacobi:

People speak of reason as if it were a real being, and the dear God as if the same were nothing

but a concept. Spinoza speaks of an Object causa sui and Kant of a Subject causa sui. Until this misunderstanding is removed, it will be impossible to understand one another. When one knows what reason is, all discrepancy with revelation ceases.

Conversely while philosophers may ceaselessly dispute about what reason is, people of faith harken to their God and build their world around that harkening. To be sure once matters of faith becomes theological problems, the same problem occurs; but, if viewed with a more ancient eye, the issue of theological dispute can also turn around the matter of "which God?" is appealing to us and demanding our response—the God that creates, reveals and redeems, or a supra-human (diabolical) power that may be merely devouring us?

In this respect, Hamann's position can be buttressed by an insight that plays a pivotal role in the work of [Rosenstock-Huessy](#), a genuine progeny of Hamann. For Rosenstock-Huessy saw the problem of his age was not just that people did not believe in God, but they did not have any clue about the gods; only once one concedes the reality of gods—a reality that is witnessed in behaviours, for the gods are not under our command—is one in a position to understand God. For originally the gods are recognized and named, and their communal importance assigned so that they can be followed, summoned, supplicated to, and obeyed (or disobeyed). I will take up this point below.

For Hamann the discrepancy between reason and revelation ceases because revelation deals in contingencies, not metaphysics, which deals in the Absolute. The nature of the Absolute would become the centre of philosophical gravity for post-Kantian idealisms, but Hamann already recognized the problem of this philosophical move before it even takes place when he writes to Jacobi: *"Being, faith, reason are merely relations which are not to be dealt with as absolutes; they are not things, but pure academic concepts, signs for the understanding, not things to be admired, but means of helping to awaken and fix our attention."*

If one thinks that the truth of life's meaning is disclosed through reason itself, then Hamann's position is absurd. Though it is precisely this question of what reason is and what it can really do that runs through Hamann's critique of metaphysical thinking. While it is commonplace for philosophers to present people of faith as ignorant, or superstitious dupes as opposed, for example, to [Dennett's "brights,"](#) Hamann's contrast between the God of "rational salvation" and the "God of historical revelation" is the contrast between ahistorical abstract thinking taking its cues of truth from "nature" and an historical hermeneutical community taking its orientation from a tradition and its symbols grounded in mystery,

creation, miraculous contingencies, covenant, prophecy, love, hope and faith in salvation. The enlightened philosophers can only construe all this through a process of “denuding,” so that what is left is mere “nature;” or rather those features of nature, which accommodate the framing required by the experimental and mathematical conditions that render it a totality of laws.

Spinoza's breaking down of the emotions into natural drives, which then, along with other natural circumstances, are invoked to make sense of the Bible, exemplifies the process. It is, though, the substitution of a history based upon the understanding as opposed to the history of the imagination, the substitution of what exclusively conforms to law for what is frequently parable, and the substitution of one community's orientation—the philosophers' community—for the communities of the Jewish and Christian peoples.

For Hamann the failure to grasp that historical nature is not mere nature, but one in which symbols, imagination, and the gamut of semiotic triggers bind and form communities is a mere prejudice of enlightenment philosophers, and illustrates a major difference between the depth of knowledge about the nature of people and life within the religious tradition that the enlightened are simply blind to because of their own prejudice. Thus, of [*Lessing's Education of the Human Race*](#), he writes in a letter to Herder:

A week ago, I took up the Education of the Human Race for the second time... Basically the old leaven of our fashionable philosophy: prejudice against Judaism [i.e. anti-historical]—ignorance of the true spirit of the Reformation [i.e. knowing only philosophical self-salvation].

Another major reason why Hamann is considered an early existentialist is because he revels in the absurd—in a manner that suggests a deep affinity with the British author Laurence Sterne—and he turns the tables on those who would take the absurdity of existence as if it were somehow capable of receiving a rational explanation. And he does this in all manner of ways, from the (seriously) playful nature of his authorship, to his position on language as a miracle, to his critique of the enlightenment as a form of idolatry. The great irony of the power of Hamann's thought is that it plays the “fool” against reason's majesty and might, only to expose the threadbare nature of that majesty. Philosophy engages in a substitution racket and takes unreal things as real things—and then it criticizes things we know through the very lives we live, because they do not conform to the unreal schema we have created.

Of course, Nietzsche will make this same point—but the real assessment of any comparison between

Nietzsche and Hamann revolves around what one thinks of their respective faiths in the superman or Christian life, and it must be said, Nietzsche's and Hamann's radically different views over what the Christian life entails. Hamann would undoubtedly find in Nietzsche's (and Heidegger's) reading of Christianity an ahistorical fantasy. Both Nietzsche and Hamann, nevertheless, concur about Platonism being an "enemy" of life, and Hamann's admiration for Socrates does not extend to the legacy of his greatest pupil, which he sees as an being inimical to Christianity: *"Platonism is not the friend but the enemy of Christianity."*

Bearing the above in mind, then, it is true that Hamann was opposed to placing faith in the abstract "reason" of imagined "forms." And he wrote to Jacobi that *"the entire Kantian construction appears to me to rest upon the idle trust that certainty comes ex vi formae [by the power of forms]."* Which is to say, he saw Kant's entire undertaking of the transcendental delimiting of the legitimacy boundaries of our experience in the Critique of Pure Reason as completely wrong-headed.

For the mind to try and understand itself through self-reflection and the study of the "mind" is akin to someone thinking that fish are produced by a fishing rod, (the same analogy is also apposite for understanding why Hamann objects to naturalist attempts to understand language of the sort that he thought his close friend Herder had foolishly undertaken). Why the mind is more knowable than language and experience is itself, though, due to a mistaken faith. And this faith in the mind's power to oversee itself, is, for Hamann, a blind and blinding faith that suffocates and smothers "life" with its own limited understanding and glaring light. As he would write to Herder: enlightened reason is the reason of "sadduaic freethinkers;" and their "reason is untruth, a superstition." "Sound reason" exists in their "imagination." Thus Alexander perceptively observes:

Hamann can sum up his authorship as an "exposure [Entkleidung] and transfiguration" of those who attempt "a violent unclothing [Entkleidung] of real objects down to naked concepts and bare intellectual entities, pure phantoms, and phenomena."

And,

Hamann's purpose is to challenge "the despotism of Apollo" ["God of wisdom" i.e., philosophy] which "fetters truth and freedom in demonstrative proofs, principles and conclusions" (II, 272). These things only distort truth, which is not enshrined in any consistent combination of ideas. Truth is the life which became flesh and the Spirit which "justifies and makes alive" (III, 227). God

gives life to us in a unity which does not come before us dissected into intellectual abstractions. In His revelation of Himself He concentrates Himself in the unity of one human person. Not only in his thought, but in his style as well, Hamann tries to reflect this concentration and this unity. His style is its own symbolic attack on that way of thinking which "prefers the conceivability of a thing to its truth.

Truths, principles; systems I am not up to. Rather scraps, fragments, crotchets, thoughts.

I might also add here that the similarities between Hamann's and Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics and their eschewal of "naked" truth cannot be overestimated—but Nietzsche, unlike Hamann, hails a new metaphysics of will to power because he wants philosophers to be the value creators of the future. For Hamann, the idea that one can philosophically will a culture would be just one further symptom of the derangement of enlightenment faith.

In so far as Hamann is correct to recognize that the "Greek" (i.e., philosophical) mind, with its various "ideas," names, and way of going about its business had culturally triumphed over the "Jewish" and early Christian spirit, Hamann had no choice than to "speak Greek." Although he mixed it up with babble and strange tongues to both engage and confuse minds dealing with clarity and distinctness in a world full of lives which rarely offers either. That is, to truly take on what he saw as becoming the dominant faith of the new age on whose cusp he lived, any criticisms which might be heard by the younger generation had to be, at least partially, philosophically shaped. Yet the purpose of his speaking philosophically was to draw philosophy into another, more hermeneutical rather than "rationalist" or metaphysical "camp."

Moreover, it was not that he thought all philosophical thinking was useless, a point made obvious in his Socratic Memorabilia that shows his serious respect for philosophy which was genuinely inquisitive, yet sufficiently humble to accept reason's aporias, rather than engage in elaborate rationalisation and abstraction which swiftly becomes an idol of one's own making. To his friend Lindner he wrote:

An ancient king of Israel believed in an old witch who saw gods mount up out of the earth. Since then, our philosophers have tightly closed their eyes in order not to have to read any distractions to the detriment of nature, and have folded their hands in their laps to pamper their beautiful skin; and it has rained castles-in-the-air and philosophical systems from heaven. Whoever would work his land or build houses, dig up or conceal treasures, must dig in the womb of the earth, which is the mother of us all.

Alexander cleverly observes three major ways in which philosophy appears in Hamann:

Hamann uses the term philosophy in at least three different senses which taken together, point to Hamann's distinctive conception of philosophy and faith.

- 1. Philosophy understood as against faith, or as another faith. Often "philosophy" in Hamann means "false philosophy." Philosophy here is "idolatry." If he thought of "Rome" and "papacy" as cryptic symbols for the new philosophical "despotism" of the Enlightenment, then perhaps he also spoke of this philosophy as anti-Christ ...*
- 2. Philosophy understood as before faith, or better, before Christ. Philosophy here is "ignorance." This is philosophy which is not yet Christian, but is not anti-Christian or incompatible with faith. Its symbol is Socrates.*
- 3. Philosophy understood as in Christ, or as thinking "from faith to faith." Philosophy here is "love of the LOGOS." Much of what he calls "philosophy" in this sense would in modern usage be called theology. An example is in his letter to the Princess Galitzin, December 1787: "Herein [in Jesus Christ] consists the Alpha and Omega of my entire philosophy. More I know not, and do not wish to know."*

What is most original is that Hamann had, at the time of the Enlightened philosophy's greatest self-assurance, opened up the meaning of philosophy in such a way that we may legitimately inquire after the religion of a philosophy, and not blithely accept the enlightened reading of religion as the outer shell of a philosophy, which could be understood by the "natural reason" of the philosopher, and thus turned against those world and self-making aspects of religion which could be relegated to mere "superstition." With this insight Hamann had thrown out a philosophical challenge to philosophers from Spinoza through to Hume and Voltaire *et. al.*

But while Hamann's madcap style and provocations would ensure acclaim amongst philosophical and literary luminaries, such as, Herder, Goethe, Schelling, Hegel (up to a point), and Jean Paul, his erstwhile friend Kant would fail to recognize anything of genuine philosophical importance in Hamann. And he would write his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, as if he were oblivious to the significance of his former friend's challenge, and provide one further enlightened rationalisation for religion being

morals for people who could not take their medicine straight, as rational ideas, but who needed the hoopla of ritual to ingest it. But, for Hamann, it was actually morality itself as an object of reason, and (again) the philosopher's substantiation of a thought process into a "faculty" that was genuinely phantasmic and idolatrous. As he would write to Herder after reading Kant's *Metaphysical Elements of Ethics*:

Instead of Pure Reason the talk here is of another phantom of the brain and idol: the Good Will. That Kant is one of our shrewdest heads, even his enemies must admit, but unfortunately this shrewdness is his own evil demon, just as is the case with Lessing; for a new scholasticism and a new papacy are represented by both of these Midas ears of our glorious age.

Just as Hamann saw philosophy in anthropological terms, his hermeneutical apologetics of Christian faith is such that it exposes any such enlightened reductions as vacuous precisely by illustrating how faith orientates, and hence how different faiths orientate differently. Thus, even if one does not share another's faith, one at least will be able to see how faith incarnates a life and a life-world. This would be an insight that would be of decisive importance for Herder.

Of the various orientations and emphases that lay behind Hamann's insight into where faith fits in life, one of the most elemental that has important implications in more standard philosophical theologies is his (Lutheran) overturning of the more traditional theo-philosophical account of the "nature" or character and "direction" of the relationship between humans and God. The Greek movement toward monotheism, which would be so fateful in the neo-Platonic and neo-Aristotelian traditions and that wing of the Christian tradition that had been deeply influenced by those traditions, had all identified the soul's spiritual journey as a process of transcendence, an upward movement of the soul to a God who Himself is characterized by his "transcendence."

In response to this Hamann makes the obvious point (though one that is rarely expressed within philosophically shaped theologies) about the Jewish and Christian God that "is the basis of all his [i.e., the philosopher's] attacks" on "natural theology" and "natural religion", viz., that, within the biblical narratives, it is not God's transcendence that is the all-important issue for understanding the human predicament in relationship to God, but God's "condescension."

When theologians and philosophers refer to God's transcendence, a term that evolves out of the Greek philosophical mind rather than biblical tradition, and when they refer to transcendence, without

focusing upon the greater mystery of condescension, for Hamann, they not only misconstrue God, but they foster an exaggerated and idolatrous faith in the power of the world. For transcendence, as Alexander sums up Hamann's position, is "world-oriented," but the "symbol of 'condescension' is God-orientated." That is the theo-philosophical emphasis upon God's transcendence means that He is conceived, in the first instance, in relationship to the world, which appears familiar to us. Alexander also uses the example of baroque art to brilliant effect to illustrate what Hamann's sees as what is at stake when we focus upon the relationship between God and humans as one of transcendence, rather than "condescension."

A glance at the art ruling Hamann's age instantly reveals the source of Hamann's instinctive objection: its world is one in which reason's confidence in its position, its powers and its cosmos are self-secure. The world is more real than God. Everything Hamann protests against is here: it is a world in which reason demonstrates its dominance over every nook and cranny of reality. Ornamentation and artistic ramification testify to its self-confidence. No area is beyond its all-shaping power. When God in His "transcendence" is represented, it is "transcendence" (as in Sebastiano Conca's "David Dancing Before the Ark") over an otherwise "solid" earth. There is no question here as to what reality is utterly prior—it is man's world and the human reason which has shaped it—and no amount of "height" in the painting can improve God's "status." Divine infinity has disappeared and only a domesticated variety remains.

Alexander adds that commencing with the "world-orientated" theology turns "all symbols into irrational assertions, and theology has simply asseverated that we must be content with this irrationality."

By starting from the familiar, as natural theology does, to the unfamiliar, we have immediately reversed what Hamann sees as the far more profound insight of revelation; for what we do in the world with biblical faith is commence with something mysterious that is disclosed through parables, stories, commands etc. Moreover, for Hamann, the whole point of the Bible is revealed through how it speaks to its faithful, and the living power it reveals to those who are prepared to build their lives and world through faith in that power. Thus, for Hamann: *"Every biblical story is a prophecy which is fulfilled through all centuries and in the soul of every man"* (1,315). But also, *"Every book is a Bible to me and every occupation a prayer"* And *"All the miracles of the holy scriptures happen in our souls"* (I, 78). In other words, Hamann sees the universe as one that is pregnant with meaning. Of course, so does the schizophrenic, but the "gamble" of faith (to draw upon [Pascal](#)) lies, for Hamann, not in the origin—for faith in something is inescapable—it lies in what that faith engenders in a life and in a community.

One of the more remarkable features of the Western world today is that while the academic mind so frequently serves the enlightened ideals of freedom, equality, and justice, it has largely accepted the importance of culture as a primordial and positive force of identity. We shall briefly return to this point in our discussion of Herder, but here I simply wish to underscore that Hamann was living at a time when Western culture was undergoing a seismic shift due to philosophy extending into the various domains of human being, which up until relatively recent times it had little, or at best, as in the church, an ancillary role to play.

He had grasped that the world of Christendom and its culture was being swallowed up into a world bathed in philosophical glare. He was not a romantic wanting to revive medieval Christendom, as say [Novalis](#) or [Frederick Schlegel](#), or [Franz von Baader](#) would become. And he did not idolize culture itself. But what is interesting is that the kinds of arguments he is raising about peoples and their faith, arguments developed and expanded along somewhat similar lines by Herder in applying them to cultures (though I think Hamann always the more radical, consistent mind), have been accepted not only by the more anthropologically inclined and in the humanities more broadly, but in society's ideas-brokers at large.

Yet when it comes to the West itself, the victory of the enlightened mind is intrinsic to the general historical amnesia, and often sheer hostility, to Christian symbols and history. Hamann's importance is that he taps into the experiential dimension that makes sense of Christianity as a personal and collective act, by constantly deploying biblical examples to illumine (genuinely enlighten) everyday as well as more perennial kinds of experience.

To put this slightly differently: today we can all accept that the imagination, history, language, and faith of people matter more than the reasons we impose upon them (which is not to say that we have to accept, as [Gellner](#) and others have feared that this leaves us without any means of critical judgments about cultural practice). That is, we think culture matters. Hamann opens up the door to why and how faith matters culturally and personally.

For, while Hamann is "up front" about his Christianity and Lutheran outlook, an outlook he not only did not assume his readers shared, and which many of his readers did not share, Hamann undertakes to be a thorn in the Enlightenment, a kind of Christian Socrates against the enlightened philosophers, who, for Hamann, are the sophists of his own time. They come with their own theological dogma and faith in their reason to deliver salvation, which though is largely hidden to them because they think they serve

truth, and that the world will be saved through their works. But their truth is a lifeless idol.

What has taken the place of divine infinity is now reason's infinity: its infinite capacity is the corollary of its absoluteness—whether as a heuristic (Kant) or substance (Hegel) makes no difference to the essential point Hamann recognizes. What, though, is meant to be the philosophical display of reason's supreme majesty, is, for Hamann, really indicative of the mayhem of the age, a mayhem in which the every-day truths of every-day life are maimed by abstractness.

The most fundamental act of intellectual maiming, for Hamann, occurs through the philosophical cleavages which purport to deliver rationally pure forms and classifications. Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, as the name of his short essay on Kant clarified, was symptomatic of this delusional obsession with purity. As Hamann presents the problem, the increasing ascension of philosophical purity has occurred over time at the expense of the most elemental features of human sociality: tradition, custom, belief, religion, law-making, and ultimately language itself.

The first philosophical purification consisted in the partly misunderstood, partly failed attempt to make reason independent of all tradition and custom and belief in them. The second is even more transcendent and amounts to nothing less than independence from all experience and its everyday induction. After a search of two thousand years for who knows what beyond experience, reason not only suddenly despairs of the progressive course of its predecessors, but also defiantly promises impatient contemporaries' delivery and this in a short time, promises also, of that general and infallible philosopher's stone indispensable to Catholicism and despotism. Religion will submit its sanctity to it right away, and law-giving its majesty, especially at the final close of a critical century when empiricism on both sides struck blind, makes its own nakedness daily more suspect and ridiculous.

The third, highest, and as it were empirical purism, is therefore concerned with language, the only, first, and last organon and criterion of reason, with no other credentials but tradition and usage.

Yet again, we see a Nietzschean trope—"be true to the earth"—already deployed by Hamann against the destructive incursions of metaphysics into the most elemental features of social life.

Such talk as reason's grounding or basis alludes to its capacity for building a tower or ladder to better understand the ways of God, the term which still worked for the deists, and, with German idealism,

would become equivalent to or more often subsumed under the term the Absolute, before the Absolute would, with Fichte and the neo-Hegelians, and Nietzsche, become the imposition of the human will. For Hamann this overweening ambition and self-idolization—addressed in the story of the tower of Babel—could lead to nothing but disaster.

With great prescience he would see that the disaster would be driven by morality—which was just a veneer for the self-belief that people have in being able to dictate to God's creation—i.e., life—how it should be: In a letter to [Hartknoch](#) he speaks of *"our moralistic century"* and in another to Jacobi he writes of the "moralistic" enlightened free thinkers as *"apostles of lies."* And to [Johann Steudel](#), he refers to *"the moralistic generation of vipers among the Pharisees."* This is but one more example of Hamann's turning of the tables on the men who believed that their own light would save the world—for it is usually Christians who are presented (and indeed often guilty of) grim and earnest moralizing.

For Hamann, *"morality, bourgeois righteousness, industrious community service and charities"* fueled the problem of evil—and he countered with the simple faith that *"Christ is the door."* I think the following sentence will also resonate with those who cannot stand the virtue signaling that has become so widespread and which emanates from people who want for nothing, and who live off the ill-gotten (for they themselves keep saying how ill-gotten everything in the West is) gains of their forefathers, but seek ever more adulation for being who they pretend to be: *"A strict moralism appears to me more vile and stale than the most capricious ridicule and scorn. To turn the good inward, and to show the evil outwardly—to appear worse than one actually is, to be better than one appears: this I hold for one's duty and way of life."*

While Hamann is not strictly a political philosopher, he could see that what the enlightened philosophers were spreading was a suffocating web of tyrannical moralising. Thus, Alexander writes: *"The 'philosophical century,' a proud epithet to the illuminati of the eighteenth century, Hamann uses as a term of opprobrium. He speaks of the 'Babylonian philosophy' which stands under the Confusion of Babel. It is the new 'despotism,' a 'metaphysical, moralizing' Catholicism, 'which has its seat in the very place [Berlin] where such an outcry is raised over the papacy.'"*

More important than the nausea he felt at the philosophical sycophancy directed at [Frederick the Great](#), and Frederick's own taste for vain-glory was his prophetic sense of the hellish future emerging from the idolatry of reason's light. In 1762 when the following passage first appeared it may have seemed the ravings of a lunatic, but in 1794 it was nothing if not prescient:

Nature works through the senses and the passions. But those who maim these instruments, how can they feel? Are crippled sinews fit for movement?—Your lying, murderous philosophy has cleared nature out of the way, and why do you demand that we are to imitate her?—So that you can renew the pleasure by becoming murderers of the pupils of nature, too—Yes, you delicate critics of art!, you go on asking what is truth, and make for the door, because you cannot wait for an answer to this question—Your hands are always washed, whether you are about to eat bread, or whether you have just pronounced a death-sentence.

Such prophecy, for Hamann, stands in the closest relationship to what it was he saw as the real meaning of Enlightenment: a power grab by abstract moralizers who want to become the guides and guardians of their new world. In his Letter to [Christian Jacob Krauss](#) he responds to Kant's essay, "What is Enlightenment?" with its "*Sapere aude!*" and Kant's claim that enlightenment is the emergence of people from their "*self-incurred tutelage*."

Hamann immediately "smells a rat;" for who is it who espies those in need of emancipation, and what is their role in the process, and what benefits accrue to them in terms of office, profession, prestige and such like? I quote at length because it is such a powerful indictment of the Enlightenment, which comes armed with its own mythology, and which has been used to judge all other mythologies but its own, which it seals with the sanction of a reason that is naught but its own conjuring:

Who is the other lay-about or guide that the author has in mind but has not the heart to utter? Answer: the tiresome guardian who must be implicitly understood as the correlate of those who are immature. This is the man of death. The self-incurred guardianship and not immaturity—Why does the chiliast deal so fastidiously with this lad Absalom? Because he reckons himself to the class of guardians and wishes thereby to attain a high reputation before immature readers. The immaturity is thus self-incurred only insofar as it surrenders to the guidance of a blind or invisible (as that Pomeranian catechism pupil bellowed at his country pastor) guardian and leader. This is the true man of death—So wherein lies the inability or fault of the falsely accused immature one? In his own laziness and cowardice? No, it lies in the blindness of his guardian, who purports to be able to see, and for that very reason must bear the whole responsibility for the fault. With what kind of conscience can a reasoner [Raisonneur] & speculator by the stove and in a nightcap accuse the immature one! of cowardice, when their blind guardian has a large, well-disciplined army to guarantee his infallibility and orthodoxy? How can one mock the laziness of

such immature persons, when their enlightened and self-thinking guardian—as the emancipated gaper at the whole spectacle declares him to be—sees them not even as machines but as mere shadows of his grandeur, of which he need have no fear at all, since they are his ministering spirits and the only ones in whose existence he believes?

So doesn't it all come to the same thing? Believe, march, pay, if the devil is not to take you. Is it not sottise des trois parts? And which is the greatest and most difficult? An army of priests [Pfaffen] or of thugs, hench-men, and purse snatchers? According to the strange, unexpected pattern in human affairs in which on the whole nearly everything is paradoxical, believing seems harder for me than moving mountains, doing tactical exercises—and the financial exploitation of immature persons, donec reddant novissimum quadrantem [till they have paid the last penny].

In this sense, then, the understanding and use of reason is itself corrupted, and philosophers who would have reason devour way more than it can chew, and in their devouring prepare the world for a new kind of hellish tyranny, concealed under the birth lights of rational progress.

In depicting Hamann's critique of the Enlightenment, let us take up again the earlier point about the gods and the life-worlds of pre-philosophical peoples so that we can bring into sharp relief the world of faith in reason's ideas and faith in gods. For Hamann is not for a second claiming that we should deny what we know to be true. But (again Nietzsche makes the same point but in a more palatable way to a readership hankering to display its creative genius in world-making), he contrasts one world, which divinizes its ideas without conceding that it does this, with another, which rests on faith about a God it obeys and whose way are miraculous and hence never completely rational or comprehensible.

And he finds no compelling reason whatever—precisely because he takes experience and history as the touchstones of reasons about human matters—for rationalized principles to be taken as completely truthful of anything about us or our world. Whereas Kant had thought he had demonstrated, in defense of human dignity, that the very form of our reason is the clue to how we generate a moral content so that we are not (at least in thought) beholden to the limits of our nature and world, Hamann sees nothing but lunacy in such an aspiration.

Again, the comparison with Nietzsche is apposite: Nietzsche had stressed that behind reasons of value we would find nothing, at least nothing other than a will to power. But for him that meant he and the higher men should see nihilism as an opportune condition so that they could then create a higher culture and breed supermen who would give meaning to the earth.

Hamann would have been caught between nausea and laughter had he read Nietzsche: nausea at the sickening nature of the arrogance and all the deluded blather about great men, and heroes that was so typical of 19th century romantics fearful that the world in the making was as Nietzsche had put it, one fit for nothing more than "hopping fleas;" laughter at the kind of people who sit around and fancy in all seriousness and pomposity that they can provide the conditions for human greatness. He would, though, I think we can safely say, have loved Chesterton's depiction of the superman as the feathered creature living in Croydon who was so sensitive that a breeze could kill him.

Hamann perhaps speaks more forcefully to us today than to his contemporaries. For we have witnessed what forces the attempt to replace gods with reasons and political actions of the sort pushed for by Nietzsche and Marx have unleashed. And we can also see that the less eschatological rights-driven attempt to replace this world with a morally absolute one, while having success in the West, is not at all embraced in cultures, where traditional values and figurative speech and imagination still are very much alive.

The only God that reason ever overthrew was the God of reason, but that God was itself a philosophical/metaphysical creation. Yet it was the case that as the faith in abstract ideas grew, as people have become more caught up in and satiated by material success, as, to use Weber's terms, instrumental reason contributed to the disenchantment of the world, Western people have cared less for a "language" and for rituals in which the "gods" were called upon.

But the world's mysteries do not stop because we are less conscious of them. The pre-moderns, which is to say a great number who inhabit the globe today, had accepted and still accept that the world is full of mysterious powers and thus told stories about their gods. And their gods were the living powers which "overpowered," or "ruled" over them, and hence the powers to which they supplicated themselves.

Again, let me turn to Hamann's greatest and most original "pupil" of the twentieth century Rosenstock-Huessy, a thinker who like Hamann challenged the security of the modern mind by his persistent recourse to ancient symbols and "names" to enable it to see with different, and more attuned eyes what was happening in the pre-modern world and to the selves it was shaping, in order to better see what moderns were oblivious to in their own destructive doing. The echoes of Hamann loudly resound in the following passage addressing the perennial and existential nature of human supplication and "divine" invocation by Rosenstock-Huessy:

Manifold are the powers which raise their voices in man. Anything may become his "god", anything his 'world.' Atheists, for example, may bring the "concept of God" before their tribunal in the name of their own God, matter. In other words, their God is matter, and their doubts and questions are aimed at a dead thing, the definition of theology. But this heckling of theological concepts has little to do with the name of the living God. A God is present in the materialist's question as in any other. God is not a concept. He is always a person, and he bears a name. The name in which we are asked to ask others.

For instance, when I ask a sportsman: "How may a good sport do such and such a thing?" I invoke the power of sport. The sportsman in question shall not justify himself for my personal satisfaction. He is summoned to satisfy "Sportsmanship" and Her imperative. I am evading the disagreeable situation of somebody setting himself up as in authority, but putting the Sport on the higher level and myself remaining on the same human level with the other fellow. Yet there can be no doubt that I am relying on the existence of two levels, one of human democracy, the other of ruling powers....

The power who puts questions into our mouths and makes us answer them is our God. The power which makes the atheist fight for atheism is his God. Of course, God is not a school examiner. Man never gives his real answer in words; he gives himself...The gods whom we answer by devoting our lives to their worship and service ask for obedience, not for lip-confession. Art, science, sex, greed, socialism, speed—these gods of our age devour the lives of their worshippers completely.

That the gods preceded man, and that, historically, polytheism precedes monotheism are both indications of how the ancients sought to make sense of their worlds and their selves. Monotheism was, *inter alia*, a cry for the concordance of these powers to cohere and life and death to be under the dominion of a higher justice and goodness than evident in our mortal experience. This cry for concordance is partly addressed in Egyptian, Greek and Roman mythologies, where the gods belonged to a common "household," so that these living powers and mysterious surprising forces, for all their discord, share the same "dwelling." The polytheistic residues are evident, as Rosenstock-Huessy also observes, in the plural Elohim expressing, for the Jews, *"the divine powers of creation."*

The modern rebuilding of everything from scratch, the mind's year zero of Descartes et. al. is at once a reversal of how life has been experienced, and figuratively represented by pre-philosophical people, as well as an occlusion of our fragility and dependency. The initial anti-historical bent of Descartes was quickly replaced by a combination of models and axiomatic philosophical mythical history, so conspicuous, in the social contract theorists, that were indicative of the new myth-making of those

relying upon their "natural reason," and who would interpret history as not only a repository of myth, but as a template for their own projections which were meant to grasp what was really happening in order better to fix it with their philosophies. That is, they preferred their stories to those who had made the past, and reconfigured them in such a way that the earlier stories would fit the templates and models of those who "understood" more and came later, and whose energies were devoted to making a new kind of future.

But if we rely upon our understanding to provide "meaning" of the past we are inevitably drawn back into the mythic. That generation upon generation of historians will revise previous findings of the past as they get closer to the "truth" is invariably the result of the new quest and questioning being posed to the "facts" of the past. But the new quest with its own certitudes—such as the certitude of knowing what is involved in the creation of a less oppressive or more just society (in spite of philosophers ceaselessly disputing the principles and assessments as much as historians dispute the roles and "weights" of different causes and meanings of events)—is itself but the identification and valorisation of ideas of orientation and value that reflect faith in the new god.

Historical knowledge ostensibly provides a firm foundation alongside reason, but its mythic dimension is the inevitable result of us not simply deriving meaning from events, much less interpreting an event as just a collection of itemised or catalogued facts, but us drawing upon events to support the meaning of the world we inhabit. Thus, Hamann surmises against [Viscount Bolingbroke](#): *"Perhaps the whole of history is more mythology than this philosopher thinks, and like nature a sealed book, a cloaked witness, a riddle which cannot be solved unless we plough with some other ox than our reason."* And, *"The field of history has always seemed to me to be like that wide field that was full of bones, and behold, they were very dry. Only a prophet can prophesy of these bones that veins and flesh will grow on them and skin cover them."*

The reference here to prophecy stands in the closest relationship to another invaluable insight of Hamann, viz., that as we are ever poised between past and future, and as future is making us as much as past is forming us, we are as much implicated in the quality of our prophetic capacities as in our observational ones. Neither our prophetic nor observational capacities are substances. But they are all part of a more general sensorium which informs our understanding, even though we understand very little of how we understand, let alone prophesy, or mediate between past and future.

Our knowledge is indeed in part, and our prophesying in part; united, however, it is a triple cord

that is not quickly broken. If one falls, the other will lift up his fellow; if the two lie together, then they have heat. What would all knowledge of the present be without a divine remembrance of the past, and without an even more fortunate intimation of the future, as Socrates owed to his daemon? What would the spirit of observation be without the spirit of prophecy and its guiding threads of the past and future? It rains its gifts on the rebellious also, that the Lord might nonetheless be and dwell among them incognito without their knowledge and will.

And,

Despite the authority of the intellectual universe into presence and absence, I do not pretend that these predicates are anything more than subjective conditions by which no actual duplication of the objects themselves is substantiated, but rather merely a relationship of the diverse views and sides of one and the same thing to the measure of the inward man which corresponds to them, to his negative, variable, finite power which is incapable of any omnipresence because this is the exclusive property of a positive immeasurability.

Likewise, the spirits of observation and of prophecy are expressions of a single positive power which cannot be divorced by their nature but only in thoughts and for the use of thoughts; they in fact mutually presuppose themselves, refer to each other, and have effects in common. Hence when I compared the present with an indivisible point, the duplication of its power and its close connection with the past, as effect, and with the future, as cause, are not at all cancelled.

The enlightened philosophers had indeed put themselves in the role of prophets through their intimation that knowledge in accordance with the philosophical strictures they placed upon it would yield a more benign future. But knowledge is a vast, indeed boundless field, when it comes to trying to identify precisely what will come of what we do. The enlightened philosophers were only as good as the lights by which they operated, and those lights were (to rephrase Pascal) as much of the heart as of the head, the question that Hamann keeps throwing at these philosophers and their philosophers is simply: how much do you really know about the human heart and the human circumstance? Is it really better than the vast compendium of observation across ages, types of people and circumstances, the concatenation of contingencies gathered within the Bible?

Of course, this earlier "knowledge" is not method-dependent, and hence "unenlightened," but are Spinoza and Descartes, Rousseau and Kant et. al. really more insightful about who and what we are

than the biblical authors, or artists such as Homer or Shakespeare? Some do concede they are. But there is no compelling grounds to concede this. Further those who use philosophy to prove the superiority of the philosophical approach to value and existential meaning are only compelling to those who already share their faith in philosophy's power.

As we saw with the founding of the new metaphysics, it initially takes off by studying nature and reason as such, before moving into ethics, politics, aesthetics etc. But Hume had raised the issue whether the science itself really needed the metaphysics (even though he still drew upon it). For his part Hamann, like Pascal, had the good sense to know that the study of natural science (a subject which he seems to have taken little interest in) was completely irrelevant to the kinds of claims he was making.

On the other hand, he made the critical observation of the Cartesian and post-Cartesian view of nature that is at once the kind of pre-philosophical observation any person sensitive to "nature" could make, and also central to the phenomenological critique of reductive naturalism and its metaphysics. The following collection of citations from Hamann all bring out different features of this insight, and give a sense of how important it is to Hamann:

*Only a "bloody-lying philosophy" pretends this is all to nature, and thereby sets nature aside
Nature is an equation of an unknown quantity, like a Hebrew letter without vowel-points. It is a
book, a letter, a "fable." It takes more than physics to exegete her).
The great and small Masoretes of philosophy have poured over the text of nature like a flood.
Must not all her beauties and riches be reduced to water?
Is nature a matter of "single, natural points to which everything reduces itself? Does everything
consist of mathematical lines?"
Nature groans under such tyranny and longs for the day when it will be free of man's fallen
condition.*

Just as Plato had moved from the study of the cobbler to reasoning about how we should live, and the nature of the entire cosmos, the new philosophical idea-ism had quickly moved from the study of "nature" and "mind" to all else beside. But such a move requires ignoring the very different (to use Wittgenstein's formulation) "rules" of different "language games."

And it is precisely when we take stock of the unavoidable fact that reasoning, whilst not denying 'blazes' of insight, or the mute thereness of all manner of contingencies, nor, even, the importance of

silence in reflection, is operating in a world made by and smothered in the calls and behests, the promises and decisions, the education within a "problematic" and field of learning with its historical development, and concatenation of support structures, professional opportunities, that is to say in the vast formative, triggering, incubating and commanding powers of language enmeshed in assigned roles and circumstances, the understanding of which circulates socially.

As Hamann would write: *"If I were only as eloquent as Demosthenes, I would need to do no more than repeat one phrase three times: reason is language, Λόγος; this marrowbone I gnaw and will gnaw myself to death over it."*

Hamann's conviction that reason cannot be divorced from language, and that human life is so bound up with language that one cannot "transcend" it to make any sense of actual lives, and "life-worlds" stands in striking contrast to the idea that the mind "uses" language as a tool is an elementary, albeit widely held belief that is found in philosophy. Whether Hamann followed all the conceptual twists and turns of the first Critique and how they related to Aristotle, Leibniz, and Newton is impossible to gauge from his pithy critique of Kant and comments expressed in letters, but he certainly recognized immediately that Kant had treated reason as if language were not intrinsic to reason or even the world. Commencing with a paraphrase of Kant's question, he observes:

How is the faculty of thought possible? the faculty to think right and left, before and without, with and beyond experience?—then no deduction is needed to demonstrate the genealogical priority of language, and its heraldry, over the seven holy functions of logical propositions and inferences. Not only is the entire faculty of thought founded on language, according to the unrecognized prophecies and slandered miracles of the very commendable Samuel Heinicke, but language is also the centerpoint of reason's misunderstanding with itself, partly because of the frequent coincidence of the greatest and the smallest concept, its vacuity and its plenitude in ideal propositions, partly because of the infinite [advantage] of rhetorical over inferential figures, and much more of the same.

Sounds and letters are therefore pure forms a priori, in which nothing belonging to the sensation or concept of an object is found; they are the true, aesthetic elements of all human knowledge and reason.

That Kant had privileged mathematical physics over the vast expanse of the world "experience," thereby creating a hiatus between "morality" and "experience," each with their own transcendental

foundations adding support to metaphysical principles, whilst also making the faculty of (aesthetic and teleological) judgment a mediator between two worlds, is completely in keeping with the Cartesian break with experience as historical. Thus, conceptualisation of experiences in Kant, governed by the understanding in conjunction with its intuited representations, draws upon a mental disposition to reality, which has nothing to do with the actual social processes involved in the demarcation of different spaces of investigation, role reciprocation, and the great amalgam of activities and other dispositions (mental as well as physical and social) where tradition and language reinforce each other. But it is precisely these kinds of convergences that Hamann notices. Thus, in his [*Essay on an Academic Question*](#), (published under the pseudonym Aristobulus) Hamann writes:

The lineaments of a people's language will therefore correspond with the orientation of its mode of thinking, which is revealed through the nature, form, laws, and customs of its speech as well as through its external culture and through a spectacle of public actions.

It is through speech that we take notice, that we form not just groups, but communities beholden to publicly declared commitments and associations, thereby leaving the eternal present of mutability or more elemental languages of mere animality, and move between past and future, as generations may “feed off” the discoveries and legacies, as well as errors of the past. *“Speak that I may see you!—This wish was fulfilled by creation, which is a speech to creatures through creatures; for day unto day utters speech, and night unto night shows knowledge.”*

But, for Hamann, speech does not thereby elevate us to the all-seeing position of a Zeus, or deist's philosophical God, which the philosopher would love to reach, and which may free us from error. On the contrary,

To speak is to translate—from an angelic language into a human language, that is, to translate thoughts into words—things into names—images into signs, which can be poetic or curiologial, historic or symbolic or hieroglyphic—and philosophical or characteristic. This kind of translation (that is, speech) resembles more than anything else the wrong side of a tapestry: And shews the Stuff, but not the Workman's skill, or it can be compared with an eclipse of the sun, which can be looked at in a vessel of water.

Or, as Paul put it, we experience the world as through a glass darkly. And while our senses do indeed convey information to us, it is our galvanization of collective and collaborated experiences that enables

us to make sense of our senses. Thinking that reason somehow provides the all-knowing vantage point, makes no sense at all to Hamann, because reason can only work with the materials at its disposal, and apart from sensation it is primarily language. Thus, he writes to Jacobi:

With me it is not so much the question: What is reason? but rather: what is language! And I take this to be the basis of all paralogisms and antinomies which it is customary to lay at the doorstep of the former [the reason]. Thus, it happens that one takes words for concepts, and concepts for things themselves. In words and concepts no existence is possible which applies simply to things and matters of fact.

Language is simultaneously the storehouse, retriever of all past knowledge and past experience, as well as what activates so many of our moods and aspirations for the future—it speaks from and of the inner as well as the outer. We did not make language any more than we made our hands or feet or heads. Yet, at the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, we are making and remaking it all the time, just as it is making and remaking us. It is the source of our reason as much as the source of the abuse of reason, and much else. But it is also miraculously bestowed, rather than willed, and it grows and activates far beyond any limits of intention. It is alive with spirit. The divine word and the Holy Spirit are, for Hamann, both intrinsic to the faith that is deeply experiential and antithetical to a more abstract way of thinking based-on separating our participation in life from life as objectified.

Hamann had seen and amply demonstrated that the seam of biblical speech fitted the very condition that anything real has: potency. And the reality of something is its truth. Plato had conceded that even as he attempted to bifurcate reality into the higher and lower, the idea and that which participates within it. As did Aristotle, who distanced himself from this dualism of Plato, as he tried to conjoin the aspects of what made the real in such a way that it would remain within the province of philosophy. This required designating what was substance and what mere accident so that we could compare and inquire into substances.

But both Plato and Aristotle elevate the mind and definition in tandem with the idea and substance. The proof, though, of a process resides neither in our understanding nor defining—again that is what Hamann knew and appealed to. Of course, there are philosophers in moral philosophy who follow some variant of Kant's dualism in which the truth of a principle is in its rational grounding—the world and all in it hence must be shrunken in order to conform to an overarching morally rational principle. Which only serves to show exactly what Hamann knew—that a madman is not to be divorced from the

contingency he loves by the demonstration of his madness. He or she must be won over by loving another contingency.

Hamann plays the madman because he thinks we are all a little mad, and the maddest are those who believe in their own purity and rational certainty; they have found the perfect means of convincing themselves that the unreal is real. Contingency, though, including the contingency of our feelings, memories, "prejudices," schooling, allegiances etc. are enmeshed in our convictions and willingness to change our minds.

Hamann grasped that the way the world is spoken of becomes the way the world is: this speaking is through commands and decisions, oaths and affirmations, loyalties and obligation, the creation of masters and protectors and commanders. When the heart goes bad, it may still, indeed, in some cases only then open itself enough to be saved, which is a Jewish and Christian idea; but to believe that the heart might be able to escape sin, that it will not mess-up, is a philosopher's moral fantasy, that rests upon principles and ideas being substitutes for who we really are, what we do and what we believe, and what tempts us and what saves us.

The Enlightenment with all its hope has been one current in the formation of a modern world that for many is experienced as a hopeless, loveless, isolating, selfish enterprise. Just as language is the clue to our world making, to how we beckon and call, describe, and evoke, draw others into social projects whether to hold a meeting, build a bridge, follow a career, go to war, make a law, buy a product and engage in any number of actions, the poor use of language is also responsible for all manner of errors and seductions. It is not that we think without language, but the language we think with may not be its best usage.

The philosophers of the Enlightenment elevated the mind, but generally either ignored or objectified language as in the study of linguistics. This is because it puts demands upon the world to be represented in sufficient clarity and distinctness that we know what things really are, as opposed to what we merely think and say they are. Mystery dissolves under the glare of enlightenment. And the danger of the idea of enlightenment itself was that it tore us out of the traditional gatherings and collective experiences and the sediments of that gathering in language and promised redemption through abstraction.

To be sure, the radical nature of the search for light had taken on such momentum because of the

scale of carnage of the religious wars and Thirty Years War, as well as the new pathways of life that accompanied the Reformation, and the new modalities of social power which required political articulation. While, then, the Enlightenment was itself a reaction to, and symptom of a tradition in crisis, the fact was that Hamann could also see a catastrophe of enormous magnitude incubating in the solution, which is why he sought to temper the philosophical abstractions that were carving out a new future with the more figurative traditional spiritual stock and forces of Christian culture.

Hamann's friend and admirer Herder would attempt to bring those "forces" of culture back into philosophy. In this respect he more than Hamann continues in the vein of Vico.

Part 1 and Part 3

Wayne Cristaudo is a philosopher, author, and educator, who has published over a dozen books.

The featured image shows, "The Cult of Reason being celebrated at the Notre Dame, Paris," anonymous engraving, 1793.

