

G.F. Meier's "Letter to His Auditors, in Which He Informs Them of His Decision to Hold a Course on Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding"

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the role played by the *collegium* held by G.F. Meier at Halle during the Winter Term 1754/55 on Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and by the printed academic program that preceded it. The first part reconstructs Locke's early influence at the newly founded University of Halle in the first half of the eighteenth century, where Meier studied and taught. Meier was familiar with Locke's *Essay* through the French anticipation by Jean Le Clerc, which was the basis for the first German exposition of Locke's philosophy by Friedrich Gladov, but also through the Latin translation of the *Essay* edited by Gotthelf Heinrich Thiele. The second part examines Meier's appropriation of the *Essay*, as mediated by Wolff and Baumgarten, for Meier's facultative logic (concepts, judgment, and argumentation) and for his philosophy of language. The third part makes available the English translation of the full text of the *Zuschrift an seine Zuhörer, worin er Ihnen seinen Entschluß bekannt macht, ein Collegium über Locks Versuch vom menschlichen Verstande zu halten*, the academic program prepared by Meier for the course on Locke, in accordance with the wish expressed by Frederick II the Great during the interview he had with Meier at Halle on 15/16 June 1754. The fourth part considers the implications of Meier's engagement with Locke, which had decisive consequences for the entire history of the German Enlightenment.

Keywords: academic programs, Frederick II the Great, John Locke, Georg Friedrich Meier, Immanuel Kant, University of Halle

1. *Locke at Halle*

The aim of this paper is to reconstruct the role played by the *collegium* held by G.F. Meier's at Halle during the Winter Term 1754/55 upon Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* and by the printed academic program that preceded it, the *Zuschrift an seine Zuhörer, worin er Ihnen seinen Entschluß*

*bekannt macht, ein Collegium über Locks Versuch vom menschlichen Verstande zu halten.*¹ The program and the course find their origin on 15/16 June 1754,² when in a private audience Meier received from Frederick II the Great (who appreciated Locke very much and was annoyed to acknowledge that he was taught at no university of his kingdom)³ the suggestion that he be the first German professor to offer a course on Locke, which Meier implemented right away, thus marking a turning point for the German Enlightenment.

The *Zuschrift* is dated Michaelismas (30 September) and the course started four weeks later, on 26 October 1754. It was reviewed in the last issue of the year 1754 of the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*. In it, the anonymous reviewer mentions the “peculiarity” of the writing, “for it gives notice of a course that is unusual at German universities”, and most importantly, as “everywhere at Halle has been known, and notwithstanding Meier “respectfully does not mention it”, the fact that the course was the consequence of “the most gracious preoccupation of the monarch for the best fostering of philosophy”. The *Zuschrift*, continues the reviewer, “shows very well how useful it is to teach the doctrine of the right use of the understanding not merely in accordance with a system, but in accordance with such a book as the one written by Lock”. After such a high declaration, which Meier has committed to implement, the reviewer declares that “Professor Meier does not need that we publicly testify how completely we agree with the thoughts he has carried out.”⁴

No wonder, then, that the news of the interest showed by the King fostered attention on Locke: it is not a coincidence, suggests Davide Poggi, then, that in the same year of Meier’s course the translation of the third edition of the very first German exposition of Locke’s life and writings (which was published for the first time at Halle in 1717) was reprinted in Halle and nowhere else;⁵

¹ Meier, *Zuschrift an seine Zuhörer*. See Pozzo, *Meiers ‘Vernunftlehre’*, pp. 83-85, 106.

² Droysen, “Tageskalender Friedrichs des Großen vom 1. Juni 1740 bis 31. März 1763”, p. 136.

³ See Poggi, “Meier’s *Zuschrift*”, p. 115: in the digital edition of the *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand – Werke Friedrichs des Großen*, one can read Frederick’s works and search items through the texts. Of the term ‘Locke’ one finds 34 occurrences and 14 for ‘Lock’.

⁴ Anonymous, “G.F. Meier, *Zuschrift an Seine Zuhörer, worin er Ihnen seinen Entschluß bekannt macht, ein Collegium über Locks Versuch vom menschlichen Verstande zu halten*”, p. 1112. See Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, *Index deutschsprachiger Zeitschriften 1750-1815*.

⁵ See Poggi, “Meier’s *Zuschrift*”, p. 116. The anonymous *Leben und Schriften des Weltberühmten und Hochgelahrten Engländers Johann Locke*, is based on the bio-bibliography of Locke compiled by Le Clerc under the title “Eloge de feu Mr. Locke”, and was originally published under the title of *Bericht von des Weltberühmten und Hochgelahrten Engelländers John Locke Leben und Schriften, aus dem Frantzösischen Johannis Clerici übersetzt und mit unterschiedlichen Anmerkungen erläutert von Friedrich Gladov*.

neither it is a coincidence that Georg David Kypke a few months later produced the first German translation of Locke's *Of the Conduct*.⁶

The impact of Locke's philosophy in the whole of Germany has been the subject of longstanding research.⁷ There is a consensus that by the time Meier studied and began teaching,⁸ the newly established University of Halle had not only shown itself to be promptly open to Anglo-Saxon philosophy, with the elaborations proposed by Christian Thomasius and Christian Wolff,⁹ but had in fact profiled itself as "the early center for the diffusion of Locke's ideas" in Germany.¹⁰

2. Meier on Locke

The privilege of being granted an audience during the king's visit at Halle on 15/16 June 1754, Meier's mentor Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten wrote to Meier, was likely to enhance Meier's standing in Prussia, and the *Zuschrift*, which Meier apparently sent to Baumgarten as a gift, was to be a testimony to an epoch of change in which German philosophers were in the process of distancing themselves from rationalism and embracing empiricism.¹¹ And this, despite the fact that the course on Locke ended up being an isolated case,

⁶ Locke, *Anleitung des menschlichen Verstandes*. Poggi, "Meier's *Zuschrift*", p. 117, notes that Meier rightly emphasizes that, in 1754, Locke's *Of the Conduct* had received neither a Latin nor a German translation.

⁷ Zart, *Einfluss der englischen Philosophen seit Bacon auf die deutsche Philosophie des 18. Jahrhunderts*; Brown, "German Interest in Locke's *Essay*, 1688-1800"; Fischer, "John Locke in the German Enlightenment: An Interpretation"; Pollok, "Die Locke-Rezeption in der deutschen Aufklärung: Frühe lateinische und deutsche Übersetzungen von Lockes Werken (1709-61)"; Poggi, *Lost and Found in Translation?*; Rydberg, "Impartial Observations of a Sensible Mind".

⁸ On Meier's biography see the eighteenth-century reconstruction by Lange, *Leben Friedrich Meiers*, as well as the late twentieth-century ones by Schenk, *Leben und Werk des halleischen Aufklärers Georg Friedrich Meier*; Pozzo, *Meiers Vernunftlehre*, pp. 63-131; and Kertscher, "Meiers Platz im geistig-kulturellen Leben der Stadt Halle". On Halle, see Hinske (ed.), *Zentren der Aufklärung I. Halle*.

⁹ See Fischer, "John Locke in the German Enlightenment", pp. 432-34; and Poggi, "L'Essay di John Locke e la *Psychologia empirica* di Christian Wolff".

¹⁰ Brown, "German Interest in Locke's *Essay*, 1688-1800", p. 477.

¹¹ Baumgarten, Letter to G.F. Meier of 25 October 1754, in Nannini, "~~Können-Sie-denn-der- gleichen-schreiben, ohne in Wallung zu gerathen? Ich nicht?~~" A Commented Edition of an Unknown Letter of Baumgarten to Meier", p. 208. The hypothesis put forward by Nannini, *ibid.*, p. 214, seems quite plausible, namely that Baumgarten's letter was a reply acknowledging the reception of the *Zuschrift* sent by Meier to him at Frankfurt an der Oder.

with the rather low attendance of only four students, among them Johann August Noesselt, who later became a renowned theologian, and the young Karl Abraham von Zedlitz und Leipe, whom in 1770 Frederick appointed Minister of Justice.¹²

As a youth, Meier received a solid technical and scientific education, which was however deficient in the humanities. On this subject, Meier himself puts on record in the biography written by his friend and colleague Samuel Gotthold Lange: “I had the disadvantage that the *humaniora* in general were less practiced in our lessons, so I learned most of what I know about them through my own readings”.¹³ In the *Zuschrift* Meier states he has been made aware of Locke’s *Essay* through the French anticipation published by Locke himself two years before the actual appearance of the book. By 1754, he knows about the Latin translation of the *Essay* edited by Gotthelf Heinrich Thiele, and he adds he is aware of the fact that Locke’s *Of the Conduct* had not been translated in either Latin or German yet.¹⁴

Although one finds no mention of Locke’s name in any of Meier’s writings before 1754, it is well known that Meier’s *Vernunftlehre* and the *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre*¹⁵ are strongly dependent on Locke’s facultative logic (concepts, judgement, and argumentation),¹⁶ and on his philosophy of language.¹⁷ References to Locke were mediated by the authors of the textbooks Meier studied, the ones written by Christian Wolff, Johann Franz Budde, Johann Gottlieb Heineccius, Martin Otto, and obviously Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten. If

¹² Pozzo, *Meiers ‘Vernunftlehre’*, p. 84.

¹³ Lange, *Leben Friedrich Meiers*, p. 30. See Nannini, “An Unknown Letter of Baumgarten to Meier”, pp. 212-17.

¹⁴ Meier, *Zuschrift an Seine Zuhörer*, pp. 12-13; ed. Poggi, *Philosophical Academic Programs*, p. 125. According to Poggi, “Meier’s *Zuschrift*”, p. 117, this confirms the role played by Thiele’s version in the circulation of the Lockean *Essay* among the thinkers of the *Aufklärung*: John Locke, *Libri 4 De Intellectu Humano*. Meier is well informed about the publication history of Locke’s *Essay*. In fact, he refers also to: Locke, “Extrait d’un Livre Anglois qui n’est pas encore publié, intitulé ESSAI PHILOSOPHIQUE concernant L’ENTENDEMENT, où l’on montre quelle est l’étendue de nos connoissances certaines, & la manière dont nous y parvenons. Communiqué par Monsieur LOCKE” as well as to Id., *Of the Conduct of the Understanding*, in Id., *Posthumous Works*; Id., *De la conduite de l’Esprit dans la Recherche de la Vérité*, in Id., *Œuvres diverses de Monsieur Locke*.

¹⁵ Meier, *Vernunftlehre*. The latter has recently been translated into English: Id., *Excerpt from the Doctrine of Reason*.

¹⁶ See Buickerood, “The Natural History of the Understanding: Locke and the Rise of Facultative Logic in the Eighteenth Century”.

¹⁷ See Pozzo, *Meiers ‘Vernunftlehre’*, pp. 281-98.

tendencies can be identified that privilege some perspectives instead of others, it is clear that at Halle the analytical approach privileged by empiricism was dominant.¹⁸

Meier refers to Lange what happened during the interview, which began with the monarch asking on which textbooks he was giving his courses, whereby Meier promptly replied he was lecturing on his own textbooks.¹⁹ Meier sums up his recollection as follows:

In general, I noticed from the success of the interview that the King was satisfied with me. He did not like the fact that I took unknown compendia. He ordered me to read Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. I did not try to show him that this book would not be convenient for beginners to read in a course. I obeyed, and experience taught me that it is not a book for being lectured on. I had scarcely four steady auditors, and I held this course only once.²⁰

Lange's commentary on the conversation between Frederick and Meier is not uninteresting, despite his partiality:

With particular modesty, Meier here commemorates a very strange circumstance. The King demanded few professors before him. Among them all, he was particularly eager for Meier. Although Meier understood the French language well, he was not practiced in its proper pronunciation. Another person therefore acted as interpreter, as it were, although Meier understood the King well, and only lacked the right delicacy of pronunciation. In the end, this conversation did not require an interpreter, as the King could understand Meier quite well. Meier, who related this incident to me in detail, departed from the King not only with the respect which every subject must have, but also with the respect that one worthy man has for another; and the notions that the King received from Meier contributed to his prestige, as it has been testified by their success. Meier confided in Lock as an author whom one ought to read and reflect upon, but not as an author on whom to hold a course [*collegium*]. A philosophical exercitation [*asceticum*] would have been in emergency more fitting, but in front and of four attending students? Meier read for a few

¹⁸ See Engfer, *Philosophie als Analysis*.

¹⁹ The information from Büsching, *Beyträge zu der Lebensgeschichte denkwürdiger Personen, insonderheit gelehrter Männer*, p. 80, quoted in Nannini, "An Unknown Letter of Baumgarten to Meier", p. 213.

²⁰ This passage was quoted in inverted commas as pronounced by Meier himself in Lange, *Leben Meiers*, pp. 38-39.

hours without having several hundred listeners. How nobly and grandly the King thought, and proved that he could think, and how modestly this Meier narrated.²¹

The truth is, however, that although Frederick advocated for himself the merit of having introduced Locke to Prussian universities, he was not happy with the way Meier had carried out the task he had committed him to.²² At the level of the Prussian Government, the reaction of Zedlitz, the young minister to be, was reconstructed as follows by Conrad Rethwisch:

The King himself, whose attention he [Zedlitz] had attracted, especially as a Silesian, when he had been introduced to him during a visit to Halle [on 15 or 16 June 1754], pointed him to Locke to enrich his philosophical knowledge. As a result, he attended a lecture by G.F. Meier on the aforementioned English thinker, which was announced at the immediate request of the King to the professor, but was only slightly satisfactory and only captivated three listeners in the long run, as the lecturer, who had previously been completely absorbed in the Wolff-Baumgarten system, was not able to gain sufficient mastery over his new subject. Nevertheless, the introduction to Locke did not remain fruitless for the future minister; many of his later measures are based on his thoughts on education.²³

Finally, it is important to note that the *Zuschrift* was an academic program, a *Programmschrift* (from the Latin syntagm *oratio programmatica*, in the tradition of Aristotle's *Protrepticus*) also called a *Vorlesungsankündigung* (course announcement). Academic programs were printed at the expense of the respective professor and distributed to students unbound and free of charge. Their goal being that of soliciting students' attendance, they were also called *Einladungsschriften* (invitations) and their content was not rarely quite provocative, usually aimed at highlighting the novelty of the approach – in this case the fact that Locke's *Essay* was being taught in Germany for the first time.

²¹ Lange, *Leben Meiers*, p. 39.

²² Nannini, "An Unknown Letter of Baumgarten to Meier", p. 218, mentions appropriately the content of the interview Frederick II conceded to Gottsched on 15 October 1757: see Gottsched, "Schreiben des Professors Gottsched in Leipzig an Professor Flottwell in Königsberg (22. Oktober 1757)", p. 297.

²³ See Rethwisch, *Der Staatsminister Freiherr v. Zedlitz und Preußens höheres Schulwesen im Zeitalter Friedrichs des Großen*, pp. 79-80. See also Trendelenburg, *Friedrich der Große und sein Staatsminister Freiherr von Zedlitz*, p. 9; Mainka, *Karl Abraham von Zedlitz und Leipe (1731-1793)*, pp. 52-60.

Academic programs were usually printed on one full sheet folded *in quarto* with sixteen pages. The circulation of academic programs was generally quite small, which also explains why they did not reach the public very much. To give an idea of the extension of this literary genre, between 1756 and 1775, Kant published eight academic programs. A first group is connected to Kant's Geography teaching: *Theorie der Winde* (1756), *Entwurf Geographie* (1757), and *Lehrbegriff* (1758). A second group is about the question of how to extend the mathematical method to all parts of philosophy, and includes *Optimismus* (1759), *Spitzfindigkeit* (1762), *Negative Größen* (1763), and *Nachricht* (1765). Ten years later, his last academic program appeared, *Racen* (1775).²⁴

3. Maier's Academic Program on Locke's Essay

Letter to his auditors,
in which he informs them of his decision
to hold a *collegium* on Lock's *Versuch
vom menschlichen Verstande*.
Halle, in Magdeburg
published by Carl Hermann Hemmerde
1754

[3] As I shall be starting a *collegium* in the Winter Term, a *collegium* that has hitherto been unusual, I have considered it my duty to inform in advance of its arrangement those who may be willing to participate in it. I pass over, with reverent silence, the close occasion of the same [i.e., the interview with the monarch], which is already sufficiently well known; and my present intention is only to make known in advance to those to whom *Lock's Versuch vom menschlichen Verstande* is unknown, what they have to expect from a *collegium* on this work, and how I intend to arrange my lecturing on it. [4] In this way, everyone will be able to examine in a reasonable way whether he wants to stay in this *collegium* or not.

There are many among you, gentlemen students, who arrange their studies at universities with no other aim than to learn a profession through which they seek to acquire those indispensable skills that one must have if one wants to hold a certain office and earn a living according to the present constitution of the State. Long experience has taught which parts of scholarship are necessary

²⁴ See Pozzo, "Introduction", pp. ix, xiv-xv. On Kant's academic programs see also *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften. Bd. 1: Werke - Neuedition*, pp. 931-32.

to this end, and it has therefore determined the habitude about what sciences a theologian, a lawyer, a physician must learn to this end. The sum total of these sciences is what each student calls his *cursus* [of studying], and when he has heard as many *collegia* as is necessary to go through his entire *cursus* in ~~an~~ manner of necessity, he declares he has completed his *cursus* and has nothing more to learn. A student of this kind does not even fall into the laudable temptation to attend another *collegium* that is not part of his *cursus*. He regards scholarship no more than as a handicraft, and he thinks [5] much too low to enable one [professor] to vigorously recommend him a *collegium*, without which he is yet able to learn as much as is necessary to administer an office after the ordinary manner: for the world is governed by a small wisdom. As long as a student has such a poor notion of studying, it is impossible to persuade him that a *collegium* on *Lock's Versuch vom menschlichen Verstande* will be of much use to him.

On the contrary, he who rises above this miserable way of thinking, and indeed studies also to the end that he may make himself fit for a useful office and thus become a useful member of the human race and of the State, but has other nobler intentions beyond them, he will not confine himself to the narrow confines of the ordinary *cursus* of studying. He will regard studying as a means of making himself skillful, of seeing the truth with his own eyes. He will therefore regard it as his own endeavor to rise above the prejudices and errors of the human race, and when will the human race [6] lack errors and prejudices? and to learn the nature of things, together with the Author [God] of them, correctly and practically? It is true that no human being will ever fully succeed in this endeavor. Nevertheless, it is a truly noble endeavor, and a student has already gained a great deal if his study is such an endeavor. Noble endeavors cannot succeed badly, much less fail completely. And if a student thinks so, one can encourage him to attend a *collegium* that does not belong to the circle of those parts of scholarship that one calls a *cursus*. And in this way, *Lock's* excellent *Versuch vom menschlichen Verstande* can be presented to anyone who wants to become a true scholar.

Lock, as he himself relates, used to set forth all sorts of learned investigations with some learned friends. And given that, fortunately, his company consisted of only honest men who were merely interested in knowing the truth, they realized that they were venturing themselves into insurmountable difficulties by their method of investigation. They were therefore alarmed, [7] and inquired whence it might be that they could not extricate themselves from the difficulties they were encountering. And then *Lock* discovered that they were not on the right path to the truth, or that they were not properly using their understanding to discover the truth. He therefore had the idea of starting from the beginning and investigating how the human understanding should be used in order to arrive at a correct cognition. And from this arose his *Versuch*

vom menschlichen Verstande. He first shows that no knowledge is innate in us, and second that we attain all our knowledge either through the senses or at the same time through reflection. He goes through all our noblest concepts and shows how we arrive at them. He notices everywhere the limits of the human understanding, and he follows experience everywhere. At the same time, he deals with many things that belong to metaphysics and other parts of philosophy. And although there are many things in his *Versuch* that belong to the ~~doctrine of reason~~ [*Vernunftlehre*], it is not merely a *Vernunftlehre*, much less a complete system of the *Vernunftlehre*.

[8] *Lock* is therefore to be regarded as a thoroughly honest man, who has set aside all prejudices, especially those which arise unnoticed from the systems of scholars, [a honest man] who has followed the tracks of simple experience and sought to discover a safe path through the realm of truths. In every step that he has taken with the greatest caution, he has made very useful discoveries, from the collection of which he has composed his book. In his day, most of his discoveries were new, and he therefore deserves to be placed alongside the greatest improvers of philosophy. The learned world has also recognized his great merits, and as long as there will still be sound reason among the philosophers, so long will the *Versuch vom menschlichen Verstande* be read and admired. A *collegium* on it therefore gives the opportunity to deal with many philosophical matters much better than can be done if they are only touched upon in passing or briefly in a system of *logic*, metaphysics or another science. And because this *Versuch* contains no methodical system, it leaves the mind of the reader and auditor in more [9] freedom to judge about an opinion and about a whole system.

It would, however, be unreasonable to warn a student against all methodical and systematic knowledge. Although there are many false systems, and although most of the systems invented by human beings are filled with errors, it is incongruous to say that truths are turned into errors because they are properly connected with each other, and because one is deduced from the other in a consistent manner, that is, because they are brought into a system. A truth can only be thought in its complete correctness if it is thought with its premises and consequences, and it is precisely then that a truth is thought systematically. If one tears a truth out of its system, one almost necessarily forgets many of its determinations, and one often cannot discover the incorrectness of a proposition except by means of other truths; just as a beam does not receive its proper shape until it is attached to the other parts of a building. He who has not learned to think systematically [10] is like a tramp in the realm of truths who leaves the beaten track and wanders about cross-country. Sad experience also sufficiently teaches that such scholars fall into an infinite number of errors, into the danger of which one cannot even incur if one has learned to think systematically.

On the other hand, it is very dangerous if a scholar never thinks otherwise than systematically, and on top of that only according to a certain method. Truth has the same nature everywhere, and dogmatic truths can therefore have the same fate as historical ones. Now experience teaches that if one can only lie coherently, the most obvious lies can be made so similar to the truth that one cannot regard them as lies. If one immerses oneself in a novel, one is unable to distinguish the true from the false in it. A system is for the most part a novel of abstract propositions. And therefore, one must not be surprised that an unrhymed idea can often seem to be a manifest truth, if one is able to interweave it quite artificially [11] into a learned system. If, therefore, one thinks merely systematically, one is either in danger of being plunged into error in a quite philosophical way by the aid of the mathematical method; or at least of being persuaded from the truth by the prejudice of the system, and thus of arriving at no true conviction. It is therefore to be advised that one should sometimes venture out of the narrow and measured course of the system, in order thus to come to speak to oneself, and to judge the correctness of the system with more freedom.

In addition to the fact that *Lock's Versuch vom menschlichen Verstande* contains many particularly useful investigations, one can expect to benefit from the instruction of this great philosopher that it will be all the easier to beware of being forced under the yoke of a system in such a way that one becomes prejudiced in favor of it. *Lock* gives excellent instructions for discovering an infinite number of errors, prejudices and lack of thought on the part of scholars, which often arise merely because one is blinded by a system full of lies.

[12] To many it will at first seem impossible to read a *collegium* on *Lock's Versuch*, because it is not only a rather extensive treatise, but also because the whole book consists of a free discourse. However, from this it is clear that it is unnecessary to explain all the propositions and periods of the author in the oral presentation of the same. I shall therefore extract the main proposition from each paragraph and try to explain it properly. At the same time, I shall add my own observations, and shall not be a slave to *Lock*, but shall depart from his opinions with all reasonable freedom if I think I have reason to do so. And as there are a great many investigations in his *Versuch*, which have been presented, so to speak, in all the compendia of the *Vernunftlehre* and of metaphysics since his time, I shall dwell on them very little. And so, I will try to entertain my auditors primarily with such investigations that are not usually dealt with in detail in the oral lectures of the usual sessions of philosophical reading hours.

Before *Lock* communicated his *Versuch* to the world, he published a small work, [13] which was an extract from the larger work in English. *Clericus* translated it into French, and had it printed in the eighth volume of his *Bibliothèque* in January 1688, and also edited it later, especially with *Lock's* own additions.

As far as I know, this extract has not been translated into either German or Latin, and it is therefore impossible that I should take it as the basis of my lectures. He also wrote another small work, *Von dem Gebrauch des Verstandes in der Untersuchung der Wahrheit*, which was only printed after his death, and of which, to my knowledge, neither a German nor a Latin translation exists. I have therefore decided to read about the great work myself, and I will take as a basis the Latin translation which was published in Leipzig in 1741 under the following title: *Johannis Lockii, Armigeri, Libr. IV. de intellectu humano etc.* edited by M. [Magister] Gotthelf Heinrich Thiele Rector of the Gymnasium in Lublin. When I shall have finished this course, I will make a short German excerpt myself, for the convenience of my gentlemen auditors.

[14] Because due to my renowned state of health I cannot dare to read many hours of the day, I will initially only hold this course on *Lock* each Saturday from 2-3, and as soon as I have finished the *Privatissimum* on metaphysics, I will continue it every day at the same hour.

I will hold this course like any other private philosophical private *collegium*, and if it pleases God, I will begin it on 26 October in my house. Written at the Royal Frederick-University in the Michaelmas ~~Mass~~ of 1754.²⁵

The *Zuschrift* starts with some commonplace considerations about the usefulness of philosophical offerings for a student's *cursus studiorum*. It turns personal, however, right away when Meier depicts Locke as an honest sage, a great philosopher, and an innovator. If it is true he does not provide much specific detail about the content of Locke's *Essay*, it is also true he expresses great respect. He notes that the *Essay* "contains no methodical system", which "leaves the mind of the reader and auditor in more freedom to judge from an opinion, and from a whole system".²⁶ In other words, although the *Essay* is a treatise, its being written in "free discourse" makes it unusual for a eighteenth-century treatise, which brings the advantage of allowing more freedom of thought to the readers: as a "means" of seeing the truth with one's own eyes, in "an endeavor to rise above the prejudices and errors of the human race",²⁷ but at the same time it brings the disadvantage of being difficult to read and discuss in a classroom, so that it seems "impossible" to adopt it for classes. With the consequence that Meier finds it "unnecessary to explain all the propositions

²⁵ Meier, *Zuschrift*, pp. 1-14; ed. Poggi, pp. 119-25. My translation. While the words in bold have been converted into italics, Meier's Germanization of Locke's name into 'Lock' and his translations into German of the titles of Locke's works have been retained.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 8-9; ed. Poggi, p. 123.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 5-6; ed. Poggi, p. 122.

and periods of the author” in his oral presentation,²⁸ whereby Meier ensures he, “shall not be a slave to *Locke*, but shall depart from his opinions with all reasonable freedom”.²⁹

Meier mentions the crisis of late seventeenth-century Cartesianism, when “honest men, who were only interested in discovering the truth, realized that they were getting themselves into insurmountable difficulties by their method of investigation”. Locke had the idea of starting from the beginning and investigating how the human understanding “should be used in order to arrive at correct cognition”. He mentions the main ideas of book I and II of the *Essay*, “that no knowledge is offered to us, and then that we attain all our knowledge either through the senses or at the same time through reflection”. Most importantly, Meier appropriates the syntagm ‘limits of the human cognition’ (*Schranken der menschlichen Erkenntniß*) and points out with admiration that Locke “goes through all our noblest concepts and shows how we arrive at them. He notices everywhere the limits of the human intellect, and he follows experience everywhere”.³⁰

As a professor of logic and metaphysics, Meier notes that Locke “deals with many things that belong to metaphysics and other parts of philosophy”. And although there are many things that belong to logic, the *Essay* is not a logical treatise, much less a complete system of logic,³¹ which was more or less the same quandary Kant brooded upon when he realized that the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* was never to take the shape of either a logical or a metaphysical textbook.³²

A discussion on the use of “methodical and systematic knowledge follows”, very much in the direction of French debates, as the occurrence of the syntagm ‘novel of abstract propositions’ (*Roman abstracter Sätze*) shows.³³ Meier is

²⁸ Ibid., p. 12; ed. Poggi, p. 124. Let it be noted that Meier’s failure with teaching a treatise such as the *Essay* at Halle found a repetition some decades later at Königsberg, where the *Lecture Catalogues* show that Karl Ludwig Poerschke announced courses upon “*Librum Viri Excellentissimi Kant, Critic der reinen Vernunft*” in the Summer Term of 1788, in the Winter Term of 1788-89 and in the Summer Term of 1795. Already in the Summer Term of 1798, however, Poerschke abandoned Kant’s masterpiece in favor of easier texts such as Beck’s, *Erläuternder Auszug aus den kritischen Schriften des Herrn Prof. Kant auf Anrathen desselben*, and Ulrich’s *Institutiones Logicae et Metaphysicae*, see Oberhausen and Pozzo (eds.), *Vorlesungsverzeichnisse der Universität Königsberg (1720-1804)*, pp. 547, 554, 630.

²⁹ Meier, *Zuschrift*, p. 12; ed. Poggi, p. 124.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 7; ed. Poggi, p. 122.

³¹ Ibid., p. 12; ed. Poggi, p. 124.

³² See Pozzo, “Le projet d’écrire un manuel de logique et métaphysique pendant la décennie silencieuse”.

³³ Ibid., p. 10; ed. Poggi, p. 124. References are to Voltaire’s *Zadig ou la Destinée* (1747) and possibly to the distinction between *esprit de système* and *esprit systématique* in Condillac’s *Traité des Systèmes* (1749).

eager to show he is disenfranchising himself from the *praeiudicium systematis* (*Vorurteil des angenommenen Lehrgebäudes*), which he has listed in his *Vernunftlehre*.³⁴ In the *Zuschrift*, he advises "that one should sometimes venture out of the narrow and measured course of the system, in order thus to come to speak to oneself, and to judge the correctness of the system with more freedom".³⁵ Meier praises Locke's "excellent instructions for discovering an infinite number of errors, prejudices and lack of thought on the part of scholars, which often arise merely because one is blinded by a system full of lies".³⁶ We may say that in the *Zuschrift*, Meier prefigures the radicalization of his battle against *praeiudicia*, which he is about to undertake in the years to come.³⁷

4. *Impact of Meier's Tackling Lockean Challenges*

The course on Locke had a substantial impact on Meier's writings after 1754, when he considerably intensified his skepticism with regard to the possibility and limits of human knowledge and also gave his epistemology clear empiricist traits.³⁸

In the *Betrachtungen über die Schrancken der menschlichen Erkenntnis* (1755) Meier focuses on the issue of the limits of human cognition that he had mentioned in the *Zuschrift*,³⁹ as an incentive for reaching out to anybody who is not a philosopher by profession. Assessing the limits of one's cognition is presented as an incentive to self-satisfaction for those who are not philosophers by profession. The solution proposed by Meier to the problem of the limits of human cognition is, however, of purely quantitative nature. On the one hand, he compares the scope of human cognition with the cognition of animals, and on the other hand with the cognition of other thinking beings and spirits, to conclude that the human being is a microcosm because of his own limitations.⁴⁰

³⁴ Meier, *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre*, § 170, pp. 277-78; ed. Adickes, pp. 14-15; Meier, *Excerpt*, p. 40.

³⁵ Meier, *Zuschrift*, p. 11; ed. Poggi, p. 124.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11; ed. Poggi, p. 124.

³⁷ See Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilkritik*; Pozzo, "Prejudices and Horizons: The Philosophy of G.F. Meier".

³⁸ Pozzo, *Meiers 'Vernunftlehre'*, p. 84.

³⁹ Meier, *Zuschrift*, p. 7; ed. Poggi, p. 122.

⁴⁰ Meier, *Betrachtungen über die Schrancken der menschlichen Erkenntnis*, p. 56.

In the “Einleitung in die Metaphysik” (1755), the first treatise of his *Metaphysik*, Meier follows Locke in questioning the distinction between *metaphysica generalis* and *specialis* while pointing out one can pursue other forms of metaphysics, in which the systematic construction of the absolute loses its primacy to the phenomenological experience of consciousness. Meier elaborates an apology of what he calls the “true”, the “genuine metaphysics” in opposition to its degenerated forms. While Meier appropriates, through Baumgarten, the core of Wolff’s metaphysical construction, he indicates, however, the conditions of possibility for a future genuine metaphysics that ought to be a science (a distinct cognition based on certain and unshakable foundations), a science that merits this title and that explains and demonstrates as long the limits of human cognition permit. All other known forms of metaphysics are the result of fallacies. There are principles and fundamental truths that provide the commencements of human cognition. On the other side, even a skeptic who maintains that humans cannot attain complete certainty would concede that there are several concepts and judgments that humankind has accepted as foundations on which a complete conviction is founded.⁴¹

In the *Beyträge zu der Lehre von den Vorurtheilen des menschlichen Geschlechts* (1766), the confrontation with Locke is decisive for the shift in Meier’s position that Norbert Hinske interpreted as a shift from the stance of a Wolffian to that of a half-skeptic, of someone devoted to “empirical skepticism” as Meier’s elaboration of the “fundamental prejudice of empirical cognition” shows.⁴²

Published, in the same year of Kant’s *De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis* and just as that as a reaction to the Dutens edition of Leibniz’s *Nouveaux Essais* (1765),⁴³ Meier’s last work on logic and metaphysics is the essay “Von dem Ursprunge der menschlichen Erkenntniß” (1770), where he takes up in an independent way the same issues dealt with by Condillac in his *Essai sur l’origine des connaissances humaines* (1746),⁴⁴ with the notable differ-

⁴¹ Meier, “Einleitung in die Metaphysik”, in Id., *Metaphysik*, pp. 2-6.

⁴² Meier, *Beyträge zu der Lehre von den Vorurtheilen des menschlichen Geschlechts*, Hemmerde, Halle 1766; and the recent critical edition with Italian translation, *Contributi alla dottrina dei pregiudizi del genere umano*. See Hinske, “Georg Friedrich Meier und das Grundvorurteil der Erfahrungserkenntnis: Noch eine unbemerkt gebliebene Quelle der Kantschen Antinomienlehre”, p. 118, and Pozzo, *Meiers Vernunftlehre*, pp. 172-74.

⁴³ See Tonelli, “Leibniz on Innate Ideas and the Early Reception of the Publication of the *Nouveaux Essais* (1765)”.

⁴⁴ See Kuehn, *Scottish Common Sense in Germany 1768-1800*, pp. 103-7.

ence that instead of sharing Locke's *tabula rasa* thesis, Meier opted for Leibnizian innatism: experience teaches us only that "the first beginning of human cognition lies in obscure sensations that God has created in the soul".⁴⁵

Kant adopted for his logic lectures Meier's *Auszug aus der Vernunftlehre* for about forty years. It is not at all surprising, then, that Kant's own logical writings as well as his *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* were influenced by Meier. Locke's philosophy played an especially important role in this context. In fact, Meier served as mediator between Locke and Kant, helping to introduce Lockean issues such as the "extension of human cognition" and the "degrees of assent" into the teaching of logic in the German universities. Most importantly, he made such issues salient for Kant.⁴⁶

All things considered, although Meier's *Zuschrift* is a rather concise text, one can agree with Davide Poggi that its impact was nonetheless essential for understanding Kant's "awakening from dogmatic slumber".⁴⁷ If Johann Franz Budde and Alexander Gottlob Baumgarten were the ones who laid greater emphasis on the empirical and practical aspects that Thomasius and Wolff had taken up from Locke in the *Frühaufklärung*,⁴⁸ Meier was bound to provide food for thought for the *Hochaufklärung*.

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⁴⁵ Meier, "Von dem Ursprunge der menschlichen Erkenntniß", pp. 17-18; see Pozzo, *Meiers 'Vernunftlehre'*, pp. 174-76.

⁴⁶ Hinske, *Zwischen Aufklärung und Vorurteilskritik*.

⁴⁷ Poggi, "Meier's *Zuschrift*", p. 118.

⁴⁸ See Fischer, "John Locke in the German Enlightenment", pp. 433-35; and Pozzo, *Meiers 'Vernunftlehre'*, p. 74.

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