



**Theological Empiricism: Aspects of Johann Georg Hamann's
Reception of Hume**

Hans Graubner

Hume Studies Volume XV Number 2 (November 1989) 377-386.

Your use of the HUME STUDIES archive indicates your acceptance of HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use, available at

<http://www.humesociety.org/hs/about/terms.html>

HUME STUDIES' Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the HUME STUDIES archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Each copy of any part of a HUME STUDIES transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

For more information on HUME STUDIES contact humestudies-info@humesociety.org or visit:

<http://www.humestudies.org>

Theological Empiricism: Aspects of Johann Georg Hamann's Reception of Hume

Hans Graubner

The philosophical Enlightenment in Germany executed in none of its phases as clean a break with the theological tradition as the English and especially the French. To its very end it pleaded for a theology of Creation, however thin this plea had become, that is, for an adherence to the first article of the Creed. On the other hand, a philosophical adherence to the second article, that is, to christology, had no chance left owing to the rationalist Bible criticism of the 17th and 18th centuries and was not considered a serious philosophical position in the controversy between natural religion and revealed religion. Its mere link-up with historic facts that were considered epistemologically inferior made it unthinkable in the eyes of the dominating rationalists. In 18th century Königsberg this controversy determined the life-long argument between Hamann and Kant. Hamann attacks Kant and the German philosophy of the Enlightenment from the position of revealed religion. In doing so, he refers to David Hume from the very beginning. In Hume's thoughts Hamann saw a chance of regaining a serious position for the Christian religion, that is, of its christology, in philosophical discussion.

This very aim of Hamann's shows that he proceeds from completely different philosophical interests than does Hume. But there are certain basic attitudes that make it understandable why Hamann refers to Hume, even declares him to be his philosopher. These attitudes, which they have in common, may be called criticism of reason, epistemological empiricism, and subjectivism. In spite of these attitudes, which they share, the difference between their ways of thinking leads to Hamann's practise of not adopting any of Hume's ideas unchanged. Instead of speaking of reception it would be better to speak of a transformation of Hume's thoughts into the totally different world of Hamann's ideas.

The latter is determined by at least three basic motives:

Firstly, by the sharp criticism of an over-estimation of reason in philosophy. This criticism is directed both against the rationalism of the recognized German philosophy as well as against Hume's scepticism and Kant's transcendental philosophy.

Secondly, by his personally being affected by Christianity, which renders it impossible for him to separate the personal from the theoretic-

cal, and philosophy from the way a philosopher sees himself and from his own historical background.

Thirdly, by a concentration of all philosophical energy on language as the fundamental empirical and historical fact, which, for Hamann, becomes the centre of his theological, ontological and anthropological reflection.

It is my intention to show how Hamann unfolds his basic motives by following certain ideas of Hume's, for example, the idea of **geometry**, that of **belief** and that of **image**. In the end I shall summarize Hamann's **criticism of scepticism** and point out the significance of **anthropomorphism** in Hume's and Hamann's understanding of religion.

Referring to the understanding of Hamann's Hume-reception so far, I want to emphasize three results:

1. Hamann's Hume-reception is due, above all, to his repeated study of the *Treatise*, which must have begun earlier than was assumed before.

2. Hamann's reference to Hume is not restricted to the discussion of the concept of belief, but is far more extensive.

3. Neither is Hamann's Hume-reception a total "misunderstanding"¹ of Hume nor is his passing-on of Hume's ideas to the German romanticism "a strange paradox";² rather it is a conscious transformation of empiricism into a theology of language, which has had an effect even on romantic and idealistic secularization.

Now I shall come to my first point.

I. Geometry

After having finished his studies in Königsberg and before his conversion experience at London in 1758 that was to determine his whole life, Hamann, from 1752 to 1756, became a private tutor for two aristocratic families in Courland. During this time he definitely read the German translations³ of Hume's "Political Essays" and of his *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.⁴ That Hamann, who had a good command of the English language, knew even the *Treatise* at this time, can, according to my hypothesis, be gathered from his use of Hume's conception of geometry in an unpublished philosophic essay during his time as a private tutor.

In this essay Hamann argues against the method *more geometrico*, promoted by Descartes, which, as a characteristic of rationalism, dominated the philosophic and scientific process of thinking above all in Germany. According to Hamann, only "the origin and nature of geometry" made it understandable why its method was so "carefully"⁵ imitated by other disciplines. For owing to this origin, the certainty of the geometric method appears as independent of the objects it is

applied to. Therefore, its transformation to other disciplines can give even "errors a fictitious certainty of truth" (N 4:223). Hamann justifies that understanding by saying that "the first ideas" of geometry "were arbitrarily determined by imagination" and "depend on it." This derivation of the principles of geometry from a process of imagination means for him that the certainty of the geometrical "method," too, is only based on imagination. Both "had to be invented at the same time" (N 4:222), says Hamann; that is, they consist of fictions of imagination.

For that unusual justification of geometry, which cannot be Hamann's own invention, I do not see any other source but Hume's *Treatise*. Hamann makes use of results from the chapter *Of the ideas of space and time* (T 26-68) which is not included in the first *Enquiry*. There Hume tries to show that the ideas of geometry, as all ideas, are based on a processing of sensual impressions. Their exactitude, however, is reached by an action of the imagination which surpasses the degree of exactitude that the impressions of objects can achieve. For example, imagination simulates *some imaginary standard of equality*⁶ by progressing to an absolute exactitude after having experienced various degrees of exactness. It is inclined to produce such fictions because *when set into any train of thinking, [it] is apt to continue, even when its object fails it* (T 198).

When criticizing the application of the geometric method to other disciplines Hamann compares the sciences with languages. The character of languages is destroyed by the pre-dominance of only one language, for example, that of geometry. It cannot be preserved by conceptual synchronization but only by translation. In this context Hamann stresses the link-up of all languages with "images, sensual signs" (N 4:223). In doing so he seems to draw an analogy between geometry and language to the extent that each geometric idea must be able to express itself in a sensual, precisely drawn figure as a linguistic idea does in an empirical and historical word.

Those thoughts become even more obvious nearly thirty years later when Hamann forges them into a metacritical weapon against Kant's "purism of reason" (N 3:281). In the first instance, he uses the links between geometry and imagination against Kant's "old cold prejudice for mathematics" (N 3:285), and later he advances his argument by drawing a parallel between geometry and language. He says that while geometry finds it necessary to make its ideas visible in an empiric drawing, Kant's transcendental philosophy misjudges the nature of language and tries to set up a paradox; although having to express itself in language, it, nevertheless, thinks it can shake off the empirical and historical nature of language.

This short look at Hamann's criticism of Kant shows that his early reception of Hume's interpretation of geometry certainly remains

present, but is totally covered by Hamann's central reflection on language.

II. Belief

After his London experience of conversion in 1758, Hamann begins to examine Hume's idea of belief and comes to the following conclusion: he adopts Hume's judgment that belief has to be accepted even where reason has dominated up to now, that is, in human knowledge. But he argues against the role that Hume gives imagination in this doctrine of belief, and thus he comes to a definition of belief that contradicts Hume's intentions.

Hume calls belief a taking for granted that consists of a greater vivacity of certain ideas compared to others. Such a greater vivacity originates from his conception that a *LIVELY IDEA* is *ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION* (T 96). Associated ideas are connected in the imagination according to their resemblance, contiguity, or cause and effect (T 10-13). The vivacity of a *present impression* can only be transferred to the associated ideas by way of associations that have already existed and can thus reflect credit on them. This transfer is done by the imagination, which passes such associated ideas smoothly along without hindrance. Therefore, belief is an *act of the mind* (T 114), and an *action of the imagination* (T 253-4).⁷

This action of the imagination produces the belief in the inference from cause to effect and vice versa, because the getting used to a sequence of impressions forces the imagination to pass on from one object to another; it produces the belief in the permanent existence of objects, because the imagination links similar impressions of an object even when interrupted; and it produces the belief in the personal identity of human existence by its propensity to mix up association with identity and give the mere *bundle* (T 252)⁸ of associated perceptions the fictions of an identical ego.

Hamann never refers to the belief in the binding force of causal conclusions at all. He ridicules it as Hume's "blind faith" (N 3:25).⁹ He has a different view of the other forms of Hume's belief. He seems to agree with them in the "Socratic Memorabilia" in the sentence, "Our own existence and the existence of all things beside us must be believed and can be proved in no other way" (N 2:73), but Hamann only agrees to Hume's idea that belief is unavoidable both for the knowledge of things as well as for self-knowledge. Hamann's attack, however, is directed against the function of imagination in the origin of belief. Referring to Luther's understanding of belief for him belief does not originate from actions of the human mind, rather it can only be received as a gift of God. That is why for Hamann the belief in the existence of things does not only work where imagination transfers the vivacity of

an impression to associated ideas, but already and solely where that vivacity has its origin: in the impressions themselves. For Hamann, belief is the *force and violence* (T 1) of the *sensation*, which originates in the direct perception of the senses. Only this perception has an evidence that is independent of the actions of the human mind and only receptive. That is why Hamann calls this perception theologically a "sensual revelation" (N 3:39). Belief happens like "tasting and seeing" (N 2:74); it is, for Hamann, an expression of the basic sensualist principle: "Knowledge based on belief," as he says in his conclusion, "is basically identical with: *Nil in intellectu —*" (ZH 7:166) *quod non prius fuerit in sensu*.

Against Hume's belief in the personal identity of human existence Hamann puts the belief based on the experience of Christian existence. The belief, on which our self-experience is based, cannot be gained by confounding two similar actions of the imagination. In his "Socratic Memorabilia" Hamann explicitly defines against Hume: "Imagination ... can ... be no creator of belief" (N 2:74). As with the knowledge of things, Hamann here again transfers the basis of belief from a fiction of imagination to a *SENSATION*, a *sentiment* (T 7), using Hume's terms to express it.¹⁰ But what he means is something else. Self-knowledge is for Hamann a "voyage to Hell" (N 2:164); it leads to the "sensation" of an "ignorance" (N 2:73), in which all self-confidence that is based on actions of the human mind dissolves. But it is that kind of sentiment with respect to the self that the traditional Christian revealed religion, according to Hamann, speaks of. It links the sensation of the loss of all human self-definition with the sentiment of regaining the self with the help of Christ, who has accompanied man into the deep experience of his nothingness and still does so. Thus, when referring to self-knowledge, belief is, for Hamann, based on the revelation of God in history in the same way as, when referring to the knowledge of things, it is based on God's revelation in nature.

III. Images

As a rule, Hume only calls the ideas "images" or "copies" of the impressions in order to define the difference between and the relationship among the two perceptions; but when the subjectivity of human knowledge is emphasized, both of them are seen together as opposed to the objects by which they are produced and of which we only know by way of those *perceptions or impressions and ideas* (T 67). In the final chapter of the first *Enquiry* Hume calls that representation of things in knowledge by impressions and ideas *image: nothing can ever be present to the mind but an image or perception*,¹¹ and as mainly the impressions are responsible for the subjective adherence of knowledge to the senses, Hume also speaks of a *sensible image* (E 154).

Hamann obviously refers to this characterization of the sensual subjectivity of human knowledge as a mere knowledge of images in his "*Aesthetica in nuce*" in the sentence: "Senses and passions speak in and understand nothing but images. The whole treasure of human knowledge consists of images" (N 2:197). One may understand this basic conviction of Hume and Hamann also as a generalization of Bacon's doctrine of idols,¹² because *eidola* now have proved to be invincible and determining all human knowledge. Hume says that *we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence beyond those sensible images*. Their relation and order are only controlled by the human mind and its imagination so that the range of human knowledge appears as a closed *universe of the imagination* (T 67-8).

Hamann has to transform this epistemological approach, because it excludes theological experience. He therefore confronts it with his conception that the whole "Creation [is] a speech" of God, "which stretches from one end of heaven to the other" (N 1:393). Thus, with the help of the Bible, he transforms the universe of images and imagination into a universe of language. He interprets the relationship between world and man as a speech, or an address, and transforms the process of knowledge into a process of communication.

This address of God to man is made in a language of images: images, because man can only perceive with his senses; language, in order to make him understand something different from himself. In this way, every recognizable thing becomes a figurative speech in parables and metaphors. The language of God's Creation is poetry. God is, as Hamann says, "the poet at the beginning of the days" (N 2:206). This language is necessarily a language of images because of the link-up of human experience with the senses; for, as a condescension of God to the human ability of perception, it is, at the same time, his revealed grace in the address and his inaccessible obscurity behind his creatures who are his only way to address man. Hamann interprets the ontological status of the created world as an "absolute,"¹³ that is, an indissoluble metaphor. This is the essence of his theological aesthetics. It originates from connecting the epistemological empiricism with the experience of God's address to man.

God's condescension to man as a limited being who depends on his senses is shown in two ways: as God's language of Creation that can be perceived by the senses in nature, and as God's word that became flesh in human history. With the help of these two great metaphors of God's poetry, nature and Christ, Hume's closed *universe of the imagination* becomes, for Hamann, an open universe of God's language.

IV. Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

1. Criticism of scepticism

In connection with his translation of Hume's *Dialogues* in 1780 Hamann resumes his interpretation of Hume's scepticism that he had already defined in 1759 and rejects Hume's solution of the theological problem at the end of the *Dialogues*. His criticism of Hume's scepticism culminates in his statement that Hume proves the helplessness of reason with the help of reason (E 155).¹⁴ In this way, sceptical reason, for Hamann, fulfils the function of law according to the Apostle Paul, which is just in itself though it cannot justify but only leads to the recognition of sin. Against his own will Hume, for Hamann, plays his role in the plan of salvation of the 18th century, because, in the dialectics of law and gospel, he holds the position of the law, which exacerbates man's fall.

Owing to this position, the sceptic cannot develop any credible idea of God. His pretended ignorance remains vain and does not yield to embark on the "voyage to Hell that means self-knowledge," but only enables man to hear the gospel. Thus, Hamann mocks Philo's solution that is in itself an outcome of sceptical helplessness, his final hope of a *revealed truth* with the help of an *adventitious instructor*.¹⁵ Such a hope of a "new teacher" (N 3:274), as Hamann translates it, equals, as Hamann says, more the Pharisees' expectance of the Messiah than the "gospel ... of the cross" (N 3:316).

2. Anthropomorphism

Hamann thinks that Kant's attack against natural religion in his "Criticism of Pure Reason" is dependent on Hume's *Dialogues* and he "completely agrees" with "the English and Prussian Hume ... with respect to" (ZH 4:330)¹⁶ this attack. The conclusion from the planning of nature with respect to its reasonable creator assumes an identity or, at least, resemblance between human and divine reason. The sceptical attitude, however, which traces human knowledge back to sensual impressions (Hume) or restricts it to knowledge based on experience (Kant) reveals the inability of human reason to recognize God.

As long as the Enlightenment considered human reason as equal to divine reason, the accusation of anthropomorphism against the sensual and imaginative ideas of God in the historic religions was a standard argument of the natural against the revealed religion. Owing to Hume's philosophical approach, this accusation is directed against natural religion itself. Cleanthes' natural theology has *run into* [an] *anthropomorphism*, which has a more basic importance than the one which the natural religion fought against. Philo repeats Hume's theory of knowledge when he objects to Cleanthes: *Ideas are copied from real objects, and are ectypal, not archetypal*, and reproaches him: *You*

reverse this order and give thought the precedence (D 73).¹⁷ Human reason belongs to the "universe of imagination" that is linked up with sensual images. That means there cannot be any non-anthropomorphic idea of God so that any idea of God must be abandoned. Hume, however, does not draw that conclusion. His speaker, Philo, rather tries to save a remnant of the *argument from design*¹⁸ of Cleanthes' natural religion by accepting a *remote analogy* between the *cause ... of order in the universe and human intelligence* (D 122).

Hamann, on the contrary, supports Hume's radical argument of anthropomorphism and rejects Philo's falling back into natural theology. But, against the threatening loss of all ideas of God that is connected with this argument, he sets his transformation of the empiric basis of Hume's argument and conceives the images as speech. This transformation of image into speech means a new understanding of man. He changes from a prisoner in a picture-gallery to a receiver of God's address. The term "anthropomorphism" gets a new meaning with Hamann. Whereas with Hume it means Man's being restricted to the *universe of imagination*, it is for Hamann God's condescension to human understanding. Thus, anthropomorphism is no hindrance in Hamann's theological interpretation of Hume's empiricism but the condition of a theology that wants to do justice to man. A sensual and historical experience of God has only become possible because God's word became Nature in the Creation and Man in Christ and, at the same time, has remained word. For Hamann, language is an "anthropomorphism ... privileged" (N 3:18) by God himself, because he condescended to man in the absolute metaphors of Nature and Christ.

By integrating Hume's radical anthropomorphism into his own understanding of theology, Hamann has reached a reevaluation of the Christian revealed religion. Its anthropomorphism is not only of equal value to that of all theologies based on reason but even superior to them. To the atheistic consequences of Hume's anthropomorphic argument, however, Hamann opposed his theology of language that was new in its kind and of great consequence.

*Seminar für deutsche philologie der Georg-August-Universität
Göttingen*

1. Rudolf Lütke, "Misunderstanding Hume: Remarks on German ways of Interpreting his Philosophy," in *Philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. V. Hope (Edinburgh, 1984), 105-15.
2. Isaiah Berlin, "Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism," in *David Hume, Bicentenary Papers*, ed. G. P. Morice (Edinburgh, 1977), 109.

3. Cf. G. Gawlick and L. Kreimendahl, *Hume in der deutschen Aufklärung* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstadt, 1987), 23, 20.
4. Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefe*, ed. W. Ziesemer and A. Henkel, 1:178, 205. Further references ("ZH") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
5. Johann Georg Hamann, *Werke*, ed. J. Nadler, 4:222. Further references ("N") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
6. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1987), 48. Further references ("T") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
7. Cf. T 102: *operation of the reason or imagination*.
8. Cf. T 207: *heap or collection of different perceptions*.
9. Hamann uses the word "Köhlerglauben."
10. Cf. Hamann's use of the terms "sensation" and "sentiment": Ch. W. Swain, "Hamann and the Philosophy of David Hume," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 5 (1967): 348.
11. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1972), 152. Further references ("E") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
12. With respect to Hume this interpretation is given by R. Brandt in his German edition of the Treatise: David Hume, *Ein Traktat über die menschliche Natur*, trans. Th. Lipps, ed. R. Brandt (Hamburg, 1978), xvii-xviii.
13. This term is used by H. Blumenberg, "Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie," *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 6 (1960): 10-11.
14. Hamann's criticism of Hume's scepticism is well unfolded by O. Bayer, "Die Geschichten der Vernunft sind die Kritik ihrer Reinheit," in *Hamann-Kant-Herder, Acta of the 4th International Hamann-Coll. in Marburg/Lahn*, ed. B. Gajek (Bern, 1987), 25-32.
15. David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Nelson Pike (Indianapolis, 1978), 123. Further references ("D") will be to this edition and will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
16. Cf. O. Bayer (above, n. 14), 25.
17. Cf. T 160: *For if every idea be deriv'd from an impression, the idea of a deity proceeds from the same origin*.
18. Title of Pike's commentary (D 125).