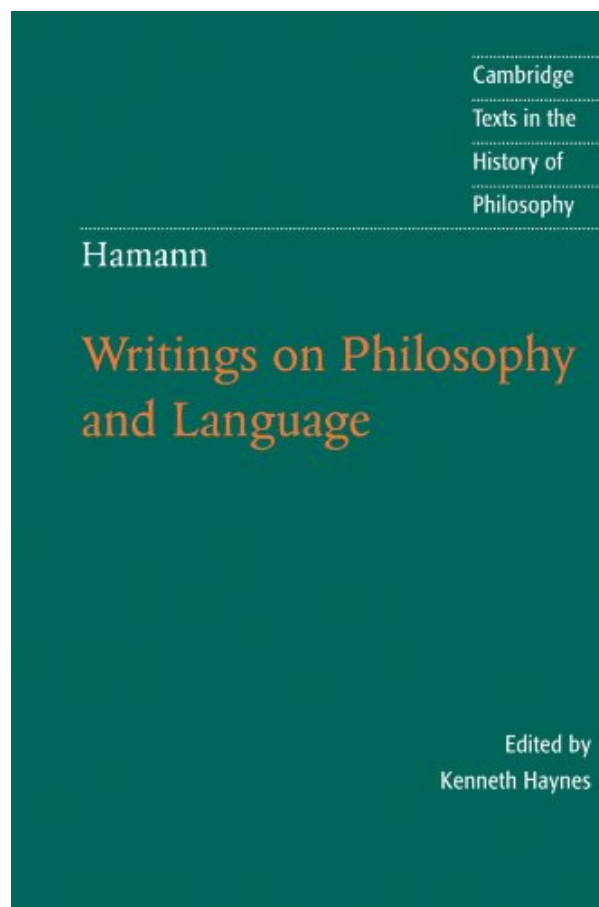


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Johann Georg Hamann (1730-88) is a major figure not only in German philosophy but also in literature and religious history. In his own time he wrote penetrating criticisms of Herder, Kant, Mendelssohn, and other Enlightenment thinkers; after his death he was an important figure for Goethe, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and others. It was only in the twentieth century, however, that the full and radical extent of his 'linguistic' critique of philosophy was recognized. This volume presents a translation of a wide selection of his essays, including both famous and lesser-known works. Hamann's enigmatic prose-style was deliberately at odds with Enlightenment assumptions about language, and a full apparatus of annotation explains the numerous allusions in his essays. The volume is completed by a historical and philosophical introduction and suggestions for further reading.

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Indispensable but Flawed

By Samuel

In the view of Kant, Goethe, Hegel, and Kierkegaard, Hamann was a genius of extraordinary insight and depth. In fact, Goethe called him the brightest light of his age. But Hamann remains in obscurity, especially in the Anglophone world, and therefore any reliable edition of his writings in English is to be welcomed.

This edition by Cambridge is without doubt the most simultaneously affordable, reliable, and extensive collection of Hamann's writings in English. It is thus indispensable for anyone who desires to read Hamann in English. Its indispensability is a function of its status on the market - it's the only such collection of texts. Kenneth Haynes should be commended for editing the text, but he was a strange choice for Cambridge, as Haynes is a specialist neither in Hamann nor even in German philosophy or literature (cf. his CV). This is only one of many drawbacks to this valuable text.

For many figures, just having the texts available is enough to justify an edition like this, but Hamann is exceptional: his texts are so obscure in style, content, and context that they require substantial introduction

and commentary if one wishes to understand them. The only explanation of each text is the (on average) single paragraph each selection receives in Haynes' introduction. This is hardly adequate, especially for a series designed for students' use. This is the first serious flaw of the text itself: inadequate introductory and commentary material. Students will need more than this text to begin understanding Hamann, even on an introductory level (five pages of introduction to each text would have extended the book by only 60 pages, still putting it just under 300 pages of text, which seems entirely reasonable).

The second is the omission of Hamann's Socratic Memorabilia (only a tiny excerpt is included). Given that this is Hamann's most significant single text on his relationship to the Enlightenment and philosophy, that it provides one of most significant interpretations of Socrates of the period, one which a student should be able to compare with, say, Hegel's or Kierkegaard's or Nietzsche's, the omission of this text from a collection of Hamann's writings on "Philosophy and Language" is not simply bizarre but totally unjustified. Anyone teaching Hamann would likely assign the Socratic Memorabilia and anyone new to Hamann needs to read it; its omission thus vitiates the introductory purpose of the text.

Although this text is indispensable, then, it is flawed, even as an introductory collection.

Thus, supplementation is needed, and here is the sad part: there is no affordable book that contains even the Socratic Memorabilia (perhaps Cambridge will someday re-issue a new edition of Haynes' edition with a full translation). Thus, the student wishing to have a good introduction to Hamann, besides owning this book, needs access to a university library. Get James O'Flaherty's edition of the text, with commentary, or the translation, also with extensive introduction and commentary, in Gwen Griffith Dickson's "Hamann's Relational Metacriticism". For further introductory material on Hamann, read Frederick Beiser's chapter dealing with Hamann in "The Fate of Reason," O'Flaherty's monograph, "Unity and Language," and at least the first essay in his book "The Quarrel of Reason with Itself." We also now have a thorough overview of Hamann in English, John R. Betz "After Enlightenment." This is an invaluable book. Its only drawback for the student is that its engagement with post-modernity, etc. is irrelevant to getting a basic handle on Hamann's context. Still, the scholarship is excellent and coverage is thorough. In addition to this text, then, O'Flaherty, Dickson, and Betz should be more than enough to get one started on understanding Hamann.

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Hamann -- The Counter Enlightenment's Little Known Genius

By D. Fineman

Since the 18th century, Hamann has been little known and translated into English. His works have been scattered about and difficult to obtain. Historically, this absence might seem odd. Herder, who worked with both Kant and Hamann, chose Hamann as his mentor. Hamann influenced Goethe and is often credited with the "storm and stress" movement of what was to become romanticism. Two reasons may account for this disregard: Hamann writes in a poetic manner stuffed with allusions and tropes AND he wages war against the analytic orientation that Kant represents and is taken as right. This edition does a great job with the former with extensive notes to allusions and on translation. The second objection is up to the reader.

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