



On the concept of thinking in Reinhold's system of Rational Realism¹

O conceito de pensamento no Sistema do realismo racional de Reinhold

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Abstract

The paper explores Karl Leonhard Reinhold's remarkable philosophical turn from 1801, in which he defends a system of Rational Realism centred on the insight that the concept of thinking is the only appropriate starting point for philosophising. Reinhold does not consider the faculty of thinking solely to be distinct from the faculty of intuiting anymore. Rather, he emphasises that thinking is not at all to be understood as *representing*, which is first and foremost to say: it is by no means based on the relation between subject and object. By introducing this distinction, Reinhold intends to keep thinking free from connotations of the activity of thinking and the thinking subject. Instead, thinking is to be understood in the sense of a structure of thought and as objective thinking. At the same time, this distinction is supposed to express that thinking is not primarily

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thinking about an object. According to Reinhold, we can only speak of thinking about an object when it comes to the level of the *application* of thinking, and not at the level of thinking itself. This corresponds with Reinhold's view that thinking is to be understood as a structure of thought which is more original than the manifestations of thinking in its basic elements "concept", "judgment" and "inference".

Keywords: Reinhold, Karl Leonhard. Realism. Thinking. Logic. Representation.

Resumo

O artigo explora a virada filosófica de Karl Leonhard Reinhold a partir de 1801, em que o autor defende um sistema do Realismo Racional baseado na ideia de que o conceito de pensamento é o único ponto de partida apropriado para filosofar. Reinhold não considera mais a faculdade de pensar apenas como distinta da faculdade de intuir. Em vez disso, ele enfatiza que o pensamento não tem que ser entendido como representação e, portanto, não está de forma alguma baseado na relação entre sujeito e objeto. Ao introduzir essa distinção, Reinhold pretende manter o pensamento livre de conotações da atividade do pensamento e do sujeito pensante. Em vez disso, o pensamento tem que ser entendido no sentido de uma estrutura de pensamento e de pensamento objetivo. Ao mesmo tempo, essa distinção supostamente expressa que o pensamento não é primariamente pensar um objeto. Segundo Reinhold, só podemos falar de pensar sobre um objeto quando se trata do nível de aplicação do pensamento, e não no nível do pensamento em si mesmo. Isso corresponde à visão de Reinhold de que o pensamento tem que ser entendido como uma estrutura de pensamento que é mais original que as manifestações do pensamento em seus elementos básicos, tais como "conceito", "juízo" e "inferência".

Palavras-chave: Reinhold, Karl Leonhard. Realismo. Pensamento. Lógica. Representação.

At the beginning of the 19th century, after a brief spell as an adherent of Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, the Kantian Karl Leonhard Reinhold takes a remarkable philosophical turn. He defends a system of Rational Realism which centres on the insight that the concept of thinking is the only appropriate starting

point for philosophising. By adopting this stance, Reinhold clearly indicates that he has abandoned his former view which holds in Kant's spirit that the concept of representation forms the basis of all philosophical knowledge. In particular, he vigorously opposes Fichte's and Schelling's view that the active I (or a coalition between the active I and productive nature) should be put at the very top of all prospective attempts at erecting a philosophical system. In line with the philosopher Christoph Gottfried Bardili, who published his work *Grundriß der Ersten Logik*² at the end of 1799, Reinhold considers his now favoured concept of thinking to be the key concept of a completely new logic, which is to be established within the system of Rational Realism. If we have a closer look at this new logic, we notice that it provides a framework for treating teachings of classical formal and Kantian transcendental logic as well as theorems of developmental logic and theology on the footing of definitions and deliberations which pertain to the concept of thinking. Furthermore, Reinhold defends a remarkable ontological thesis right from the very start. He claims that the adequately conceived concept of thinking is associated with an original unity of thinking and being as "Prius κατ' ἐξοχεν". In the course of expounding his system, Reinhold eventually proposes a pioneering epistemological guiding idea. He presumes that thinking is to be conceptualised as thinking in *application* as soon as it is supposed to lay claim to gaining knowledge. Against this background, he argues that applied thinking in its fundamental structure is a formal and material condition of knowledge, and that it, as far as the procedure is concerned, includes the validation of hypothetically valid knowledge.

In what follows, I don't want to take a stand on the question of how Reinhold's reorientation came about³. Rather, I shall evaluate his newly-reached philosophical position. Does Reinhold in pursuing his Rational Realism regress to a pre-critical way of philosophising, as it has often been contended⁴? In other words: Does he fall below the level of

² BARDILI, 1800.

³ For this question see BONDELI, 1995, p. 261-277.

⁴ So resolutely KLEMMT, 1961.

the Kantian Philosophy as well as of his earlier Elementary Philosophy? Does Reinhold's Rational Realism, as critics also argue every now and then⁵, just restate his earlier views in a new form? In my opinion, it cannot be denied that some of the results which Reinhold presents as novelties are not actually new. Moreover, one cannot avoid the impression that in a certain respect — namely as regards the arrangement of the domain of practical reason — Reinhold's Rational Realism falls back behind a previously reached Kantian problem-level. To my mind, however, Reinhold also provides insights and approaches which, admittedly, may be not be completely new, but have nevertheless proved fruitful with regard to the development of theoretical philosophy in the 19th and 20th century. As I see it, this can be demonstrated by carefully examining Reinhold's explication of the concept of thinking.

In order to be able to characterise and appraise Reinhold's concept of thinking in an adequate way, we need to recall how the concept of thinking was understood in compendiums dedicated to general logic or the theory of thinking — among them Kant's contributions to general logic — at that time. If we follow Kant, thinking is principally to be defined as distinct from intuiting. While intuiting is about representing the manifold and relates to a representing subject's direct reference to an object, thinking is about an activity which strives for unity and relates to a representing subject's indirect reference to an object⁶. By drawing this distinction, Kant assumes that thinking is to be regarded both as the activity of thinking and thus as an act of a thinking subject, and as an object being thought of, that is to say, as a result of thinking. Besides, it goes without saying at that time that the faculty of thinking — following the Aristotelian tradition of logic — is to be seen as a system of logical axioms and theorems and as an apparatus consisting of elementary principles and basic elements of propositional logic. Laws of thought like the law of non-contradiction, the principle of sufficient reason, and the law of excluded middle are largely taken for granted. The logical calculus of reasoning comprises the basic

⁵ So already Fichte, Schelling and Hegel in their polemic against Reinhold's system of Rational Realism.

⁶ See KANT, 1996, p. 121 f. [Critique of Pure Reason A 68/ B 93].

elements “concept”, “judgement” and “inference”, and a distinction is made between different kinds and forms of judging and inferring. Kant partly complements the considerations on concept, judgment and inference by his teachings on transcendental logic.

As for Reinhold, we can note that he does not consider the faculty of thinking solely to be distinct from the faculty of intuiting anymore. Rather, he emphasises that thinking is not at all to be understood as *representing*, which is first and foremost to say: it is by no means based on the relation between subject and object. By introducing this additional distinction, Reinhold intends to keep thinking free from connotations of the activity of thinking and the thinking subject. Instead, thinking is to be understood in the sense of a structure of thought and as objective thinking. At the same time, this additional distinction is supposed to express that thinking is not primarily thinking about an object. According to Reinhold, we can only speak of thinking about an object when it comes to the level of the *application* of thinking, and not at the level of thinking itself. This corresponds with Reinhold's view that thinking is to be understood as a structure of thought which is more original than the manifestations of thinking in its basic elements “concept”, “judgment” and “inference”. With this distinction in mind, Reinhold tellingly points out that he aims to grasp thinking *as such*. He therefore uses the expression “thinking as thinking” (“Denken, als Denken”)⁷. This thinking *as thinking* is not to be confused with self-reflective thinking, that is to say, with thinking about thinking, because this would lead to a notion of thinking activity or subjective thinking.

Now, what is thinking *as such*, positively speaking? Reinhold's answer goes as follows: thinking, by its very nature, is calculating. And furthermore: thinking is characterised by the capacity to ascertain identity which is akin to calculating. A general mode of establishing identity is repeatability (A as A), while special modes are substance (A in A) and reason (A through A). Altogether, this assertion of identity can be expressed by means of the formula “A as A in A and through A” (“A als A in A und durch A”)⁸. As soon as thinking appears in its

⁷ See REINHOLD, 1801-1803, H 1, p. 100.

⁸ See REINHOLD, 1801-1803, H 1, p. 108.

elements “concept”, “judgement” and “inference” and refers with an epistemic intention to an object, we find ourselves at the level of a successive application of thinking (A) — as conceived on the basis of the identity formula — to some matter (C). This application generally presents itself as a relation between possibility (– B) and reality (+ B), whose continuation (application of – B + B to C) leads to the cognition of an object (b)⁹. In a further step, applied thinking is also regarded as a basis for a developmental logic which runs through the levels of the natural and the mental world and finds its fulfilment in being as “*Πριος κατ’ ἐξοχεν*” or in God as a manifestation of thinking.

Let’s leave aside the question of whether this capacity to ascertain identity, which is akin to calculating, is really the essence or merely one among several unifying aspects of the faculty of thinking, and let’s turn to the following questions: what is achieved by adopting this positive definition of the concept of thinking? And what does the novelty of this definition consist in? In the view of the critical Kant — explicitly championed by Gottlob Benjamin Jäsche, the editor of Kant’s *Lectures on Logic* of 1800 — the following charge is up for debate at that time: as previously in the case of Leibniz and Wolff, Rational Realism is another attempt to present the logical law of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason as ontological principles. This attempt is motivated by the intention of taking these principles as a foundation for moving on to the knowledge of an object by invoking an analytical judgment (that is, a judgment according to the principle “*praedicatum inest subiecto*”). In short: it is a new version of the futile effort to “pick out an object” of laws of thought¹⁰. In Fichte’s opinion, who also deals with Rational Realism around 1800, it is not at all absurd to ground an identity statement of the type “A = A” in an ontologically conceived manifestation of identity. This, however, is only reasonable if the self-acting I is considered the one who performs this assertion of identity and not, as Rational Realism assumes, an object, a being, a non-I. This is why Fichte judges Rational Realism similarly to Spinoza’s

⁹ See REINHOLD, 1801-1803, H 2, p. 183-192.

¹⁰ See KANT, 1902-, IX, p. 8.

theory: he deems it to be dogmatic and inconsistent¹¹. So, how can Reinhold maintain that he advances a philosophy which is superior to Kant's and Fichte's approaches?

Without doubt, Reinhold draws on already existing theorems from substance ontology when he argues for philosophising which is based on the concept of thinking. It is not least Bardili who can be held responsible for this reversion. His contribution to logic is grounded in his thorough study of classical Greek metaphysics of unity and substance on the one hand, and of Leibniz's interpretation of the philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Ploucquet on the other hand. A closer investigation of these connections reveals that the understanding of thinking in the sense of calculating builds on the tenets of Pythagorean Platonism which was renewed by Leibniz. Roughly speaking, the identity formula "A as A in A and through A" as such bears a resemblance to Aristotle's concept of substance in the sense of the immutable in everything mutable¹² — this is a concept which can be found in Leibniz's interpretation of the monad as entelechy and, apparently, earlier already in Spinoza's interpretation of substance with its components of being in itself ("in se") and being conceived through itself ("per se")¹³. The effort to express the concept of identity and, later on, also the basic terminology that relates to the application of thinking to matter by means of algebraic signs is, finally, an indication that Reinhold is in line with Leibniz's project of universal mathematics. In summary, we can conclude that Reinhold sees himself as an exponent in the intellectual tradition of a productive Leibniz renewal when he advocates a philosophical system which is based on the concept of thinking. He refers to Leibniz as the originator of the new system and the intellectual mastermind of ingenious projects, to Leibniz, who is at odds with the system of his disciple Wolff. In short: he refers to the *esoteric* figure Leibniz. This explains quite a lot of the origin of Reinhold's concept of thinking. But I haven't said anything about the argumentative potential of the concept so far. In order to make this potential and its

¹¹ See FICHTE, 1962-2012, I/6, p. 433-436.

¹² See ARISTOTELES, 1989-1991, 2. Halbband, p. 238 [Metaphysica. XII, 1069b-1070a].

¹³ See SPINOZA, 1989, p. 86 [Ethica. Pars I, Def. 3].

fruitful side visible, we have to go into Kant's and Fichte's objections to Rational Realism.

Let's first turn to the objection that results from Kant's position and maintains that Rational Realism transforms the logical law of non-contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason into ontological principles and, in doing so, proposes the analysis of judgments as a way of attaining knowledge of an object. The first part of the objection can hardly be denied, of course. Like Leibniz in the case of his principles of non-contradiction and sufficient reason, Reinhold regards his identity formula "A as A in A and through A" as being ontologically and theologically founded. It does not change anything regarding this shared orientation that Reinhold, unlike Leibniz, does not conduct a proof of the existence of God but argues, along with Jacobi, from a theologically ("theological" in the sense of an original belief) informed philosophical perspective for the existence of God.

If we look at the second part of the objection, we reach another result, however. It is definitely not the case that Reinhold, drawing on his ontologically founded concept of identity, explains knowledge of an object by taking the approach of judgment analysis. Reinhold leaves no doubt that an application of thinking is necessary for knowing an object, and hence that it is not enough to start with thinking as such. Extending his Kantian model of cognition, he works on the assumption that there needs to be reference of categorical concepts to matter, or more precisely, to matter which is given under the conditions of space and time. In other words, we have to take into account the formal and material conditions of possibility which pertain to the object of knowledge. In addition, Reinhold proposes a processual procedure of explanation called "analysis"¹⁴, which is tailored to the requirements of applied thinking. Concretely speaking, this procedure should consist of four basic elements, namely thesis, hypothesis, conjunction or "synthesis" and disjunction or "antithesis". Obviously alluding to Aristotle, Reinhold also speaks of four forms of reasons. Simply put,

¹⁴ See REINHOLD, 1801-1803, H 2, p. 184; H 3, p. 133.

the procedure itself should encompass the following steps or, depending on the context, meet the following requirements:

- At the beginning of the examination there has to be available a hypothesis or a hypothetical true. This hypothesis needs to be reduced (“zurückgeführt”) to its reason, to the thesis or the original true (das “Urwahre”)¹⁵.
- In this context, “reduce” means that the hypothesis is compared with the thesis as the object to be known. This comparison is to be understood as the relation (conjunction) between hypothesis and thesis and as the distinction (disjunction) between hypothesis and thesis. In this sense, the comparison is to be understood as a validation procedure.
- This validation, in turn, should make it possible to “separate” (“abscheiden”) subjective or illusory knowledge from objective or real knowledge¹⁶.

In the way in which Reinhold develops the issue, knowledge of an object thus depends on the existence of formal and material conditions of cognition as well as on his specific procedure of analysis. This, however, immediately raises the question of how Reinhold relates applied thinking, which is grounded in conditions and procedural requirements, and the ontological thesis of a unity of thinking and being, which underlies thinking as such. Does he relegate the methodology of epistemology to a formal appendage of ontology? Or does he weaken the ontological thesis of the unity of thinking and being and sees it as a regulative idea? Is, as a consequence, also the original true merely to be understood as an ideal and the reduction of the true to the original true, which he calls for, as a process of convergence? Be that as it may, there is every reason to raise the objection that Reinhold, in reflecting on formal and material conditions of knowledge and proposing a procedure of analysis, departs from the analytical theory of judgment, but does not completely abandon it.

¹⁵ See REINHOLD, 1801-1803, H 1, p. 71.

¹⁶ See REINHOLD, 1801-1803, H 4, p. 213.

Still, on closer inspection, this does not change the fact that particularly Reinhold's procedure of analysis draws attention to a systematic point of the issue about how to attain knowledge of an object, which opens quite a new perspective. And this perspective not least includes the further development of Kantian epistemology.

By pursuing the idea of his procedure of analysis, Reinhold starts championing the programme of conceiving critical reason without bounds, thus complementing the Kantian programme which, by contrast, centres on the delimiting nature of critical reason. Going beyond Kant, who limits the scope of knowledge by making it hinge on transcendental preconditions and on the relation to matter given in space and time, Reinhold calls for continual critique and validation of the resulting knowledge. In his view, we can only speak of more or less well-founded hypothetical validity when it comes to knowing an object — with the exception of obviously logical and mathematical objects and, moreover, with the exception of God as an object of belief. Therefore we are faced with the task of constantly validating and, if need be, adjusting the knowledge we have gained so far. This means that Reinhold considers Kant's proof of the objective validity of synthetic a priori knowledge to be a merely hypothetically valid result, although it is well-founded, of course. This is why further fact-based validation is indispensable. The procedure of analysis is supposed to provide the means for this continual validation. Besides, Reinhold maintains that knowledge of an object can also be associated with falsification in a certain sense. What he has in mind, however, is not falsification of hypothetical laws through observation, but rather elimination of merely illusory knowledge, which is to be achieved by a strict practice of analysis. While according to Kant illusory knowledge is produced when we as epistemic beings transcend the domain of experience, Reinhold holds the opinion that illusory knowledge is mainly caused by a defective analysis procedure. So according to Reinhold, illusion is the result of an incomplete analysis or an inappropriate observance of its procedural steps. If we do not pay attention to the thesis, we end up in bottomless epistemic scepticism. If we do not pay attention to the hypothesis, we lapse into dogmatism. If we do not pay attention

to conjunction and disjunction, we lack sufficiently interconnected as well as sufficiently sophisticated tools and objects of cognition. We cannot identify and distinguish the things we refer to, and we are thus not able to put them together. Against this background it becomes clear that the objective validity of knowledge is not only a question of formal and material conditions of knowledge and of the proof principle of the possibility of experience, but also a question of the quality of the instruments which are used for this purpose.

It is deplorable that Reinhold's explanations concerning analysis remain comparatively general and tentative. What is moreover missing is a level of self-reflection which would permit Reinhold to argue that the instrument of the analysis needs to be criticisable too. Nevertheless we can state that — after Fichte, Maimon, and other authors of that time with an orientation towards scepticism had rudimentarily dealt with hypothetical knowledge — Reinhold was the first to apply himself to the issue in a comprehensive and focused way. In doing so, he was not insignificantly involved in preparing the ground for an undertaking which had its breakthrough in the philosophy of science of the 20th century. In this regard, we can particularly think of Karl R. Popper's Critical Rationalism.

Let's now have a closer look at Fichte's objection. As already mentioned, he maintains that Reinhold's decision to take objective thinking as a starting point — in Fichte's interpretation an attempt to exclude the performance of the thinking subject — is a reversion to dogmatism. In my opinion, we cannot deny that Reinhold's consistent anti-subjectivism, which frames his concept of objective thinking, has negative consequences. It is, for example, not clear how Reinhold can any longer hold his since 1792 resolutely defended view that free will is a person's faculty of freely choosing whether or not to observe the moral law¹⁷. This view was vehemently defended until the late 1790s and regarded as the yardstick of enlightened awareness of morals and law. All the same, we should not overlook the productive potential which inheres

¹⁷ On Reinhold's concept of free will see REINHOLD, 2007-. Bd. 2/2, p. 183-206; REINHOLD, 2007-. Bd. 5/2, p. 141-153. For a detailed discussion of this concept see STOLZ; HEINZ; BONDELI, 2012.

in Reinhold's call for objective thinking. Reinhold's primary intention is to establish the concept of thinking in the sense of the *content* of thinking. Against the tenets of proponents of a relation between subject and object Reinhold emphasises that the question of true thinking depends not only on the effort of a subject and reference to an object, but also and particularly on an inner condition, that is to say, on an objectified form of articulating the content of thinking. In my opinion it is not implausible to see Reinhold's stance on this point as an anticipation of Frege's concept of the world of thought. According to Frege, thoughts are neither "things of the external world" nor "representations"¹⁸. They are not things of the external world because with their content they can possibly refer to such things. They are not representations because representations of any kind — as opposed to thoughts — are essentially associated with a subject who acts as their bearer, and with a receptive or active faculty. In this sense, thoughts form an autonomous sphere. On closer inspection, Reinhold's closeness to Frege is not only based on the opposition against the paradigm of representation. This closeness also becomes manifest in his attempt to refute naïve realism or objectivism. Like Frege he rejects the view that thoughts — instead of mental representations or operations — can act as representatives of things of an external world. According to Reinhold, the "*objectivity*" of thoughts or, as he calls it as well, the "*objective in itself*" must not be confused with the Kantian "*thing in itself*"¹⁹. If we acknowledge this difference, it is not possible to hold in Fichte's sense that Reinhold's turn to objective thinking implies a regression to a kind of dogmatism of objects or things in themselves.

At this point, it must not go unnoticed that Reinhold's orientation towards objective thinking does not solely generally emphasise that we ought to take thinking in the sense of the content of thinking seriously, and that we should discuss the inner constitution of this content. Apart from that, Reinhold concretely draws attention to a problem of philosophical language and to the task of linguistic purification

¹⁸ See FREGE, 1986, p. 43.

¹⁹ See REINHOLD, 1801-1803, H 6, p. 67-68.

which derives from this problem. Since the inception of his programme of elementary philosophy Reinhold has deemed it necessary to address the fact that certainty in connection with our knowledge is only possible if we avail ourselves of clear and distinct concepts. The aim of generating concepts of this kind can only be achieved if we concurrently pay attention to philosophical language²⁰. Because concepts can only be expressed and communicated by words (that is to say, because concepts are the meanings of words), we attain clear and distinct concepts only then when we control linguistic arbitrariness, which is as pervasive in philosophical jargon as it is in vulgar language. What is particularly to be avoided is an ambiguous use of words. Words should be used in an unambiguous way. Besides, it is not acceptable that different words have one and the same meaning. Thus, homonymy and synonymy must be excluded. By turning to his primary principle of thinking, Reinhold affirms these demands. And at the same time he marks the beginning of his upcoming undertaking in the philosophy of language called "Synonymik", in which he presents the system of Rational Realism in a new way by basing it on a purified terminology which clarifies the word families of "unity" and "difference"²¹. I shall not go into the details of this endeavour of the late Reinhold, but I would like to highlight that the anti-subjectivism, which is expressed in Reinhold's decision to take the concept of thinking as a starting point, has something to do with his intentions concerning the philosophy of language and particularly with his ideal of a philosophical language.

In Reinhold's opinion, the linguistic arbitrariness to be eliminated is an indication of subjectivism. His conception of an ideal, non-arbitrary language, by contrast, is to be understood as a novel type of objectivism. By taking this stance, Reinhold pursues his project in the context of natural (everyday) language and not within the framework of artificial (mathematised) philosophical language. It would be preposterous, however, to charge Reinhold with advocating semiotic naturalism. Reinhold is far from claiming that we ought to leave our

²⁰ On this point see BONDELLI, 2018.

²¹ See REINHOLD, 1812, p. 43-69.

world of artificial linguistic signs and had better revert to some kind of natural linguistic signs. What he does decidedly endorse indeed is a counter-position to two lines of thought in the philosophy of language, which are usually associated with the name of Locke: conventionalism and semantic psychologism. Firstly, Reinhold rejects the view that the assignment of signs to meanings (or objects) follows a conventional practice and is thus arbitrary and haphazard. Secondly, Reinhold opposes the idea that linguistic meaning is something subjective, that is to say a subject's representation couched in words. In considering this standpoint, we can discern Reinhold's anti-instrumentalism. Words are not solely a means of transporting meanings, but they are also constitutive of meaning. To put it positively, Reinhold's stance on the philosophy of language is reminiscent of an objectivism as outlined in Leibniz's *Dialogus de connexione inter res et verba*. Reinhold agrees with Leibniz that there is a relation between word and object, which forms the foundation of truth ("fundamentum veritatis") and is not arbitrary ("quod non est arbitrarium")²², although the level of signs has become dissociated from the level of objects. Furthermore, and again in agreement with Leibniz, Reinhold regards linguistic meaning not only as an objective interrelation we create, but also as a kind of stock we draw on and put to good use, that is to say: an objective interrelation in which we as subjects participate.

Before I close, I should say that the conclusions of Reinhold's philosophy of language which follow from his primary principle of thinking are relatively rudimentary and inchoate. Moreover, their general aim is not unproblematic. Proposing an unambiguous philosophical basic terminology has its difficulties and pitfalls as we know from the comparable undertaking in the context of Neopositivism. What is primarily lacking in Reinhold's account are reflections on an intersubjective practice of communication. Despite these flaws Reinhold's struggle against linguistic arbitrariness and his steady efforts to intervene in disputes by way of definition-seeking, language-conscious philosophising have made a highly meritorious contribution to the discourses

²² See LEIBNIZ, 1996, p. 32-34.

of that time as well as to those to come. All things considered, Reinhold made sure that post-Kantian speculation, which was rich in original and ingenious ideas, did not completely deviate from the path of philosophising which is intelligible to the general public.

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