# Introduction

There is perhaps something dubious in suggesting that the thoughts of Georg Christoph Lichtenberg could be organized under the heading of "Philosophical Writings." He was, after all, not a philosopher in the current sense of the term, instead dedicating his life and work to advancing the nascent field of experimental physics, toiling away his days in the laboratory and classroom where he dazzled his students with strange apparatuses, electrical and magnetic phenomena, and the manipulation of various gases. The short remarks contained in his *Sudelbücher* (Waste Books) have traditionally been regarded as satirical and humorous, as have most of his lengthier contributions to eighteenth-century journals. In Germany, where he is well known and widely read, he is largely regarded as a witty observer of humanity, credited with introducing the literary form of the aphorism into German literature, while in the English-speaking world he is known for little more than his commentaries on Hogarth's engravings and his discovery of the electrical phenomenon known as "Lichtenberg figures." Yet many thinkers have appreciated Lichtenberg for the trenchant philosophical thoughts he offers obliquely in his work: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Kierkegaard, Freud, Benjamin, Mach, Mauthner, and Wittgenstein, among others, have all engaged with his work to advance their own thinking on topics ranging from self-consciousness and the unconscious to the relationship between philosophical and ordinary language. In this regard, Lichtenberg occupies an important, if largely unacknowledged, role in the history of philosophy, and this role is likely to grow as we understand his writings from a philosophical point of view.

## Life

Lichtenberg was born in Ober-Ramstadt, near Darmstadt, Germany, on July 1, 1742, the youngest of seventeen children, most of whom died at a



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very young age. A malformation of the spine, the cause of which continues to be a matter of speculation, led to his small stature (about 4 feet 9 inches) and hunched back and was the source of various pains and medical ailments throughout his life, no doubt contributing to his often hypochondriacal disposition. His father was a Protestant clergyman associated with the pietist tradition popular in Germany in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From 1752 to 1761, he attended the Darmstädter Pädagogium under Johann Martin Wenck (1704–1761), after which he received private lessons. In 1762, he was awarded a stipend to pursue his studies at the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen, where he matriculated in 1763 as a student of mathematics and physics. Founded under the Hanoverian ruler, King George II of England, the university was one of the most modern and liberal in Germany, focusing in large part upon the empirical sciences and Newtonian physics and well connected to English academic life. While a student at the university under the eminent mathematician and natural scientist Abraham Gotthelf Kästner (1719–1800), Lichtenberg befriended Johann Christian Polycarp Erxleben (1744–1777), whose *Anfangsgründe der Naturlehre* (*Foundations of the Natural Sciences*) Lichtenberg would later edit and use as the foundations for his own lectures on physics. Under the direction of Kästner, Lichtenberg conducted astronomical observations at the Göttinger Observatorium from 1766 through 1774, graduating from his university studies in 1767. In 1770, Lichtenberg was appointed professor extraordinarius in Göttingen, where he would for the most part remain throughout his career until his death from pneumonia on February 24, 1799, at the age of fifty-seven.

Perhaps unexpectedly, Lichtenberg's romantic life has been the topic of much interest and speculation in both academic and literary works. The most scandalous of his relationships was with the twelve-year-old flower girl Dorothea Stechard (1765–1782), whom he met in 1777. With the permission of her family, she was employed as Lichtenberg's housekeeper, and although they were never married, she lived with Lichtenberg from 1780 until her death in 1782. Shortly thereafter, in 1783, he employed Margarethe Elisabeth Kellner (1759–1848) as a housekeeper; she was also from a working-class family and at twenty-two years old was much younger than Lichtenberg. This relationship eventually developed into a secret affair that produced three children out of wedlock. In 1789, as Lichtenberg's health deteriorated, they were married to ensure that she would receive his pension after his death, and between 1791 and 1797, they had four more children. She died well into the nineteenth century, some fifty years after Lichtenberg. That Lichtenberg was not readily bound by social conventions,

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and indeed often flouted them, is reflected not only in his romantic life but also throughout his writings.

Lichtenberg achieved notoriety during his lifetime primarily through his lectures and his revisions of Johann Christian Polycarp Erxleben's *Anfangsgründe der Naturlehre* (*Foundations of the Natural Sciences*), rather than for his own advancements in the natural sciences. Between 1784 and 1794, Lichtenberg published four editions of this physics compendium, including his own critical comments and revisions, which remained the standard German physics textbook even into the beginning of the nineteenth century. His lectures based on Erxleben's text were supplemented by experiments that brought him renown throughout Europe and were attended by famous scientists and intellectuals, including Alessandro Volta (1745–1827), Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832), Karl Friedrich Gauss (1777–1855), and Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859). Election to numerous scientific societies, including the Royal Society of Sciences both in Göttingen and London, the Royal Academy of Sciences of St. Petersburg, and the Scientific Society of Holland, among others, attests to Lichtenberg's prominence in the natural sciences and the great respect accorded him by his contemporaries.

He was renowned not just for his scientific work but also for his literary publications and work as an editor. From 1778 to 1799 he edited the *Göttinger Taschenkalender* (*Göttingen Pocket Almanac*), which published essays on the natural sciences and philosophical and literary observations in the humanist spirit of the Enlightenment. These essays, such as "Von Cometen" ("On Comets") (1787) and "Amintors Morgenandacht" ("Amintor's Morning-Prayer") (1791), and his commentaries on Hogarth's engravings, which appeared between 1794 and 1799, represent an important part of Lichtenberg's literary corpus, supplementing and extending many of the ideas found in his Waste Books. Between 1780 and 1785, Lichtenberg, together with Georg Forster, edited the *Göttingische Magazin der Wissenschaften und Literatur* (*Göttingen Journal of Science and Literature*), which was dedicated to updates and reviews of current scientific research and also contained numerous literary contributions. To today's readers, however, Lichtenberg is best known for his Waste Books.

## The Waste Books

In 1764, while still a student in Göttingen, Lichtenberg began the Waste Books for which he was later to become famous. They consist of a series of fifteen notebooks that he kept throughout his life, and in which he notes

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his trenchant observations on philosophy, literature, the sciences, and nearly every aspect of private and public life. He called them his "waste books" after the name given to notebooks kept by accountants in England for their rough calculations and lists of transactions, which were later transferred to a journal and finally to a formal ledger (E 46). Many of the observations and remarks in the Waste Books are taken up and reworked in essays published during his lifetime, but most were never developed or elaborated upon. While the remarks contained in the Waste Books have since become known as aphorisms, this designation is not one on which he himself placed any emphasis, and it was only later that these writings became associated with the aphoristic tradition. Indeed, the first edition of Lichtenberg's writings, published by his sons between 1800 and 1806, were entitled *Vermischte Schriften* (*Miscellaneous Writings*), and the writings drawn from his notebooks were organized according to topic and simply called Bemerkungen vermischten Inhalts (Remarks on Various Subjects).

Lichtenberg's writings and his manner of doing philosophy might in many ways be associated with the style and content of the writings of the French enlightenment *philosophes*—Helvétius, Rousseau, Alembert, and Buffon—who appear throughout the Waste Books. These thinkers were observers of humanity and nature and brought their critical insights to bear on a wide range of topics from empirical psychology and the natural sciences to art and politics, and they did so in a variety of forms from letters and autobiographical journals to poetry and public discourse. His writings also share similarities with the fragmentary and speculative writings of German romantics such as Novalis and Schlegel, though his own approach is more empirical than speculative. This is in marked distinction from the systematic tradition associated with mid-eighteenth-century German philosophy, such as that of Christian Wolff, and the subsequent development of the immense and scholarly philosophical systems associated with Kant, Hegel, Fichte, and other idealists. In this tradition, philosophy was often the purview of a small academic group whose discussions seemed to bear only a tangential relationship to the matters of ordinary life.

It is in the former sense that the observations and remarks in the Waste Books might be called philosophical. One finds in them no fully developed doctrine or system, but one does find an acute and consistent thinker who considers philosophical problems, responds to the thoughts of his contemporaries, and develops the implications of their views. He discovered these problems not only in reflection on systematic philosophy but also in the practical aspects of scientific experimentation, in poetry, visual art, and theater, and in the conversations, jokes, and activities of

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everyday people, from the grocer to the soldier. Indeed, for Lichtenberg it seems that there is never a time when one is not doing philosophy, since our common language is embedded with philosophical views and commitments with which we always operate in our daily life. It might be fitting to say of Lichtenberg what he said of another, namely, that "he understood philosophy as the everyday man usually does: he reasoned and formed hypotheses in his housekeeping [. . .]" (B 177). To do philosophy means to uncover, become perplexed about, form hypotheses about, and even at times correct the entrenched philosophical commitments evident in our language and practices. This is also accompanied by reflection on the role of emotions in philosophy and on the obscure idea of philosophy itself (D 167). Through such itinerant investigation and reflection, Lichtenberg writes, "we often scare up game that methodical philosophy can make use of in its well-ordered household" (J 1550). The Waste Books can be understood as a journal of such discoveries and a hint at how they might further be developed. Ultimately, however, they should really provide a spark for one's own thinking and investigation: in this sense, they are not meant merely to be read—Lichtenberg himself often inveighs against reading—but to be considered thoughtfully. If there is a single principle guiding his remarks, it is the Enlightenment dictum: *Gnothi Seaton*, "know thyself," where knowing thyself must also mean knowing the world for oneself.

## Self-Knowledge

The common wisdom of the rationalism that dominated much of eighteenth-century German philosophy was that the knowledge one could have of oneself was the most secure knowledge possible. The Cartesian idea that I may doubt anything except the fact that I am doubting, and thus that "I think" seemed to many unassailable. Yet Lichtenberg challenges this position throughout the Waste Books. Beginning from the point of view of first-personal conscious experience, Lichtenberg attempts to introspect some self, and finding such an attempt fruitless he famously remarks: "[. . .] We know only the existence of our sensations, representations, and thoughts. *It thinks*, we should say, just as one says, *it lightnings*. To say *cogito* is already too much if we translate it as *I think*. To assume the *I*, to postulate it, is a practical necessity" (K 76).

The self, which is supposed to be nearest to each of us, and which Descartes seemed to have no trouble positing, appears to Lichtenberg to be perhaps the most elusive object of inquiry. It is certainly nothing

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that can be encountered in introspection as some substance to which the various modifications of consciousness may be ascribed. Nor, it seems, would Lichtenberg accept that this self is a mere bundle of sensations, as Hume had proposed; it is, after all, unclear what makes the various perceptions encountered part of the same bundle if not the ascription to some self. For Lichtenberg, there is nothing that one could become acquainted with in introspection that could provide any grounds for cogito judgments such as "I think" or that would function as the bearer of self-ascriptions.

Lichtenberg was quite familiar with the solution proposed in the "Transcendental Deduction" of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Here Kant argues that it is a necessary condition for unified experience that one be able to ascribe one's thoughts and experiences to a single, unified self that would remain numerically identical throughout the modifications of conscious experience. This requirement, that the "I think" be able to accompany all of one's representations, he calls the "transcendental unity of apperception." For Kant, we can know a priori that there is such a unity because experience itself would not be possible without it. In the "Paralogisms of Pure Reason," this claim is also used as the basis of a critique of rationalist psychologists, such as Descartes, who Kant believed had mistaken the necessary unity of apperception for the unity and numerical identity of a simple, immaterial, and immortal soul. Yet it would appear that the Kantian solution of providing a transcendental argument for the necessity of a unified self would be equally as dissatisfying to Lichtenberg as was the initial Cartesian formulation. Beginning from the perspective of first-personal conscious experience as he does, the transcendental self does not seem to be an object of possible experience. Indeed, Kant had conceded as much, suggesting that it is true that the transcendental unity of apperception cannot itself be an object of possible experience but that we are warranted nevertheless in accepting it and in accepting the restricted validity of the cogito judgment.

Lichtenberg proposes that, because we cannot introspect a self, instead of the formulation "I think" we should use the impersonal formulation "it thinks," as we would say "it lightnings" or "it's lightning." As in the phrase "it is raining," "it" is pleonastic; grammatical rules require a noun for the phrase, but it does not refer to an agent. This formulation would capture both the elusiveness of the substantial self in introspection and the elusiveness of the self as the author of one's thoughts, but it may problematically leave Lichtenberg with no way of understanding who the observer of the occurrent thoughts might be. For it does indeed seem that

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there is someone or something observing the thoughts. If one were to follow him in this line of thinking, one might end up committed to an ontology that includes no selves and would have difficulty accounting for what, if any, motivational force thoughts may have in the absence of any self to whom they are occurring or to whom they might be ascribed. We find a clue as to how he might develop these issues when he suggests that positing the "I" is a mere practical necessity, perhaps nothing more than a necessary fiction. But he says little about what such necessity consists in. Is it required by the grammar of our language, as Nietzsche later proposed in remarks that are doubtless indebted to Lichtenberg? Is it required in order to makes sense of moral action and responsibility, or in order to make sense of reasoning and commitment? This critique of self-knowledge and the questions it raises run counter to the central role given to the self in other philosophy of the period, especially that of Fichte, who placed the self-positing "I" at the center of his system. It is doubtless the most insistent problem Lichtenberg has imparted to the history of philosophy—and it is one for which he provides no solution.

Self-knowledge seems then to be more of a guiding principle, a *desideratum*, in Lichtenberg's thought than anything admitting of the kind of epistemic certainty accorded it by Descartes or perhaps Kant. Where self-knowledge is not understood as the task of cognizing a self, it is understood as the task of authentic thinking in general. This aspect of self-knowledge involves a thorough investigation of thought and a critique of how we acquire knowledge of ourselves and the world around us. In the spirit of Enlightenment autonomy, he often criticizes our tendency to accept without examination or scrutiny the claims and opinions of others, whether such claims and opinions are derived from books or erudite discourse on matters of science or religion (B 264). Against this—the posturing of intellectuals, the arguments of theologians, and particularly the false emotionality and mannerisms of the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress) poets, especially those of the *Göttinger Hain*—Lichtenberg entreats us to allow our own reason and thinking to be a guide and to be authentic in our self-expression (A 76). This authentic pursuit of self-knowledge involves not only attentive reflection but also wit and creative thinking and the construction of a coherent narrative regarding who one is and the life one leads. This does not just concern only our waking, rational life but must also include attention to and interpretation of our dreams, of the history of our sleeping life, and the unknown source of our thoughts and motivations (K 86). In this understanding of self-knowledge, he anticipates later philosophical

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conceptions found in *Lebensphilosophie*, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, and existentialism, all of which place a high value on self-discovery.

In what he calls his "doctrine of *Seelenwanderung*," "metempsychosis," or the "transmigration of souls," Lichtenberg also considers whether we can have knowledge of our own existence before birth and what our death might consist in (B 33). In many ways, these reflections can be seen as exploring some of the problems of personal identity involved in his emphasis on first-personal conscious experience (J 511). John Locke (1632–1704), in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), raised similar questions regarding the identity of the self across time, and Lichtenberg was quite familiar with this work and the discussions surrounding personal identity. Locke argues that the identity of a person consists not in the persistence of a body or the persistence of a substantial self that might be encountered in inner sense but in the fact that our various experiences seem to be tied together into a kind of continuity of conscious experience. Often it seems that Lichtenberg might adhere to such a criterion of personal identity, but it is also unclear how he might make sense of such continuity given his notion of impersonal thoughts. For he seems to offer no understanding of what might unite two conscious experiences or how they might be continuous with one another. In other remarks, he considers materialist conceptions of personal identity, in which the identity of a person consists in the identity of a physical body, arguing that identity of a body might be maintained despite a gradual replacement of its parts (A 56).

Given the importance accorded to introspection and the restrictions placed on our knowledge, Lichtenberg is also interested in the problem of other minds and the very existence of other selves.[1] He suggests that the knowledge we seem to have of others is mere projection on our part. Just as in a dream, when we think that someone else is talking to us, we are merely generating this dialogue internally, so too it is possible that what we take to be other people and their opinions could be generated within us (K 85). This tendency to impart minds to others extends also to our relationship with inanimate nature. We find ourselves imbuing nature with a kind of soul, even to the point that we would empathize with a broken clock (K 83). Indeed, this tendency may also explain how we arrive at pronouns regarding "the other" at all. Here the dangers of the pursuit of self-knowledge become evident, for in turning inward in self-observation we may become hypochondriacal, self-obsessed, disconnected, and alienated from the world around us and fail to recognize that we are in many ways dependent upon others and that the pursuit of self-knowledge is an endeavor that may even presuppose the existence of others (B 262).

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## Mind and Body

Given Lichtenberg's interest in self-knowledge, metempsychosis, and personal identity, it is not surprising that he often reflects on the mysteries of mind-body dualism (J 1306). In the Waste Books, he primarily considers two of the dominant views of the period: psychophysical parallelism and physical influx. Through the legacy of Leibniz and the continuation of Leibnizian philosophy in the work of the preeminent German rationalist Christian Wolff (1679–1754), the thesis of psychophysical parallelism came to dominate much of the discussion of dualism in Germany. According to this thesis, there is no causal physical interaction between mind and body; instead, they mirror one another in a preestablished harmony. Physical influx, on the other hand, held that there was some direct causal link between mental and physical phenomena. Lichtenberg finds ample occasion to parody both views and dualism in general. He suggests for example that the soul must have a very detailed map of the body to which it is purportedly related or that one might create a fairytale to describe their interaction. He also questions how a simple soul could be related to a complex physical body or brain and why only a single soul should be related to a single body (F 349, F 189). He even jokingly imagines a machine that would model the behavior of the competing views—perhaps only then would we have grounds for deciding which is best. Because of such problems with dualism, he also considers various alternatives throughout the Waste Books.

On a trip to England between 1774 and 1775, Lichtenberg became familiar with materialist theories such as those of David Hartley (1705–1757) and the associationist psychologist Joseph Priestley (1733–1804). In his *Observations on Man, His Frame, His Duty, and His Expectations* (1749), Hartley argued that all psychological events, perceptions, sensations, and emotions could be explained by material, physical processes, and Priestley furthered these claims in *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind, on the Principle of the Association of Ideas* (1775). Inspired by these ideas, Lichtenberg often offers causal explanations of psychological phenomena in terms of how sensations of external objects are transmitted to the retina through nerve fluids in the eye (F 349, F 1084). He also finds inspiration for his own view in the work of the French materialists, Claude Adrien Helvétius (1715–1771), whose *De l'Esprit* (*On Mind*) (1758) argues for a materialist and determinist view of man, and Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–1751), whose *L'Homme Machine* (*Machine Man*) (1748) famously rejected Cartesian mind-body dualism. At one point, he predicts that psychology itself will eventually arrive at a subtle materialism, but he also considers some potential

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arguments against materialism (F 425). He is also acutely aware of what he calls the "tremendous parallax" between our conception of ourselves in terms of materialism and the conception of ourselves gained through introspection. Beginning from introspection, we cannot seem to get at the physical processes that might underlie our thinking, and beginning from the point of view of a physical world, it seems difficult to account for the variety of our thoughts. Moreover, he finds materialism problematic because it implies that human actions are determined by physical processes and that free will is merely an illusion (J 668, E 30). In the philosophy of Spinoza, Lichtenberg discovers another possible alternative to dualism and often proposes that mind and body may in fact be aspects of a single substance or substrate, whether God or nature.

Lichtenberg also raises the question of the relationship between mind and body in his writings on physiognomy. Eighteenth-century physiognomists claimed that the character or soul of a person was mirrored in their physical features, particularly the face, so that intelligence, for example, could be inferred from features such as the distance between a person's eyes or the shape of her head. Physiognomy was taken very seriously by its scholarly adherents; but it also became a wildly popular theory, and in parlors throughout Germany people traced silhouettes of one another in hopes of discerning the deeper characteristics of their souls. In his essay "Über Physiognomik wider die Physiognomen" ("On Physiognomy, against the Physiognomists") (1777), Lichtenberg attacks this view and its foremost proponent, Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741–1801). And in a later essay, "Fragment von Schwänzen" ("Fragment on Tails") (1783), he lampoons Lavater by analyzing the silhouettes of various animal and wig tails in order to draw ridiculous conclusions about the soul of the individuals. Similar remarks are found throughout the Waste Books. Against the physiognomists, Lichtenberg argues that we may infer things about the character of a person only on the basis of her acquired features. Thus someone who smiles frequently might have wrinkles around the mouth, and someone who furrows her brow might have distinct wrinkles on the forehead. From this it might legitimately be concluded that the former is often happy and the latter often troubled. Contrary to what the physiognomists had claimed, there is, however, no intrinsic or innate relationship between characteristics such as intelligence and physical features. It is clear also that Lichtenberg would have rejected on this basis the burgeoning anthropological studies that sought to infer the mental characteristics of a race from the physical features of its members. Not only did he find physiognomy epistemically

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suspect, but he thought it may also lead to a dangerous "physiognomical *auto de fe*," a trial by fire in which people would be judged according to physical features for crimes they have not yet committed (F 521).

What sets Lichtenberg's thinking apart on these issues of mind and body is, however, the way he often entertains various points of view, seeking to understand the origin and implications of the philosophical problems. He diagnoses dualism, for example, as a carryover from our unreflective youth, suggesting that we often employ terms such as *soul*, and perhaps even *matter*, without a clear understanding of their meaning (J 668, E 30). Or he suggests that we employ such terms in philosophical discussions as the algebraist might insert a variable into an equation as a stand-in for some unknown quantity. The unreflective or vague use of these terms often leads us into philosophical discussions without any clear understanding of what these discussions are about. In such situations, Lichtenberg proposes that we attend to our use of such terms, the hidden theoretical commitments embedded in them, and the consequences these hypotheses or "pictures" of the world have for our actions and will have for further investigations (J 568).

## Religion and Ethics

Frederick Beiser has argued that with the growing attention to epistemology in the eighteenth century, many philosophers sharpened their critiques of religious doctrine, particularly what were thought to be its epistemically unfounded and rationally dubious elements. These critiques of religion on the basis of reason, however, led still other philosophers to claim that reason itself was inherently skeptical, that it undermined faith and would inevitably led to atheism. With this general wariness about reason itself, many also raised questions regarding its universality and impartiality, two elements that seemed to be foundational for the Kantian philosophy and especially Kantian ethics that dominated much of the discussion of the relationship between rationality and religion in the period.[2] Throughout the Waste Books, Lichtenberg responds to these discussions in his critiques of religion and its institutions, beliefs, and practices; in his reflections on Spinozism and nature; in his remarks on the relationship between reason and emotions; and in his observations on the apparent failure of aspects of Kantian ethics.

Lichtenberg often scathingly attacks religion, Christianity in particular, for its dogmatism, false piety, and adherence to superstitious beliefs (J 733).

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The most frequent aim of his attack, however, is not the content of religious belief but the theologians who proffer such beliefs and those who blindly follow them. Theologians cloak their pronouncements in the garb of truth only to manipulate their followers; they tell the story of human nature as one of gradual decline and moral corruption (J 974); and they seek to trick us with incomprehensible and sophistic arguments and dictates into believing we are morally ill, and all the more ill if we do not understand them (K 288). Having expunged all common sense and rationality from the Bible, they promote solemn adherence to ritual and blind acceptance of the doctrines of Christianity. All of this is anathema to the spirit of authentic reflection and critique at the center of much of Lichtenberg's thought. His genealogy of the belief in miracles and other superstitions suggests that they instituted themselves in a time when men were ignorant and incapable of reason. And in a remark that parallels the later thoughts of Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Lichtenberg suggests that the Christian morality propounded by the theologians may have arisen from a certain weakness and that its dictum of universal tolerance is an unattainable fantasy (G 59). If there is a true Christian religion expressed in the Bible, Lichtenberg writes, it is certainly not that practiced by the Catholics of his time (J 269, GH 33).

As clear as Lichtenberg's feelings about the institutions of religion are, there remains nevertheless an ambivalent attitude toward the idea and existence of God. On the one hand, he radicalizes Kant's demotion of God to an unknowable yet necessary practical requirement in ethics, writing that the statement *God exists* says nothing more than that we feel obliged to do what is right (L 275). As such, God is perhaps merely a useful fiction that in the end will be rejected just as the belief in ghosts has been (D 329). He also attempts to wrest the notion of God from the hands of the theologians, arguing that God himself must also be rational and is best served not by blind subservience but by conducting oneself according to the dictates of reason. Thus there may be reasons for the belief in God, though ultimately these may be rejected. On the other hand, he suggests that our heart may recognize a God, though any understanding of this is beyond the capacity of reason and can only be made comprehensible through revelation. And in this sense Lichtenberg is much closer to those who would defend faith in God against its demotion by reason.

It is also evident in his thoughts on Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza (1632–1677) that Lichtenberg did not summarily reject the notion of God but accorded an important place to an understanding of ourselves as parts of

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a single monistic substance, as aspects of God or nature. "Amintor's Morning-Prayer" is a meditation on this monistic substance thought as nature, and similar reflections on Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677), monism and nature can be found throughout the Waste Books. Yet this flirtation with Spinozism does not fit so comfortably with European monotheism, and it would likely have been considered by many of his contemporaries to be tantamount to a confession of atheism. In 1780, the famous German playwright Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–1781) confided to the philosopher Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819) that he found Spinozism to be the only true philosophy. Jacobi subsequently argued in his *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (*Letters on the Teachings of Spinoza*) (1785) that Spinozism was a pantheistic doctrine and thus really no different from atheism. This led to a furious debate known as the *Pantheismusstreit* (Pantheism Controversy) that eventually involved other Enlightenment figures including Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). In his *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus* (*David Hume on Belief, or Idealism and Realism*) (1787), Jacobi further argued that Enlightenment rationalism would lead to such atheism and that philosophers should instead return to faith or belief. Though Lichtenberg does not clearly argue for any position on this issue, he was certainly aware of its many implications, and we might understand many of his remarks as his own attempt to work through these debates.

Lichtenberg often discusses other topics that were pervasive in Enlightenment discussions of religion, particularly deism and theodicy. Deists held that reason can show us that the world is created by a supreme being. This supreme being, however, created the world according to a design, much like a clock, set it in motion, and allowed it to operate without intervention. This allows for a materialistic world governed by laws discoverable by reason and is also compatible with Lichtenberg's Spinozistic monism and the determinism of Priestley and Lamettrie (J 280, 282). Theodicy, which attempted to reconcile God with the existence of evil, was also a central concern of the Enlightenment period and one that he often mentions. In his *Essais de Théodicéé sur la bonté de Dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (*Theodicy*) (1710), Leibniz coined the term *theodicy*, arguing that the evil in the world was not in conflict with the goodness of God. Lichtenberg often entertains a view that was rejected by Leibniz, namely, that the existence of evil in the world may show that the world was created by an inferior being. He also proposes that Leibniz's defense of Christianity does not show him to be a Christian, and instead

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may have been motivated by a less noble aim such as vanity (F 348), an issue that returns in his remarks on the deeper and often unfathomable motivations for moral action.

Regarding ethics, Lichtenberg has little to offer in the way of guiding principles or arguments, suggesting instead a critique of prevailing moral pronouncements and the moral principles that underlie everyday interactions. At one point, he considers four principles of morality proposed by one of his contemporaries—philosophical, religious, human, and political—suggesting that these may all be aspects of a single moral principle, expressed in different ways in order to be made comprehensible to different people. Unfortunately, he does not indicate what this single moral principle might be; but the crucial point made here and elsewhere is that moral principles should be explainable to ordinary people in their own language and that we operate in our everyday lives with such principles (B 195). It is the investigation of these principles and how they underpin ordinary interactions that Lichtenberg is primarily interested in and that perhaps has the most promise in developing a theory of ethics. But because Lichtenberg believes ethics to be so localized, there may be some reluctance on his part to believe that moral principles discovered in one area will or should be universally applicable in others. This kind of relativism stands in stark contrast to Kant's moral philosophy.

In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant argues, among other things, that one always acts according to a maxim and that such a maxim should be universalizable. This means that in choosing an action we must choose one whose maxim is such that we can will that all people act according to it. Moreover, he argues that the motivation for an action takes precedence over its consequences in evaluating the moral worth of a person, which means that an act done in order to increase one's own pleasure makes one morally less worthy than an act done out of pure duty or obligation. These central tenets of Kant's deontological moral philosophy are often the target of Lichtenberg's critiques, and he also finds similar views at work in Stoic ethics (A 28, KA 166, G 65). He sarcastically suggests that the ability to adopt principles that do not take one's own pleasure into account may simply be the result of old age. The old do not take account of the sensual side of human nature simply because they no longer possess such a sensual side (L 910). He also suggests that in reflecting on Kant's highest moral principle we should also consider that God enticed humans to propagate by making sex pleasurable (J 1071). Indeed, he finds it unlikely that we could ever act solely according to duty without always having our own interest and pleasure in mind; thus, the very notion of acting from

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duty alone is incomprehensible and contrary to the empirical evidence and our nature. Perhaps leaning toward a consequentialist ethics, he considers his colleague Feder's suggestion that the only means of evaluating an action is according to its consequences or according to mere authority (E 487). For Lichtenberg, reason and the universalizability of maxims must play a role in deciding upon actions, as Kant had suggested, but reason cannot be the sole guide. Our sensual nature should also be taken into account, just as the consequences of an action must be taken into account (J 710).

## Judgment and the External World

Kant's influence on Lichtenberg's thinking is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in his discussions of knowledge of the external world. Lichtenberg was familiar with Kant's precritical work in the sciences long before the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, but it was in this work that Lichtenberg found a voice expressing many of his own concerns.[3] His understanding of the central issues of Kant's *Critique* is informed by the early reception of the first edition of this work at the university in Göttingen. In a 1782 review of the *Critique* in the *Göttingische Anzeigen von gelehrten Sachen*, Christian Garve (1742–1798) and Georg Friedrich Heinrich Feder (1740–1821), who was a colleague of Lichtenberg, accuse Kant of falling into a kind of idealism similar to that of George Berkeley (1685–1753). As they understood it, Kant was suggesting that objects, qua sensations or appearances, were dependent upon modifications of the self rather than some transcendentally real object. In doing so, Kant had failed to show how one could distinguish between an appearance occasioned entirely subjectively, such as a dream, and one that was occasioned by an external, real object. The result of Kant's position, according to the review, could lead only to skepticism about the existence of external objects. This, however, did not lead Lichtenberg to reject Kant but to offer some novel ways of addressing what he understood to be some of its main concerns.

Given Lichtenberg's background, his inquiries into knowledge of external objects take on a decidedly empiricist slant, which often lead him to conclusions that are idealist in nature. As in his discussions of self-knowledge, he begins his investigations from the first-personal perspective of conscious experience. From this perspective, it seems that one can have knowledge only of one's internal representations, sensations, and emotions and that knowledge of how things stand in the world independent of these

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representations is dubious. Whether in fact the causes of these representations can be attributed to objects outside conscious experience, to "things in themselves," seems to be something that cannot be known from our limited perspective. At times, he does, however, suggest that we often do regard some representations as being caused by external objects, though we might not be warranted in doing so, and he wonders, like Kant, whether this has something to do with features of our cognitive apparatus. At other times, he entertains the idea that we observe a kind of regularity in our representations and infer on this basis that they represent states of external objects and have an external cause. Some representations, like fantasies and daydreams, he suggests, seem to be dependent upon us and modifiable according to our will, while others, such as representations of objects behaving according to physical laws, seem not to be.

The objects that seem to be independent of us, or distinct from us, Lichtenberg calls "*praeter nos*" (without us). Other objects seem to be not only independent of us but also spatially distinct from us, and Lichtenberg calls these "*extra nos"* (outside us).[4] In his understanding of spatiality, he is also influenced by Kant. In the "Aesthetics" section of the first Critique, Kant offers an alternative to two views of space that were current at the time: the first view, which was associated with Newton, held that space was an empty container in which objects were located; the second view, associated with Leibniz, held that space consisted in the relations among objects. Against these views, Kant argues that space is a "pure form of intuition." By this he means that space is not something inhering in the objects themselves but something contributed by human cognition. Human minds are so constituted that they experience things spatially, but we are not justified in concluding on this basis that things in themselves are spatial. Lichtenberg follows Kant here in his understanding of the spatial externality of objects, suggesting that we are not warranted in concluding that the spatiality of objects is a property of the objects themselves and not merely due to our forms of cognition. However, while they are in agreement on this point, Lichtenberg does press Kant's thoughts a step further in wondering whether the seeming independence from us of objects *praeter nos* might not also be due to some form of human sensibility, but he is reticent about what might further be involved in such a conception (H 150, J 643, J 1537, K 64).

Unfortunately, Lichtenberg does not offer any reflections on Kant's attempt in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783) to clear up the seeming idealist implications of his view by arguing that we can have

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noninferential or direct knowledge of the existence of external objects despite our not having knowledge of how these objects are in themselves. Nor does he consider Kant's attempts in the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the "Refutation of Idealism," to argue that self-knowledge is dependent on knowledge of external objects. Lichtenberg does, however, explore some of these issues further in his reflections on Karl Leonhard Reinhold's (1758–1823) analysis of the representational faculty in his *Elementarphilosophie* (*Elementary Philosophy*), where he discusses the "form" and "matter" of representations, suggesting that the form of a representation may be due to human cognition and the matter due to external causes. Elsewhere, Lichtenberg also describes the appeal idealism has for us at various points in life, suggesting that despite our arguments to the contrary we always remain idealists (H 150). Expanding upon such ideas, he writes that we love only the pleasant sensation produced in us by loved ones but not the loved ones themselves since we can know only our own sensations (H 151). Thus he sees certain strands of idealism as having emotional and ethical consequences. At times he also seems entirely exasperated with the issue. Regarding skepticism, he writes that simply because a skeptic wishes to be refuted does not mean that he deserves to be, for it seems that no arguments could satisfy someone who is inclined to believe an absurdity (E 418). And at one point he even declares the very question about the objective existence of external objects to be irrational or absurd (L 277).

While he finds many of the problems of idealism and skepticism intriguing, he often leans in his thinking toward views advanced by some of the Scottish common sense philosophers. This is not surprising given the influence of these philosophers on the philosophical faculty in Göttingen during his tenure. Two philosophers in this tradition stand out in his writings and offer remedies for philosophical problems that parallel some of his own. James Beattie (1735–1803) became quite popular in England and Germany on the basis of a simplified version of common sense philosophy expounded in *An Essay on the Nature and Immutability of Truth In Opposition to Sophistry and Scepticism* (1770). But the view expounded there owes much to Thomas Reid (1710–1796), whose writings received less attention. Reid argued against the representationalist "theory of ideas" of Locke and Descartes and the skepticism of Hume, in favor of a direct realist account of perception according to which we perceive external objects as they actually are. What is striking in Reid's account and parallels Lichtenberg's own thinking on the matter is the suggestion that the indirect realist view does not attend closely enough to how we express our relationship to the world in our everyday

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language. The problem with the indirect realist view is that it posits an intermediary object, a representation, between ourselves and objects. But in doing so it misunderstands completely how we actually relate to the world. When we smell a flower, for example, we do not smell a representation of a flower, for representations have no scent, but we smell the flower directly. This much is clear from our common expressions about these things.[5]

It is a great interpretive difficulty, and perhaps one that cannot be resolved given the itinerant nature of Lichtenberg's writings, whether he thought a materialist account of perception of external objects was in some way reconcilable with some of his idealist tendencies. One might perhaps argue that our perception of external objects can be given a causal explanation, for example by nerve fluids being affected by external objects and these fluids then creating an effect on the retina of the eye (F 349, F 1084). One might then suggest that how something is perceived will depend also on the material constitution of the brain. And one might indeed find evidence for a view that regards perception as incorporated in a system of matter throughout Lichtenberg's thoughts and his discussions of Priestley (F 1130). Yet as tempting as such a solution might be, his pronouncements against our knowledge of the causal features of things in themselves seem to make such an explanation dubious. There are also great difficulties in resolving his seeming empiricism with what are often idealist positions, but these may best be explained by suggesting that empiricism, coupled with a representationalist view of external objects, in fact leads to some of the idealist positions Lichtenberg often espouses.

The concerns with the relationship between objects in the world and our sensations are not unrelated to some of Lichtenberg's ideas about judgment and truth, many of which are novel for eighteenth-century German thought. Many of his observations end up in the idealist predicament that there seems to be no way of explaining how judgments can be objectively valid, that is, how they might correspond to the external world. Kant had resolved this issue of objective validity by suggesting that judgments are true of the world because they are true of our forms of sensibility. Lichtenberg, however, suggests that judgments are true not because they correspond with states of affairs in the world or with our forms of sensibility, but because they cohere with other judgments and meet with the consensus of other rational people.[6] He writes, for example:

> Human philosophy is never other than the philosophy of one particular individual corrected by that of others, even fools, ac-

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> cording to the rules of a rational appraisal of degrees of probability. Propositions to which everyone assents are true. If they are not true, then there is no truth. Other propositions we are often compelled to hold true on the assurance of experts, and any man would believe such propositions were he to find himself in the same circumstances. Where this is not the case, we have a particular philosophy and not one established in the council of mankind. Superstition itself is a local philosophy voicing its opinion as well. (A 136)

Judgments are subjected to scrutiny in an intersubjective "council of mankind" where they can be appraised, disputed, and tested for coherence with other judgments. And at times, our judgments must rely on the testimony of others rather than merely on our own estimations of the matter. Thus knowledge is something of a shared burden and is dependent on social interaction and social institutions. Borrowing a thought from his own work on probability in mathematics, he suggests that we eschew the notion of certainty in epistemology and consider judgments in terms of their degree of probability (A 136, H 15). On this view, the coherence of one judgment or belief with others increases the probability of its truth but does not afford anything like certainty. His thoughts here are similar to those of his contemporary Thomas Bayes (1702–1761) and anticipate those of Pierre-Simon Laplace (1749–1827), both of whom have had a great deal of influence upon current discussions of the relationship between probability and knowledge in the sciences.

## Natural Science

While most of Lichtenberg's reflections on the natural sciences are to be found in his lectures on physics, his commentaries on Erxleben's *Foundations of the Natural Sciences* and his contributions to scientific journals, the Waste Books are nevertheless a rich source for considerations of the relationship between epistemology and science. His thoughts are found primarily in notes in the Waste Books, which were to form the foundation of a physics compendium he hoped to write on the basis of Kantian philosophy.[7] Two concerns generally dominate his theoretical reflections on the sciences: the first is an empiricist interest in restricting our knowledge claims to observable phenomena; the second is an interest in providing an account of the role

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of human cognitive capacities in science. He is also concerned throughout the Waste Books with specific debates in eighteenth-century physics, particularly about atomism and dynamism and the physics of light and color.

Lichtenberg often critiques the scientific theories of many of the rationalist physicists of the period, particularly the Cartesians. While such philosophers proposed mechanistic explanations of physical phenomena, they often did so on the basis of a priori rational or metaphysical analysis. Many of their hypotheses Lichtenberg thought untestable and even absurd. In his writings, he often ridicules ideas like the Cartesian explanations of gravity, which held that objects fall to the earth because they are caught in tiny imperceptible vortices; and he derides other physicists who had helped themselves to various *qualitas occultas* and other theoretical entities to explain physical phenomena. Against these fantastical explanations, he proposes that the natural sciences concern themselves only with observable phenomena or entities reducible to such phenomena.

In keeping with his understanding of the relationship between representations and external objects, Lichtenberg understood physical phenomena as sensations or modifications of the self or consciousness. For this reason, he felt that an inquiry into the self or mind was an important prerequisite for any science. Thus in his compendium notes, he proposes to begin with an analysis of the subject, its capacity for knowledge, the means by which it acquires this knowledge, and the limits of understanding and reason, and only then does he proceed to a discussion of wider problems in physics. He often remarks that given that the kind of knowledge available to the scientist depends on human cognition, the laws of physics might appear different if the human mind were differently constituted (H 176, L 662, L 799, L 852).

In this sense, the empirical observation of nature is always bound up with our cognitive capacities. For Lichtenberg, we discover in nature only what we ourselves put there. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that without the order imposed by us on nature neither coherent experience nor knowledge would be possible (J 392, E 497). Here he follows to some degree Kant's arguments in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But while Kant argues that the categories organize our experience and thus make objective knowledge of nature possible, Lichtenberg suggests that this ordering capacity extends much further. Nature it seems is thoroughly constructed; we create the laws of physics just as we create biological and social categories in order to simplify and organize empirical phenomena according to some *Vorstellungsart*, or manner of representing (A 192). That we regard some behavior in nature

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as necessary is merely the result of our organizing observed phenomena according to rational principles such as necessity. Lichtenberg's thoughts here should, however, be understood as claims not primarily about nature as it is in itself but about how we do and must represent it to ourselves. In keeping with his epistemic modesty about nature, we know it only as we organize it, not as it is in itself.

What distinguishes Lichtenberg's view from that of Kant and many of his contemporaries is that the ordering of nature through our representations is an entirely practical affair. That is to say, he is concerned less with validity than with the effects or consequences of the adaptation of a certain way of representing nature. This thinking informs not only his views about scientific theories and how they explain natural phenomena but also his understanding of the relationship between mathematics and the natural world (G 40). Contrary to Kant, who had argued that mathematics, and geometry in particular, can be true of the world because it is true of our forms of sensibility, he often suggests that it is often nothing more than a useful fiction. But even if such ways of organizing the world turn out to be false, he believes it may nevertheless be useful to believe them (J 1521) because they may open up new avenues of thought and research. His instrumentalism in this regard is clear: hypotheses and "paradigmata," as he often calls them, are merely useful "heuristic pulleys" (K 312).

This instrumentalist view of scientific theories is also revealed in a number of his remarks on some important scientific debates of the period. The first is between impulsionist and attractionist explanations of gravity, and the second is between atomist and dynamist views of nature. Impulsionists, such as Georges-Louis Lesage (1724–1804), explained gravity in terms of straight-line movements that are the result of the impulsions of atomic particles. To explain how bodies move toward one another, Lesage posited *copruscucles gravifiques*, which were imperceptible particles that pushed bodies toward one another through collisions. Attractionists, such as Kant, on the other hand, explained gravity as the result of an imperceptible force that attracted one body to another (L 918). Lichtenberg often found the former view desirable because it provided a mechanistic explanation of nature and accorded with Newton's inverse square law of universal gravitation, whereas the latter posited action at a distance to explain the phenomena but had no explanation of how such action occurred.[8]

The position that scientists took on these matters also dependend on whether they were proponents of an atomistic or a dynamic view of nature. Lesage's explanation of gravity relied on the atomistic view, whereas Kant's

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relied on the dynamic view. At points in his lectures on physics and his remarks in the Waste Books, Lichtenberg seems to lean toward the dynamic view of nature, taking up an argument proposed by Kant in his *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* against the atomistic-impulsionist views. On the Kantian view, extended matter is impenetrable not because it has the property of solidity but because the presence of repulsive forces resist compression. On this basis, he concludes that matter is infinitely divisible and thus that there are no simple substances or atoms. Kant then argues that if only repulsive force existed, then matter would be dispersed to infinity. Since matter is not dispersed in this way, he concludes there must be some attractive force that holds matter together. There is thus both an attractive and a repulsive force in nature. Lichtenberg recognizes the advantages afforded by both the atomist and dynamist views, suggesting that they are perhaps reconcilable or that they may in some way depend on one another (L 917, 918). The choice of a theory in such a case should be guided by practical virtues: the ability to predict empirical phenomena with some accuracy, explanatory simplicity, and accordance with our common sense understanding of the world.[9]

There is also some discussion in the Waste Books of the physics of light and various theories of color, including those of Newton and Goethe. Goethe turned to Lichtenberg as an authority on the physics of light and Newtonian optics in the early phase of his own research on color and colored shadows. His letter to Lichtenberg from May 1792 was accompanied by copies of the first two installments of his *Beiträge zur Optik* (*Contributions to Optics*) in hopes that Lichtenberg would be sympathetic to his views and perhaps introduce the theories to a wider audience of natural scientists. Unfortunately, the response to this initial letter is lost, but a letter from October 1793 is preserved and includes a response to Goethe's third installment of the *Beiträge* entitled *Von den farbigen Schatten* (*On Colored Shadows*). A central tenet in Goethe's experiments with light is a rejection of the Newtonian physics of light in favor of qualitative experiments that attempt to capture the wide range of variation in color phenomena depending on surrounding light conditions, mixtures of light, and refraction. It is in short a phenomenology of color rather than a physics of color. It seems from his responses that Lichtenberg did not take Goethe's experiments seriously as a contribution to the physics of light. He did, however, attempt to explain the difference in Goethe's and Newton's views in terms of the relationships among language, judgment, and sensation and their differing uses of the term *white*, topics that emerge throughout his discussions of color and light in the Waste Books.[10]

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## Language and Thought

Lichtenberg's thoughts on epistemology are inseparable from his interest in language, an interest that he shared with many of his contemporaries. The emergence of the field of anthropology in eighteenth-century Germany was accompanied by a humanist interest in languages and their origins, classical philology, and hermeneutics. In his celebrated translations of Homer, Johann Heinrich Voss (1751–1826) introduced a new pronunciation for the Greek letter η justified on the basis of an analysis of the portrayal of sheep sounds in Greek literary texts. According to Voss, βη was to be pronounced in German as bäh. Regarding these changes, Lichtenberg carried out a satirical critique of Voss in essays such as "To Bäh or Not to Bäh, That Is the Question." Similarly, throughout the Waste Books, Lichtenberg offers pronouncements on debates concerning nomenclature in the sciences, which were sparked by the terminological changes in chemistry introduced by Antoine Laurent de Lavoisier (1743–1794) in his *Méthode de Nomenclature Chimique* (*Methods of Chemical Nomenclature*) (1787) (K 20). Other figures in the period, such as Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744–1803) and Johann Georg Hamann (1730–1788), critiqued many of the dominant philosophical positions of the period on the basis of their understanding of the relationship between human language and the capacity for reason, thought, and expression. It is in the context of such discussions that Lichtenberg develops his thoughts on language.

In his writings on language, Lichtenberg explores a number of views during the course of his career. Early remarks, such as those found in Waste Book A (1765–1770), reveal a deep interest in the Leibnizian idea of a *characteristica universalis* or universal language. As Lichtenberg understood it, the *characteristica* was intended to be a formal language consisting of simple concepts—concepts that admit of no composite definitions—and formal rules for the combination of these concepts. This language was intended for expressing not only logical truths but also objects and their relations in the world. He often finds such a language appealing because it would be able to dispense with the ambiguity of ordinary language in philosophy and the natural sciences (A 3).[11] However, he often critiques formal language as well, suggesting that it would contain notions such as necessity and contradiction that are not found in the empirical world. Indeed, the empirical world seems to be far too complex and rich to be accounted for within the strictures of a formal language, which must express itself in general terms. His concern with this rationalist conception of language also aligns here

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with his critique of rationalist metaphysicians, Wolff among them, who he believed had unwarrantedly extended the rules of logic, such as the principle of contradiction, to nature itself.

Lichtenberg also shows interest in the tendency of some thinkers to become captivated by language and to depart from the world of sense in unfounded metaphysical speculation, *Schwärmerei,* or enthusiasm.[12] He often mentions the Christian mystic Jakob Böhme (1575–1624), whose pronouncements and speculations often verge into nonsense. Kant had also criticized a similar tendency in his *Dreams of a Spirit Seer* (1766) regarding the mystical thought of Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772). Lichtenberg is not, however, always critical of such fantastical departures but speculates that perhaps such language may be something like the language of "angels," which expresses a philosophy that, even if we were to hear it, we would scarcely be in a position to understand (B 242). And in this regard, he is very near the language of his contemporary Hamann and anticipates in many ways the philosophy of later German thinkers such as Walter Benjamin (1892–1940). This is the language one speaks when one begins to see "all in all," to see the large within the small, and to see the whole (F 48). His fairytale speculations of a world beyond that of human understanding and cognition and his fantasies about imaginary machines and contraptions belong to these reflections on language (J 711), as does his emphasis on the performative dimension of language, the instinctive nature of communication, and elements such as style, tone, and emotion, which seem often to occupy a place more important than that of meaning and reference (A 21, A 22, D 413, J 1005). It is also where philosophy and science fail that he believes such fictions and fantasies may be useful in imparting wisdom (J 713).

It is perhaps in the philosophy of British empiricism, most likely that of Locke, that Lichtenberg finds reflections on language that allow him to move beyond the thinking of Leibniz and the rationalists and that accord with many of his own views on representation. Beginning from the view that our knowledge is limited to the representations and sensations encountered in conscious experience, he is led quite naturally to a representationalist philosophy of language, which takes the meaning of a word or term to be some mental entity or representation. This view is reflected in his observation that many disputes are merely about words, which is to say that the thinkers have the same idea or representation in mind but use different words or concepts to express it. He also draws out a problematic implication of this view when he suggests that there is nothing to prevent

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us from associating any idea we wish with any word, and thus that the association of a word with its meaning is entirely arbitrary and subject to change at any moment (E 85). In hearing one another, we always run the risk of reducing the other person's language to our own, of associating their words with our own particular representations. Drawing conclusions from this for hermeneutics, he suggests that understanding another person would require that we sometimes be that person (B 262).

Elsewhere, Lichtenberg suggests that the meaning of a word is not some mental entity but rather consists in its common use (J 417). What this common use is depends upon the historical period, culture, and discourse in which it appears. A consequence of this is that understanding another person involves understanding the specific use their words have in their historical and cultural context (A 9, G 135). Because reasoning and thinking are so closely tied to our use of everyday language, he also observes that we may sometimes be misled by language and as a result often reason incorrectly. This is perhaps evident in the case of "I think" judgments, where grammatical rules require that we posit a bearer of ascriptions, but from this we falsely conclude that the "I" is a substance. Philosophy consists in clarifying or making explicit the commitments involved in the view of the world embodied in our everyday language, its metaphors and common expressions. He writes, for example:

> [. . .] Our false philosophy is embodied in our entire language; we cannot reason, so to speak, without reasoning falsely. We fail to consider that speaking, regardless of what, is philosophy. Anyone who speaks German is a folk philosopher, and our academic philosophy consists in qualifications of this common philosophy. All our philosophy is the correction of linguistic use; that is, the correction of a philosophy, our most common one. But only this common philosophy has the advantage of possessing declinations and conjugations. Thus true philosophy is always taught in the language of false philosophy. [. . .] (H 146)

This suggestion has been deeply influential for later philosophers, particularly Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who was an avid reader of Lichtenberg, and anticipates twentieth-century ordinary language philosophy. For Lichtenberg, philosophical language always carries on an unwitting "love affair" with common, everyday language and despite its protestations cannot so easily tear itself away from this relationship. Because of this tight

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relationship between philosophy and language, he also accords an important place for creative language, wit, striking metaphors, and poetic language that may open up a new understanding of the world and with it perhaps new philosophical views.

One might suggest that this can be taken as representative of Lichtenberg's style of thinking as a whole. In keeping with Enlightenment ideals, he is always committed to firsthand knowledge, knowledge acquired through observation, but he nevertheless saw an important place for the knowledge that can be gained through communication, dialogue, and consensus. Where he is skeptical, it is often only to prevent the dogmatic acceptance of ideas, which would eventually stultify thinking, investigation, and experimentation. And because thinking and experimentation are often confused and arrested by acceptance of such ideas, Lichtenberg proposes a thoroughgoing critique of the concepts we use in our analyses and the language in which we express these ideas: "The most common ideas and those upon which everyone agrees deserve most often to be investigated [. . .]" (KA 295).

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