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Impartial observations of a sensible mind

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ABSTRACT

This article contributes to the scholarly analysis of impartiality in the early modern period. While previous studies have focused on impartiality in law, history, philosophy and aesthetics, this article analyzes impartial and cold or even cold-blooded self-examinations and self-observations, primarily in the work of the eighteenth-century German philosophers and writers Georg Friedrich Meier and Karl Philipp Moritz. The article is particularly concerned with the relation between the *therapeutic* and *epistemic* meanings and functions of these concepts. Without suggesting a linear development, it details how, over time, therapeutic connotations tended to be challenged and partly replaced by epistemic ones. It further argues that this development was intimately connected to the culture of sensibility and, in particular, to the growing interest in the unique, individual and often sensual experience.



KEYWORDS

Impartiality;
disinterestedness; sensibility;
subjectivity; spiritual
exercise; German
enlightenment

1. Introduction

Historians of science have traced and analyzed the emergence of scientific objectivity from early modern natural and experimental philosophy to the establishment of the modern conception of knowledge untouched by and independent of the knower in the mid-nineteenth century.¹ While the history of objectivity is a complex affair, unfolding along numerous winding paths, the epistemic virtue of impartiality or disinterestedness has been ascribed a key role. Adopted from law and history, impartiality came to denote an epistemic attitude of restraint and non-interference essential to the conduct of scientific observations and experiments.²

In this article, I build upon this foundation by analyzing impartiality not in the context of natural philosophy but as a part of discourses and practices regarding the cultivation, examination and observation of the sensible self in eighteenth-century Germany.³ At the core of this account is an attempt to understand how increasingly radical attempts to conduct impartial self-examinations and self-observations developed parallel to increasingly radical discourses on sensibility and subjectivity. The article explores this problematic by focusing on the conceptions of *impartial* and *cold* or *cold-blooded self-examinations* and *self-observations* articulated by the philosophers and writers Georg

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Friedrich Meier and Karl Philipp Moritz. Although these were highly heterogeneous and eclectic concepts that developed in a nonlinear fashion, their therapeutic meanings and functions tended to be challenged by epistemic ones towards the last decades of the eighteenth century. This shift was part of the broad, eclectic and increasingly radical interest in the individual and often sensual self.

2. Impartiality as an epistemic virtue and as *cultura animi*

The history of the concept of *impartiality* is extraordinarily complex and heterogeneous.⁴ As Barbara Shapiro and others have shown, it probably originated within a legal context.⁵ For the legal system to work, confidence in its impartiality was crucial. Judges, lawyers, jurors and witnesses ought to state matters of fact and make impartial judgments free from prejudice and unperturbed by passion and desire. In the sixteenth century, impartiality expanded from legal settings to historiography.⁶ Applying judicial attitudes and techniques within this new field, it became important to evaluate sources, distinguish facts from fictions and adduce evidence. Much like in the courts of law, a person engaged in this activity should cultivate a disinterested and impartial attitude, free from bias.

In the course of the seventeenth century, the attitudes and techniques that had emerged within the legal and historiographical contexts migrated to natural and experimental philosophy.⁷ While many strands certainly played into this development, one rather concrete factor was that leading proponents of the new philosophy were often active within all three spheres. Most notably, Francis Bacon was a judge, a historian and a pioneering natural and experimental philosopher.⁸ When launching his vision of the new philosophy, he thus already had at his disposal the apparatus for systematically accumulating and evaluating matters of fact: just as the judge and the historian ought to cultivate attitudes of discipline, control and disinterestedness, in combination with strict adherence to systematic modes of procedure, so too should the natural and experimental philosopher. In the second half of the century, this new identity was typically performed by the gentleman, a person who embodied discipline, control and trust, and who, by virtue of his economic independence, could devote time and resources to the new science and to institutions such as the Royal Society.⁹

Over the past two decades, a complex discussion has emerged around the question of how to understand the establishment and functions of notions of *fact*, *impartiality*, *disinterestedness* and *prejudice* in seventeenth-century natural and experimental philosophy.¹⁰ One common tendency has been to inscribe these in the larger history of scientific objectivity. On a more detailed level, however, analyses differ considerably. Whereas, for instance, Stephen Gaukroger and Julie Robin Solomon have argued that disinterestedness marks the very origin of the modern concept of scientific objectivity, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have pointed out that naturalists did not refer to objective knowledge in the modern sense. Instead, they argue that the modern concept of objectivity as knowledge without a knower, free from prejudice and unmarked by skill and judgement, is an essentially post-Kantian invention that emerged on a broad front first in the mid-nineteenth century.¹¹ Another quite different approach has been to shift from a social-historical perspective to one that regards early modern philosophy and science as spiritual exercise and *cultura animi*. Drawing on the historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot's pioneering reading of philosophy as an exercise-oriented way of life,

Sorana Corneanu has suggested that new attitudes, techniques and practices served not only to secure knowledge on the social level of the community, but also to therapeutically cure and temper the mind of the individual.¹² Thus seen, disinterestedness and impartiality were not just codified intellectual norms; they were also ethical capacities.¹³

This article is indebted to the approach to early modern philosophy as spiritual exercise and *cultura animi*. While sympathizing with the recontextualization of disinterestedness as a *therapeutic* rather than an *epistemic* virtue, my own analysis focuses on the tradition of regular, often daily, interrogations, examinations and observations of one's moral-psychological conduct. As Hadot, Michel Foucault and many others have shown, regular self-examination played a central role in both ancient pagan and Christian spiritual exercises.¹⁴ In the Renaissance and the early modern period, these exercises flourished both in the spiritual branch of the Christian tradition and within philosophy. It has also been suggested that they were of direct relevance for the development of the attitudes and techniques of the new natural and experimental philosophy.¹⁵ The long tradition of spiritual exercises thus might be seen to provide yet another important chapter in the history of disinterestedness. Although more limited in scope, my own contribution nevertheless represents an attempt to explore this hypothesis, with a focus on the very relation between the concept's therapeutic and epistemic meanings and functions.

3. Georg Friedrich Meier and the impartial history of the heart

The development of disinterestedness in Germany appears to have followed a similar pattern as it did in Britain and France.¹⁶ On the one hand, references to impartiality (*Unpartheylichkeit*) and lack of prejudice in titles and prefaces witness to a broad rhetorical usage whereby authors asserted these qualities as characteristic of their works and themselves. As Hanns-Peter Neumann has shown, this was typically how the philosopher Christian Wolff used the words in his academic works, pamphlets and correspondence.¹⁷ On the other hand, underlying this usage, there was a fairly extensive philosophical analysis and debate concerning the nature of prejudices in particular. The discussion often revolved around different prejudices; some were considered to originate from human nature, while others were believed to be more culturally conditioned. Authors also questioned whether and to what extent it is possible to eradicate prejudices. Although the various positions often differed significantly, the underlying view was that prejudices are caused by passions and desires. Since these forces tend to cloud the judgement and thus drive prejudiced beliefs and actions, it is necessary to systematically examine and temper the mind.¹⁸

Regardless of the origin of prejudices – whether they derive from human nature or from upbringing and belief in authority – it was important to systematically examine, identify and remedy them. This was stressed by Wolff, who recalled René Descartes's account of how he had been misled by prejudices since childhood and how the realization of this had convinced him to carry out a fundamental critical self-examination.¹⁹ Although Wolff did not provide a particularly elaborate theory of prejudice, his discourse constituted the immediate background for Meier's extensive discussion of the matter.²⁰ One of Meier's earliest attempts to provide a theory of prejudice appears in *Portrait of an Art Critic* (*Abbildung eines Kunstrichters*, 1745).²¹ Meier stressed here that the art critic must carry out systematic self-examinations through which he traces and breaks the negative chain of errors. Erroneous judgements, Meier argued, are based on erroneous

concepts, hasty judgements and false prejudices. With regard to the latter, Meier highlighted a number of specific prejudices. Among these he counted (a) the bias to regard as perfect what one likes and as imperfect what one dislikes, (b) the making of one's own character and traits the yardstick for perfection, (c) the preference for the old and established over novelties, (d) the accusation and denigration of everything that belongs to a certain person or a certain group of persons and, finally, (e) the glorification of persons or groups of high repute.²² In the following decade, Meier addressed the topic in *Doctrine of Reason (Vernunftlehre, 1752)*. "In all branches of learning, one must strive to discover and dispel the prejudices [*Vorurtheile*] of men, these monsters of human knowledge. In metaphysics one discovers the metaphysical prejudices [*Vorurtheile*], in ethics the moral ones, and so on."²³ In relation to the discussion in the *Portrait*, Meier expanded the analysis by distinguishing between "prejudice of too much confidence" and of "too much distrust."²⁴ Although Meier provided a new grouping, the different prejudices were largely the same. He observed that, while character traits, persons, groups and even peoples with whom one could identify were usually assessed favorably and vice versa, other prejudices had to do with the overestimation or underestimation of one's own abilities or of anything that is new and different.²⁵

The discussion of prejudices also ran through Meier's five-volume *Philosophical Ethics (Philosophische Sittenlehre, 1753–1761)*. The work followed the natural law tradition insofar as it structured ethics into three overarching duties: those towards the self, towards others and towards God. Duties towards the self are particularly relevant for my purposes. Drawing on Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz's and Wolff's natural law discourse on perfection, Meier argued in the second volume that man is obliged to perfect himself – particularly the mind and the higher cognitive faculties – as much as possible. To acquire self-knowledge, it was important to search and purge the mind of sources of errors and corruption. "Errors always arise from specific sources, and we are therefore obliged to block the sources from which the errors in self-knowledge [*Selbsterkenntniß*] flow, because otherwise it is impossible for us to avoid these errors."²⁶ Drawing on his earlier works on errors, Meier argued that these may stem from ignorance, from rash judgements and from prejudices.

Accordingly, we are obliged, in considering and examining ourselves [*Betrachtung und Untersuchung unserer selbst*], to spare no time and effort, to avoid all rashness, all impatient and too hasty zeal, and not to judge ourselves according to any preconceptions. Especially, in self-knowledge [*Selbsterkenntniß*], we must beware of the prejudice [*Vorurtheile*] of too good confidence and too strong distrust.²⁷

Elaborating further on the topic, Meier made what is for my purposes an interesting remark, in stressing the importance of impartiality.

Consequently, in order to get to know ourselves properly, we must always examine ourselves impartially [*unpartheyisch untersuchen*], and we must neither take sides with or against us in advance. This is, of course, an infinitely difficult duty, since disorderly self-love hinders us in the exercise of it. But the more difficult it is, the more we must strive to exercise it, and the more diligence we must devote to it.²⁸

Meier's passage is indicative of the way in which impartiality played a role in the struggle against prejudice. What makes this context stand out from those that have typically caught scholarly interest, however, is how prejudices and impartiality come to

occupy a role in the practical regimen of regular self-examinations. Probably drawing directly on Wolff, Meier presented an outline of how to structure the day around regular self-examinations.²⁹ Accordingly, in the morning, a virtuous plan should be made to serve as a moral guide and yardstick during the day. In the evening, one should then reflect on one's past life and in particular the past day, focusing on one's successes and failures and the improvements that can be made tomorrow.³⁰ In support of this work on the self, Meier also suggested keeping a moral diary, recording and evaluating daily moral-psychological states, progress and failures. Such "quite reasonable and pragmatic history [*Historie*] of one's own heart," he stressed, "must be a faithful account of our entire life."³¹ That Meier discusses the daily exercise of the self in terms of prejudice, impartial self-examination and history of the heart shows how these concepts shared a common past. Having been exported from legal and historiographical contexts into philosophy, they were now incorporated by Meier into an ethical practice. That Meier ascribed this practice a broader significance is also indicated by the fact that he communicated it in a more popular form in a number of moral weeklies. The moral weekly featured short texts, published on a weekly basis and bound into thick annual volumes, that were written to morally educate and entertain the reading bourgeoisie.³² Meier, together with his friend and colleague Samuel Gotthold Lange, edited four moral weeklies between 1748 and 1768.³³ Common topics included sociability and friendship but also self-knowledge. In an early contribution, in part four of the moral weekly *Man (Der Mensch, 1752)*, Meier and Lange portrayed life as a journey that requires a road map in the form of a moral journal. "Such a diary would be a kind of compulsion that would require us to examine ourselves closely. And this would be an excellent exercise of moral vigilance."³⁴ By gradually filling this diary with impartial records, it eventually becomes an instructive and entertaining history of the self.

Even the impartial record [*unpartheyische Aufzeichnung*] of good behavior is very useful to a person, because it can lead him to a refreshing tranquility of conscience. He then knows how far he has already come in the good, and what is still left to do Such a diary, which we are promoting, would in time become an immensely pleasant novel, and we would not be able to get enough of reading it in our old age.³⁵

The moral examination of the self was a topic that Meier and Lange returned to. One particularly illustrative example is a contribution on self-knowledge in the first volume of the moral weekly *The Blissful (Der Glückselige, 1763)*. In a manner reminiscent of the *Philosophical Ethics*, Meier and Lange emphasized that self-knowledge could only be acquired through systematic self-examination of one's past, present and future. By dedicating time to this continuous work, one would eventually gain access to and learn from a history "far more useful than the best history [*Geschichte*] in the world."³⁶ Meier and Lange's discussion in the moral weeklies further illustrates how the notions of *impartiality* and *history* were used to bolster the regimen of daily self-examination.

To summarize, the concepts of prejudice and impartiality originated in a legal context and were then exported to historiography before finally being absorbed into philosophy. While previous studies have reconstructed the rhetorical and social contexts as well as that of philosophy as spiritual exercise, here I highlight the particular context of

therapeutic self-examinations. In line with the *cultura animi* framework, impartiality was a prerequisite for identifying and eradicating prejudices and misconceptions that would otherwise threaten to plunge the soul into ruin.

4. Karl Philipp Moritz and the cold-blooded observer of the self

While I have so far situated Meier's discourse on prejudice and impartial self-examination in a therapeutic context, I will now examine therapeutic and epistemic connotations in Moritz's notion of cold or cold-blooded self-observations. Before addressing these, however, I first return to the context of disinterested observations in early modern natural philosophy and medicine.

In the early modern period, the Latin term "*observatio*" was exported from astronomy to natural philosophy and medicine.³⁷ Whereas natural and experimental philosophers used the term to refer to singular observations of things in nature or in experimental situations, in medicine "*Observationes*" signified collections of medical cases, systematically organized to enable physicians to identify symptoms, diseases and possible cures. Gianna Pomata has argued that such collections constituted an epistemic genre in the sense of a standardized textual format for organizing and communicating medical knowledge.³⁸ In the early eighteenth century, such collections were produced by leading physicians such as Friedrich Hoffmann and Georg Ernst Stahl.³⁹ While some cases exemplified specific diseases, many were harder to categorize or even seemed unique. More often than not, such extraordinary cases revolved around mental rather than physical conditions. The Stahlian physician Michael Alberti thus devoted a whole dissertation to various cases of people with imaginary illnesses.⁴⁰ In the 1750s, the physician Johann Gottlob Krüger, who had studied with Hoffmann, published *Attempt at an Experimental Psychology (Versuch einer Experimental-Seelenlehre, 1756)*, in which he argued that extraordinary cases where nature had, so to speak, intervened in the normal cause of nature could be regarded as a form of psychological experiment.⁴¹ The second half of the book consisted of an extensive appendix containing a wide range of extraordinary cases, from pathological sensibility and emotional illness to mental disorders and delusions, strange effects of brain damage, somnambulism, placebo effects of medication and so on and so forth. In the 1770s, cases formed the backbone of the Swiss writer, philosopher and theologian Johann Caspar Lavater's extensive works on physiognomy as well as his two-volume *Secret Diary of a Self-Observer (Geheimes Tagebuch von einem Beobachter seiner Selbst, 1771–1773)*.⁴² The *Diary* is a psychological history of the heart in the tradition of Meier at the same time as it marks a discursive transition towards a new strand of psychological *self-observations (Selbst-beobachtung)*.

Lavater's work constituted an important source of inspiration for Moritz's attempt to launch an empirical psychology based on cases either drawn from medicine, literature and history or produced through observations and self-observations.⁴³ In 1780, Moritz published *Contribution to the Philosophy of Life from the Diary of a Freemason (Beiträge zur Philosophie des Lebens aus dem Tagebuche eines Freimäurers)*, in which he intended to use fragments from the diary of a friend to paint the picture of his soul. The following year the work was published in a second edition with a more extensive preface where Moritz remarked that the self-observer must

be free of all passions during the time he observes, but have strong passions at other times ... He must therefore learn the art of suddenly pulling himself out of the whirl of his desires [*Wirbel seiner Begierden herauszuziehen*] at certain moments of his life, in order to play the cold observer [*kalten Beobachter*] for a time, without taking the least interest in himself.⁴⁴

In 1782, Moritz came back to and further elaborated this point in *Prospect of an Experimental Psychology* (*Aussichten zu einer Experimentalseelenlehre*).

He should be attentive to his present real life; to notice the ebb and flow of the tide which reigns all day long in his soul, and the difference of one moment from the other; he would have to take time to describe the history of his thoughts [*Geschichte seiner Gedanken*] and make himself the subject of his most prolonged observations; he would not have to be without all violent passions, and yet he would understand the art of suddenly pulling himself out of the vortex of his desires [*Wirbel seiner Begierden herauszuziehen*] at some moments of his life, in order to play the cold observer [*kalten Beobachter*] for a while without showing the slightest interest in himself.⁴⁵

While Meier had referred to “impartial” examinations, Moritz spoke almost exclusively of “cold” or “cold-blooded” observations in the sense of observations conducted with calm emotional detachment.⁴⁶ This preference likely represents a shift from originally legal and historiographical terms to a medical vocabulary that was rooted in humoral theory yet aligned with the sensibility culture of the time. That said, Moritz’s picture of the cold and disinterested observer indicates the emergence of self-observation as a technique for exploring the unique, individual and often highly sensible mind. At the same time as the passions were to be controlled during the act of observation, they somewhat paradoxically provide the very content that makes self-observations worthwhile. Insofar as the self-observer can keep them out of the act of observation, the sensible and passionate mind is thus a particularly rewarding object of study.

Moritz’s plans were not just the empty words of an enthusiast but actually resulted in the journal *Know Thyself or Journal of Empirical Psychology* (*ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ oder Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde*, 1783–1793). The very title betrays the tension between therapeutic and epistemic meanings and contexts. On the one hand, the journal presented an extensive and diverse selection of observations, of which some were adopted from medicine and literature whereas others were actively produced through detailed observations and self-observations.⁴⁷ Especially the latter exhibits many features in common with the kind of moral-psychological history of the heart that Meier advocated, and that he explicitly situated in the context of the ancient *ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ* or *Know Thyself*. On the other hand, the label *empirical psychology* marks a significant shift in an epistemic direction. Observations were, first of all, to produce useful factual knowledge of the soul. What distinguished the content of the journal from the popular mainstream literature, Moritz stressed, was that “I record facts [*Fakta*], and not moral gibberish, not a novel, and not a comedy, nor any other books.”⁴⁸ The gaze is here that of the disciplined observer who scrutinizes, dissects and analyzes facts. In another contribution, it was remarked that, “in a magazine on empirical psychology, especially initially, the interspersed reflections must be as few as possible. Subsequently, it can expand more and more through important reflections and important facts [*Fakta*] that mutually help each other.”⁴⁹ For the empirical psychologist, it was important to cultivate the attitude of an impartial observer who accounts for facts to then add reflections and further facts.

Moritz's journal contained an abundance of observations and self-observations of which I will highlight one example that illustrates some central recurring tendencies. The contributor of this text described it as "one of the rarest documents of self-observation [*Selbstbeobachtung*] ... a fragment of remarks which the self-observer [*Selbstbeobachter*] made in his last very serious illness."⁵⁰ This man, he continued, "considered the knowledge of the inner state of his soul and the ability to quickly and correctly notice every change in it to be one of the noblest abilities of man, a great means to virtue."⁵¹ Thus introduced, the text itself recounted in detail the extraordinary sensitivity of the mind during the last phase of the disease.

Every germ of impulse, every remnant of an old one, needed only the slightest inducement to make the whole soul its property; like small heaps of powder, which one would never have noticed if the whole room had not caught fire, but which now, as the flame comes to each one, outshine the rest. The fleeting impulses, which otherwise sometimes fly through the soul and disappear before they are perceived, were transformed in my case into lasting, painted pictures.⁵²

The case exhibits a kind of double logic, in which the contributor first assumes the role of a neutral informant, and the disinterested attitude reappears in the dying man's meticulous account of his own fluctuating impressions.

Among the many cases discussed in the journal were a number of excerpts from the biography of a certain Anton Reiser.⁵³ The excerpts were connected to Moritz's own four-volume novel *Anton Reiser: A Psychological Novel* (*Anton Reiser. Ein Psychologischer Roman*, 1785–1790).⁵⁴ The work should be seen against the background of Moritz's interest in psychological observations and cases, and constituted what Andreas Gailus has referred to as a psychological "case-biography."⁵⁵ As such, the novel explores in some depth Reiser's development and life as he oscillates between exaggerated fantasies of greatness and sobering attempts to make reason his guiding principle. The third book thus describes how Reiser, in an attempt to replace romantic novels with philosophy and other food for reason, discovers the potential of recording his observations in a diary. While he is initially unable to perform self-observations, he eventually learns, after much practice, to assume the role of a cold-blooded observer.⁵⁶ The account of the cold-blooded observer foregrounds the dynamic tension between the affirmation and control of the sensible mind that runs through the whole novel. As Birgit Nübel has pointed out, this very tension is further reinforced by the narrative technique through which Reiser's experiences are portrayed in the third person as by a distanced observer.⁵⁷ Similar points have been made by Sheila Dickson, who has shown that play with narrative techniques was not restricted to *Anton Reiser* but figured frequently also in the *Journal*.⁵⁸ A broader and perhaps somewhat bolder thesis has been advanced by Cristina Fossaluzza, who has characterized Moritz's work as "subjective anti-subjectivism," the point being that subjectivity is constantly explored, perpetuated and reinforced precisely through the detached and critical gaze.⁵⁹

In the last section, we saw how Meier's impartial self-examinations served a therapeutic function by eradicating prejudices and misconceptions due to ignorance. In this section, this is further illustrated, while there is also a tendency that therapeutic connotations are challenged by epistemic ones. Overall, the picture here is no longer that of the philosopher who seeks to discipline and purge the mind of the raging passions. Rather,

we see the almost voyeuristic play between the affirmation of the sensual and the affective and the curbing of the same through the gaze of the cold observer: the more sensible the soul, the more necessary it became to subordinate it to impartial observations. While we have so far only glimpsed how the culture of sensibility tapped into the discourse on impartial self-observation, we will now address this context more in detail.

5. Aesthetic disinterestedness and disinterested psychological self-observations

Given the central role of the passions in the *cultura animi*, it should not come as a surprise that this also provides a relevant context for understanding sensibility. Yet, despite the fact that sensibility has been on the scholarly radar for more than a century, the Hadotian perspective has only recently started to be acknowledged.⁶⁰ Taking it into account, however, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten and Meier's aesthetics comes to view as an exercise-oriented culture of the sensual soul rather than an abstract theory or a scientific discipline in the modern sense of the word. What prepared the ground for this specific form of self-cultivation was a radical revision of the epistemology of Leibniz, Wolff and many other early modern philosophers.⁶¹ Sensual knowledge, in the form of clear and confused representations, had been valued insofar as it could be refined into or contribute to clear and distinct representations. But Baumgarten argued, in *Reflections on Poetry (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus, 1735)*, that sensual knowledge itself possessed a unique richness or extensive clearness that qualified it as a basis for aesthetics or the science of perception.⁶² With this followed not only a new science but also a cognitive and moral promotion of the sensual and affectual life as such.

This move by Baumgarten was further elaborated by Meier, who argued that his *Theoretical Doctrine of the Emotions in General (Theoretische Lehre von den Gemüthsbewegungen überhaupt, 1744)* was an attempt to complement the often sketchy and insufficient accounts of the emotions within aesthetics by providing a systematic scientific study.⁶³ While the theoretical part of this science defined and examined the emotions, the practical or ethical part "teaches us when we need to awaken a passion, to nourish, to increase, to decrease, to still and to prevent. In short, the practical doctrine of the emotions subjects the passions to reason and shows their rightful use."⁶⁴ In line with this revaluation of the role of the emotions, one must practice and learn how to regulate and channel them by systematically directing or distorting attention or by reinforcing or weakening sensual impressions.⁶⁵ A few years later, Meier's theory of emotion was put to work in the three-volume work *Basic Premises of All the Fine Arts and Sciences (Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften, 1748)*, where he stressed that the perfection of morality required the cultivation of both the higher cognitive and the lower sensual faculties, of which philosophy attends to the former and aesthetics to the latter.⁶⁶

Baumgarten and Meier's aesthetics provided the epistemological foundation for a broader literary movement where poets and writers abandoned the Pietist creed of a life in the honor of God in favor of the more life-affirming *carpe diem* ideal associated with ancient philosophes and poets such as Epicurus and Anacreon.⁶⁷ While the so-called Anacreontic poets promoted the sensual and affectual, the sensibility culture that developed in the second half of the century constituted a much broader and more

ambiguous movement where philosophers and writers often highlighted the dangers of exaggerated sensibility. This tension is, as we have seen, striking in Moritz's wavering between embracing and controlling the sensuous and affective forces.

Baumgarten and Meier's promotion of aesthetics can be said to have influenced Moritz on two levels. First, it played an important role in contributing to and promoting the broader culture of sensibility that came to shape Moritz and many other writers in the second half of the century. Second, it exerted a more direct intellectual influence through the launch of aesthetics as the perfection of sensual knowledge. Particularly relevant for my purposes is that this second, more specific context forms the immediate background to Moritz's and later on the Kantian notion of aesthetic disinterestedness.⁶⁸ The basic idea is that aesthetic disinterestedness refers to the immediate joyful experience of a beautiful object in its own right without any interest or instrumentality. Immanuel Kant thus argued that the aesthetic experience is characterized by a free and harmonious play between cognitive capacities that is disinterested or "without interest" (*ohne Interesse/uninteressiert*) because it has not yet been determined by a concept.⁶⁹ To cultivate a disinterested attitude here means to maintain this state of harmonious play. Kant's discourse has been traced back to a short text written by Moritz – a letter to Moses Mendelssohn in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, entitled *Attempt at a Unification of All Beautiful Sciences under the Notion of That which Is Complete unto Itself* (*Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst vollendeten*, 1785).⁷⁰ Moritz's point was precisely that the aesthetic experience is characterized by a disinterested form of enjoyment that is free from instrumental usefulness. In observing the beautiful, we lose ourselves for a while, "and this very losing, this forgetting of ourselves, is the highest degree of pure and disinterested [*uneigennützig*] pleasure that beauty affords us."⁷¹ The disinterested overcoming of narrow self-interest through art was further elaborated in *On the Creative Imitation of Beauty* (*Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen*, 1788).⁷² As Mattias Pirholt has remarked, Moritz's account of the constant struggle to overcome human imperfection by imitating nature's perfectibility reflects the metaphysics of perfection at the same time as it paves the way for the Kantian and the Idealist discourse on aesthetic disinterestedness.⁷³

The idea of the aesthetic experience as a disinterested loss or overcoming of the self has led scholars to ponder its relation to empirical psychology. While some have pointed to the literary qualities of the psychological case study, others have spotlighted a more profound conceptual connection. Monika Class thus argues that Moritz's aesthetics and empirical psychology are united by their interest in the individual; an interest that overcomes self-interest in being essentially disinterested and empathetic towards others.⁷⁴ A similar if more Foucauldian interpretation has been put forward by Robert Scott Leventhal, who claims that "the transcendence of specific interests or purposes, desire and will, moving beyond existing concepts and rubrics informs both disciplines with regard to their putative procedure and aim."⁷⁵ Leventhal further argues that there was an essentially therapeutic quality to the disinterested attitude of the observer. In *Prospect*, Moritz described disinterested self-observation as a comforting way of dealing with life's setbacks, such as being neglected or treated unfairly by other people.

As soon as I see that they don't want to give me a role myself, I stand in front of the stage and am a calm, cold observer [*kalter Beobachter*]. As soon as my own condition becomes

burdensome to me, I stop worrying so much about myself and regard myself as an object of my own observation, as if I were a stranger whose fortunes and misfortunes I listened to with cold-blooded [*kaltblütiger*] attention. In no circumstances of life is the observation of oneself and the people around us something unpleasant or burdensome. It is rather a consolation and a refuge from our own particular sorrow.⁷⁶

Leventhal argues that there is a therapeutic core to Moritz's aesthetics and empirical psychology that can be traced back to Meier and which, in a broader perspective, reflects the kind of *care of the self* that Foucault has referred to. This strand is ultimately also what explains the Greek title of the journal the *ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ* or *Know Thyself*. A similar point has been made by Nübel, who has suggested that the disinterested perspective of the cold observer served a therapeutic function in relieving the mind not only of passions but of the constant stream of impressions.⁷⁷ Overall, it thus seems that the therapeutic vein found in Meier's self-examinations is still very much alive in Moritz's empirical psychology. In both cases, impartiality and cold-bloodedness served similar tempering therapeutic functions. This, in turn, brings us back to the initial question of whether impartiality in early modern philosophy and science should be understood as an *epistemic* or a *therapeutic* concept.

The context of aesthetic disinterestedness can arguably be seen as a further expression of the tension between therapeutic and epistemic connotations inherent in Moritz's project. That said, it nevertheless seems that the epistemic connotations become more pronounced, and that these are often manifest through an almost voyeuristic alternation between rampant devotion to and restraint of the sensual and affectual. If this tension is at the heart of much of the literature on sensibility, the epistemic side is articulated in the new generation of textbooks on empirical psychology that became common from the second half of the 1780s. In their extensive and detailed discussions of self-observation as one of the principal methods of empirical psychology, epistemic connotations were paramount. In *Instructions for the Regular Study of Empirical Psychology* (*Anweisungen zum regelmäßigen Studium der Empirischen Psychologie*, 1787), the Kantian philosopher Ferdinand Ueberwasser thus stressed that the observer should prepare for observation by calming the soul and adopting an impartial attitude that would then guide the self-observation.

In preparation (a) a calm soul, free as much as possible from all prejudices, all preference and expectation [*Vorurtheilen, Vorliebe, Erwartung*] that it will be one way or the other, and seeking nothing but truth. (b) A determination, as exact as possible, of what we actually want to observe. *In the observation itself*, which here consists in the direction of the sense of self to the changes taking place in the inner self, a persistent observation with all attentiveness, but without noticeable effort, of the changes taking place in the soul, of the manner of their origin, of the accompanying circumstances, of the changes directly and indirectly following them, frequent repetition of the same observation both under similar and different circumstances, with a firm resolution to fully feel everything that the change contains.⁷⁸

A few years later, the Kantian philosopher Carl Christian Erhard Schmid stressed freedom of prejudice and impartiality as two of the roles to be followed by the self-observer in the extensive *Empirical Psychology* (*Empirische Psychologie*, 1791).

The influence that common and personal prejudices [*Vorurtheile*], or even inclinations and passions, have on observation to give it a skewed direction must be carefully prevented or at least made harmless ... No result that may have been found should get in the way of the

continuation of observation or destroy its impartiality [*Unpartheilichkeit*], but only give new impetus and new points of direction to the spirit of observation [*Beobachtungsgeiste*].⁷⁹

Schmid's textbook became highly influential and was reprinted several times. In 1804–1805, the writer Johann Carl Wötzel published *Outline of an Actual System of Anthropological Psychology in General and of Empirical Psychology in Particular, in Two Parts* (*Grundriß eines eigentlichen Systems der anthropologischen Psychologie überhaupt und der empirischen insbesondere, in zwey Theilen*). Given that Wötzel was known as a “Vielschreiber” who maintained a high production rate by copy-pasting and rewriting others' material, it is perhaps not surprising that the work contains a passage on freedom from prejudice and impartiality that strongly recalls Schmid's formula.⁸⁰

Enter observation without prejudices, preferences and passions [*Vorurtheile, Lieblingsneigungen und Leidenschaften*], allow them no influence, try everywhere possibly to prevent and disable them. Because the spirit of truth is without passions and free of prejudice, removed from old orthodox theological opinions full of superstition and enthusiasm, free from self-love, fondness and preference for certain people and things Therefore, no healthy result, no matter how certain it may be, may impede all possible continuation of the observation or destroy the impartiality [*Unpartheilichkeit*] of the observer himself, but rather it must stimulate him to even more precise investigations.⁸¹

Although authors agreed that psychological knowledge had important ethical implications, this new strand of textbooks illustrates the way in which impartial self-observations came to be articulated almost entirely within an epistemic context. Rather than illustrating a general tendency, however, these textbooks should be understood as perhaps the most extreme, and genre-specific, articulation of epistemic impartiality or disinterestedness that emerged in this context.

In this section, we have seen how the history of impartial self-examinations and cold self-observations coincides with that of aesthetics and with the culture of sensibility more broadly. The latter has attracted scholarly interest for more than a century.⁸² While historians of philosophy and literature have charted the role of sensibility within aesthetics, poetry and literature more broadly, social and cultural historians have addressed larger questions of secularization, civic identity and even the emergence of modern subjectivity and selfhood.⁸³ With regard to the latter, it has been argued that the interest in sensibility, and in the unique and individual experience more generally, should be understood as an expression of a new kind of civic self, an identity that, reacting against what was perceived as a repressive Christian ideal, was in the process of exploring its own possibilities and limits.⁸⁴ Intellectuals like Meier and Moritz placed themselves at the forefront of this development not only by exploring the uniqueness of individual experience but also by communicating and mediating it in moral weeklies, journals, novels and other information genres of the emerging public sphere.

6. Conclusion

This article draws on but also complicates previous historiographies of impartiality by analyzing *impartial*, *cold* and *cold-blooded self-examinations* and *self-observations* in the work of Meier and Moritz as well as other key sources. On the one hand, situating Meier's discourse in the overall context of philosophy as an exercise-oriented therapeutic

culture of the soul, lack of prejudice and impartiality come into view as serving therapeutic, regulative and tempering functions. To adopt an impartial attitude when examining one's own mind was crucial since one would otherwise risk being engulfed and corrupted by the very passions and desires that one had set out to explore. On the other hand, in sharp contrast to more repressive classical spiritual practices, Meier stressed the importance of affirming the sensual and affective. In Moritz's work, this tendency became much more pronounced. In accounts of the cold and cold-blooded observer, the distinction between therapeutic and epistemic functions is ambiguous. If the earlier picture had been that of the moral philosopher who struggled to temper and cure the mind, Moritz instead presented the sensible self as something that must be simultaneously embraced and observed with a cold gaze. While it is arguably possible to ascribe the cold attitude a therapeutic function, as it enabled a calm, disengaged view from above, this dimension seems to have been erased in the new generation of Kantian textbooks on empirical psychology that emerged from the second half of the 1780s. In these, the balance between affirmation and control of the sensible mind, which characterized the sensibility literature as well as Moritz's psychology, shifted almost entirely towards control, represented by the disciplined, systematic and impartial scientific observer.

The winding paths through which impartial self-examinations and self-observations developed over the course of the eighteenth century reflect overarching social and cultural processes associated with the emergence of the modern individual self. In particular, the growing interest in exploring the unique, subjective and often sensual experience through impartial self-observation should be understood as an expression of a civic self in the process of exploring and shaping its own identity. This identity was not just explored but also communicated and mediated to a wider readership through moral weeklies, journals, novels and other genres of the public sphere. In this way, the discourses of Meier, Moritz and many others took on a significance that far exceeded the disciplinary boundaries within which they were formed.

Notes

1. Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*; Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective", 597–618; Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*; Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*; Dear, "From Truth to Disinterestedness in the Seventeenth Century", 619–31.
2. Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*; Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective"; Dear, "From Truth to Disinterestedness"; Shapin and Schaffer, *Leviathan and the Air-Pump*; Shapin, *Social History of Truth*, 211–27; Gaukroger, "The Autonomy of Natural Philosophy", 131–63; Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making*.
3. This article is one of several publications exploring discourses and practices of self-examination and self-observation in eighteenth-century Germany. In particular, it further develops and complements the analysis presented in Rydberg, "Self-Observational Life in Eighteenth-Century Germany".
4. While "impartiality" and "disinterestedness" have a largely synonymous meaning in English, the central German eighteenth-century term was typically "Unpartheylichkeit". For the concept of impartiality, see Murphy and Traninger, *The Emergence of Impartiality*; Lühe, "Unparteilichkeit"; Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact*.
5. Shapiro, *Culture of Fact*.
6. *Ibid.*, 35–6.

7. Shapin, *Social History of Truth*; Shapiro, *Culture of Fact*.
8. Shapiro, *Culture of Fact*, 37.
9. Shapin, *Social History of Truth*.
10. Shapiro, *Culture of Fact*; Shapin, *Social History of Truth*; Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*; Gaukroger, "Autonomy of Natural Philosophy"; Dear, "From Truth to Disinterestedness"; Murphy and Traninger, *Emergence of Impartiality*; Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making*; Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind*.
11. Gaukroger, "Autonomy of Natural Philosophy"; Solomon, *Objectivity in the Making*; Daston and Galison, *Objectivity*; Daston, "Objectivity and the Escape from Perspective".
12. Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind*.
13. *Ibid.*, 109–13.
14. Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*; Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*.
15. Corneanu, *Regimens of the Mind*; Shapin, *Social History of Truth*, 156–70.
16. Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilkritik*; Lühe, "Unparteilichkeit"; Reisinger and Scholz, "Vorurteil"; Neumann, "Objectivity, Impartiality, and Hermeneutics", 265–85.
17. Neumann, "Objectivity, Impartiality, and Hermeneutics".
18. Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilkritik*, 84–154.
19. Wolff, *Philosophia rationalis sive Logica: Pars III*, 730, § 1012.
20. See the introduction to Meier, *Contributi alla dottrina di pregiudizi del genere umano/Beyträge zu der Lehre von den Vorurtheilen des menschlichen Geschlechts*. See also Schneiders, *Aufklärung und Vorurteilkritik*, 208–31.
21. Meier, *Abbildung eines Kunstrichters*.
22. *Ibid.*, 118–23, §§ 68–70.
23. Meier, *Vernunftlehre*, 275, § 202.
24. *Ibid.*, 275, § 202.
25. *Ibid.*, 276–80, § 202. In 1766, Meier published *Contributions to the Doctrine of the Prejudices of the Human Race*, presenting a comprehensive analysis of the concept of prejudice, based on his earlier work. Since it came several years after the ethical texts that are the focus of this account, I will not engage with it in detail here. See Meier, *Contributi alla dottrina dei pregiudizi/Beyträge zu der Lehre von den Vorurtheilen*.
26. Meier, *Philosophische Sittenlehre*, 380, § 403.
27. *Ibid.*, 380–1, § 403.
28. *Ibid.*, 381, § 403.
29. See Wolff, *German Ethics*; Wolff, *Vernünftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseligkeit, den Liebhabern der Wahrheit mitgetheilet*, 105, § 173.
30. Meier, *Philosophische Sittenlehre. Anderer Theil*, 391–2, § 407.
31. *Ibid.*, 408, § 414.
32. Martens, *Die Botschaft der Tugend*; Maar, *Bildung durch Unterhaltung*.
33. Zenker, "Zwei Jahrzehnte Volksaufklärung (1748–1768)", 55–80.
34. Lange and Meier, *Der Mensch, eine moralische Wochenschrift. Vierter Theil* (1752), part 168, 324–25.
35. *Ibid.*, part 168, 326–7.
36. Lange and Meier, *Der Glückselige, eine moralische Wochenschrift. Erster Theil* (1763), part 5, 66.
37. Daston, "The Empire of Observation, 1600–1800", 81–113; Pomata, "Observation Rising", 45–80.
38. Pomata, "Observation Rising". See also Pomata, "Praxis Historialis", 105–46; Pomata, "Sharing Cases", 193–236.
39. Rydberg, "Epistemics of the Soul", 383–403.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Zelle, "Experiment, Experience and Observation", 93–105; Rydberg, "Wolff and the Beginnings of Experimental Psychology", 231–50.
42. Lavater, "Geheimes Tagebuch. Von einem Beobachter seiner Selbst (1771)", 21–255; Lavater, "Unveränderte Fragmente aus dem Tagebuche eines Beobachters seiner Selbst (1773)", 711–1051.

43. The literature on Moritz is vast. For an overview of the state of the field, see Košenina, *Karl Philipp Moritz*; Fossaluzza, *Subjektiver Antisubjektivismus*; Schrimpf, *Karl Philipp Moritz*.
44. Moritz, *Beiträge zur Philosophie des Lebens*, 4.
45. Moritz, *Aussichten zu einer Experimentalseelenlehre*, 16. The work was, in fact, republished the very same year as *Proposal for a Journal in Empirical Psychology* (*Vorschlag zu einem Magazin einer Erfahrungs-Seelenkunde*, 1782). The change of title, which Moritz claimed to have made on the recommendation of Moses Mendelssohn, reflected the abandonment of experimental psychology in favor of an empirical psychology.
46. One hypothesis is that Moritz derived his discourse on the *cold observer* from Lavater. While Moritz seems to have preferred the more evocative phrase *cold observer*, it is worth noticing that he initiated the publication of a three-volume *Grammatical Dictionary of the German Language* in which he discussed the words “neutral” and “unparteilich”. According to this work, “unparteilich” signified an absence of preference and affection for a thing, whereas “neutral” referred to the absence of participation through advice or action. See Moritz and Stenzel. *Des hrn. Hofr. Moritz grammatisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*, 30.
47. In the wake of the growing interest in medical cases and case histories, Moritz’s journal has caught the attention of several scholars. See Leventhal, *Making the Case*; Pethes, *Literarische Fallgeschichten*; Zelle, “Experiment, Experience and Observation”; Košenina, *Karl Philipp Moritz*; Dickson et al., “*Fakta, und kein moralisches Geschwätz*”; Class, “K. P. Moritz’s Case Poetics”, 46–73; Gailus, “A Case of Individuality”, 67–105.
48. Moritz, *ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ oder Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (1783), vol. 1, part 1, 2.
49. *Ibid.*, 31–2.
50. Moritz, *ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ oder Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (1785), vol. 3, part 2, 63.
51. *Ibid.*, 63–4.
52. *Ibid.*, 73–4.
53. Moritz, *ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ oder Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (1784), vol. 2, part 1, 76–95; *ibid.*, part 2, 22–36; Moritz, *ΓΝΩΘΙ ΣΑΥΤΟΝ oder Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (1791), vol. 8, part 1, 90–8; *ibid.*, part 2, 7–30.
54. Moritz, “Anton Reiser”, 9–425. As Wingertzahn has shown in his extensive comment, the extracts in the journal were typically published before the corresponding volume of the novel. See Wingertzahn, “Kommentar”, 557–661.
55. Gailus, “A Case of Individuality”. For the connection between the journal and the novel, see also Wingertzahn, “Kommentar”; Leventhal, *Making the Case*; Pethes, *Literarische Fallgeschichten*; Dickson, Goldmann, and Wingertzahn, *Fakta, und kein moralisches Geschwätz*; Košenina, *Karl Philipp Moritz*; Fossaluzza, *Subjektiver Antisubjektivismus*.
56. Moritz, “Anton Reiser”, 209–10, 247–8.
57. Nübel, “Karl Philipp Moritz”.
58. Dickson, “[D]as Innere des Menschen aufklär[en]”, 18–29.
59. Fossaluzza, *Subjektiver Antisubjektivismus*.
60. See, for instance, Trop, *Poetry as a Way of Life*; Grote, *The Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory*; Gross, *Felix Aestheticus*.
61. For this particular context, see Buchenau, *The Founding of Aesthetics in the German Enlightenment*, 121–36; Grote, *The Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory*, 102–46; Nannini, “The Six Faces of Beauty”, 477–512.
62. Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry*, 78, 39.
63. Meier, *Theoretische Lehre von den Gemüthsbewegungen überhaupt* (1744).
64. *Ibid.*, 6, § 5.
65. *Ibid.*, 206, § 113, 308, § 176.
66. Meier, *Anfangsgründe aller schönen Wissenschaften* (1748), 30.
67. Kertscher, “Georg Friedrich Meiers Platz im geistig-kulturellen Leben der Stadt Halle”, 25–41; Beetz and Kertscher, *Anakreontische Aufklärung*; Kemper, *Deutsche Lyrik der frühen Neuzeit. Band 6/1 Empfindsamkeit*.
68. Aesthetic disinterestedness has long captured scholarly interest. For a selection of studies, see Hilgers, *Aesthetic Disinterestedness*; Rind, “The Concept of Disinterestedness”, 67–87;

- Woodmansee, *The Author, Art, and the Market*; Strube, “INTERESSELOSIGKEIT”, 148–74; Stolnitz, “On the Origins of ‘Aesthetic Disinterestedness’”, 131–43.
69. Hilgers, *Aesthetic Disinterestedness*, 21–4. See also Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 87–127 (5:201–44). The translation into the English “disinterestedness” tends to lose some of the rather specific technical meaning that Kant attached to the German terms.
 70. Moritz, “Versuch einer Vereinigung aller schönen Künste und Wissenschaften unter dem Begriff des in sich selbst vollendeten”, 3–9.
 71. *Ibid.*, 5.
 72. Moritz, “Über die bildende Nachahmung des Schönen”, 63–93.
 73. Pirholt, “Imitation, Interest, and the Ethics of Imperfection”, 263–85. For an in-depth analysis of Moritz’s *On the Creative Imitation of Beauty*, see also Rocks, “Praktiken zur Autonomie”, 187–203.
 74. Class, “K. P. Moritz’s Case Poetics”.
 75. Leventhal, *Making the Case*, 295.
 76. Moritz, *Aussichten zu einer Experimentalseelenlehre*, 21.
 77. Nübel, “Karl Philipp Moritz”.
 78. Ueberwasser, *Anweisungen zum regelmäßigen Studium der empirischen Psychologie für die Candidaten der Philosophie zu Münster*, 5–6, § 5.
 79. Schmid, *Empirische Psychologie*, 122–3, § 23.
 80. In addition to plagiarizing other writers, Wözel also changed his name to Wezel, presumably in order to take advantage of the fame of the better-known Johann Karl Wezel. Given that Wözel wrote on similar topics, the name change has caused some confusion among scholars. See McKnight, “Wezeforschung in der DDR”, 221–64.
 81. Wötzel [Wezel], *Grundriß eines eigentlichen Systems der anthropologischen Psychologie*, 158.
 82. For an overview of the state of the art, see Beetz and Kertscher, *Anakreontische Aufklärung*; Kemper, *Empfindsamkeit*; Sauder, *Empfindsamkeit*.
 83. For the context of literature and aesthetics, see Beetz and Kertscher, *Anakreontische Aufklärung*; Verwey and Kertscher, *Dichtungstheorien der deutschen Frühaufklärung*; Kemper, *Empfindsamkeit*. For the broader social and cultural context, see Sauder, *Empfindsamkeit*; Kemper, *Empfindsamkeit*; Aurnhammer, Martin, and Seidel, *Gefühlskultur in der bürgerlichen Aufklärung*.
 84. The thesis that the modern individual self emerged in the eighteenth century has been widely discussed by scholars for many decades. For some of the most influential works, see Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy*; Seigel, *The Idea of the Self*; Taylor, *Sources of the Self*; Leventhal, *Making the Case*. In the German scholarly discussion, Moritz has been highlighted as a central figure in this development. See Fossaluzza, *Subjektiver Antisubjektivismus*; Košenina, *Karl Philipp Moritz*.

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