
Book Review

BEISER, FREDERICK C. *Diotima's Children: German Aesthetic Rationalism from Leibniz to Lessing*. Oxford University Press 2009, 320 pp., \$70.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Daniel Whistler

If early eighteenth-century German philosophy remains a closed book to most philosophers, our ignorance is nowhere greater than in aesthetics. Although many undergraduates could name Baumgarten as the founder of modern aesthetics, few professors could tell you any more. The neglect of this period by Anglo-American scholarship is nothing short of scandalous, and so it is with immense relief and approbation that Frederick Beiser's new volume, *Diotima's Children*, should be welcomed. Beiser surveys the highlights of what he names "German aesthetic rationalism," with chapters on Leibniz, Wolff, Gottsched, Bodmer, Breitinger, Baumgarten, Winckelmann, Mendelssohn, and Lessing. Although not exhaustive, this survey is nonetheless an immensely helpful introduction to a tradition of aesthetic thought that has been universally overlooked.

Diotima's Children is a book of two halves: a methodical presentation of the systems of the early rationalists followed by a fast-paced narrative of the controversies in which later rationalists were embroiled.

The main difficulty with which the early chapters grapple is the splendid isolation of the rationalist tradition. Wolff and Baumgarten wrote seemingly oblivious to philosophical developments elsewhere in Europe, and this is reflected in Beiser's early chapters, which are austere monuments to systems erected seemingly free from external pressures. Yet, austerity notwithstanding, they are still testament to Beiser's consummate skill—making relevant and comprehensible the driest and most abstract of philosophical systems. Harmony-in-variety, the universality of beauty, and the application of the principle of sufficient reason to aesthetics—all of these tenets of early aesthetic rationalism are presented vividly. Moreover, Beiser achieves this without compromising on the difficulty of the underlying metaphysics and epistemology. Indeed, his treatment of Leibniz and Wolff will not be of interest to aestheticians alone, but constitutes one of the clearest presentations of their philosophical thought as a whole in English-language literature.

Beiser's overriding argument in these chapters is that an aesthetic tradition developed spontaneously within rationalism, prior to and independent of the influence of empiricism. Beiser implicitly rejects the prevalent assumption that it was the influx of empiricist thought in the second half of the eighteenth century that gave rise to a new discipline called aesthetics. He demonstrates at length how aesthetics was a pursuit indigenous to German rationalism, developing from problems intrinsic to the tradition.

The pace of the book changes completely, however, in the final two chapters, devoted to Mendelssohn and Lessing. Here adversaries from competing (empiricist and antirationalist) traditions finally enter the fray: Burke, Hutcheson, Rousseau, and Hamann. They challenge rationalism with ever-increasing cogency, forcing Mendelssohn and Lessing (as the last defenders of this tradition) to justify themselves repeatedly. These competing traditions raise searching questions concerning the sublime, the *je ne sais quoi* element in aesthetic

experience and genius. The last two chapters, therefore, are devoted to controversies, skirmishes, and polemics. As a result they are far livelier—even if less methodical.

Diotima's Children is not meant merely as an exercise in the history of philosophy, however. It is also intended as a battle cry against two later aesthetic traditions—the Kantian and the Nietzschean. In the introduction, Beiser indicates the ways in which pre-Kantian rationalist aesthetics both gives us a way to interrogate and also offers an alternative to these two modes of thinking about aesthetics that still define the discipline today.

Beiser's charge against Kant is simple: by misrepresenting the rationalist tradition in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant fails to acknowledge the cogency of its position. On the one hand, this results in his “paltry polemic” against rationalist aesthetics (16). On the other hand, and more significantly, this failure means he is not aware of how earlier forms of the positions he holds had already been criticized from a rationalist standpoint. For example, Beiser shows how Kant's contention that pleasure is noncognitive had already been questioned by the aestheticians that preceded him.

Second, Beiser deploys German aesthetic rationalism to critique the Nietzschean adherence to the Dionysian. For Nietzsche and his followers, eighteenth-century philosophers were simply unaware of the Dionysian element of existence—“the irrational energies and instinctive forces behind life” (20). Beiser's strategy is to demonstrate that pre-Kantian German aesthetics was very aware of this element of art and existence, but *interpreted* it through the figure of Diotima, not Dionysus. Rather than seeing the erotic as an antirational frenzy, they conceived it—in line with Diotima's speech in Plato's *Symposium*—as part of a process of becoming rational and good. The hegemony of reason remained unchallenged.

The sole problem with these two critiques is that Beiser is not able to pursue them at any length without sacrificing historical reconstruction. In fact, compared to his previous books, this one is too short, at 320 pages, to achieve all of his goals. What the book most lacks is a substantial conclusion bringing together the insights garnered from each of the rationalists, reapplying them to later aesthetic theory. It is in the case of Kant that this lack of substantial engagement is most problematic. Beiser repeatedly stresses that Kant was ignorant of the rationalist aesthetic tradition. Such an emphasis gives the appearance that Kant began the *Critique of Judgment* completely liberated from the rationalist tradition, *ab initio*. Of course, Beiser is right to combat facile attempts to read pre-Kantian German philosophy as a dress rehearsal for Kant himself. However, throughout his whole survey of pre-Kantian aesthetics, Beiser grudgingly admits some influence on Kant only once (273). While Kant was revolutionary, he was not *that* revolutionary.

Diotima's Children is an immensely ambitious and rewarding volume. It provides us with a masterly survey of a shamefully neglected area of the history of philosophy—for this alone, it deserves its place on reading lists for both undergraduate and graduate aesthetics courses. However, it also begins to use this historical survey to challenge our contemporary preconceptions in aesthetics. German aesthetic rationalism provides (as Beiser starts to show) the resources to reconceive the discipline in alternative ways, ones that interrogate the very core of our post-Kantian and post-Nietzschean sensibilities. *Diotima's Children* is, then, both a magisterial monograph in the history of philosophy and a provocative intervention in contemporary aesthetics.

DANIEL WHISTLER
Department of Theology
University of Oxford
Oxford, OX1 3LD England

EMAIL: daniel.whistler@worc.ox.ac.uk