

Performing Enlightenment

Johann Burkhard Mencke and Academic Self-Critique

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Published in:

Actes de la 1ère Pré-Biennale Internationale de Philosophie Pratique en ligne

Publication date:

2021

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Citation for published version (APA):

Eskildsen, K. R. (2021). Performing Enlightenment: Johann Burkhard Mencke and Academic Self-Critique. In E. Théodoropoulou (Ed.), *Actes de la 1ère Pré-Biennale Internationale de Philosophie Pratique en ligne: Philosophie en praxis Le geste philosophique: engagements politiques, éthiques, éducatifs, artistiques 9-10 Mai 2020* (pp. 113-127). Laboratoire de Recherche en Philosophie Pratique.

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Performing Enlightenment: Johann Burkhard Mencke and Academic Self-Critique

Ο Διαφωτισμός ως Performance: Ο Johann Burkhard Mencke και η Ακαδημαϊκή Αυτο-Κριτική

Performant les Lumières: Johann Burkhard Mencke et l'Autocritique Universitaire

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For many Enlightenment philosophers, to do philosophy was not only to think and write, but also to live and act in the world. This performative purpose changed the meaning of philosophical texts as well as which texts could be considered as philosophical. The essay illustrates this point through the example of Johann Burkhard Mencke's famous lectures, *De charlataneria eruditorum* –on charlatany of the learned– first delivered at the University of Leipzig in 1713 and 1715. Mencke not only discussed the significance and problems of performance, but also emphasized his points by his own performance as a lecturer and as an author. He was not only critical of the false authority of others, but also of his own authority as well as that of his Enlightenment colleagues and allies. The lectures, I argue, exemplify a genre of Enlightenment philosophy that placed self-critique at the center.

Keywords: *Performance, Philosophy, Universities, Enlightenment, Critique.*

Για πολλούς φιλοσόφους του Διαφωτισμού, το να κάνεις φιλοσοφία δεν ήταν μόνο το να σκέφτεσαι και να γράφεις, αλλά επίσης το να ζεις και να δρας μέσα στον κόσμο. Αυτός ο επιτελεστικός σκοπός άλλαξε το νόημα των φιλοσοφικών κειμένων, καθώς επίσης και των κειμένων που θα μπορούσαν να θεωρηθούν φιλοσοφικά. Το δοκίμιο φωτίζει αυτή την άποψη, μέσα από το παράδειγμα των διάσημων διαλέξεων του Johann Burkhard Mencke, *De charlataneria eruditorum* –σχετικά με τον τσαρλατανισμό των λογίων– που εκδόθηκε για πρώτη φορά στο Πανεπιστήμιο της Λειψίας στα 1713 και 1715. Ο Mencke όχι μόνο έθεσε υπό συζήτηση την σημασία και τα προβλήματα της performance, αλλά επίσης έδωσε έμφαση στα απόψεις του με την δική του performance ως ομιλητή και ως συγγραφέα. Δεν ήταν μόνο επικριτικός απέναντι στην ψεύτικη αυθεντία των άλλων, αλλά και απέναντι στην δική του καθώς επίσης και σε εκείνη των συναδέλφων του και συμμάχων του Διαφωτισμού. Οι διαλέξεις του, υποστηρίζω, αποτελούν υπόδειγμα ενός είδους φιλοσοφίας του Διαφωτισμού που έθεσε την αυτοκριτική στο επίκεντρο.

Λέξεις-Κλειδιά: *Performance, Φιλοσοφία, Πανεπιστήμια, Διαφωτισμός, Κριτική.*

Pour plusieurs philosophes des Lumières, faire de la philosophie n'était pas seulement penser et écrire, mais aussi vivre et agir dans le monde. Ce but performatif changea tant le sens des textes philosophiques que les critères sur la base desquels un texte pourrait être considéré comme philosophique. Cet article illustre cette question à travers l'exemple des conférences fameuses de Johann Burkhard Mencke, sous le titre, *De charlataneria eruditorum* – Du charlatanisme des instruits – qui fût publié pour la première fois à l'Université de Leipzig en 1713 and 1715. Mencke n'a pas seulement discuté la signification et les problèmes de la performance, mais il a également mis en exergue ses points de vue, au moyen de sa propre performance en tant que lecteur mais aussi en tant qu'auteur. Il était critique non pas seulement envers de l'autorité fautive des autres, mais aussi bien de sa propre autorité ainsi que de ses collègues et alliés des Lumières. Les conférences, Je soutiens, exemplifient un genre de la philosophie des Lumières qui plaça l'auto-critique au centre.

Mots-Clés: *Performance, Philosophie, Universités, Lumières, Critique.*

Mencke as a Philosopher of Performance

Eighteenth-century Europeans associated critical thinking with philosophy and philosophy with Enlightenment. However, they insisted, to do philosophy was not just to think, but also to live and act in the world. The French ideal of the *Philosophe*, as it emerged during the 1740's, was based upon this connection between thinking and living¹. Similar definitions circulated in the German speaking parts of Europe already from the 1690's². Our understanding of philosophy has changed since and this change has influenced our idea of the Enlightenment as well. The Enlightenment is still associated with philosophy, but with more limited definition of philosophy. Philosophy, by this definition, is an investigation into the foundations of human understanding rather than a way of interacting with the world³. Core works of the Enlightenment have therefore disappeared from the canon of Enlightenment thought. One example is Johann Burkhard Mencke's *De charlataneria eruditorum* –on the charlatanism of the learned– first published in 1715. The book was probably the most successful academic publication of the early German Enlightenment. For many scholars across Europe, it embodied the spirit of a new

¹ Gumbrecht, H., U. and Reichardt, R., «Philosophe, Philosophie», in: Reichardt, R. and Schmitt, E. (eds.), *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820*, vol. 3, Munich: Oldenbourg, 1985, pp. 7-88 / Dierse, U., «Philosophie – Französische Aufklärung», in: Ritter, J. and Gründer, K. (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 7, Basel: Schwabe & Co. AG •Verlag, 1989, pp. 698-709 / Schlobach, J., «Philosophes», in: Delon, M. (ed.), *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, trans. by Wells, G., vol. 2, Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001, pp. 1020-1023.

² Eskildsen, K., R., «Christian Thomasius, Invisible Philosophers, and Education for Enlightenment», *Intellectual History Review*, 18(3), 2008, pp. 319-336.

³ Especially the impact of Kantian philosophy changed the ideal and, in consequence, the history of the Enlightenment, see also Hunter, I., «The History of Philosophy and the Persona of the Philosopher», *Modern Intellectual History*, 4(3), 2007a, pp. 571-600.

critical age. Countless copies were printed and can still be found in libraries and antiquarian bookshops all over the continent. However, in standard histories of the Enlightenment, the book is absent. It, for example, is not discussed in the otherwise comprehensive *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy* nor in Jonathan Israel's detailed accounts of early Enlightenment debates in *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested*⁴.

The book started its life as two lectures, delivered at the University of Leipzig, on the 9th of February 1713 and the 14th of February 1715, at the graduation of new masters of philosophy. The lectures were published together in the spring of 1715. The Leipzig censorship board banned the book shortly after its publication, on the 6th of May 1715, but it was immediately republished in Amsterdam and later also in other parts of Europe. The first underground translation into German appeared in 1715 or 1716. A second German translation, authorized by Mencke himself, went into print in 1716. In the following decades, it was translated into French and Dutch. A Spanish translation appeared in Madrid in 1787. Through its many different editions, the book also changed. In 1716, the Amsterdam publisher added a commentary by the later Göttingen professor Christoph August Heumann, which was reprinted and translated in late editions as well. These later editions also added numerous new footnotes or expanded older ones, swelling the original slim volume of 154 pages into a tome of 339 pages in the sixth edition published in Naples in 1786. Other writers produced new works borrowing Mencke's title and idea⁵. So, throughout the eighteenth century, the book served as a shared European venue and reference point for critical discussions about the role and place of scholarship in the world.

⁴ Haakonsen, K. (ed.), *Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008 / Israel, J., I., *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 / Israel, J., I., *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

⁵ On the history of publication and the many different editions, see Mencken, H., L. «Preface of the Editor», in: Mencken, J., B., *The Charlatanry of the Learned*, trans. by Litz, F., E., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1937, pp. 3-45.



Fig. 1. Johann Burkhard Mencke, *De charlataneria eruditorum declamations duæ*, Leipzig, 1715. Courtesy the Royal Library, Copenhagen.

Mencke emphasized the connection between scholarship and the world by drawing attention to the performance of knowledge. The frontispiece of the first edition (fig. 1) showed a charlatan on a stage, performing in front of a crowd. In the second German edition (fig. 2), he added an additional stage. In the text, Mencke repeatedly compared scholarship to the theatre. In Antiquity, he claimed, the theatre had served moral instruction. Now, the performance had acquired a meaning of its own. Plays were judged according to the size of the applause and playwrights had invented new ways to attract applause. The members of the audience, moreover, reacted as much to one another as to the play itself. This interplay between performers and audience, Mencke argued, did not only happen at the theater, but also in scholarship. Scholars thirsted for recognition, were judged according to their fame, and had invented new ways to attract approval, which had little to do with their scholarship. This search for applause, by other means than scholarship itself, was what Mencke called learned charlatany⁶. So, the central question of the book was how and why society recognized someone as a person of knowledge, if not through this knowledge itself. It did not ask by which standards knowledge could be considered as justified true belief, but instead why people believed in what was presented to them as knowledge.

⁶ Mencke, J., B., *De charlataneria eruditorum declamationes duæ*, Leipzig: apud Jo. Frid. Gleditsch & Filium, 1715, especially in the introduction, unpag., and in the invitation to the first lecture, pp. 133-134. His definition of learned charlatany on p. 134.



Fig. 2. Frontispiece of the second German translation, Johann Burkhard Mencke, *Zwey Reden von der Charlatanerie oder Marcktschreyerey der Gelehrten*, Leipzig 1716. Courtesy the Royal Library, Copenhagen.

Performance and Critique

The usual reading of the book, recently reiterated by Marian Füssel and Hole Rößler, is that Mencke wanted to distinguish between real scholars and imposters⁷. So, Füssel, Rößler and others have argued, the book helped establish a new culture of scholarship and demarcated the Enlightenment from its opponents. This interpretation certainly fits with the usual Early Modern use of the concept and imagery of the charlatan. One illuminating example is the private art collection of the seventeenth-century Leiden medical professor Franciscus de Boë Sylvius, discussed by Pamela Smith⁸. In the entrance, Adriaen Brouwer's painting of a charlatan greeted visitors –marking the boundary between the outside world and the professorial residence. Another of Sylvius's possessions was Gerard Dou's famous *De Kwakzalver* of 1652. On both paintings, a charlatan; dressed in colorful clothing; sells his merchandize at a market square. Sylvius decorated his house this way, Smith argues, with the intention of «demarcating reason from folly, distinguishing his own experimental and practice-based medicine from that of mere manual operators, and distancing his controlled sensory investigation from indulgence in sensuality»⁹. At a first glance; the frontispieces of Mencke's book could suggest a similar reading. We are brought to the marketplace with a charlatan on a stage. Above his head a banner declares *Muntus fuld tezibi*, probably Saxon dialect for *Mundus vult decipi* –the world wants to be deceived. This was the motto, Mencke reported, of all medical quacks¹⁰.

However, the primary targets of Mencke's satire were not outsiders to the university. He showed little interest in the real charlatans on the Leipzig market and gave almost no attention to the most obvious enemies of the Enlightenment, such as orthodox theologians or religious enthusiasts. He instead focused upon mainstream academics. Some of his victims, such as Rosicrucians and antiquarians, were normal laughing stock of the Enlightenment. But Mencke also mentioned quite a few scholars, who were revered at German universities, and chided recent inspirations to Enlightenment thought, including French skeptics, critical philologists, and the idols of modern natural philosophy, Francis Bacon, René Descartes and Isaac Newton. He questioned the astrologers and alchemists of the past as well as the modern believers in facts, mechanical philosophy, and the law of gravity. He ridiculed

⁷ Füssel, M., «'The Charlatanry of the Learned': On the Moral Economy of the Republic of Letters in Eighteenth-Century Germany», *Cultural and Social History*, 3(3), 2006, pp. 287-300 / Rößler, H., «Scharlatan! Einleitende Bemerkungen zu Formen und Funktionen einer Negativfigur in Gelehrten Diskursen der Frühen Neuzeit», *Zeitsprünge*, 17(2/3), 2013, pp. 129-160.

⁸ Smith, P., H., *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004, pp. 183-236.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

¹⁰ Mencke, J., B., 1715, *op.cit.*, p. 119.

defenders of older traditions of Roman law as well as advocates of recent theories of natural law¹¹. If Mencke's work served as demarcation between the Enlightenment and its predecessors and opponents, there was not much left on the side of the Enlightenment.

Performance and Self-Critique

Rather than demarcation and critique of the opponents of the Enlightenment, the book probably aimed at academic self-critique. Universities were important battlefields in the intellectual wars of the early Enlightenment. They had played a key role in the process of religious confessionalization over the past two centuries. They had not only educated the clergy, but also delivered the intellectual justification for the division of Europe between the three major confessions, Catholicism, Calvinism and Lutheranism, and helped enforce confessional uniformity within the borders of each principality. This was especially the case in Protestant countries, where Church and university were closely intertwined. The Enlightenment critique of the confessional order therefore also had to target the universities¹². The crisis of the European mind here played out in lecture halls and in textbooks rather than in salons and popular journals.

Enlightenment thinkers were remarkably successful in taking over the universities. Most of the central characters of the early German Enlightenment were or became university professors. The universities therefore came into a double position as, at once, the principal guardians of confessional uniformity and the primary platform of the Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers had to embrace an academic way of knowing and, at the same time, change what it represented. They had to assume academic authority, but also to question this authority. So, scholars turned their critique inwards and, during the first decades of the eighteenth-century, wrote hundreds of satirical lectures, dissertations, dictionary and journal articles, theater plays and short stories, in which they ridiculed themselves and their colleagues. Mencke's *De charlataneria eruditorum* was the most successful of these writings, but far from the only one¹³.

¹¹ This insistence upon the continued problem of charlatanism may be most evident in his discussion of physicists and lawyers in the second lecture. *Ibid.*, pp. 111-115 and 119-124.

¹² Hunter, I., «The University Philosopher in Early Modern Germany», in: Condren, C., Gaukroger, S. and Hunter, I. (eds.), *The Philosopher in Early Modern Europe: The Nature of a Contested Identity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 35-65 and, for the critical alternative, Hunter, I., *The Secularisation of the Confessional State: The Political Thought of Christian Thomasius*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007b.

¹³ Forster, L., «'Charlataneria eruditorum' zwischen Barock und Aufklärung in Deutschland», in: Neumeister, S. and Wiedemann, C. (eds.), *Res Publica Litteraria: Die Institution der Gelehrsamkeit in der frühen Neuzeit*, vol. 1, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987, pp. 203-220, and Fulda, D., «Die Gefahr des Verachtetwerdens und die Fähigkeit über sich selbst zu lachen: Wissenschaft, Gesellschaft und Lächerlichkeit in der frühen und mittleren

A closer look at the frontispiece to Mencke's book confirms that it was not intended to demarcate outsiders, but rather to critique of the university itself. The scholar in the middle is surrounded by characters from the *commedia dell'arte*, to emphasize the theatricality of the situation, but he is not one of them. He is not dressed as a charlatan, but in the contemporary style of fashionable German academics, with wig and sword. The audience is also different from those on the Dutch paintings in Sylvius' house, analyzed by Smith. It is not just the common crowd, but consists of scholars and members of polite society. The person on the donkey is probably a character in the book, Erasmus of Rotterdam's friend Heinrich Loritus Glareanus. On the frontispiece of the second German edition, Mencke gave the scholar on the donkey his own frame, clarifying the context. According to Mencke, Glareanus taught philosophy at the University of Basel, but had not acquired a doctoral degree. During official events, he therefore had to remain either among the students on the floor or with the masters at the back of the lecture hall. To protest this arrangement, he entered a graduation ceremony mounted on a donkey¹⁴. The story about Glareanus and the donkey was not only historical anecdote, but also a reference to the hierarchical social order of a lecture hall, where the audience would be seated according to academic rank. This was still the norm at German universities during the early eighteenth century¹⁵. In the book, Mencke listed many other similar techniques that scholars employ to acquire and sustain academic status. They had invented impressive titles, used their degrees and dedications to patrons to sell books, promised too much in the titles of their books, and boasted about their achievements. The authority of the timeless and placeless Republic of Letters, in reality, was based on actions in place and time. The postures of timelessness and placelessness, as when scholars dressed in deliberately antiquated clothing to appear pious or absorbed in studies, was in itself a way to gain prestige among their contemporaries¹⁶. However, those who attempted to escape this false otherworldliness, dressed fashionably and behaved like 'galant hommes', like many of Mencke's contemporaries, were equally guilty of appealing for applause by other means than scholarship¹⁷.

Aufklärung», in: Fulda, D., Roeben, A. und Wichard, N. (ed.), *„Kann man denn auch nicht lachend sehr ernsthaft sein?“ Sprachen und Spiele des Lachens in der Literatur*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010, pp. 175-202.

¹⁴ Mencke, J., B., 1715, *op.cit.*, pp. 54-56.

¹⁵ Clark, W., *Academic Charisma and the Origins of the Research University*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006, pp. 77-78.

¹⁶ Also, Eskildsen, K., R., «How Germany Left the Republic of Letters», *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 65(3), 2004, pp. 421-432.

¹⁷ Mencke, J., B., 1715, *op.cit.*, pp. 51-54.

The publisher of the underground German translation, printed in «Cosmopolis» and «at the costs of scholarly society», reemphasized this element of academic self-critique with a new second frontispiece (fig. 3). At the bottom of the new frontispiece, someone is selling *arcana* –secrets– shown in a projection devise. On the top, two modern and stylish scholars are seen on a staircase. *Commedia dell' arte* characters are presenting them to an image with the banner *nosce te ipsum* –know yourself. On the image there is a rather strange figure, which does not have any clear model in early modern iconography; a bird with a human face on its breast and the bird is biting the nose. An obvious inspiration could be ancient story of the pelican pecking its breast to feed its young; a symbol of self-sacrifice and a symbol of Christ himself in Christian iconography. But there are no young birds and no blood, and it does not explain the face or the nose-biting. These may refer to the German expression, which was already used during the early eighteenth century, ‘sich an die Nase fassen’ –‘to take oneself at the nose’– meaning to be self-critical.

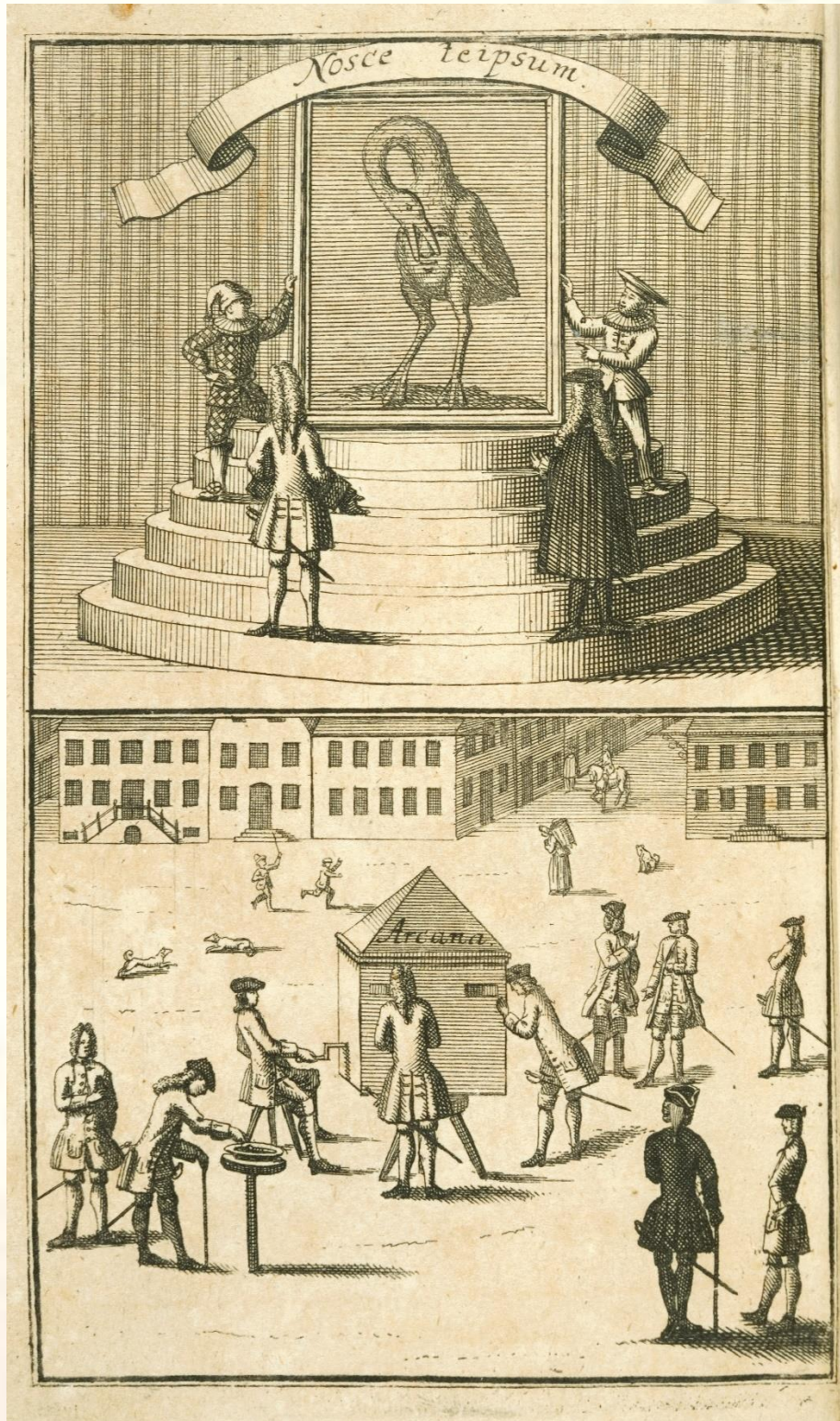


Fig. 3. Second frontispiece of the first German translation, Johann Burkhard Mencke, *Zwey Reden von der Charlataneria oder Marckschreyerey der Gelehrten*, Cosmopolis, no date. Courtesy the Joseph Regenstein Library, Chicago.

Self-Critique as Performance

Mencke's book was not only an analysis of academic performances, but also originated as academic performances; as two lectures delivered to new masters of philosophy in a lecture hall at the University of Leipzig. When delivering these lectures, Mencke's position was not that of an outsider, who criticized the establishment. He was at the prime of his academic career. A scion of a revered academic family, he had become secret counsellor of the Elector of Saxony, Royal Historiographer, and editor of the most prestigious academic journal in the Holy Roman Empire, the *Acta eruditorum*. When he delivered the first lecture, he was also the Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy. The second lecture was at the day of his inauguration as Rector. So, the occasion was the moment, when one of the most esteemed professors at the University of Leipzig bestowed one of its highest degrees, in front of the academic community. The lectures were written for this context. Mencke wanted, as the introduction to the authorized German edition explained, «to open the eyes of his audience». For «audience», the translator used the German word «Zuhörer» –those listening to him¹⁸.

In the original Latin version of the book, Mencke included a description of the graduation ceremony and its symbols¹⁹. According to this description, after his lecture, he called the candidates to the lectern. They were shown or given a purple hat, an open book, a closed book and a ring. The hat symbolized the freedom to philosophize and their inclusion into the Republic of Letters. The open book reminded them that they were continuing the work of their teachers. The close book encouraged them to trust their own judgement and the truth over established authorities. The ring symbolized their marriage to the virgin Sophia, the personification of wisdom. Finally, Mencke graduated them, calling upon God, Christ, and the Church, listing all his own titles and offices and wielding the authority and power of the vice-chancellor. So, while ridiculing academics who used other means than scholarship to acquire and convey academic prestige, Mencke was during exactly this.

Some of his criticism seems aimed at his own lectures and the graduation ceremony. He started his first lecture by addressing the rector and vice-chancellor as «magnifice»–magnificent– and «spectatissime» –most esteemed. Shortly after he ridiculed scholars that used these designations to put themselves at the level of princes and Roman senators. He chided those who criticized famous scholars to add to their own fame and questioned the academic order of seating in lecture halls during graduation ceremonies. During the first ceremony, he described the purple color of the hat as symbol of humility and a caution

¹⁸ Mencke, J., B., *Zwey Reden von der Charlatanerie oder Marcktschreyerey der Gelehrten* (Leipzig: Bey Joh. Friedrich Gleditschens seel. Sohn., 1716),)(3

¹⁹ Mencke, J., B., 1715, *op.cit.*, pp. 57-65.

against charlatanism. At the beginning of his second lecture, he joked about the risk of turning into a charlatan himself, selecting such as topic for his lectures. Mencke may have planned his lectures as performances that revealed themselves as performances. He may have offered an Enlightenment version of the performing arts concept that Bertolt Brecht called the *Verfremdungseffekt* –the alienation effect– where the audience is encouraged to disengage from the play, to see the situation from the outside and to reflect upon its significance.

The publication of the lectures as a book somewhat changed the situation. The original Latin edition of the book, with its description of the graduation ceremony, may have been an attempt to transfer the experience of the performance to print. This may be the reason for the extraordinary frontispiece. Mencke must have considered this frontispiece carefully and probably had some influence on it. The publisher was Mencke's farther-in-law Johann Friedrich Gleditsch. With the frontispiece, the reader was not just put in the position as a reader, but also in the position of the spectator, looking at the stage from above. This spectator could then imagine watching not only the charlatans on the Leipzig market, but also Mencke himself at the center of the stage, dressed in wig and fashionable clothing and with a graduation diploma in his left hand. So, the book not only explained the problem, but also exemplified the problem.

Enlightened Charlatanism

Philosophy and critique took many different shapes during the early Enlightenment. Spinoza and his followers critiqued knowledge based upon revelation and tradition. Instead of the word of God or his servants on earth, philosophers should turn to the voice of reason. The members of the Royal Society of London, on the contrary, critiqued knowledge based upon abstract principles or the systems of philosophers and adopted the motto, 'nullius in verba' (on no one's word). As an alternative, they proposed that knowledge should be based upon facts, discovered through experiments and free discussions in their private laboratories. Both Spinozists and British natural philosophers worked outside the universities and rejected the universities as too traditional and too hierarchical for the production of knowledge. The peculiar institutional situation of the German Enlightenment produced a different kind of philosophical ideal. For this ideal, academic self-critique was central. Mencke's book did not offer any alternative to academic authority –like Spinozist rationalism or the facts of British natural philosophers. However, it did offer instruments to analyze how this authority worked. All academics, by Mencke's definition, were guilty of some degree of charlatanism and should be aware of their charlatanism.

This point may have become even more important with increasing specialization. Today few academics believe that reason or facts will one day solve the problem of authority. In the complicated modern system of expertise, we have to rely upon the word of others. We trust experts not because we understand their knowledge, or how this knowledge was produced, but because of the institutions that they represent. We have instated systems of control, but these systems often only increase our dependence upon institutions. They, for example, allow administrators and funding agencies to estimate the relative value of research, according to impact factor, H-index, and i10-index, without ever reading the actual research. These systems are therefore also open for new forms of fraud, which manipulate with the indicators of knowledge rather than with knowledge itself²⁰. Even more than Mencke and his contemporaries, we may live in a world of charlatanism. No amount of speculation about the foundations of human understanding will relieve us from this predicament. Our best hope may be a philosophy that again insists upon the connection between living and thinking. We need to ask not only what knowledge ought to be, but also what it is in and for the world.

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