RIVAL ENLIGHTENMENTS:
Civil and Metaphysical Philosophy in Early Modern Germany

IAN HUNTER

Cambridge University Press
Rival Enlightenments is a major reinterpretation of early modern German intellectual history. Ian Hunter approaches philosophical doctrines as ways of fashioning personae for envisaged historical circumstances, here of confessional conflict and political desacralisation. He treats the civil philosophy of Pufendorf and Thomasius and the metaphysical philosophy of Leibniz and Kant as rival intellectual cultures or paideia, thereby challenging all histories premised on Kant’s supposed reconciliation and transcendence of the field. This landmark study reveals for the first time in English the extraordinary historical self-consciousness of the civil philosophers, who repudiated university metaphysics as inimical to the intellectual formation of those administering desacralised territorial states. The book argues that the marginalisation of civil philosophy in post-Kantian philosophical history may itself be seen as a continuation of the struggle between the rival enlightenments. Combining careful and well-documented scholarship with vivid polemic, Hunter presents penetrating insights for philosophers and historians alike.

Ian Hunter is Professor of Humanities and Founding Director of the Centre for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at Griffith University, Queensland, Australia. He is the author of Culture and Government: The Emergence of Literary Education (1988) and Rethinking the School (1994), as well as numerous articles dealing with the historical conditions and roles of moral and political thought.
The books in this series will discuss the emergence of intellectual traditions and of related new disciplines. The procedures, aims, and vocabularies that were generated will be set in the context of the alternatives available within the contemporary frameworks of ideas and institutions. Through detailed studies of the evolution of such traditions, and their modification by different audiences, it is hoped that a new picture will form of the development of ideas in their concrete contexts. By this means, artificial distinctions between the history of philosophy, of the various sciences, of society and politics, and of literature may be seen to dissolve.

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The prime objective of this work is to reinstate a marginalised intellectual culture to its proper place in the intellectual history of early modern Germany. Although the civil philosophy of Samuel Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius is not unknown in the modern humanities academy, sympathetic treatment of their work is largely confined to the history of political philosophy, jurisprudence, and theology. To the extent that they feature in intellectual history and the history of philosophy more broadly, however, they appear as superseded figures, destined to be absorbed by the great oscillations between rationalism and voluntarism, idealism and empiricism which would reach their culminating reconciliation in the epochal philosophy of Immanuel Kant. We shall see that this reigning dialectical historiography is itself the offshoot of a second, rival intellectual movement, centred in the culture of university metaphysics. In order to recover early modern civil philosophy, therefore, it has proved necessary to criticise and reject a dialectical historiography designed to erase its historical existence and political significance. In place of this reconciliatory history, this book offers an account of two independent intellectual cultures – the ‘rival enlightenments’ of civil and metaphysical philosophy – which remain unreconciled today.

Retrieving civil philosophy from the all-assimilating, all-unifying mill of dialectical philosophical history is no straightforward task. For, by drawing its impetus from the arranged mutual deficiencies of opposed viewpoints, this historiography gives shape not just to history but also to the historian. It treats history as the medium in which the unreconciled dimensions of human subjectivity move towards their harmonisation, in the final recovery of the a priori conditions of experience and morality – the moment of Kant’s critical philosophy. Under these intellectual conditions, the historian views the past in terms of the unreconciled oppositions – between rationalism and voluntarism, intellectualism and empiricism – and finds his or her own ethical impulse in the need to