

# John Keill and the Pre-Critical Kant\*

Marco Sgarbi

*This paper focuses on John Keill's influence on Kant's pre-critical thought, as well as on his early understanding of Newtonianism. The first section reconstructs the spread of Newtonianism in Königsberg during Kant's university years. The second deals with Keill's method of philosophizing and its impact on Kant's methodological reflections in his early scientific writings. The third and fourth examine how Keill's conceptions of inverse square law, solidity, extension, and divisibility helped Kant find his own eclectic way in combining metaphysics and mathematics.*

Keywords: Kant, Keill, Newton, Metaphysics, Mathematics.

## 1. Newtonianism in Königsberg

The eighteenth century is usually characterized as the age of Newton for the impact his thought had on many research fields from natural philosophy to ethics, from legal theories to literature, from mathematics to metaphysics. However, the “Newtonian moment” arrived very late in Germany<sup>1</sup>, and in particular in Königsberg in comparison to other countries like France and Italy, and other university towns like Paris and Padua. Of Newton and his followers’ reception and influence in Germany we know almost nothing. There are no serious studies like those of J.B Shank for the French Enlightenment, or of Maria Laura Soppelsa for Italy, or of that edited by Eric Jorink and Ad Maas for the Dutch Republic<sup>2</sup>. In spite of

\* All references to Kant's works are cited in the body of the text according to the volume and page number, given in Arabic numerals separated by a colon, in the critical edition of *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (=KGS), edited by the Royal Prussian (later German, then Berlin-Brandenburg) Academy of Sciences (Georg Reimer, later Walter de Gruyter & Co. 1900). The one exception to this rule is the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where passages are referenced by numbers from “A,” the first edition of 1781, and/or “B,” the second edition of 1787. Unless otherwise noted, the translations of Kant's writings are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992) and those of Aristotle's from the *Complete Works* (Princeton University Press, Princeton 1984).

<sup>1</sup> Mordechai Feingold, *The Newtonian Moment: Isaac Newton and the Making of Modern Culture*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Maria Laura Soppelsa, *Leibniz e Newton in Italia: il dibattito padovano, (1687-1750)*, LINT, Trieste 1989; John B. Shank, *The Newton Wars and the Beginning of the French Enlightenment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2008; Eric Jorink, Ad Maas (eds.), *Newton and the Netherlands: How Isaac Newton Was Fashioned in the Dutch Republic*, Leiden University Press, Leiden