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Johann Caspar Lavater
and the 18th-century Roots of Anomalistics

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Abstract – This article delves into the discourses surrounding anomalistic topics during the late Enlightenment, with a particular emphasis on Lavater's connections to this field. After outlining the theological and philosophical background that fueled his interest in paranormal phenomena, the main section explores the most significant cases Lavater investigated, detailing his methods of inquiry. Finally, the conclusion revisits the article's introduction, aiming to shed more light on the relationship between Lavater's anomalistics and the intellectual landscape of the late Enlightenment.

Keywords: history of parapsychology/anomalistics, Lavater, late Enlightenment, methods of early anomalistics, Charles Bonnet, Johann Joseph Gaßner, exorcism, Alessandro Cagliostro, initiatic societies, Ecole du Nord.

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Introduction

Historiographical reflections on the development of parapsychology, or anomalistics as it has more recently been termed, typically assert that it emerged in the latter half of the 19th century.[1] The formation of the first institutions dedicated to this field, such as the *Ghost Club*

1 I prefer the term "anomalistics" over "parapsychology" particularly because it does not suggest a specific affiliation of this discipline with psychology. I refer to the subjects of this field of research as "paranormal phenomena" or "the paranormal".

(1862) and the *Society of Psychical Research* (1882), both located in London, or the Munich *Psychologische Gesellschaft* (1886), is often used as a starting point. Additionally, scholars repeatedly emphasize Romanticism and particularly Romantic mesmerism as a significant precursor (Klosterman, 2012, p. 4). However, its historical origins can be traced even further back. In the ensuing discussion, I will contend that anomalistics originated in the late Enlightenment era through a confluence of philosophical and theological inquiry, early empirical explorations, and cultural fascination with paranormal phenomena, a constellation that began to take shape even before the advent of the mesmeric investigations of somnambulism. Moreover, I seek to illustrate that Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801) stands as one of its pivotal founding figures. The Swiss pastor of the Reformed Church was one of the most influential writers of the 18th century, celebrated for his contributions as a poet, philosopher, and theologian. His fascination with paranormal phenomena drew criticism and ridicule from many contemporaries and later interpreters, who accused him of miracle-seeking, gullibility, and an altogether too naive enthusiasm. However, a closer examination reveals that Lavater's inquiries into the paranormal were not merely outbursts of irrationalism, as his adversaries suggested, but well aligned with intellectual currents of the late Enlightenment.

The history of anomalistics in 18th-century Germany provides a chance to refine a still-influential view of the Enlightenment, which identifies this movement with a radical rationalism that "disenchanted" the world, leaned towards atheistic materialism, and dismissed the study of supposedly paranormal phenomena as unnecessary, labeling them as errors or deceptions from the start. However, the existing historiography of anomalistics has taken a notably ambivalent stance on this issue. One of the few studies on the history of parapsychology that addresses the 17th and 18th centuries titles its relevant chapter "In Kampfstellung gegen Rationalismus und Aufklärung" (Combating Rationalism and the Enlightenment) (Ludwig & Tischner, 1960, pp. 60–76) and thus positions parapsychological research as an antagonist to the Enlightenment. Within this framework, Ludwig and Tischner, again following a popular narrative, conceptualize Romanticism and its appreciation of paranormal phenomena and their investigation as a strictly counter-Enlightenment trajectory that paved the way for the development of modern anomalistics (Ludwig & Tischner, 1960, pp. 84–85).

Nonetheless, other sections of their book present a more nuanced perspective on the Enlightenment. The authors highlight that during its heyday, there were three distinct groups regarding the treatment of paranormal phenomena: orthodox Christians, those who adhered to a one-sided Enlightenment perspective, and critical advocates of the field who occupied a middle ground between the two (Ludwig & Tischner, 1960, p. 60). Rightly in my view, they note that Henning's book on divinations and visions reflects the perspective of a moderate Enlight-

enment (Ludwig & Tischner, 1960, p. 68). Additionally, they point out the diversity of opinions concerning prophetic dreams and similar phenomena as presented in Moritz's *Magazin für Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (Ludwig & Tischner, 1960, pp. 68–69). I will come back to Henning and Moritz later on.

John Beloff (1993) also initially posits an opposition between parapsychology and the Enlightenment, and later revises this stance. His history of parapsychology commences with mesmerism, particularly highlighting the understanding of somnambulism in the early 19th century, which surpassed the physicalistic magnetic theory of early mesmerism. In the prologue, he outlines the historical context that precedes mesmerism and delineates three distinct epochs: Renaissance magic, the Age of Enlightenment, and the Romantic Era. In the Renaissance, the occult arts like astrology, alchemy, and Kabbalah flourished. This period gave way to the scientific revolution, which systematically dismantled magical thinking, disenchanting the world and establishing a mechanistic paradigm that relegated the mind to a marginal role. Parapsychology emerges as a counter-movement to this reductive worldview. "Parapsychology, as we shall follow its progress in the ensuing chapters, can best be understood as challenging the mechanistic and reductionistic implications of official science by reaffirming the autonomy of mind" (Beloff, 1993, p. 12). It was well prepared for by Romanticism, which established "the cultural climate more propitious for paranormal phenomena to arise" (Beloff, 1993, p. 14). According to Beloff, parapsychology shares with traditional magic the premise that the mind, under certain conditions, is able to directly exert influence on the external world. It distinguishes itself from pre-Enlightenment magic by embracing a core tenet of the scientific revolution: the rigorous testing of hypotheses through methodical experimentation (cf. Beloff, 1993, p. 13). Thus, he ultimately recognizes that one of the foundational roots of parapsychology can be traced back to the scientific mindset of the Enlightenment. The following considerations deepen this insight by demonstrating that two methodological approaches to empirical anomalistics were already developed during the late Enlightenment. Furthermore, it will be shown that the cultural climate for the investigation of paranormal phenomena already existed at that time.

The Berlin Enlightenment (represented by authors like Friedrich Nicolai or Johann Erich Biester and the monthly journal *Berlinische Monatsschrift* as a journalistic platform) perhaps most closely resembled the above-mentioned Enlightenment stereotype. Representing a radically rationalist stance, this faction was the most powerful enemy of Lavater's anomalistic endeavours. However, it will become evident that it represented but one of many voices within the rich tapestry of late-Enlightenment thought.

Divination, spirits and miracles: Enlightenment discussions of paranormal phenomena

18th-century Enlightenment philosophy and psychology were engaged with 1) miraculous mental powers, 2) spirits, and 3) the question of whether miracles are possible. The epitome of paranormal human abilities was considered to be divination, which was generally understood to encompass precognition and precognitive dreams, fortune-telling, and sometimes also telepathy (cf. Kim, 2001, pp. 47–98). A spectrum of interpretations emerged on this matter, ranging from the outright denial of divination by scholars oriented towards materialism and sensualism, to interpretations that regarded it as a natural, albeit largely latent, human skill. At the other end of the spectrum lay the acceptance of supernatural causes of divination such as angels, demons, the spirits of the deceased, or God. An informative source that accurately reflects the various explanatory approaches is Henning's study on divinations and visions (Henning, 1777). Arguing from a moderate Enlightenment perspective, Henning does not categorically exclude the possibility of supernatural causes but prefers psychological explanations.

Belief in spirits was prevalent even among the educated classes of the time. It cannot be simply reduced to an anti-Enlightenment irrationalism or survival of a premodern mentality. As Diethart Sawicki notes, "The notion of bodiless, intelligent entities that could influence matter and manifest perceptibly to the senses was embedded across the authoritative domains of knowledge in the late 18th century" (Sawicki, 1999, p. 370; see also Conrad, 2008, pp. 92–103). Not only the writings of Swedenborg, the most renowned visionary of the century, but also philosophical and theological speculations about the spirit world (e. g. Abel, 1791 and Dedekind, 1793) and the poetry of the time contributed to the popularity of the topic. Last but not least, professional performers of the paranormal, often criticized as "charlatans," drew attention through public or semi-public spirit summoning. They sparked fervent debates and calls for closer scrutiny of the activities and phenomena occurring within the séances.

For instance, the well-known philosopher and Lutheran theologian Christian August Crusius (1715–1775) lamented in his controversial article on the necromancer Johann Georg Schrepfer (1738–1774): "I wish that at least some of the eyewitnesses would take the time to reflect carefully on what happened and to record it properly and have it printed [...] This would serve the truth in an important way, as there is a danger of deception behind it, and many do not know how to find the middle ground, but either outright deny the facts or make a false interpretation of them" (Crusius, 1775, pp. V.).

In the numerous psychological-anthropological journals published during that period, discussions encompassed the relationship between the soul and the body, dreams, various forms of madness, and also paranormal phenomena. These publications sought to enhance the empirical

foundation concerning divination and communication with the spirit world through detailed case studies. Among them, the many contributions on ghostly apparitions, prophetic dreams, precognitions, and fortune-telling in the *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* (Magazine for the Empirical Science of the Soul, 1783–1793), established by the late Enlightenment thinker Karl Philipp Moritz (1756–1793), warrant particular attention.

In line with the prevailing discourse of the time, the editors of the magazine offered varied assessments of the paranormal (cf. Dessoir, 1890; Kim, 2001, pp. 68–86). The popularizer of radical rationalism Carl Friedrich Pockels (1757–1814) criticized them in a moralizing tone, dismissing them as mere figments of imagination and superstition that the Enlightenment sought to combat. This stance led to a dispute with Moritz, who was reluctant to outright deny their existence and rejected what he perceived as Pockels' superficial polemic against enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*, a pejorative term used to criticize emotionally exalted religiosity).

While Moritz expressed skepticism about the soul's ability to foresee future events, he contended that it was premature to render a definitive judgment on the matter. He advocated for the collection of relevant data and their careful analysis, suggesting that divination might represent a human capacity that until then had remained largely untapped due to a lack of knowledge and recognition.

This skeptical openness to anomalous phenomena resembles in a way Lavater's cautious yet affirmative stance regarding their existence. By referring to Moritz, Lavater sought to lend greater credibility to his position within the late Enlightenment, a move that was particularly necessary in light of the scathing critiques from the already mentioned Berlin Enlightenment. "How many inexplicable tales of divination does Moritz gather! In the end, does it not all converge on a form of divination that belongs to human nature just as much as reason and memory?" (Lavater, 1790, p. 90).

A third realm in which anomalies were reflected upon within the scholarly world was that of the discourse on miracles. It partially overlaps with the discussion of paranormal human abilities insofar as they were perceived as miraculous powers. Since the beginnings of the Enlightenment movement in the 17th century, the miracles and prophecies that hold significant importance in the Bible, along with the faith in them that has been transmitted through later Christianity, have been the subject of contentious debate. A significant number of prominent philosophers and theologians have taken a stance on the question of the existence or non-existence of miracles. Particularly at stake were the relationship between apparent or genuine "supernatural" phenomena and the laws of nature in terms of Newtonian physics, and the question of whether God actively intervenes in the affairs of the world, and if so, how. Lavater was

introduced to this discourse as early as the 1760s during his sojourn with the famous theologian Johann Joachim Spalding (1714–1804) in Barth (cf. Lavater, 1997a, pp. 64–65). His theory of miracles developed in response to the ideas of philosopher Etienne Thourneyser (1715–1763) and the famous naturalist and philosopher Charles Bonnet, both of whom reference Leibniz's theory of miracles. In his work *Aussichten in die Ewigkeit* (Prospects of Eternity) he identifies several causes for the emergence of miraculous powers and wondrous events (Lavater, 2001, pp. 356–359). Alongside the partial awakening of abilities inherent in human nature that usually remain dormant during earthly life, anomalous events absolutely beyond human control may be instigated by higher beings (angels), through the direct intervention of God, or through a God-willed, preordained convergence of various hidden physical causes. This position was certainly not represented by every theoretician but remains within the bounds of the Late-Enlightenment discourse on miracles.

Philosophical and Theological Sources of Lavater's Interest in the Paranormal

For Lavater, the ultimate purpose of human life is found in the union with God (cf. Lavater, 2001, p. 348). He underscores the significance of participating in God's power as a fundamental aspect of earthly Christian existence and of the bliss that awaits us in the afterlife. Christians already have the opportunity to partake in the fullness of the power bestowed upon Jesus Christ by God during their earthly lives. Complete participation is promised for the state of transfiguration at the end of days. The transfigured will realize the nearly infinite powers inherent in their nature, and they will also have access to the powers of angels and God: "In short, everything is possible for us; for we are also, in this sense, companions and partakers of the divine nature" (Lavater, 2001, p. 363).

Lavater aligns with Charles Bonnet in asserting that every human being contains an immortal "seed," which holds the potential for all future perfections of humanity, including opportunities for development after death. Under certain conditions, this seed can partially manifest in the present life. In *La Palingénésie philosophique* (1769), a work partially translated into German and commented upon by Lavater, Bonnet proposed that the potential body of resurrection exists already within the earthly body, taking the form of a subtle body composed of ether or light (cf. Bonnet, 1769, p. 23). Lavater later built upon this idea.

Egocentric desires, passions, and vices impede the journey toward ever higher levels of perfection and godlikeness after the Fall, yet they do not fundamentally undermine the limitless perfectibility of humanity. According to Lavater, the proofs of the Spirit and of power (1 Corinthians 2:4), as recounted in the Bible by Jesus and the apostles, represent anticipations of higher

powers inherent in human nature, manifested through the Holy Spirit. He seeks to support his claims with relevant biblical passages, asserting that such paranormal powers of faith and prayer are also promised to Christians of later generations (see Lavater, 2002, pp. 93–99).

A common objection to this theology was that there is little evidence of the purported miraculous powers in contemporary Christian life, suggesting that these gifts were granted by God solely during the early days of Christianity for its establishment. This criticism prompted Lavater to actively search for manifestations of paranormal powers in the present.

Lavater's most important cases

Pursuing his interests in anomalistics, he engaged with four sociocultural fields where individuals attributed with paranormal powers played a notable role at that time. First, there was the agrarian village culture, characterized by its healers and clairvoyants. Second, the southern German Catholic Church with Johann Joseph Gaßner, an exorcist who gained widespread fame. Third, the initiatic societies that thrived among the educated elite. Within this context, themes included communication with the deceased and other spirits, as well as the pursuit of magical powers and occult sciences like alchemy. Lastly, the fourth area of interest was the scene of mesmerist doctors, who investigated the paranormal abilities of their patients. This latter milieu shares many overlaps with the third field. Lavater's profound engagement with mesmerism, which began in 1785, is a vital part of his anomalistics. However, it will be set aside here, as the exploration of this intricate topic extends beyond the scope of the present study.[2]

Elisabeth Tüscher

In late summer or autumn of 1769, Lavater embarked on an investigation of the telepathic abilities of the clairvoyant Elisabeth Tüscher. Although her life circumstances are not well-documented in the surviving records, it is evident that she hailed from humble beginnings. She was indeed based in the city of Biel, but she fits into the milieu of rural clairvoyants. Tüscher practiced a form of hydromancy, an ancient method of divination that utilizes water. It was said that gazing into a glass filled with water would evoke clairvoyant visions of absent people and events for her. Seeking a rigorous evidence-based approach, Lavater consulted Charles Bonnet for guidance on the appropriate investigative methods (Luginbühl-Weber, 1997, pp. 387–388). After some initial reservations, Bonnet agreed and devised what is likely the first experimental

2 Lavater's mesmerist practice and his theories about animal magnetism are discussed in Baier (2023), pp. 243–281.

research design for a case study aimed at verifying the existence or non-existence of extrasensory perception.[3]

The aim was to test whether Tüscher could truly discern what was happening at distant locations inaccessible to her (usual) senses. Bonnet agreed to meticulously document his daily routine for two days. During this time, Tüscher was frequently asked what Bonnet was doing. Simultaneously, she was also asked for information about other individuals. The comparison of her statements with Bonnet's records revealed no matches.

However, Bonnet was not ready to give up. He pointed out deficiencies in the method used so far and advocated for an improved approach that would take the investigated person more into account, utilize an optimized and standardized questionnaire, and generate more accurate interview protocols. Tüscher should only be questioned about one person per day, with an interval of one hour between each experiment, allowing her brain fibers to rest in between. The precise time and phrasing of the questions should be meticulously recorded in writing. Leading questions should be avoided, as well as questions of varying content (Luginbühl-Weber, 1997, p. 387).

The available sources do not clarify whether and, if so, how closely Lavater adhered to these suggestions. Nevertheless, further experiments took place. In a summary of the Tüscher case, which he wrote in a letter to Bonnet dated January 31, 1771, the Zurich scholar emphasized that, in his opinion, the research project did not yield any conclusive results. He also highlighted a fundamental issue that would persist in discussions of anomalistic research: if paranormal abilities do exist, they may not be easily demonstrated or disproven under repeatable experimental conditions, as alleged "possessors" of these abilities cannot exert control over them in the same way they can with other mental powers. "I must therefore leave the matter in its complete indecisiveness. It is only certain that she (as she always said) does not have control over the art to see absent things as if they were present; and I add – only to a degree of certainty of 1 in 24. I cannot comprehend how she answered some of my questions with such astonishing accuracy" (Luginbühl-Weber, 1997, p. 106).

Months later, in a letter dated November 1, 1771, Bonnet once again inquired about the status of Lavater's experiments with Tüscher. He made it unmistakably clear that, in his view, the experiments had proven that her abilities were based on deception. He also indirectly urged Lavater to publish the negative results of their investigation to enlighten the public (Lugin-

3 Baumann (2023) provides a detailed analysis of the correspondence between Lavater and Bonnet, focusing on their views on miracles and the paranormal powers of faith.

bühl-Weber, 1997, p. 121). Lavater did not respond to this, and their correspondence on the subject ended. From then on, their exchange dwindled for years, likely at least partly due to their differences regarding the investigation of the Tüscher case.

In his later anomalistic studies, Lavater moved away from the carefully planned experiments that Bonnet had proposed. Instead, he crafted and interpreted profiles of individuals and their abilities through participant observation, personal notes, recorded conversations, and third-party accounts. This approach aligned with the *Erfahrungsseelenkunde* of Moritz – where formal experiments played a minimal role – and appeared to resonate more with him than the development of standardized testing procedures, for which he lacked adequate training. Additionally, he had come to recognize that the abilities in question were not reproducible under experimental conditions. After he came to believe that mesmerism offered a method capable of achieving exactly this, he once again championed the need for methodical experimentation.

If he deemed a case sufficiently intriguing, he typically contacted other scientists, inviting them to explore the matter using their available methods. However, he struggled to find anyone willing to engage as deeply as Bonnet had in the Tüscher case. The educated public, swayed by the controversies surrounding Lavater, increasingly dismissed such investigations, and it seemed that no one was willing to risk being labeled as his accomplice.

Johann Joseph Gaßner

In the summer of 1774, Lavater first learned about the Catholic exorcist Johann Joseph Gaßner (1727–1779). The simple village priest from Vorarlberg had, within just a few months, risen to become the most sought-after healer of his time. In the period from autumn 1774 to summer 1775, thousands of people – contemporary sources mention as many as 20,000 – flocked to Ellwangen in present-day Baden-Württemberg (cf. Midlefort, 2005, pp. 53–53). They came from all over Germany and neighboring European countries to attend Gaßner's healing events, held at the princely castle and in a city apartment. These crowds included patients seeking treatment, their companions, and curious onlookers alike. The appearance of the exorcist became the subject of the most intense public debate in late 18th-century Germany. Around 150 pamphlets were published either in support of or against Gaßner.

Gaßner was an unorthodox exorcist (cf. Meißner, 1985). The public nature of his demon expulsions, witnessed by large crowds, was not in keeping with the protocols of the Catholic Church. His healing activities centered on cases where, in his view, the devil and his demons mimicked common, medically recognized ailments in order to tempt their victims – as described in the Bible's account of Job's afflictions. For Gaßner, many illnesses were of this demonic nature.

The idea that being surrounded by demons (*circumsessio*), beyond merely exerting harmful moral influence through evil whisperings, could cause physical harm, was largely rejected in the Catholic demonology of the time. The *Rituale Romanum* of 1614, which codified the exorcistic rituals and their application, did not account for such demonic attacks and their defense, as it was entirely tailored to phenomena of possession (*obsessio*). However, according to the *Rituale*, there was the possibility of *praecepta in nomine Jesu* ("exhortations in the name of Jesus"), under which Gaßner's approach could be categorized if one were to turn a blind eye.

To ascertain whether the illness in question had a demonic origin or other causes, Gaßner would first conduct a test exorcism. This procedure was known in Catholic literature and exorcistic practice. However, by the 18th century, it had fallen out of favor, as it was deemed to unnecessarily burden the already suffering. Gaßner's formulas for this were: "If there is anything unnatural about this illness, I command in the name of Jesus that it should reveal itself immediately!" or "Devil, I command you in the name of Jesus to bring forth all the evils you have caused to this person!" If after this command no symptoms appeared, the patient was dismissed. However, if symptoms manifested, they were eliminated by banishing the demon.

Then the second step of treatment followed: the instructional exorcism, which consisted of self-help instructions. Gaßner repeatedly invoked the symptoms to train the patients to formulate exorcistic commands ("Begone, Satan!" etc.) themselves and thus to become their own exorcist and rid themselves of their illness. Gaßner's instructional exorcism was an innovation. The possibility of self-exorcism was occasionally mentioned in contemporary literature, but it was he who brought it to the forefront and taught it.

The nuances of his healing method were not the concern of the combatants in the Gaßner debate. Neither was the confessional division of Germany into Protestant and Catholic Christianity decisive in this context. The criticism, particularly from Enlightenment theologians of both Protestant and Catholic backgrounds, faced proponents of Gaßner who also came from both confessions. The discussion was particularly emotional, as Gaßner had imprudently suggested in his writings that it is possible that witches do exist. Moreover, the power he attributed to the devil reminded many of the era of witch trials, which no one wished to see return. However, belief in witches played little role in his actual practice – he diagnosed only very few patients as bewitched or actually possessed by demons.

At the end of August 1774, Lavater received a letter from a physician in Constance reporting on Gaßner's work. He began a correspondence with the Catholic priest, informed himself through printed sources about his healing practice, and reached out to several doctors, asking them to analyze it from a medical perspective.

Gaßner's exorcisms aligned far more closely, and in a much more spectacular fashion, with Lavater's religious views than the previously examined cases of paranormal powers. At first fascinated, he became convinced he was dealing with a man endowed by the Holy Spirit, who was reviving the miraculous power of faith as promised in the Gospels, just as Lavater had long yearned for. At the same time, and this again makes him a precursor to the practice of empirically researching anomalies, he advocated for a scientific investigation of Gaßner's work on-site, not only from a medical but also from a theological standpoint.

On March 26, 1775, he wrote to the famous Halle theologian Johann Salomo Semler (1725–1791), one of the leading representatives of the Protestant theology shaped by Enlightenment thought. Semler had already reacted in 1759 to the publication of a case of possession reported from a Lutheran context with a counter-treatise, which triggered a debate in Protestant theology known as the "The Dispute on the Devil" (*Teufelsstreit*). He continued to engage with this topic in the years that followed (Geffarth, 2008). Semler was therefore known to be highly critical of the assumption of possession and demonic influences. Nevertheless, Lavater openly declared to him that he was convinced of Gaßner's miraculous healing power. He urged Semler to travel to Ellwangen, or to send a third party in his place, to investigate the healings. He also declared his willingness to cover the travel expenses for this trusted person, in case untruths and fraud were uncovered during the investigation. Anticipating the accusation of credulity, he defends himself: "And then what more can I do, beyond the many daily inquiries I undertake, than to place this investigation into the hands of a man – who thinks so differently from me on this matter as one can possibly think? A man whom the entire world knows to be an opponent of demonology and possession" (Semler, 1775, p. 5). In particular, Lavater wanted Semler to determine whether the exorcist could truly heal incurable diseases in the name of Jesus Christ. If so, he sought to know whether these ailments were chronic and if they had been permanently cured.

As one might anticipate, Semler chose not to travel to Ellwangen, nor did he send a trusted person to the demon-ridden Catholic wilderness of Southern Germany. In his response, however, he addresses Lavater's considerations and his proposal to test Gaßner's healing activities in a nuanced manner (Semler, 1775, pp. 78–86). He admits that many devout Christians might sincerely perceive Gaßner's exorcisms as actual miraculous healings. He suggests that one could also assume that Gaßner is genuinely earnest in his work and that his intention to expel demons is sincere, and that it could also be possible that he truly heals sick people. However, this would not yet establish that Gaßner's healings were genuinely the result of the banishment of demons. To eliminate the influence of prior knowledge, he writes, one should task Gaßner with exorcising a patient while asleep – someone who has neither spoken to him before nor heard anything about him – and then observe the outcome. Furthermore, he dismisses the research questions

he was meant to address for Lavater in Ellwangen, arguing that they cannot be reliably answered either on-site or in general. How, for instance, could one ascertain whether a specific illness was genuinely incurable prior to Gaßner's treatment, thereby justifying the assumption of a supernatural miracle?

Lavater responded to Semler's reply with a second letter (Semler, 1775, 127–139). Therein, he informs him that meanwhile he has had access to a larger number of writings about the exorcist. Based on this reading, he revises his initial assessment of the exorcist. He now believes that Gaßner does not succeed in all his exorcisms and that most of his successfully treated patients ultimately relapse. While Gaßner claims to perform all his actions in the name of Jesus, Lavater has found no reports in the literature suggesting that Gaßner might be employing magnetism in place of his faith (a hypothesis emerging at the time). If this were indeed the case, he would have to be considered a fraud. The exorcist may attribute all the diseases he treats to the devil as their cause; however, this is far from a settled matter. In fact, his theories hold little merit and should not be conflated with established facts. Even if magnetism were the true force behind Gaßner's healings, it would be essential to recognize that such a remedy exists in nature. He underscores the importance of applying a maxim to Gaßner's exorcisms, which could be referred to as a principle of his anomalistics: "Let us not oppose it a priori. Instead, let us investigate whether it exists."

By May 1775, when this letter was written, Lavater had lost his urge to hastily arrange a meeting with Gaßner. Several factors contributed to this shift: warnings from friends, the study of serious critiques against the exorcist, and the satirical jabs aimed at Lavater himself, his associations with fraudulent miracle-workers, and his belief in the continuation of New Testament miraculous gifts. Having grown cautious regarding Gaßner, he sought to avoid further inflaming the situation by meeting with the exorcist and opted to wait for calmer times. His patience was not tested for long, as the exorcist soon receded from the spotlight of the late-Enlightenment public debate.

Gaßner's political and ecclesiastical adversaries, seeking to be rid of him, had searched for a sufficiently successful therapeutic approach that dispensed with a demonological explanatory framework. They ultimately alighted upon the magnetic cure pioneered by the Viennese physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), who in November 1775 was able to convince the members of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences in Munich, through a demonstration of his animal magnetism and an expert assessment, that he could achieve the same effects as Gaßner through the power of animal magnetism, without recourse to the workings of demons or Jesus Christ. This marked the end of Gaßner's career as a celebrated exorcist, his rituals having been prohibited by both Emperor Joseph II and Pope Pius VI.

Semler concluded his exchange with Lavater regarding Gaßner by publishing a two-volume work (Semler, 1775). The books included the letters from Lavater directed to him, his own replies, and a notice of their correspondence that appeared in the Halle scholarly newspapers on April 13, 1775. Furthermore, the publication contains extensive comments, additions, and explanations authored by Semler, along with several critical contributions from other writers that address not only Gaßner but also the previously mentioned spirit conjurations of Johann Georg Schrepfer.

In June 1778, Gaßner and Lavater finally met, during the latter's visit to Bavaria. Gaßner had been transferred to the village of Pondorf in Lower Bavaria, where he would spend the few remaining years of his life as a parish priest. Lavater stayed with Gaßner for a day. In his travel diary, he describes the encounter in considerable detail (Lavater, 1997b, pp. 1–28). He recounts the content of their conversations, for which he had prepared by formulating several questions to Gaßner, and provides a meticulous account of the treatment administered by the exorcist to a man named Bauer. Lavater also reports that he had Gaßner treated his own cough and compulsive yawning without success. Reflecting on his experiences with the exorcist and the reports about him, he concludes that there likely exists a latent, magical power of the spirit over the physical body – a power that dwells within all people due to their being made in the image of God, which can be continually refined and reach its highest flowering through faith in Jesus Christ. In this final assessment, demons or the devil no longer play a role. It sounds more akin to the "mind over matter" principle espoused by the Mind Cure movement of the late 19th century, rather than a plea for the practice of exorcism. After his travels in Bavaria, Lavater did not pursue the Gaßner matter any further.

Cagliostro

In the ensuing years, Lavater's fascination with the paranormal guided him into a specific segment of the partly aristocratic, partly bourgeois educated elite of his time, a social class to which he himself belonged. Within this milieu, initiatic societies thrived, providing spaces for the exploration of new forms of social and religious life while creatively engaging with old "occult sciences," which were believed to hold the keys to humanity's hidden powers.

Guiseppe Balsamo (1743–1795), commonly known as Count Alessandro di Cagliostro, is the first to be mentioned here. The Freemason, alchemist, magician, and healer with a penchant for deception and fraud was one of the most controversial figures in late 18th-century Europe (Faulks & Cooper, 2008). He traveled throughout Europe as a doctor and seller of medicines, using his Masonic network and spreading his "Egyptian Rite," a high-degree system he invented, which was intended for physical, moral, and religious self-improvement and promised the development of magical powers, including communication with spirits.

Cagliostro was arguably the most famous among the numerous so-called "charlatans" of the time. Due to the vehement polemics from Enlightenment thinkers against them, the religious and cultural-historical significance of these figures was nearly entirely overlooked. It is only in recent years that scholars have begun to recognize the contributions these entrepreneurs of the paranormal made to the religious field of their time and especially to the emergence of new forms of unchurched spirituality (Asmussen & Rößler, 2013; Hannemann, 2014; Bazarkaya, 2019).

In 1779, Lavater was made aware of Cagliostro by Elisa von der Recke.[4] Two years later, in January 1781, he sought out the magician in Strasbourg, where Cagliostro was currently attracting much attention as a healer. Lavater traveled with a friend, the physician Johannes Hotze, and another aquaintance, a "young Tobler." Lavater and Hotze met Cagliostro out of personal interest, but they also had a task to carry out. They were to assess his qualification and character to determine whether he could serve as a doctor for Gertrud Sarasin-Battier, who suffered from severe gout attacks. A close friend of the Sarasin family, Lavater with the help of Lotze was fulfilling a request from Gertrud's husband (cf. Langmesser, 1899, pp. 31–41).

From today's perspective, the preparation for and conduct of the meeting was anything but professional. The first interview was a blunt failure. Hotze concealed his identity as a doctor and presented himself as notably reserved. Cagliostro did not know what to make of him. Furthermore, he was unsettled by the apparently unannounced presence of Tobler, who appeared to be unsure of his own reason for attending the conversation (cf. Hegner, 1836, pp. 238–239). In the tense atmosphere of this talk a candid exchange of ideas was impossible.

The following day, Lavater attempted a second approach and had Cagliostro handed a note with three questions: "Where do your insights come from? How did you acquire them? What do they consist of?" The magician replied curtly: "In verbis, in herbis, in lapidibus." This formula entered literary history because Goethe, who learned of Cagliostro's answer through Lavater, cited it in his comedy *Der Groß-Kophta*, in which the magician and the hype around him are parodied (cf. Blumenthal, 1961, p. 22). The Latin formula was not invented by Cagliostro. It is a partially quoted saying attributed to King Solomon, and often cited in medieval medical works and later in alchemical writings and Paracelsian literature (e. g. Helmont, 1707). Probably, the magician adopted the saying from there. The full phrase is: "In verbis, in herbis, in lapidibus est magna virtus." (In words, herbs, and stones lies great [healing] power).

4 Recke was at that time a devoted follower of Cagliostro, but she later distanced herself from him and published a critical and highly interesting work, in which she describes and reflects upon her experiences with the magician (Recke, 1787).

After Goethe inquired about his assessment of Cagliostro, Lavater conveyed it in a letter dated March 3, 1781:

> Cagliostro is a highly original, powerful, unrefined, and, in certain respects, indescribably base man; a Paracelsian star-fool [*Sternnarr*] – a hermetic philosopher, an arcanist, an anti-philosopher – that is perhaps the worst that can be said about him. Set aside all that is told about him – as he stands, he is certainly a remarkably steadfast and very peculiar [höchstprägnanter] man. […] He claims that the seven spirits are at his service, which he can see, hear, and feel just like me. He makes an unequivocal claim to the gift of prophecy. I believe, quite calmly and provisionally, what he says, although I am certain that the man often wants to go beyond his faith and then collides. He is certainly not without charlatanry, although he is not a charlatan. (cited after Funk, 1901, pp. 152–153)

Lavater thus portrays the magician as an original and strong-willed personality with poor manners, who nevertheless manages to convince through his commanding presence. He identifies his intellectual background referring to Paracelsus and Hermeticism and criticizes his use of astrology for healing purposes. For Lavater, Cagliostro was a gifted practitioner with no talent for theoretical reasoning, just as the exorcist Gaßner was (cf. Funk, 1901, p. 155). With regard to his medical practice, he correctly characterizes him as an arcanist, which, according to the language of the time, means a person in possession of secret recipes or manufacturing processes.

Lavater further reports that Cagliostro claims the ability to summon spirits and predict the future, and he does not outright deny this. However, he criticizes him for often wanting more than he is capable of. He recognizes that charlatanry in the sense of deliberate fraud is mixed into his actions, although his entire demeanor should not be reduced to that.

The seven spirits that Cagliostro claimed to command refer to the seven spirits that, according to Revelation 1:4, stand before God's throne. In his Egyptian Freemasonry, communication with them occupies a central place. Lavater interprets them, like the magician himself, as the seven first-created angels, closest to God and endowed with sublime power. In a letter to Sarasin from 1782, he expresses doubt regarding Cagliostro's morally ambiguous behavior and questions his claim that these spirits are at his service, urging Sarasin to exercise caution in trusting him (cf. Langmesser 1899, p. 41).

Lavater's aspiration to maintain a "calm, provisional faith" towards the magician, reflects the foundational attitude he wished to adopt in his anomalistic studies. This can be seen as a principle of benevolent interpretation, wherein the interviewees and examined writings are not immediately dismissed as irrational, deceitful, or mired in error. Instead, Lavater approaches them with a presumption of trust regarding the validity of their assertions. In contrast, the Berlin

proponents of radical Enlightenment, as his paradigmatic adversaries in the realm of anomalistics, adhered automatically to a hermeneutics of suspicion towards authors deemed enthusiasts or charlatans. They were all too inclined to see fraud or error, while Lavater's approach seems to embody greater impartiality.

However, he time and again overextends this attitude, veering into the opposite extreme. In such instances, he fails to set aside his own ideological biases, leading him to assume the existence of anomalies where a more critical examination would have been warranted. This gives the impression that Lavater time and again subscribes to a "There's always something to it!" maxim. His opponents, of course, interpreted this as gullibility and naivety, which simplifies his basically nuanced approach.

Lavater's confidence in Cagliostro's medical expertise was strong enough to recommend that Jakob Sarasin seek his assistance for the therapy of his wife. She recovered under Cagliostro's treatment, and her husband became one of his ardent supporters. Nevertheless, despite three additional encounters with Cagliostro (in October 1781, July 1782, and June 1783), and his high regard for Cagliostro's extraordinary talents, he ultimately remained skeptical, particularly due to the magician's arrogant self-presentation.

Franz Josef von Thun and the Spirit Gablidone

Another scandal during this tumultuous period of public agitation was ignited by Lavater's summary of conversations with Count Franz Josef von Thun (1734–1801), a Bohemian nobleman with whom he had cultivated a correspondence for several years (for Thun and the Gablidone affair cf. Cerman, 2015, pp. 84–94). In July 1781, during a fortnight's stay in Zurich, Thun engaged in discussions with Lavater and members of his circle. The Count had previously been a follower of the high-degree Masonic Strict Observance, maintained connections with the Illuminati of Avignon, and was likely affiliated with the Viennese lodge of the Asiatic Brethren.

Their conversations did not aim from the beginning to address magical powers; rather, the two wanted to explore differences and relationships between the various religions. At a certain point Thun inquired whether Lavater had any knowledge of "the holy Kabbalah or genuine magic." Lavater responded with finesse, inviting Thun to share his insights on the matter (Anonymous, 1787, p. 28). This prompted, as Lavater recounts, a lengthy narrative that Thun resumed intermittently throughout his stay in Zurich, including discussions with Lavater's brother and two other acquaintances. Lavater's records are not mere notes or transcripts of these conversations; rather, they represent an initial analysis. He organizes the themes that Thun repeatedly addressed into thirty numbered sections, without assessing the validity of the accounts or interpreting the content beyond their categorization by main topics.

According to Lavater, Thun's narratives revolved around his communication with a *spiritus familiaris* (a benevolent, helpful spirit of a deceased person) named Gablidone, purportedly a Jewish Kabbalist from pre-Christian times. Since around 1766, the Count had participated in gatherings where Gablidone answered questions. A magician renowned by his stage name Maganephton, who had graced the stages of Viennese taverns, served as a medium, conveying the messages of Gablidone. In keeping with the spirit of the times, an initiatic society emerged around the communication with this spirit, the Gablidone Brotherhood, which ceased to exist after Maganephton's death in 1778.

Lavater preserved his records of Thun's reports in his *Collectanea*, a private collection of what he claimed were twenty articles about paranormal phenomena from various, affirmative as well as critical, perspectives (cf. Lavater, 1790, pp. 86–87). Regarding his motivation for creating such a collection, he writes: "I enjoy collecting phenomena of all kinds, either to learn about the greatness or the smallness of humanity, its power, or its art of mimicking power without possessing it" (Lavater, 1790, p. 86).

In 1787, the article on Thun and Gablidone was stolen under mysterious circumstances and published by an anonymous editor, accompanied by a polemical "explanatory introduction" (Anonymous, 1787, pp. 3–24). The aim of the introduction and the whole publication was to undermine Lavater's allegedly harmful influence on his followers and the broader public by ridiculing him. Additionally, Lavater was assigned a role within the Enlightenment conspiracy theory that depicted the Jesuit order as a ruthless secret organization of Catholic propaganda, covertly working to undermine the accomplishments of the Enlightenment. The editor claimed that the Jesuits were behind Maganephton's machinations, with Lavater either knowingly or unknowingly assisting them.

To insinuate Lavater's involvement in the Jesuit conspiracy, the genre of the manuscript was misinterpreted. A summary of Thun's narratives, which refrained from judgment, was presented as a naive plea for the authenticity of a ghostly apparition that was based on evident deception. Lavater was accused of presenting the tricks of Maganephton and the Jesuits as genuine miracles and of disseminating other writings of this nature within his extensive private network, away from public scrutiny.

In his response to the theft and unauthorized publication, Lavater elucidates the intent of his manuscript while occasionally adopting a tone of bitterness, a reaction that is entirely understandable in light of the injustice he has endured. He now considers anything possible, "after it has become inappropriate to grant me the fundamental rights of humanity and property – in an age where only *enlightenment* and *tolerance* are spoken of" (Lavater, 1790, p. 87, italics by Lavater).

He also seizes the opportunity to summarize the information he has gathered on ghostly apparitions and their invocation. Not everything must necessarily be deceit; he cannot prove or disprove whether Gablidone is indeed a spirit from the realm of the dead at his current level of knowledge. More important than the question of truth or deception, however, would be the point that it is not worth pursuing these matters extensively, as the messages from such spirits are generally unfruitful. The operations of mediums yield no insights that could not be obtained through easier and less dangerous means. With this clarification, he refuted the suggestion that he would incite the summoning of spirits.

The École du Nord

The final extensive journey of Lavater's life led him to Copenhagen in 1793 (cf. Lavater, 1997b, pp. 109–365). There he visited a small clandestine circle known as the "École du Nord." This group, comprised of members from the upper echelons of society, was founded and led by the non-reigning Landgrave Prince Carl of Hesse-Kassel (1744–1836). A high-degree Freemason, Prince Carl held leadership positions in the Strict Observance and the Rectified Scottish Rite. Later, he became a member of the Illuminati. Little is known about his Copenhagen group due to a strict commitment to secrecy, which Lavater largely adhered to in his letters and records. Within the École, Prince Carl imparted his own secret teachings on the connections between religion, history, and nature. Central to his system was a doctrine of reincarnation, which he referred to as "rotation." Members of the École were regarded as reincarnations of biblical figures, although it remains uncertain whether this belief applied to all individuals within the group. Another peculiar aspect of the group was the claim that John, the beloved disciple of Jesus, was still alive on Earth and was in direct contact with the members.

At the center of the group's cult was a white-glowing, cloud-like apparition that hovered in the room, visible and tangible to the chosen ones. This phenomenon not only appeared during meetings; it was visible and interrogable for individuals on various occasions (Lavater, 1997b, p. 324). Prince Carl and his followers referred to it as "the Lord," "Spirit of the Lord," "Face of the Lord," or simply "the Oracle" (Lavater, 1997b, pp. 311, 322, 333). Through this entity, the Copenhagen circle believed they were communicating with Jesus Christ and, under his guidance, with the spirits of the deceased and the angels. At the beginning of their group sessions, they would inquire whether it pleased the Lord for questions to be asked. The Oracle answered this question and subsequent inquiries through signs appearing in the cloud, indicating Yes, No, or Yes/No (meaning the question needed to be rephrased to be answered with a yes or no). Another sign, likely appearing at the end of each communication in response to a blessing wish, was interpreted as a personal blessing from Jesus Christ (Lavater, 1997b, p. 328).

In 1791, Lavater was repeatedly invited by the Danish Foreign Minister Andreas Peter Count von Bernstorff (1735–1797), a member of the École du Nord, to visit the circle, with travel expenses covered by the group. However, he initially had significant reservations and wanted to learn as much as possible about the group before embarking on this adventure, seeking any indications of deception or fraud. The correspondence with Bernstorff, his wife Auguste, and Prince Carl dragged on, but ultimately, Lavater set off for Copenhagen in May 1793. As always on such journeys, he took the opportunity to visit prominent people and old aquaintances along the way. He left no doubt about the main purpose of his trip: "What do I have to examine? – *Is Christ truly active among these Christians*?" (Lavater, 1997b, p. 310, italics by Lavater). Independently of this, he also wanted to scrutinize the teachings of the circle.

Lavater was allowed to attend some secret meetings. Although he longed to make direct contact with Jesus Christ, he was unable to perceive the cloud phenomenon himself. His summary immediately after returning from Copenhagen in August 1793 sounds disappointed: "I am back – can hardly move – I can only say: everything is so completely different from what I thought, hoped, wished; yet I do not regret having been there" (Lavater, 1997b, p. 323). His own religious inclinations played an important role in his interactions with the Copenhagen circle. In some respects, they practiced a form of Christianity that resonated with Lavater. Although he was not admitted to the inner circle, he maintained correspondence with Prince Carl until his death, remaining skeptical of his qualities as a philosopher and spiritual guide. In his final years, the expectation stirred by the Copenhagen group of meeting the disciple John became a highly emotional obsession for him.

Once again, elements of descriptive anomalistics in the sense of Moritz' approach can be discerned. Lavater composed a manuscript titled "Results of My Journey" (now lost), organized by numbered main points, along with a "Supplement" that has been preserved in a copy by his friend Ulrich Hegner (1759–1840) (Lavater, 1997b, pp. 324–332). This insightful source for the École du Nord provides a detailed description of the circle's oracle practice and some of its teachings, as well as the members' behavior towards Lavater, largely refraining from judgments.

Closing remarks

Conclusion

I will conclude by revisiting the topic of the Enlightenment roots of Lavater's anomalistics. Lavater did not perceive himself as an adversary of the Enlightenment; rather, he positioned himself as a critical voice within its discourse. He believed he had been unjustly attacked under

its banner, with unscrupulous means employed that contradicted the very principles of the Enlightenment. "No Cagliostro, no Schrepfer, no Gassner, no Mesmer will take my reason from me, just as those who incessantly boast of enlightenment seem not to have grasped the A. B. C. of the most basic morality and humanity" (Lavater, 1821, p. 4). Can this self-assessment still hold true in light of the research findings presented here? I would argue that it can – and for the following reasons:

The proponents of the Berlin Enlightenment did not hesitate to employ questionable or unscrupulous tactics in their at times paranoid campaign against Lavater, yet he remained resolute in his pursuits. Furthermore, the portrayal of him as a wonder-obsessed enthusiast, which was perpetuated by this faction over the years, cannot be sustained. An initial enthusiasm, observable in a few of the supposed cases he examined, was typically soon followed by a phase of disillusionment. Only in rare instances, a tendency toward obsessive belief in the miraculous did manifest.

As noted earlier, there was a growing demand for more rigorous field research independent of Lavater during this period, with contributions in the *Magazin zur Erfahrungsseelenkunde* and other anthropological and psychological journals reflecting this direction of research. The time was ripe for anomalistic studies. It is thus understandable that Lavater felt profound disappointment when his enlightened interlocutors failed to heed his repeated invitations to investigate the cases he presented. He criticized their avoidance of empirical studies as a form of credulity and cowardice (Lavater, 1821, pp. 36, 55).

In contrast to his critics, he immersed himself, with great interest and without hesitation, unafraid of the potential damage to his reputation, into a shadow world of the miraculous, largely populated by dubious personalities. During his investigations, it soon became evident to him that he often encountered illusions and deception rather than genuine phenomena. In the records concerning the manifestations of the spirit Gablidone, it is noted: "Nothing is more easily and eagerly imitated than that which bears the name or semblance of something miraculous" (Lavater, 1790, p. 88). In a later letter, he resignedly concedes that even among respectable individuals, extraordinary powers typically do not manifest in their purest form but are invariably somewhat compromised, often through the machinations of malevolent spirits. He writes to Sarasin: "It is a pity that this beautiful ray of the divine image is so rarely, if ever, preserved in its purity even in good, pious souls. I know of no example where a divinatory person has not become a plaything of deceitful spirits! – Alas, we poor mortals!" (Langmesser, 1899, p. 119).

Thus, he did not lack in critical capacity or the practice of discernment. However, there were also shortcomings in his approach that rendered him vulnerable to criticism. Probably the most notable weakness of his anomalistics was the insistence on the existence of paranormal phenomena, which extended beyond the principle of benevolent impartiality in field research, driven by his strong religious and philosophical convictions. He never doubted that paranormal powers lie dormant within human nature, far exceeding all that is known, merely awaiting awakening and cultivation. He placed considerable pressure on himself to present such anomalies as empirical evidence of the divine nature of humanity and the truth of the biblical promises. In almost none of the cases he examined did he conclude that there was absolutely nothing to be found.

Whether this ingrained prejudice could have been dispelled through improved research methods and the insights of critical collaborators remains an open question. If one were to exclude his anomalistics from the late-Enlightenment movement merely based on this bias, one would also have to reject the position of the radical rationalists, who clung to the mirror-image prejudice that any investigation was unnecessary because its negative outcome was already established a priori.

Lavater addressed a significant desideratum of the Enlightenment by refusing to dismiss the various domains in which paranormal phenomena played a role with mere slogans and derision from a position of superiority. Instead, he endeavored to examine these phenomena more closely within the limits of his capabilities and sought to inspire other researchers, who were more skeptical than he, to follow suit. However, the increasingly entrenched positions in this late-Enlightenment discourse ultimately obstructed any possibility of fruitful collaboration.

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Deutsches Abstract

Johann Caspar Lavater und die Wurzeln der Anomalistik im 18. Jahrhundert

In diesem Artikel werden die Diskurse über anomalistische Themen innerhalb der späten Aufklärung untersucht und Lavaters Beziehung dazu herausgearbeitet. Anschließend wird der theologische und philosophische Hintergrund präsentiert, der zu seinem Interesse an paranormalen Phänomenen beitrug. Der folgende Hauptteil befasst sich mit den wichtigsten Fällen, die er untersuchte, und erläutert seine Methoden der Untersuchung. Die Zusammenfassung greift abschließend den Beginn des Artikels wieder auf und versucht, die Beziehung zwischen Lavaters Anomalistik und dem Denken der späten Aufklärung tiefer zu beleuchten.