

Christian Wolff

Christian Wolff (born January 24, 1679 in Breslau, died April 9, 1754 in Halle) was one of the most influential German philosophers of the eighteenth century. His literary output was immense, with extensive series of books, covering the entire range of philosophical topics in addition to the natural sciences, in both Latin and German.

Wolff studied theology, mathematics and philosophy in Jena beginning in 1699. With the help of G. W. Leibniz, he secured a position at Halle, then a stronghold of Pietism, teaching first mathematics and then philosophy.

Wolff was a moderate rationalist. This means that, while remaining within the bounds of theological orthodoxy as he perceived it, he valued the use of reason as a means of defending and elucidating truths that he believed to be amenable to rational inquiry. Although early in his career he held that revelation does not include truths that human reason can discover, eventually he adopted the strategy of separating religious truths into two classes: revealed truths that can be neither discovered nor comprehended by human reason (in his terminology, “pure” revealed truths) and revealed truths that can be discovered and comprehended by reason (“mixed” truths, the subject of natural theology). An example of the first sort is the Trinity. Wolff did not doubt that this doctrine is revealed in the Bible; however, the philosopher can not go beyond acknowledging it as revealed, for the doctrine transcends reason’s powers. The second sort of revealed truths have to do with God as creator and preserver and with our moral duties toward God.

This distinction yielded several results. First, Wolff believed firmly in the agreement of reason and revelation. As noted, this did not mean that all revealed truths could be comprehended by reason. In the case of pure revealed truths, human reason must, he held, submit to revelation. Nonetheless, although revelation might transcend reason, it would never contradict reason. Pure revealed truths were not, he argued, irrational. Second, this distinction meant that the methods of philosophy and natural theology on the one hand were quite different from those of revealed theology on the other. Wolff was thus careful to establish a firm demarcation between philosophy and revealed theology.

Wolff’s philosophical intent was quite conservative. He had no intention of subverting orthodox theology and in fact sought, where appropriate, to support it philosophically. Certainly many of his students believed his was the best philosophical defense of the Christian faith available. However, his conviction that reason and revelation do not conflict was inevitably taken to mean that human reason functions as the standard by which doctrines are evaluated. Further, his attempt to demarcate philosophy from theology tended to make philosophy an autonomous discipline, loosed from orthodox theological moorings. The possibility of academic philosophy free of ecclesiastical doctrine was disconcerting to many in his day.

Wolff ran afoul of certain Pietist theologians, notably August Hermann Franke (1663-1627) and Joachim Lange (1670-1744), while at Halle. There were several points of dispute. For one, Wolff understood philosophy to encompass the entire range of essences, i.e., of entities in so far as they are logically possible. The Pietists felt that this made philosophy into a more comprehensive and hence more significant science than theology. They also objected to his elevating God’s understanding over God’s will (since the range of possible being *known* by God is more extensive than the range of actual being *created* by God). Representing God primarily as an understanding mind seemed to suggest too great a similarity between God and the human mind. They were further

bothered by the fact that God's omnipotence seemed compromised, since God's will can not, in Wolff's view, change eternal truths and the essences of things. They were also disturbed by his view of human good as being centered in happiness instead of in the moral familiar and evangelical framework of sin and redemption.

Controversy with the Pietist theologians at Halle broke out in earnest in 1719 on the appearance of the German version of his book on metaphysics. Students were warned against attending his lectures and were used as informants to report on his lectures. Things came to a head in 1721 when Wolff gave a lecture on Chinese ethics. In it he asserted the agreement between the wisdom of the Chinese and his own philosophy, thus arguing for a natural and universal basis of human ethics and implicitly denying that ethics rests on revelation. The Pietists went on the offensive and, after a considerable amount of political maneuvering, both inside and outside the university, they persuaded the king, Friedrich Wilhelm I, in 1723 to banish Wolff on pain of death.

Wolff taught at Marburg until 1740. Here he composed a series of philosophical works in Latin parallel to his German works. As a result of his experiences in Halle, he became something of a *cause célèbre* and he received numerous invitations to accept teaching positions. Meanwhile, the controversy in Halle sparked a debate throughout the German universities about the merits and dangers of Wolff's philosophy. After some initial setbacks, Wolff's followers began to win the war of public opinion by presenting Wolff's philosophy not only as orthodox but as a valuable apologetic tool. National pride also entered into the issue, for in 1733 Wolff was made a member of the French Academy, the first German since Leibniz to be so honored. At length, after more political maneuvering and a public relations campaign to convince the king that Wolff's philosophy was an important defense against atheism, Wolff was recalled to Halle and study of his philosophy was made virtually mandatory. In 1745 he was made a Prince of the Holy Roman Empire.

Wolff is not considered to be a first-rate philosopher on the order of Leibniz or Immanuel Kant. His place in history is secured by two contributions. First, he created a vocabulary of German philosophical terms and thus contributed to the development of German philosophy. Second, he conveyed to the German academic world the importance of methodological rigor in philosophy. Consequently, his importance lies more in his influence than in his ideas. As the most influential German philosopher in the period between Leibniz and Kant, Wolff's moderate rationalism issued a challenge to the assumptions and methods of orthodox theology while providing a rigorous but also conservative alternative to the destructive brand of rationalism found in France and England.

References and Further Reading

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