CHRISTIAN WOLFF & SWEDENBORG[†]

Kurt P. Nemitz[*]

PREFACE

No philosopher is mentioned more often in Swedenborg's theological works than Christian Wolff. Wolff (1679–1774) was one of the major influences on Swedenborg's writing, and thus on the revelation made through him.

There is without question always a long and detailed preparation for every Divine revelation. The ancient prophecies announcing the coming of Jesus Christ Himself were made as far back as the ominous day Eve and Adam let themselves be seduced by the Serpent. And the prophecies kept on being made till the Star appeared. Because Truth is infinite, the process of its manifestation to mankind can never be otherwise than extremely complex. As with the form Life takes when it enters the world at the birth of every child, the form every Divine Revelation takes in each age is shaped by innumerable, as it were, genetic factors. Its ova in the revelator's mind is a vessel formed of all his knowledge and experience—of religion, history, science, language, culture—by his education, personal life and involvements. So too it was when our God and Lord revealed Himself anew to us through his servant Emanuel Swedenborg.

Swedenborg praised Wolff in high terms in his pre-theological works, calling him a "true philosopher;"[1] but in his theological writings he strongly criticizes him, describing him as a person who "placed learning only in such things as subserve intelligence and not in intelligence itself. "[2] This

---

[†] The author expresses gratitude to the Carpenter Fellowship Fund Committee of the Academy of the New Church for funding this study. He is also indebted to Rev. Stephen Cole for sharing his own significant research on Christian Wolff.

[*] Rev. Kurt Nemitz, B.A., M. Th., resides in Bryn Athyn where his mailing address is Box 164, Bryn Athyn, PA 19009.

[1] Emanuel Swedenborg, "A Comparison of the *Ontology* and general Cosmology of Christian Wolff with our Principles of Natural Things."*Scientific and Philosophical Treatises* (Bryn Athyn: Swedenborg Scientific Association, 1992) Part I, Fasc. 7, 113.

[2] *Spiritual Diary* (hereinafter SD), n. 4744.

notwithstanding, had not Swedenborg during a period early in his philosophical career intensively read and reacted to Wolff's conceptions, and also adopted some of Wolff's terminology, at the very least simply his *formulation* of significant elements of the theology for the New Church would have been markedly different.

The intent of this study of Christian Wolff is to provide further insight into the nature and content of the revelation the Lord our God has made at His promised Second Coming. To accomplish this it proceeds in three essays in order to: 1) give a basic knowledge of Christian Wolff's life and a brief overview of his philosophy; 2) trace the development of Swedenborg's awareness of Wolff's ideas; and 3) suggest the role Wolff was unwittingly to play in Swedenborg's formulation of the doctrine divinely revealed for the New Church.

JOHAN CHRISTIAN WOLFF

Although Johan Christian Wolff's once renowned name has now fallen like a brilliant shooting star into the darkness of oblivion, it may rightly be said that in his day—he was eleven years older than Swedenborg—he was regarded in his native Germany and nations beyond as *the* philosopher.[3] Summing up Wolff's role in Germany his contemporary and great wit Voltaire across the border in France wrote, "*Frederico regnante, Wolffio docente*," that is to say, "King Frederick is ruling, Professor Wolff is teaching,." And while in *Candide* Voltaire caricatured this acclaimed professor as the absurdly optomistic Doctor Pangloss, in his famous biography of Charles XII he describes Wolff as "that renowned and eminent connoisseur of all branches of philosophy."[4] This was no small compliment,

[3] Yet it is interesting to note that one contemporary, the German prelate Oetinger, went on record as saying he preferred reading Swedenborg to Wolff. He wrote to Duke Charles Of Württemburg: "When Chancellor Reuss had read me a letter from Copenhagen containing some information about Swedenborg, through Professor Kiess I became acquainted with his *Arcana Coelestia*. Thirty years previously I had studied Swedenborg's *Principia Rerum Naturalium* in folio, which I preferred much to Wolff's philosophy on account of its leading to the Sacred Scripture. It is wonderful how a philosopher, who was accustomed to think according to the rules of mechanics, should have become a prophet!" (R. L. Tafel, 1877, *Documents concerning the Life and Character of Swedenborg.* London: Swedenborg Society. 2–2: 1030.)

[4] Voltaire, *Histoire de Charles XII*, livre premier, tome IV, 45.

considering that in that day the general designation *philosophy* included the realm of practical knowledge as well as the theoretical—the natural sciences and mathematics as well as metaphysical ruminations. The subjects of Wolff's voluminous writing ranged from mathematics and magnetism on up to ethics and metaphysics. "Illustrious Wolff," said the historian Carlyle, "was recognized, at that time, as the second greater Leibniz, and head philosopher of Nature, who by 'mathematical method' had as it were taken Nature in the fact, and illuminated everything, so that whosoever ran might read, which all manner of people then tried to do, but have now quite ceased trying by the Wolff method."[5]

By the time Wolff was sixty not only had several of his works gone into third editions and his book *The Fundamental Principles of Philosophy* become the most popular textbook in Germany, but also Wolffians were in the faculty of most of the German universities. There were even Wolffian societies for the layman. These, such as the *Gesellschaft der Wahrheitsfreunde* (Society of the Friends of Truth) begun in 1736, were established to carry his popular philosophy beyond university circles. Biographies were written about him while he was still living. The German moral weeklies, following English models such as *The Spectator*, were filled with Wolffian doctrines. Popular books were even written presenting the Wolffian philosophy for the ladies![6]

Yet who today except perhaps a graduate student in philosophy even knows there was such a person as Christian Wolff? Part of the reason for his fall from popularity into oblivion, it seems, is that success did him in. Edwards' observes in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: "Wolff's doctrines were so successful and widely accepted that they began to appear trivial, and he was thought of as a commonplace philosopher."[7] But the greater part of the reason interest in him waned is undoubtedly that Wolff actually never personally generated any philosophical ideas that were novel and memorable.

---

[5] Carlyle, *Frederick the Great* in William White, *Emanuel Swedenborg, His Life & Writings* (London: Simkin, Marshall, 1867).

[6] Lewis Beck White, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, 1969), 260.

[7] *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 342, 343.

Wolff's Life

This once renowned academic, Christian Wolff (sometimes spelled less correctly Wolffe), was born in Breslau on Jan. 24, I679.[8] The son of a tanner, when young he was directed toward becoming a Lutheran pastor. As a result of his early education in Lutheran theology he did in fact become quite knowledgeable in the subject, particularly in the writings of the Catholic scholastics Thomas Acquinas and Suarez—knowledge he is said to have applied quite successfully in arguments with his Catholic contemporaries.[9] When he came to the University of Jena, however, he first studied mathematics and physics, to which he soon added philosophy, receiving his master's degree in 1702. A year later, in I703, he qualified as *Privat-dozent*, i.e.. lecturer, in the University of Leipzig, where he lectured up through the year 1706. Then, in 1707 at the age of twenty-eight, he became professor of mathematics and natural philosophy at the University of Halle.

This appointment came, significantly, through the influence of the already then well-known philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz—whose recommendation also brought him a seat in the Academy of Science in Berlin. Leibniz, a gentleman thirty-three years Wolff's senior, had learned of him through a letter from Otto Menke, founder and editor of Leipzig's *Acta eruditorum*, one of Europe's most highly respected scholarly journals (and one that was to review some of Swedenborg's secular publications). Leibniz was impressed by Wolff's *Privat-dozent* dissertation on the application of mathematical methods to the problems of practical philosophy. Leibniz's interest initiated an intellectual correspondence between them that lasted from 1704 until Leibniz's death in 1716, and initiated an equally long-lasting influence on Wolff's thought. In his writing, as a current Wolff scholar observes, Wolff "took in one element after another from Leibniz's philosophy."[10]

---

[8] There was another Wolf (*sic*), with whom Swedenborg was perhaps acquainted, and visited at Hamburg in 1736, Johan Christoph Wolf. See Tafel's *Documents Concerning Swedenborg*.

[9] Lewis Beck White, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard, 1969), 256.

[10] Tore Frängsmyr, *Wolffianismens genombrott I Uppsala* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1972), 17.

Wolff's academic career began with teaching mathematics at HalIe — he is thought to have been the first to teach calculus in Germany—but with time he expanded his fields of expertise, adding lectures in physics and eventually all the main philosophical disciplines. Mathematics was for him the mental basis for the study of all other sciences, and in his day actually included much of what in the present day is called "natural science" (e.g., astronomy) and "engineering" (e.g., design of fortifications). His specialization on mathematics led to the production of a monumental work on the subject (six volumes in the original German, five in the Latin version that followed three years later). The respective German and Latin titles of these ambitious works were *Anfangsgründe alle mathematicischen Wissenschaften* (1710) and *Elementa matheseos universae* (I713–15).

Productive though he was, however, he was not entirely appreciated at Halle. The university was a center of Pietism, a significant ecclesiastical movement of reaction against the dry intellectualism within Lutheranism of that day. The fundamental difference between the Pietist view and that of the orthodox Lutheran establishment arose from the Pietists' conception of Christianity as consisting chiefly in a change of heart and consequent holiness of life, while the orthodox Lutherans of the time made it consist mainly in correctness of doctrine. It is not surprising therefore that the claims the intellectual Wolff advanced on behalf of detached and relatively irreverent philosophic reason appeared impious to his heart-oriented pietistic theological colleagues. Furthermore, his teaching about our universe was regarded, not incorrectly, as deterministic. Two of his opponents on the faculty at Halle were Johan Franz Buddeus and Andreas Rüdiger—the latter whom Swedenborg was to visit at Halle a little over a decade later in 1734.

Open strife with the Pietists broke out in 1721 when Wolff, on the occasion of laying down the office of pro-rector, delivered an oration *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica* (On the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese), with the subtitle "The real happiness of a people under a philosophical king."[11] In it he defended his view that human reason possessed

[11] Wolff's international reputation grew to be such that a translation was later published in England, in I750.

the power to attain to moral truth by its own efforts. He instanced the moral precepts of Confucius as evidence of this ability, arguing that since the pagan Chinese of the Orient possessed an ethical system similar to that in the Occident, ethics was not dependent upon revelation, and high culture and human happiness were possible *apart* from religion.[12]

When the attacks on his views from the Pietists on the faculty turned personal, he appealed to the court for protection. His enemies, however, told their Prussian king, Frederick William I, that if Wolff's determinism were to be recognized as valid, no soldier who deserted could be punished, since he only would have been acting as it was predetermined he should. So upset was the king by this information that on November 18, 1723, he dismissed Wolff from his position at Halle and ordered him to be gone form the realm within 48 hours—or be hung! Accordingly Wolff departed. Crossing the border eastward he found refuge in Saxony, where the Landgrave of Hesse received him as no less than a distinguished personage.

It was further south, however, in the province of Hesse, that he found employment. He obtained a position at the Calvinist dominated University of Marburg where, in spite of his nominal Lutheran status, he had lectured by invitation the previous summer. He cannot but have enjoyed at least some aspects of this change in his situation. Marburg gave him a yet wider audience, as it attracted students, including even Catholics, from other countries. It was, incidentally, in part due to this change of location that, beginning in 1726, he ceased writing in German and now, doubtless with a broader, pan-European readership in mind, wrote in Latin. He became quite popular. The publicly known circumstances of his expulsion had drawn wide attention to him and served to advertise his new teaching position at Marburg. His years at Marburg were his period of true greatness. It was there he attained his reputation as the great mathematician of his day.

Words flowed from pen like water from an artesian well. His works were numerous and voluminous, heavy both in style and content. "In

[12] Cf. Swedenborg's statements about the existence of a written revelation, "the Ancient Word," in the region of China called Great Tartary (*Apocalypse Revealed* 11[2] et alii.).

reading them," it has been observed, "one cannot forget Wolff's definition of 'prolixity' in the *German Logic* (ch. 10, sec. 14): '*When a book is prolix: If more of already known things is presented than is required by the purpose of the book, then the book contains superfluous things in it, then it is prolix*.' He illustrates what needs no illustration. He proves (though often by proofs so invalid that the fastidious reader may squirm) what needs no proof. He defines what needs no definition. He cites by elaborate cross-references, his other works, which all too often are found not to elucidate the passage in question but almost be equivalent to it. He recommends his other books. He boasts of what he has accomplished. He moves with glacial celerity. He ruthlessly bores."[13]

Here follows a list of Wolff's major works. The first of these, but only a scant handful of the remainder, has been translated into English:

1713 *Vernünfftige Gedanken von den Kräften des menschlichen Verstandes*—Eng. trans. I770

1718 *Ratio praelectionum Wolffianarum in mathesin et philisophiam universam*

1710 *Anfangsgründe alle mathematicischen Wissenschaften, 6 vols.)*—in Latin, *Elementa matheseos universae*, 5 vols.), 1713–1715)

1719 *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt.* (A second and better edition of this was issued in 1732–1733; it was of this Swedenborg made use.)

I720 *Vernünfftige Gedanken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen zu Beförderung ihrer Glücksalighet*

172I *Vernünfftige Gedanken von dem gesellschäftlichen Leben der Menschen und insonderheit dem gemeinen Wesen zu Beförderung der Glücksalighet des menschlichen Geschlechts*

1721 *Allerhand Nützliche versuche, dadurch zu genauer erkäntniss der natur und kunst der veg gebähnet wird, den Lieberhabern der Warheit mitgetheilet*

I723 *Vernünfftige Gedanken von den Würkungen der Natur*

I724 *Vernünfftige Gedanken von den Absichten der naturlichen Dinge*

[13] Lewis Beck White, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard, 1969), 258.

1724 *De differentia nexus rerum*

I725 *Vernünfftige Gedanken von dem Gebrauche der Theile des menschlichen Leibes der Thiere und Pflanzen*

1726 *Oratio de Sinarum philosophica practica*

1726 *Ausfürliche Nachtricht von seinen eigenen Skriften*

1728 *Discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere*

I728 *Philosophia rationalis, sive logica, methodo scientifica pertracta et ad usum scientiarum atque vitae aptata*

I729 *Philosophia prima, sive Ontologia, methodo scientifica pertracta, qua omnis cogitationem humanae principia continentur*

1731 *Cosmologia generalis methodo scientifica pertracta, qua ad solidam, imprimis Dei atque naturae, cogitationem via sternitur*

I732 *Psychologia empirica methodo scientifica pertracta, qua ea, quae de anima humana indubia experientiae fide constant, continentur et ad solidam universae philosophia. practicae ac theologiae naturalis tractatione via sternitur*

I734 *Psychologia rationales methodo scientifica pertracta, qua ea, quae de anima indubia experientia fide innotescunt, per essentiam et naturam animae explicantur, et ad intimorem naturae ejusque autoris cognitionem profutura proponuntur.*

I737 *Theologia naturalis methodo scientifica pertracta. Pars prior integrum systema complectens, qua existentia et attributa Dea a posteriori demonstantur, 2 vols.*

I738 *Theologia naturalis methodo scientifica pertracta. Pars posterior, qua essentia et attributa Dei ex notione entis perfectissimi et natura animae demonstrantur et Atheismi, Deismi, Fatalismi, Naturalismi, Spinosismi aliorumque de Deo errorum subvertantur*

1738–39 *Philosophia practica universalis methodo scientifica pertracta. Pars posterior, praxin complectens, qua omnis praxeos moralis principia inconcussa ex ipsa animae humanae natura a priori demonstrantur*

1740 *Jus naturae methodo scientifica pertractum, 8 vols.*

1741 *De necessitate methodi scientificae et genuino usu juris naturae et gentium*

1749 *Jus gentium methodo scientifica pertractum, in quo jus gentium naturale ab eo, quod voluntarii, practitii, et consuedinarii est, accurate distinguitur*

1750 *Institutiones juris naturae et gentium, in quibus ex ipsa hominis natura continuo nexu omnes obligationes et jura omnia deducuntur*
I750–53 *Philosophia moralis sive ethica*
1735–40 *Kleine philosophische Schriften*, collected and edited by G. F. Hagen

Volumes enough to fill an entire bookcase. But this partial list only begins to give an idea of what a prolific author he was. According to Hazard, Wolff published in all 63 works in the period 1703–1753,[14] but since many of them were divided into several volumes, the total must have been nearly a hundred volumes. One of these was even an autobiography. Next to the just cited *Deutsche Logik*, among the most popular of all his publications were his so-called "German Metaphysics"—*Vernünftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, und alle Dingen überhaupt* (Rational Thoughts concerning God, the World, and All Things in General) first published in 1719, and the *Anmerkungen* (Notes)[15] added to that tome which appeared in 1724.[16] The *Metaphysics* was reprinted twelve times and the *Anmerkungen* six times. It began a whole literary genre and brought about his wider renown. His authorship evoked a proportionate response. Already by I737 over 200 books and pamphlets had appeared arguing for or against Wolff's doctrine. By 1739 his prodigious publications, which in their Latin versions had become available to all Europeans during his years at Marburg, plus the reading public's awareness of his persecution at Halle, had made him an intellectual hero.

Consequently, one of the first acts of Frederick the Great when he ascended when the throne in 1740 was to recall Wolff to his kingdom and the University of Halle there. In fact, that year King Frederick even invited him to Berlin, with the intention of balancing the Wolffian and Newtonian philosophies on the faculty at the Berlin Academy, an invitation Wolff chose not to accept, although he did accept the honor of a membership in the Academy. In I743 he was made Chancellor of the University at Halle,

[14] P. Hazard, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (London: 1954).

[15] Although English titles have been given here, these have not actually been published. To date only Wolff's *Discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere* (Praeliminary Discourse on Philosophy in General) has been published in English translation translated by Richard J. Blackwell. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963).

[16] Charles A. Corr, "Cartesian Themes in Wolff's German Metaphysics," in Werner Schneider, *Christian Wolff* 1679–1754 (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983), 113.

and in I745 he was ennobled to become "von Wolff" and received the title *praeceptor Germanae* from the elector of Bavaria. In the lecture hall, however, now in his mid-sixties, he had outlived his power of attracting students. His subject matter was no longer fresh and he was lonely in his classrooms. It seems, as Edwards has observed, "Wolff's doctrines were so successful and widely accepted that they began to appear trivial and he was thought of as a commonplace philosopher."[17]

Nevertheless, it has been properly said that Wolff's philosophy, the first comprehensive system ever to be published in the German language, was until 1750 either the source of most of the intellectual life in that nation or the primary target of intellectual attack. The assault came from two sides: from those few who stood firm with Pietism, and from those increasingly many who were preparing the way for the end of the Enlightenment's intellectual dogmatism and the establishment of a new philosophy. Yet he was highly respected by even many of his detractors. One of these, Immanuel Kant, born into the world a scant half-century after Wolff (1724), praised him for introducing the spirit of exactness and vigor (*Gründlichkeit*) into German philosophy. [18]

At the age of 75 Wolff died on April 9, I754.[19]

WOLFF'S PLACE IN 18TH CENTURY PHILOSOPHY

There were three major philosophical questions that concerned Wolff's and Swedenborg's era: Where does it all come from? How does God control things? and How is the body related to the mind? Wolff's place among his contemporary philosophers seeking to provide the answers, excluding Swedenborg, can be categorized as follows:

Where does it all come from?—Descartes
How does God control things?—Leibniz
How is the body related to the mind?—Leibniz, Wolff.

---

[17] *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 342, 343,

[18] White, 261.

[19] *Encyclopedia Brittanica*, 1956.

In these questions Wolff's thought drew on and was a consummation of both his seniors, Descartes and Leibniz .

I think it might be said that Wolff played a secular role in the intellectual world of the 18th century Europe similar to the theological role played by John the Baptist at Jesus' time in Israel, i.e., the role of bringing one age to a close and of preparing the way for the next. Wolff was the last major representative of Cartesian and Scholastic thought in Germany, and he was one of those who had opened the door to the *Aufklärung* (Enlightenment) there. Like Decartes he took mathematics as the model of his philosophical method. For him, mathematics—which he equated with syllogistic reasoning—was the propaedeutic to all understanding; it was the structure underlying all forms of knowledge. [20]And after the manner of the Scholastics he strove to apply syllogistic logic to all fields of knowledge, which has prompted one scholar to characterize him as a "German Aquinas."[21]

But Wolff's philosophizing went beyond Cartesian methodology and the primarily theological concerns of Scholasticism. In the words of the learned chronicler of early German philosophy Louis Beck White in his book *Early German Philosophy*, Wolff was one of the "two founders of the German Enlightenment." [22]

The Enlightenment, or *Aufklärung* in German, was there, as overall in Europe, a "sunny morning" frame of mind. It was marked by an intellectual optimism and a concern for human affairs that transcended the traditional respect for orthodoxy and authoritarian institutions. A classic characterization of this up-beat age is the following by Dilthey:

> The main features of the Enlightenment were everywhere the same: the autonomy of reason, the solidarity of intellectual culture, confidence in its inevitable progress, and the aristocracy of the spirit.[23]

---

[20] Peter Hans Heill,*The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: U. of Cal., 1975), 33.

[21] J. N. Findlay, *Kant and the Transcendental Object: a Hermaneutic Study* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

[22] White, title ch. XI.

[23] Dilthey, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin and Leipzig: Teubner, 1923–36), III, 131 (quoted by Louis Beck White in *Early German Philosophy*, 245).

This "aristocracy of the spirit" seems in fact to be precisely one of the things Swedenborg in his early philosophic period valued in Wolff. In his *Principia Rerum Naturalium* he praised Wolff's statements that: "In philosophy we must grant a place to philosophical hypotheses, so far as they prepare the way to a clear discovery of the truth." Again: "Science can make no progress without freedom to philosophize." Again: "Full liberty must be granted to all who philosophize in a philosophical manner, nor have we any reason to apprehend from such a liberty any danger either to religion, to virtue, or to the State."[24]

The Age of the Enlightenment throughout Europe was like day dawning: there was a confidence that all things could be seen and understood in the light of a rational analysis of the facts of experience. Yet, to accurately understand this era in which Swedenborg and Wolff lived we need also be aware that with many (although not quite so much so with Wolff) there was also an appreciation of the role of emotion and feeling. Hans Peter Heil explains:

> The new epistemology of the Enlightenment and the beliefs of the Neologists were directed against…rationalist explanations of both natural law and Christian revelation. The tendency of the Aufklärers was to redefine the word "natural" to make it accord with the observable qualities of man. Their work advanced a new model of scientific inquiry for the study of man. In the process, they felt forced to revise the standard rationalist evaluation of the powers of reason. Two of Wolff's earliest critics, Johann Gottlob von Justi and Johann Jacob Schmauss hammer away at this point. For them reason was at best a fragile tool, far overshadowed by man's passions and emotions. It was like the peak of an iceberg; it hid the real form of man's human nature. In a manner similar to Hume's, both believed reason to be the handmaiden of man's passions, which implied that any explanation founded on reason alone (including natural law) really clothed irrational motives. In his critique of the idea of the balance of power, Justi made the point clear: "A creature such as man, who possesses so many depraved predispositions and emotions and who

[24] Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Principia* (trans: James R. Rendell and Isaiah Tansley; London: Swedenborg Society, 1912), 292.

> also is endowed with the qualities of reason, is able to clothe his perverted and wrong actions in beautiful forms and masks…One always shows the world the pretty side of actions that actually result from the storm of one's passions. Reason, the dangerous companion of the passions, is always ingenious enough to construct whole systems to veil injustice.[25]

Lewis Beck White, the great scholar of early German philosophy, gives Wolff a primary place in the German Enlightenment because:

> [He] changed the Catholic and Protestant scholasticism of the Baroque period and the new natural science of Leibniz and von Tschirnhaus, as well as he understood them, into a conception of philosophy as an omnicompetent instrument of enlightenment. His goal, with the schoolmen, was no longer to make men religious, but to make them cultured and practically effective. Though few philosophers have been more completely academic than Wolff, whose pedantry, prolixity, and lack of humor became notorious, few philosophers have been more explicitly and self-consciously inspired than he toward putting philosophy in the service of non-philosophers, toward making philosophy the basis for popular education which would end futile religious controversies and contribute directly to the well being and happiness of mankind.[26]

Wolff's university lecturing and prodigious writing served to inspire the German academic community with the spirit of the Enlightenment. Consequently, to understand the genesis of Kant's thought, for example, it is generally agreed that a study of Wolff is essential, since the education and early years of Kant's career were spent in the dominant atmosphere of the German universities, and when he made his break from traditional philosophy in the late 1760s, he was in large measure repudiating the Wolffian tradition.[27]

---

[25] Peter Hans Heill, *The German Enlightenment and the rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: U. of Cal., 1975), 95

[26] White, 261.

[27] cf. Richard J. Blackwell in Translator's Introduction to Christian Wolff's *Preliminary Discourse on Philosophy in General* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963) ix.

Many of the learned in Sweden too, for whom the nearby and much more substantial scholarly establishment in Germany was a major source of influence, were inspired by Wolff. But Wolff's modes of thought also put significant personages in the establishment on the defensive. Tore Frängsmyr documents this in his book on Wolff's effect on "Wolffianism's Breakthrough at Uppsala University—the Philosophy of the Era of Freedom in the Mid-1700s." In his foreword he writes:

> Christian Wolff's philosophy was a significant contribution in the intellectual debate that took place during the era of freedom at Uppsala University. Because it was so all-embracing, not only philosophers and theologians but even scientists were drawn toward taking a position to philosophic questions. The representatives of orthodoxy looked on uneasily as rationalism extended itself, for with it followed freedom of thought and ideas of the enlightenment. They were jealous to retain their old privileges and to stake out the boundaries for philosophic freedom, and they were prepared to fight for their cause. In the resulting controversy, however, the conception of Wolffianism was not unequivocal; certainly it contained dangerous points, but it also had its good sides. Properly used it could serve as faith's handmaiden. Curiosity about philosophic problems and their solutions therefore had to subordinate themselves to the interest of theology.[28]

The state church's protective parochialism, however, in Frängsmyr's view did not prevent Wolff's Weltanschauung from playing a major role in intellectual life of 18th century Sweden:

> In rationalism's grand period, the years of the 18th Century, Wolffianism was one of the most typical intellectual currents of the times. With his methodical, observing awareness and his ambition to embrace almost all knowledge during the greater part of the century this philosophy came to appear as a fashionable science. It embodied the worship of human reason and believed itself able to systematize all its conquests. In

[28] Tore Frängsmyr, *Wolffianismens genombrott I Uppsala* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1972), 5.

> its basic view it was strongly characterized by mathematics and scientific thinking, but at the same time it filled the need for a more rationalistic philosophy in the church. The consequence was quite rightly that Wolffianism was at times considered as part of the process of enlightenment, at times as an opponent to the philosophy of the enlightenment; this depended more on the position the church took than that of the philosophers'. That it played an important role in the cultural stream, even in Swedish waters, seems incontrovertible.[29]

WOLFF'S PHILOSOPHY IN BRIEF

For all of his influence and acclaim, nevertheless Wolff can scarcely be called a significant philosophic innovator, which is doubtless the reason he is so little known and remembered today. He was actually not an innovator even in mathematics, the foundation science on which his whole Weltanschauung was structured. Wolff's only contribution to mathematics was lexicographical; for as he conceived mathematics, its essential nature consisted of definitions and syllogistic proofs. However, concerned as he was with universal problems of being, there was an area in which he was a precursor: his ideal was to contrive a universal language of symbols (mathesis universalis). Because of his mathematical/syllogistic Weltanschauung, his ideal—very probably inspired by his master Leibniz—was to contrive a universal language of symbols (mathesis universalis) which could replace the imperfect language of normal discourse. (This presumed more perfect language was to become a desideratum of Swedenborg's as well).

Wolff is very scholastic, with an awesome array of definitions. His inspiration for all this Beck White finds to be Leibniz's little 1684 study "Meditations on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas." In philosophizing he wants to: begin with empirical, historical knowledge; then, through analysis replace unclear with clear and distinct ideas; abstract and analyze these until one gets to simple ideas; combine these into definitions; and, finally, syllogistically move back to the empirical starting point—having picked up reasons and causes along the way.[30]

[29] Frängsmyr, 11.

[30] White, 262

This is very similar to the analytic-synthetic method Swedenborg was to espouse in his work *The Soul, or Rational Psychology*.[31]

A result of Wolff's analytic mind-set was his analysis and categorization of all human knowledge. In his *Discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere* he was the first to draw a clear distinction between pure and applied sciences—and he recommended that both be studied. In fact he himself became a practicing scientist, doing research and gathering data on, among other things, the nature and properties of magnetism (a subject that was to engage young Swedenborg too, early in his scientific period). In all his formulations in these various fields Wolff maintained a structure of argument modeled on mathematical proof. His professed ideal was to base even theological truths on evidence of mathematical certitude.

Nonetheless, rather than an innovator he was basically but a brilliant follower—a disciple of Leibniz. It was in fact clad in this toga that Swedenborg was to see him in a spiritual vision. Some of his contemporaries even referred to his philosophy as "Leibnizian-Wolffian," although Wolff made a point of denying that there was any such thing as a "Leibnizian-Wolffian" philosophy or that he ever intended to create such a philosophy. The phrase "Leibnizian-Wolffian" philosophy seems to have been coined nevertheless by one of his own disciples, Georg Bernhard Bilfinger (1693–1750).[32] Besides this, part of the justification manufactured by his opponents for his above-noted expulsion from Prussia was the charge that he was denying free will through his teaching of Leibnizian determinism. In short, Wolff was essentially a populizer of Leibniz, who, in the words of the Swedish scholar Inge Jonsson, "in a long series of handbooks reduced Leibniz's constantly evolving philosophy to a rigid system which could be taught to large numbers of students in the classroom."[33]

Wolff had become well acquainted with Leibniz's thinking in spite of the fact that his mentor in his lifetime (d. 1716) published only one full-length book, *Essays on Theodicy* (1710). How Wolff still was able to acquire

---

[31] Cf. Emanuel Swedenborg, *The Soul or Rational Psychology* (trans: F. Sewall; New York: New Church Press, 1887), xxx, xxxi.

[32] Charles A. Corr, "Christian Wolff and Leibniz" (Just Ideas: 1975) 242, 243.

[33] Inge Jonsson, *Emanuel Swedenborg* (New York: Twayne, 1971), 67.

this thorough acquaintance with Leibniz's ideas may be explained by what has already noted above: a.) beginning in 1768 and onwards Leibniz published a series of occasional articles in such academic journals as *Acta eruditorum*, and *Journal des scavans*, and b.) through the agency of *Acta eruditorum's* editor Otto Menke, in 1704 Wolff entered into an extended correspondence with Leibniz.

These letters were largely devoted to mathematics, the natural sciences, and some personal matters, but we note that in them Leibniz does discuss some of his philosophical ideas—most significantly, the doctrine of pre-established harmony between man's soul and body, which Wolff was to accept and promote.

But even before this, Leibniz's comment on Wolff's 1703 dissertation on the subject of algebra, which Wolff had sent him on Menke's advice, had already produced a fundamental change in Wolff's very philosophical method. Wolff had advocated the position of Descartes and Tschirnhaus that the syllogism is not a means of discovering truth. Leibniz disagreed. As a result Wolff re-examined his position on the syllogism and completely reversed his early evaluation. He came to the conclusion not only that the syllogism was a legitimate means to discover new knowledge, but that it was the essential mode behind mathematics, science, and the ordinary processes of thought themselves. This was very significant because, as just noted, nothing is more typical of Wolff's mature writings than their thoroughgoing commitment, both in theory and practice, to the machinery of the categorical syllogism.[34]

Everything Wolff wrote was formulated with almost maniacally detailed logical precision—albeit in a genial manner that often had an almost folksy tone and gave him great popular appeal. But this oft-times genial tone did not, could not, negate his deductive style's often tiresomely ceaseless referencing to previous statements in his works.

It was due to Wolff's devoted use of the syllogism's aprioristic dialectic that, as noted above, Peter Hans Heil writing on the German Enlightenment, has called him "the last major representative of Cartesian and scholastic thought in Germany," adding that "whatever he took from

[34] Corr, 248.

Leibniz was forced into a static mold of rigorous demonstration that divested it of the same dynamic elements that made Leibniz's philosophy so appealing to later generations." [35]

Wolff's Two Fundamental Principles

Wolff based all his philosophical thought on two fundamental principals: Non-Contradiction (*principium contradictionis*) and Sufficient Reason (*principium rationis sufficientis*). The principle of non-contradiction—that a thing cannot simultaneously be and not be—he held to be the primary law of clear thinking, so much so that he maintained that all other true statements could be derived from it. With its help one could decide whether a thing was possible or not. But in addition each and every thing that could possibly exist must have a "sufficient reason" for its existence. In asserting this principle Wolff was simply reformulating Leibniz's statement that "everything has a cause." Using these principles, Wolff felt, one could understand why a thing existed or did not exist, and why it existed in one way and not another. Philosophy he defined as knowledge of the possible; and its task, consequently, was to demonstrate how and why it was possible.

For Wolff philosophizing must be done according to definite rules, and for this purpose he developed the mathematical method, which Frängsmyr notes has also been called the "geometric, demonstrative, and scientific method."[36, 37] Basically this meant that the philosopher is to obey the laws of logic and, in particular, the laws of deduction. Wolff said that no principles may be used if they are not fully proved, and that no new principles can be accepted unless they are derived from such principles. Definitions too were of utmost importance to him. One is not allowed to diverge from the meaning that words generally have, he said, and if new

---

[35] Peter Hans Heill, *The German Enlightenment and the rise of Historicism* (Berkeley: U. of Cal., 1975) 33.

[36] Tore Frängsmyr, *Wolffianismens genombrott I Uppsala* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1972), 21, 22.

[37] Cf. Swedenborg, *The Principia*, "…the principal means leading to a truly philosophical knowledge are three in number—experience, geometry, and the power of reasoning." (London: Swedenborg Society, 1912), 2.

words and concepts are introduced they must absolutely be properly defined. Things and phenomena that are of a different nature must be given different names, and philosophical terms once accepted are not to be changed. By starting from axioms, using clear definitions, making precise distinctions, and following these rules, he maintained, the philosopher should be able to connect known truths with each other by the deductive method and arrive at incontrovertible conclusions. In this way, he would obtain just as reliable results in philosophy as in mathematics.[38]

Underlying this belief in the validity of this mathematical method, obviously, is the assumption that nature is structured according to a fixed, interdependent order, which assumption was taken for granted in the 1700s as it is by science today. This assumption then led on to natural theology and teleology. Natural theology concluded that since there is such an ingenious order in the many aspects of observable nature, there must be an omniscient Creator behind all things, ordering them; in fact, finding this God of order was often the primary, driving force behind scientific research. This view was in turn supported and reinforced by the teleological view that all things in nature's order have a purposeful relationship. Thus, by scientifically demonstrating this purposeful relationship it was tacitly understood that one had proved the existence of an organizing principle behind all things, namely God. In the 1700s natural theology and teleology constituted a generally accepted proof for the existence of a Divine Creator.

Consequently Wolff with his "modern" scientific demonstrations of and methodically reasoned arguments for purposefulness in nature was unhesitatingly appreciated as natural theology's great representative, and so as a leading supporter of religious belief.

However, this raises a question. In 1725 Wolff stepped forward in the full dress of natural theology in his great German work *Vernünftige Gedanken von den Absichten der natürlichen Dingen* (Rational Thoughts on the Purposes of Natural Things). But in an earlier, 1718, Latin work, *Ratio praelectionum Wolffianarum in mathesin et philisophiam universam* (The Rationale in Wolff's Lectures on Mathematics and Philosophy in General), he

[38] This summary of Wolff's philosophic method is adapted from Frängsmyr, *Wolffianismens genombrott I Uppsala* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1972) 21.

had actually attacked both natural theology and the teleological method. How could this happen; had his philosophical understanding suddenly changed?

Whether or not Wolff did come to believe he saw God within all of nature is significant for us because Swedenborg reports that in the spiritual world Wolff "confessed that he never believed in any God, but that nature was everything."[39]

The Swedish Wolff scholar Tore Frängsmyr gives this answer. "The solution apparently lies in the fact that, as Bissinger supposes,[40]Wolff differentiated between his learned and his more popular readership. Nothing of this [natural theology] recurs in his great Latin works, and he made known his purposes in other places. Before a strictly scholarly reading public he rejected the perspective of natural theology and particularly that of teleology, but he recognized its worth for a broader readership. In a foreword to a translation of Niewentyts' renowned work on natural theology (1731) he alluded to his own work in his mother tongue, which was said to be simply for the reading public who did not have a mastery of the language of the learned."[41] It is worthy of note that, as one might accordingly expect, Wolff never attempted to prove the validity of the Christian revelation with his "scientific" method.

There was yet more in philosophy than simply methodology that Wolff took from Leibniz. He accepted Leibniz's injunction to view the world as a harmonious conjunction of individually discrete and spontaneous elements, and expanded upon it. His own concept of substance, in fact, stemmed from Leibniz's concept of monads. While he avoided Leibniz's proprietary term "monad" itself, using instead one of Leibniz's alternate terms for the primal unit of finite being, the "simple,"[42] Wolff assumed the existence of similar, monad-like invisible substances, devoid of extension and figure, no two of which could be identical. The phenom-

---

[39] SD 4727.

[40] Bissinger, Anton, "Die Struktur der Gotteserkenntnes," *Studien zur Philosophie Christian Wolff's* (Bonn: 1970).

[41] Frängsmyr, 33.

[42] The term "simple" Wolff probably also took from Leibniz, who says, in *De Bonitate Dei* speaks of "… all souls, entelechias or primitive forces, substantial forms, simple substances or monads …." *Tentamina Theodicæae*, 2 Tom. (Frankfurt: 1739), n. 396.

enal world he posited as being made up of these "simple" substances or metaphysical atoms. The whole universe he saw as being composed of these and interconnected in a very tightly ordered, law-governed structure (*nexus rerum*). In fact, so closed and unalterably fixed was the structure of existence as he conceived it that he was considered just as much a determinist as Leibniz.

Series

His concepts regarding the structure of the universe he presented in his 1731 work *Cosmologia*. All things were connected in successive and simultaneous series:

> Series entium finitorum tam simultaneorum, quam successivorum inter se connexorum dicitur Mundus, sive Universorum [the series of finite entities of both a simultaneous and successive character are called the world or universe][43]…In mundo adspecabili multa entia simuultanea dantur [in the visible world there are many things (which exist) simultaneously][44]…Nexus rerum succesivarum consistit in dependentia effectus a causa effeciente & in genere in dependentia causati a causa [a successive connection of things consists in the dependence of the effect on a cause and in general on the dependence of the thing caused on a cause].[45]

These terms, successive and simultaneous, he had defined a year earlier in his *Ontologia*:

> If, when A exists, B, C, D etc. also exist, A, B, C, D etc. are termed simultaneous (*simultanea*). But if when A exists, B does not exist, however B begins to exist when A is ceasing to exist; and likewise when B exists, C does not exist, however C begins to exist when B is ceasing to exist; and so on, then A, B, C, are successive (*successiva*).

---

[43] Christian Wolff, *Cosmologia Generalis* (Frankfurt & Leipzig: 1731), n. 48, p. 44.

[44] *Cosmologia* n. 51, p. 46.

[45] *Cosmologia* n. 23, p. 19.

> For example, in a garden the flowers that ornament it, taken together are simultaneous; but those which come forth to view as others die are successive.[46]

The human body, too, he regarded as constituted in like manner, but for this body there was a soul. And as part of this philosophical Weltanschauung Wolff here also basically accepted Leibniz's explanation of the relation between the soul and body, i.e., that there was no functional interconnection between a soul and its body other than a logical one, a pre-established harmony produced by the Creator. Yet he did grant a role to experience, for while he regarded all concepts as being inborn, he maintained that experience made them actual.

Wolff's ideas themselves may not have been very original, but among the products of his thinking there were nonetheless some that had a significant effect on Swedenborg. Wolff's thought on the *nexus rerum* or connection of all things of the phenomenal world produced a corpus of clearly defined concepts and terms from which Swedenborg was to draw support in his own formulations, especially, the formulation of his own doctrine of series and degrees.

---

[46]*Ontologia* (Frankfurt & Leipzig: 1730), n. 569, 441.

(To be continued)