

Christian Wolff and Leibnizian Monads

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As the label “Leibnizian-Wolffian School Philosophy” suggests, Christian Wolff has traditionally been regarded as Leibniz’s disciple. Thanks to L. W. Beck, C. A. Corr, J. École, and others, we now know that Wolff was inspired by Leibniz but pursued largely his own goals.¹ How wide is the gap that separates Leibniz’s metaphysics from Wolff’s system? With respect to the monadology, C. Wilson claims that the gap is narrow. She argues that Wolff believed in a “certain version of monadology” although he did not employ the term “monad” for his own notion of a simple substance.² On the other hand, D. Rutherford thinks that the gap is large. In light of Wolff’s correspondence with Leibniz, he notes that their intellectual exchange reached an impasse. This impasse seemed to have occurred in 1711, eight years before the publication of Wolff’s comparatively early *German Metaphysics*. “Very early in his career,” Rutherford observes, “Wolff was offered an entry into the inner recesses of Leibniz’s philosophy and politely declined the invitation.”³ Wolff did so apparently because of irreconcilable philosophical differences: “Wolff is a substance dualist . . . [who] denies that ‘atoms of nature’ possess a power of representation.”⁴ Wolff, according to Rutherford, rejects Leibniz’s monadology.

That Wolff did not accept Leibnizian monads is a plausible description of Wolff’s stance throughout his career. This invites the inference that Wolff *rejected* Leibniz’s monads. But such an inference is too sweeping. I argue that Wolff first sympathized with the theory of monads, then distanced himself from it, and finally rejected it. In other words, the initial gap that opened up between Wolff and Leibniz in 1711 remained narrow until about 1720 and widened afterwards.

Consider what Wolff has to say about the topic of monads in the *German Metaphysics* (1719). There he concurs with Leibniz’s rejection of atomism (in the Fifth Letter to Clarke, #24), repeats his mentor’s denunciation of atomism as a “lazy philosophy,” and argues against the “common error” of supposing that elements are bodily, divisible, and endowed with properties similar to those of composite bodies (§583). Then Wolff explains that elements have a force to change their inner state (§584). After enlisting Leibniz’s support for the claim that no two things are alike, whether they be simple or complex (§§ 585-6), Wolff turns to the subject of a representative power; that is, to the crux of the matter, whether Wolf-

fian elements could be identified with Leibnizian monads. He writes:

Leibniz asserts that the entire world is represented within each simple thing. This lucidly (*begreiflich*) explains how each simple thing can be distinguished from the next, and how each relates to the world in a particular manner, just as it relates uniquely (*anders*) to both near and remote things. But I still wonder whether I should accept this assertion. (§598)

Such an attitude of uncommitted appreciation is characteristic of Wolff's assessment of Leibnizian monads in the *German Metaphysics*. When Wolff describes monads, he explains how each of them is "a mirror of the entire world" (§599) and then remarks,

However, because we will suspend the investigation [of the monads] this time, it shall accordingly suffice to have provided a clear conception of the Leibnizian units of nature, and to have simultaneously shown *that they are not at odds (nicht zuwider sind) with what we have demonstrated of the simple things in the world . . .* We shall demonstrate below that the soul belongs to the simple things and that it has a force to represent the world according to the position of its body. We shall also show that still many other simple things are possible that represent the world in a more imperfect manner. Accordingly such things as the Leibnizian units of nature are possible; everything belongs to them what we have determined about the elements of the things. (§599; my emphasis)

Note that this is more than just an author's neutral description of somebody else's view. Wolff suspends his judgment, to be sure, but he evidently appreciates Leibniz's view. After describing the theory of the monads, Wolff points out that, first, the theory is possibly true, and second, that it is perfectly compatible with his own. In the next section (§600), he defends the claim of an overall harmony of nature. He concedes that neither he nor Leibniz can satisfactorily elucidate and prove the general harmony of things. Nonetheless, the general harmony of things is a fact, he insists, *and* Leibniz's monadology provides an intelligible explanation of its nature. To repeat: Wolff does not commit himself to the Leibnizian monad. But he describes it without objecting to it; he grants that Leibniz may be right; and he points out the merits of Leibniz's theory, not the least of which is its explanatory power to solve metaphysical riddles.

Later, Wolff would distance himself from Leibnizian monads step by step. In 1724, his friendly neutrality turns into a stance of independence. In the *Anmerkungen zur Deutschen Metaphysik* of that year Wolff writes that his elements are not to be mistaken for monads (such an identification, he notes, is just a

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misunderstanding of his critics), and that he has refrained from judgment because Leibniz's theory, albeit plausible, is unsubstantiated (§218). In 1729, Wolff's independence turns into detachment. Now, in the *Philosophia Prima sive Ontologia*, he is silent about the possible plausibility of the monads and merely notes that they are not the same as his elements (§684). Finally, in 1731, his detachment solidifies into rejection. In the *Cosmologia Generalis*, Wolff at last rejects the term "monad" as an inappropriate label for simple substances (§182).

This gradual disassociation from the monadology mirrors Wolff's progressive alienation from Leibniz. The fate of the pre-established harmony in Wolff's system illustrates this process: in 1719, Wolff defends the pre-established harmony as the explanation of the phenomenon of mind-body interaction and as an account of the coordination of the inner states of the elements, but in 1724, he rejects it in the context of elementary causation (for the sake of a newly devised *nexus elementorum*), and in 1734, he dismisses it in the context of the mind-body problem (which he now considers intractable).

Wolff's move away from Leibniz, philosophically probably not altogether honest, was prudent and understandable in light of his persecution. Wolff's Pietist detractors hoped to discredit him by equating his views with Leibnizian doctrines. They did so because they wanted to insinuate that Wolff is a fool, an uninspired disciple blindly following in the footsteps of his master.⁵ They also hoped to convict him of the same blasphemies that Leibniz had allegedly committed. Joachim Lange, a most vicious critic, portrays Wolff not only as a carbon copy of Leibniz in his *Causa Dei* (Halle, 1723), but also as a heretic, a Spinozist sympathizer, and generally as an *atheismi patronum* (p.61-2). So it is no surprise that Lange wanted to demonstrate the identity of Leibnizian monads and Wolffian elements (p.73, p.699)—and that Wolff, in response, insisted upon their distinction.

Wolff made himself an easy target for this reactionary movement. He became too successful for his own good after his move to Halle in 1707. In 1710, the mathematics professor began lecturing in philosophy, although he was not trained in the field. Students loved Wolff's teaching and flocked to his courses. Christian Thomasius, professor in philosophy, and Lange, chair of the theology department, were left with empty classrooms.⁶ Lange decided to plot revenge, and Thomasius, otherwise a partisan for intellectual freedom, stood passively aside when the academic turf war between Wolff and the theologians broke out. The astonishing success of the ten consecutive printings of the *German Metaphysics* created more tensions. In this work, Wolff supports Newton's new science and reveals his confidence in the powers of reason to figure out the world. All this was anathema to

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the Pietists, who claimed that science is subject to the authority of faith, and that an independent research program is impermissible on religious grounds.⁷

Things came to a head with Wolff's farewell address as the provost (*Rektor*) of Halle University in 1721. In the *Speech on the Ethics of the Chinese*, he approved of Confucian ethics as a useful and sensible moral philosophy.⁸ The Pietists were scandalized—if Wolff was right (and by all means, he couldn't be), then this would imply that the difference between right and wrong is discernible by reason alone. Now the Pietist campaign against Wolff took off. Ironically, the very uproar caused by Wolff's speech in 1721 and his newsworthy expulsion from Prussia in 1723 disseminated the offending view and undermined the authority of the theological hardliners. By mid-century, Wolff was rehabilitated, Leibniz's fame continued to spread, and Crusius had mellowed Pietism into a more profound philosophy.

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Notes

¹ Cf. Lewis W. Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 1969), 256-75; Charles A. Corr, "Christian Wolff and Leibniz," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1975): 241-65; Jean École, *La Métaphysique de Christian Wolff* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1990), 77-80 and 139-220.

² Catherine Wilson, "The Reception of Leibniz in the Eighteenth Century," in N. Jolley, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 446.

³ Donald Rutherford, "Idealism Declined: Leibniz, Kant, and Christian Wolff," delivered at "Leibniz and His Correspondents: A Conference," Tulane University, New Orleans, March 16-18, 2001. This discussion piece grew out of a commentary on that paper, which is forthcoming in a volume of conference proceedings by Cambridge University Press. The citations are from the as yet unpublished typescript, p. 3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 3 and 19.

⁵ Whenever Franz Budde mentions Leibniz and Wolff in his *Isagoge Historico-Theologica* (Leipzig, 1727), he makes sure to impress on the reader that the latter

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follows (*sequitur*) the former. Regarding the alleged denial of a free will, a putative consequence of the pre-established harmony, Budde argues that Wolff, *ut in aliis, ita et hoc in re Leibnitii vestigia premit* (p.274).

⁶ For an ironic account of this rivalry, see Voltaire's "De La Chine" in his *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (1764), Paris: Flammarion, 1964, 111-12

⁷ Cf. Budde, *Isagoge*, I.4, §29.

⁸ Cf. Christian Wolff, *Rede über die praktische Philosophie der Chinesen/Oratio Philosophiae Practicae Sinarum*, tr. and ed. M. Albrecht (Hamburg: Meiner, 1988), 65.