

ARAÚJO, PEREIRA, STURM (EDS), *THE FORCE OF AN IDEA. NEW ESSAYS ON CHRISTIAN WOLFF'S PSYCHOLOGY*, CHAM, SPRINGER, 2021. ISBN 978-3-03074434-2

Paolo Treves

Published in 2021, *The Force of an Idea. New Essays on Christian Wolff's Psychology* is important in several respects. First of all, for a linguistic reason: as stated in the introduction, prior to the publication of this volume, there was in fact no English-language publication devoted entirely to Wolff's psychology (whereas there were already texts in German, French, Spanish and Italian focusing on that question). The methodology chosen by the editors, moreover, is especially relevant: the text brings together 17 chapters by scholars with different scientific profiles, making immediately obvious to the reader, should they be unfamiliar with Wolff's texts, the impossibility of approaching Wolff's thought and, more specifically, *Psychology* from a single point of view.

Eleven years ago, Clemens Schwaiger argued that failing to recognise the importance of the empirical aspect in Wolff's thought meant, *ipso facto*, to lag behind the level of research already achieved. Similarly, it could be argued that portraying the image of Wolff's *corpus* as a monolithic and univocal doctrine constitutes a caricature rather than a legitimate historical-philosophical portrait. The volume, indeed, forces the reader to come to terms with a dynamic thought, which includes significant upheavals and which, above all, lives on the dialectic within the background of the early German Enlightenment, the image of which, as a result, becomes more vivid and vital, enriched with nuances.

From a methodological point of view, the editors' choice to divide the volume into two sections is particularly significant. The first section is dedicated to outlining the various aspects of Wolff's project, while the second focuses on the history of the effects of that project.

<https://doi.org/10.36311/2318-0501.2022.v10n1.p225>

The second part of the text, in fact, examines the history of *Psychology* unfolding from authors contemporary or immediately following Wolff up to Wilhelm Wundt, going through Kant and Hegel. This path is anything but linear, containing significant developments, which we still witness today - such is the case of the behaviourist or physiological declinations by Hagen and Krüger - and profound upheavals, such as those brought about by Kant and Hegel. This path, in any case, further demonstrates what has already emerged in the first part of the volume, namely the vitality and inescapable character of the Wolffian enterprise.

Before moving on to a more specific consideration of the volume, we should point out that the following reflections will focus on only one of the many perspectives offered by the text and, therefore, on a few contributions in particular. The methodological issue and the systematic framing of Wolff's psychological reflection will be considered in more detail. These issues, in fact, constitute two inescapable aspects of Wolff's legacy, which, by inaugurating a new and original phase in the history of metaphysics, uncovered new tensions.

One might ask, then, why the volume focuses precisely on *Psychology* - in its twofold declination, empirical and rational - and not on other parts of metaphysics, which are also the fruit of Wolffian originality and equally crucial from the point of view of the history of philosophy (think, for example, of *Cosmologia generalis* or *Ontologia* itself). The answer to this question involves all of the aspects mentioned by the editors, namely the very introduction of that discipline into the field of metaphysics, its founding role in relation to further sciences, the division of *Psychology* into empirical and rational, as well as the very relationship between Wolff's project and the emergence of scientific psychology in the 19th century. More generally, as Goubet's essay clearly shows, *Psychology* offers a privileged vantage point from which to observe the entire Wolffian system, appreciating its dynamic character and the tensions that run through it, which, in turn, allow us to understand metaphysics' subsequent upheavals in a new light.

As several essays in the volume demonstrate, in fact, the psychological sphere turns out to be a real crossroads, where the principles of other disciplines come into close contact. Manuela Mei's contribution, for example, is devoted to the idea of psychometry: a discipline introduced by Wolff in the field of *empirical psychology* which, broadly speaking, deals with measuring the effects of the soul. Such a discipline presupposes certain ontologically established principles, namely that qualities are measurable and that it is possible to obtain mathematical knowledge of qualities. Through the lens of *Psychologia empirica*, and of psychometrics, then, one can understand what Wolff had stated in the *Discursus praeliminaris* about the possibility of unifying philosophical knowledge, (which deals with finding the foundations of what is) and mathematical knowledge, thus obtaining the highest degree of certainty. A further merit of this essay is that it shows how Wolff's idea of psychometry developed also thanks to Robert Green, whose volume (entitled *The Principles of Philosophy of the Expansive and Contractive Forces or an Inquiry into the Principles of the Modern Philosophy*) Wolff had reviewed in the *Acta Eruditorum* in 1729.

In this way, an important and often insufficiently stressed aspect emerges: the importance of English thought for Wolff's reflection. Alongside the scholastic tradition - in particular

Suárez - and Cartesian thought, the decisive relationship with Leibniz and the clash with Halle Pietists (whose importance for the development of Wolff's psychological reflection is at the centre of Goldenbaum's and Pereira/Araujo's contributions), the influence of English-speaking authors is considerable. Falk Wunderlich's paper shows how the abandonment of Leibnizian monadology and the elaboration of a minimalist theory of reality's simple elements could have been motivated by the attempt to deprive materialism of any foothold: monadological theory could have been interpreted in a materialistic way, as, according to Leibniz, all reality's simple elements possess the same kind of *vis*, namely, the power to represent the world. Against Leibniz's own intentions, this could have been seen as an opening towards the possibility of attributing thought, and thus self-consciousness, to matter. This risk was increased by an argument by Locke, who, wanting to show how our cognitive capacities are insufficient to settle the monism/dualism issue, affirmed the possibility of God's attributing thought to matter. This argument, presented by Locke only as a hypothesis, prompted Wolff to further develop the contradictory nature of thought and matter, and to elaborate a theory of simple elements with different kinds of *vis*.

Although it has distanced us from the topic that most interest here - the methodological question and the framing of the psychological field in the metaphysical context - this brief *excursus* seemed necessary to show the reader how the volume represents Wolff's thought in all its dynamism and richness.

As we can see, therefore, psychological reflection allows us to explore and see in a new light other themes, such as the issue of simple elements and the relationship between different modes of knowledge. This last topic is of capital importance and finds a detailed analysis in Marcolungo's essay, which shows how *Psychologia empirica* and *Psychologia rationalis* both aim at the same objective from different perspectives. Marcolungo, thus, highlights how the rational domain of Psychology itself is quite different from that outlined by Kant, according to whom the only text of *Psychologia rationalis* would be the pure *I think*. It is worth pointing out, however, that Kant affirms this thesis, so distant from Wolff's elaboration, precisely because - as McNulty's contribution shows - the mature Kantian position, set out in the first chapter of the Doctrine of the Method of the First *Critique*, renders impracticable that mix of *a priori* and *a posteriori*, which is typical of Wolff's psychological reflection.

Marcolungo's essay shows how the empirical dimension of *Psychology* is anything but a mere collection of data and experiential facts - what Wolff in the *Discursus praeliminaris* calls *nuda facti notitia* - falling, rather, fully within the philosophical and scientific sphere. *Empirical psychology*, in fact, finds principles, starting from experience, from which one can account for what is and what happens; such is the case, for example, of the law that governs the functioning of the imagination. Truly, these are principles whose authentic foundation will take place in the *Psychologia rationalis*, when all the faculties of the soul are brought back to its single essence, but which, nonetheless, have a value in themselves. The point, thus, is that the empirical dimension in general and the psychological one in particular can never entirely be subsumed by the rational one. As shown by Marcolungo, thus, a fruitful relationship is established between the two branches of *Psychology*: on the one hand the empirical dimension

provides the principles for the rational, at once serving as a testing ground for its hypotheses, while on the other hand the possibility and effectiveness of empirical observation is expanded by the rational dimension. Observing this complex methodological dialectic should help to dispose of the exclusively dogmatic image of Wolff.

Dyck's contribution, significantly entitled *Wolff and the Dogmas of Rationalism*, also falls within this horizon. Considering the issue of innatism, the relationship between certain and probable knowledge, between reason and experience, as well as the primacy of the principle of sufficient reason, the essay shows how Wolff can be understood as a dogmatic thinker, only if the adjective is given a meaning quite different from the one often found in philosophical textbook. The section dedicated to the principle of sufficient reason is particularly relevant: Dyck demonstrates that some reality's aspects, such as essential predicates (Essentialia), cannot be traced back to that principle. In addition, the gap between conceptual truths and common experience, with respect to which no claim to certainty is made, is precisely argued. In short, as already noted about Marcolongo's contribution, it comes to recognise a fundamental and founding role for experience. It is precisely here, in my opinion, that a tension manifests itself; a tension which, maintained as such and without lapsing into the aforementioned caricatural readings, makes it possible to better understand some subsequent phases of German metaphysics. While it is true that the dimension of experience plays a prominent and inescapable role in Wolff, and more specifically in his psychology, the foundation of *any* experience, wishing to distinguish itself from a mere dream (the so-called *Somnium objective sumptum*), must be found in formal principles of predication, namely the principles of non-contradiction and of sufficient reason. In order to properly deal with this issue, we should consider another aspect discussed by several essays in the volume: the foundational role that *Psychology* plays in relation to other sciences, even of primary importance such as logic.

This issue is at the centre of Favaretti Camposampiero's chapter, which notes from the outset how the relationship between psychology and logic has often been interpreted univocally as a sign of psychologism, leaving out the other aspect implied by the relationship between logic and psychology: namely, the Wolffian thesis according to which our cognitive operations and inferential reasoning are governed by logic, so that logic itself provides the tools to analyse the activity of the mind. The essay shows how this argument avoids falling into a vicious circle by resorting to the scholastic distinction between natural logic and artificial logic: the former denoting the innate disposition of the faculties to act according to certain rules, and the latter the distinct exposition of those same rules. In this way, logic may be said to be based on psychology, which shows how the faculties function, while at the same time (artificial) logic can provide the tools to analyse the activity of the mind. Particularly relevant in this context is the case of the syllogism, which, in Wolff's view, is not just a logical operation among many, but the fundamental one, so much so that he considers it to be the psychological structure of natural reasoning. In *Deutsche Logik*, however, Wolff had stated that the syllogism itself was based on the *Dictum de omni et nullo* and, therefore, on the principles of non-contradiction and of sufficient reason. The tension we thus begin to glimpse becomes clearer when considering the relationship between psychology and aesthetics.

In their contribution, Suzuki and Spezzapria show how, even though Wolff did not develop a proper aesthetics, his psychological reflection was an essential step in that direction. Suffice it to say that the founder of aesthetics, A. G. Baumgarten, would argue that the new science finds its principles in *Empirical Psychology*. Here we cannot fully render the richness of the essay, it is however important to emphasise how Wolffian reflection on the arts, by reworking the Leibnizian dynamic between *perceptio* and *percepturatio*, effected a fundamental shift from the Aristotelian paradigm of imitation to that of representation. Suzuki and Spezzapria's essay clearly shows how Wolffian reflection on the arts structurally brings into play various aspects of his thought, such as the theory of perception, the dialectic between cognitive and appetitive faculties, as well as the concepts of perfection and truth set out in the *Ontology*. In this context, the *Dichtungsvermögen*, the mode of the imagination in virtue of which different representations or aspects of different representations come together, assumes fundamental importance. However, in order for this faculty not to lapse into 'monstrosities' in contradiction with *existentia*, it is necessary for it to be referred to the principle of sufficient reason, which allows, in Wolff's opinion, for the production of imagery in accordance with transcendental truth, governed by the fundamental and formal principles of predication. Even with regard to artistic or technical production, therefore, one can only think of an autonomy *sui generis*. This assertion might appear unjustified, since the essay mentions Wolff's explicit intention to produce a model not based on artistic autonomy. What we are referring to here, however, is the tension between the formal and material side of knowledge: within Wolff's thought, in fact, the specificity and richness of the latter risks being reabsorbed into the univocity of the former. In this regard, it is useful to refer to the essay by Heßbrüggen-Walter, where the relationship between the "reality" of the faculties and the foundation of aesthetics is enquired.

Heßbrüggen-Walter's essay starts from the relationship established by Wolff between the essence or nature of the soul - i.e. the *vis repraesentativa universi* - and the faculties, showing how only the former constitutes a real entity, whereas the latter represent mere possibilities, denoting laws which define «a condition on when to count a representation as» (p. 219) a specific kind of representation. Thus, in Wolff's opinion faculties' laws are only descriptive. This relationship is radically revised by Baumgarten, who - as stated in the essay - defends a position decidedly similar to that held by C. A. Crusius, one of Wolff's most famous opponents. If, on the one hand, Baumgarten agrees with Wolff that the faculties are governed by laws, on the other hand, he believes that these faculties are real entities and, as such, they are necessary, though not sufficient, foundations for the inherence of accidents. Contrary to Wolff's *vis-facultas* dynamics, Baumgarten's faculties become sources of laws with prescriptive force, with respect to which it is necessary to devise a discipline - namely, aesthetics - that corrects any deviations: in other words, a logic of the lower faculties.

This issue could also be read as an attempt to prepare the foundation of a genuinely autonomous sphere, where the material elements of knowledge could not be reduced to formal ones. While Baumgarten's own attempt ultimately falls victim to the same ambiguity as Wolff's, what is important to observe here is the tension creeping into Wolff's thought: on the one hand, we have the extraordinary importance of the empirical dimension, the richness and originality of analyses of artistic phenomena, on the other hand, the role of the fundamental

principles of predication, on which even transcendental truth is founded, seems to leave no room for any truly autonomous dimension.

In conclusion, the volume in its entirety appears relevant for several reasons, not least of which is that it provides scholars with the opportunity to continue to engage with an extremely rich author, whose importance is shown, moreover, in the issues and tensions he bequeathed to the history of metaphysics.