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Christian Wolff and Positive Academic Freedom

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In this article I argue that it is possible to find a positive account of academic freedom or of "freedom to philosophise" within Enlightenment thought. I focus on the case of Christian Wolff and his discussion of *libertas philosophandi*. I start by contextualising Wolff's life and philosophy and discussing the negative aspect of his freedom to philosophise. I then present a case for an additional positive version understood as epistemic autonomy. Finally, I explain Wolffian epistemic autonomy within the context of his wider theory of cognition.

Keywords: Christian Wolff, German Enlightenment, freedom to philosophise, academic freedom, epistemic autonomy

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Introduction

Academic freedom, as it is currently understood in Europe and the USA, is often considered to be a part of the persisting cultural heritage of the Enlightenment. Matthew Finkin and Robert Post, for example, explicitly state that "academic freedom first appears as a distinct concept in the late 18th Century German Enlightenment," drawing attention particularly to the influence of the work and persona of Christian Wolff (1679–1754) and his concept of the "freedom to philosophise" (*libertas philosophandi*).[1] Even scholars such as William J. Hoye, who want to challenge the idea that academic freedom originally arises during the Renaissance or the Enlightenment by arguing that its proper roots lie within Medieval Scholastic Aristotelianism, tend to emphasise the centrality of Christian Wolff's philosophy when it comes to this concept.[2]

This gives rise to two questions. The first is whether it is true to say that the concept of the freedom to philosophise, in the way it was put forward by Wolff, exerted significant historical influence on the way the concept of academic freedom developed into its contemporary form. The second question asks: what Wolffian freedom to philosophise was? In this article, I will be addressing the second question since it has garnered much less attention in the literature in comparison with the first question.[3] But if we suppose that Wolffian freedom to philosophise is a part of the Enlightenment heritage giving rise to the modern notion

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[1] Matthew W. Finkin and Robert C. Post, *For the Common Good: Principles of American Academic Freedom* (Yale University Press, 2017), 11, 19, https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300155549. They argue that from this *libertas philosophandi* the concept of *academische Freiheit* develops later in the 19th Century, and they draw a direct line from here to the 1915 *Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure* by the American Association of University Professors. See ibidem, 22ff. It is worth noting that '*libertas philosophandi'* is not the concept invented by Wolff, but has been in wide circulation before he used it.

[2] William J. Hoye, "The Religious Rootes of Academic Freedom," *Theological Studies* 58 (1997).

[3] For more regarding the first question, i.e. the influence and relevance of Christian Wolff and German Enlightenment for contemporary notions of academic and political freedom see Matt Hettche, "On the Cusp of Europe's Enlightenment: Christian Wolff and the Argument for Academic Freedom," *Florida Philosophical Review* VIII, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 91–107; David A. Bell, "Academic Freedom and its Limits," *French Reflections* (blog), accessed 18 November 2024, https://davidabell.substack.com/p/academic-freedom-and-its-limits; Sonia Carboncini,

of academic freedom, what we understand this freedom to be will impact how we challenge or defend contemporary notion of academic freedom. For example, William J. Hoye states that for Wolff freedom to philosophise is to be understood entirely negatively as "freedom from authorities or freedom from outside coercion," and that in "modern conception of academic freedom it is this freedom from external authorities which predominates."[4] What Hoye wants to argue for is a notion of academic freedom which is "more than the absence of coercion; it is a positive, motivating force,"[5] the model of which he finds lacking in the Enlightenment, but identifies as present in Aristotelian-Scholastic theology. Beyond the historical point, Hoye is claiming that if we want to develop a model of academic freedom that will go beyond a mere call for the absence of external constraints, we should look towards the Middle Ages, rather than the Enlightenment, for inspiration.

However, since Hoye is primarily interested in comparing how academic freedom differed between the Middle Ages and the Enlightenment, he does not provide an extensive argument for Wolff's *libertas philosophandi* being a merely negative principle.[6] Matt Hettche provides a much more detailed treatment of Wolff's "freedom to philosophise"; however, it is unclear whether Hettche sees Wolff's concept as a merely negative criterion. This is because Hettche does not primarily investigate the nature of Wolff's freedom to philosophise but instead focuses on those arguments that Wolff puts forward to establish the negative aspect of freedom to philosophise, i.e. his arguments in favour of removing external coercion on academic activity. This gives the impression that Wolff only has the

"Wolffrezeption in Europa," in *Handbuch Christian Wolff*, ed. Robert Theis and Alexander Aichele (Springer VS, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-14737-2_21; Michael Walschots, "The Great, Forgotten Wolff," accessed April 11, 2025, *Aeon*, https://aeon.co/essays/why-we-should-recover-the-philosophy-of-christian-wolff,. Similarly, Christiane Thompson links academic freedom to *libertas philosophandi* and the German Enlightenment, but focuses on Kant instead of Wolff. See Christiane Thompson, "Debating Academic Freedom. Educational-Philosophical Premises and Problems," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 53, no. 11 (19 September 2021): 1086–96, https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2020.1773796.

[4] Hoye, "The Religious Rootes of Academic Freedom," 411.

[5] Ibid., 420.

[6] For more regarding the difference, and possible incompatibility between Medieval and Modern conceptions of academic freedom, see Finkin & Post, *For the Common Good*, 19–23.

negative concept in mind, even if Hettche (unlike Hoye) did not set out to argue for that.[7]

What I want to argue in this article is that, in addition to the element of negative freedom, i.e. the freedom from external coercion, Wolff's conception of academic freedom or *libertas philosophandi* contains an essential positive element, which seems to have been overlooked by the scholarship. While the negative element is much easier to notice, due to both Wolff's presentational style, as well as biographical facts about him, if we investigate Wolff's theory of cognition, we will see that there are positive elements to his notion of freedom to philosophise. By this I specifically mean that according to Wolff, even in the absence of external constraints, there are certain formal criteria that must be fulfilled for our philosophical/academic judgment to be properly free, and that if such conditions do not obtain, we should refrain from publicly making a judgment.

I will start with a short biographical note regarding Wolff and his own experience with academic censorship. I will then give an account of Wolff's concept of freedom to philosophise and its negative aspect. Finally, I will proceed to argue for the positive element of Wolff's *libertas philosophandi*. I will be relying primarily on Wolff's *Discursus præliminaris de philosophia in genere* which was published as an introductory text to his 1728 *Philosophia rationalis sive Logica* (often called *Latin Logic*), in which Wolff dedicates a chapter to freedom to philosophise. I will compare this with his earlier *Christian Wolffens Ausführliche Nachricht von seinen eigenen Schrifften* of 1726, as well as bring in material from Wolff's other works when necessary.[8]

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[7] See Hettche, "Christian Wolff and Academic Freedom."

[8] Main references to Wolff will be the following: Christian Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse on Philosophy in General*, trans. Richard J. Blackwell (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1963); Christian Wolff, *Philosophia Rationalis Sive Logica Methodo Scientifica Pertractata, et Ad Usum Scientiarum Atque Vitæ Aptata*, 3rd ed. (Verona: Dionysius Ramanzini, 1735). Christian Wolff, *Christian Wolffens Ausführliche Nachricht von Seinen Eigenen Schriften, Die Er in Deutscher Sprache von Den Verschiedenen Theilen Der Welt-Weisheit Heraus Gegeben, Auf Verlangen Ans Licht Gestellet*, 2nd ed. (Franckfurt am Mayn: Andreäischen Buchhandlung, 1733). I will primarily reference section numbers of Wolff's works, rather than pages, except in the case of *Ausführliche Nachrict*. When citing the *Preliminary Discourse*, I will use Blackwell's translation and note when I diverge from it. All other translations are my own. Since *Preliminary Discourse* is originally published together with the *Latin Logic*, references to the translation correspond to the references to the 1735 version of the *Latin Logic* I am using.

Wolff and the Negative Freedom to Philosophise

It is almost a custom in Anglophone scholarship that an article on Wolff's philosophy will also include an account of his exile. Since my article concerns academic freedom, I feel the need to at least briefly mention it – though I will not go into much detail about it. Wolff's philosophy is not often discussed in our times, but on those occasions that he is mentioned, he tends to be styled as the most important German philosopher between Leibniz and Kant. In 1706 he took a position at the University of Halle, primarily teaching mathematics, but steadily moving more and more towards teaching philosophy. Wolff metaphysical teaching, the story goes, caused a long-term conflict with the Pietist Theology faculty, especially Johann Joachim Lange. In 1723 the Pietists won, successfully convincing king Friedrich Wilhelm I that Wolff should be exiled from Prussia for advocating Leibnizian pre-established harmony, which, according to Wolff's enemies, amounted to advocating fatalism.[9] On 8th of November 1723, Wolff was given the order to leave Prussia in 48 hours or hang. Wolff complied, leaving Halle for Marburg where he took up a professorship. In 1740 he returned to Halle on the invitation of Friedrich II.

Wolff's exile from Halle resulted in a major international controversy sometimes referred to as the *Pietismusstreit* or *Causa Wolffiana*. According to Finkin and Post, more than two hundred contemporary tracts were written in defence of Wolff's freedom to philosophise.[10] As Andreas Rydberg argues, Wolff's expulsion

[9] Wolff denied both charges of fatalism and that he ever considered pre-established harmony to be more than a hypothesis. See Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, §§164–165, 153. For whether Wolff's philosophy can actually avoid fatalism despite his efforts see Stephan Leuenberger, "Wolff's Close Shave with Fatalism", in *The Actual and the Possible: Modality and Metaphysics in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Mark Sinclair (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198786436.003.0003.

[10] Finkin and Post, *For the Common Good*, 19. For more on Wolff's expulsion, his reception in Europe, and the controversy see: Jonathan Irvine Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 544–562; Martin Schönfeld, "German Philosophy after Leibniz", in *A Companion to Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. Steven Nadler (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002); Carboncini, "Wolffrezeption in Europa"; Anna Szyrwińska, "Die Pietisten," in *Handbuch Christian Wolff*, ed. Robert Theis and Alexander Aichele (Wiesbaden: Springer Fachmedien Wiesbaden, 2018),

from and return to Halle were later used in service of narratives of the victory of Enlightenment reason and intellectual freedom against religious superstition and dogmatism – narratives which persisted throughout the 19th and 20th centuries —and Wolff was included among 'scientific martyrs' such as Socrates, Galileo, and Giordano Bruno.[11] Therefore, when we look at Wolff through the prism of his experience of being exiled (nominally) for his academic work by an absolute monarch, on the urging of the local theological establishment, it is natural that we will be drawn to discussing freedom to philosophise in the negative sense.[12] Let us therefore take a look at how Wolff defines 'philosophical freedom' and 'philosophical servitude' and see what we can learn about the negative and positive elements of it.

In the *Discursus* we find the following definitions of philosophical freedom and servitude: "Freedom to philosophise is the permission to state publicly our own opinion on philosophical issues. [...] Philosophical servitude is the compulsion to defend the philosophical opinions of others as true, even though we do not think that they are true."[13]

We can infer two things immediately from these definitions. The first is that in the *Discursus*, Wolff presents philosophical freedom and servitude primarily in a negative sense, i.e. as freedom *from* external coercion or censorship. The second is that, while the imposition of philosophical servitude implies the denial of the freedom to philosophise, the inverse does not seem to hold. For example, one could be prohibited by an external authority from publicly stating one's opinions

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https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-14737-2_18; Corey W. Dyck, *Early Modern German Philosophy (1690–1750)*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 95–97; Corey W. Dyck, *Wolff and the First Fifty Years of German Metaphysics* (New York [N.Y.]: Oxford University Press, 2024).

[11] See Andreas Rydberg, "The Persona of the Wolffian Philosopher in Early Eighteenth-Century Germany," *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 44, no. 2 (June 2021): 190, 198, https://doi.org/10.1111/1754-0208.12749; Finkin & Post, *For the Common Good*, 13. Wolff compares himself to Galileo, Descartes, Campanella, Socrates, Anaxagoras, and Aristotle, presenting all of them as thinkers that had their freedom to philosophise challenged at some point by religious authorities (Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, §§152, 153*,169*).

[12] For example, Richard Blackwell, in his translation of the *Discursus*, characterises the whole of Wolff's discussion of the freedom to philosophise as Wolff's reaction to his own banishment and his being "keenly aware of political and religious pressures on the intellectual." See Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, 89n1.

[13] Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, §§151, 152*.

on a philosophical issue, without being at the same time forced to endorse a contrary opinion (e.g. by being prevented from making any statement).

Wolff's examples of philosophical freedom and servitude support the claim that Wolff has these two characteristics in mind. When talking about philosophical servitude, Wolff refers to his own exile, Gisbertus Voetius' attack on Descartes, and Tommaso Campanella's imprisonment as examples of attempts, successful or otherwise, to impose philosophical servitude.[14] Similarly, he compares the Parisian Royal Academy of Sciences and the University of Paris, stating that the former had the freedom to philosophise, while the latter one did not, since the University members were only allowed to teach and defend Aristotelian philosophy, while the Academy members were allowed to direct all their labour "toward the discovery of hidden truth".[15] Wolff also cites Socrates, Anaxagoras, and Aristotle as examples of philosophers put to death or exiled on the charges of impiety as examples of those who were denied freedom to philosophise—presenting the limits to freedom to philosophise in the context of state coercion, although not explicitly claiming that these philosophers were forced into philosophical servitude.[16] Finally, he discusses Galileo, arguing that he did not enjoy the freedom to philosophise, since, as Wolff puts it, he was "forced by the Cardinals of the Inquisition to reject as false his theory of the earth in motion."[17] However, Wolff also suggests that Galileo was not thereby placed into philosophical *servitude*, since he was only banned from propounding the theory of earth in motion *as a dogma*, i.e. as a true description of reality, rather than *as a hypothesis* or *a model* for a better explanation of natural phenomena. According to Wolff, the Inquisition had no problem with treating Earth in motion as a hypothesis and was correct in claiming that Galileo (although he was ultimately proven right) did not demonstrate that Earth in motion was more than a hypothesis.[18]

[14] Ibid., §153*.

[15] Ibid., §166*.

[16] Ibid., §169*.

[17] Ibid., §152*.

[18] Ibid., §168*. Hoye states that the point of Wolff's appeal was to argue that the Inquisition extended more freedom to Galileo than Wolff himself was allowed in Halle, since the Inquisition only wanted to regulate Galileo's speech, but not his thinking. See Hoye, "The Religious Rootes of Academic Freedom," 412.

These examples show us that Wolff does recognize external coercion as a way of denying philosophical freedom, and seems to differentiate between denial of philosophical freedom and the imposition of philosophical servitude. As he puts it in an earlier text:

> who is so inexperienced in the history of the learned, that he does not know how, through consequentialising [*Consequentien-Macherey*], the freedom to philosophize has always been compromised and how this has given an opportunity to persecute those who do not want to submit their opinions to those who have secular power on their side?[19]

What all of this shows us is that Wolff gives significant importance to negative freedom in his concept of the freedom to philosophise. Wolff suggests that the only thing that would justify a state to limit the freedom to philosophise via coercion would be to prevent harm to religion, virtue, or public life. However, he also argues that philosophy, properly undertaken, cannot present harm to religion, virtue, or public life since it can only teach what is true. Hence, if religion, virtue, and public life are to be based on true principles, then philosophical freedom should not be limited, since philosophy cannot contradict what is true about them, only what is false or mistaken.[20] Wolff does acknowledge that there will be situations in which the philosopher could not present something that they know and have demonstrated to be true without thereby creating public disturbance. But in these cases, Wolff still does not allow the state to limit philosophical freedom via coercive action; rather, he puts the onus on the philosopher to remain

[19] Wolff, *Ausführliche Nachricht*, ch. 4, §42, 140. By 'consequentialising,' Wolff refers to biased, slippery-slope interpretations of texts. The purpose of consequentialising is to show that certain texts contain ideas that would be potentially harmful and thereby justify supressing them. See Matteo Favaretti Camposampiero, "Rational Reconstruction and Hermeneutic Equity: Christian Wolff's Interpretation of Occasionalism," in *Christian Wolff e l'ermeneutica Dell'Illuminismo*, ed. Ferdinando Luigi Marcolungo, Wolffiana, VII (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2017), 54.

[20] Wolff, Preliminary Discourse, §§167. See ibid., §165: "good laws and public tranquillity, which are ultimately based upon correct civil philosophy, will not be opposed by him who philosophizes according to the philosophical method, because he observes the proper interrelation of truth."

strategically silent.[21] Even the possibility of abusing the freedom to philosophise will not be sufficient to justify externally imposed restrictions to it.[22]

Positive Freedom to Philosophise

Now that I have explained Wolff's opposition to the imposition of external restrictions to freedom to philosophise, to academic freedom, we should investigate the positive aspects that characterise this freedom. I will argue that, for Wolff, the argument for negative philosophical freedom, which has been the focus in the literature, derives from the positive conception of philosophical freedom. By this I mean two things. Firstly, Wolff presents the negative freedom to philosophise—that is, lack of external constraint in stating our views—as at least partially, dependent on what it means to be free to philosophise in a more positive sense. Secondly, even if we had no external constraints on publicly stating our own views this would not mean that we were philosophising freely. To understand this, let us consider what Wolff understood by 'philosophising.'

As Matt Hettche points out, there are strict criteria regarding what 'philosophising' consists in according to Wolff, and hence freedom to philosophise is "essentially the 'freedom to present arguments'."[23] Due to this, very few forms of expression will be protected by his *libertas philosophandi*. It does not designate a universal protection on speech or other types of expression, such as artistic or political.[24] While freedom to philosophise should not be abridged, even if it potentially challenges ecclesiastical or state authority, the same does not apply to general speech or expression. Instead, freedom to philosophise is the freedom *for experts* to *properly* use philosophical method:

[21] Ibid., §165.

[22] Ibid., §167.

[23] Hettche, "Christian Wolff and Academic Freedom," 96–97.

[24] Confusingly, Hettche also states that "for Wolff, the question of free speech and the question of academic freedom are essentially identical" (ibidem: 96). It is, however, not clear in the article what he means by this statement. For an argument that free speech and academic freedom should not be identified, either in general or in Wolff's case, see Finkin and Post, *For the Common Good*, 39–41, Hoye, "The Religious Rootes of Academic Freedom," 412; Bell, "Academic Freedom and Its Limits".

> He who develops philosophy according to the philosophical method should possess the freedom to philosophize. For he who develops philosophy according to the philosophical method should be interested in nothing but the truth in choosing his opinions [*sententiis*] (§154). He should stand on his own judgment, not on the judgment of others [*suo, non aliendo stans judicio*] (§156). He should not accept what others have said unless he can understand and demonstrate it from his own principles (§157). Therefore, he should be permitted to publicly state his own opinion [*sententiam suam*].[25]

We can see from this quote that Wolff presents the negative freedom that I have discussed previously as dependent on the use of the philosophical method: freedom from external censorship should be guaranteed for those who philosophise according to the right method due to certain properties of this method.[26] As such, the freedom to publicly state one's own opinion on philosophical issues does not apply to everyone, but only to those who use the philosophical method.

What does Wolff mean by the philosophical method? There are different ways in which Wolff characterises what he sees as the proper philosophical or scientific method. In the most general terms, when talking about the 'philosophical method' Wolff refers to "the only method which enables [philosophy] to attain cognition that is certain, and is useful both for progress in the sciences and for handling the problems of life."[27] This method, which Wolff believed himself to have properly developed, is supposed to be modelled on Euclidean geometry and shared by both mathematics and philosophy. But at the point of the text that I am

[25] Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, §166.

[26] Another relevant claim in support of the claim that philosophical freedom derives from philosophical method is the following: "He who philosophizes according to the philosophical method **asks only for that freedom to philosophize which is consistent with philosophical method**." (Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, §168*, emphasis mine). I will not go into details regarding how Wolff's negative freedom follows from this. This analysis has already been undertaken by Hettche ("Christian Wolff and Academic Freedom"), who identifies Wolff's defence of negative freedom to philosophise as resting on two claims. He refers to the first as the "Defense from Truth" and links it to §154 and §166. He refers to the second as the "Defense from Utility" which can be linked to §169: "There is no progress in the sciences without the freedom to philosophize."

[27] "[...] *quod ea sola perveniatur ad cognitionem certam, quae cum ad scientiarum progressum, tum ad vitam utilis*." Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, §139*. Translation modified.

currently focusing on, philosophical method is primarily characterised via appeal to epistemic autonomy involved in its use: to philosophise properly (in other words, according to the right method) means to be interested only in truth, to use only one's own judgment, and to accept as true only what we ourselves have demonstrated. This kind of epistemic autonomy, Wolff tells us, is the precondition for the freedom to philosophise as described previously, for "the permission to state publicly our own opinion on philosophical issues."[28]

Therefore, if I am right that Wolff is interested in two types of freedom to philosophise, negative and positive, this allows us to read Wolff's definition of philosophical freedom in a new way. Here we can interpret the first part of the definition ("the permission to state publicly") as referring to the negative, while the second part ("our own opinion on philosophical issues") refers to the positive kind of freedom to philosophise. It is 'our own' opinions that are to be protected from external coercion and censorship. However, for opinions to even count as 'our own,' they must be adopted in an epistemically autonomous way. Without the positive element, we might be free to publicly state opinions but have none of 'our own' opinions to state.

But what does it mean to be autonomous regarding our own philosophical or scientific opinions? The term 'opinion,' which in this context is Blackwell's translation of Wolff's term *sententia*, might be misleading. When we talk about opinions today, we might refer to sincerely held beliefs that someone may hold regardless of how they acquired them. Moreover, our opinions might be correct or incorrect, but we might still argue that they are ours because we hold them, that we are entitled to them, and that we should be free to express them publicly. This, however, is not how Wolff understands *sententia* in this context, and it would have been better to translate *sententia* as a *judgment* or a *verdict* on philosophical issues, rather than an *opinion*. This is because, as Wolff states in the quote given above, philosophical freedom applies not simply to propositions that we might hold, but specifically to those that we hold autonomously, for instance, those that we accept merely on the force of truth:

[28] "Libertas *itaque* philosophandi *est permissio publice proponendi suam de rebus philosophicis sententiam*." Ibid., §151.

> As long as one develops philosophy according to the philosophical method, one should **exclude all extrinsic reasons** in choosing one's opinions [*in eligenda sententia exulare debere omnes rationes extrinsecas*]. For the philosopher should appeal only to the force of truth in examining a group of opinions and in selecting the one which agrees with the truth (§154). Therefore, he selects the correct opinion on the basis of his cognition of things [*ab ipsa rerum cognitione derivatas*], and **not because of any other reason**, whatever it might be.[29]

In fact, in his earlier *Ausführliche Nachricht*, Wolff defines philosophical freedom and servitude through epistemic autonomy rather than lack of external coercion or permission for public expression of opinion:

> And this is where the freedom to philosophize lies: that in judging the truth [*in Berurtheilung der Warheit*] one does not look to others, but to oneself. [...] And accordingly, slavery in philosophizing [*Sclaverey im philosophieren*] consists in the subjection of one's understanding to the judgment of another [*Unterwerffung seines Verstandes dem Urtheile eines andern*], or, what is the same, in subjecting one's assent to the authority of another. [...] And accordingly, the freedom to *philosophize* consists in an unhindered use of one's understanding [*ungehinderten Gebrauche seines Verstandes*], or, what is the same, in subjecting one's assent to the reasons by which a truth is proven [in *Resolvirung seines Beyfalles in die Gründe, wodurch eine Wahrheit erwiesen wird*].[30]

To summarise, we can identify two types of freedom to philosophise in Wolff. The first is the negative freedom to philosophise, consisting in being free from external coercion when holding or expressing one's philosophical views. The second is positive freedom, understood as epistemic autonomy—we philosophise freely only when our judgments are based on the 'force of truth' and 'intrinsic reasons.' In the next section we will look more closely at what Wolffian epistemic autonomy consists in.

[29] Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, §155. Translation modified. Emphasis mine.
[30] Wolff, *Ausführliche Nachricht*, ch. 4, §41, 132–134.

Wolffian Epistemic Autonomy

We have seen above that Wolffian epistemic autonomy consists in relying only on our own judgment rather than the judgment of others, assenting to propositions on the basis of our own cognition, and being guided only by truth and intrinsic reasons. In this section, I will explain what Wolff means by this. To understand how Wolff sees epistemic autonomy, and thereby positive freedom to philosophise, we need to understand his epistemology, or theory of cognition more generally.

Wolff's theory of cognition is fundamentally different from contemporary epistemology. In her recent work, Maria Rosa Antognazza has distinguished between two general epistemic models which we can call the 'belief model' and 'assent model.'[31] Antognazza argues that the belief model dominates contemporary (analytic) epistemology and, according to this model, knowledge is to be understood as a species of belief. What distinguishes belief from knowledge is that knowledge is fundamentally a kind of belief with specific conditions obtaining, for example: justified true belief. According to Antognazza, the dominance of the belief model is a 20th-century phenomenon and the historically dominant epistemic model, the assent model, understands knowledge in a fundamentally different way. According to the model Antognazza puts forward, belief and knowledge are both species of a higher genus: 'thinking with assent.' What distinguishes belief and knowledge is the causal account of how our assent is given. If we assent to something—to it being sunny outside, for instance—because we have looked outside and seen the sun—that is, our assent has been caused by the actual weather condition—then we *know* that it is sunny outside. If we assent to it being sunny outside because we have seen it online, or someone has called us and told us so, we only *believe* that it is sunny outside, regardless of how reliable our source is or how justified we are to trust them. Belief and knowledge are mutually exclusive states differentiated by what has caused our assent—the object of cognition itself in the case of knowledge or anything other than the object of cognition in the case of belief.

[31] For this see Maria Rosa Antognazza, "The Distinction in Kind between Knowledge and Belief", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 120, no. 3 (2020), https://doi.org/10.1093/arisoc/aoaa013; Maria Rosa Antognazza, *Thinking with Assent: Renewing a Traditional Account of Knowledge and Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024).

While Antognazza does not discuss Wolff's philosophy in her work, his theory of cognition fits Antognazza's assent model well. Similarly to Antognazza, we can divide Wolff's basic epistemic categories into *cognition* [*cognitio, Erkenntnis*] and *belief/ faith* [*Glaube/fides*]. We can also treat the two as species of assent and differentiate between them on the basis of what kind of *reasons* we have for assent. A reason [*ratio*], according to Wolff, is "that from which it is understood [*intelligitur*] why a thing is."[32] We have seen above that to be epistemically autonomous we must exclude all extrinsic reasons in choosing our opinions or views. What then are intrinsic and extrinsic reasons for assent? In his *Latin Logic*, Wolff puts it the following way: "Reasons for assent taken from the notion of the subject are called intrinsic; but those which are sought from elsewhere, extrinsic."[33] Wolff then elaborates: "intrinsic reasons are the ones on account of which the predicate agrees with the subject."[34] To put it simply, if we assent to a proposition on the basis of intrinsic reasons, we assent *due to the reasons that make it true*. For example, if I assent to the proposition that a diagonal line is the longest straight line inscribable in a square because I understand the relation which obtains between the diagonal and the sides of a square, then I assent to this for intrinsic reasons. When it comes to extrinsic reasons, Wolff suggests that this refers to all the reasons which are not intrinsic, however, looking through his text, it seems he has something more concrete in mind. Specifically, by external reasons Wolff seems to mean assent to a proposition on the basis of the authority (or testimony) of another person, or on the basis of a general consent of experts:

> something is believed, when the reason we have for assent [*rationem assensus*] is extrinsic to the thing [*rei*], i.e. it is derived from the authority of the speaker. [...] Assent that we grant to a proposition due to the authority of the one who says it is called belief/faith [*fides*]; we are said to believe [*credere*] the same proposition.[35]

[32] Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, §31.

[33] Id., *Latin Logic*, §1004.

[34] Ibid., §1005.

[35] Wolff, *Latin Logic*, §§612, 611; cf. ibid., §§ 1004*, 1006*, 1007*.

On the other hand, when it comes to cognition, specifically *philosophical cognition*, it is the cognition of the reasons why things are or occur.[36] Whoever has philosophical cognition "perceives the condition under which something is predicated of an entity, and consequently, does not attribute the predicate to the entity unless they see that the condition is present."[37] This means that, in philosophical cognition, our assent is moved directly by the intrinsic reasons behind things that are or occur, unlike in belief, in which our assent is moved by our reliance on external authority reporting these reasons. It is important to specify that it is not sufficient for the reasons determining our assent to be *correct* reasons for us to cognize something philosophically. In other words, if we take it on authority that something is a reason for a fact, even if this reason is true, this will not count as philosophical cognition and will violate the requirement for epistemic autonomy. It is crucial for Wolff that in cognising we both track the correct reasons, and that we assent to them because we perceive them to be true, rather than via relying on an authority. This we can do by employing the correct method:

> If one is to develop philosophy according to the philosophical method, he must stand on his own judgment and not on the judgment of others. [...] He who adds up a group of numbers determines their total by himself, even if someone else has already established the correct total. But if he accepts on faith the total which someone else has determined, then he has not done the calculation himself. Likewise, if one accepts definitions, principles, and propositions on the authority of another, then he has not himself compared what is affirmed or denied by others to the rules of logic. [...] Who would not laugh at a mathematician who appealed to Euclid and to the universal agreement of mathematicians to prove that the angles of a rectilinear triangle are equal to two right angles? [...] And we should also laugh at those who take arguments from others as firm and valid without bothering to reduce them to the form of genuine demonstration.[38]

In summary, Wolffian epistemic autonomy consists in a requirement for us to cognise intrinsic reasons for the phenomena in the world. This will require using the correct philosophical or scientific method in investigating the world and

[36] Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, §6. Blackwell translates '*cognitio philosophica*' as 'philosophical knowledge,' but I will use 'philosophical cognition' instead.

[37] Ibid., §41. Translation modified.

[38] Wolff, *Preliminary Discourse*, §156–156*.

not accepting explanations on authority. Instead of simply accepting, for example, the truth of the Pythagorean theorem, Wolff requires us to prove it for ourselves. It appears that Wolff presents us with only two options here: we can either autonomously cognise an intrinsic reason for something by using the proper method, or we can accept a reason on the authority of another. This means that, even in the absence of external coercion or censorship, Wolff can talk about us choosing between philosophical freedom and philosophical servitude. If we are not using Wolff's philosophical method and looking for intrinsic reasons behind things, we are putting ourselves in philosophical servitude by "subjecting [our] assent to the authority of another."[39]

Conclusion

Much more could be said about Wolff when it comes to his theory of cognition, his views of philosophical method, and his views on freedom to philosophise. One could, for example, investigate Wolff's ethical work and talk about his views on epistemic virtues and duties, as well as our duty to help others to improve their cognitive powers. One could also object here that I have not defended Wolff's views when it comes to epistemic autonomy or argued that they would be useful to contemporary debates when it comes to academic freedom. My intentions here were more modest, however: I only wanted to draw attention to a positive or autonomist element of academic freedom in Wolff's work. Wolff believed that he had developed a universal scientific method, modelled on geometry, that would be applicable to any field of inquiry and make us epistemically free by making our judgments determined only by the truth, rather than by the established authority or the interests of the powerful. Today, it is difficult to believe that Wolff's method could do this, or that a method of this kind could exist at all. But maybe we can take inspiration from the idea that there is something valuable and liberating in discovering the truth for oneself, even if there is a plethora of authorities offering to think for us. In the time when so-called artificial intelligence is being put forward as a tool to outsource our judgment, a case for the value of epistemic autonomy should be made.

[39] Wolff, *Ausführliche Nachricht*, ch. 4, §41, 133.

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Streszczenie

Christian Wolff i pozytywna wolność akademicka

W tym artykule stawiam tezę, że w myśli oświeceniowej można odnaleźć pozytywną koncepcję wolności akademickiej, bądź tzw. *libertas philosophandi* – wolności filozofowania. Skupiam się na przypadku Christiana Wolffa oraz jego rozważaniach dotyczących wolności myślenia filozoficznego. Na początku przedstawiam kontekst biograficzny i filozoficzny Wolffa, omawiając negatywne ujęcie wolności filozofowania, rozumianej jako wolność od zewnętrznych ograniczeń. Następnie argumentuję za istnieniem u Wolffa również pozytywnego ujęcia tej wolności, rozumianej jako autonomia epistemiczna. Na koniec analizuję tę autonomię poznawczą w ramach szerszej teorii poznania Wolffa.

Słowa kluczowe: Christian Wolff, niemieckie Oświecenie, wolność filozofowania, wolność akademicka, autonomia epistemiczna

Zusammenfassung

Christian Wolff und die positive akademische Freiheit

In diesem Artikel vertrete ich die These, dass sich in den Ideen der Aufklärung ein positives Konzept der akademischen Freiheit finden lässt, nämlich die sogenannte *libertas philosophandi* – die Freiheit des Philosophierens. Ich konzentriere mich dabei auf den Fall von Christian Wolff und seine Überlegungen zur Freiheit des philosophischen Denkens. Zunächst stelle ich den biografischen und philosophischen Kontext von Wolff vor und diskutiere die negative Auffassung von Freiheit des Philosophierens, verstanden als Freiheit von äußeren Beschränkungen. Anschließend argumentiere ich für die Existenz einer positiven Auffassung dieser Freiheit bei Wolff, verstanden als epistemische Autonomie. Abschließend analysiere ich diese kognitive Autonomie im Rahmen von Wolffs umfassenderer Erkenntnistheorie.

Schlüsselwörter: Christian Wolff, deutsche Aufklärung, Freiheit des Philosophierens, akademische Freiheit, epistemische Autonomie

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