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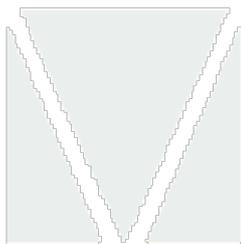
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Martin Mulsow | Gideon Stiening | Friedrich Vollhardt (Hg.)

Aufklärung, Band 29: Das Problem der Unsterblichkeit in der Philosophie, den Wissenschaften und den Künsten des 18. Jahrhunderts

Herausgegeben von [Martin Mulsow](#) und [Gideon Stiening](#) und [Friedrich Vollhardt](#)
Aufklärung 29. 2018. Bandherausgeber: Dieter Hüning, Stefan Klingner und Gideon Stiening.
Ca. 422 Seiten.
978-3-7873-3449-0. Kartoniert

EUR 158,00

Erscheint im 1. Quartal 2018

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Fehler gefunden?

PAOLA RUMORE

Wolff on the immortality of the soul

Quod si in hoc erro, qui animos hominum
immortalis esse credam, libenter erro; nec
mihi hunc errorem, quo delector, dum
vivo, extorqueri volo.

(And if I err in my belief that the souls of
men are immortal, I gladly err, nor do I
wish this error which gives me pleasure to
be wrested from me while I live.)

Cicero, *De senectute*, § 85.

I. The soul between empirical and rational psychology

The immortality of the soul can be legitimately considered the peak of Wolff's psychological investigation. Indeed, this topic concludes the rational science of the soul, both in the early version that Wolff presents in the 5th chapter of the so-called *German Metaphysics* (1719), and in its mature and more developed formulation in the Latin *Psychologia rationalis* (1734).¹ It means that during the 15 years gap between the two works, Wolff maintains the belief that the proof of immortality gathers in itself the knowledge provided by the rational science of the soul. Actually, this belief rests on a twofold ground 'subjective' and 'objective' – deeply rooted into the fundamental structure of Wolff's philosophy. The 'subjective' ground concerns the way understanding has to take in order to reach the complexity of truth. As Wolff constantly repeats in the prefaces to the new editions of these works and in other writings, clearness and distinctness can only be gathered gradually: "like the regulated nutrition promotes the gradual increase of the body, the understanding is gradually led by a moderate exercise to

¹ Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen* (1719), reprint ed. 1751 Hildesheim 1983 (from now on: *Deutsche Metaphysik*); ders., *Psychologia rationalis, methodo scientifica pertractata, qua ea, quae de anima humana indubia experientiae fide innotescunt, per essentiam et naturam animae explicantur, et ad intimiorem naturae ejusque auctoris cognitionem pro futura proponuntur* (1734), reprint ed. 1740 Hildesheim 1994.

its own development.”² The understanding needs to be slowly trained in order to build its solid system of truths, going from the more simple to the more complex ones. In Wolff’s philosophy this ‘subjective’ reason rests on an ‘objective’ ground, i. e. on the metaphysical *nexus rerum* which represents at a time the logical connection of truths. Indeed as he points out in his *Ontologia*: “Veritas adeo, quae transcendentalis appellatur & rebus ipsis inesse intelligitur, est ordo in varietate eorum, quae simul sunt ac se invicem consequuntur, aut, si mavis, ordo eorum, quae enti convenient.”³ “Universal truths are connected”, since the *nexus* between them has its ground in the same *nexus* that connects things, as he illustrated in his *Cosmologia*, so that the metaphysical or transcendental truth (*veritas transcendentalis*) is at the very ground of the logical truth of the sciences (*veritas logica*).⁴ In the impressive methodological introduction to the series of his Latin works, the *Discursus praeliminaris de philosophia in genere*, Wolff insists on this aspect by defining the *cognitio scientifica seu philosophica* as the kind of knowledge that takes into account the fundamental connection of truths.⁵

The choice to locate the question of immortality at the end of the investigation of rational psychology goes back to the idea that the notion of immortality gathers in a systematic order the components of the entire knowledge concerning the essence and the nature of the soul already developed in the previous parts of the inquiry. That’s the reason why the rational demonstration of immortality – i. e. of the capacity the soul has to survive after the death of the body – has its starting point in the investigation of the essence of the soul. But this kind of investigation which belongs properly to the scopes of rational psychology rests on empirical i. e. *a posteriori* remarks on the *existence* of the soul that Wolff derives from the undeniable experience of every thinking subject. As he stated in the *Prolegomena* to empirical psychology, the investigation of the soul begins with a kind of introspection, i. e. with the observation and description of what occurs in the soul. In the *Psychologia empirica*, Wolff claims the existence of the soul by means of a revised version of Descartes’ argument of the *cogito*.⁶ Indeed he affirms that as soon as we “pay at-

² Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik* (see fn. 1), Preface to the 4th edition (1729), § 12; but see also the 5th chapter of Christian Wolff, *Ausführliche Nachricht von seinen eigenen Schrifften, die er in deutscher Sprache heraus gegeben* (1733, 1726), reprint Hildesheim 1996.

³ Christian Wolff, *Philosophia prima, sive Ontologia, methodo scientifica pertractata, qua omnis cognitionis humanae principia continentur* (1729), reprint. ed. 1736 Hildesheim 1962, § 495.

⁴ *Ibid.*, § 482 and § 482 nota.

⁵ Cristian Wolff, *Discursus praeliminaris de Philosophia in genere / Einleitende Abhandlung über Philosophie im allgemeinen* (1728), transl. and ed. by Günter Gawlik, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1996, § 6.

⁶ On the relation between René Descartes’ *cogito* and Wolff’s so-called ‘*cogitamus*-argument’ cf. Thierry Arnaud, *Le critère du métaphysique chez Wolff. Pourquoi une Psychologie empirique au sein de la métaphysique*, in: *Archives de philosophie* LXV (2001), 35–46, here 44; Thierry Arnaud, *Où commence la “Métaphysique allemande” de Christian Wolff?*, in: Olivier-Pierre Rudolph, Jean-

attention to our perceptions”, “we experience in every moment that we are conscious (*consci*) of ourselves, and of other external things”.⁷ The certainty of our existence is highly evident, and doesn’t require any further demonstration. The same statement can be found in the opening paragraph of the *German Metaphysics*, where Wolff affirms:

we are conscious (*bewust*) of ourselves and of other things. No one who is not completely out of his mind can doubt that, and should someone want to deny it by pretending, through his words, that things are other than he finds within himself, that person could quickly be shown that his pretense is absurd. For how could he deny something or call something into doubt if he were not conscious of himself and other things? But whoever is conscious of what he denies or calls into doubt, exists. And consequently it is clear that we exist.⁸

The thing in us that is conscious of itself and of other things is the soul (*anima, mens*), which therefore exists.⁹ The soul is here defined as a thing (*ens*), which shows the double level of *perception* (the act of representing something) and *apperception* (the awareness of our perceptions).¹⁰ Leibniz had acknowledged to it. Thanks to this direct access to our perceptions, ‘introspection’ represents a privileged form of experience which leads us to the immediate knowledge of the existence of the soul, which, for Wolff, foregrounds the knowledge we have of the existence of bodies, in complete accordance with the Cartesian doubt.¹¹ The capacity for thinking is nothing but the capacity of the soul to be conscious of what occurs in it, so that “thought (*cogitatio*) is an act of the soul, by means of which it is conscious of itself and of other external things”. Therefore, every thought requires both perception and apperception.¹²

The statement about the *existence* of a thinking being concerns therefore the realm of empirical psychology, i. e. of the science that – as Wolff stresses – provides to rational psychology both the certain empirical ground, and the final confirmation of its *a priori* deductions.¹³ The empirical ‘facts’ of the soul, namely the

François Goubet (eds.), *Die Psychologie Christian Wolffs. Systematische und historische Untersuchungen*, Tübingen 2001, 61–73; Pietro Kobau, *Essere qualcosa. Ontologia e psicologia in Wolff*, Torino 2004, 37–46.

⁷ Christian Wolff, *Psychologia empirica, methodo scientifica pertractata, qua ea, quae de anima humana indubia experientiae fide constant, continentur et ad solidam universae philosophiae practicae ac theologiae naturalis tractationem via sternitur* (1732), reprint. ed. 1738 Hildesheim 1968, § 11.

⁸ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik* (see fn. 1), § 1.

⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, §§ 20 et sq.

¹⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, §§ 24 et sq.

¹¹ Cf. *ibid.*, § 22.

¹² *Ibid.*, §§ 23–26.

¹³ In his *Psychologia empirica* Wolff defines this proceeding as follows: “Empirical psychology is the science that establishes principles through experience, whence reason is given for what occurs

narrative descriptions of its working and the deduction of the principles this working rests on, allow to derive from the undeniable experience of ‘being conscious’ of itself and of other external things, i. e. of ‘thinking’, the presence of a being which needs to be able to think. The task of rational psychology, then, is to find out which properties that being has to be endowed with in order to be in the condition to perform thinking.

II. Unity and simplicity of the thinking being

By sketching the essential properties of the soul, Wolff shows once more his closeness to Leibniz, who introduced the unity of the substance as a necessary condition for any perceptual activity. According to the *Monadologia* (§ 13) – a text Wolff knew pretty well – to perceive, i. e. to represent something means to gather the plurality of the represented object in the unity of the representing substance. This ‘synthetic’ process was labeled with the notorious formula of the *reductio ad unum*, and identified the unity of the subject-substance with the fundamental condition of representation. Being the unification of the multiplicity in the unitary and identical substance the very first condition of any perception and apperception, Leibniz claims that every substance has a dynamic and active nature, in contrast to the old Cartesian image of substance as a static being. Even if Descartes presents the *res cogitans* as a substance whose essence consists in thinking, he never points out that thinking *requires* a unitary and identical substrate, or rather that those properties of substance should be the ‘necessary conditions’ of any thinking activity. Indeed, he doesn’t derive the unity and identity of the *res cogitans* from its capacity to think – as the unavoidable conditions of such an activity. Instead he introduces them on the basis of a confrontation – *via negativa* – between the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*: bodies being extended, composed and material, souls must be not extended, not composed and not material.¹⁴

Wolff explains the capacity to perform the *reductio ad unum* as the capacity of the soul to compare its representations, and each of their parts within its unitary being. A composite being wouldn’t be able to produce the same kind of represen-

in the human soul” (§ 1). And, beside that, “Empirical psychology serves to examine and confirm discoveries made a priori concerning the human soul” (§ 5). On the relation between empirical psychology and experimental physics, cf. Jean Ecole, *Des rapports de l’expérience et de la raison dans l’analyse de l’âme ou la Psychologie empirica de Christian Wolff*, in: *Giornale di metafisica* 21 (1966), 589–617, and Jean Ecole, *De la notion de philosophie expérimentale chez Wolff*, in: *Les Etudes philosophiques* 4 (1979), 397–406; Anna Maria Vittadello, *Experience et raison dans la psychologie de Christian Wolff*, in: *Revue philosophique de Louvain* 11 (1973), 488–511.

¹⁴ René Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia*, in: *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Paul Adam and Charles Tannery, Paris 1897–1909, vol. 7 (1904), 85 et sq.

tations of a unitary substance, since its composite nature would threaten the unitary nature of thought and split its components across the manifold. Wolff explains this difference stating that the representations of the soul are *repraesentationes in simplicibus* and not *repraesentationes in compositis* like the ones that occur in physical substances, e. g. in a painting or in a mirror.¹⁵

According to Wolff, the unity of the soul represents the first of its properties as pointed out by rational investigation: the soul is a *simple* substance.¹⁶ Simplicity is connected to a further property, that is, to *immateriality*, since every material substance is *ipso facto* extended and therefore divisible into parts. Beside conceiving it as simple and immaterial, Wolff characterizes the soul also as an *ens spirituale*, i. e. as a substance endowed with understanding and will, both conceived as manifestations of the unique *vis repraesentativa* that Wolff understands as the *essence* of the soul.¹⁷ Being an *ens spirituale* the soul differs both from the extended body and from its components, to whom Wolff, unlike Leibniz, doesn't ascribe any perceptual activity.¹⁸ By means of the famous thought experiment of the giant mill, Leibniz's *Monadologia* (§ 17) had already shown in a very persuasive way the impossibility to explain the generation of thought on the basis of the mechanical interaction of the material components of an extended body.¹⁹ Agreeing

¹⁵ Cf. Wolff, *Psychologia rationalis* (see fn. 1), § 83. Cf. *Deutsche Metaphysik* (see fn. 1), § 217, §§ 740 et sq., § 751. On this topic cf. Paola Rumore, *Die Bilder der Seele. Vorstellung und Einheit*, in: Luigi Cataldi Madonna (ed.), *Macht und Bescheidenheit der Vernunft. Beiträge zur Philosophie Christian Wolffs*, Hildesheim 2005, 111–122.

¹⁶ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik* (see fn. 2), § 742; *Psychologia rationalis* (see fn. 1), § 48.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, § 645, § 66.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, § 644 nota: “Falluntur autem, qui sibi aliisque persuadere conantur, quasi iuxta Leibnitium materia ex spiritibus tanquam totum ex partibus componatur, et multo magis falluntur, qui nobis hanc sententiam tribuunt, cum elementis rerum materialium, nonnisi simpliciter vindicemus, qualis vero sit vis ipsis insita in dubio relinquamus” (whereas those who try to convince themselves and other people that, as Leibniz states, matter is composed of spirits as a whole is composed of its parts, are mistaken and those who ascribe to us that judgment since I don't claim anything else than simplicity for the elements of material things, and I am in doubt as to the nature of the power they are endowed with, are even more mistaken). In order to stress this distance from Leibniz's monadology, Wolff calls these simple immaterial elements, which are not endowed with perceptions, “*atomi naturae*” (atoms of nature) or “*elementa rerum materialium*” (elements of material things), cf. Christian Wolff, *Cosmologia generalis, methodo scientifica pertractata, qua ad solidam, inprimis Dei atque naturae, cognitionem via sternitur* (1731), reprint ed. 1737 Hildesheim 1964, § 187. Cf. Hans-Jürgen Engfer, *Von der Leibnizschen Monadologie zur empirischen Psychologie Wolffs*, in: Sonia Carboncini, Luigi Cataldi Madonna (eds.), *Nuovi studi sul pensiero di Christian Wolff*, in: *Il cannocchiale* 2–3 (1989), 193–215 (reprint Hildesheim 1992).

¹⁹ On this topic cf. Margaret Wilson, *Leibniz and Materialism*, in: Margaret Wilson (ed.), *Ideas and Mechanism*, Princeton 1999, 388–406; Stewart Duncan, *Leibniz's Mill Arguments against Materialism*, in: *Philosophical Quarterly* 62 (2012), 250–272; Marleen Rosemond, *Mills Can't Think: Leibniz's Approach to the Mind-Body Problem*, in: *Res Philosophica* 91 (2014), 1–28; Paul

with Leibniz's argument, Wolff rejects any mechanical explanation of the origin of thought and claims therefore that the simple substance of the soul must also be *immaterial*.²⁰

III. Immateriality and incorruptibility

The tight connection between simplicity and immateriality is at the roots of the long-lasting belief that simplicity has played a central and often overestimated role in the long series of demonstrations of immortality provided by the history of western philosophy. The deduction of the immortality of the soul from its simplicity – what Kant would stigmatize in his first *Critique* as the “Achilles” of every rational psychology²¹ – is actually based on the alleged equivalence between immortality and incorruptibility. Being simple and not composed, the soul cannot be divided into parts, and is therefore incorruptible; simple beings are *ipso facto* incorruptible, thus immortal.

This so-called ‘simplicity argument’ has a long tradition which goes back to Plato's distinction between the visible and the intelligible world, being the first the realm of physical objects which are constantly changing, transient, and ephemeral, and the latter the realm of immaterial, unchanging, and eternal Forms. The soul – according to what Socrates claims in the *Phaedo* (78b4–84b8) – is immaterial because it must have an affinity with the Forms it apprehends. It is therefore unchanging and eternal too²². Plato's strong argument for immortality rests on the belief that the soul itself is governed by the principle that a thing cannot participate at a time in a Form and in its opposite (102d–103a), and can be summarized as follows. Being the soul something that always brings *life* in itself (105c–d), it will never participate in the opposite of life, that is, *death* without ceasing to be a soul (105d–e). Therefore, the soul cannot die (105e–106d), and is *indestructible* (106e–107a). Plato's final argument for immortality doesn't actually rest on the idea of simplicity; in fact, Plato lacked a conception of substance as the later Aristotelian *hypokeimenon*, that is a persisting substrate of essential or changing attributes, among which one could eventually include the attribute of simplicity.

Lodge, Leibniz's Mill Argument against Mechanical Materialism revisited, in: *Ergo* 1 (2014), 79–99.

²⁰ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik* (see fn. 1), § 742; *Psychologia rationalis* (see fn. 1), § 47.

²¹ Immanuel Kant, *KrV A 351*. On Kant's idea of the “Achille” cf. Corey W. Dyck, *Kant and Rational Psychology*, Oxford 2014; William Harper, *Kant on the Achilles Argument*, in: Thomas M. Lennon, Robert J. Stainton (eds.), *The Achilles of Rationalist Psychology*, Dordrecht 2008, 235–246.

²² The idea that the simplicity argument goes back to Plato is stressed by Ben Lazar Mijuskovic, *The Achilles of Rationalist Arguments. The Simplicity, Unity, and Identity of Thought and Soul from the Cambridge Platonists to Kant*, The Hague 1974.

Recent publications have shown in a very clear way that it is just within the Neoplatonic tradition, especially with Plotinus, that the ‘simplicity argument’ becomes the starting point of any pre-modern and modern rational proof of immortality.²³

Still Descartes recalls this argument to stress the fact that for what concerns the topic of immortality, metaphysics misses the goal: indeed, in the summary of his *Mediatioes de philosophia prima* – originally conceived as *Mediatioes de philosophia prima, in qua Dei essentia et animae immortalitas demonstratur* – Descartes admits that a metaphysical investigation can only lead to the demonstration of the *real* difference between soul and body.²⁴ He goes from the “clearest possible conception of the soul”, which is “entirely distinct from all the conceptions which we may have of body” (*II. Med.*), to the fact that “we may be assured that all the things which we conceive clearly and distinctly are true in the very way in which we think them” (*IV. Med.*). Then, he concludes from the “distinct conception of corporeal nature” (*II., V., VI. Med.*) “that those things which we conceive clearly and distinctly as being diverse substances, as we regard mind and body to be, are really substances essentially distinct one from the other” (*VI. Med.*). From this essential, i. e. *real*, distinction Descartes derives that “not only are their natures different but even in some respects contrary to one another” (*VI. Med.*), so that if the body is conceived as divisible, the soul must be conceived as indivisible. Even though the *real difference* of the two substances is sufficient to “show clearly enough that the extinction of the mind does not follow from the corruption of the body, and also to give men the hope of another life after death”,²⁵ the premises for the proof of immortality have to be found in the realm of Physics. Only in that realm one can try to establish in the first place that both the *res cogitans*, and the *res extensa qua talis* are in their nature incorruptible, and “that they can never cease to exist unless God, in denying to them his concurrence, reduce them to nough”; and that, in the second place, the human body (differently from the soul) is composed of a certain configuration of parts and of other similar accidents, so that it becomes a different thing from the sole fact that the figure or form of any of its portions is found to be changed. “From this it follows that the human body may indeed easily enough perish, but the mind [or soul of man (I make no distinction between them)] is owing to its nature immortal.”²⁶

²³ Cf. Karen Margrethe Nielsen, Did Plato Articulate the Achilles Argument?, in: Thomas M. Lennon, Robert J. Stainton (eds.), *The Achilles of Rationalist Psychology* (see fn. 21), 19–41; and in the same volume the paper by Devin Henry, *The Neoplatonic Achilles*, 59–74.

²⁴ Following quotations are from Descartes, *Meditationes de prima philosophia* (see fn. 14), *Synopsis sex sequentium meditationum*, 12–16.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

By means of these considerations, Descartes introduces a very fruitful idea in the history of the proofs of immortality, that is the idea that substances are *naturaliter* incorruptible, whereas their annihilation can only happen *supernaturaliter*, i. e. by means of God's intervention.

Wolff agrees with Descartes in conceiving the soul as naturally incorruptible; but he also agrees with Leibniz in identifying the nature of the soul in its essential *vis repraesentativa*, so that what is *natural* for the soul must have in that *vis* its sufficient reason.²⁷ According to Leibniz monads cannot be created nor destroyed, since their simple nature doesn't admit either a creation *per aggregationem* or a destruction *per disaggregationem*. Nevertheless, monads are finite substances, that is, they don't have the ground of their existence in themselves but depend on God's decision. In Leibniz's incisive image in the *Monadologia* (§ 47): "[Monads] are generated, so to speak, by continual fulgurations of the Divinity", and destroyed by an act of annihilation, passing respectively from the realm on non-being to the realm of being and vice versa instantaneously, and not throughout a gradual process.

Wolff adopts Leibniz's conception, according to which the soul, being a simple and spiritual substance, cannot perish in the same way bodies do: the soul is naturally incorruptible since corruptibility would contradict its nature.²⁸ It means that it can only be annihilated by means of a divine act of instantaneous annihilation.²⁹

Being essentially and naturally incorruptible, Wolff's soul doesn't perish with the body.³⁰ But as such this feature doesn't imply that the soul is in itself *immortal*, since unlike Plato and Descartes, Wolff doesn't think that the two notions of incorruptibility and immortality are completely overlapping. Wolff denounces this fallacious belief already in the first edition of his *German metaphysics* by stressing that the property of incorruptibility belongs both to matter, that is to the simple elements of bodies, and to souls: "Matter is incorruptible, but not immortal. If the body ceases to exist because of the separation of its material parts, which is the *death* of animals and human beings, it doesn't imply that matter itself is destroyed, but it still remains in the world as before, and is therefore incorruptible. But no one would affirm that matter is therefore immortal".³¹ In the later *Annotations to German metaphysics* (1724) Wolff uses this argument to carry on his polemics against the Cartesians who deny souls to beasts: "Cartesians are usually well-satisfied when they demonstrate that the soul is incorruptible and doesn't pe-

²⁷ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik* (see fn. 1), § 75; *Psychologia rationalis* (see fn. 1), §§ 68 et sq.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, §§ 666–669.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, §§ 670 et sq., 732.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, §§ 729–731.

³¹ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik* (see fn. 1), § 927.

rish with the body. But this is still insufficient; indeed in this way the human soul wouldn't be anything special in comparison to the souls of the beasts".³²

But Wolff's denunciation comes out in the clearest way in his *epistula gratulatoria* (1721) for Ludwig Philipp Thümmig's *Demonstratio immortalitatis animae ex intima eius natura deducta*, where he claims that the origin of this fallacious belief goes back to the times of Plato and Socrates.³³ According to Wolff, Plato and Descartes overlooked that, beside metaphysical incorruptibility, the immortality of the soul requires a further essential feature: after the death of the body, the soul has to persist in a condition of self-consciousness.³⁴ This establishes what Wolff calls the "individualitas moralis" of the soul as a *person*, that is, "a being which preserves self-consciousness, namely which can remember to be the same being that previously was in this or in that state, and which is also called *individuum morale*".³⁵ Being conscious of its own perceptions and preserving the memory of its own previous states – what Wolff, recalling Locke's formulation, conceives as the 'personal identity' of everyone – are the two essential features of the notion of immortality. Wolff's amendment of the old prejudice consists in conceiving immortality as a so to speak 'complex' property of spiritual substances which requires three essential components: "1. That the soul survives after the death of the body, and that it doesn't perish with it; 2. that it persists in a state of distinct perceptions; 3. that it preserves the memory of itself, that is, that it remains conscious of its previous life".³⁶

IV. Immortality and morality

By means of the amendment of the traditional idea of immortality – inspired, as Thümmig correctly points out, by Leibniz's statements in the *Theodicy*³⁷ –, Wolff integrates the traditional *metaphysical* proof with a further *moral* item: the *indi-*

³² Wolff, *Der vernünftigen Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt, Anderer Theil, bestehend in ausführlichen Anmerkungen, und zu besserem Verstande und bequemem Gebrauche derselben Herausgegeben* (1724), reprint ed. 1740 Hildesheim 1983, § 338 (from now on: *Anmerkungen zur deutschen Metaphysik*).

³³ Wolff, *Epistola Gratulatoria*, in: Ludwig Philipp Thümmig, *Demonstratio immortalitatis animae ex intima eius natura deducta; oder Gründlicher Beweis von der Unsterblichkeit der Seele*, Marburg 1737. A German translation ("Von der Unsterblichkeit der Seele") can be found in: Wolff, *Gesammelte kleine philosophische Schriften, Vierter Teil*, Halle 1739, 220–230.

³⁴ According to Thümmig, Plato admits that the soul survives in a condition of distinct perceptions, but denies on the grounds of the metempsychosis the preservation of personality (*Demonstratio* [see fn. 33], § VII).

³⁵ Wolff, *Psychologia rationalis* (see fn. 1), § 741.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, § 739.

³⁷ Thümmig, *Demonstratio* (see fn. 33), § VII.

vidualitas physica guaranteed by the incorruptibility of simple substance is now combined with the *individualitas moralis*. In this way, the question of immortality is conceived in its own complexity as a primarily *moral* question, thus also is at the basis for the teachings of religion about the promise (or threat) of eternal rewards (or punishments). In fact, as Wolff stresses repeatedly, his notion of immortality matches with the Scripture (“Notio immortalitatis, quam dedimus, scripturae sacrae seu menti Christi conformis”³⁸). Recalling the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (*Luke* 16.19–31) he remarks that

after the rich man died, he was buried and carried to Hades. Since his body was buried, it was his soul the one that went to hell. [...] Once in Hades the rich man looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. He recognized them; it means he was capable to distinguish them from each other. Thus he had perceptions whose parts were clear, that is he was in a state of distinct perceptions. He also remembered his brothers and his previous life. It means that he remembered his past state, [the life] previous to his death, and recognized he was the same one that was in that previous state. Thus Christ had the following notion of the immortality of the soul: [1.] the soul doesn’t perish with the body, but survives after death; 2. the soul keeps notions which are clear in their parts, and therefore distinct as a whole, i. e. it persists in a state of distinct perceptions; 3. after the death of the body the soul remembers itself [scil.: its previous life].³⁹

Wolff’s notion of immortality confirms, on the one hand, his conviction that rational psychology supports firmly both religion and morality⁴⁰ and, on the other hand, the perfect accordance of his philosophy with the Christian doctrine. In defense of this accordance against the accusations raised by the pietistic theologians, Wolff stresses in the mentioned *Annotations* that precisely “on a deeper knowledge of the soul rests the certainty of the immortality of the soul, which is an important fundament of Christian religion, and contributes massively to a proper practice of virtue”.⁴¹

Furthermore, Wolff’s insistence on the moral relevance of the notion of immortality allows him to distinguish clearly between the condition *post mortem* of human and animal souls. Even if incorruptible like every simple substance, animal souls do not preserve any self-consciousness, nor any memory of their past condition. That’s why “brutae personae non sunt”.⁴² In addition to that, they are not properly speaking *spirits*, i. e. they are not endowed with understanding and free-will, hence, “although animal souls are incorruptible and do not perish with the body, however they are not immortal”.⁴³

³⁸ Wolff, *Psychologia rationalis* (see fn. 1), § 740.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Praefatio, 5*–6*.

⁴¹ Wolff, *Anmerkungen zur deutschen Metaphysik* (see fn. 32), § 1.

⁴² Wolff, *Psychologia rationalis* (see fn. 1), §§ 766 et sq.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, §§ 769, 764.

Emphasizing the idea that the question of immortality cannot be considered in a solely metaphysical sense, Wolff inaugurates a long series of philosophical reflections which eventually culminate in the conviction that the proof of immortality can gain primarily or exclusively a *moral certainty*. A remarkable step in this direction was made by a radical opponent of any attempt to provide a rational demonstration of immortality. In 1746 Georg Friedrich Meier publishes his fortunate *Gedanken vom Zustande der Seele nach dem Tode*, where he declares the failure of any claim of rational psychology concerning immortality. According to Meier, simplicity is not by itself a guarantee of the survival of the soul after the death of the body, since, beside being simple, the soul is a *finite, contingent* being. Being contingent and not necessary, the soul could cease being, i. e. it *may* be or not be. This depends of course on God's decision, which is impenetrable by human reason. In the defense of one of his writings on the eternity of the soul, Meier writes:

The human soul being contingent and finite, it is possible that it dies. God's omnipotence can annihilate it. Thus the question is if God also decided to do it, or not. Reason can answer the question in no other way than considering if the whole nexus of the world necessarily requires the eternal life of the soul, or the opposite. But a finite spirit cannot conceive the whole nexus of this world; it follows that the immortality of the soul cannot be demonstrated with mathematical certainty by means of reason.⁴⁴

According to reason – as Meier claims following the suggestions of his friend and colleague Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten – we could at most affirm that the soul is immortal in a *hypothetical*, but not an *absolute* sense; that is, the soul *can* die even if, according to the teachings of the Scripture, it is very unlikely that it dies. But conceiving a soul which perishes with her own body doesn't imply any logical contradiction, and therefore it cannot be said absolutely immortal. So that for what concerns immortality, we can indeed rely on a different kind of proof, which does not reach the mathematical certainty of rational deductions, but still provides us with a *moral certainty*, i. e. with the highest degree of probability sufficient to our aims.⁴⁵ In the Revelation

God announced rewards and punishments that he, because of the highest perfection of the world, cannot entirely connect with free actions of human beings in this life. It follows that one can prove the immortality of the soul from God's revealed justice, but reason cannot do it. Therefore I showed that mere reason cannot convince us of the im-

⁴⁴ Georg Friedrich Meier, *Vertheidigung des Beweises, daß die menschliche Seele ewig lebe*, Halle 1752, § 2, 8. Cf. Meier, *Gedanken von dem Zustande der Seele nach dem Tode*, Halle 1746, § 22, and § 28: 'The death of the soul is possible in itself, and the soul is mortal in itself and for itself'.

⁴⁵ On moral certainty in the modern tradition up to Kant cf. Luca Fonnesu, Kant on 'moral certainty', in: Luigi Cataldi Madonna, Paola Rumore (eds.), *Kant und die Aufklärung*, Hildesheim 2011, 183–204.

mortality of the soul, although it cannot provide us with any single good reason from which we could derive with probability the annihilation and the death of the soul.⁴⁶

Even if a few years later Meier would reconsider his negative judgment on the rational demonstrations of immortality,⁴⁷ his early attitude reveals the inadequacy of the proofs based only on the metaphysical properties of the simple substance. The long tradition of the so-called ‘moral proofs’ of immortality that goes from Christian August Crusius to Moses Mendelssohn’s *Phaedo* will develop on this path. It includes the topic of immortality in the broader debate about the human destination, and to Kant’s doctrine of the paralogsms of practical reason.⁴⁸

V. Conclusion

Wolff’s groundbreaking analysis was immediately perceived as such and promoted by Wolff’s supporters. At the very beginning of the 1720 s, Thümmig insisted in his already mentioned *Demonstratio* on the necessity to include in the notion of immortality the three features already pinpointed by Wolff. “Since the essence of the soul survives after the death of the body we call it indestructible (*indestructibilis*); since it persists in a state of distinct perceptions and preserve the memory of itself, we call it immortal (*immortalis*)”.⁴⁹ Wolff’s proof served not only as refutation of the supporters of the death of the soul, but even more as a clear criticism of the belief of the so-called ‘mortalists’ who claimed that the soul, once abandoned its earthly life, persists in a state of ‘sleep’ until the sound of the trumpets proclaim the Last Judgment at the end of the time. Being the soul rational, it cannot lose its capacity to have distinct perception; in that case it would lose its proper essence, and couldn’t therefore be considered the *same* soul as before.

⁴⁶ Meier, *Gedanken von dem Zustande der Seele nach dem Tode* (see fn. 44), § 90, 185. For a broader investigation of Meier’s idea of immortality cf. Paola Rumore, *Georg Friedrich Meiers Theorie der Unsterblichkeit der Seele im zeitgenössischen Kontext*, in: Gideon Stiening, Frank Grunert (eds.), *Georg Friedrich Meier (1718–1777). Philosophie als „wahre Weltweisheit“*, Berlin 2015, 163–186.

⁴⁷ Meier will change his mind thanks to the work on immortality by his friend Samuel Gotthold Lange, *Versuch, des von dem Herrn Georg Friedrich Meier, öffentlichen ordentlichen Lehrer der Weltweisheit zu Halle, in seinen Gedanken von dem Zustande der Seele nach dem Tode gelegneten mathematischen Erweises der Unsterblichkeit der Seele*, Halle 1749. Cf. Rumore, *Meiers Theorie der Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (see fn. 46).

⁴⁸ On the topic cf. Paola Rumore, *Kant and Crusius on the role of immortality in morals*, in: Corey W. Dyck, Falk Wunderlich (eds.), *Kant and his German Contemporaries* (in print); Corey W. Dyck, *Kant and Rational Psychology* (see fn. 21); Corey W. Dyck, *Beyond the Paralogsms: Kant on the Immortality of the Soul in the Metaphysics Lecture Notes*, in: Robert R. Clewis (ed.), *Reading Kant’s Lectures*, Berlin 2015, 115–134; Luca Fonnesu, *Kant on ‘moral certainty’* (see fn. 45).

⁴⁹ Thümmig, *Demonstratio* (see fn. 33), § VI.

This aspect of Wolff's theory of immortality is at the center of one of the most influential treatise on immortality of the time, that is, the *Philosophische Gedancken über die vernünfftige Seele und derselben Unsterblichkeit* published in 1739 by the Lutheran theologian Johann Gustav Reinbeck, a strong supporter of Wolff's cause at the Prussian court.⁵⁰ As he claimed: "We do not call immortal solely what doesn't even cease living, rather what has such an essence and nature according to which it cannot ever cease living".⁵¹ He sums up his demonstration in a series of statements which deserves to be quoted in full:

I. A simple and indivisible thing is neither body nor matter. The rational soul is a simple and indivisible thing. Therefore, the rational soul is neither body nor matter. II. A simple and indivisible thing, which has neither body nor matter, is incorruptible and indestructible in itself, and maintains always its reality (*Wirklichkeit*). The rational soul is a simple and indestructible thing and has neither body nor matter. Therefore, the rational soul is incorruptible and indestructible in itself, and maintains continuously its reality. III. A thing which is incorruptible and indestructible in itself, and which maintains continuously its reality doesn't ever lose its essence (*Wesen*). But the rational soul is such a thing which is incorruptible and indestructible in itself, and maintains continuously its reality. Therefore, the rational soul doesn't ever lose its essence. IV. A thing which doesn't ever lose its essence and whose essence consists in such a representative power that allows it to build not only clear but also distinct and general concepts, remains always able to get concepts of those things which are necessary to rational thought and judgment. But the rational soul never loses its essence, which consists in such a representative power that allows it to built not only clear but also distinct and general concepts. Therefore, the rational soul is always able to get concepts of those things which are necessary to rational thought and judgment. V. A thing which remains always able to get concepts of those things which are necessary to rational thought and judgment is immortal. But the rational soul is such a thing which remains always able to get concepts of those things which are necessary to rational thought and judgment. Therefore, the rational soul is immortal.⁵²

The capacity to represent distinctly belongs to the essence of the soul, and is therefore preserved even when every connection with the body is over. As Wolff has shown in his rational psychology, this capacity is grounded on the system of pre-established harmony which governs the relation between body and soul. Perceptions by the soul harmonize with changes in the body without being influenced by them – according to Wolff's enormously debated example, the mouth could pronounce rational speeches even if there was no rational soul and no rational thought

⁵⁰ Johann Gustav Reinbeck, *Philosophische Gedancken über die vernünfftige Seele und derselben Unsterblichkeit*. Nebst einigen Anmerckungen über ein Frantzösisches Schreiben, darin behauptet werden will, daß die Materie dencke, Berlin 1739, reprint Hildesheim 2002. On the topic cf. Paola Rumore, *Materia cogitans. L'Aufklärung di fronte al materialismo*, Hildesheim 2013, 218–228; Rumore, *Meiers Theorie der Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (see fn. 46).

⁵¹ Reinbeck, *Philosophische Gedancken über die vernünfftige Seele* (see fn. 50), § XIX.

⁵² *Ibid.*, § LXXXVI.

in that body.⁵³ Therefore – as Reinbeck concludes – there is no contradiction and no difficulty in affirming that the rational activity of the soul can be carried on even after the death of the body.⁵⁴

Wolff's complex notion of immortality became very soon the standard view on the question. It can be found in the most influential treatises on immortality of the time, Johann Friedrich Stiebritz's *Philosophischer Beweis von der Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (1740), and Israel Gottlieb Canz's *Überzeugender Beweiß aus der Vernunft von der Unsterblichkeit sowohl der Menschen Seelen insgemein, als besonders der Kinderseelen* (1744) which represents, together with Reinbeck's work, the polemical goal of Meier's refutation of any rational demonstration of immortality.

But above all, the groundbreaking character of Wolff's investigation is revealed by the effects it produced outside the narrow academic world. In fact, his idea of immortality became very soon the main weapon of the struggle of German philosophy against the taking over of materialism. Reinbeck's idea of including in the publication of his *Philosophische Gedanken* the German translation of a famed anonymous writing about thinking matter – most likely a spurious version of Voltaire's *Letter on Locke*⁵⁵ – can be understood as a clear attempt to show what kind of dangerous consequences for the foundation of morals and for religious credo the refusal of Wolff's proof could imply.⁵⁶ Wolff's idea of the soul and his proof of immortality was what the old guard of German philosophy opposed to the naturalistic and in some cases even materialistic oriented tendencies of French philosophy warmly welcomed at the Berlin court after Frederick's accession to the throne. In fact, playing precisely on the sovereign personal interest in

⁵³ Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik* (see fn. 1), § 843.

⁵⁴ Reinbeck, *Philosophische Gedancken über die vernünftige Seele* (see fn. 50), § XC.

⁵⁵ The original title of the so-called *Epistula gallica* (French letter) was: *Copie d'un Manuscript ou l'on soutient que c'est la matière qui pense*; cf. Reinbeck, *Philosophische Gedancken über die vernünftige Seele* (see fn. 50), 321–423.

⁵⁶ Wolff was of the very same idea, as one can read in one of his letters to Manteuffel concerning Herr Hollmann in Göttingen: "Aus dem angehängten Brieffe des de Voltaire habe ersehen, daß der Prof. Hollmann in Göttingen seine Sätze, die er in der *Theologia naturali* behaupten sol, und welche deswegen noch nicht darf debitiret werden, von demselben entlehnet. Denn er giebet gleichfals vor, wie mir berichtet wird, daß Gott und die Seele was materielles wären, und man von beyden keinen Begriff haben könne, folgendes nicht wiße, was Gott und die Seele sey, daß Gott weder allwißend, noch allgegenwärtig seyn könne, und was dergleichen mehr ist. Man könnte nun H. D. Langen gleichfals vorrücken, daß dieses die Früchte wären, wenn man die Leute von meiner Philosophie abzöge und ihnen weiß machte, sie könnte ein anders Systema finden, wodurch sie meines verdunckeln und vernichten könnten". Wolff to Manteuffel, Jan. 20, 1740, in: Katharina Middell, Hanns-Peter Neumann (eds.), *Historisch-kritische Edition des Briefwechsels zwischen Christian Wolff und Ernst Christoph Graf von Manteuffel*, URL = <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bsz:14-qucosa-106475>, Letter Nr. 52.

the question of immortality the then counselor at the Prussian court, Ernst Christoph von Manteuffel, a strong supporter of Wolffianism and founder of the *Societas Alethophilorum*,⁵⁷ suggested that Frederick read the *German Metaphysics*, where he would have found “all that a philosopher can say more convincingly in favor of the immortality of the soul”.⁵⁸ The long-lasting admiration of the Enlightened sovereign for Wolffian philosophy, – which was only partially decreased by Voltaire’s harsh criticisms and which played at the time a so to speak remarkable ‘political’ role in the cultural scene of Prussia – dates back to this first propitious meeting with Wolff’s clarification of the question of immortality. As he wrote: “je commence à apercevoir l’aurore d’un jour qui ne brille pas encore tout à fait à mes yeux; et je vois qu’il est dans la possibilité des êtres que j’aie une âme, et que même elle soit immortelle. [...] Je m’en tiens à Wolff, et pourvu qu’il me procure bien que mon être indivisible est immortel, je serai content et tranquille.”⁵⁹

Der Aufsatz konzentriert sich auf Wolffs Beweis der Unsterblichkeit der Seele, den er sowohl in seiner frühen *Deutschen Metaphysik* als auch in der späteren *Psychologia rationalis* vorlegt. Aufgrund der Überzeugung, dass die Frage der Unsterblichkeit den höchsten Punkt jeder rationalen Untersuchung der Seele darstellt, zielt der Aufsatz darauf ab, den bahnbrechenden Charakter von Wolffs Verständnis der Unsterblichkeit hervorzuheben, der weit über die Grenzen einer bloßen metaphysischen Untersuchung hinausgeht. Durch die Betonung der moralischen Relevanz der Frage stellt Wolff eine neue Perspektive in die Diskussion über die Unsterblichkeit ein, die auch unter seinen Gegnern massiv einflussreich sein wird. Im letzten Teil weist der Aufsatz auf die breite Auswirkung von Wolffs Argument für die Unsterblichkeit und auf seine sozusagen „politische“ Rolle innerhalb der deutschen Kulturszene der Zeit hin.

This paper focuses on Wolff’s proof of the immortality of the soul as it is advanced both in his early *German Metaphysics*, and in his later *Psychologia rationalis*. Presenting the question of immortality as the highest point of any rational investigation of the soul, this paper aims at emphasizing the groundbreaking character of Wolff’s notion of immortality, which goes beyond the boundaries of a mere metaphysical investigation. By stressing the moral relevance of the question, Wolff introduces a new perspective in the debate on immortality,

⁵⁷ On the *Societas Alethophilorum* and on the role of Manteuffel in the circulation of Wolffianism cf. Johannes Bronisch, *Der Mäzen der Aufklärung. Ernst Christoph von Manteuffel und das Netzwerk des Wolffianismus*, Berlin 2010.

⁵⁸ Manteuffel to Brühl, April 24, 1736, quoted in: Hanns-Peter Neumann, *Der preußische Kronprinz Friedrich und die französische Übersetzung der Deutschen Metaphysik Christian Wolffs im Jahr 1736. Die Identifizierung der Krakauer Handschrift Ms. Gall. Fol. 140 in der Biblioteka Jagiellonska und der Berliner Handschrift P. 38 in der Bibliothek des Schlosses Charlottenburg*, in: *Forschungen zur Brandenburgischen und Preußischen Geschichte* N. F. 24 (2014), 35–68, here fn. 44.

⁵⁹ Frederick to Suhm, 27. März, 1736, quoted in Hanns-Peter Neumann, *Der preußische Kronprinz Friedrich und die französische Übersetzung der Deutschen Metaphysik Christian Wolffs im Jahr 1736* (see fn. 58), fn. 52.

which will turn to be massively influential even among his opponents. In the final part, the paper hints at the broad impact of Wolff's argument for immortality, and at its so to speak 'political' role within the German cultural scene of the time.

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