

## Introduction

Before undertaking the arduous task of trying to understand Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, it is helpful to consider briefly two preliminary questions. The first question is: Who was Kant's intended audience for this work? Whom did he hope to win over with its main argument? Given that Kant wrote the first *Critique* in German when it still would have been possible for him to have written it in Latin, just as he had his *Inaugural Dissertation* and several other earlier works, it is clear that he was writing primarily, even if not exclusively, for German-speaking philosophers in the second half of the eighteenth century. Who are these philosophers, and what views do they hold? Unfortunately, Kant's own text gives us very little explicit information on these points. However, this lack of information should not be thought particularly surprising, since it would be natural for Kant to assume that given his choice of audience, his readers would be in a position to identify who was coming under attack, on what point, and for what reason. At the same time, this situation does present an extra obstacle for contemporary readers, given that we do not, as a rule, know simply from reading his texts who his opponents are, what views they hold, and on what grounds.

The second, much more difficult question is: What would Kant's intended audience have understood the overall project and significance of the first *Critique* to be? On the one hand, one might think that Kant, like philosophers before him and, for that matter, ever since, is simply attempting to answer the eternal questions of philosophy. What is knowledge? What is reality? How should I act? etc. On the other hand, even if one grants the idea, contested by some, that there are eternal questions, which the great philosophers simply answer in powerful and radically different ways, it is still the case that these questions are both posed and answered in specific ways under particular historical conditions, with

different background assumptions in place. As a result, it cannot simply be taken for granted that one immediately knows, in light of the eternal questions, what project a given philosopher has chosen to undertake and what the significance of that project is supposed to be. The situation with the *Critique of Pure Reason* is no different. Even if Kant does develop an account of the nature of knowledge and explain what is real and what is not, he must be doing so in some specific context, at the very least with some particular understanding of what “pure reason” is, what it would mean to “critique” it, what method one could use to undertake such a critical project, and what pure reason could be replaced by. While Kant is not entirely mute on these points, one can fully appreciate what he took the nature and import of his undertaking to be only if one understands the projects and views of his immediate predecessors and contemporaries that he could have expected his intended audience to be familiar with. For knowing what they would have viewed as controversial and what beyond dispute as well as what projects had already been undertaken and with what success is indispensable to an accurate assessment of the contribution Kant was trying to make, of what new perspectives and options he hoped to be offering. In a very general way, the following, extremely brief characterizations of the figures whose texts have been translated below can provide a basic orientation to their significance for Kant’s first *Critique*.

Christian Wolff and Alexander Baumgarten, who are often credited with systematizing and popularizing Leibniz’s rationalist position in Germany starting in the 1720s and 1730s, are particularly important in the present context insofar as they offer specific formulations of and arguments for the kinds of positions that Kant would clearly associate with “pure reason.” Martin Knutzen, perhaps the most prominent of Kant’s teachers at the university he attended in Königsberg, provides an example of how one could deny certain Leibnizian conclusions, especially regarding causality, without, however, also rejecting the Leibnizian-Wolffian principles on which they were alleged to rest. As a result, familiarity with the views of Wolff, Baumgarten, and Knutzen promises to help us to understand some of the very specific forms that the object of Kant’s criticisms of metaphysics takes in the first *Critique*.

Christian August Crusius and Leonhard Euler took much more critical positions toward the dominant Leibnizian-Wolffian position in the 1740s and 1750s. Crusius, whose Pietist background influenced his basic orientation, was motivated by metaphysical and theological issues to relentlessly criticize the rationalist and putatively necessitarian

positions of Wolff and to work out in creative ways a position that leaves room for contingency in both the divine and human cases. Euler, whose expertise in mathematics and rational mechanics was unparalleled in the eighteenth century, criticized Wolff's metaphysics on grounds stemming from a sophisticated understanding of nature as represented by the physical and mathematical sciences (Newtonian physics in particular). Accordingly, Crusius and Euler are both valuable insofar as they represent importantly different ways in which one could be critical of pure reason at the time. Knowledge of their views is thus crucial to an appropriate assessment of the critical dimension of Kant's project, since only on the basis of this knowledge can one judge the extent to which Kant is simply adopting or adapting in subtle ways criticisms that others had already developed and the extent to which he is articulating original objections from a genuinely novel standpoint.

Johann Heinrich Lambert and Marcus Herz provide important insights into Kant's development in the 1760s and early 1770s. Lambert, another important mathematician and scientist, was somewhat less critical of Leibniz and Wolff, devoting his attention instead to the more positive project of seeking the proper method in science, mathematics, and metaphysics and attempting to establish an adequate epistemological foundation for these branches of knowledge. Insofar as Kant's first *Critique* similarly calls into question the philosophical methodology of his predecessors, Lambert's reflections provide an important point of comparison. Herz, the student whom Kant selected to publicly defend his *Inaugural Dissertation*, carefully examines Kant's position in the *Inaugural Dissertation* in detail in his main philosophical publication, and carries on a correspondence with Kant. While Herz does not offer a general perspective that is independent of Kant's at this time, he does have an excellent sense of how careful yet sympathetic readers of Kant's works at the time would have been reacting to the position he was staking out and developing further in the Critical period. In addition, his correspondence with Kant provides us with direct access to Kant's thinking in the crucial period when he was writing the first *Critique*. In different ways, therefore, Lambert and Herz offer particularly useful perspectives on what issues were of special interest to Kant in the decades prior to the publication of the first *Critique*.

Johann August Eberhard and Johann Nicolaus Tetens, despite radical differences in their philosophical orientations, both undertook the project of synthesizing various empirical phenomena within a broadly rationalist framework in the mid-1770s, during the heart of Kant's

so-called silent decade. Eberhard, whose basic sympathies lie with Leibniz, attempts to show how thinking and sensing, in the face of their fundamental contrasts, are nonetheless compatible with the soul having only one basic power, namely, that of representation. Tetens, who is generally sympathetic to both Locke's position and elements of Hume's empiricism, though certainly not in an uncritical way, similarly argues that the various mental phenomena we encounter are consistent with a single representative power, and then develops a sophisticated account of rational and sensitive cognition. Knowledge of the views of Eberhard and Tetens is thus important insofar as they are engaged in a project that is similar in fundamental ways to Kant's such that one can profitably compare and contrast their ways of synthesizing empiricist and rationalist elements.

Each of the following nine chapters fills out this cursory general introduction with selections from the most important works of each of these figures, roughly in chronological order. Brief introductions to each chapter have been limited to providing the barest of essentials – basic biographic and bibliographic information as well as a quick sketch of each author's main project and relevance for Kant – so as to maximize the quantity of primary texts provided. It is hoped that these primary texts will allow readers to attain a much more historically accurate and philosophically sophisticated understanding of Kant's position in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

## 1

## Christian Wolff

Christian Wolff was born in Breslau in 1679 and received his initial education there; he studied theology at Jena, then mathematics at Leipzig, where he received his master's degree. He was appointed professor of mathematics and natural science in Halle in 1706, at the recommendation of Leibniz, with whom he corresponded until the latter's death in 1716. Through his engaging teaching style and clear systematic prose, Wolff established himself as an important proponent of Enlightenment ideals at what was then the leading university in Prussia. In 1723 he was expelled by King Frederick William I, ostensibly because of the Pietists' accusations that his adherence to preestablished harmony committed him to fatalism, Spinozism, and atheism. Wolff fled to Marburg, where he continued to lecture and publish as a professor of mathematics and philosophy. In 1740 he returned to Halle at the request of Frederick the Great, who had since taken over the throne from his father. Wolff remained in Halle until his death in 1754.

Wolff was an extraordinarily prolific writer, publishing, among many other things, a series of lengthy German textbooks from 1713 to 1725 – on logic, metaphysics, ethics, politics, physics (including cosmology), and teleology – and then reworking many of these into longer Latin versions in the 1730s and 1740s in order to gain a wider European audience, though he also penned voluminous polemical tracts on the side in his debates with the Pietists. The most important and influential of these works is his so-called German Metaphysics, or *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (Rational Thoughts on God, the World and the Soul of Human Beings, Also All Things in General), first published in 1720 (but reprinted in twelve editions by 1752). It establishes a basic philosophical terminology and framework for his thought and for the

generations of students who would use it throughout the eighteenth century in Germany. Specifically, it lays the foundation for his views in other disciplines such as physics, ethics, teleology, and politics, providing support for the view that philosophy – metaphysics in particular – is the queen of the sciences.

*Rational Thoughts on God, the World and the Soul of Human Beings, Also All Things in General*, contains six chapters, which reflect his understanding of the systematic structure of metaphysics. After an introductory first chapter, which contains a brief discussion of certainty and how to attain it, Wolff introduces his general ontology, concerning “all things in general,” in a second chapter, where the basic concepts of his ontology are laid out and his fundamental principles, the principle of contradiction and the principle of sufficient reason, are established. In the remaining chapters he then draws on these ontological concepts and principles to provide his accounts of the more specific kinds of objects listed in the title of the work. Accordingly, Chapter Three and Chapter Five discuss the soul in the context of his accounts of empirical and rational psychology, Chapter Four develops an account of the primary features of the world in his cosmology, and Chapter Six concludes with a discussion of God in his natural theology.

Wolff’s importance for Kant is considerable and plays out in both positive and negative ways. On the positive score, not only does Kant adopt much of the German philosophical vocabulary Wolff had introduced (in fact, building on it with his own distinctive terminology), but he also accepts Wolff’s basic division of metaphysics into rational psychology, rational cosmology, and rational theology (such as in the division of the Transcendental Dialectic’s three main chapters). At the same time, and on the negative side, he of course criticizes Wolff’s position and arguments on many occasions (as indefensibly dogmatic), though he never cites particular passages in which these positions and arguments are stated in Wolff’s works. The selections translated below are intended to remedy this defect by indicating how Wolff develops his overall position and by providing detailed passages that are directly relevant to particular arguments and criticisms in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.



*RATIONAL THOUGHTS ON GOD, THE WORLD AND  
 THE SOUL OF HUMAN BEINGS, ALSO ALL THINGS  
 IN GENERAL (1720)*<sup>1</sup>

CHAPTER ONE. HOW WE COGNIZE THAT WE EXIST  
 AND OF WHAT USE THIS COGNITION IS FOR US

§1.<sup>2</sup> *How we cognize that we exist.* We are conscious 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.

§2. *Whether one has reason to question it.* Some will perhaps be surprised, while others who, due to a lack of deep insight, are unable to deal with explanations and proofs, will even laugh that I must first prove that we exist. For no human being under the sun has ever denied this, and if someone were to go this far, it would not be worthwhile to refute him, because he would either be robbed of his understanding and thus not know what he is saying, or have to be so obstinate that, against his own better judgment, he would deny everything on principle. For this reason even the most unusual sects of egoists who recently arose in Paris and denied the existence of all things have admitted: **I exist.**

§3. *The first reason.* I hope that they will soon stop being surprised when I tell them the reasons that have inclined me to do this. In the preface to the philosophy that is found at the beginning of my *Rational Thoughts on the Powers of the Human Understanding* (§5), I remarked that philosophers must not only know that something is possible or occurs, but also be able to indicate the reason why it is possible or occurs. Because we have such certainty about our own existence that we cannot call it into doubt in any way (§1), it is also incumbent upon us to show where this certainty

<sup>1</sup> Translated from *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (Halle, 1751, 11th ed.).

<sup>2</sup> §§1–7 are relevant to the Paralogisms (A338–A405/B396–B432), especially A341–A348/B399–B406.

comes from. And because we intend to deal with philosophy here, we must inquire where such a great certainty comes from.

§4. *The second reason.* And (which is the second reason) this investigation has a great value of its own. For if I know why we have such great certainty about our own existence, then I am aware of how something must be constituted so that I can cognize it with as much certainty as I do that I myself exist. It is a great thing when I can say of important truths without fear: “They are as certain as that I exist,” or also, “I cognize that they exist with the same certainty as I have when I know that I exist.” And quite a bit rests on this because we are attempting to explain our natural cognition of God and the soul as well as of the world and all things in general with indubitable certainty.

§5. *Consideration of the way in which we cognize that we exist.* For us to obtain this benefit we must consider a bit more precisely in what way we cognize that we exist. Now when we do this, we find that our cognition in this case is constituted as follows: (1) We undeniably experience that we are conscious of ourselves and of other things (§1 above & §1 c. 5 of *Logic*). (2) It is clear to us that whoever is conscious of himself and other things exists. Consequently, we are (3) certain that we exist.

§6.<sup>3</sup> *By means of which syllogism this occurs.* If we want to cognize distinctly how these reasons convince us that we exist, we shall find that the following syllogism is contained in these thoughts:

Whoever is conscious of himself and other things, exists.  
 We are conscious of ourselves and other things.  
 Therefore, we exist.

§7. *How this syllogism is constituted.* In this syllogism the minor premise is [supported by] an indubitable experience, whereas the major premise belongs to those [propositions] that one admits without any proof as soon as one understands the words that arise in it, that is, it is a fundamental principle (§2 c. 6 *Logic*). For who would want to doubt the existence of a thing of which we cognize that it exists in a certain way? Everyone sees that if specific [*besondere*] things are to exist, they can exist in none other than a certain way (§27 c. 1 *Logic*).

<sup>3</sup> See B422–B423 (Paralogisms), where Kant appears to deny the soundness of such an inference.

§8.<sup>4</sup> *What certainty a demonstration has.* A proof of this sort is a demonstration (§21 c. 4 *Logic*) and accordingly makes clear that everything that is properly demonstrated is just as certain as our existence because what is demonstrated is proven in just the same way as our existence is.

§9. *With what certainty geometrical truths are proven.* Not only have I noted [as much] in my *Thoughts on the Powers of the Human Understanding* (§23 & 24 c. 4), but anyone who would aim to analyze proofs in geometry precisely will realize that proofs in geometry are likewise carried out through syllogisms in which the premises are of undoubted certainty, and require no further proof. Therefore, one sees that geometrical truths are proven with the same certainty as our own existence and, consequently, everything that is proven in geometrical fashion is as certain as our own existence is.

CHAPTER TWO. ON THE FIRST PRINCIPLES OF OUR COGNITION  
 AND OF ALL THINGS IN GENERAL

§10.<sup>5</sup> *Principle [Grund] of contradiction.* When we cognize that we are conscious of ourselves and other things, and take this to be certain, this occurs because it is in fact impossible for us to comprehend that we should be conscious of ourselves and at the same time not be conscious of ourselves. Similarly, in all other cases we find that it is impossible for us to comprehend that something does not exist when it does. And in this way we acknowledge without any reservation at all this universal proposition: **Something cannot at the same time be and also not be.** We call this proposition the **principle of contradiction** and not only do syllogisms have their certainty through it (§5 c. 4 *Logic*), but it also places any proposition that we experience beyond all doubt, just as we experience this in our own case, [namely] that we are conscious of ourselves.

§11. *Constitution of contradiction.* Accordingly, a contradiction requires that what is affirmed is also denied at the same time. And in this fashion it is necessary that the thing of which something is affirmed is not only the one of which something is denied, but also that in both cases this one thing is taken in the same circumstances and viewed in the same way. E.g., if two people do not take a word in the same meaning, the one

<sup>4</sup> See A734/B762 (Discipline of Pure Reason).

<sup>5</sup> §§10–12 are relevant to On the Highest Principle of all Analytic Judgments (A150/B189ff.). §§10–12 are also relevant to Section 1 of *New Elucidation* (1:388ff.).

can verbally deny of this thing what the other affirms (§15 c. 2 *Logic*) and still no contradiction arises insofar as what the one person is affirming is not the same as what the other person is denying.

§12. *What is possible and impossible.* Because nothing can be and not be at same time (§10), we recognize that something is impossible if it contradicts something else of which we already know that it is or can be, as when it follows that a part is equal to or greater than the whole, or also when one thing contradicts another that is supposed to be subsumed under it. And in this way what contains something contradictory in itself is impossible, as, for example, iron wood is or two circles that intersect each other and have the same middle point. For whatever is iron cannot be wood and when two circles intersect each other they cannot have the same middle point, as is proven in geometry. Hence one can see further that whatever contains nothing contradictory in itself is possible, that is, whatever not only can itself exist next to other things that are or can be, but also contains in itself only those things that can exist next to each other is possible, as, for example, a wooden plate is. For being a plate and being wooden do not oppose each other; rather, both can exist at the same time.

§17.<sup>6</sup> *What identity and difference are.* If I can posit thing B for thing A and everything remains as it was, A and B are **identical**. [...] But if I posit B for A and not everything remains the same, A and B are **distinct** or are **different things**.

§18. *What similarity and dissimilarity are.* Two things are **similar** to each other, if that by which one is to cognize them and distinguish them from each other, or through which they are determined in their kind [*Art*], is identical in both. By contrast, A and B are **dissimilar things** if that by which one is to cognize them and distinguish them from each other is different in both. [...]

§20. *How similar things are distinguished.* Accordingly, similar things cannot be distinguished from each other unless one either actually brings them together or does so in thought by means of a third thing, e.g., when one places two similar clocks next to each other or represents two similar buildings in their different positions, for which reason we also

<sup>6</sup> §§17–21 are relevant to On the Amphiboly of the Concepts of Reflection (A260/B316ff.).