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1 Introduction

1.1 The reception of Wolffian philosophy

This study focuses on the last work of eighteenth-century philosopher Christian Wolff, the *Oeconomica methodo scientifica pertractata*, a rationalist guide to domestic morality. Born in 1679 in Breslau Wolff embarked on a splendid academic career, enjoying the support of contemporary luminaries like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. He accepted a professorship for mathematics at Halle university in 1706 and soon expanded his range to include natural, theoretical and moral philosophy.¹ Wolff ultimately made a name for himself as one of the first scholars to systematically publish in the vernacular at a time when Latin still ruled the day at German universities; in fact, this made him a major figure to spread philosophy amongst the population at large in the eighteenth century.² Popular and controversial alike, he was expelled from Halle by Frederick Wilhelm I in 1721, the culmination of an enduring conflict with the theological faculty who dominated the university at the time. The scandal inevitably contributed to his fame; Wolff spent his exile in Marburg as a coveted professor, resisting the eventual pardon of the king. He only returned to Halle in 1740 with the accession of Frederick II where, amply decorated, he passed away in 1754 – midway through writing the *Oeconomica*.³

Although Wolff's life is well-attested, his legacy is disputed: revered, reviled, yet indisputably famous throughout his lifetime, the *maître à penser de l'Allemagne* quickly lost in prominence thereafter.⁴ And even though Wolff left behind an immense oeuvre covering over 50,000 printed pages, spawned an eponymous movement with his methodology and furnished the German language with a philosophical terminology – in short, even though the impact of Wolffian philosophy can be considered a fact, his name is not as commonplace in modern academia as his erstwhile prominence would suggest.⁵ In fact, this discrepancy between lifelong prominence and posthumous oblivion is an oft-repeated theme in contemporary scholarship.⁶

1 Ahnert, Thomas, 'Introduction', in *The Law of Nations Treated According to the Scientific Method*, by Christian Wolff, ed. by Thomas Ahnert, trans. by Joseph H. Drake (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2017), pp. ix–xxiv (xi–xii).

2 Biller, Gerhard, 'Biographie und Bibliographie', in *Handbuch Christian Wolff*, ed. by Robert Theis and Alexander Aichele (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), pp. 5–34, p. 11.

3 Biller, 'Biographie und Bibliographie', p. 5.

4 As Wolff was famously dubbed by Voltaire. Quoted in Thomann, Marcel, 'Christian Wolff', in *Staatsdenker in der frühen Neuzeit*, ed. by Michael Stolleis and Notker Hammerstein (Munich: Beck, 1995), pp. 257–83, p. 257.

5 Biller, 'Biographie und Bibliographie', p. 7.

6 See, for instance, Wundt, Max, *Die Deutsche Schulphilosophie im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1964), p. 123; Schwaiger, Clemens, 'Christian Wolff', in *The Bloomsbury Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century German Philosophers*, ed. by Heiner F. Klemme and Manfred Kuehn (London: