The Principle of Morality in Eighteenth-Century German Philosophy

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During the eighteenth century, German philosophers wrote on a broad range of topics in moral philosophy: from meta-ethical issues such as the nature of obligation, to elaborate systems of normative ethics (often in the form of a doctrine of duties to self, others, and God), to topics in applied ethics such as the permissibility of the death penalty and censorship. Moral philosophy was also intimately related to the modern natural law tradition at the time, as well as to discussions taking place in theology and psychology, to name only a few other disciplines.[1] As a result, it is often hard to isolate eighteenth-century German moral philosophy without addressing a whole host of other philosophical subjects.[2] There are nonetheless certain central topics that were discussed by nearly every major figure of the period and which therefore serve as a window into how German philosophers approached moral philosophy during the eighteenth century. In this chapter I illustrate that one such topic is the principle of morality; namely what philosophers took to be the supreme norm at the foundation of judging actions to be morally good or evil.[3] As we will see, although

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[1] For the relationship between natural law and moral philosophy in eighteenth-century German philosophy, see T. J. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) and K. Haakonssen, "German Natural Law," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, ed. M. Goldie and R. Wokler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 249–290.

[2] This circumstance helps explain why research on eighteenth-century German moral philosophy beyond Kant is still in its infancy. A survey of the literature reveals that, especially in English-language scholarship, Wolff and Crusius are often the only eighteenth-century German figures other than Kant whose moral philosophies are given any attention, if at all; see e.g., J. B. Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy: A History of Modern Moral Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). In Terence Irwin's *The Development of Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press. 3 vols. 2007, 2008, 2009), for instance, Kant is the only eighteenth-century German philosopher mentioned in any detail. The situation in German-language scholarship is significantly better, especially thanks to efforts such as De Gruyter's Werkprofile series, which has allowed leading scholars to give attention to the moral philosophies of lesser-known figures such as G. F. Meier and Christian Garve (see e.g., F. Grunert and G Stiening, eds., *Georg Friedrich Meier (1718–1777): Philosophie als "wahre Weltweisheit"* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015); and U. Roth and G. Stiening, eds., *Christian Garve (1742–1798): Philosoph und Philologe der Aufklärung* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021). The existing surveys of eighteenth-century German moral philosophy in English are contained in: L. W. Beck, "From Leibniz to Kant," in *Routledge History of Philosophy Volume VI: The Age of German Idealism*, ed. K. M. Higgins and R. C. Solomon, (London: Routledge, 1993), 5–39; L. W. Beck, *Early German Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press, 1969); S. Bacin, "Rationalism and Perfectionism," in *The Cambridge History of Moral Philosophy*, ed. S. Golob and J. Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 379–393; M. Kuehn and D. F. Norton, "The Foundations of Morality," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Philosophy*, ed. K. Haakonssen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 939–986; and Schneewind, *Invention*.

[3] To date, how German philosophers conceived of the principle of morality during the eighteenth century has been discussed under the broader heading of the 'foundations of morality' (see e.g., Kuehn and Norton, "Foundations"), which groups together several topics; not only the principle of morality but also issues in moral psychology, moral

several figures approached this principle in a broadly similar way by identifying "perfection" as the central concept at work, they differ considerably with respect to important details. Furthermore, certain common threads reveal themselves: philosophers differ not only with respect to the content of the principle, but also with respect to the way in which it can be derived, how particular duties can in turn be derived from the supreme principle, and how the principle can be formulated. I begin by outlining Christian Wolff's influential principle of perfection (Section 1), followed by a consideration of Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's subtle revision of this principle (Section 2) and Christian August Crusius's theological alternative (Section 3). I then briefly consider the impact that the reception of eighteenth-century British philosophy had on German moral philosophy during the second half of the eighteenth century (Section 4), before considering Moses Mendelssohn's and Immanuel Kant's answers to the 1763 Prize Essay Question (Section 5) and Johann August Eberhard's unique mixture of rationalism and empiricism from the early 1780s (Section 6). I conclude (Section 7) with a brief discussion of Kant's approach to the principle of morality and the principle of happiness proposed against it by his early empiricist critics.[4]

1. Wolff: The Principle of Perfection

Wolff's moral philosophy begins with a statement of fact: the free actions of human beings bring about changes in what Wolff calls the internal and external states of human beings.[5] Put

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education, and moral epistemology (see e.g., the excellent discussion in S. Grote, *The Emergence of Modern Aesthetic Theory: Religion and Morality in Enlightenment Germany and Scotland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), chap. 1). The 'foundations of morality' was a largely British expression, however, and its German equivalent (*Grundlage der Moral*) was rarely if ever used in the German context (see Grote, *Emergence*, 16). Accordingly, one of my aims in this chapter is to suggest that it is helpful to separate scholarly treatment of the principle of morality from these other related issues, especially in the German context.

[4] Kant's conception of the principle of morality is given brief treatment in this chapter for three reasons: 1) it has already been discussed extensively in the literature (some of which I refer to in Section 7); 2) *The Oxford Handbook of Kant*, ed. A. Gomes and A. Stephenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming) includes a chapter on the moral law, see B. Herman, "The Moral Law," in *The Oxford Handbook of Kant*, ed., Anil Gomes and Andrew Stephenson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming); and 3) one of my aims in this chapter is to highlight eighteenth-century German figures other than Kant.

[5] C. Wolff, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. J. École, H. Arndt, R. Theis, W. Schneiders, J. Paccioni, and S. Carboncinci-Gavanelli (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1962–) (hereafter: "WGW"), here I. Abt., vol. 4, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen* (hereafter: "WDE"), §2. For partial English translations of this work, see J. B. Schneewind, ed., *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 333–348; and M. Walschots, ed. and trans., *Kant's* Critique of Practical Reason*: Background Source Materials* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), 18–39. I begin this chapter with Wolff because my focus is necessarily limited. Although Wolff is often regarded as initiating the beginning eighteenth-century German moral philosophy (see e.g., H. Poser "Die Bedeutung der Ethik Christian Wolffs für die deutsche Aufklärung," in *Theoria cum Praxi*, Vol. 1 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1980.), 206–17), a more complete account would have to consider the disciples of Christian Thomasius who preceded Wolff, such as Andreas Rüdiger.

differently, actions have consequences on a human being's states of body and soul (internal states), as well as their honour, reputation, finances, etc. (external states). At the core of Wolff's view is the idea that actions are good or evil depending on whether the states that actions bring about make a human being more perfect or imperfect: "That which makes both our internal as well as external state perfect is good; and that which makes both more imperfect is evil." (WDE §3) Whether the states produced are more perfect or imperfect depends, for Wolff, on whether they agree with the essence and nature of the human being: "Now, when the present state agrees with the previous and the following one and all of them taken together agree with the essence and nature of human beings, then the state of the human beings is perfect, and all the more perfect the greater this agreement is." (WDE §2, see also §28) Wolff claims that the proof of this is complicated, but experience shows it to be the case (WDE §2).

To see more precisely how this works, we therefore need to consider the essence and nature of the human being. For Wolff, the human being essentially consists of a body and soul.[6] Wolff defines the essence of a body in terms of its composition or the size, shape, and arrangement of its parts,[7] and the essence of the soul in terms of its fundamental power to represent the world according to the position of the body (see WDM §753–756). If our actions agree with the way in which our body parts are arranged as well as with our soul's power to represent the world, then they are more perfect. Wolff provides some helpful examples here: in a natural state, the human body is well functioning and does not experience any pain. If one were to then consume a large amount of food and drink, Wolff claims that one would experience pain and become "dull [*matt*]" (WDE §2). Consuming large amounts of food and drink is therefore morally evil, on Wolff's view, because it brings about states that conflict with the natural state of the body. Similarly, but with respect to the soul, if one were to practice cognizing the truth, such as by performing mathematical equations, you would in no way be acting contrary but rather in agreement with the essence of the soul, thereby making it more perfect. Exercising your cognitive capacities is therefore morally good, on Wolff's view (see WDE §2).

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[6] See WDE §224 and §14, WGW II.3 (*Philosophia prima, sive ontologia*, hereafter: "WO"), §503 and §506, and WGW II.10 (*Philosophia practica universalis*, hereafter WPPU) I, §49. External states are the things that are related to satisfying the human being's basic needs, as well as their well-being and enjoyment (see WDE §513), and thus are only indirectly relevant to their nature or essence.

[7] See WGW I.2 (*Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menchen*, hereafter: "WDM"), §606, §611, §614.

It is on the basis of these seemingly natural facts, namely that free actions have consequences on our states and the essence and nature of the body and soul, that Wolff derives what he calls the "*universal rule for free actions*":

> since good actions make our internal and external state more perfect, but evil actions make it more imperfect (§3), so does nature obligate us to do that which makes us and our state, or, what is the same, our internal and external state, more perfect and on the other hand to omit that which makes us and our state, or, what is the same, our internal and external state, more imperfect. Thus, we have a rule according to which we should direct the actions that are in our control, namely: *do that which makes you and your state or that of another more perfect, omit that which makes it more imperfect.*[8]

This 'universal rule' is Wolff's ultimate standard for judging the morality of actions.[9] Wolff also calls it a law of nature (WDE §19) in virtue of the fact that he derives it from the nature of human beings consisting of a body and soul.[10] The extent to which one is capable of judging the morality of actions on the basis of this rule is the extent to which one possesses "conscience [*Gewissen*]" (WDE §73), and in order to make such judgements one needs to know not only what kinds of changes our actions bring about in the states of human beings, but also whether such states agree with the essence and nature of human beings (see WDE §3 and §13). Moral judgement therefore requires a considerable amount of both self-knowledge and knowledge of the world, for Wolff.[11] It also requires the exercise of reason: Wolff defines reason as "insight into the connection of things" (WDE §23 and WDM §368), such as the connection between an action and its consequences, so reason "teaches" the law of nature (WDE §23). Moral knowledge is gained through experience as well, such as when we learn what the soul is capable of accomplishing through knowledge of its

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[8] WDE §12. For other statements of Wolff's fundamental moral principle, see WDE §19, WPPU I §127, §128, and §152.
[9] See D. Hüning, "Christian Wolffs 'allgemeine Regel der menschlichen Handlungen,'" *Jahrbuch für Recht und Ethik/Annual Review of Law and Ethics* 12 (2004): 91–113, here, 92; E. Stobbe, "Is Christian Wolff's Practical Philosophy Eudaimonistic?" in *Christian Wolff's German Ethics: New Essays*, ed. S. Schierbaum, M. Walschots, and J. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 153–173, here 159; and M. Favaretti Camposampiero, "Objective Morality: Wolff and the Impious Hypothesis," in *Christian Wolff's German Ethics: New Essays*, ed. S. Schierbaum, M. Walschots, and J. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 129–152, here 145.
[10] For Wolff's statements of this natural 'grounding' of his ethics, see WDE §14, WO §503 and §506, and WPPU I, §49.
[11] For Wolff's conception of what we are obligated to know in order to make moral judgements, see M. Walschots, "Wolff on the Duty to Cognize Good and Evil," in *Christian Wolff's German Ethics: New Essays*, ed. S. Schierbaum, M. Walschots, and J. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 219–236.

effects.[12] Wolff's conception of moral knowledge is therefore consistent with his broader commitment to the idea of the 'marriage of reason and experience.'[13]

Two features of Wolff's conception of the universal rule for free actions deserve further discussion here. The first is the concept of perfection, which is central to his philosophy as a whole.[14] Wolff defines perfection as "consensus in variety [*Zusammenstimmung des mannigfaltigen/consensus in varietate*]"[15] and he conceives of it as teleological in nature in the sense that one needs to know the end of a thing in order to judge its perfection.[16] Again, Wolff makes this clear with a number of helpful examples. First, there is the example of architecture (*Baukunst*), where the perfection of a building depends on the intentions of the builder.[17] Another of Wolff's favourite examples is that of a clock: "One judges the perfection of a clock on the basis of it correctly indicating the hours and their parts." (WDM 152) Wolff also explicitly discusses an example that is relevant to moral philosophy, namely "the human being's course of life [*der Wandel des Menschen*]." (WDM §152) The relevant end in this case is the general end that unifies one's course of life: "The human being's course of life consists of many actions. When these all agree with each other in such a way that they are all eventually grounded in a general purpose, then the human being's course of life is perfect." (WDM 152) On the one hand, Wolff indicates that this end or purpose is simply perfection itself.[18] Our actions are simply the means to attaining the general end of perfection, and when all our actions (and omissions) agree with respect to the attainment of this general end over the course of our entire life, we have led as morally good a life as possible.[19] On the other hand, Wolff is clear that an individual human being can choose a particular course of life, and the

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[12] See WDE §232 as well as Wolff's essay "De experientia morali" [*Of Moral Experience*] in WGW II.34.3, 681–719 and for a discussion C. Fugate, "Wolff's Ethical Experimentalism and its Roots in his *German Ethics*," in *Christian Wolff's German Ethics: New Essays*, ed. S. Schierbaum, M. Walschots, and J. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 273–295.

[13] See WGW II.1 (*Philosophia rationalis sive logica*), §1232 and WGW II.6 (*Psychologia rationalis*), §487, and the discussion in C. W. Dyck *Kant and Rational Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), chap. 1.

[14] For Wolff's concept of perfection, its place in his moral philosophy, and how it differs from that of his predecessors see C. Schwaiger, *Das Problem des Glücks im Denken Christian Wolffs* (Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog, 1995), 93–120; C. Schwaiger, "Vollkommenheit als Moralprinzip bei Wolff, Baumgarten und Kant," in *Vernunftkritik und Aufklärung. Studien zur Philosophie Kants und seines Jahrhunderts*, ed. M. Oberhausen (Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog, 2001), 317–328; and U. Goldenbaum, "Wolff's Powerful Concept of Perfection and its Roots," in *Christian Wolff's German Ethics: New Essays*, ed. S. Schierbaum, M. Walschots, and J. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 67–86.

[15] See WDM §152, WO §503 and Schwaiger, *Das Problem*, 95–106 for the Leibnizian roots of this formulation.

[16] See WGW II.4 (*Cosmologia generalis*), §538 scholium and C. Schwaiger, *Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten: Ein intellektuelles Porträt* (Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog, 2011), 159–161.

[17] See WGW I.9 (*Ausführliche Nachricht*, hereafter: "WAN"), §76; Schwaiger, *Baumgarten*, 159; Hüning, "Regel," 94; and Grote, *Emergence*, 159.

[18] See WDE §40 and WDM §910, and GW II.12 (*Philosophia moralis sive ethica*), Preface.

[19] See WDM §907; WPPU I, §9; GW I.19 (*Grundsätze des Natur- und Völckerrechts*), §9; Hüning, "Regel," 95.

perfection of one's life therefore also depends on the specific course of life one chooses (see WDE §256). Wolff gives the example of studying: if I have set myself the life goal or purpose of attaining knowledge, then specific actions (such as attending university) are morally good because they make my life more perfect insofar as they promote this end, and imperfect insofar as they hinder the attainment of this end (WDE §227). Whatever form the perfection of one's own life takes, it should be noted that human beings can never attain the highest degree of perfection that is reserved for God only (see WDE 44). The greatest perfection, i.e., "highest good" or "blessedness [*Seeligkeit*]" that the human being can achieve is where one "proceeds from one particular perfection to another and increasingly avoids imperfection," thus it consists in "an unhindered progress to ever greater perfections." (WDE §44)

The second important feature about Wolff's view to note is that by grounding moral goodness in the nature of human beings and things, Wolff holds that actions are "in themselves good and evil and are not first made such by God's will."[20] Wolff even invokes Hugo Grotius's famous 'impious hypothesis' and claims that "[i]f it were therefore just as possible for there to be no God and the present relation of things could exist without him, then the free actions of human beings would nonetheless remain good or evil."[21] Wolff thereby aligns himself with the tradition of 'objective morality,' which includes Grotius, according to which moral goodness is internal to actions, rather than determined externally by, for instance, God's will.[22] Indeed, Wolff explicitly positions himself against Samuel Pufendorf in many places, who held, contra Grotius, that actions were first made morally good or evil by God's (subjective) will.[23] Although there are divine laws, on Wolff's view, namely those which obligate us to perform or omit actions on the basis of God's will (see WDE §17), these are coextensive with natural laws because God cannot give human beings laws that are not good in themselves first.[24]

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[20] WDE §5, §20. See also WDE §16 and WPPU I, §35.

[21] WDE §5, WAN §395 and see Favaretti Camposampiero, "Objective Morality" for discussion.

[22] See WAN §137 and WPPU I, §55 and §172, and for a discussion S. Bacin, "Morality as Both Objective and Subjective: Baumgarten's Way to Moral Realism and Its Impact on Kant," in *Baumgarten and Kant on the Foundations of Practical Philosophy*, ed. C. D. Fugate and J. Hymers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 90–105; and J. G. Walch, "Moralität," in *Philosophisches Lexicon* (Leipzig: J. F. Gleditschens, 1726), 1828–1832.

[23] For Wolff's statements against Pufendorf see WAN §137; WPPU I, §63; WGW I.10 (*Christian Wolffs eigene Lebensbeschreibung*), §132; and for a discussion H.-J. Kertscher, *"Er brachte Licht und Ordnung in die Welt": Christian Wolff–eine Biographie* (Berlin: Mitteldeutscher Verlag, 2018), 56. To be noted is that Wolff was a Pufendorfian early on, see F. Grunert, "Natural Law as a Theory of Practical Philosophy: The Relationship between Natural Law and Ethics in Christian Wolff's Practical Philosophy," in *Christian Wolff's German Ethics: New Essays*, ed. S. Schierbaum, M. Walschots, and J. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 44–66, here 50.

[24] See WDE §29. Wolff is therefore on what we might call the 'naturalist' side of the Euthyphro dilemma in contrast to the 'voluntarist' side (see Bacin, "Morality," 90). The Euthyphro dilemma continued to be discussed in the modern

Wolff's principle of perfection was extremely influential and found a broad reception among eighteenth-century German philosophers. In addition to the figures discussed in the remaining sections of this chapter, writers such as Joachim Georg Darjes, Gottfried Achenwall, and Gottlieb Hufeland all adopted a version of Wolff's principle of perfection.[25] Not surprisingly, the principle also received considerable criticism. I focus here on two criticisms that will be important for my discussion of the remaining figures in this chapter.

A first criticism accuses Wolff's principle of egoism: figures such as Johann Joachim Lange, Wolff's principal antagonist in Halle who was responsible for his ultimate exile from Prussia, objected that Wolff's principle of perfection only has the agent's own perfection in view.[26] On the one hand this reaction is understandable, for Wolff at times formulates his principle in egoistic language. Consider an alternative formulation of the principle from the *German Ethics*: "*do what makes you and your state more perfect and omit what makes you and your state more imperfect.*"[27] On the other hand, scholars have argued that there are philosophical reasons that explain why Wolff might have formulated the principle in this way, such as the primacy Wolff gives to duties to self over duties to others and God.[28] Additionally, Wolff only occasionally formulates the principle in egoistic language and more often than not he emphasizes that it is rather the perfection of the world or of the entire human race which should serve as the ultimate end of our action. In a summary of the *German Ethics* that Wolff himself wrote for the *Acta Eruditorum*, for instance, he says that "the perfection of the whole human race ought to be considered in the actions of all humans taken simultaneously."[29] Similarly, in his *Oratio de Sinarum philosophia practica* [*Oration on the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese*], written around the same time as the *German Ethics* was published, Wolff clarifies that his "first fundamental principle […] is the orientation of human acts to the perfection of the microcosm, and

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period via Grotius and Pufendorf (for an excellent discussion see J. Olsthoorn, "Grotius and Pufendorf," in *The Cambridge Companion to Natural Law Ethics*, ed. T Angier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 51–70), including in German philosophy, as we will see.

25 See Hüning, "Regel," 93 and the sources listed there.

26 See J. Lange, *Beschiedene und ausführliche Entdeckung* (Halle: Buchladen des Wäysenhauses, 1724), 367–369 and J. Lange, *Philosophische Fragen Aus der neuen Mechanischen Morale* (Halle: Fritsch, 1734), 19. Schwaiger, *Das Problem,* 175-6 lists others who levelled similar objections.

27 WDE §19. For other 'egoistic' formulations of the principle, see WDE §40, and WPPU I, §152.

28 See S. Bacin, "Wolff, the Pursuit of Perfection, and What We Owe to Each Other: The Case of Veracity and Lying," in *Christian Wolff's German Ethics: New Essays*, ed. S. Schierbaum, M. Walschots, and J. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024) and C. Schwaiger, "The Systematic Structure of Wolff's German Ethics in Context," in *Christian Wolff's German Ethics: New Essays*, ed. S. Schierbaum, M. Walschots, and J. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 27–43.

29 WGW 38.3, 1192.

consequently also to that of the macrocosm."[30] Moreover, and as Clemens Schwaiger has argued, a more 'altruistic' interpretation of the principle is consistent with Wolff's claim that human beings experience pleasure on the basis of the representation of *any* perfection, whether this perfection be one's own, that of another, or even of inanimate objects.[31]

The second objection is that of indeterminacy. Wolff himself says that his principle is "an indeterminate standard" or norm (*ein undeterminirter Maaß-Stab*) (WDE §28) and is universal or general such that one cannot "immediately" judge on its basis alone whether all actions are good or evil.[32] Indeed, and as noted above, one needs other information such as knowledge concerning the nature of the action, human beings, and the world, in order to successfully judge the morality of actions. On its own, the principle is merely what Wolff calls a '*notio directrix*,' that is, a kind of regulative or 'directing' concept that merely guides our judgement without precisely indicating a conclusion on its own.[33] As we will see, this is an issue for which Kant will later criticize Wolff's principle.

2. Baumgarten: Perfect Yourself! (As Far as Is Possible)

Baumgarten wrote two important textbooks on moral philosophy, the *Ethica Philosophica* [*Philosophical Ethics*] and *Initia Philosophiae Practicae Primae* [*Elements of First Practical Philosophy*], and in both of them he acknowledges a debt to Wolff.[34] In the Preface to the *Elements*, for instance, Baumgarten states that one of his goals is that of "abridging" and "explaining" Wolff's universal practical philosophy (BI Preface). It is therefore not surprising to find what at least at first glance appears to be a somewhat traditionally Wolffian conception of the morality of actions in these texts:

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[30] C. Wolff, *Rede über die praktische Philosophie der Chinesen*, ed. M. Albrecht (Hamburg: Meiner, 1985), 7 and for the English translation see C. Wolff, "Discourse on the Practical Philosophy of the Chinese (1721)," in *Moral Enlightenment: Leibniz and Wolff on China*, ed. and trans. J. Ching and W. G. Oxtoby (Steyler Verlag: Nettetal, 1992), 145–186, here 146. For other 'altrustic' formulations of the principle see WGW II.36 (*Ratio praelectionum*) Section II Chapter 6, §6, §23, §199; WDE §12; WGW I.3 (*Anmerckungen*), §45; WPPU II, §28; Schwaiger, *Das Problem,* 101; WAN §137; Schwaiger, *Baumgarten,* 164; WGW II.35 (*Meletemata*) III, 106, 107 and 113.

[31] See WDE §404; WGW II.5 (*Psychologia empirica*), §511; Schwaiger, *Das Problem*, 131–132; and Schwaiger "Ethik," in *Handbuch Christian Wolff*, ed. R. Theis and A. Aichele (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), 253–68, here 260.

[32] See WDE §14, see also WAN §20, §45 and WO §526 Scholium.

[33] See WGW I.21.2, 108–168 for Wolff's essay on this topic and for a discussion T. Rosenkoetter, "Perfection and the Foundations of Wolff's German Ethics" in *Christian Wolff's German Ethics: New Essays*, ed. S. Schierbaum, M. Walschots, and J. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 174–196.

[34] For English translations of these works, which I follow in this chapter, see A. Baumgarten, *Elements of First Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. C. Fugate and J. Hymers (London: Bloomsbury, 2020) (hereafter: "BI") and A. Baumgarten, *Philosophical Ethics*, ed. and trans. J. Hymbers (London: Bloomsbury, 2024) (hereafter: "BE").

actions are deemed morally good or evil in virtue of their "implications," i.e. consequences, on the body, soul, and external states of human beings (BI §32 and §34). Actions are therefore also good or evil in themselves or "per se" (BI §36), and even atheists can be convinced of moral good or evil. Baumgarten also clarifies that it is ultimately the relation an action has to "perfection" that comprises "its morality" (BI §36, see also BI §45), and that our obligations are known not only through reason (BI §39 and 41) and thus without faith (see BI §1), but also through what Baumgarten calls the "analogue of reason" (BI §95), namely experience.[35]

Directly relevant to the topic of this chapter, Baumgarten is explicit that he has "brought forth a first principle understood according to, restricted to and credited to the illustrious Wolff" (BE Preface), although he abridges it considerably as "Perfect Yourself" (BE §10) and "*seek perfection*." (BI §43)[36] The former is what Baumgarten calls the "principle of ethics" as well as the "principle of the whole of practical philosophy" (see BE Index), but he offers a variety of additional "imperatives" as well, such as "*do the good*" (BI §39), "*do what is the best for you to do*" (BI §40) and "*live according to nature, as much as you can*." (BI §46, see also §48) The addition of "as much as you can" or "as far as is possible" (*quantum potes*) is a constant feature of Baumgarten's principle of morality and its various formulations (see e.g. BE §10 and BI §43, §46, §48). Although not present in Wolff's version, it reflects an idea that is not only in Wolff (see e.g. WPPU I §115, §209, and §264) but has a tradition stretching back to at least Grotius,[37] according to which we cannot be morally obligated to impossibilities; in other words, that 'ought implies can.' Baumgarten goes beyond Wolff and the preceding tradition here by developing a detailed hierarchy of various modalities and their relations that seeks to clarify the relationship between 'ought' and 'can.' For instance: what is morally required (what Baumgarten calls the "morally necessary" in the narrow sense) must first be both absolutely (i.e. conceptually or logically) possible as well as physically or naturally possible.[38]

Baumgarten makes a number of other subtle but significant changes to Wolff's moral philosophy that have an impact on his conception of the principle of morality. One of the most important concerns the concept of perfection: although Baumgarten suggests that he has *not* altered

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[35] Baumgarten also subscribes to the idea of a 'marriage of reason and experience,' but he also adds 'faith' to the equation as well (see BI §99 and BE §55).

[36] For another formulation see A. Baumgarten, *Jus naturae* (Halle, 1763), §30.

[37] See H. Grotius, *The Rights of War and Peace*, ed. R Tuck, Book II (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), II.X.I.

[38] See A. Baumgarten, *Metaphysics*, ed. and trans. C. Fugate and J. Hymers (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) (hereafter: "BM"), 469, §723 and for a discussion M. Walschots, "Moral Necessity, Possibility, and Impossibility from Leibniz to Kant." *Lexicon Philosophicum*, forthcoming.

Wolff's definition,[39] a closer look reveals that Baumgarten abandons defining perfection in teleological terms.[40] In his *Metaphysics*, Baumgarten defines perfection as follows: "If several things taken together constitute the sufficient ground of a single thing, they *agree*. The agreement itself is *perfection*, and the one thing in which there is agreement is the *determining ground of perfection*." (BM §94) This altered definition was meant to answer some early objections to Wolff's view. Defining perfection teleologically resulted in counterintuitive results, such as it being possible to call 'perfect' various winds gathering together in the common end of blowing down a house (see BM Preface of the Second Edition) or, to use an example closer to moral philosophy, a person undertaking various actions towards the end goal of committing murder. Baumgarten's subtle change here is that he believes that only "realities" can be perfect (see BM Preface of the Second Edition) and that realities can only agree with other realities, and "negations' with "negations" (see BM §136, §139, and §140). The aforementioned examples are thus not examples of perfection because the collapse of a house and death are negations, and thus cannot be perfect (see BM Second Preface). In contrast, Baumgarten defines perfection as merely the agreement of many things with the same determining ground. A poem, for example, is not perfect in virtue of its variety being unified in the intentions of the poet, but in virtue of its variety being grounded in the same topic.[41]

A second subtle change that Baumgarten makes to Wolff's view is meant to answer the egoism objection discussed in the previous section. In both the *Ethics* and the *Elements* Baumgarten clarifies that the imperative to 'seek perfection' does not solely have one's own perfection in view, but commands "seek *your* perfection by which you become either a more perfect end, or a more perfect means." (BI §43) The idea here is that one would not be perfecting oneself as much as possible if one were to only perfect oneself as an end. One also needs to perfect oneself as a means to the perfection of others in order to fully satisfy the obligation. Thus, according to Baumgarten's own emphasis on duties to self, fulfilling one's duties to self involves fulfilling duties to both others and God as well (see e.g. BI §11–149).

A third and final alteration that Baumgarten makes to Wolff's conception of the principle of morality concerns how he conceives of actions as good 'in themselves.' Like Wolff, Baumgarten holds that morality is "objective" in the sense that it can be known as good or evil in abstraction from the will of any human or divine agent (BI §36). He qualifies this view, however, with five

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[39] See BM, Preface of the Second Edition.
[40] See Schwaiger, *Baumgarten*, 160–163.
[41] See A. Baumgarten, *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus* (Halle, 1735), §66 and Schwaiger, *Baumgarten*, 160.

important caveats.[42] First, Baumgarten clarifies that actions being good in themselves does not imply that they are good on their own or outside of any relation to external things. Far from it: even though Baumgarten alters Wolff's conception of perfection, he agrees with Wolff that actions are "related to perfection as means" (BI §36), and thus are good and evil only within the nexus of relations that exist between an action and its consequences or implications (see BI §33). Thus, although we can know actions to be good or evil 'in themselves' or independently of their relation to a rational will, moral good and evil are nonetheless not isolated but 'relational' categories. Second, Baumgarten clarifies that the categories of moral good and evil are not fictions, existing "in the intellect like some, but who knows what, thought entity." (BI §37) In other words, moral good and evil are not mere representations, but are real and grounded in the nature of things, regardless of how they are represented.

Baumgarten's third caveat is the most significant. He argues, namely, that morality being objective is compatible with it also having its sufficient ground in God's will and even requires this. The idea here is that although the morality of actions is independent of God's will in the sense that God does not arbitrarily choose the content of what is good and evil, the world and the relations among the things that exist in it nonetheless have the sufficient ground of their actuality in God's will (see e.g., BM §933). Thus, given the morality of actions is determined by their 'implications,' and these hold only because God created the world, there is a sense in which the morality of actions *also* depends on God's will. The fourth and fifth caveats are consequences of this idea. Fourth, Baumgarten disagrees with Wolff that the atheist is capable of *fully* grasping the morality of actions. Indeed, given the previous point, Baumgarten believes that in accepting the objective morality of actions, the atheist is encouraged to accept God as the sufficient ground of actions and their implications.[43] Fifth and finally, Baumgarten holds that believing in the objectivity of morality does not preclude it also being subjective, that is, the result of someone's will (see BI §37). He argues, rather, that the implications of actions can be *both* natural and chosen, and that, as explained above, the objectivity of morality leads to its subjectivity and vice versa (see BI §33, see also §82 and §100).

Baumgarten makes a number of other subtle changes to Wolff's moral philosophy. A significant one that cannot be treated here is Baumgarten's alteration of Wolff's moral psychology.[44]

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[42] See BI §37 and Bacin, "Morality" for an extended discussion.

[43] See Bacin, "Morality," 97, who argues that this might explain why Baumgarten never employs Grotius' 'impious hypothesis,' as Wolff does.

[44] See especially C. Schwaiger, "Ein 'Missing Link' auf dem Weg der Ethik von Wolff zu Kant. Zur Quellen- und Wirkungsgeschichte der Praktischen Philosophie von Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten." *Jahrbuch fur Recht und Ethik* 8

These changes are important to keep in mind because it was Baumgarten's version of Wolffianism that went on to have an influence on figures such as G. F. Meier and J. A. Eberhard.[45]

3. Crusius: Dependence, Obedience, and God's Necessary Willing

For quite some time, philosophical debate, including in moral philosophy, took place almost exclusively between Wolffians and their critics. This changed in the 1740s when Crusius offered the first systematic alternative to Wolffianism in a series of German texts, beginning with his 1744 treatise on moral philosophy, the *Anweisung, vernünftig zu leben* [*Guide to Living Rationally*].[46] In this text, Crusius is explicit that his moral philosophy presupposes from natural theology both the existence of God as well as his essential properties, such as his ultimate goodness and perfection (CA §168). Another such property important for my purposes here, which is to outline Crusius's a priori proof of the actuality of the divine moral law,[47] is what Crusius calls a "*freedom only to the good*" (CA §52), that is, the ability to only choose among possible good things, as opposed to the human capacity of "freedom to the good and evil." (CA §52)[48] This is significant because Crusius does not believe that our current world is the best of all possible worlds.[49] He holds, rather, that creating the world was not absolutely necessary on God's part and that he could have created either a different (but still

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(2000): 247–262 and Grote, *Emergence*, chap. 3. For a recent study of Baumgarten's practical philosophy see A. Aichele, *Wahrscheinliche Weltweisheit: Alexander Gottlieb Baumgartens Metaphysik des Erkennens und Handelns* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2017).

[45] For Baumgarten's influence on Eberhard, see Schwaiger, *Baumgarten*, 167–175.

[46] C. A. Crusius. *Anweisung vernunftig zu leben* (Halle, 1744) (hereafter: 'CA'). See Schneewind, *Moral Philosophy*, 569–585 and Walschots, *Background Sources*, 44–82 for partial English translations of this work. A complete translation is being prepared by Christopher E. Fremaux for Oxford University Press's *New Texts in the History of Philosophy* series.

[47] Crusius presents three proofs for the actuality of natural laws, the first two of which are a posteriori proofs. According to the first (see CA §169), there must be natural laws because the drive of conscience (one of the human being's three fundamental drives) must have an object; otherwise, God would have created this drive for no reason (which would be contrary to divine perfection). According to the second (see CA §170), there must be natural laws because living according to them is the only way we can satisfy the drive of conscience and thereby achieve happiness. The idea of the second proof is that, if there were no natural laws but we were to nonetheless possess the drive of conscience, then we could never satisfy all of our drives and become truly happy (but, again, God's perfection prevents this from being the case). I focus on the third proof here due to constraints of space.

[48] One of the most fundamental ways in which Crusius departs from Wolff concerns the concept of freedom: whereas Wolff conceives of freedom in a psychological determinist fashion similar to Leibniz, Crusius' conception of freedom is fundamentally 'indeterminist.' For an overview of how Leibniz, Wolff, and others conceive of freedom, see the introduction to J. Noller and J. Walsh, eds., *Kant's Early Critics on Freedom of the Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022). 2022. For a discussion of Crusius's conception of freedom of the will, see M. Walschots, "Crusius on Freedom of the Will," in *Christian August Crusius (1715-1775): Philosophy Between Reason and Revelation*, ed. F. Grunert and A. Hahmann (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021), 189–208.

[49] See C. A. Crusius, *Entwurf der nothwendigen Vernunftwahrheiten* (Leipzig: Gleditsch, 1745) (hereafter: "CE"), §385–389, and S. Schierbaum, "Crusius against the Arbitrariness of Moral Obligation: An Alternative to Theological Voluntarism?" in *Varieties of Voluntarism in Medieval and Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. S. Schierbaum and J. Müller (New York: Routledge, 2024), 271–289, here 278.

good) world, and that he could have done so at an earlier or later time, or even not at all. (see CE §309) Once God creates the world, however, which we know him to have done a posteriori, Crusius holds that certain other choices on God's part necessarily follow. Most importantly, Crusius believes that it is necessary for God to have created free beings. The proof he offers of this is as follows: since God is ideally perfect, he cannot do anything in vain, because doing so would conflict with his perfection (see CE §281). But merely making possible things actual is a vain act on God's part because in becoming actual things achieve no other relation to him than what they had before, namely dependence on and complete determination by him (see CE §281). Put differently, from God's point of view it does not matter if things exist or not because they are entirely determined by him even in their state of possibility; actuality adds nothing new here (see CA §211). It is only by means of freedom that created things can achieve a relationship to God that he himself did not determine them to have in advance and that they did not already have in the state of possibility. Put differently, freedom allows a created thing to choose its own relation to God and thus not have this relation previously determined by God. Accordingly, in order for the creation of the world and the actuality of things to not be in vain, there must be free creatures (see CE §520–521). Indeed, Crusius holds that freedom is a necessary part of God's "formal end" when creating the world, namely that for the sake of which he acts (see CA §13, §211 and CE §281).

When God chooses to create free beings while creating the world, he is not indifferent towards how they use their freedom because a lawless use of freedom makes any other end God might have in creating the world unsafe and insecure (CE §281). So how does God will that human beings use their freedom? Since God is a perfect being, he wills the essential perfection of things (CA §171). Crusius even says that striving for perfection is God's very first "foundational desire" (CE §278). So, when creating free beings, God must also necessarily will that their free actions are in accordance with the essential perfection of things (CA §171). And with this we come to the initial conclusion of Crusius' a priori derivation of what he calls "the highest foundational natural law" (CA §174): "*do that which is in accordance with the perfection of God and your relation to him, and furthermore what is in accordance with the essential perfection of human nature, and omit the opposite.*" (CA §137) This is "a universal rule […] on the basis of which individual cases can be judged," and which sums up all our more particular, material duties (CA §137).

Before moving on to Crusius' second, more detailed formulation of the principle of morality, there are a number of things to note about the above. The first concerns perfection: Crusius mentions the "essential perfection" of human nature in the above formulation, which he

contrasts with "contingent" perfections (see CA §114). 'Essential' perfections are, appropriately, those that have to do with the essence of the thing under consideration, whereas 'contingent' perfections do not (see CA §114). Crusius offers the example of an astronomical globe: that its poles are in the right place is an essential perfection, whereas whether or not it has an expensive stand is merely a contingent perfection (CA §114). Only essential perfections are relevant to judging whether an action is morally good or evil. The second point to note concerns the concept of goodness: although he mentions perfection in the above formulation of the principle, Crusius is explicit that, contra Wolff, goodness and perfection are not the same thing (CA §26). Crusius defines perfection as "the relation of a thing's state to the sum of the effects, to which it should be suited." (CA §26) Goodness, by contrast, is that which is "in accordance with the will of a spirit" (CA §26), and moral goodness in particular "that which is in accordance with the moral intentions of God, that is, that which he bids to be promoted through the reason and free will of created spirits." (CA §26)[50] As Crusius makes clear, this is exactly what the highest natural law demands (see CA §26), thus, God's will, as expressed in this law, is the ground of moral goodness (see CA §171). Third and finally, although this appears to make Crusius a 'voluntarist' about moral value in that its content is determined by God's will, this is only partially true.[51] As we have seen above, Crusius believes that it is not necessary that God create a world at all, but once God does Crusius believes that God *necessarily* makes certain other choices, namely that free beings exist, and that free beings should act in a certain way (and thus that the highest natural law has the content that it does), for the reasons explained above. Accordingly, moral goodness is not determined by God's arbitrary will, but his necessary willing (see CA §173), so Crusius is not a theological voluntarist of the traditional sort.[52]

As mentioned, the above is only Crusius' first formulation of his highest foundational law, which only partially illustrates its content. In order to see its full content we need to consider two concepts at the center of his moral philosophy: dependence and obedience. As we have seen above, human beings exist with the properties they possess (such as freedom) on account of God's (necessary) choice to create us in this way. Accordingly, Crusius states that we depend on God "in every respect" (CA §133), that is, "the human being depends on God singularly and alone, and

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[50] See also CA §44 and CE §195. Crusius distinguishes between metaphysical goodness (what is in accordance with the natural intentions of God), physical goodness (what is in accordance with the will of created beings), and moral goodness. See Walschots, "Crusius," 194 and 204.

[51] Schneewind, for instance, describes it as a "carefully modified voluntarism" (see *Invention*, 445).

[52] See Schierbaum, "Crusius" for a thorough and convincing defense of this claim against the interpretation of others such as G. Rivero, "Von der Abhängigkeit zur Notwendigkeit. Kants Perspektivwechsel in der Auffassung der Verbindlichkeit zwischen 1785 und 1797," *Aufklärung* 30 (2018): 217–236.

necessarily, and thus to the highest degree, with respect to its existence, essence, and entire well-being." (CA §168) Indeed, Crusius even claims that there is no state so essential to human beings than their dependence on God (CE §284). Crusius defines dependence as "the kind of relation of one spirit to another, where the one receives certain goods from the will of the other in such a way that, if this will were absent, the goods would also cease to exist." (CA §133, see also §166) Crusius calls this "moral dependence" (CA §166) and distinguishes it from merely being subjected to an overpowering authority. The difference here is that only in the case of moral dependence does one owe certain debts to the will on which one depends for certain goods; in the case of mere subjection to an overpowering authority, one does not.

The debts that we owe in virtue of our complete dependence on God are what Crusius calls "obligations of indebtedness [*Schuldigkeiten*]," which are properly moral obligations in contrast to obligations of prudence, the latter of which concern what we ought to do in relation to the essential ends of human nature (see CA §162 and CE §131). Moral dependence therefore implies that we are indebted to God for certain goods and that we owe him certain things in return, such as obeying his will, which is codified in the highest natural law. Crusius says that when we obey the will of an authority out of indebtedness, this is "obedience [*Gehorsam*]" (CA §166). Furthermore, Crusius says that God not only intends that we obey his divine law, but that we obey it from obedience, that is, that we not only fulfill the law but that we do so out of our indebtedness to him for certain goods (see CA §159 and §165). With these two pieces in place, Crusius is in a position to offer a more "complete concept of divine natural law" (see CA §165), namely:

> *do everything that is in accordance with the perfection of God, the essential perfection of your own nature and that of all other creatures, and finally also the relations of things to each other that he has established, and omit the opposite, out of obedience to the command of your creator, as your natural and necessary sovereign.* (CA §174)

Before concluding this section, two small notes. First, Crusius defines the will as "the power of a spirit to act according to its representations" (CA §2) and he believes that "each and every willing presupposes the representation in the understanding of the thing that we will." (CA §5) Out desires do not regress into infinity, however, so there are "first" or "foundational desires" (CA §89–91) that we have innately, which implies that we have innate ideas of the things we foundationally desire. (CA §92) One of these foundational desires of human nature is the "drive of conscience" or "the natural drive to cognize a divine moral law, that is, to believe in a rule of human action wherein it is determined what God demands be done or omitted out of obedience and for the sake of our

dependence on him and which he would otherwise punish." (CA §132) Crusius claims that this drive was implanted in us so that we are able to act according to our dependence and obedience on God, regardless of the relation that exists between the divine law and our well-being. And given this is one of our foundational desires, Crusius believes that we not only have an innate idea of the highest natural law, but also of God (see CA §137).

The second small note is that, despite their differences, Crusius and Wolff agree that moral philosophy is ultimately a rational enterprise. For instance, Crusius defines the *Guide* as "the science containing the rules of how the human will should be constituted and how it should act according to the prescription of reason." (CA §155, see also §159) Like Wolff and Baumgarten, Crusius also argues that it is via the use of reason that we come to know not only the highest natural law, but also our more particular duties (see CA § 168 and §203). As we will soon see, this is a presupposition that gets called into question during the second half of the eighteenth century once British philosophy is rapidly and enthusiastically received.

4. The Reception of Eighteenth-Century British Philosophy

German moral philosophy during the second half of the eighteenth century is markedly different from that in the first half for at least one important reason: from approximately the 1740s onwards, eighteenth-century British moral philosophy was increasingly read and received. Indeed, it has even been claimed that a more general 'Anglophilia' overtook German academics around the middle of the century.[53] Although figures like Anthony Ashley Cooper, a.k.a. the third Early of Shaftesbury, and Francis Hutcheson were likely read by German thinkers during the first half of the century as well,[54] interest in their writings increased significantly during the second half due to the in some cases rapid translation of their works into German.[55] This was significant because English was not as well-known as French, for instance, so the English philosophy that received uptake prior to being translated into German was translated either into French or Latin, Locke's *Essay* being an

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[53] See L. Knapp, *Empirismus und Ästhetik: Zur deutschsprachigen Rezeption von Hume, Hutcheson, Home und Burke im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 2 and 5 n18.
[54] See e.g., Grote, *Emergence*, 13.
[55] See M. Wundt, *Die deutsche Schulphilosophie im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1964), 270–271 for a preliminary list of these translations.

important example.[56] Subsequent to these translations, German philosophy could not help but be transformed. Manfred Kuehn has described this situation in detail:

> The Germans […] discovered that British philosophers also had something to offer; and since the relevant works were not only extensively reviewed in many German journals, but for the most part also translated quickly, many Germans were led to formulate a new problem or task for themselves. The works of Locke, Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, Smith, Ferguson, and almost every other British philosopher of note were full of problems that needed solutions and observations that needed to be explained, if German philosophy of the traditional sort was to succeed.[57]

This situation is important for the purposes of this chapter because, as Kuehn goes on to note, one of the central problems that the British introduced to the domain of moral philosophy was "the problem of a 'moral sense,'"[58] that is, the idea that a sensible faculty could be the foundation of moral judgment. As we have seen, during the first half of the eighteenth century German moral philosophy considered reason to be the central faculty by means of which we come to know what is morally good and evil. One can therefore see how the idea of a moral sense became a 'problem' to be wrestled with. As a result, during the second half of the eighteenth century many major moral philosophers sought to incorporate the idea of a moral sense into their conception of moral judgement, as we will see in what follows.

5. The Prize Essay: Mendelssohn and the Pre-Critical Kant

It was well known that German philosophers considered the fundamental principle of morality to be a central topic in moral philosophy, even during the first half of the eighteenth century.[59] But the topic became even more central during the second half of the century when, in

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[56] See Wundt, *Schulphilosophie*, 270n and K. Pollok, "Die Locke-Rezeption in der deutschen Aufklärung," in *Locke In Germany: Early German Translations of John Locke, 1709-61*, ed. K. Pollok, Vol. 1 (Bristol: Thoemmes, 2004), v–xxxviii, here v–x. See also B. Fabian, *The English Book in Eighteenth-Century Germany* (London: The British Library, 1992), 72–3 who claims that "It was the educated German reader who read his English authors in French."

[57] M. Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 183–184. For more on the relationship between eighteenth-century British and German philosophy, see M. Kuehn, "The German Aufklärung and British Philosophy," in *Routledge History of Philosophy*, Vol. 5, ed. S. Brown (London: Routledge, 1996), 253–272, and J. Engbers, *Der 'Moral-Sense' bei Gellert, Lessing and Wieland: zur Rezeption von Shaftesbury und Hutcheson in Deutschland* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2001).

[58] Kuehn, *Biography*, 184.

[59] See for example J. G. Walch, "Gesetz der Natur" in Walch *Lexicon*, esp. 1266–1284, and J. H. Zedler, "Natur-Gesetze (moralisches)," in *Universal-Lexicon*, Vol. 23 (Leipzig, 1740), 1086–1098.

June 1761, the Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences announced the topic of its essay competition for the year 1763 and singled out the "first principles" of both natural theology and morality:

> The Class of Speculative Philosophy herewith proposes the following question for the year 1763: One wishes to know whether metaphysical truths in general, and the first principles of *Theologiae naturalis* and morality in particular, admit of distinct proofs to the same degree as geometrical truths; and if they are not capable of such proofs, one wishes to know what the genuine nature of their certainty is, to what degree the said certainty can be brought, and whether this degree is sufficient for complete conviction.[60]

The question was formulated by Johann Georg Sulzer,[61] and out of the more than two dozen anonymous entries, the winning essay was penned by Moses Mendelssohn and an honourable mention given to Immanuel Kant. In their essays, both Mendelssohn and Kant offer interesting reflections on the content and derivation of the principle of morality, as well as the faculty by means of which we attain moral knowledge.

5.1 Mendelssohn

Mendelssohn's answer to the prize essay question is that "metaphysical truths are capable […] of the same certainty but not of the same perspicuity [*Faßlichkeit*] as geometric truths."[62] The idea here is that since both mathematics and metaphysics offer proofs by means of conceptual analysis, they are capable of the same certainty. But because mathematics deals with simple concepts and metaphysics with more complex concepts, the inferences of the latter are less 'perspicuous,' that is, intelligible or comprehensible.[63] With respect to natural theology, Mendelssohn argues that the case of proving God's existence by means of the ontological argument shows that metaphysics can actually result in *more* certainty than mathematics because an argument such as this does not appeal

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[60] Translation from P. Guyer, *Reason and Experience in Mendelssohn and Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), chap. 1, which also contains an excellent discussion of the prize essay's context and the answers provided by both Mendelssohn and Kant.

[61] Sulzer made important contributions to eighteenth-century German moral philosophy himself. See H. F. Klemme, "Johann Georg Sulzers 'vermischte Sittenlehre': Ein Beitrag zur Vorgeschichte und Problemstellung von Kants Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten," in *Johann Georg Sulzer (1720-1779): Aufklärung zwischen Christian Wolff und David Hume*, ed. F. Grunert and G. Stiening (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011), 309-322 for a discussion.

[62] M. Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften: Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. F. Bamberger and L. Strauss. (Stuttgart: Friedrich Frommann Verlag Günther Holzboog, 1972) (hereafter: "MGS"), 2:272. English translations taken from M. Mendelssohn, *Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. D. O. Dahlstrom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) (hereafter: "MPW"), 255.

[63] See Guyer, *Reason*, 29.

to experience whatsoever.[64] When it comes to moral philosophy, Mendelssohn argues that "the general principles of ethics can be proven with geometric rigorousness and validity."[65] In order to illustrate this, Mendelssohn spends the majority of the fourth section of his essay outlining three ways of "arriving" at or deriving what he calls the "general law of nature,"[66] as well as what is involved in deriving more concrete duties from this general law and the certainty involved therein. Outlining these positions will be my focus in this section.

The first way of arriving at what Mendelssohn calls "the first law of nature" is an a posteriori argument, which is based on the observation of "the thousandfold desires and wishes, passions and inclinations" that "human beings have in common."[67] Mendelssohn argues that all of them, even our "wickedest inclinations, the vilest desires," although they are mistaken, "aim at the preservation or betterment of the intrinsic or extrinsic condition of ourselves or another creature," thus he officially formulates "the first law of nature" as follows: "*make your intrinsic and extrinsic condition and that of your fellow human being, in the proper proportion, as perfect as you can*."[68] As can be seen here, Mendelssohn adopts a version of the Wolffian principle of perfection, which incorporates Baumgarten's clarification that one perfect both oneself and others, 'as far as one is able.' Mendelssohn's addition of "*in the proper proportion*" highlights an implicit feature of the Wolffian view not yet mentioned, namely that one must be careful not to put too much priority on perfecting either one's body, soul, or external state or condition (or those of others) individually, such that the others are sacrificed.[69] Indeed, Mendelssohn stresses throughout his essay that we are to avoid conflicts of duties by, for example, ensuring that "higher" or more general natural laws are not violated by more particular or "lower" rules;[70] a distinction to be discussed further below. Important to note about this first proof is that Mendelssohn assumes that observation alone confirms the universality of this fundamental law in human nature.[71]

Mendelssohn's next two derivations of the content of the moral law are *a priori* proofs. His second proof seeks to show that the "same natural law can be proven a priori from the mere

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[64] See Guyer, *Reason*, 29.
[65] MGS 2:315/MPW 295, see also MGS2:322/MPW301.
[66] MGS 2:316/MPW 296.
[67] MGS 2:316/MPW 296.
[68] MGS 2:316/MPW 296.
[69] See e.g. WDE §224–225. For information on how Mendelssohn both owes certain debts and departs from Wolff's moral philosophy, see H. F. Klemme, "Der Grund der Verbindlichkeit. Mendelssohn und Kant über Evidenz in der Moralphilosophie (1762/64)," *Kant-Studien* 109, no. 2 (2018): 286–308.
[70] See e.g. MGS 2:324/MPW 301.
[71] See D. O. Dahlstrom 2023, "Moses Mendelssohn," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. N. Zalta and U. Nodelman. Winter 2023 Edition. https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2023/entries/mendelssohn/ .

definition of a being with free will."[72] Mendelssohn defines freedom in a way similar to Wolff as follows: "A being endowed with freedom can choose what pleases him from various objects or representations of objects."[73] For Mendelssohn, representations of perfection, beauty, and order in objects afford us with an experience of pleasure, where perfection here is defined as "the utility and sensuous pleasure that the object promises us,"[74] and this pleasure or satisfaction yields "compelling reasons by which a free being is *determined* in his choice."[75] Mendelssohn therefore subscribes to a Leibnizian conception of freedom here, according to which it is compatible with a certain kind of determinism: freedom is nothing other than choosing what we represent as best or as having the most perfection (or beauty or order) among the options available to us. Indeed, Mendelssohn even holds, as do Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten before him, that we *necessarily* choose what we represent to be best, and that, reflective of the fact that this nonetheless involves freedom, the kind of necessity here should be called "moral necessity."[76]

Mendelssohn believes that the same content of the natural law specified in the first proof flows from the above described definition of free will in the following way: if we represent a given course of action as best, then we also represent it as the course of action that we *ought* to carry out, even if we are mistaken. Thus, if freedom is defined as specified above, namely as stating that "each free being is ethically compelled to determine himself in his choice according to the most trenchant motives," then this illustrates that we are already obligated "to bring about as much perfection, beauty, and order in the world as is possible for him."[77] It deserves mention that scholars have found this proof to be problematic for at least one reason: if we already choose what we represent as best with necessity, why should we additionally be obligated to do so?[78] A similar but distinct objection is as follows: just because human beings do *in fact* choose according to what is represented as best does not mean they *ought* to. In other words, Mendelssohn seems to move from an 'is' to an 'ought' in this second proof.

Mendelssohn argues that the same first natural law can be "demonstrated" in a third way, namely "that this general law of nature is in keeping with God's aims and that I conform to the great

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[72] MGS 2:317/MPW 297.

[73] MGS 2:317/MPW 297 and see WDM §519 where Wolff defines freedom as the capacity (*Vermögen*) of the soul "to choose from two equally possible things that which pleases it the most."

[74] MGS 2:317/MPW 297.

[75] MGS 2:317/MPW 296, my emphasis.

[76] See Walschots, "Moral Necessity" for a discussion of how Leibniz, Wolff, and Baumgarten all conceive of the necessity of free action in this way.

[77] MGS 2:318/MPW 297.

[78] See Klemme, "Grund," 293–295 for a similar objection, and Dahlstrom, "Mendelssohn," for a response.

final purpose of creation and become an imitator of divinity whenever I render a creature, myself or another, more perfect."[79] Mendelssohn's argument is reminiscent of a line of thought in Crusius: assuming God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence, how could "the wisest and most benevolent being have any other intention than the perfection of creatures?"[80] Accordingly, it is "impossible" for God to "want something other than that we should orient our free actions in conformity with this intention."[81] The result is that "I conform to the great final purpose of creation and become an imitator of divinity whenever I render a creature, myself or another, more perfect."[82]

These three "basic maxims" therefore lead to the same conclusion and the same principle of morality, namely "make yourself and others perfect."[83] Mendelssohn states that "[i]nfinitely many" additional proofs, "or even the right sorts of experiences" might be offered, but they would all lead to the same results.[84] Indeed, he holds that this "harmony" of many "outlooks" and "perspectives" is what reveals the truth of the principle's content.[85] To return to the topic of the prize essay more generally, although some proofs of the content of the principle of morality might be based on experience, such as the first above, since a priori proofs can be offered as well (such as on the basis of the concept of a being endowed with free will or the concept of God), the certainty of this "single, universal law of nature" is "the same as is promised in the first principles of metaphysics."[86] At the same time, Mendelssohn argues that just as metaphysics is as certain but less "perspicacious" than mathematics, so are the proofs in moral philosophy less perspicacious than those in metaphysics or natural theology. This is because moral philosophy is built on the foundations of the metaphysical sub-disciplines of theology, cosmology, and psychology, such that one must "have been convinced of them before one can promise oneself some light in moral philosophy."[87]

Where uncertainty comes into play is the domain of "applied ethics [*der ausübenden Sittenlehre*]," that is, deciding what to do in particular cases or deriving concrete duties from the general principle.[88] Mendelssohn argues here that the "truth of the conclusion" in concrete cases "depends on the certainty of the experience" that the present case is in fact an appropriate instance

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[79] MGS 2:318/MPW 297–298.
[80] MGS 2:318/MPW 298.
[81] MGS 2:318/MPW 298.
[82] MGS 2:318/MPW 297–298.
[83] MGS 2:321/MPW 300.
[84] MGS 2:321/MPW 300.
[85] MGS 2:321/MPW 300.
[86] MGS 2:321–322/MPW 300.
[87] MGS 2:322/MPW 301.
[88] MGS 2:322/MPW 301.

in which a general rule can be applied.[89] More particularly, because we can only know through experience both the present circumstances as well as the consequences of our actions on the internal and external states of ourselves and others, the certainty of what we are to do in particular cases varies by degree depending on the certainty of our experiences about these two aspects.[90]

Before concluding the discussion of Mendelssohn, two notes are in order. The first is that Mendelssohn makes a threefold distinction between types of moral laws. The 'first natural law' mentioned above is distinct from more "subordinate" "universal laws of nature which flow immediate from the first source."[91] Examples of these latter laws include "Revere the creator! Love virtue, flee vice! Control your passions, submit your desires to reason!"[92] Mendelssohn argues that all these subordinate laws of nature "can be proven with geometrical rigor," i.e., derived from the principle of morality with "the utmost conviction," and that "no exception to them occurs" and they cannot conflict with "any higher duty."[93] These subordinate yet universal laws are to be distinguished from other, more "derivative laws of nature," that is, the more concrete, particular duties that are derived from the highest principle *and* the subordinate laws of nature that apply in concrete cases.[94] It is only with these latter duties that uncertainty comes into play, because it is here where we need to rely on experience for knowledge of our circumstances and the foreseeable consequences of the action under consideration.

The second note is that Mendelssohn assigns the experiential knowledge of good and evil, which we rely on in the moment of choice to avoid indecision and the paralysis that waiting for absolute certainty would entail, to a particular faculty, namely an "inner feeling" or "sentiment of good and evil" which is similar to "what taste is in the domain of the beautiful and the ugly."[95] Although Mendelssohn argues here that this feeling "works according to inalterable rules, according to correct principles," these principles "are founded upon indistinct knowledge and frequently upon mere probabilities" and thus introduce uncertainty into its conclusions.[96] This discussion of a "sentiment of good and evil" reveals the influence of British moral philosophy on Mendelssohn which, as we will see, is present in the Pre-Critical Kant as well.

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[89] See MGS 2:322/MPW 301.
[90] See MGS 2:322–323/MPW 302.
[91] MGS 2:323/MPW 301.
[92] MGS 2:323/MPW 301.
[93] MGS 2:323/MPW 302–302.
[94] MGS 2:323–324/MPW 302.
[95] MGS 2:325/MPW 303.
[96] See MGS 2:325/MPW 303.

5.2 Kant

In his answer to the prize essay question, Kant argues that due to some important differences between mathematics and philosophy (such as their method, First Reflection §1; use of signs, First Reflection §2; their number of unanalyzable concepts and indemonstrable propositions, First Reflection §3; and their objects, First Reflection §4), the kind of certainty we can attain in each discipline is altogether different (see Third Reflection, §1).[97] He nonetheless claims that the certainty achievable in metaphysics is "of exactly the same kind as that in any other philosophical cognition" (KAA 2:292) and that, more generally, "[m]etaphysics is as much capable of the certainty which is necessary to produce conviction as mathematics." (KAA 2:296) Once he turns to the specific case of natural theology (Fourth Reflection, §1), Kant even argues that "the greatest conviction" is possible because we are concerned with whether it is "absolutely necessary" that certain predicates belong to a being (KAA 2:296) as opposed to only contingently; less conviction is involved in the latter case because "it is generally difficult to discover the variable conditions" under which such predicates hold." (KAA 2:296)

In the case of moral philosophy (Fourth Reflection, §2), Kant's conclusion is different: he argues that "although it must be possible to attain the highest degree of philosophical certainty in the fundamental principles of morality," (KAA 2:300) these principles "*in their present state are not capable of all the certainty necessary to produce conviction.*" (KAA 2:298) To illustrate this, he focuses on the "fundamental concept" (see 3:300) of obligation, which leads him to a discussion of the principle of morality because it is this principle that serves as "a rule and ground of obligation." (KAA 2:298) Kant anticipates his later distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives (see KAA 4:414–417) here by distinguishing between "the necessity of the means" and "the necessity of the ends" (KAA 2:298) and by classifying only the latter as true obligation; the former are merely "recommendations to adopt a suitable procedure, if one wished to attain a given end." (KAA 2:298) Kant then singles out two principles, to which "the whole of practical philosophy might be subordinated," namely "I ought to advance the total greatest perfection" and "I ought to act in accordance with the will of God." (KAA 2:298) As we have seen, these are broadly the two

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[97] References to Kant's works cite the volume and page number of I. Kant, *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. (formerly Königlich-Preussische) Akademie der Wissenschaften. (Berlin: Reimer, 1900–1919; de Gruyter, 1920–) (hereafter: "KAA"). Translations follow the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* and I indicate when these have been modified.

dominant approaches to the principle of morality in eighteenth-century German philosophy prior to Kant. Given what he says about the nature of obligation, Kant argues that whichever of these principles is the correct one, "if it is to be a rule and ground of obligation" it must "command the action as being immediately necessary and not conditional upon some end." (KAA 2:299)

In striking contrast to his later Critical position, Kant says the following about the fundamental principle of morality:

> Having convinced myself after long reflection on this matter, I can now briefly show the following. The rule: perform the most perfect action in your power, is the first *formal ground* of all obligation to act. Likewise, the proposition: abstain from doing that which will hinder the realization of the greatest possible perfection, is the first *formal ground* of the duty to *abstain* from acting. (KAA 2:299)

Accordingly, at this point in his intellectual development Kant partially subscribes to a version of the Wolffian principle of morality. But only partially because, as Kant says above, this is only the first *formal* ground of obligation, which, he claims, must be supplemented by "indemonstrable material principle of practical cognition" if it is to issue any "judgements of the truth." (KAA 2:299) Just as it is not possible to prove anything on the basis of the principle of contradiction alone (see KAA 2:294–295), for example, Kant holds that the principle of perfection tells us nothing about the morality of particular actions on its own. Thus, Kant is making an implicit criticism of the principle of perfection here that he will later repeat[98] and which, as we have seen, Wolff himself acknowledges, namely that the principle itself is indeterminate or empty.

Kant spends the rest of his discussion of moral philosophy in the prize essay entertaining one particular way of providing an indemonstrable *material* principle, namely by means of feeling. He claims that "it is only recently, namely, that people have come to realize that the faculty of representing the *true* is *cognition*, while the faculty of experiencing the *good* is *feeling*, and that the two faculties are, on no account, to be confused with each other." (KAA 2:299) It is through the faculty of feeling that Kant claims we can obtain "an unanalyzable feeling of the good," that is, one that is "simple" is the sense that it does not arise from other, more simple feelings (KAA 2:299). Such an analyzable feeling of the good is what would make it possible to say that something is perfect in the sense that we could say that "the necessity of this action is an indemonstrable material principle of obligation." (KAA 2:299–300) Other possible material principles are "love him who loves who"

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[98] See e.g. KAA 4:443.

(KAA 2:300) and "do what is in accordance with the will of God" (KAA 2:300); these are both indemonstrable in the sense that "it cannot be further shown by analysis why a special perfection is to be found" (KAA 2:300) in either mutual love or obeying God's will. Kant concludes by siding with the option of feeling, and in particular the judgements issued by "moral feeling," that is, the moral sense: "*Hutcheson* and others have, under the name of moral feeling, provided us with a starting point from which to develop some excellent observations." (KAA 2:300)[99] As Kant's language here suggests, he thinks it is still unclear "whether it is merely the faculty of cognition, or whether it is feeling (the first inner ground of the faculty of desire) which decides its [i.e., practical philosophy's] first principle," and that this unclarity is the reason why, at least at present, "practical philosophy is even more defective that speculative philosophy." (KAA 2:300) As we will see, Kant eventually decides in favour of the faculty of cognition.

6. Eberhard: Wolffian Rationalism and Empiricism

Johann August Eberhard (1739–1809) was an important figure in late eighteenth-century German philosophy. In addition to becoming G. F. Meier's successor in Halle, and thereby occupying the chair Wolff once held from 1778 until his death, Eberhard founded two periodicals, the *Philosophisches Magazin* and *Philosophisches Archiv*, both of which were important outlets for the Wolffian reaction to Kant's philosophy.[100] Eberhard is important for the purposes of this chapter for two reasons. First, he published his central text on moral philosophy, the *Philosophical Ethics* (*Sittenlehre der Vernunft*), in 1781; the same year that Kant published the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[101] Second, in addition to being a representative of Wolffian philosophy, Eberhard was regarded as one

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[99] On the translation of 'the moral sense' as *das moralische Gefühl* and its significance for Kant, see M. Walschots, "Hutcheson and Kant: Moral Sense and Moral Feeling," in *Kant and the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. E. Robinson and C. W. Surprenant (London: Routledge, 2017), 36–54.

[100] Eberhard initiated a famous controversy with Kant through these periodicals, see H. E. Allison, *The Kant-Eberhard Controversy* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). For more information on Eberhard's life and works see the Introduction to J. A. Eberhard and I. Kant, *Preparation for Natural Theology*, ed. and trans. C. D. Fugate and J. Hymers (London: Bloomsbury, 2016). For an essay on the principle of morality by Eberhard from later in the century see J. A. Eberhard, "Ueber den höchsten Grundsatz in der Moral," *Philosophisches Magazin* 4, no. 3 (1791): 366–372.

[101] A note on the translation of *Sittenlehre der Vernunft*: in the third edition of his *Philosophical Ethics*, Baumgarten adds a footnote to §2 that equates "*Sittenlehre der Vernunft*" with "*Ethica philosophica*," hence my choice here (see A. G. Baumgarten, *Ethica Philosophica*. Third Edition (Halle: Hemmerde, 1763). Also to be noted is that in 1781 Eberhard also published his *Vorbereitung zur natürlichen Theologie* [*Preparation for Natural Theology*], which Kant used in his lectures on rational theology. See Eberhard and Kant, *Preparation*.

of the best "empirical" moral philosophers of the late eighteenth century.[102] Accordingly, Eberhard's moral philosophy is significant because it represents an interesting mix of Wolffian rationalism and empiricism that would have been known in philosophical circles just prior to Kant publishing his own moral philosophy just a few years later.[103]

Eberhard makes his empiricism explicit right at the beginning of the *Ethics*. In the Preface, Eberhard argues that what is novel about his moral philosophy is its attempt to combine the "analytic" and "synthetic" method; the latter being the method of Wolff who begins with general and foundational concepts and principles and derives further conclusions from them, and the former being the method of "other nations," most likely the British, who begin with experience and then proceed to arrive at more general principles and concepts.[104] Eberhard argues that this combination of methods is necessary in moral investigations more so than in others because "even though we are not permitted to remain with sensation when judging morality, we nonetheless always begin there, and we feel the need to search for the higher principles of morality no sooner than we have cognized the inadequacy of sensation when so judging." (EPE Preface)

In addition to assigning some importance to the empirical method, the content of Eberhard's moral philosophy reflects his empiricism as well. Above all, this is clear from the importance he assigns to the concept of happiness. Eberhard defines moral philosophy, for instance, as follows: "If there is an art of happiness for human beings, then there must also be an overarching concept [*Inbegriff*] of the rules of this science. The science of these rules is the *doctrine of morals* or *moral science* in the broad sense." (EPE §1) On its own, this definition falls within the rationalist tradition: Leibniz, for instance, defines wisdom as "the science of happiness,"[105] and Crusius defines his *Guide* as a science for attaining both human perfection and happiness (see CA §159). Eberhard's departure from the Wolffian tradition in particular concerns the relationship between happiness and the moral goodness of actions.

After providing the above definition of moral philosophy, Eberhard's first order of business is to define the nature of good and evil action, which signals the centrality of the topic within his moral philosophy. Eberhard states that the means to the end of happiness are the free actions of

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[102] See J. F. Flatt, Review of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *Tübingische gelehrte Anzeigen*, 14. Stück (the 16th of February 1786): 105–112, here 107, and Walschots, *Background Sources,* 89.

[103] See Schwaiger, *Baumgarten*, 167ff.

[104] J. A. Eberhard, *Sittenlehre der Vernunft* (Berlin: Friedrich Nicolai, 1781) (hereafter: "EPE"), Preface. For an earlier distinction of the analytic and synthetic method along these lines, see J. Priestley, *A Course of Lectures on Oratory and Criticism* (London: J. Johnson, 1777), 55.

[105] See G. W. Leibniz, *Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 83, translation modified.

human beings, and thus a free human action "is *good* when it promotes the human being's happiness, and *evil* when it hinders this." (EPE §2) Eberhard defines happiness here as "a state, in which *a true pleasure is uninterruptedly enjoyed*" (EPE §3), and a true pleasure as opposed to an apparent pleasure as one that is not the ground of a future displeasure (EPE §3).[106] Importantly, Eberhard notes that pleasure can be defined as the "immediate sensation […] of perfection," (EPE §3) such that the sensation or representation of perfection, or its ground, is what causes us to experience pleasure (EPE §5). Indeed, Eberhard even goes on to distinguish between four different kinds of pleasure: of the senses (EPE §9), of taste and the imagination (EPE §10), of the understanding (EPE §11), and of the heart (EPE §12). In each of these cases what pleases us is the "lively representation or sensation of perfection, whether in us as *subject* or external to us in the *object*." (EPE §13) The point that is significant for our purposes is that, at least according to this first explanation of the morality of actions, it is not bringing about perfection but happiness that ultimately classifies an action as morally good. This is a notable departure from Wolff who considers an action's morally relevant quality to be its relation to perfection, and happiness to be the joy or satisfaction that results from proceeding from one perfection to another.[107]

To be sure, Eberhard openly admits that he defines the morality of actions in a variety of ways (see EPE §24), one of which, namely what he calls his "more developed concept of the morality of actions," states that "a free action is *good* if it contains perfection, and *evil* when it contains *imperfection*." (EPE §20) This definition suggests that Eberhard is not so far from Wolff after all. However, according to another definition, Eberhard holds that "all free actions that agree with the essential perfections of human beings are *correct*, *good actions*, and their moral rightness and goodness […] consists in this agreement," (EPE §21) and he goes on to clarify that that the "*essential perfection* of human beings consists in directing its capacities and powers towards happiness." (EPE §22) Eberhard's emphasis on happiness is thus not accidental. At the same time, Eberhard stresses that it does not matter which of these definitions we use because they are different merely insofar as they "indicate the concept of human goodness more or less distinctly." (EPE §24) The idea here seems to be that each definition expresses the same fundamental idea and would find the same actions to be either morally good or evil, along similar lines as Mendelssohn's three basic maxims.

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[106] For the Leibnizian roots of Eberhard's conception of happiness and pleasure, see Schwaiger, *Baumgarten*, 174–175.
[107] See e.g., WDE §51–52 and for a nice summary of why it is perfection rather than happiness that lies at the center of Wolff's moral philosophy, see E. Stobbe, "Is Christian Wolff's Practical Philosophy Eudaimonistic?" in *Christian Wolff's German Ethics: New Essays*, ed. S. Schierbaum, M. Walschots, and J. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024), 153–173.

Eberhard later formulates what he calls the "first moral principle, or the highest *moral law*" (EPE §44) as follows: "seek, by means of your free actions, to make yourself more perfect, and as much as possible, that is, as much as is absolutely, naturally, and morally possible for you, and always attempt to achieve the highest degree of perfection that you can achieve." (EPE §44) Eberhard's formulation of the principle of morality owes a clear debt to Baumgarten; not only because of its incorporation of the 'as much as possible' clause, but also in virtue of its indication that what we are obligated to do must first be both 'absolutely' and 'naturally' possible (see also EPE §40), which, as we have seen, was a clarification Baumgarten added to Wolff's view.

An additional formulation of Eberhard's principle states that "those actions are internally good that, in themselves, make us and our state more perfect, and evil that, in themselves, make us more imperfect." (EPE §37)[108] Eberhard therefore believes in the "*internal* or objective morality" (EPE §25) of actions and, like Wolff and Baumgarten before him, holds that "each and every free human action has an internal morality and *cannot be entirely indifferent*." (EPE §25)[109] Indeed, Eberhard is explicit that he sides with Grotius and Wolff against Hobbes, Pufendorf, and others, the latter of whom believe in "*external* or *subjective* morality," (EPE §25) according to which morality is derived from "the *will of God*, or from the will of *a human regent*." (EPE §26)

Eberhard's position on the objectivity of morality is interesting because he attempts to modify the internalist view by accommodating what he sees as correct about the externalist view. The real point of disagreement between these two camps, he suggests, concerns whether it is ultimately God's will or his intellect that is the final ground of natural laws (EPE §31). Whereas externalists believe that God's will is the ground of the content of morality, internalists hold that God's will is not arbitrary but can only will or nill insofar as something is internally or naturally good or evil, that is, in accordance with the degree of perfection cognized in it (EPE §32). Thus, for Eberhard God's will follows his intellect, that is, his representation of the essence and nature of things (EPE §32). He then argues that defenders of the internal view agree with defenders of the external view that God nonetheless legislates natural laws, in the sense that his will is the ground of their actuality (EPE §31). Eberhard therefore follows Baumgarten here in believing that, while God is not responsible for the content of the morality of actions (this being "internal" to them in the sense of determined by their relation to human beings and the rest of nature) God is nonetheless the

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[108] A further formulation that I do not consider here states that a free action is good when "it is determined by exactly the same grounds, by which natural actions are determined." (EPE §24)

[109] See Favaretti Camposampiero, "Objective Morality" for the argument that in his later Latin works Wolff made room for indifferent actions.

ultimate ground of the existence of both human beings and nature, and thus of the "actuality" of morality as well.

Two final notes about Eberhard's view. The first concerns moral judgement. Since some pleasures are not 'true' but merely 'apparent' in that they later turn into displeasure, and not all pleasures last because some are merely temporary, Eberhard argues that sensation is not a reliable guide when judging actions morally (EPE §4). What we need, rather, is a guide to what contains "the greatest sum of the best pleasures," (EPE §8) which is another way in which Eberhard defines happiness, and this is determined by finding what is not only immediately pleasurable, but also mediately pleasure, that is, what serves as a means to pleasure over the long term and does not later turn into displeasure. To make judgements of this sort, we need "the capacity to have insight into the connection of things," namely reason (EPE §13). Thus, "only *reason* can judge which actions are good or evil." (EPE §13, see also §4 and §6) Interestingly, however, Eberhard also acknowledges that it is permissible to speak of a "moral sense" as long as this "capacity [*Vermögen*]" is understood correctly. For Eberhard, the moral sense is merely "the sensible capacity of judgement applied to morality," (EPE §53) i.e., the capacity to have clear but *indistinct* representations of the morality of actions (EPE §51). An impermissible definition would conceive of it as an original or innate faculty that is independent of the foundational power of the soul to represent the world, as Eberhard claims Hutcheson and Henry Home conceive of it (see EPE §54). As the capacity for indistinct representations of the morality of actions, the moral sense rests on the more foundational power of representation, and thus can be understood as nothing other than "that which is similar to reason [*das Vernunftähnliche*]." (EPE §53) Thus, for Eberhard the moral sense can be improved with practice and education, especially by improving the understanding (see EPE §55).

Second, among the objections that have been made to his "first moral principle," Eberhard singles out as "the most manageable [*der erträglichste*]" the egoism objection, that is, the claim "that the *social* virtues cannot be derived from it." (EPE §45) Eberhard argues that this objection has been answered in two ways. First, he claims that Wolff illustrated on the basis of experience that it is impossible for human beings to perfect themselves outside of society, and thus that perfecting oneself leads to perfecting others as well. Second, Eberhard claims that Baumgarten offered the a priori proof that there are obligations to not only perfect oneself as an end, but also as a means to the perfections of others (EPE §45). Eberhard contends that he offers an additional proof that there is such an obligation "from the nature of the soul itself." (EPE §46) More specifically, Eberhard argues that performing duties to others could not take place without the exercise of certain powers

in us, and given the metaphysical principle that "the perfection in the effect must be equal to the perfection of the cause, insofar as the effect depends on the cause," perfecting others therefore implies perfecting ourselves. (EPE §46) That Eberhard feels the need to prove this obligation, presumably in a more successful way than his predecessors had done, illustrates that this objection was one of the most influential challenges to Wolff's principle of perfection throughout the century.[110]

7. Conclusion: Kant, The Principle of Happiness, and Beyond

If Kant was unsure about whether the faculty of cognition or that of feeling decided the first principle of morality in his early Prize Essay, he soon found some clarity. In his 1770 "Inaugural Dissertation," Kant clearly decides in favour of the faculty of cognition: "Moral Philosophy, therefore, in so far as it furnishes the first principles of adjudication, is only cognised by the pure understanding and itself belongs to pure philosophy."[111] It would nonetheless take some time for Kant to formulate his final version of the supreme principle of morality. In the *Kaehler* lectures notes on ethics from the mid-1770s, for instance, Kant purportedly defines the principle of morality as follows: "The principle of all duties is therefore the agreement of the use of freedom with the essential ends of humanity."[112] While Kant's early writings certainly anticipate aspects of his mature conception of the principle of morality,[113] it is not until the *Groundwork*, first published in 1785, that Kant officially sets himself the task of "the identification [*Aufsuchung*[and corroboration [*Festsetzung*] *of the supreme principle of morality*." (KAA 4:392) The result of his investigation is the categorical imperative: "*act only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law*." (KAA 4:421) This 'universal law' formulation of the categorical imperative is Kant's most prominent; it features in the *Critique of Practical Reason* as the "fundamental law of pure practical

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[110] For more on Eberhard's response to the objection see Schwaiger, *Baumgarten*, 173f. and B. Oberdorfer, *Geselligkeit und Realisierung von Sittlichkeit* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1995), 107–109.

[111] KAA 2:396, translation modified. For an account of the changes in Kant's intellectual development that led to this view solidifying, see M. Walschots, "Achtung in Kant and Smith," *Kant-Studien* 133, no.2 (2022): 238–268, here 243–245.

[112] I. Kant, *Vorlesung zur Moralphilosophie*, ed. W. Stark (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 180. See also Kant, *Vorlesung*, 64–65 and Werner Stark's note on the same pages. For a more in-depth discussion of Kant's conception of the principle of morality in his lectures on ethics, see O. Sensen, "The Supreme Principle of Morality," in *Reading Kant's Lectures*, ed. R. R. Clewis (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 179-199.

[113] See e.g., D. Henrich, "Concerning Kant's earliest ethics: an attempt at a reconstruction," in *Kant's Observations and Remarks: A Critical Guide*, ed. S. M. Shell and R. Velkley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 13–37.

reason" (KAA 5:30) and in the *Metaphysics of Morals* as *the* categorical imperative (see KAA 6:225).[114] In the *Groundwork*, Kant famously derives the content of this principle from the concept of a good will (see KAA 4:402),[115] and one of its most controversial features is whether and how it is capable of judging the morality of actions by means of the contradiction(s) Kant identifies as performing the function of the "canon" of moral judgement (KAA 4:424).[116]

Kant's attempt to conceive of a formal principle of morality by means of "pure philosophy" (KAA 4:390), that is, one "completely cleansed of everything that might be in some way empirical and belongs to anthropology" (KAA 4:389) was controversial. Indeed, many of Kant's early critics had empiricist leanings, which encouraged several of them to propose an alternative to the categorical imperative, namely 'the principle of happiness.' According to a line of argument put forward by both Johann Friedrich Flatt and Gottlob August Tittel, for example, Kant himself admits that happiness is an end or purpose that human beings necessarily possess and thus cannot give up.[117] They therefore argued that happiness is an end capable of issuing the unconditional and universally valid obligations of the sort Kant claims is characteristic of morality.[118] Furthermore, both Flatt and Tittel claimed that on its own Kant's principle was merely formal, and thus that it is impossible to derive concrete duties from it without making reference to experience.[119] In response they both proposed what they called "the principle of happiness" as a more viable alternative, which Tittel formulates as follows: "act in such a way that through your action and disposition the common world best, the well-being of sensing and thinking natures–and thus also your own happiness–is preserved and promoted."[120] Other critics, such as J. G. H. Feder and Christian Garve, proposed similar alternatives.[121] Thus, while influential on its own as well, one of the primary ways

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[114] For a recent account of the various formulas of the categorical imperative, see A. Wood, *Formulas of the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

[115] For a discussion of this derivation see A. Wood "The Good Will," *Philosophical Topics* 31, no. 1–2 (2003): 457–484.

[116] For a discussion of the challenges Kant view faces and the various interpretive options scholars have proposed, see R. Galvin, "The Universal Law Formulas," in *The Blackwell Guide to Kant's Ethics*, ed. T. E. Hill Jr. (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 52–83.

[117] See Flatt, Review, 107–108 / Walschots, *Background Sources*, 89–90, and G.A. Tittel, *Ueber Herrn Kants Moralreform* (Frankfurt: Pfähler, 1786), 31 / Walschots, *Background Sources*, 105–106) as well as KAA 4:415 where Kant makes this claim.

[118] See Flatt, Review, 108 / Walschots, *Background Sources*, 90, and Tittel, *Moralreform*, 31 and 38 / Walschots, *Background Sources*, 105–106 and 109.

[119] See Flatt, Review, 110 / Walschots, *Background Sources*, 91, and Tittel, *Moralreform*, 35 / Walschots *Background Sources*, 107–108.

[120] Tittel, *Moralreform*, 38–39 / Walschots, *Background Sources*, 109.

[121] See J. G. H. Feder, Review of the Critique of Practical Reason, *Philosophische Bibliothek*. 1. Band (1788): 182–218, here 203 / Walschots, *Background Sources*, 216) and Garve, *Versuche über verschiedene Gegenstände aus der Moral, der Litteratur und dem gesellschaftlichen Leben* (Breslau: W. G. Korn, 1792), 114 / Walschots, *Background Sources*, 252–253).

in which Kant's conception of the principle of morality had a lasting influence was by inspiring the development of what some have called the 'eudaimonist' theories of morality in late eighteenth-century German philosophy.[122]

The principle of morality continued to be a topic of importance until well into the nineteenth century. This is reflected in an additional prize essay question issued by the class of philosophical and moral sciences of Harlem in 1810, which read as follows: "What are the reasons why philosophers differ with respect to the first principles of morals, but nonetheless generally agree with respect to the implications and the duties that are derived from their principles?"[123] The winning essay, authored by J. C. F. Meister, argued that although the various principles put forward by philosophers might be worded differently, they all implicitly make use of the principles of perfection and happiness, which is why they all tend to come to the same results.[124] Among other things, this serves as a testament to the fact that the principle of happiness proposed by Kant's early critics became a live option later in the century. Similarly, in 1825 C. F. Stäudlin, a historian of moral philosophy influenced by Kant, claimed that "Those who want to improve moral philosophy continue to argue over its highest principles."[125] The narrative I have offered about the principle of morality in this chapter could therefore be expanded both within the eighteenth century and beyond it.[126] Among other things, I hope the preceding is a testament of the detailed views that eighteenth-century German moral philosophy has to offer and that a more exhaustive study deserves to be offered.[127]

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[122] See e.g., Hochstrasser, *Natural Law*, 212, and F. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 172.

[123] See J. C. F. Meister, *Über die Gründe der hohen Verschiedenheit der Philosophe nim Ursatze der Sittenlehre* (Züllichau: Darnmannschen, 1812), and Anonymous, Prize Essay Announcement, *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* 2, no. 224 (Sunday August 18, 1810): 841.

[124] See the summary of Meister's position in C. F. Stäudlin, *Neues Lehrbuch der Moral für Theologen* (Göttingen: Bandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1825), 598n.

[125] Stäudlin, *Lehrbuch*, 598. And see Hochstrasser, *Natural Law*, 206–212 for a discussion of Stäudlin as a historian of moral philosophy.

[126] A few of the ways in which my discussion of the eighteenth century could be expanded include addressing C. F. Gellert's account of the principle of morality (for a brief discussion see M. Kuehn, "Ethics and Anthropology in the Development of Kant's Moral Philosophy," in *Kant's Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals: A Critical Guide*. Ed. J. Timmermann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7–28) and J. G. H Feder's scepticism concerning the need for a fundamental principle (for a discussion see S. Bacin, "Kant and Feder on the Will, Happiness and the Aim of Moral Philosophy," in *Kant and his German Contemporaries*, Vol. 1, ed. C. W. Dyck and F. Wunderlich (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 232–249.

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