

Wolff on the Duty to Cognize Good and Evil

Michael Walschots

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Abstract. In this chapter I offer an account of the nature, scope, and significance of Wolff's claim that human beings have a duty to cognize moral good and evil. I illustrate that Wolff conceives of this duty as requiring that human beings both acquire distinct cognition of good and evil as well as avoid ignorance and error. Although Wolff intends for the duty to be quite demanding, he restricts its scope by, among other things, claiming it primarily concerns those who have the skills, circumstances, and opportunity to acquire such cognition. Wolff calls these individuals the 'inventors' of the truths of morality and he considers himself to be such an inventor. I argue that part of the significance of this duty lies in the fact that Wolff conceives of himself as living up to it by writing the *German Ethics*, thereby sharing the knowledge he has 'invented' with others.

Keywords: Wolff, Christian; excusable ignorance; duty to self; overdemandingness;

1. Introduction

Wolff's "Universal Rule for Free Actions" requires that human beings "**do that which makes you and your state or that of another more perfect, [and] omit that which makes it more imperfect.**" (DE §12) On its surface, this is a fairly straightforward view: since Wolff defines 'good' as "that which makes both our internal and external state more perfect" and 'evil' as "that which makes both more imperfect" (DE §3), the 'universal rule' states that human beings are obligated by

nature to do good and omit evil (DE §9), as well as to prefer the better to the worse (DE §10). More specifically, and as Wolff explains in the opening sections of the *German Ethics*, actions are either good or evil by virtue of the changes they bring about in human beings and their states, that is, by virtue of their *consequences*: actions are good if they make our internal (body and soul) and external (e.g., our finances or reputation) states more perfect, and they are evil if they make these states more imperfect (DE §4–5). *All* actions are either good or evil in this way, and all actions are *necessarily* either good or evil in themselves and by nature, because the regular and orderly nature of the world makes it such that that the same kind of action always brings about the same consequences under the same conditions (DE §5).

As is the case with many of Wolff's doctrines, however, what at first glance seems like a relatively straightforward view is, upon reflection, much more complex. To take just one example: the above basic features of Wolff's moral theory become increasingly more complicated as soon as we consider what is involved in both *judging* the morality of actions as well as *performing* our duties. In order to judge whether an action is good or evil, for instance, Wolff's moral theory requires that agents know a considerable amount of information about both themselves and the world in which their actions takes place; at the very least, agents must know the consequences that actions bring about for both oneself and one's own states, as well as for others and their states.¹ Furthermore, and with respect to performing our duties, that is, acting in accordance with what we judge to be morally good or evil, Wolff's theory of the will requires that agents first possess cognition of good and evil in order for them to be able to act and omit in the first place. Wolff's theory of the will is extremely strict in this regard: cognition of the good is a motive (*Bewegungsgrund*) of volition (*Wollen*) and

¹ In this paper I primarily speak of *cognition* and *cognizing* to reflect Wolff's usage of *erkennen* and *Erkenntniß*, the latter of which is his German rendering of *cognitio* (see DM, *das andere Register*). I do, however, occasionally speak of 'knowledge' of and 'knowing' good and evil, but readers should be aware that I take there to be no important distinction between these two sets of terms, at least for my purposes in this paper.

cognition of evil a motive of nolition (*nicht-Wollen*)² in such a way that agents can only will or nill actions if they first cognize them to be good or evil, and if an agent has already willed or nilled an action, then there is no other explanation available for why they did so other than the fact that they cognized the action as good or evil respectively (see DE §6–7).

Thus, once we combine Wolff’s ‘universal rule’ with other features of his moral theory, and particularly his theory of the will, it seems as though human beings are not merely obligated to ‘do what is good and omit what is evil’, but also to *cognize* good and evil as well.³ Accordingly, once Wolff turns to his doctrine of duties in the *German Ethics* it is no surprise to find him claiming that human beings have a specific duty to cognize good and evil (DE §263).⁴ What is surprising, however, is how little attention Wolff seems to devote to this duty, especially considering how central it appears to be to his moral theory more generally: indeed, and as we have just seen, if Wolff’s theory of the will implies that we can only ever do what is good and omit what is evil once we first possess cognition of good and evil, then there appears to be a sense in which *all* duties at least indirectly require that human beings acquire cognition of good and evil in order for them to be able to actually perform their duties. My overall aim in this paper is therefore to clarify the nature of this duty and its place within Wolff’s moral theory, as presented in the *German Ethics*.⁵ More

² To be noted here is that Wolff distinguishes between ‘nolition,’ i.e., positively ‘not-willing’ something, and omission (*unterlassen*), i.e., the absence of volition. As he explains in the *German Metaphysics*: “when we will, our mind is inclined towards the thing. When we nill, it withdraws from it. When we omit willing, it remains, as it were, still and immobile, such that it is neither inclined towards the thing nor withdrawn from it.” (DM § 495) As such, Wolff understands ‘nilling’ to be “something more” (ibid.) than omitting and as similar to having an aversion towards a thing (see DE §7). Although the representation of good and evil are, generally speaking, motives for volition and nolition respectively, the representation of evil might also be a motive for omission as well, as Wolff’s language often suggests. I leave these details of Wolff’s philosophy of action aside in this paper and primarily speak of the representation of evil as a motive for omission, as Wolff does.

³ Thomas (2004: 181–2) picks up on this implication.

⁴ As will become clear, Wolff primarily conceives of cognizing good and evil to be a ‘duty’, but it is also something we are obligated to do. This fits with Wolff’s definition of duties as “actions that we are obligated to perform.” (DE §221) In line with these definitions, I refer to cognizing good and evil as both a duty and, occasionally, as something we are obligated to do throughout this paper.

⁵ Although I occasionally refer to some parallel discussions in Wolff’s later works, given the focus of this volume I primarily restrict myself to the theory presented in the *German Ethics*.

specifically, I have three goals: first, to reconstruct Wolff's understanding of the duty to cognize good and evil on the basis of his scattered remarks on the topic; second, to assess its scope and whether it is too demanding; and third to make a case for its significance in his moral theory more generally.

I proceed as follows: in section two I argue that the duty to cognize good and evil requires that agents both acquire distinct cognition as well as avoid error and ignorance of good and evil. I illustrate here, among other things, that this duty is tied to Wolff's doctrine of excusable ignorance: since we are obligated to cognize good and evil, ignorance of our duty is no excuse, except under very specific circumstances. This leads me to section three, where I argue that although Wolff intends this duty to be quite demanding, in that it also requires us to develop several perfections of the understanding, he also qualifies it in important ways. In particular, I illustrate that this duty does not concern all human beings equally, but primarily only those Wolff calls 'the inventors of the truths of morality'. In section four I turn to the overall significance of this duty in Wolff's moral theory. I not only suggest that this is a central duty given its location in the *German Ethics*, but I also argue that Wolff thought of himself as living up to this duty when writing the *German Ethics* itself, and thus that he conceives of himself as one of the 'inventors of the truths of morality.' I conclude in section five by briefly clarifying a potential source of confusion that arises from my discussion. In particular, I argue that Wolff's conception of the duty to cognize good and evil does not contradict his compatibilist conception of freedom, as Joachim Lange claim. I thereby hope to suggest that although Wolff seems to treat the duty to cognize good and evil only marginally, it is nevertheless inextricably linked to some of the most difficult questions of his moral philosophy.

2. The Duty to Acquire Cognition and Avoid Ignorance and Error

Wolff presents the duty to cognize good and evil in Part II of the *German Ethics*, which is devoted to duties to self.⁶ As Wolff explains in the first, introductory chapter of Part II, entitled ‘On the Duties of the Human Being to Itself in General’: “**Duties to oneself** are those actions that the human being has to perform by virtue of the law (and thus, where we are speaking merely of natural duties, by virtue of the law of nature) with respect to one’s own person.” (DE §223) As he goes on to explain, there are therefore three types of action that the human being must perform in relation to one’s own person:

Because the law of nature requires that the human being does that which makes oneself and one’s state more perfect and omits that which makes oneself and one’s state less perfect (§.19), but the human being consists of a body and soul, the human being must care for its soul, as well as for its body and external state. (DE §224)

Part II of the *German Ethics* is therefore divided into five chapters: after the first introductory chapter, the remaining four chapters are each devoted to an individual part of the self: the soul, i.e., both the understanding (Ch. 2) and the will (Ch. 3); the body (Ch. 5); and our external state (Ch. 6).

The duty to cognize good and evil is presented in Chapter 2 of Part II, devoted to the human being’s duties to the understanding. Wolff reminds us here of his definition of the understanding from the *German Metaphysics*, according to which it is “a power of the soul, by means of which it distinctly represents what is possible (§.277 Met.)” (DE §254) As Wolff continues:

Since it [the understanding] is all the more perfect the more it can represent things distinctly [and] the more it is capable of distinctly representing in one thing (§.848. Met), we are, in relation to our understanding, obligated to do everything that promotes the number and

⁶ For more information on the structure of the *German Ethics*, see Clemens Schwaiger’s contribution to this volume.

distinctness of representations, and by contrast to omit that which can hinder this (§.12).

(DE §254)

Thus, our first and primary duty to the understanding is to increase both the number of our representations as well as their distinctness. As Wolff goes on to clarify, this duty is quite broad in scope: “we must not pass by any opportunity where we can acquire a concept of something or learn something, and accordingly we must strive for as much cognition as is possible for us to acquire, that is, to the extent that our powers suffice and the circumstances in which we have been placed allow.” (DE §255) Indeed, and as I discuss further below, since Wolff subscribes to a version of the ‘ought implies can’ principle (see DE §247), the duty to increase the number and distinctness of our representations is only limited by things such as our natural cognitive capacities and the time and resources available to us to do so.

I return to the scope of the duty to cognize good and evil in the next section. For the time being, it is in the context of the above discussion that Wolff introduces the idea that we are obligated to cognize good and evil “in particular [*absonderlich*]” (DE §263). The full section in which Wolff outlines this duty is as follows:

Since nature obligates us to do what is good and omit what is evil (§.9), and also to prefer the better to the worse (§.10), but the human being cannot perform the good nor omit what is evil, nor prefer the better to the worse, before one understands what is good, what is evil, what is better, and what is worse (§.514. Met), nature, and therefore God as well (§.29.30), obligates us to the cognition of good and evil. Ignorance of what is good and evil is therefore to be avoided. (DE §263)

There is much to discuss about this duty itself, but what is immediately worth emphasizing about the above paragraph is that Wolff is explicit that it is his theory of the will that makes it so important for us to acquire cognition of good and evil: as the reference to *German Metaphysics* §514 implies, free

action and omission is not possible unless we first cognize the constitution of the action we are considering, that is, whether it is good or evil. Because of this, if we are obligated (by both nature and God⁷) to perform the good and omit evil, Wolff's theory of the will implies that we are thereby indirectly required to both acquire cognition of good and evil and avoid ignorance of these things as well.

Indeed, it is worth stressing that the duty to cognize good and evil also requires that human beings avoid ignorance of good and evil (DE §263). This fits with Wolff's discussion of the more general duty to acquire as much cognition as possible: just as the duty to acquire cognition of good and evil is subordinate to the more general duty to acquire as much cognition as possible, so is the duty to avoid ignorance of good and evil subordinate to the duty to avoid ignorance in general (DE §262). To be noted here is that ignorance (*Unwissenheit*) is defined as a "lack of cognition" (DE §262) and is to be distinguished from error (*Irrthum*), namely a false sense of the truth or falsity of a judgement, that is, taking a false judgement to be true or a true judgement to be false.⁸ This implies that we are not obligated to acquire just any cognition of good and evil, but cognition that will not lead us astray. Thus, the duty to cognize good and evil is, more specifically, the duty to acquire *distinct* cognition of good and evil (see DE §271). Not only this, but we are required to acquire 'adequate' (*vollständig*) concepts of good and evil, that is, distinct cognition of not only the concept (of an action), but of all of the parts of the concept as well (see DL Ch. 1: §15 and 16). Wolff claims that this is the only way to avoid obscure concepts of good and evil, which can lead us to error, i.e., mistaking good for evil or vice versa, which Wolff stresses it is quite dangerous to do (DE §283).

The next aspect of this duty to consider is what exactly it requires us to cognize and by what means we are meant to cognize it. Wolff claims we are required to cognize the "constitution

⁷ Wolff argues for the equivalence of the two in §29 and 30 of the *German Ethics*, as he indicates in the above section.

⁸ See DM §396 and Faveretti (2017) for an extended discussion of Wolff's conception of ignorance and error.

[*Beschaffenheit*]” (DM §514) of our actions. In other words, and as Wolff says early on in the *German Ethics*, the duty to cognize good and evil requires that we know whether an action makes the internal and external states of human beings more perfect or more imperfect (DE §3). And we judge this, he clarifies, on the basis of their “outcome [*Erfolg*]” (DE §5), i.e., the consequences that actions bring about. As mentioned above, these are the consequences that *necessarily* result from actions such that *all* actions are either good or evil in themselves and by nature (DE §5). Cognizing good and evil therefore requires, at minimum, an insight into the ways in which actions causally bring about consequences for the internal and external states of human beings. Another way to put this is that the duty to cognize good and evil requires us to have insight into the connection of things. For Wolff, this is reason, which he defines as “insight into the connection of things.” (DE §23 and see DM §368) In the first instance, therefore, Wolff argues that we acquire cognition of the constitution of our actions, i.e., whether they necessarily bring about good or bad consequences, by means of reason.

This is not all that the duty requires, however. On the contrary, we are also required to know a significant amount about ourselves, i.e., human nature, in order to better know how both ourselves and our states, as well as others and their states, can be made more perfect or imperfect. The duty to cognize good and evil therefore requires that human beings “know themselves [*sich kennen ... lernen*].” (DE §237) Self-knowledge allows us to know three things: 1. what perfections we are capable of in general, 2. how far we have come in acquiring these perfections, and 3. what is left for us to accomplish (DE §228). Sticking to the case of duties to self for the time being, this means that we are required to know a significant amount of information about our own internal and external states. Wolff argues that this knowledge is acquired in various ways. We acquire knowledge about our body, for instance, in two ways: namely via anatomy, and by paying attention to the things that benefit and harm both our own body and those of others (DE §234). We learn about the soul from

its effects (DE §232), and so we learn about the perfections of the understanding from the sciences and the arts, i.e., what the understanding has produced (DE §232), and we learn about the will from the virtue and vice that human beings perform in the world, knowledge which we acquire both by means of experience and by studying history (DE §232). Finally, Wolff claims that we learn about our external condition in the same way, namely by means of experience and history, which gives us insight into how the external condition of human beings in general can be constituted, what changes it can undergo, and what kinds of fortune and misfortune can arise in it (DE §236). In sum, then, knowledge of good and evil is acquired by means of both reason and experience, which fits nicely with Wolff's broader epistemology, according to which philosophical cognition is gained by the unification or 'marriage' of reason and experience.⁹

The focus so far has been on what we are required to know, and by what means we acquire this knowledge, in order to perform duties to self. As we have seen, Wolff claims that knowledge of others, i.e., their body, soul, and external state, as well as how their states are changed by certain actions, can provide us with relevant information that we can use in the context of duties to self. Indeed, Wolff even claims that we are obligated not only to know ourselves (DE §228), but to know others as well (DE §230). Given this situation, what we are required to know in the context of duties to others is the same as for duties to self: in the context of duties to others, self-knowledge serves as an example and provides necessary information about the bodies, souls, and external states of others. Indeed, insofar as duties to others and duties to self are "one and the same [*einerley*]" (DE §768), that is, insofar as what we owe to ourselves is what we owe to others (DE §768),¹⁰ the

⁹ See Dyck (2014: Ch. 1) for a discussion. See also Fugate's contribution to this volume for the role that experience plays in moral knowledge in particular.

¹⁰ There are of course certain qualifications to this identification (see e.g., DE §769 and 770). See also Bacin's contribution to this volume for a discussion.

knowledge necessary to perform duties to self is the same knowledge we are required to acquire in the context of duties to others.

Things are slightly different in the context of duties to God, however. Wolff defines duties to God as “those actions that the human being has to perform by virtue of the law (and those, where we are speaking about natural duties, by virtue of the law of nature).” (DE §650) However, in that God is “invariable” (DE §651), God needs no outside assistance in becoming that which he already is. Put differently: since God is the most perfect being, the human being can do nothing to make God more perfect (DE §651). All we can do, Wolff says, is “cognize the perfections of God and use them as motives for one’s actions.” (DE §651) Indeed, our duties to God are merely the actions whose motives simply consist in divine perfections (DE §651) and performing the actions that divine perfections give us motives to perform is how we honour God. (DE §652) The main rule of duties to God is therefore “honour God.” (DE §652) Accordingly, just as the rule to do that which makes oneself and others more perfect indirectly requires us to cognize good and evil, so does the rule to honour God indirectly require us to cognize God:

Because the human being is obligated to strive for as much cognition as is possible for them to attain (§.255), and especially for all of those cognitions that are useful when performing the good and avoiding evil (§.263), but God is the most perfect among all the things that we cognize (§.1083) and furthermore cognizing him makes the performance of good and the avoidance of evil easier (§.656), the human being is also obligated to cognize God. (DE §657)

As Wolff adds here, cognizing God’s perfections and using them as additional motives to perform those actions we already cognize to be good makes it even easier to perform those actions (see DE §656). We are therefore obligated to cognize God and his perfections not just for the sake of duties to God alone, but in the case of all duties more generally. Also to be noted is that Wolff adds,

similar to what has been explained above in the case of duties to self and others, that we come to cognize God by means of both reason and experience (DE §663) and that we are also obligated to avoid ignorance and error of God's perfections, because these are obstacles to honouring God and performing our duties to him (DE §665). Wolff explains that we should therefore not only cognize God but cognize him with certainty and attain living cognition of God (see DE §658 and §169).

Before concluding this section, I want to highlight two important implications of my account of the duty to cognize good and evil, as outlined above. The first is that ignorance of good and evil does not excuse us from doing our duty. Indeed, it is precisely in the context of the duty to cognize good and evil that Wolff outlines his doctrine of excusable ignorance: immediately after arguing that we are obligated to acquire cognition and avoid ignorance of good and evil, Wolff states that ignorance only excuses (*entschuldiget*) when “one can prove that our powers, circumstances, and opportunity have not allowed ignorance to be avoided.” (DE §264)¹¹ Wolff then goes on to note what he calls the ‘ancient’ distinction between an ignorance that is to be overcome (*eine Unwissenheit, die zu überwinden ist*) and an ignorance that is not to be overcome (*eine Unwissenheit, die nicht zu überwinden ist*).¹² We can overcome ignorance when our powers, circumstances, and opportunity make it possible for us to do so, but if our powers, circumstances, and opportunity do not allow us to acquire certain cognitions, then the ignorance is not to be overcome. Wolff gives the example of a dish that may or may not be healthy: before we have tried the dish, we simply cannot know whether it is healthy for us. Thus, before trying the dish, we cannot overcome our ignorance of whether it is good or evil, thus we cannot be blamed if we eat it and are subsequently harmed. However, if we have already tried the dish, then we should already know whether it is good for us (assuming this is

¹¹ As we will see in the next section, our powers, circumstances, and opportunity are the primary conditions determining the scope of the duty to cognize good and evil.

¹² In his later Latin works Wolff refers to “vincible [*vincibilis*]” and “invincible [*invincibilis*]” error and ignorance, i.e., error and ignorance that is and is not to be overcome, respectively. See e.g., PPU I, §30n and Favaretti (2017, pg. 119–20).

something we have paid attention to). But if we did not attend to this, then we could have overcome our ignorance here, meaning if we were to try the dish again and being harmed, then we are to blame since we could and should have known that it makes us ill (DE §265).

Wolff's doctrine of excusable ignorance brings a second implication of the duty to cognize good and evil to the fore: if ignorance only excuses when our powers, circumstances, and opportunity make it such that we could not have known what we ought to do or omit, this must mean that we only have a duty to cognize good and evil if the constitution of our actions are *knowable* in the first place. This is a feature taken for granted, and perhaps for good reason, in the case of natural (and therefore also divine) obligation; in this case Wolff simply assumes that reason grants us insight into the connection of things. Perhaps a better way of putting this is that the principle of sufficient reason makes it such that, at least in principle, it is possible for us to know the constitution of all actions, since "everything that exists has its sufficient reason why it is." (DM §30) In the case of human or civil obligation, however, this feature cannot be taken for granted, because it is possible that the laws have not been made sufficiently knowable. Thus, as Wolff says in the *German Politics*, civil obligation is unique in that civil laws must be *publicized*, i.e., made known by being posted in public places where everyone can read them, announced in public assemblies, or distributed in public printings (DP §416). It is only if civil laws have been made public that ignorance cannot excuse us (DP §417); if it was not possible for us to know the civil laws because they were not made public, our ignorance *can* excuse us, presumably because we were given no opportunity to cognize them (see DP §415).

In the next section I explore the ways in which Wolff qualifies the duty to cognize good and evil, namely insofar as our powers, circumstances, and opportunity allow, in more detail, thereby determining just how demanding it is.

3. The Demandingness of the Duty to Cognize Good and Evil

As we have briefly seen above, Wolff qualifies both the duty to acquire cognition more generally, and the duty to acquire cognition of good and evil in particular: we are only required to strive for as much cognition as our powers are fit for and as our circumstances allow (DE §255). This fits with Wolff's subscription to a version of the 'ought implies can' principle, according to which "neither nature nor God can obligate us to something impossible" and thus "neither are we obligated to obtain those goods that are not in our power, nor to avoid the evil that is not in our power." (DE §247) Wolff therefore expands on the above qualification and says that since we cannot possibly acquire *all* the cognition that our powers and opportunity allow for (indeed, it is possible to acquire many different cognitions in the same circumstances by means of our powers) we are often forced to make a choice of what cognition to acquire and what cognition to forego. More clearly: Wolff states that either the lack of time or the lack of the necessary resources makes it such that we necessarily must prefer some cognitions over others (DE §256). What are we to choose? Wolff argues as follows:

Since every human being chooses a certain lifestyle [*Lebens-Art*], in which they either already actually find themselves or to which they are making themselves suitable..., the human being must prefer the cognition that is more helpful to them in those undertakings that they have to perform on account of their lifestyle, and they therefore do wrong when they prefer another cognition that does not promise the same benefit. (DE §256)

Wolff follows this up with a statement of caution: one is not immediately excused for neglecting a cognition because one thinks it is of no use for one's lifestyle. On the contrary, one is only excused for not possessing a cognition when that cognition was neglected for another that is more necessary for one's lifestyle. This means that if our powers and circumstances allow us to acquire both

cognitions, we must acquire them both, regardless of how useful they are to our lifestyle (DE §257). Indeed, circumstances often arise where a certain cognition would not only be useful but necessary for us later on, but which we did not foresee being so at the time we were able to acquire it. Wolff claims that history gives lots of examples of this (DE §258). We should therefore strive to learn as much as possible, because we do not know whether and how a cognition might be useful for us in the future. Furthermore, we need to be careful about inaccurately judging whether something is useful for our lifestyle or not: Wolff states that we are prone to self-deception here and being wrong about the usefulness of a cognition for our lifestyle is dangerous, because we might be led to judge that a cognition is useless when in fact it is highly useful for our lifestyle (DE §259). Thus, we also need to be careful when judging what our powers are capable of accomplishing (DE §260), and when judging what our circumstances actually allow (DE §261). The conclusion Wolff draws is that the safe route, when it comes to acquiring cognition, is to acquire as much cognition as possible and not neglect an opportunity to learn, even if we do not yet know if a cognition would be useful for us or not (DE §259).

In the remainder of Chapter 2 of Part II of the *German Ethics*, Wolff goes on to delineate a variety of further perfections of the understanding that we are obligated to develop to make it easier for us to acquire as much distinct cognition as possible. Indeed, we are required to develop many of these perfections of the understanding in order to distinctly cognize good and evil in particular. Consider just a select few of these: because we are obligated to not only cognize good and evil but to have *distinct* cognition of good and evil and have an adequate concept of our actions and omissions, Wolff claims that we are obligated to develop shrewdness (*Scharfsinnigkeit*), that is, the ability to distinguish one thing from another of the same general type as well as see how they are similar (DE §267, 271, and DM 850). Shrewdness, in turn, requires us to develop a good command of language so that we are capable of defining things in their usual sense (DE §276). Furthermore, we are

obligated to strive for a thoroughness (*Gründlichkeit*) in our cognition, that is, distinctness in the inferences that we make (DE §284), such as when reasoning out what consequences an action or omission might have, and this, in turn, is facilitated by means of acquiring a facility in demonstration (*Fertigkeit im Demonstriren*), i.e., the ability to prove the major premises in our inferences (see DE §286 and DM §347). Again, this is just a selection of the perfections of the understanding we are obligated to develop; additional perfections we are obligated to develop, and specifically for the sake of acquiring cognition of good and evil, include: scientific knowledge (*Wissenschaft*) (DE §293), wit (*Witz*), the art of invention (*Kunst zu erfinden*),¹³ and the art of experience (*Erfahrungs-Kunst*), wisdom (*Weisheit*), and reason (*Vernunft*) (see esp. DE §313).

Both the duty to acquire cognition more generally, and the duty to acquire cognition of good and evil in particular, are therefore fairly demanding duties: not only do they require that we acquire as much cognition as possible, as far as our powers and circumstances allow, that we never miss an opportunity to learn, and that we have precise self-knowledge about our powers and circumstances, they also require that we develop a whole host of perfections of the understanding that make it easier for us to acquire cognition. Wolff therefore predicts that one might object that he is being far too demanding with this duty:

I know very well that both this and what has in general been said about the exercises, by means of which we are to obtain the perfections of the understanding, will seem to many to be much too expansive [*weitläufig*]. But such people must accept the fact that they do not attain this perfection, and that they make themselves unhappy by means of a disorderly way of life, even with external fortune. Nature will not change its laws to please such people. It makes no leap (§.686 Met.) and every habit requires its practice, without which one cannot attain it (§.525. Met). (DE §338)

¹³ As I explain below, Wolff has a unique way of understanding ‘invention.’

Wolff's main response to the objection that he is being too demanding is therefore to buckle down and insist that this needs to be the case: if one thinks that developing all these perfections of the understanding is too much, then one must accept the consequences. Put differently: developing these habits and perfections is how one attains happiness, so it is in one's own best interest to develop them and if does not do so, then one must accept responsibility for one's own unhappiness.

To be fair, however, this is not the entirety of Wolff's response to the overdemandingness objection. Indeed, he qualifies the obligation to cognize good and evil in an additional and important way. He says, namely that "the entire human race is to be regarded as one person" such that "natural obligation does not concern [*angehet*] everyone at all times, but often only those who possess a skill for something, by means of which others can afterwards be served." (DE §288) This implies that the obligation to acquire cognition, and the obligation to acquire cognition of good and evil more specifically, primarily concerns those individuals who possess more opportunity, natural skill, and the circumstances (e.g., the time) necessary to acquire this kind of cognition (DE §289). Not only this, but Wolff goes on to say that those individuals who have the opportunity, skill, and necessary time, but who do not share their knowledge with others, or do not apply themselves to this task as much as they are capable, "do wrong in the highest degree [*höchst unrecht thun*]" (DE §289) As Wolff puts it in relation to the duty to acquire cognition more generally:

a human being not only has to care for themselves, but for others as well (§.12.), thus those, to whom God has conferred powers and opportunity, are obligated to perform this work for the betterment of others and to share with others that which they have learned about the soul to others in written texts. (DE §233)

Wolff therefore clarifies that the duty to acquire cognition (of good and evil) is only especially demanding on those individuals who have the degree of powers and opportunity required in order to devote to this demanding task. Indeed, with respect to such individuals, the duty to acquire

cognition (of good and evil) demands even more, namely, to subsequently serve other individuals by sharing their knowledge.

Wolff expands on this point earlier in the *German Ethics* in the context of discussing judging the morality of actions for the purpose of ordering all of one's ends towards a main end. (see DE §139ff.) There too Wolff argues that perfections of the understanding like shrewdness, the art of invention, and wit are required to judge good and evil, and that this seems to require quite a lot of human beings. (DE §150) His response there is the following:

we are currently only speaking of those who ought to work out the rules, according to which human beings must judge their free actions in the various situations of life, that is, of the inventors of the truths that belong to the doctrine of morals [*von Erfindern der Wahrheiten, die zur Sitten-Lehre gehören*]. It is, however, not necessary that all human beings be inventors, rather it is sufficient when some among the scholars apply themselves to this, whose inventions might subsequently merely instruct others, which can happen much easier. (DE §150)

First, a point of clarification: Wolff understands 'invention' (*erfinden/Erfinden*) in a particular way, namely in terms of "deriving [*heraus zu bringen*] unknown truths from other known truths", which means that the art of invention (*Kunst zu erfinden*)¹⁴ is the facility in doing so (see DE §294 and DM §362), and an 'inventor' (*Erfinder*) is a person skilled in deriving truths in this way. As Wolff goes on to explain after the above quotation, the skill required for invention does not need to be possessed by a single person, and that many such inventors, even living in different time periods, can contribute to the task of 'inventing' the truths of the doctrine of morals (DE §150). Indeed, whenever we invent new truths, this often happens because we build off what others have accomplished before us (DE §150), thus our inventions are not solely due to our own skill.

¹⁴ Wolff's Latin expression is *ars inveniendi*. See EM 5.24: §106.

In summary, Wolff's response to the overdemandingness objection to the duty to acquire cognition generally, and cognition of good and evil in particular, is threefold: first, since we cannot be obligated to that which is not in our power, we are only required to acquire as much cognition as our powers, circumstances, and opportunity allow; second, this means, however, that we are obligated to acquire as much and *all* the cognition that our powers, circumstances, and opportunity allow, and we would do wrong if we were to acquire any less; nonetheless, and third, the duty primarily concerns those who are especially suited to acquiring this cognition, namely the inventors of truth, who have the skills, circumstances, and opportunity necessary not only for acquiring this cognition, but for sharing with the rest of humanity as well. Important to note is that this does not mean that those who are less skilled at inventing are not also obligated, it just means that the obligation 'concerns' them in a different way: although they might not be required to invent truths and share them with others, they are still required to acquire such truths by reading the texts that others write.

In the next section I suggest that Wolff takes himself to be an inventor of the truths of morality and that he considers himself to be living up to the duty to cognize good and evil, as it applies to him as such an inventor, when writing the *German Ethics* itself. I argue that this speaks to the significance of the duty to acquire cognition of good and evil within his moral theory.

4. The Purpose of the *German Ethics*

In section two of this chapter, I illustrated that each of the three kinds of duties (to self, others, and to God) all indirectly require that we acquire certain kinds of knowledge in order to be able to actually perform them. Indeed, I showed Wolff's theory of the will seems to imply that *all* duties indirectly require that we cognize good and evil. This suggests that the duty to cognize good and evil

is not inconsequential but is rather an important part of Wolff's moral theory more generally. In this section I wish to make a more expanded case for the significance of this duty within the *German Ethics* by mentioning two further reasons that speak to its importance.

First, I propose that it is no accident that the duty to cognize good and evil is one of the first duties listed in the *German Ethics*. As we have seen, Wolff introduces the duty in the second chapter of Part II. Although Wolff never says so explicitly, Part I of the *German Ethics* corresponds to his 'universal practical philosophy' and therefore deals with the most general concepts of his moral philosophy and philosophy of action. Parts II–IV, by contrast, correspond to his 'special practical philosophy', that is, his doctrine of duties to self, God, and others, respectively. As mentioned, Part II is organized as follows: the first chapter deals with duties to the self in general before going on to discuss our duties to the understanding, will, body, and external condition. The duty to cognize good and evil, presented in chapter two and preceded only by Wolff's general remarks on duties to self in general, is therefore one of the very first duties presented in the *German Ethics*. Indeed, the duty is second only to the duty to acquire cognition and avoid ignorance and error more generally. This is significant, because although Wolff clarifies in the Preface (DE *Vorrede*: *9) that he refrains from externally "dressing" the truths he presents in the *German Ethics* in "mathematical clothing" in the sense that he does not present them in terms of definitions, principles, and deductive proof (see DE *Vorrede*: *10), he nonetheless combines the "common [*gemein*] style of presentation with the mathematical." (DE *Vorrede*: *9) Put differently, this means that Wolff retains the mathematical style of presentation *internally*, albeit not externally (DE *Vorrede*: *9). A core feature of the mathematical method, and the one relevant for my point here, is that certain truths should be presented first if they enable the reader to understand all subsequent truths. As Wolff says in the *Preliminary Discourse*, for instance: "In every part of philosophy order is to be kept such that what is given first is that by means of which what is subsequent is understood and proven or at least made probable." (PD §132) Indeed, this is a feature that

Wolff claims the philosophical method has in common with the mathematical method (see PD §139).¹⁵ The position of the duty to cognize good and evil within the *German Ethics* therefore confirms what we have already suspected, namely that it has a position of priority among those things we are obligated to do and therefore occupies an important place within his moral theory.¹⁶

The second point I wish to mention concerns Wolff's motivations for writing the *German Ethics* itself. In the previous section we have seen that Wolff qualifies the seemingly demanding character of the duty to cognize good and evil by clarifying that it does not directly concern everyone, but primarily only the 'inventors' of the truths of morality. A somewhat obvious implication of this is that Wolff considers himself to be one of these inventors, and that the *German Ethics* is his attempt to share the cognition he has acquired with others. Consider the following passage, partially quoted above, which brings these points together:

Since not everyone is skilled at inventing, and on the other hand a human being must care not only for themselves but also for others (§.12), so are those to whom God has given the power and opportunity in order to carry out this work obligated to do so, and also to share what they have learned about the soul with others in writing. Out of this urge flows what I have written in my rational thoughts on God, the world, and the soul of human beings [i.e., the *German Metaphysics*], and even further what I am writing in the present book. Indeed, if God continues to grant me life and health, and allows me the opportunity, I will serve with more teachings on the soul in the future at other opportunities. (DE §233)

Wolff therefore sees himself as living up to the duty to cognize good and evil by writing the *German Ethics*. Even more specifically, he sees himself as living up to the particular demands the duty makes on him as an 'inventor' who has the skill, circumstances, opportunities to both cognize this

¹⁵ For more on Wolff's method, see DE *Vorbericht*: §7; DL Ch. 1: §25; DL Ch. 1 §39, and Gava (2018).

¹⁶ See Schwaiger's contribution to this volume for discussion of the priority Wolff gives to duties to the self more generally.

information and share it with others. Indeed, Wolff clarifies at many points throughout the text that his aim in the *German Ethics* is to help human beings achieve distinct cognition of good and evil (see e.g., DE §271, 288). More specifically, and as he makes the point in the Preface to the first edition, Wolff's aim (*Absicht*) in the German Ethics is to offer distinct concepts of all things virtuous and vicious to encourage human beings to be more virtuous and honourable than they tend to be (DE *Vorrede*: *3). Confirming the importance of first knowing good and evil for practicing virtue, Wolff says there that “if we do not want to become dangerous people in the world, [nor] bring about misfortune for the human race by means of the intention of doing good, then we must be able to properly distinguish the good from evil, and thus have a correct concept of both.” (DE *Vorrede*: *4) Not only this, but Wolff states that his motivation for writing his philosophy in German rather than Latin was “so that even those who have not studied can nonetheless attain this” (DE §289), that is, cognition of good and evil. I therefore take it that Wolff's motivations for writing the *German Ethics* and what he hopes it will accomplish is an additional factor that confirms that the duty to cognize good and evil plays a central role in his moral theory.

5. Conclusion: Freedom

My aim in this paper has been to offer an account of the nature, scope, and significance of the duty to cognize good and evil within Wolff's *German Ethics*. As we have seen, Wolff holds that human beings are obligated to acquire distinct cognition, as well as to avoid ignorance and error, of good and evil. Furthermore, we are obligated to acquire as much distinct cognition of good and evil as possible, so far as our powers, circumstances, and opportunity allow. Wolff qualifies this, however, by saying that the duty primarily concerns the people he calls the ‘inventors’ of the truths of morality, namely those who have the time and skills necessary to do this. He also claims, however,

that these inventors are in turn obligated to share their knowledge with others. Indeed, Wolff takes himself to be one of these inventors, and he conceives of the *German Ethics* as his attempt to share the cognition of good and evil that he has acquired with the broader public. I therefore hope to have shown that although Wolff does not give this duty the attention it seems to warrant given its importance, nor indeed an organized treatment of it, it nonetheless plays a central role in the moral theory he presents in the *German Ethics*.

To conclude I would like to briefly clarify a potential point of confusion raised by the above discussion which touches on a problem at the heart of Wolff's philosophy. In order to see the issue, remember that Wolff conceives of willing as resulting from our representation of the good, as mentioned briefly in the Introduction. Not only this, but Wolff conceives of choice as proceeding according to our representation of the best with *necessity*, even though, and as he explains in the *German Metaphysics*, he takes his conception of the necessity of choice to be compatible with freedom (see esp. DM §521). Wolff's compatibilist conception of freedom is similar to that presented by Leibniz in the *Theodicy* (see e.g., Leibniz 2007, 63): although we necessarily choose what we distinctly cognize to be best on balance with other options, our choice is only *hypothetically* necessary, not *absolutely* necessary, in the sense that alternative courses of action are still logically possible or do not involve a contradiction. Thus, although choice is determined in the sense that what we choose is "certain [*gemiss*]" given the order of the world in which we live (DM §517), Wolff argues that human beings are nonetheless free in the sense that they possess the capacity [*Vermögen*] "to choose from two equally possible things that which pleases it the most" (DM §519) and that freedom can be meaningfully understood as *self-determination* (DM §519).¹⁷

¹⁷ For a nice overview of Wolff's conception of freedom and its similarity to that of Leibniz, see Noller and Walsh (2022: xx–xxiii).

According to my discussion in this chapter, however, one might think that Wolff presupposes a more robust, libertarian conception of freedom. As we have seen above, Wolff argues that we are obligated to acquire the cognitions that are the most useful for our lifestyle, and that we do wrong if we prefer a cognition that does not benefit our lifestyle to the same degree (DE §256). This seems to suggest that we might be free (in the libertarian sense) at a higher level of abstraction to choose which cognitions we acquire, which in turn then determine how we act. This is a point picked up on by Joachim Lange in his critique of Wolff's conception of our duties to the understanding: Lange argues that Wolff seems to suggest that duties to the understanding are "free duties" in this more robust sense, and that this "directly contradicts" Wolff's metaphysical system (1724, 437), according to which everything in the mechanical nexus of nature happens with necessity (see Lange 1724, 436).

The point I wish to briefly make is that Wolff's conception of the duty to cognize good and evil can be reconciled with his compatibilist conception of freedom. Indeed, Wolff himself suggests this, albeit implicitly, when discussing which cognitions we ought to prefer: he claims, namely, that "the human being must prefer the cognition that is more helpful to them in those undertakings that they have to perform on account of their lifestyle, and they therefore do wrong when they prefer another cognition that does not promise the same benefit." (DE §256) This suggests that Wolff is not claiming that we are able to *choose*, in the libertarian sense, what cognitions are most useful to our lifestyle. On the contrary, he is saying that the human being will *necessarily* prefer those cognitions that are "more helpful" to or will "benefit" their lifestyle (see DE §256). Put differently, our lifestyle makes it such that certain cognitions will please us more than others, and it is these cognitions that we are 'free' to choose, i.e., that we will necessarily choose because they please us the most. Understanding Wolff's claims in this way allows his conception of the duty to cognize good and evil

to be reconciled with his compatibilist conception of freedom, thus there is no need to presuppose a libertarian conception of freedom.

The debate between Wolff and Lange over the former's alleged fatalism is much too big a topic to be treated here in any satisfying way.¹⁸ Additionally, while it would be worthwhile to discuss how Wolff's conception of our duties to the understanding can be reconciled with his conception of freedom in more detail, I leave a fuller investigation of this topic for another occasion. What I hope to have illustrated in this brief conclusion are two things: first, that the duty to cognize good and evil is intertwined with issues that strike at the heart of Wolff's philosophy; and second, that Wolff's conception of this duty is consistent with his compatibilist conception of freedom, despite what critics like Lange suggest.

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