

Seminar in Political Thought and Intellectual History
Cambridge University
November 9, 2009

**Christian Wolff's Critics and the 'Foundation of Morality'
in the Early German Enlightenment**

Simon Grote

Introduction

This paper is a significantly shortened and condensed version of a chapter from my dissertation, whose subject is aesthetic theory in early eighteenth-century Germany and Scotland. The first half of the eighteenth century is traditionally identified as the period in which “modern” aesthetic theory was born, with the modernity of the period’s various theories measured largely by the degree to which they anticipate Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*. The purpose of my dissertation is to demonstrate that the historically flimsy bond of “pre-Kantianism,” which has long been the standard means of yoking together the aesthetic theories of this period, can be replaced by a means that is historically better informed and more attentive to the aesthetic theorists’ self-conscious engagement in controversies of their own time. To this end, I present a comparative analysis of two major figures in the pre-Kantian aesthetic canon, namely, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten (1714-62), the German coiner of the term *aesthetica* in 1735 as the name of a new kind of philosophy, and Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746), a “father” of the Scottish Enlightenment and theorist of the “sense of beauty” and the “moral sense,” together with some of their lesser known contemporaries in the 1730s, 40s, and 50s. I argue that the aesthetic theories of Baumgarten and some of Hutcheson’s Scottish colleagues, primarily William Cleghorn (1719-54), were addressed in similar ways to a heavily debated question known in both Scotland and Germany as the question of the “foundation of morality”: to what extent, and how, the moral education of human beings can and should make use of natural human faculties. The dissertation is divided into two parts, Scottish and German, each of which has two principal tasks: (1) to lay out the debate over the foundation of morality, and then (2) to explain how the aesthetic theories fit into the debate. The chapter from which my paper is drawn performs the

first of these tasks for the German side of the dissertation.

The Scottish controversy over the foundation of morality is relatively well known, but the German variant is less well known; the debate itself as such and its importance in early eighteenth-century Germany have not yet been explained. Therefore, all considerations of Baumgarten's aesthetic theory aside, the purpose of my paper is to delineate some of the central issues and arguments and to show that they lie at the center of two better-known eighteenth-century German controversies, each of which features prominently in modern scholarly discussions of the period, but neither of which has been convincingly linked to the other: (1) the controversy between philosopher Christian Wolff (1679-1754) and the Pietist theologians who succeeded in 1723 in having him expelled from the city of Halle, where he had been a professor since 1706, and (2) the disagreements among Christian Thomasius and colleagues of his in Halle and elsewhere over the value of Samuel Pufendorf's approach to the study of natural and divine law, which is now often said to have led to a split within the so-called "Thomasian school" of natural jurisprudence. By showing that both these controversies turned in part on precisely the same set of issues, I hope, the paper can serve us as a useful point of entry into a still largely obscure period in German intellectual history, as well as a basis for determining the extent to which the Scottish and German debates over the foundation of morality resemble each other.

Please note that shortening the chapter to a reasonable length has required me to cut half of the original text, including many inset quotations, and to leave only English translations of the remaining quotations. For anyone interested in looking at the original text of inset quotations in the paper, as well as a much fuller version of the argument, I am happy to supply the original chapter upon request.

Bibliography

Almost all the major primary texts (listed below in order of the section of the paper to which they are relevant) are available in modern reprint editions, but unfortunately those that have not been reprinted are rare, and all but one text is available only in German or Latin:

Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von der Menschen Thun und Lassen, zu Beförderung ihrer Glückseeligkeit* [= *Deutsche Ethik*], 4th ed. (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1733; rept. Hildesheim: Olms, 1996).

Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* [= *Deutsche Metaphysik*], 11th ed. (Halle, 1751; rept. Hildesheim: Olms, 2003).

Johann Liborius Zimmermann, *Die Überschwengliche Erkenntnis Jesu Christi* (Halle, 1731).

This text is also available in an English translation, printed in 1772, in the Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) database (search by author's full name), and in the Eighteenth Century Microfilm Collection (reel #11346).

Johann Liborius Zimmermann, *De actionum humanarum moralitate* (Jena, 1728).

Johann Franz Buddeus, *Bedencken über die Wolffianische Philosophie*, ed. with commentary by Christian Wolff (Frankfurt/Main, 1724; rept. Hildesheim: Olms, 1980).

Johann Georg Walch, *Bescheidene Antwort auf Herrn Christian Wolffs Anmerkungen* (Jena, 1724; reprint Hildesheim: Olms, 1990).

[Johann Georg Walch, Philosophisches Lexikon \(Leipzig, 1726\), s.v. "Moralität."](#)

This brief text contains probably the clearest and most concise account of the dispute over the foundation of morality, and I recommend it before all the other primary texts in this list. It is available for download on the seminar web site.

Johann Franz Buddeus, *Institutiones Theologiae Moralis* (Leipzig, 1727; rept. Hildesheim: Olms, 2007).

Christian Thomasius, *Grundlehren des Natur- und Völkerrechts* (Halle, 1709; rept. Hildesheim: Olms, 2003).

Nicolaus Hieronymus Gundling, "Ob die natürliche Gesetze von dem Wesen der menschlichen Natur, oder von dem göttlichen Willen entstanden," *Gundlingiana* 33 (1724): 275-92.

Of the secondary literature available in English, probably the best concise, schematic overview of the intellectual background in early eighteenth-century Halle is

Ian Hunter, "Multiple Enlightenments: Rival *Aufklärer* at the University of Halle, 1690-1730," in *The Enlightenment World*, ed. Martin Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones, Christa Knellwolf and Iain McCalman (London: Routledge, 2004): 576-95.

Other English-language discussions of important parts of the intellectual background, including individual authors, can be found in

Knud Haakensson, "German natural law," in *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-century Political Thought*, ed. Mark Goldie and Robert Wokler (Cambridge: UP, 2006).

Martin Mulrow, "Gundling vs. Buddeus," in *History and the Disciplines*, ed. D. Kelley (Rochester: U Rochester P, 1997): 105-15.

Jerome Schneewind, *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge: UP, 1998).

Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (Oxford: UP, 2001).

Thomas Ahnert, *Religion and the Origins of the German Enlightenment: Faith and the Reform of*

Learning in the Thought of Christian Thomasius (Rochester: U Rochester P, 2006).

T. J. Hochstrasser, *Natural Law Theories in the Early Enlightenment* (Cambridge: UP, 2000).

In the relevant German secondary literature, two of the most worthwhile, concise recent discussions of Wolff and the Wolffian controversies are

Dieter Hüning, "Christian Wolffs Begriff der natürlichen Verbindlichkeit als Bindeglied zwischen Psychologie und Moralphilosophie," in *Die Psychologie Christian Wolffs*, ed. Oliver-Pierre Rudolph and Jean-François Goubet, *Hallesche Beiträge zur Europäischen Aufklärung* 22 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2004): 143-67.

Albrecht Beutel, "Causa Wolffiana: Die Vertreibung Christian Wolffs aus Preußen 1723 als Kulminationspunkt des theologisch-politischen Konflikts zwischen Halleschem Pietismus und Aufklärungsphilosophie," in *Reflektierte Religion*, by A. Beutel (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007): 125-69.

On Christian Thomasius and his "school," the state of the art is most concisely represented by

Hinrich Rüping, "Christian Thomasius und seine Schule im Geistesleben des 18. Jahrhunderts," in *Recht und Rechtswissenschaft im mitteldeutschen Raum*, ed. Heiner Lück (Köln: Böhlau, 1998).

To this can be added various essays (including above all those by Rüping, Helmut Holzhey, Simone Zurbuchen, Horst Dreitzel, and Walter Sparn) in

Grundriß der Geschichte der Philosophie: die Philosophie des 17. Jahrhunderts, v. 4, Das heilige Römische Reich, ed. H. Holzhey and W. Schmidt-Biggemann (Basel: Schwabe, 2001).

Other important works worth consulting include

Max Wundt, *Die deutsche Schulphilosophie im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1945; rept. Hildesheim: Olms, 1992).

Emanuel Hirsch, *Geschichte der neuern evangelischen Theologie: im Zusammenhang mit den allgemeinen Bewegungen des europäischen Denkens*, v. 1-5 (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann, 1949-54).

Carl Hinrichs, *Preussentum und Pietismus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971).

Werner Schneiders, *Naturrecht und Liebesethik* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1971).

Heinz D. Kittsteiner, *Die Entstehung des modernen Gewissens* (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1995).

Biography

Simon Grote is a Ph.D. Candidate in early modern European history at the University of California, Berkeley, where he plans to submit in May 2010 a dissertation entitled, *Moral Philosophy and the Origins of Aesthetic Theory in Scotland and Germany*. He is also currently a Thyssen Fellow at the Interdisciplinary Center for the Study of the European Enlightenment, at the Martin Luther University in Halle/Saale. He received an M.Phil. in political thought and intellectual history from Cambridge University in 2005, an M.A. in Roman history from the University of California, Berkeley in 2004, and an A.B. in history from Harvard University in 2001. He has published two articles on subjects related to his dissertation:

“Pietistische *Aisthesis* und moralische Erziehung bei Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten.” *Aufklärung* 20 (2008): 175-198.

“Hutcheson’s Divergence from Shaftesbury.” *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 4.2 (Fall 2006): 159-172.