

## *German Paths to Experience*

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**Review of: Karin de Boer and Tinca Prunea-Bretonnet (eds.), *The Experiential Turn in Eighteenth-Century German Philosophy*, New York and London, Routledge, 2021, xii+309 pp. ISBN: 978-1-138-60683-8.**

As its title clearly announces, the overall aim of this collection of studies is to present, document, and defend the idea that, in the eighteenth century, German philosophy underwent an experiential turn. The lexical choice of ‘experiential’ instead of perhaps more usual terms like ‘empirical’ or ‘experimental’ is not difficult to explain. Describing a philosophical turn as ‘empirical’ would have easily evoked the standard rationalism/empiricism distinction, which the Editors explicitly reject as “worn out” (1), insofar as several of its presuppositions and implications have been seriously undermined by recent scholarship. As for ‘experimental’, though increasingly adopted in early modern studies precisely to replace the relatively anachronistic category of ‘empiricism’, using this adjective would have put the greatest emphasis on just one side of the issue, namely the success of experimentation within the natural sciences and the attempts to apply similar practices to areas of strictly philosophical investigation as well. ‘Experiential’, by contrast, aims to express the philosophical significance acquired by experience in the widest sense of the word. Although this may seem commonplace if referred to other time periods or geocultural areas like the British seventeenth century or the French Enlightenment, it is by no means trivial if referred to eighteenth-century German philosophy, which a long

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historiographical tradition depicted as an age dominated by dogmatic, intellectualist thinkers who loved speculation and despised brute facts.

Challenging another widespread prejudice, the book makes a case for the original and autonomous character of this German experiential trend – first, by dismantling the idea that any German philosophical interest in experience was imported from abroad. Although some foreign champions of experience-based philosophy like Locke had a powerful and longstanding impact on the German Enlightenment, German authors could also draw on native sources. Lutheranism and especially the Pietist movement certainly contributed to shaping a positive image of experience, which was to attract those who, like the Thomasians, sought an alternative to the Wolffian paradigm (4). In “The Thomasian Context: Crusius on Experience”, Stefan Heßbrüggen-Walter reconstructs the doctrinal evolution within the so-called Thomasius school, which made the transition from a sensation-based account of experience (shared by Andreas Rüdiger, Johann Jacob Syrbius, and Johann Franz Budde) to Adolph Friedrich Hoffmann and Christian August Crusius’s propositional view. The main opponent of this trend, Wolff, was himself strongly influenced by German sources in his assessment of the epistemic function of experience. In “Before and Beyond Leibniz: Tschirnhaus and Wolff on Experience and Method”, Corey W. Dyck argues that Tschirnhaus’s “experimental Cartesianism” (18) had a decisive impact on the young Wolff, in that it prompted his adoption of the geometrical method and his consequent ascription of a pivotal role to empirical evidence in the procedures of both discovery and justification. According to Dyck, the Tschirnhausian imprint of Wolff’s early philosophical project not only lasted throughout Wolff’s intellectual trajectory, even after his contact with Leibniz’s thought, but oriented his very reception of Leibnizian epistemology. (A question that might cross one’s mind, however, is why not turning the tables and claiming that the Tschirnhausian elements that Wolff still retained in his post-Leibnizian works were precisely those that proved compatible with Leibniz’s doctrines, since the incompatible ones were immediately discarded.)

A further typical feature that this book ascribes to the German experiential turn is (somewhat paradoxically) the theoretical effort to analyze the very concept of experience. German philosophers did not content themselves with the commonsensical, pre-theoretical notion of experience (3) but sought to characterize its nature and determine its functional role in cognitive processes. As Heßbrüggen-Walter notes (82), this approach spread only after the publication of Wolff’s *German Logic* (1713), whose sophisticated treatment of experience made even his opponents feel bound to specify their own understanding of this concept.

The third (and perhaps most important) distinctive trait of the German rediscovery of experience is its connection with metaphysical issues. In this respect, too, Wolff laid much of the groundwork for most subsequent debates, maintaining for instance that “even in abstract disciplines like *first philosophy* [i.e., ontology], the fundamental concepts must be

derived from experience, which founds historical knowledge” (Wolff 1728, §12). In what follows, I will mainly focus on issues and chapters directly related to Wolffianism.

Christian Leduc’s chapter (“The Role of Experience in Wolff’s General Cosmology”) focuses on general cosmology, the new discipline introduced by Wolff as the part of metaphysics which investigates the most general properties of the physical world. Wolff provided two distinct expositions of this metaphysical doctrine of the world: the first appeared in the fourth chapter of the *German Metaphysics* (1720); the second and larger one appeared some eleven years later, in the Latin *Cosmologia generalis* (1731). We should bear in mind that, in Wolff’s system, the position of each discipline is determined by its foundational role with respect to other disciplines. On the one hand, general cosmology is based on ontology (the most general part of metaphysics) and specifically on the ontological doctrine of composite beings. On the other hand, general cosmology provides the foundations of physics. Thus, one of the functions of general cosmology is to bridge the gap between ontology and physics, that is, between the very abstract concept of composite being and the concepts of the concrete bodies that populate our physical world. Leduc’s question is whether this metaphysical approach to the physical world owes something to our empirical acquaintance with the actual world. As highlighted by recent scholarship, Wolff was not a purely speculative natural scientist; on the contrary, he was actively engaged in experimental physics. But did this experimental approach to the physical world somehow influence his general cosmology too? According to Leduc, the answer also depends on whether we consider the cosmological chapter of the *German Metaphysics* or the Latin *Cosmologia generalis*: for “the method Wolff employs in the *German Metaphysics* hinges much more on experience than the one he employs in the *Cosmologia*” (38). In the eleven years that separate these two works, Wolff’s position evolved: experience lost at least part of the fundamental role it played in the *German Metaphysics*.

Although I am largely sympathetic to this approach, which has the merit of recognizing that there are significant differences between Wolff’s German and Latin systems, I think that some aspects of Leduc’s reconstruction are worth discussing. To make his point, Leduc develops two main arguments. First, he observes that Wolff’s recourse to experience in the earlier work is “more substantial”, in that “many proofs are established on the basis of observation and experimentation, and in numerous sections Wolff adduces everyday experience or scientific experiments to vindicate his views” (42). For instance, the *German Metaphysics* invokes empirical evidence to establish the law of inertia. I do not find this example compelling for two reasons. On the one hand, experience appears to provide not so much a foundation of the law of inertia as confirmation of it. On the other hand, the same procedure can be found in the Latin *Cosmologia* as well. After demonstrating the proposition that “Every body resists motion”, Wolff adds empirical confirmation of this: “In the actual world, the same is confirmed *a posteriori*” (Wolff 1731, §129). The same Latin formula (“*In mundo adspectabili idem confirmatur a posteriori*”) occurs several

times in this work, which shows 1) that experience also plays a role in the Latin *Cosmology*, and 2) that experience is always about the actual world alone (the *mundus adspectabilis*).

This latter point leads us to Leduc's second argument: whereas the doctrines of the Latin *Cosmology* are meant to apply to every possible world, the cosmological chapter of the *German Metaphysics* "is concerned with the physical world such as it is known through actual perceptions. Wolff did not necessarily believe that the treated cosmological principles were applicable to all possible worlds" (42–43). One might object, however, that it is precisely in the cosmological chapter of the *German Metaphysics* (see §569) that Wolff formulates, for the first time, his doctrine of possible worlds. Indeed, it is this doctrine that makes the cosmological chapter essential for the final, theological chapter, since by establishing that other worlds are possible Wolff can establish that the existence of this world is contingent, which provides a premise for demonstrating the existence of God. Thus, I am inclined to think that the doctrine of possible worlds was an essential part of Wolff's project of general cosmology from its inception.

Of course, Leduc acknowledges that experience is not absent from the Latin *Cosmology*. He quotes an interesting passage from §5, in which Wolff expresses his view on the relation between experimental cosmology and scientific cosmology. However, my reading of this passage is slightly different from his. In my reading, Wolff does not simply say that experimental cosmology "improves" our knowledge (Leduc, 49); rather, he says that, "to some extent, experimental cosmology can be cultivated before scientific cosmology and can be combined with it" (Wolff 1731, §5). What Wolff appears to be claiming is that, to some extent at least, it is possible to develop both the experimental side of this discipline and its rational side in parallel, so to speak, without having to establish the theory before conducting experiments and collecting observations, or vice versa. I think that Wolff never changed his mind on this possibility of the parallel development of *a priori* theory and *a posteriori* experience, which in this way can support each other.

Another example of the German tendency to draw on experiential resources even outside the strictly scientific or technological domain is offered by Alessandro Nannini's chapter on "*Aesthetica Experimentalis*: Baumgarten and the Aesthetic Dimension of Experience". Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten is mostly known as the founder of aesthetics and the author of a *Metaphysics* which Kant adopted as a textbook in his lectures. The standard picture of Baumgarten pays little attention to his connection with the experimental tradition issuing from the natural sciences, thereby overlooking the fact that Baumgarten taught not only aesthetics but also physics (59). By contrast, Nannini convincingly argues that Baumgarten's aesthetics – and especially what Baumgarten called the "aesthetic art of experience" or "aesthetic empirics" (58) – should be read in the context of early modern experimentalism. According to Nannini, Baumgarten's linking of aesthetics and experimentalism is paramount to his philosophical project and could be described as a two-way or mutual foundation. On the one hand, aesthetics provides a philosophical foundation

for experimentalism. On the other hand, aesthetics itself tends to develop into an experimental discipline.

A still open issue, in my opinion, concerns the sources of Baumgarten's project. Nannini's chapter is successful in widening the usual references so as to include several neglected sources belonging to the experimentalist tradition, but refrains from reconstructing the precise derivation of doctrines and concepts. A case in point is Baumgarten's treatment of sense deception in his *Metaphysica*, which Nannini describes as part of the aesthetic project of grounding the reliability of sensory experience. Baumgarten maintains that sensations in themselves cannot be false; if they deceive us, it is only because we infer wrong judgments from true sensations. Nannini is certainly right in stressing the importance of the idea that sense perceptions are basically innocent, for they are always veridical. But what is the source of this idea? Is it the experimental tradition or rather Leibniz, as Nannini seems to suggest by using the example of the square tower that appears round when seen from some distance? How does the Leibnizian inspiration of Baumgarten's epistemology relate to the empirical or experimental strand of his aesthetics?

As Nannini observes, experience is relevant to Baumgarten's metaphysics and aesthetics also in the form of *inner* experience. While the external senses provide information about the physical world, the mind also has cognitive access to itself by means of the so-called inner sense. In the German eighteenth-century context, this faculty was deemed crucial for justifying the epistemic claims of metaphysical psychology, in that the mind's ability to directly experience its own states and perhaps even become acquainted with its own nature provided an empirical, introspective basis for psychological investigations. However widespread, this position was not universally accepted. In "Christoph Meiners's Empiricist 'Revision' of Philosophy and Michael Hißmann's Anti-Speculative Materialism", Falk Wunderlich argues for the existence of a materialist strand within German empiricism, whose upholders were wary of internal experience and trusted only scientifically codified forms of external experience. Hißmann, in particular, maintained "that inner experience, obtained through introspection, is not informative about the nature of the human mind and that philosophy should rather rely on the results of medicine and physiology" (119). By contrast – as Udo Thiel shows in "Experience and Inner Sense: Feder–Lossius–Kant" – other Enlightenment thinkers like Johann Georg Heinrich Feder, Johann Christian Lossius, and the pre-critical Kant not only considered inner sense to be a source of psychological knowledge but "were tempted to ascribe to inner sense an even more fundamental role, namely, that of grounding experience and cognition in general" (100). In his critical philosophy, Kant downgraded inner sense to a merely empirical-psychological function. At the same time, however, he retained "the idea of a fundamental or radical faculty that grounds thought" by transferring this function to pure apperception. Concerning the sources of these German developments, Thiel points to Locke's idea of reflection as an inner source of knowledge, distinct from outer sensation. In my view, this picture could be usefully complemented by also taking into consideration the Wolffian tradition of

ascribing to inner sense a foundational role with respect to logic and metaphysics, which I take to be the direct target of Kant's late dismissal of rational psychology as "merely an anthropology of the inner sense" (Kant 2000, 325; see Favaretti Camposampiero 2018).

A somewhat similar consideration might also apply to Paola Basso's chapter, "Lambert on Experience and Deduction". Investigating Lambert's effort to complement the formal procedures of a Wolff-inspired deductive method with a Lockean focus on simple concepts drawn from experience, Basso highlights the originality of Lambert's own epistemology as merging "the Euclidean and Newtonian methods" (189) and combining *a priori* and *a posteriori* elements in a "mixed procedure" (192). In spite of Lambert's criticism of the Wolffian reliance on definitions, the "hybrid" *a priori* Basso describes as the hallmark of Lambert's method (193) could actually be compared to Wolff's own "weak" *a priori* (see Vanzo 2015). As Basso herself acknowledges (193), Lambert's endorsement of the method of astronomy finds a clear precedent in Wolff's suggestion that both philosophers and physicians should imitate astronomers (see Favaretti Camposampiero 2016). Furthermore, Lambert's notion of *a priori* experience – however odd it might appear at first sight – might be relevant to reconstructing his overall approach to inner experience and sensation (see Favaretti Camposampiero 2018).

Another dimension of inner experience that attracted the interest of Enlightenment thinkers was the phenomenon of dreaming. In "The Role of Reason, Experience, and Physiology in Formey's *Essay on Dreams*", Annelie Grosse explores this topic with reference to Jean-Henri-Samuel Formey, a member of the Berlin Academy better known for his exposition of Wolffian philosophy. Although dreams might seem to have little to do with experience and reason, this chapter shows that the investigation of dreams and the effort to provide a scientific explanation for this phenomenon were a sort of testbed for the newborn discipline of empirical psychology. Grosse argues that the *Essay on Dreams* stands out from other works by Formey in that it emphasizes the reliability rather than the flaws of sensory experience. In her interpretation, this empiricist attitude was part of a rhetorical strategy designed to make Wolffian ideas more palatable to the members of the Berlin Academy. On the one hand, she highlights the Wolffian inspiration of the *Essay on Dreams*, whose "methodological procedure [...] corresponds to Wolff's account of how to establish knowledge in general, and empirical knowledge in particular" (168). On the other hand, she stresses the originality of Formey with respect to his Wolffian sources. Formey sought "to integrate metaphysics and natural philosophy" (p. 160), thus overcoming the Wolffian "separation of physiological and metaphysical investigations of the human soul" (p. 158): for, according to Grosse, Wolff "investigated the nervous system in his natural philosophy and the mental faculties in his metaphysics" (p. 158). So, whereas Wolff provides only metaphysical explanations, Formey also provides physiological explanations, and thus approaches the phenomenon of dreaming "from a completely different angle" (p. 171).

A limit of this assessment is that it considers only Wolff's account of dreams in the *German Metaphysics*, without paying attention to the Latin works and especially the *Psychologia rationalis*, which develops a theory of dreams based on physiological principles. According to Wolff, the state of the dreaming soul corresponds to a certain state of the brain, for every mental process has a corresponding physical process in the brain. Before Formey, Wolff's *Psychologia rationalis* had already integrated the physiology of the nervous system into the metaphysics of the soul. Should we then infer that, in this perspective, Wolff's Latin works are more empirically founded than his German works, contrary to what was the case with general cosmology in Leduc's chapter? I would resist this conclusion. For why should we assume that physiological explanations are more empirical (or evidence-based) than metaphysical reasoning? The physiological model of the brain and nervous system that we find in both Wolff and Formey is largely hypothetical: it derives more from Cartesian speculative physiology than from an empirical observation of the inner workings of the brain. Thus, I am reluctant to equate 'physiological' with 'empirical'. From the Wolffian point of view, the theory of dreams that Formey develops in his *Essay* belongs to rational psychology rather than to empirical psychology.

The anti-Wolffian faction of the Berlin Academy is mainly represented in this volume by Pierre-Louis Moreau de Maupertuis and Jean-Bernard Merian. In "Contingency and Experience in Maupertuis's *Essay on Cosmology*", Anne-Lise Rey argues that Maupertuis's hostility towards rationalism and his endorsement of experimentalism did not prevent him from developing "a metaphysics centered on teleology" (142), which escapes our rigid dichotomies between Newtonianism and Leibnizianism. Rey's reconstruction focuses, on the one hand, on Maupertuis's physico-theological account of the laws of nature and, on the other hand, on his rejection of the absolute certainty of mathematics in favor of moral certainty and probable knowledge. Like Maupertuis, Merian sought "a 'third' or 'middle path' that combine[d] empiricist and speculative features" by avoiding both dogmatism and radical (i.e. Humean) skepticism (Tinca Prunea-Bretonnet, "On the Mitigated Phenomenalism of J.-B. Merian", 203). Prunea-Bretonnet describes the view emerging from his work on apperception as "a phenomenalist position founded on empiricist premises" (205), while she characterizes his overall metaphilosophical approach as a form of eclecticism.

The book's final section is devoted to Tetens and Kant. In "Tetens on the Nature of Experience Between Empiricism and Rationalism", Clinton Tolley and R. Brian Tracz challenge the mainstream narrative that depicts Tetens as a staunch empiricist, by highlighting some Leibnizian commitments in his account of the origin of concepts, as well as his progressing beyond Locke and Hume's notion of experience. Conversely, in "The Role of Experience in Kant's *Prize Essay*", Courtney D. Fugate addresses the vexed issue of the early Kant's alleged failure to depart from rationalism by arguing that the experience-based method he prescribed for metaphysics in his *Inquiry Concerning the*

*Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* in fact “embod[ies] the anti-rationalist spirit of Bacon and Newton” (233). Focusing on the *Inquiry* and the *Dreams*, Karin de Boer’s chapter (“Kant’s Inquiries into a New Touchstone for Metaphysical Truths”) investigates Kant’s pre-critical strategies for using experience to delimit the pretensions of metaphysics without completely dismissing the purely intellectual dimension of knowledge. Reassessing the role which Wolff’s *German Metaphysics* ascribes to inner experience in establishing metaphysical concepts and truths, de Boer argues that “Kant’s position during the 1760s was closer to Wolff’s in this regard than appears at first sight” (278).

This volume contains a wealth of original, insightful analyses and remarks which will certainly stimulate further discussions in a field of scholarship that is currently attracting more and more attention. Anyone interested in the history of early modern German philosophy will benefit from reading it. A general question that remains open is: if all these German philosophers agree in reevaluating (outer as well as inner) experience as a source of knowledge, why do they appear to be divided into two main groups – which is what has made the standard ‘rationalists vs. empiricists’ narrative so persuasive? If they all belong to one and the same philosophical turn, if they all “attempted to reconcile rationalist and empiricist accounts of cognition” (6), how are we to explain their taking sides with one or the other camp? By rejecting the standard rationalism/empiricism distinction as worn out, do not we risk losing sight of the strenuous oppositions that split the German eighteenth-century philosophical scene with regard not only to specific topics but also to general metaphilosophical issues? For instance, both the Pietists and Wolff firmly relied on experience, yet they could find no common ground. One reason might be that they invoked experience for different purposes, namely either to set boundaries on reason, as with the Pietists, or to enhance its use, as with Wolff (see Goldenbaum 2016). The experiential turn appears to have involved different, divergent, or even mutually incompatible paths.

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