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Introduction

THE COMPROMISE

ON 12 NOVEMBER 1723 Professor Christian Wolff left the Prussian university town of Halle accompanied by a group of students. On crossing the River Saale and leaving Prussian territory, he paused to refund the students their fees for the lectures he would not be able to give. Hours earlier he had received a cabinet order issued by King Friedrich Wilhelm I. The order removed Wolff from his university post and decreed that ‘within forty-eight hours of receipt of this order he is to leave the town of Halle and all other royal lands on pain of the noose.’¹ The news of Wolff’s banishment came as a shock. Professor Joachim Lange of the theology faculty at Halle was unable to sleep or eat for three days, or so he later claimed.² Lange’s distress, assuming it was genuine, was presumably aggravated by guilt. For several years Lange and his colleagues in Halle’s staunchly Pietist theology faculty had been trying to undermine Wolff. The cause was a dispute about the overlapping claims of theology and philosophy. Its roots lay in the claim of Spinoza and his allies that all truths in theology must conform to philosophy.³ Theology must either submit itself to philosophical judgement or retreat to a space that did not impinge on the real world. The feud between Wolff and Lange may also have been personal. There were suggestions that Lange was jealous, for there were more empty benches in his lectures than in Wolff’s.⁴ In a university system that required students to pay lecture fees directly to their professors, the competition to recruit students could be deeply divisive. The antagonism had broken into open warfare on 12 July 1721, on the occasion of Wolff ending his term as university pro-rector and handing over to none other than Lange. Wolff’s oration at the end of his term was designed to aggravate the Pietists. He praised Confucius as a forerunner of his own philosophy and argued that Chinese moral philosophy proved

that it was possible to be good without being Christian. The speech was both a provocation to Lange and an unwise admission by Wolff that his own philosophy had no need of Christianity. It was obvious that Lange would use his position as pro-rector to undermine Wolff. Getting their revenge in first, Wolff's students took to the streets. There were shouts of 'Long live the old pro-rector, death to the new one Lange!' The students sang obscene songs outside Lange's home.

The whole episode was tragic, comical, depressing, and bizarre. The official reason for Wolff's banishment was alleged atheism.⁵ The unofficial reason was stranger. Wolff had not helped his cause by involving the government in his dispute with the theologians. In March 1723 one of Lange's supporters, Daniel Strähler, published the first instalment of a multipart critique of Wolff's philosophy. Without even reading Strähler's argument, Wolff complained to the government that Strähler was bringing the university into disrepute by criticising him personally. Strähler was forbidden to continue his critique. With his proxy out of action, Lange published his own critique of Wolff, which began a public duel of essays lasting from July to November. There were three further attacks by Lange and three parries by Wolff.⁶ Lange also demanded that a royal commission be established to investigate Wolff's dangerous teaching. Wolff had sympathizers at the Prussian court, and at first it seemed that no action would be taken against him. However, Wolff's bothersome appeals to the authorities about Strähler had evidently caused annoyance in more traditionalist factions at court. A military crony and member of the King's 'tobacco cabinet' explained to the King that Wolff believed in Leibniz's doctrine of preestablished harmony. (In fact Wolff did not assert that preestablished harmony was true; he merely treated it as the most plausible of all available conjectures.) According to this doctrine souls and bodies do not interact causally, they only appear to do so. In reality they have been set in harmony by God, in the same way as two clocks can be set to tell the same time. One implication of Leibniz's doctrine is that all human actions are preordained by God and therefore divinely sanctioned. Hence, so the King's smoking crony averred, the King's soldiers could desert and argue that God had willed them to do so. For the Soldier King this was too much, and he immediately banished Wolff on pain of execution by hanging.

German intellectual life in the early to mid-eighteenth century involved significant compromises and dangers. Censorship was an ever-present threat, even if an incoherent one. Censorship was hard to enforce because of the patchwork of legal jurisdictions that made up the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation. Wolff fled from Prussian Brandenburg into nearby Hessen-Kassel, where he safely took up a chair at the University of Marburg.



FIG. 1. Professor Christian Wolff, during his time at the University of Marburg, etching by Johann Georg Wille

Censorship was also often counterproductive. In the fifteen years following his banishment, around two hundred essays and pamphlets were published on Wolff's philosophy.⁷ He became German philosophy's leading figure, the 'dominant progressive philosopher' in the Empire,⁸ and a hero of the Enlightenment. In Paris, the *Encyclopédie* devoted an article to him. Nonetheless censorship was existentially threatening because the penalties could be so severe and so unpredictable. Wolff was banished and threatened with hanging by personal order of the King and for reasons that he could not have foreseen and were arguably beyond his control—an obscure metaphysical theory he did not even subscribe to. He was accustomed to feuding with the theologians in Halle. They had been trying to silence him for some time. Lange's colleague August Hermann Francke had been warning his students against attending

Wolff's lectures since 1712.⁹ Lange starting planting informants in Wolff's lectures in 1717. For years the structures of university governance protected Wolff against these intrigues. What they could not protect him against was the King's personal intervention.

Eighteenth-century Germans understood the flaws of monarchical government. They knew it was prone to the arbitrary abuse of power Wolff had experienced. However, monarchy was the system almost all of them lived under, and they believed in the security and stability it afforded. There was relatively little systematic criticism of monarchy as a form of government.¹⁰ The answer to abuses of power was not to exchange monarchy for a republic. Instead, Germans tended to place their hope in sensible government. It was an attitude that had become widespread in the aftermath of the Thirty Years' War. After the peace of 1648, political discourse focused on reviving the German lands from three decades of bloodshed, destruction, famine, and disease. Governments were urged to provide sound administration, good public order, and physical and moral welfare—what was known as 'Polizei'.¹¹ The ideal state was a highly regulated commonwealth that could increase the welfare of its subjects.¹² There was a preference for policies that produced results, less so for deliberation on the constitutional structures that underpinned them or might guarantee the rights of their subjects. Wolff gave rational form to this view in his *German Politics*, published during his pro-rectorship at Halle in 1721. His argument follows the Aristotelian theory that there are three basic forms of government, distinguished by the number of persons making up the ruling authority in each: monarchy (rule by a single person), aristocracy (rule by a group), and 'polity' (rule by the whole community). Each form is capable of providing blameless and effective government. Wolff's solution to arbitrariness and abuse of power is not to analyse the merits and flaws of the forms of government and reach a view on which is best. He treats them as equally valid. He does show glimpses of republicanism: he writes approvingly of the freedoms provided by a 'polity', which one can also term a 'free republic', he says.¹³ However, he soon restores parity between the three forms of government by observing that the 'ignorance and obstinacy' that can arise in a 'polity' causes as much damage as the abuses of power under aristocracy and monarchy.¹⁴ On the question of democracy his view is clear, and was shared by almost all of his contemporaries: popular suffrage cannot produce good government.¹⁵ 'Democracy' is in fact his name for the corrupted form that a 'polity' will descend into if the common people impose their selfish interests on the state. In general, however, constitutionality and representation have only very limited

impact on the quality of government. Wolff's language is dominated instead by moral psychology. What distinguishes effective from corrupt government is whether rulers promote the interests of the state or their own selfish interests, and whether they do so is decided chiefly by their moral character.

Wolff's compromise with political reality involved shifting the focus of criticism away from political systems and towards the safer ground of personal morality. In doing so, he insisted on a political role for the scholar-cum-official class to which he belonged. He repeatedly affirmed the need for monarchs to take advice from philosophers. Ideally the modern monarch should be a philosopher himself, but since this was rarely the case, the monarch should employ a caste of educated officials to draw up the state's laws,¹⁶ just as Chinese governments had done.¹⁷ The idea of philosophers advising on legislation was wishful thinking, of course. The vast majority of German territories were ruled by autocrats and enjoyed no representative democracy. There were many consultative bodies, such as the noble diets or city councils, but these played only a minor role in legislation and administration. Their main role was to allow the estates (nobility, town burghers) to bring complaints to the notice of their prince. Moreover, the estates were medieval institutions that did not reflect the interests of the modern university-educated class of officials, let alone the professoriate. If the professoriate had any influence, it was felt indirectly through the universities' role in educating government officials. The German lands were unusual in Europe for having a very large number of universities and for educating government administrators to a high level. The science of government (*Kameralwissenschaft*) was taught extensively, alongside economics, law, and other relevant disciplines. A lively public sphere had emerged, including a growing circulation of newspapers and journals. The largest and most diverse publishing industry in Europe gave Wolff and his class many opportunities to present their ideas on government. This was one of the contradictions of eighteenth-century German society. The professoriate enjoyed high status and profile, but this was not matched by their political influence. When philosophers published unsolicited advice to monarchs—for instance in the venerable literary tradition of the 'mirror of princes', which reached back to the Middle Ages and beyond—the advice was usually more moral or educational than directly political. That accorded with Wolff's political theory, which held that the welfare of the state depended on the monarch's moral qualities. It has long been argued that the German intelligentsia's self-image and its claims to a leading role in state and society were out of step with political reality, and it is hard to disagree.

1740 brought hopeful signs for the progressive wing of the Enlightenment. Friedrich Wilhelm I was succeeded by Friedrich II (Frederick the Great). The new Prussian king was reputed to be cultured and enlightened. Wolff had refused the old Soldier King's invitations to return to Halle, but he accepted Frederick's invitation, at the second time of asking. His return in December 1740 was a triumph. The same year he published the first volume of his *Law of Nature Treated in the Scientific Manner*, which presented a more liberal version of Rationalism than the *German Politics*.¹⁸ Whereas Aquinas, the first theorist of natural law, had originally determined the source of law to be God's will, Wolff sought to distance law from theology. Natural law was a product of human reason. It was the same move as he had made in his Chinese oration of 1721. One benefit of distancing philosophy from theology in this way would be to reduce sectarianism. If theology was cut off from philosophy, then sectarian divisions would lose their philosophical footing and instead become mere matters of social practice or private conviction. Natural law would thus give philosophical sanction to the settlement of 1648 and the religious peace it had brought to places like Wolff's hometown of Breslau (Wrocław). (Wolff's philosophy proved popular across Germany's confessional divide and was taught at Catholic universities as much as Protestant ones.) At the same time, Wolff faced the familiar danger of being seen to come too close to Spinozan naturalism.¹⁹ For Spinoza there was only one natural law, and that was the 'impersonal, morally neutral' law of nature itself.²⁰ Wolff kept to a middle way. His natural law occupies the realm of reason, an autonomous place insulated from both the accusation of Spinozan atheism and interference by the theologians.²¹ Reason has authority over all human beings by virtue of its very nature, and it can be known by all humans, again by virtue of its nature. The natural character of human rights flows from reason's universality. In contrast to his great predecessors in natural law, Samuel von Pufendorf and Christian Thomasius,²² Wolff argues that there are human rights that we are born with (*iura connata*). These are so absolute and fundamental that human action or reflection cannot alter them. They include both 'negative' freedoms, such as freedom from persecution, albeit on a limited scale,²³ and 'positive' rights to such goods as sustenance, habitation, and work.²⁴ To be sure, existence in the state requires that we sacrifice some rights, and the sacrifices might need to be extensive. Nonetheless, the *iura connata* are so fundamental that they continue to exist even if surrendered: the modern state is a compromise between the absolute validity of our rights on the one hand and limitations to our rights on the other.²⁵ In international law, Wolff argues for parity of esteem for

states.²⁶ Relations between states are not a function of power; we do not respect a state because it forms part of an international balance of power. On the contrary, we owe all states a duty of esteem because they all promote the perfection of their subjects.²⁷ In this sense, Wolff's conception of natural law draws on Aristotelian and Leibnizian notions of perfectibility. The law is the unfolding of reason towards a perfection that imitates the perfection of God.

Any hopes that princes might abide by natural law or that Frederick II might prove a more enlightened ruler than his father were immediately challenged. On 16 December 1740, only ten days after Wolff's triumphant return to Halle, Frederick launched an attack on Austrian Silesia. His military successes were greeted enthusiastically in the mainly Protestant northern and central heartlands of the Enlightenment. The wave of support for Frederick made the Wolffians' intellectual balancing act even more difficult. Frederick's aggression and the accompanying tightening of political restrictions in Prussia made Wolff's theory of natural law seem overly optimistic. It might still be argued that Frederick was a positive embodiment of the power of the rational state and was maintaining the Enlightenment principle of religious freedom. Germany's leading playwright and critic, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, was not convinced. In an angry outburst to his friend Friedrich Nicolai, he claimed that Frederick's version of the Enlightenment amounted to little more than scorn for all religion.²⁸

Criticism of Wolffianism grew through the 1750s and '60s. As with Wolffianism itself, it is hard to class its critics as either liberal or conservative. Justus Möser, a legal official in the prince-bishopric of Osnabrück, made his reputation by defending the rights of the traditional estates against the arbitrariness of the territory's secular authority. Möser's essays present a wider critique of modern rationalizing tendencies in politics and culture. He has been claimed as a protoconservative by Klaus Epstein and Karl Mannheim,²⁹ and as an inheritor of traditional estates-based conservatism by Panajotis Kondylis.³⁰ The conservative tendency in Möser's thought is grounded in a sceptical attitude to rationality. All attempts to reason about ultimate truths lead to more doubt, and so reason is a poor guide to organizing society. We would be better advised to accept things as they are and use tradition and history as our guides. However, as Beiser has shown, Möser was concerned to revise natural law, not abandon it. Möser rejects the basis of Wolffian moral psychology. Whereas Wolff argues that our sense of good and evil is a form of knowledge, Möser proposes

the reverse: our knowledge derives from affects and inclinations.³¹ For Möser, Wolffian natural law is not really natural; it is in fact rational. Möser replaces reason with nature as source of natural law.³² In political terms, the universal laws of Wolffianism divert the state from the true plan of nature in all its variety and pave the way for despotic uniformity.³³

Critics could argue that ‘nature’ in Wolff’s philosophy was not nature, and ‘human nature’ was not human nature.³⁴ For Wolff, the natural world was organized rationally. Each organism or other natural entity had its own function within nature as a whole, and the purpose of the whole was to satisfy the claims of reason. The beauty of nature could only be understood on the assumption that it was created by a beneficent divine architect. To be sure, much of Wolff’s theory of nature was more empirical and commonsense than its critics gave it credit for, but its critics did have an easy time ridiculing the notion that, say, rats existed in order to provide food for cats. Wolffian nature was a rationalist construction. Demands for a more authentic conception of nature that offered greater existential intensity became more urgent in the late 1750s, following Rousseau’s *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1750) and *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality among Men* (1754). German intellectuals, including Möser, tended to view Rousseau’s denunciations of modernity as extreme. However, Möser agreed with Rousseau’s rejection of rationalist culture, especially the culture of the Rococo.³⁵ Rousseau was an ally against attempts by Frederick II and Johann Christoph Gottsched to rationalize German literature—or to Frenchify it, which amounted to the same thing. Gottsched, the most prominent Wolffian after Wolff, was also attacked for his attempts to standardize the German language on the model of the Saxon dialect. A prolonged dispute broke out in 1740 between Gottsched and the two Swiss philologists Johann Jakob Bodmer und Johann Jakob Breitinger. It is noteworthy that for the critics of Rationalism—Möser, Bodmer, Breitinger, Johann Georg Hamann, and his protégé Johann Gottfried Herder—language and literature were a key focus. Of all of them, Herder was the closest to Rousseau. He worked out a new version of Rousseau’s conjectural history of civilization that centred innate human creativity at the source of human history.³⁶ More generally, Herder presented a progressive anti-Rationalist alternative to Wolff. His first important intervention was his 1765 essay ‘Problem: How philosophy can become general and useful for the benefit of the people.’ Even though Wolff had done much to make the style of philosophical exposition more accessible and had written in plain and lucid German,³⁷ the content of his philosophy remained abstract and his view of human nature overly rational. Herder’s counterproposal is that philosophy

should be ‘taken back to anthropology’, which has the further consequence that philosophy must be ‘modified according to the varieties of the population.’³⁸ If philosophy has to conform to human variety, then Wolff’s *iura connata* would cease to exist. Wolff’s and Herder’s versions of a progressive Enlightenment could hardly have been more different.

The critiques of Wolffian rationalism were persistent and well made, but the critical voices were scattered and at the margins of the German-speaking world: Möser in Osnabrück in the northwest, Bodmer and Breitinger in Zurich, and Hamann and Herder in far-flung East Prussia. While their ideas were well received, they did not change opinion significantly in the central Lutheran heartlands of the Enlightenment. They did not find anything like the wide approval or institutional acceptance that Wolff’s philosophy enjoyed. They did little to change the terms of the Wolffian compromise with monar-chic power.

Wolffianism was still the dominant philosophical tradition in the German lands in the 1760s, as Goethe’s writing career was beginning. His arrival on the literary scene in the latter years of Wolffianism shaped certain key features of his intellectual development. Above all he reacted against the unnatural conceptions of nature in Wolffianism. He found several allies, including Rousseau, Spinoza, Möser, and Herder. Much has rightly been made of Herder’s influence on the young Goethe. Herder channelled Goethe’s literary talent away from an uninteresting Rococo style and towards new and more natural modes of expression, for instance, the popular songs sung in rural German communities (*Volkslieder*). Herder also influenced Goethe’s intellectual development by giving him resources in the battle against Wolffianism. However, Goethe had already found key allies in this battle, notably Rousseau and possibly Spinoza. (The date of Goethe’s first meaningful engagement with Spinoza is contested,³⁹ but it is certain that Goethe knew about Spinoza before he met Herder in 1770.) Goethe’s literary career went on to span sixty-five years, during which Europe’s cultural and intellectual landscape changed profoundly. Although he insisted he was not a philosopher, he read widely in philosophy. He was friendly or acquainted with several of the most prominent figures in the golden age of German philosophy: Herder, Jacobi, Schiller, Reinhold, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Schopenhauer. Perhaps because he was not a philosopher by vocation, and so was less interested in creating a self-consistent

philosophical system, an extremely wide variety of intellectual influences left traces in his writings. He was the kind of writer who responded to the good, the bad, and the simply interesting in what he read, whether or not he agreed with it. He wrote in a dizzying range of genres and disciplines. His literary works include arguably the single richest corpus of lyric poetry in modern Europe. There are also epics and artfully wrought cycles of poems. His dramatic works range from small comic pieces and libretti for musical theatre, through bourgeois social plays and large-scale historical dramas, to the huge and barely stageable phantasmagoria of *Faust*. In addition to four extremely diverse novels, he composed numerous shorter prose narratives. He wrote a very large body of critical and historical writings on literature and the visual arts. In science, which from 1780 onwards occupied as much of his time as literature, he wrote essays on geology, meteorology, optics and colour, botany, entomology, and mammal zoology. Many of his critical and scientific writings are shot through with a philosophical desire to question and understand what we know, how we know it, and what it means. This is particularly true of the mass of aphorisms he produced from the 1790s onwards. His poems, plays, and prose narratives are also philosophical, in the sense that they create fictional worlds in which philosophical ideas are put to the test. If not a philosopher by vocation, Goethe was a decidedly philosophical writer. This is why it makes sense to think of his writing career in terms of both his literary and his intellectual development. This book focuses on the latter, and of course in doing so it presents only part of the picture. It does include analyses of some of his literary works because they are philosophical in the sense described above. However, its main focus is on his career as a thinker, on a life lived in constant close contact with philosophical, religious, aesthetic, scientific, and political ideas.

Goethe's cultural legacy is well known. His intellectual legacy has been no less important, but is less familiar. One indication of the power of his influence is that some of the major figures of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries built their intellectual careers around the reception of his ideas. Four examples are Matthew Arnold, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Weber, and Oswald Spengler. It was not just that these four found ideas in Goethe's writing that they could make their own. It was that they had a deep and broad allegiance to a Goethean way of thinking and sustained that allegiance for the duration of their intellectual careers. Arnold ranked Goethe among the four most powerful

influences on his life.⁴⁰ Arnold's vision of Victorian high culture as 'the best which has been thought and said in the world'⁴¹—a notably Goethean formulation⁴²—was based on the classics and the Bible. The latter, Arnold wrote, 'will forever remain, as Goethe called it, not only a national book, but the Book of the Nations.'⁴³ Arnold regretted the decline of religious belief, and yet he agreed with Goethe—and with Goethe's favourite philosopher Spinoza, to whom Arnold came via Goethe—that religion must do without the supernatural.⁴⁴ Unlike Goethe, Arnold was politically liberal, though in a limited sense, and the limits on his liberalism were again Goethean. Freedom was a philistine concept, and liberalism must be tempered by 'renouncement' and experience.⁴⁵ 'Renouncement' was one of Goethe's signature ideas, and it was from Goethe that Arnold learned that the reasons for 'renouncement' came from our personal experience. This is the meaning of Arnold's best known statement on Goethe: 'Goethe's profound, imperturbable naturalism was absolutely fatal to all routine thinking; he puts the standard, once for all, inside every man instead of outside him.'⁴⁶ For Nietzsche, Goethe represented a different kind of naturalism, 'healthily restrained celebration of the sensuous.'⁴⁷ The image of Goethe in Nietzsche's writing is unusual (for Nietzsche, that is) because it is consistently positive and without the ambivalence or reversals that characterize Nietzsche's attitude to his other 'heroes'. Consequently Nietzsche associates Goethe with all of his 'familiar, eternally recurring preoccupations and obsessions.'⁴⁸ Everything Nietzschean also seems to be Goethean. Weber became dedicated to Goethe in his teens when, according to his wife Marianne, he read all forty volumes of the Cotta edition of Goethe's works.⁴⁹ Weber's writings on sociology and politics are scattered with quotations from Goethe, but his reception of Goethe was not shallow. Of special importance to him were the two *Wilhelm Meister* novels and *Faust*, which helped to form his notions of the specialized vocation and active asceticism.⁵⁰ He shared with Goethe an ambivalence about modernity: a belief that modernity consisted in and must be met with practical engagement, alongside a sense that modernity had lost contact with beauty and spiritual richness. Scepticism about modernity was Spengler's dominant mode, most famously in his *Decline of the West* (1918–1922). In the preface to a 1922 edition of *Decline* Spengler wrote that 'Goethe gave me the method, Nietzsche the questions.'⁵¹ The work's subtitle, *Outlines of a Morphology of World History*, indicates what Spengler had in mind, for *morphology* was one of Goethe's signature concepts. According to Spengler's morphological method, cultures undergo evolutionary processes that dictate the forms they take. Again there is a vein of naturalism in Goethe's influence, which for Spengler expresses itself as a scepticism about

civilization. Spengler dismisses the progressive model of historical development and replaces it with a cyclical one. For the epigraph of *Decline* Spengler used some verses by Goethe that advertised that cyclical model: 'in the infinite the same thing / Flows on eternally repeating itself' ('im Unendlichen dasselbe / Sich wiederholend ewig fließt').⁵²

Goethe's theory of morphology was a biological, not a historical theory, and it enjoyed its most fruitful reception in nineteenth-century evolutionary science. Again, his scientific legacy is not as well known as it might be. As Robert Richards has shown, Goethe's 'conceptions in morphology, the science virtually of his own creation, had a solid empirical footing and provided purchase for the emergence of evolutionary theory in Germany and England.'⁵³ A line of influence leads from Goethe's work on mammal anatomy through Carl Gustav Carus and Richard Owen to Darwin. In the first edition of *The Origin of Species*, Darwin cited Goethe's theory of the 'compensation of growth.'⁵⁴ In the third edition, he added a historical preface in which he acknowledged Goethe's work on mammal morphology in the mid-1790s.⁵⁵ Other evolutionary biologists promoted Goethe's work, notably Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, Ernst Haeckel, and Thomas Henry Huxley. Goethe's holistic vision of nature inspired Alexander von Humboldt to develop his conception of ecology.⁵⁶ Huxley, on being invited to write an editorial for the first edition of the new science journal *Nature* in 1869, offered his own translation of a rhapsodic prose poem 'Nature' that was at the time generally attributed to Goethe.⁵⁷ Darwin admired Huxley's translation.⁵⁸ Other aspects of Goethe's work in biology have been less influential, but have still found resonance. The botanist Agnes Arber published a translation of Goethe's essay on plant metamorphosis.⁵⁹ Her own theory of plant form grew out of her reception of Goethe.⁶⁰

The wider reception of Goethe's science is a more mixed picture. The theory of light, optics, and colour on which he worked for nearly twenty years has been largely (and rightly) rejected, and it prompted some nineteenth-century scientists to deny Goethe's scientific work any credibility whatsoever. The physicist and physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz argued in a lecture of 1853 that Goethe was really an intuitive artist, not a scientist. (In 1875 he added a postscript to the lecture in which he acknowledged that Darwin's theory of evolution was 'unmistakably' based on the same ideas as Goethe's.)⁶¹ Helmholtz's friend the physiologist Emil du Bois-Reymond made a similar argument in 1882. He set Goethe up as example of the damage done to German science by philosophical speculation.⁶² In the developing split between the two cultures of science and the humanities, Goethe's science was forced onto

the humanities side. This had an unfortunate consequence. His expulsion from science allowed him to emerge as a mediating figure between the two cultures or as a throwback to a golden (or just different) age before the split occurred. Heinrich Henel claimed that ‘the real importance of Goethe as a student of nature lies in the fact that he was the last great figure in the Western world to offer an alternative to what is now known as science.’⁶³ The idea of Goethe as an alternative to modern materialist science was one of his main attractions to Rudolf Steiner and the anthroposophists. Steiner promoted Goethe’s scientific writings as an alternative to the dominant materialist trend in modern science. Anthroposophy has applied its own version of Goetheanism to a wide range of disciplines, including agriculture, medicine, and education.

Goethe’s political legacy is less well known than his scientific legacy but just as contested. It is only in recent years that his political thought has begun to be analysed systematically. Much of the earlier political reception of Goethe was based on either partial and tendentious interpretations or somewhat fuzzy notions of his symbolic value for the German people. The earliest trends in political Goethe reception tended to pick out supposedly socialist or liberal elements in his work, especially in the two *Wilhelm Meister* novels.⁶⁴ With the advent of German unification in 1871, Goethe for the first time became a political figure and a symbol of Germanness, even being equated with Bismarck.⁶⁵ ‘Germany’, wrote Herman Grimm, ‘was chosen by fate to have produced men like Luther, Goethe, and Bismarck.’⁶⁶ Grimm claimed that Goethe’s German would become the language of the German Empire. Grimm’s intentions were liberal. The Nazis reenvisioned Goethe in their own image: Faust was a symbol of the German *Volk* and its mission to assert itself in the world.⁶⁷ With the defeat of Nazism and the foundation of the German Federal Republic, Goethe resumed his role as a spiritual forerunner of liberalism. It was a fortunate coincidence that the new Republic’s constitution was promulgated in 1949, the two hundredth anniversary of Goethe’s birth. Goethe became the exemplary ‘good German’ and he prefigured the clauses in the Federal constitution that protected the free unfolding of the human personality.⁶⁸ In the German Democratic Republic the image of Goethe took its lead from the Hungarian Marxist György Lukács’s *Goethe and his Age* (1947), which presented Goethe as having the unusual ability to rise above his class-consciousness and analyse the ‘German misery’ of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Lukács’s view spread to the German left in the West in the 1960s. Goethe’s novel *Werther* became a symbol of political alienation. At the same time, for the student movement of the 1960s and ’70s, the postwar

Goethe cult seemed part of the Federal Republic's failure to fully recognise the crimes of the Nazis.⁶⁹

In an article published in 1998, Ekkehart Krippendorff notes that scholars have neglected the subject of Goethe's politics.⁷⁰ In fact it has long been recognised that his politics contained an authoritarian strain.⁷¹ His opposition to free speech, democracy, and civil rights for Jews—indeed civil rights for anyone—is well known. In the 1990s the work of W. Daniel Wilson brought to light Goethe's authoritarian activity as a minister: his role in suppressing popular demands for rights and in the surveillance of freemasons, students, and professors at the University of Jena.⁷² Wilson's conclusions are contested, but their tenor fits with Goethe's well-documented opposition to democracy and civil rights. This raises in a particularly stark form the question of how we can make sense of the contrast between the authoritarian politician and the seemingly liberal writer and thinker. Krippendorff lists the many ways in which Goethe engaged with politics as a minister of state, writer, and observer of a politically tumultuous era. He concludes that Goethe does not fit into the familiar political spectrums of conservative-progressive or right-left: 'However, he was by no means unpolitical, to which status he has been overwhelmingly reduced for the sake of convenience.'⁷³ The fallacy of the 'unpolitical Goethe' has not only been a matter of convenience, a way of avoiding using the ill-fitting and anachronistic right-left spectrum. It goes back to Thomas Mann's decidedly political defence of Goethe during World War I. For Mann, the 'unpolitical Goethe' was a true representative of the German bourgeoisie, whose proper role was indeed to be unpolitical.⁷⁴ Krippendorff's answer to the problem of Goethe's contradictoriness is that Goethe was primarily interested in political results, not ideas: he was a doer, not a thinker.⁷⁵ Of course, the idea of being a deliverer of results flatters every politician's self-image, and Goethe was no less guilty than any politician of presenting himself as a selfless and unideological servant of the people. And while there is some truth in that image, we should set against it the fact that he thought and wrote about political practice and ideas continually from his student days onwards. We certainly cannot explain the gap between his authoritarian politics and liberal attitudes to culture and science by pretending that he did not think about it. A more historically accurate answer to the problem will be evident from the story of Christian Wolff and the uneasy compromise of the eighteenth-century German intelligentsia between intellectual freedom and political unfreedom. For Goethe, however, the compromise with power took a less liberal and progressive form.

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