



CHAPTER 1



A Unique Philosopher

WOLFF'S PHILOSOPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Franklin Merrell-Wolff¹ was a philosopher, mathematician, mystic, and sage. As a young student he became convinced that Immanuel Kant had demonstrated the impossibility of metaphysical knowledge, if our resources are limited to sense perception and conceptual cognition. However, he found in mystical literature unmistakable evidence for the existence of a third function of cognition and felt compelled to verify it personally. He successfully consummated his twenty-four-year quest in 1936, when two Fundamental Realizations*² transformed his life and formed the base for his original philosophical formulation.

Several features make clear why Wolff's philosophy deserves serious attention. First, it is grounded explicitly in his mystical experiences, culminating in the High Indifference—the profound penetration of the terminal phase of his fifth and final Realization. His intimate autobiographical accounts of these episodes are invaluable because mystics rarely include personal psychological

*To emphasize the importance of mystical experiences that are fully transcendent, the term *realization* will be capitalized when it refers to Fundamental Realization or when it specifies Wolff's fourth or fifth Realizations. It will not be capitalized for references only to mental realization (intuitive insight), partially transcendent mystical experiences, or to the entire set of Wolff's realizations.

material of this sort in their writings. These reports are the essential link between firsthand mystical experiences and their subsequent interpretation and conceptual development. His personal narrative of these realizations and the philosophy that he derives from them substantially advance our knowledge of mysticism, as well as its significance for a comprehensive world view.

Wolff's fascinating life and experiences are sufficient to attract our interest. Moreover, the brilliant intuitive and intellectual reflections of his illumined mind on the nature and philosophical implications of his realizations constitute an unparalleled practical and theoretical legacy. For spiritual seekers, his wisdom, insight, and instruction provide effective guidance along the path of personal attainment. For those whose central concern is to comprehend reality, his articulated thought deepens our understanding of the nature of mystical experience and its relevance for philosophy, psychology, and religion.³ He characterizes the investigation of the overlap among these three domains of fundamental human inquiry as metapsychological, inasmuch as it is essentially inaccessible to ordinary methods. However, this region is available to direct awareness through a noetic function of consciousness that transcends the empirical realm, and it may be studied by means of continued operation of relative consciousness alongside the nonrelative. Wolff's introduction and treatment of coincident modes of consciousness contribute notably to our exploration and comprehension of mystical states, which, according to mystics' reports, intrinsically transcend the reach of empirical investigation.

What is more important, as he points out, the discovery of a third means of cognition, apart from perception and conception, would have dramatic philosophical implications. Theoretically, it opens the door to metaphysical knowledge. Wolff considers three metaphysical questions fundamental to his work:

1. Is metaphysical knowledge possible?
2. If so, how may it be known?
3. If known, how may it be communicated, and to what extent?⁴

Insofar as mystical experience gives nonsensuous, nonconceptual content directly to consciousness, this would satisfy the central necessary condition stipulated by Kant.⁵

To briefly sketch the problem, Kant introduces the concept of the 'noumenon'—what a thing is like in itself apart from the phenomenon, which is the sensible appearance of a thing. This distinction is implicit in the very concept of 'appearance'. Knowledge of phenomena is formed by the synthesis of the sensible intuition of an object and a corresponding concept provided by the faculty of understanding. For example, the phenomenon of seeing a tree is a synthesis of the specific sensuous impressions with the concept 'tree'. A second well-established cognitive faculty involves knowing the characteristics of concepts and their relations in abstraction from sensible content, such as we find within the domain of pure mathematics. In pondering the possibility of positive knowledge of the noumenon, Kant concludes that it is necessary that an object be presented through a form of intuition entirely apart from sensibility. However, he is unable either to prove or to exclude the existence of such an intuition. Furthermore, even if it were to exist, he contends that noumenal knowledge would still be problematic. The intuitively given content must be enrobed conceptually to be understood, but no concept from the field of sensible knowledge can possibly apply to a domain of a completely different nature.

Wolff believes that he has resolved successfully the Kantian problem, but whereas he has found an experiential ground for metaphysics, this falls short of establishing an exclusive systematic formulation. Although Kant has shown that noumenal reality cannot be intelligibly described, Wolff contends that language may be used symbolically to indicate a transcendent referent. Because diverse symbols may be employed effectively, various metaphysical schemes are possible—in fact, they are desirable as necessarily complementary ways of representing this Transcendent Reality. This overt metaphysical relativism is a subtle, but extremely significant, feature of his philosophy. It allows him (and those who would wish to follow him) to avoid the unnecessary limitations imposed by the traditional system-building approach to metaphysics. Nevertheless, he is obliged to show how the noetic aspect of realization constitutes knowledge, even in the most liberal sense of the term.

Notwithstanding the difficulty engendered by metaphysical indeterminacy, Wolff's metaphysics does exhibit an identifiable character. It favors an approach that is oriented to the primacy of consciousness, which is understood in a special way, as unconditioned

either by the immediate subjective experience or by any objective content. Consciousness ordinarily exhibits a subject-object polarity, wherein the subject, in its purity, transcends the object within a given relative structure. He regards his shift of focus from the subject-to-consciousness to Consciousness Itself⁶ as a Copernican revolution completing that of Kant, who established epistemological primacy in the subject, rather than in the object. Wolff believes that his approach shows how mystical experience might be made not only comprehensible, but indispensable for a truly satisfactory world view.⁷

His training in mathematics, as well as philosophy, results in an emphasis that is compatible with the distinctive character of the Western mind. Wolff's knowledge and application of Eastern wisdom, methods, and terminology should not obscure his explicit aim to serve as a bridge between East and West. He views this material through the lens of his realizations and recasts it in terms of Western philosophy. In particular, he is deeply concerned that his contribution be understood, at least partially, as an attempt to resolve the central epistemological and metaphysical problems of the post-Kantian world. For this reason he deliberately prefers a primarily philosophical mode of expression.

In addition, because he regards mathematics as the discipline lying at the foundation of the West's theoretical orientation, Wolff desires to reflect this strength by using it to catalyze and apprehend Transcendent Consciousness. He employs the resources of higher mathematics to symbolize nonrelative states of consciousness and indicate distinctions within a zone of awareness that is only partially determinate. His orientation to conceptuality, appreciation for the critical aspect of philosophy, and symbolic and analogical use of mathematics initiates a method of attainment accessible to the West. By so doing, he has largely fulfilled his intention to pioneer a distinctively Western mystical path.

Wolff's Realizations

Wolff regards philosophy as a Way of Life whose central concern is realization.⁸ Without this grounding, his work would lack its compelling sense of authenticity and profundity. Even so, because of his intellectual integrity and the value he places on critical intelligence, he insists that these realizations "do not carry this force for

other individuals unless they have similar Realizations. So this philosophic statement is not dogmatically affirmed as something that other people must accept. It is put forth as a suggestion for others to consider, not as an authoritative presentation.⁹ Thus the challenge to the reader is to verify what she can for herself by her own personal Awakening. A presumption of truth may be built through discursive reasoning, but ultimately only Introception¹⁰ can yield this kind of knowledge.

He defines *realization* as “the Awakening to the Transcendent or Cosmic Consciousness. . . . Realization is not a development of consciousness in the subject-object sense. It implies a radical event involving the shifting of the level of consciousness.”¹¹ He distinguishes realization from experience in terms of the following features: It is a state of consciousness

1. where time is not relevant, in contrast to temporal process
2. based on a function of consciousness other than perception
3. wherein the subject transcends the object.¹²

Realization may be either mental or Fundamental. Mental realization differs from Fundamental Realization inasmuch as only the former permits adequate conceptualization of its essential insight.

Wolff’s two Fundamental Realizations followed a series of three preliminary mental realizations. His first premonitory recognition, “I am *Ātman*,” was the flash of awareness that the ‘I’, the pure subject-to-consciousness, is identical to the *Ātman* or Pure Self, not the ego, so it can never be an object before consciousness. The second realization, “I am *Nirvāṇa*,” corrected his misconception concerning the nature of *Nirvāṇa* as a subtle external world or space within the objective, relative manifold. Rather, it is identical to the inmost sense of ‘I’ as pure subject. One may only Awaken to this eternal condition. Third, “Substantiality is inversely proportional to ponderability,” was the insight that the substantial ground of Reality, as the Primordial Plenum, lies in inverse relationship to the degree that what appears to consciousness is sensuously ponderable. Although he illustrates this insight by using the language of physical objects, there is no doubt that Wolff intends the principle to extend to all domains of awareness, including both inner and outer perception.

In contrast, Fundamental Realization intrinsically transcends language and concepts, so its essential nature cannot be captured in any discursive formulation. Wolff's first of two, "I Am THAT,"¹³ fulfilled the insight of "I am *Ātman*." However, it was Transcendent and personally transformative. It went beyond the mere idea that the 'I' is identical to the Pure Self, but Realized this existentially through the intentional isolation of the subjective moment of consciousness. The essential nature of his second Fundamental Realization, "The High Indifference," was the transcendence of a state that he describes as utter Satisfaction by a more exalted state of Equilibrium and Equanimity that was neutral between all pairs of opposites, including *Nirvāṇa* and *samsāra*. It was a state of utter Fullness and infinite potential, but completely aloof concerning which possibilities would become actual. Despite this affective neutrality, the state was superior to anything Wolff had ever encountered—its supernal value unmistakably self-evident. Just as Fundamental Realization transcends mental realization as the infinite transcends the finite, the High Indifference transcended Wolff's first Fundamental Realization as a higher order of Infinity transcends a lower order of infinity. Ultimately, it is utter Mystery. Practically, its transformative effect was both personal and philosophical, as it resulted in a permanent shift in his base of consciousness and made necessary a fundamental revision of his systematic philosophy.

A positive and pervasive feature of Wolff's work is his overriding concern for penetrating to the truth of substantive issues by using his personal resources (mystical and intellectual) instead of relying upon secondary sources. Reporting his realizations was necessary, he believes, for otherwise there would be no way to establish the epistemological base for his philosophy.¹⁴ When he speaks from the authority of his own mystical experiences,¹⁵ he subordinates all other material to them.

These five Realizations stand as authority before me just insofar as the field they cover is concerned, and this means that they transcend in that field the authority of any scripture, sutra or shastra that already exists. . . . neither empiric science nor normative science has the power to overrule or lead to the rejection of any of the five Realizations. The Realizations have primacy over all other forms of knowledge, scriptural, scientific or mathematical, which exist so far as I am concerned.¹⁶

His position on their relative validity is therefore clear and uncompromising. Nonetheless, it is clearly undogmatic, insofar as he contends that it is only for those who have had similar realizations that such pronouncements may be accepted as authoritative.

Although Wolff adapts concepts and doctrines from other systems where it is useful to do so, his philosophy is original, grounded in his firsthand mystical awareness. He also expresses it in whatever terminology—whether created, borrowed, or modified—he finds most effectively communicates it to contemporary Western culture.

I am not simply making a transformation of Oriental philosophy into Western language. Even less am I producing a statement based upon the Ben Israel religiosity, nor even of Greek philosophical mysticism. What I am doing is producing a statement in terms that are indigenous to the West that will reflect the meaning and the way of Realization.¹⁷

Wolff's descriptive and explanatory focus is his realizations, so he is greatly concerned with how well the words and concepts he employs portray and communicate this immediate content. Consequently, he subordinates their absolute fidelity of meaning within any traditional context to his practical end.

Finally, Wolff's overall intention is twofold, philosophical and personal, dealing with fact and value, respectively:

1. to design his philosophical formulation to be critically sound to convince any rational, open-minded person, and
2. to convey to the reader the nature and value of Fundamental Realization.

He wishes not only to provide sufficient justification to establish its existence, but also to encourage a personal quest. He contends that motivation for seeking this goal is both philosophical and religious. Clearly, an essential criterion for a wholly adequate evaluation of his philosophy is firsthand awareness of its base, and the only way to verify the existence of this purported cognitive function is to make it active for oneself. Furthermore, he reports that Realization is of supernal value, worth achieving for its own sake, for therein lies the resolution of the sensed problems of the human condition.

These articulate reports detailing his personal transformational process are an unparalleled source of guidance for the seeker. Along with his extensive accounts of the realizations themselves, he includes a wealth of autobiographical material concerning the mystical path, whereas most mystical texts omit this kind of firsthand evidence. He also introduces several unique practical aspects, for example, securing a self-conscious link to relative consciousness during the episodes that he characterizes as Fundamental Realizations. These provide a valuable aid to the reader's individual attainment.

Scholarship

Although Wolff read extensively, his research was mainly limited to English texts and translations. Furthermore, following his departure from the academic world in 1915, he lost contact with most of the ensuing developments in Western philosophy. His withdrawal resulted in a number of gaps in his background, displayed principally in his nineteenth-century orientation to the history of philosophy. On the one hand, this is regrettable, for the combination of his keen mind and profound mystical aptitude would have enabled him to critique insightfully developments in twentieth-century philosophy from a profound point of view. On the other hand, he found it necessary to concentrate his efforts on the greater goal of individual Enlightenment, which he believed an academic focus would likely have prevented.

Despite Wolff's appreciation for the value of scholarship, he consistently subordinates it to that of facilitating the process of attaining Fundamental Realization. His reflective analysis of their interrelationship clarifies his rationale.

Scholarship is important and is a great aid, but it can also be a barrier, because one may be taken up by the consideration of ideas to an exclusion of other features that are essential. There is such a thing as being overloaded with scholarship so that the ideational process is all the time too active. Incisive ideas are more helpful in the actual *sādhana* than carefully modulated ideation, which takes in a multitude of exceptions. The ideas are tools so far as the *sādhana* is concerned, and a sharply defined tool is a more effective tool than one with the blunted edge of too much modification or consideration of exceptions. The amount of scholarship that is good for the individual would vary from in-

dividual to individual. But scholarship becomes too great and is a barrier when one is everlastingly hung up with the process of ideation. Remember that scholarship is only a tool. It is not the end; it is not the goal. The goal is another way of knowing; it is another way of cognizing, of being aware, and in principle it should be possible for one to attain this without scholarship. But scholarship can be a very great aid if one is not attached to it, not bound by it, not inclined to view it as an end in itself, and thus make it a substitute for the real *sādhana*.¹⁸

He considers the personal attainment of Fundamental Realization by each individual far more important than mere intellectual acceptance of mystics' findings.¹⁹ If the philosopher is to Realize this function personally, he must broaden his approach. Wolff contends that the Western scholar places himself at a disadvantage by remaining aloof from this subject matter. Usually it is a virtue to maintain such an attitude, but where direct acquaintance requiring psychical transformation is involved, it presents a barrier. He contends that what is needed is an attitude of self-giving, which is sacred rather than secular.²⁰ It will be insufficient to provide scholarly commentary at arm's length, so to speak, for one must Awaken to know directly and immediately That to which the mystic refers.

In the scholarship of mysticism, there has always been a division between those who commit themselves to the experience and those who remain reserved. The latter must avoid unwarranted skepticism; the former, excessive credulity. A central philosophical issue concerns authority: Is the mystic in a better position to discuss and evaluate mystical experiences than the nonmystic? If we consider the analogous situation of dreaming, then, other things being equal, the dreamer has an advantage over the nondreamer in a philosophical discussion concerning their nature and significance. Direct awareness is exceedingly helpful, if not strictly necessary, for an adequately qualified appraisal of Wolff's philosophy, mysticism, ultimate reality, or any transempirical subject matter. An attitude that remains *exclusively* oriented to scholarship is incompatible with attaining such awareness—it forcibly preempts it. We might also wonder if such an attitude is not a central factor in the apparent opacity of most accounts of, as well as the philosophy based on, mystical experience. Thus it is reasonable to suggest that

for critical commentary (which too is an important part of the enterprise) to be effective, one must first apprehend the content in a more direct manner. This process requires a complementary approach that seeks an optimum balance.

In grounding his essential philosophy Wolff speaks from personal mystical experience, rather than deriving his conclusions from other sources. To be sure, he contends that his major theses cannot be established solely by rational argument from some other base. That is, pure reason, neither by itself, nor in combination with ordinary experience, can demonstrate (or refute) a transcendental reality.²¹ Nevertheless, though much can be said from the base of realization, he believes that employing a strictly scholarly style would inhibit its effective communication. For this reason he generally prefers to advance it in modes more appropriate to expression from exalted states of consciousness, the subject matter, and the audience. We see, then, that his treatment of other systems of thought is primarily a means to an end, more than an end in itself, and is best evaluated in that light.

SYNOPSIS

General Approach

Wolff compares his position with the major schools of his day,²² but we shall further consider how it is related to later developments—in particular, phenomenological and analytic traditions. It will be helpful to determine the extent to which Wolff's insights, analysis, and conclusions may be corroborated by other methods. Whereas every school, system, movement, approach, and so on, is acknowledged to have something worthwhile that must be integrated within a comprehensive philosophical synthesis, none of them has exclusive or invincible authority. Determining the contribution of such a figure to this grand project is a dynamic creative process, for it cannot merely be subsumed within the preexisting world view.

The overarching domain of inquiry is the totality of human awareness. Our guiding telos is philosophy itself, which involves the ongoing quest to resolve the central issues and problems of human existence. Due to the nature and scope of the subject matter, it is necessary that our methodology be eclectic and open-ended.

The explication and critique of the central features of his philosophy require methods of greater diversity, including phenomenology and conceptual clarification. Our overall approach, however, must rely on intuition for insight into the subtleties of the experiences reported, their philosophical significance, and our resulting world view.

Structure and Development

This critical exposition of Wolff's philosophy has the minimal purpose of presenting the contribution of a unique philosopher who yet remains relatively unknown. Our most concrete concern is to provide an accurate factual description of germane biographical material on his life, those who influenced his thought, and especially the accounts of his realizations. The main task in the following two chapters involves the establishment of a three-dimensional context for understanding Wolff's articulated philosophy²³—biographical, ideational, and experiential. Chapter 2 begins with a brief biographical sketch to show how, to an unusual degree, Wolff is inseparable from his philosophy. We then identify and discuss the central figures who significantly influenced Wolff's orientation within the mystical tradition and the character of his philosophical statement. Chapter 3 elaborates his five realizations—the reports of the mystical experiences that transformed his life and ground his philosophy.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with special problems that arise regarding mystical experience, namely,

1. the essential nature of mysticism, and
2. the meaningfulness of mystical language.

To establish a context for understanding and integrating Wolff's accounts of his realizations and the philosophy he derives from them, chapter 4 considers the subject of mysticism, the attempt to define it, and its relation to philosophy. Chapter 5 attempts to resolve the semantic problem of expressing and communicating the unique nature of mystical experience, which mystics generally report to be ineffable—that is, beyond both words and concepts. Consistent with Wolff's position, we shall find that the most advan-

tageous interpretation of mystical experience is the view that mystics are aware of a Transcendent, nonphenomenal 'core' that is essentially impervious to strictly descriptive formulation. We are able to escape the semantic paradox—trying to describe the indescribable—because symbols, linguistic and otherwise, may be used meaningfully to 'point' to it indirectly. Hence we are entitled to conclude that the ineffability of mystical experience does not entail that the mystic must adopt a strategy of strict silence. Furthermore, to treat mystical subject matter authentically requires that *we* also employ language symbolically when necessary by using concepts, notions, and linguistic and nonlinguistic forms that overflow standard usage.

The preponderance of this work deals directly with the essence of Wolff's formal philosophy, emphasizing the metaphysical and epistemological issues that he addresses. The key to his approach lies in the nature of consciousness and its role in the determination of reality. Chapter 6 investigates relative consciousness and the subject-object relationship that structures it. The discussion in chapter 7 shifts to the transcendent sense of Consciousness (the ultimate referent of what he symbolizes by Consciousness-without-an-object), and the issue of ontological primacy. Here we shall consider the relationship between consciousness and the self, comparing and contrasting Wolff's position with selected representatives of analytic, phenomenological, and Eastern schools of thought. What is more important, we shall investigate the metaphysical significance of the Primordial Consciousness that Wolff Realized.

The emphasis shifts from metaphysics to epistemology in chapter 8 to consider the noetic thesis that mystical experience is a source of cognition that is derived neither from conception nor sense experience. Wolff regards this discovery as his major contribution to philosophy. Within the context that Kant proposes for establishing the possibility of metaphysical knowledge, we explore the existence, operation, and significance of this third cognitive function.

Finally, chapter 9 summarizes Wolff's philosophy of Introceptualism²⁴ and its contribution to Western philosophy. It presents a serious challenge to traditional philosophical approaches based solely on relative consciousness—one that cannot be ignored. However, if we accept it in the spirit of philosophy, as love of wisdom, it will lead to a source of enduring value.