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The Powers of the Soul: Wolff and Crusius on the Nature of Power

This paper examines an important eighteenth century debate regarding the number and nature of the soul's powers. It is sometimes alleged that Christian Wolff was committed to the position that the soul is endowed with just a single faculty: the faculty of cognition.¹ However, this is a misreading that conflates two distinct metaphysical concepts: a faculty [*Vermögen*] with a force or power [*Kraft*].² In reality, Wolff attributed numerous faculties to the soul. They are enumerated in his empirical psychology and they include the senses, the imagination, the understanding, reason, and the will. Wolff did think that the soul had only one *power*. This was a necessary consequence of the soul's simplicity. He further argued that this one power was essentially cognitive in nature; it was the soul's power to represent the world. All of the soul's faculties, including the will, were supposedly exercised through this one basic power for representation or cognition. Thus, according to Wolff, the soul is endowed with multiple faculties but just a single power, which is cognitive in nature and is responsible for actualizing all of the soul's faculties.

Wolff's Pietist critics worried that this position would undermine the freedom and independence of the will. They insisted that the will is a separate power from the intellect, i.e. the soul's power of cognition, and that the soul therefore possesses multiple powers. In this paper, I address a particularly sophisticated version of this criticism, offered by Christian August Crusius. He argued that Wolff's definition of power is too broad because it does not specify the causal relationship between a power and its supposed actions or effects. According to Crusius, modern science requires a more precise definition of power. He denies that the single power that Wolff attributes to the soul – its power to represent the world – qualifies as a power in the strict sense that is demanded by science. This is a surprising reversal of roles as Wolff embraced modern science and mathematics, while most of his critics were theologians, who remained committed to Aristotelianism. However, Crusius seizes the mantle of science in his critique of Wolff and argues that Wolff relies on an outdated and imprecise notion of power or force. He essentially accuses Wolff of attributing an occult power to the soul. Crusius exposes a real weakness in Wolff's argument that the soul can only have one power on account of its simplicity. However, I show that Crusius still fails to demonstrate his most crucial thesis: that the will cannot be exercised through a power that is purely cognitive in nature. He does not prove that the intellect and the will must be separate powers. The stakes of this debate were high. Pietists, like Crusius, accused Wolff and his followers of being determinists, fatalists, and Spinozists. Although it is not as well-known as the controversy over pre-established harmony, the question of how many powers belonged to the soul was part of the intense polemical battle between the Wolffians and their Pietist critics. This paper sheds light on an important but forgotten aspect of their debate.

¹ See e.g. Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1969), 268-269.

² The terms "faculty" [*Vermögen*] and "power" [*Kraft*] are sometimes treated as synonyms. However, Wolff drew an important distinction between them. A faculty is a potentiality. It is the possibility to act or do something. This potentiality is actualized through a power. For example, when I am seated, I have the potential to stand up.

Consequently, I have a faculty for this motion. If I do in fact utilize this faculty and rise from my chair, then I exercise it through a power. See Christian Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1983), 161-162, §117.
