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Paola Rumore

## In Wolff's Footsteps. The Early German Reception of La Mettrie's *L'Homme machine*

### 1. A specter personified

At the end of 1747, when *L'Homme machine* began to circulate, the German philosophical scene was entering into a temporary truce in its long-lasting struggle against materialism, at that point still considered the most harmful and the disgraceful expression of free-thinking. This situation concerned mainly that large part of Germany, which had remained almost uncontaminated by the new Francophile trend that animated the cultural enclave of Frederick's court in Berlin. In fact, according to one of the most authoritative interpreters of 18<sup>th</sup> century German philosophy, "the French Enlightenment had surely caused some disturbance in Sanssouci, but its resonance in the surrounding German world remained limited"<sup>1</sup>. The publication of *L'Homme machine*, often described as a "monument of disgrace and ignominy"<sup>2</sup>, forced Germany to face once again the phantom of materialism, which now appeared in the form of a real danger in a well-delineated shape, no longer a vague, undefined, and somehow spectral threat. The degree of reality of the current menace of materialism was also increased by the fact that the author of the book had been warmly welcomed at the Prussian court; *L'Homme machine* was not one of the usual phantomatic foreign dangers pressing up against the borders of the kingdom, but a real presence on German soil. Indeed up to that moment modern German philosophy had not experienced any significant and explicit profession of materialism, since its first clear defence goes back just to the 1770s, i.e. to Michael Hißmann's *Psychologische Versuche*, and his brilliant synthesis of sensualistic ideas à la Condillac and the recent physiology inspired by Bonnet and Priestley<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> W. KRAUSS, *Ein Akademiesekretär vor 200 Jahren: Samuel Formey*, in Id., *Studien zur deutschen und französischen Aufklärung*, Rütten & Loening, Berlin 1963, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> *Tablettes du clergé et des amis de la religion*, 2 (1822), p. 181.

<sup>3</sup> M. HISSMANN, *Psychologische Versuche. Ein Beitrag zur esoterischen Logik*, Helwing, Hannover-Göttingen 1788 (1777). Cf. H.F. KLEMMER / G. STIENING / F. WUNDERLICH (Hrsg.), *Michael Hißmann (1752-*

Indeed the the forms of ‘pseudomaterialism’ that appeared in Germany between the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century – for example with Friedrich Wilhelm Stosch, Theodor Ludwig Lau, or Gabriel Wagner – turned out to be the indirect and unavoidable consequence of the denial of any form of substance dualism, and of the reduction of the realm of reality to a general mechanical whole. Those kinds of reflections had a clear metaphysical commitment, and did not share much with the later project of understanding human nature solely by means of the physiology of the body<sup>4</sup>. Both of the two main struggles in Germany against the phantom of materialism – until the publication of *L’Homme machine* – were fought under the flag of Wolff’s philosophy. The first, which goes back to the conflict between Wolff and the Pietists in Halle in the early 1720s, had involved Wolff himself, who had been charged by Johann Franz Buddeus with promoting a form of fatalism by extending the principles of mechanical determinism from the realm of bodies to that of souls and ideas<sup>5</sup>. The connection between fatalism and materialism was pretty obvious<sup>6</sup>. The second struggle goes back to the early 1740s, the time of the publication of the German translation of a spurious version of Voltaire’s *XIII Philosophical Letter* on thinking matter by the Berlin theologian Johann Gustav Reinbeck, who built his own refutation on the basis of Wolff’s rational psychology<sup>7</sup>. In both cases the materialistic approach – here understood in the sense of a ‘psychological’ materialism – was supported by a fundamental argument taken from Locke’s *Essay*, i.e. the impossibility of any reliable knowledge of real essences. This impossibility allowed Wolff’s thesis concerning both the necessity of essence, and the connection between its attributes to be refuted, excluding therefore any form of fatalism, on the one hand; on the other hand, it allowed the hypothesis of thinking matter to be legitimated by ascribing the contradiction of the attributes of thought and extension to the boundaries of the human understanding, instead of introducing a suspicion of ‘weakness’ in God’s omnipotence. Wolff rejected Locke’s idea of the unknowability of real essences; he claimed that we cannot just know which attributes belong to the essences of

1784). *Ein materialistischer Philosoph der deutschen Aufklärung*, de Gruyter, Berlin 2012; cf. P. RUMORE, *Materia cogitans. L’Aufklärung di fronte al materialismo*, Olms, Hildesheim 2013, cap. V.

<sup>4</sup> In the past years the literature on these authors has increased significantly. For a first general bibliography cf. RUMORE, *Materia cogitans* cit., cap. I. On the *Vertrauter Briefwechsel* by U.G. BÜCHER cf. the paper by U. GOLDENBAUM in the present issue. On the relationship between mechanism and those forms of materialism cf. P. RUMORE, *Mechanism and Materialism in Early Modern German Philosophy*, in *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. RUMORE, *Materia cogitans* cit., cap. II.

<sup>6</sup> On the materialistic grounds of Wolff’s fatalism cf. M. FAVARETTI CAMPOSAMPIERO, *La chaîne des causes naturelles. Matérialisme et fatalisme chez Leibniz, Wolff et leurs adversaires*, in *Dix-huitième siècle*, 46 (2014), pp. 131-148.

<sup>7</sup> J.G. REINBECK, *Philosophische Gedancken über die vernünfftige Seele und derselben Unsterblichkeit. Nebst einigen Anmerckungen über ein Frantzösisches Schreiben, darin behauptet werden will, daß die Materie dencke*, Hauden, Berlin 1740 (reprint Olms, Hildesheim 2002).

things, but also that we can grasp their sufficient reason, i.e. the principle according to which that particular thing has precisely those attributes, and not any other, excluding therefore any possible contradiction among them. In the very following years Georg Friedrich Meier, who shared with Wolff and Reinbeck the belief in both the logical and the ontological validity of the principle of sufficient reason, expressed the same conviction with these words: “God can create only possible beings. Omnipotence cannot produce thoughts in a compound being; it cannot endow matter neither with the faculty (*Vermögen*), nor with the capacity (*Fähigkeit*) of thinking”: omnipotence is “the faculty to make real all what is possible”, not even what is (logically, and therefore ontologically) impossible<sup>8</sup>. This obviously implied that because of their radical heterogeneity extension and thought cannot coexist in one and the same substance: being extended and composite, matter is passive and subject to movement; on the contrary thought is active, unextended and simple, and eludes any mechanical law that concerns the movement of bodies. This claim allowed conceiving human bodies as machines, but not the human being in its complexity. Indeed problems arose with the shift from the image of the body-a-machine to the one of the man-a-machine, viz. with the submission of human thoughts and actions to those mechanical laws that rule matter, i.e. with the denial of a dualist perspective in favor of a monism which leaves no place for any spiritual entity<sup>9</sup>.

The scandalous image of the man-a-machine – as it appeared in the title of La Mettrie's book – started circulating in Germany impressively fast and with a very unique propulsive force. Not only the main philosophical and theological journals started to propagate rumors concerning *L'Homme machine* right after its publication, but the main authoritative voices of the German cultural scene, from Euler to Ploucquet, hastily printed out their refutations of what they considered the odd and harmful hypothesis of the *materia cogitans*. The presence of the image of the man-machine in one of the central works of the German Enlightenment, i.e. in Johann Joachim Spalding's *Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des*

<sup>8</sup> G.F. MEIER, *Beweis: daß keine Materie denken könne*, Hemmerde, Halle 1742, § 34.

<sup>9</sup> The image of the body-machine was widespread in the Wolffian realm of German philosophy, without any dangerous significance. Cf. for instance C. WOLFF, *Vernünfftige Gedanken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (1720; henceforth, *Deutsche Metaphysik*), Olms, Hildesheim 1983, § 740; WOLFF, *Von dem Begriff der Gesundheit* (1729), in ID., *Gesammelte kleine philosophische Schriften, welche besonders zu der Naturlehre gehören...* (1736), Olms, Hildesheim 1981, § 2, p. 341; G.F. MEIER, *Beweis, daß die menschliche Seele ewig lebt*, Hemmerde, Halle 1751 (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1754), p. 3: “ich stelle mir demnach einen Gottesacker als eine Werckstatt der Natur vor, wo sie die Ueberbleibsel der Menschen klüglich und sparsam zusammenstellt. Sie nimmt die Maschine des menschlichen Körpers an diesem Orte aus einander, und braucht sie zu dem Baue tausend anderer Körper, welche sie auf der Schaubühne dieses Erdbodens von neuem aufzustellen willens ist”. Problems seem to arise with the shift from the image of the body-machine to the man-machine, i.e. to the reduction of the man as a whole to the mechanical laws of matter.

*Menschen* (1748), and in what is commonly considered the manifesto of that era, Immanuel Kant's *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (1784), counts as a further confirmation of the persistent impact of La Mettrie's work on the German debate in the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup>.

During the three decades that separate the publication of *L'Homme machine* from the flowering of Kantianism, German philosophy developed a stereotypical understanding of the image of the 'man-machine', which was in fact distant from La Mettrie's own. The present paper focuses on the early moments of the breakthrough of the book in Germany, from the gradual discovery of the name of its author to the first prompt reactions against it, in order to try and understand the reasons that led to the birth and development of such a clichéd and, as we will see, almost unfounded misunderstanding. Considering the early reviews and refutations of *L'Homme machine* the paper attempts to show that the *affaire La Mettrie* itself can be seen as a case of the persistent hegemony of Wolffianism, whose ideas – even if at that point less present than in the two previous decades – kept on working as an inescapable filter promoting the circulation of some convictions, and preventing the transmission of others. German philosophy read *L'Homme machine* right away through Wolff's spectacles, encouraging the development of a misleading opinion on the nature of its materialism, without the latter ever being reconsidered.

## 2. Wolff facing “les esprits forts”

On January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1748 Wolff, at that point back in Halle again where he was attending to the conclusion of the series of his Latin works, asked his close correspondent and friend Ernst Christoph Count of Manteuffel some information on a “certain French treatise concerning the man-machine” he had heard some rumors about<sup>11</sup>. Once Manteuffel received Wolff's request, he set his active network

<sup>10</sup> C. SCHWAIGER, *Zur Frage nach den Quellen von Spaldings “Bestimmung des Menschen”. Ein ungelöstes Rätsel der Aufklärungsforschung*, in N. HINSKE (Hrsg.), *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, Meiner, Hamburg 1999 (Aufklärung, vol. 11), pp. 7-19. P. RUMORE, *Kant's Understanding of the Enlightenment with Reference to his Refutation of Materialism*, in *Con-Textos Kantianos. International Journal of Philosophy*, 1 (2014), pp. 80-95.

<sup>11</sup> *Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, January 2<sup>nd</sup> 1748 (nr. 414), in *Historisch-kritische Edition des Briefwechsels zwischen Christian Wolff und Ernst Christoph Graf von Manteuffel*, K. MIDDELL / H.-P. NEUMANN (eds.), URL = <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bsz:14-qucosa-106475>, pp. 152-154. A partial reproduction of the correspondence (limited to the letters that were philosophically relevant) was already published at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by H. OSTERTAG, *Der philosophische Gehalt des Wolff-Manteuffelschen Briefwechsels*, Quelle & Mayer, Leipzig 1910 (reprod. Olms, Hildesheim, 1980). On the new edition we referred to in this paper cf. H.-P. NEUMANN, “*Verharre in aller ersinnlichen Submission*” – *Die Korrespondenz Christian Wolffs und das Vorhaben der historisch-kritischen Edition des Briefwechsels*

into action in order to provide his friend with the infamous book, which seemed to have reawakened one of Wolff's deepest ambitions, i.e. the struggle against any form of *Profanität* regardless of their different external manifestations such as deism, skepticism, materialism or freethinking in general. A huge part of the decade-long correspondence between the two friends is occupied by Wolff's complaining about the harmfulness of those philosophical deviations and by his ideas concerning the best way to encourage the natural and spontaneous attitude towards truth in the human mind. By means of Manteuffel, the "highest defender of his philosophy", and of his "Society of Alethophiles" Wolff meant to promote his own ideas up to a level of publicity they could not reach otherwise<sup>12</sup>. Indeed, as the founder of that Society, originally conceived as the proper instrument of dissemination of Wolffianism, Manteuffel acted for over a decade as director and medium of a widespread network of admirers of Wolff's philosophy, promoting a prompt spread of Wolff's works and gospel and, last but not least, contributing in a very massive way to the penetration of those ideas in the German culture until the late 1740s.

Wolff and Manteuffel shared the same negative opinion concerning the Berlin philosophical scene. Both of them complained bitterly about the "well-known situation of our times", when "especially in Berlin people incline even too much towards the free-thinking (*libertinage*)" of the *esprit forts* and of naturalists; indeed those thinkers seemed "to gain more and more ground remarkably in Germany, where only a few people are able to read their works *cum grano salis*"<sup>13</sup>. Wolff held a precise opinion concerning the gradual barbarization of German philosophy, the popularity of freethinking and of materialism as its worst manifestation. In a letter written in April 1739 he complained to his friend Manteuffel about this circumstance, developing a sort of genealogy of such a disgraceful philosophical trend. According to Wolff the very first germs of the modern materialistic aberration came from England *via* Hobbes and Locke, where they orig-

*zwischen Christian Wolff und Ernst Christoph Graf von Manteuffel*, in E. JOST / D. FULDA (Hrsg.), *Korrespondenznetzwerke der Aufklärung*, Kleine Schriften des IZEA, vol. 4, Halle 2012.

<sup>12</sup> The first letter of the correspondence between Wolff and Manteuffel, May 11 1738 (nr. 1), p. 1: "Euer Hochgräfl. Excellenz haben sich bisher als den grösten Beschützer meiner Philosophie erwiesen"; Manteuffel's reply is on May 16 1738 (nr. 2), p. 3 (from Berlin): "vous m'avez instruit et m'instruisez journellement par vos savans écrits [...] Les veritez que vous m'avez fait connoitre, et que vôtre present me met en état d'approfondir encore mieux, sont si inestimables, que tout ce que je possède n'en egalerait pas le prix". On the Society of the Alethophiles, and in general on Manteuffel's role in the dissemination of Wolffianism cf. J. BRONISCH, *Der Mäzen der Aufklärung. Ernst Christoph von Manteuffel und das Netzwerk des Wolffianismus*, de Gruyter, Berlin 2010.

<sup>13</sup> The quotations are from: *Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, Dec. 11 1746 (nr. 292), p. 232; *Manteuffel's letter to Wolff*, Dec. 9 1746 (nr. 291), pp. 231-232; *Manteuffel's letter to Wolff*, Dec. 19-20 1746 (nr. 295), pp. 238-239.

inated from the various disastrous attempts to translate Newton's mathematical genius *in philosophicis*.

“The British were wrong in confusing the *imaginaria*, which are very useful in mathematics, and *realia* of metaphysics and physics, which should instead be carefully distinguished from the first. [...] Those are again the outcomes of Hobbes and of Locke, who [Locke] inculcated materialism in a pleasant way (*unter einem angenehmen vehiculo*) in those who want to be successful taking advantage of others, avoiding the hard work of the proper use of their understanding, and putting their imagination and senses at a disadvantage”<sup>14</sup>.

In Wolff's reconstruction, combining the weakness of their method in philosophy with a good dose of arrogance, British *esprits forts* provided a mixture of Pyrrhonism and deism which turned out to be a danger even for that kind of religion, the natural one, they originally intended to safeguard. Once oriented in that materialistic direction British philosophy crossed the Channel, and became responsible for the current disastrous situation of French philosophy: “England corrupted France”, and “that's why even in France philosophy is now in a very bad condition. Those who want to move some steps further stick to Descartes, whereas some others stay with Locke. In this way, skepticism and deism triumph among the learned people in Paris”<sup>15</sup>. Actually the process of contamination concerned the whole of Central Europe<sup>16</sup>; indeed freethinkers set up swiftly in Germany, and especially in Prussia where they found their most impudent bulwark<sup>17</sup>.

As mentioned above, the awareness of being at the head of a real philosophical ‘mission’ for the sake of common sense (*gesunder Menschenverstand*) had already animated Wolff in the years of his controversy with the theologians in

<sup>14</sup> Wolff's letter to Manteuffel, April 19 1739 (nr. 22), p. 45.

<sup>15</sup> Wolff's letter to Manteuffel, April 19 1739 (nr. 22), pp. 46-47: “In Frankreich ist die Philosophie auch noch in einem sehr schlechten Zustande. Die weit gehen wollen, hangen an dem Cartesio. Einige bleiben bey dem Locke. Und daher hat in Paris unter den grösten Gelehrten der Scepticismus und Deismus die Oberhand“.

<sup>16</sup> According to Wolff Italy warmly welcomed his philosophy as an antidote to scepticism and materialism: “Erst mit letzterer Post habe von einem guten Freunde vernommen, daß der Portugiesische Minister in Rom P. Evora, bey dem ich so wohl angeschrieben, als nur möglich, ihm diese Ursache gesagt, warum insonderheit bey der hohen Geistlichkeit und anderen gelehrten Theologi meine Philosophie in Italien in so großes Ansehen kommen, als er in andern auswärtigen Ländern noch nicht gefunden. Es wäre nemlich durch die principia der heutigen berühmten Engelländer der Materialismus und Scepticismus in Italien überall gewaltig eingerißen. Man hätte sich nicht im stande gefunden aus der Scholastischen Philosophie demselben zu begegnen. Daher hätte man sich mit Macht auf meine Philosophie legen müßen, weil man darinnen die Waffen gefunden, dadurch man diese Monstra bestreiten und besiegen kan” (Wolff's letter to Manteuffel, June 7 1739, nr. 30).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. P. CASINI, *Newton in Prussia*, in *Rivista di Filosofia*, 91 (2000), pp. 251-282; on the German reception of the French Enlightenment cf. P.-E. KNABE, *Die Rezeption der französischen Aufklärung in den “Göttingischen Gelehrten Anzeigen” (1739-1779)*, Klostermann, Frankfurt 1978.

Halle; at the end of his long career the encounter with La Mettrie's materialism reawoke in him the very same vocation. But by 1748 Wolff was an old man who had gone through the tormented *affaire* of the condemnation of his writings, of the banishment from his Halle, and of the many controversies with his persecutors; it was highly probable that by that time, he had not the slightest intention of committing himself personally in a strenuous dispute against freethinkers. The time of the virulent crossfire with Buddeus was over; Wolff's attitude was now different:

“By means of confiscation, refutation, and banishment one doesn't manage to combat evil. If the youth is not raised in a proper way in schools and universities, and if the older ones are not models for the younger, in particular if churchmen are not models for common people, all the rest will be in vain. [...] I think that I provide something useful by keeping on working on my writings, instead of using my time to refute today's freethinkers”<sup>18</sup>.

Once he came in contact with La Mettrie's new defense of materialism his reaction was far from tepid, and following his request, Manteuffel's personal secretary Christian Gottlieb Spener delivered in a few days a copy of the incriminated book to Halle. Nevertheless Wolff seemed to have gathered a precise opinion of the book even before having flipped through it; in his eyes it represented yet another defense of materialism developed in the way free-thinkers do, i.e. by means of principles that seem evident to those who haven't yet learnt how to think thoroughly (*gründlich*). It has to be seen if the author has the skills of Hobbes and of his British followers, since the French fickle spirit (*der Frantzösische Fladder-Geist*) appreciates only what fits the senses, considering all the rest excessively arid and inane<sup>19</sup>.

Manteuffel basically agreed with Wolff's first impression, and didn't hesitate to call that peculiar expression of free-thought by its proper name; indeed he thought he could recognize in the book the same ideas and the arguments Voltaire had expressed in “a certain letter written to demonstrate that matter can think”, the one that Reinbeck had “solidement refutée” by means of the princi-

<sup>18</sup> Wolff's letter to Manteuffel, January 2 1748 (nr. 414), p. 153. The same idea can be found also in a previous letter (Dec. 29 1747, nr. 412) where Wolff claimed: “Die Confiscation der Bücher macht insgemein, daß die Menschen begieriger darnach werden, und je unartiger sich der Autor aufführet, je mehr wil ein jeder einen solchen raren Schatz haben, und ob ihn gleich nur wenige theuer bezahlen, so communiciret doch ein Besitzer deßelben ihn desto mehreren, wodurch er bekandter wird, als wenn man ihn vor einige groschen hätte haben können, da man als eine gemeine und ungereimte Sache ein solches Buch würde verachtet haben” (p. 150). Cf. also Wolff's letter to Manteuffel, Nov. 2 1748 (nr. 486), p. 266.

<sup>19</sup> Wolff's letter to Manteuffel, January 2 1748 (nr. 414), p. 154.



ples of Wolff's rational psychology<sup>20</sup>. The two friends had a predominantly bad opinion of Frederick's favourite advisor, considering him to irreparably lack stable principles, with a clear inclination towards materialism, skepticism, and atheism<sup>21</sup>.

On January 14<sup>th</sup>, just three days after having received the book, Wolff announced to his friend that he was ready to return back the copy he had on loan. After this first lightning but careful reading Wolff was able to conjecture about the paternity of the work; according to him the author could have easily been a certain Kuenz (Caspar Cuenz or Gaspard Cuentz, or Künz, 1676-1752), the Swiss State Counselor in Saint-Gall, and member of the Académie des Sciences et Belles Lettres in Marseilles, who was well known to Wolff as the author of four volumes in octavo on materialism. *L'Homme machine* seemed to fit perfectly the scope of presenting the same ideas in a much shorter and more manageable compendium, probably according to the advice by the Marquis d'Argens, who was notoriously engaged in the *affaire*<sup>22</sup>. The monumental work by Cuenz Wolff was referring to was published in Neuchâtel by the Imprimerie des éditeurs du Journal helvétique in 1742 with the title *Essai d'un Système nouveau concernant la nature des êtres spirituels en partie sur les principes du célèbre Mr. Locke, philosophe anglois dont l'auteur fait l'apologie*. Actually the 'apprentice' philosopher Cuenz shared with the author of *L'Homme machine* a clear apologetic inclination towards Locke, as well as a just as much clear aversion for the metaphysics of monads. Nevertheless – and it should probably have made Wolff suspicious – he attempted to reconcile his radical metaphysical materialism with the principles of Christianity. By stating that God's immateriality was nothing but a mere chimaera, and the unextended substance a pure *ens rationis*, Cuenz stood as the paladin of a new alliance between philosophy and religion which aimed at silencing the reprisals of the *esprit forts*<sup>23</sup>. According to Wolff's general view Cuenz's mate-

<sup>20</sup> Wolff's letter to Manteuffel, January 11 1748 (nr. 415), p. 155. The original title of the so-called *Epistula gallica* (French letter) was: *Copie d'un Manuscript ou l'on soutient que c'est la matière qui pense*; cf. *supra* fn. 7. On Reinbeck's refutation cf. RUMORE, *Materia cogitans* cit., pp. 121-128. Differently from Manteuffel – who was actually writing a private letter and not taking part in a public debate – Reinbeck was very prudent in ascribing the letter to Voltaire, despite its clear proximity to his so-called *Letter on Locke* in the *English Letters*.

<sup>21</sup> Manteuffel's letter to Wolff, June 15 1739 (nr. 33), p. 75: "Voltaire, luy même, est un homme qui n'a aucun principe fixe. Son genie plus vaste que solide; soutenu d'une Philautie demesurée, et d'un desir outré de passer pour un esprit universel et superieur; le porte cependant à embrasser et à soutenir avec vivacité les opinions les plus extraordinaires. Etant de ce gout là, il ne faut pas être surpris, qu'il donne, à corps perdu, dans le Materialisme et le Scepticisme, ne cachant pas même à ses confidens, qu'il est Athée. Il est d'ailleurs d'une humeur turbulente, inegale, emportée, mordante, et tellement livré à la vilainie, à la debauche la plus infame, et a tout ce qui est le plus opposé à la probité, et à la sagesse, qu'il n'y a que la crainte des supplices qui l'empêche de professer ouvertement la sceleratesse".

<sup>22</sup> Wolff's letter to Manteuffel, January 18 1748 (nr. 418), pp. 159-160.

<sup>23</sup> The role of Cuenz in the German scene of the time was not the most central, but also not marginal at all. With his dissertation on monads (*Dissertation qui a remporté le prix proposé par l'Académie royale*

rialism went back to the time he spent in Paris, where that philosophical attitude seemed to be “so common among the learned people” that “every member of the Academie des sciences and of the Academie des inscriptions and belles lettres are nothing but deists” (p. 157). In effect Wolff considered the path that leads from deism to materialism to be short and pre-set: “it moves from Spinozism and ends up in the materialism itself” (*ibidem*), the latter being a sly mixture of the deistic mistake (the denial of divine providence), and of Spinoza’s erroneous idea that God is as much extended as material and composite bodies<sup>24</sup>. The claims of *L'Homme machine* followed unsurprisingly from those premises: there is no other being than material being; humans and animals differ only by means of the degree of their physical organization; the different terms we use to indicate the faculties of the soul are nothing but empty words which designate the faculty of imagination and the brain as its ‘laboratory’; the soul doesn’t exist at all, nor does the odd artificial harmony that seeks to explain the *commercium* between mind and body; every psychical process can be reduced to the *mechanismum corporis* and to cerebral modifications that produce thoughts and appetites. The conclusion was the identification of the ‘true philosopher’ with the physician, who deals only with the mechanical functioning of the material body; it implied a profound disregard towards the explorers of the depths of the soul, and even more

*des sciences et belles lettres sur le Système des Monades avec les pièces qui ont concouru*, Hande und Spener, Berlin 1748) he managed to enter the philosophical debate, and to enter in contact with the main representatives of the Berlin Academy, from Maupertuis to Formey. Cf. A. THOMSON, *Un marginal de la république des sciences: Caspar Cuenz*, in *Dix-huitième siècle*, 40 (2008), pp. 29-42; C. BORGHERO, *Spiriti estesi e corpi animati. La metafisica di Cuenz tra Newton e Diderot*, in *Giornale critico della filosofia italiana*, XCI (XCIII) (2012), pp. 324-339; A. THOMSON, *L'Âme des Lumières. Le débat sur l'être humain entre religion et science: Angleterre-France (1690-1760)*, Champ Vallon, Paris 2013, pp. 232-237. A further confirmation of Cuenz’s uninterrupted activity of self-promotion can be found in the correspondence between Wolff and Manteuffel: Wolff tells his correspondent he has just received from Cuenz “ein Plan von einem neuen Systemate von dem Ursprunge, der Erzeugung und Natur des Menschen” – the same *précis* of the “essai sur la formation, la propagation et la nature de l'être humain” Cuenz had already sent to Euler (THOMSON, *Un marginal de la république des sciences* cit., p. 37). Claiming that Cuenz was the real author of *L'Homme machine* Wolff asks Manteuffel to forward it to Kästner (at that time still close to Wolff’s philosophy) in order to hear his opinion on it (*Wolff’s letter to Manteuffel*, July 13 1748, nr. 448, p. 204; *Manteuffel’s letter to Wolff*, July 16 1748, nr. 449, p. 205; *Manteuffel’s letter to Wolff*, July 22 1748, nr. 452, pp. 209-210, with a report on Kästner’s opinion on the *précis*, that Wolff will judge “gemäß seiner durchdringenden Einsicht und gewöhnlichen Überlegung”, *Wolff’s letter to Manteuffel*, July 26 1748, nr. 455, p. 213, and Manteuffel’s reply of July 30 1748, nr. 457, p. 216).

<sup>24</sup> According to Wolff (cf. *Theologia naturalis methodo scientifica pertractata. Pars posterior*, Renger, Francofurti et Lipsiae 1737, reprint Olms, Hildesheim 1980, § 529) “Deista [...] dicitur, qui Deum existere concedit, eum tamen res humanas curare negat, seu providentiam divinam negat. Unde Deismus in negatione providentiae Numinis consistit, cujus existentia admittitur” (cf. G. GAWLICK, *Christian Wolff und der Deismus*, in *Christian Wolff 1679-1754. Interpretationen zu seiner Philosophie und deren Wirkung*, Meiner, Hamburg 1983, pp. 129-138; and Id., art. “Deismus”, in J. RITTER / K. GRÜNDER (Hrsg.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Schwabe, Basel and Stuttgart 1971 ff.). On Spinoza’s mistake: WOLFF, *Theologia naturalis methodo scientifica pertractata. Pars posterior* cit., §§ 689-694: § 692: “Spinoza errat, dum extensionem Dei esse attributum, sive Deum esse rem extensam contendit”.

towards the theologians – a disregard that according to Wolff and Manteuffel the anonymous author shared with Johann Christian Edelmann, on whose dramatic destiny they had commented at length<sup>25</sup>. Like Edelmann, every materialist is at the same time godless and Spinozist: he has “no other God than Nature, and [...] he assumes there is a *seule substance diversement modifiée*”<sup>26</sup>.

According to Wolff this kind of materialism was nothing more and nothing less than the old idea of reducing substance to merely passive matter ruled by mechanical principles. It was once again the reproduction of the same old story; in about one century materialism had not been able to move one step further. It was actually still at the same point where Hobbes left it, being a form of metaphysical and mechanical monism where inert matter was conceived in terms of extension (shape, size and motion), and the only kind of activity originated in a principle of movement coming from outside<sup>27</sup>. After all, Wolff’s metaphysical conception was fundamentally Cartesian, and any form of materialism appeared in his eyes as an undue mutilation of dualism.

Considering the question from this rigid perspective, Wolff was not able to grasp the peculiarity of La Mettrie’s materialism – a peculiarity that in fact La Mettrie himself had contributed to keep out of sight by hinting already in the title of his work at a possible Cartesian legacy. In his materialism matter was much more than bare extension. His system embodied a form of *modern Epicureanism* according to which matter has an immanent active principle; it consists in the composition of atoms, or molecules conceived as portions of living matter<sup>28</sup>. The

<sup>25</sup> Wolff’s letter to Manteuffel, January 14 1748 (nr. 417), p. 158. The reference is to J.C. EDELMANN, *Abgenöthigtes Jedoch Andern nicht wieder aufgenöthigtes Glaubens-Bekentniß* (1746), in *Sämtliche Schriften in Einzelausgaben*, ed. by Walter Grossmann, frommann-holzboog, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt 1969-1987, vol. IX, followed by J.P. SÜSSMILCH’s reply, *Die Unvernunft und Bosheit des berüchtigten Edelmanns durch seine schändliche Vorstellung des Obrigkeitlichen Amts aus seinen Moses dargethan und zu aller Menschen Warnung vor Augen gelegt*, Haude und Spener, Berlin 1747, and again by EDELMANN’s, *Schuldigstes Danksagungs-Schreiben an den Herrn Probst Süßmilch vor Dessen, Ihm unbewußt erzeugte Dienste* (1747), in *Sämtliche Schriften in Einzelausgaben* cit., vol. XI. On Edelmann cf. E. SCHEWELEIT, *Johann Christian Edelmann – Repräsentant der radikalen Aufklärung*, in W. FÖRSTER (ed.), *Aufklärung in Berlin*, Akademie Verlag, Berlin 1989, pp. 279-315; R. OTTO, *Johann Christian Edelmann’s Criticism of the Bible and its Relation to Spinoza*, in W. VAN BUNGE / W.N.A. KLEVER (eds.), *Disguised and Overt Spinozism around 1700*, Brill, Leiden 1996, pp. 171-188; E. WALRAVENS, *Johann Christian Edelmann’s Radicalism: A Synthesis of Enlightenment and Spirituality*, in *Philosophica*, 89 (2014), pp. 137-178.

<sup>26</sup> Wolff’s letter to Manteuffel, January 29 1748 (nr. 420), p. 162; even though “Edelmann hat nur weniger Verstand und politesse, als der in frantzösischem Habit eingekleidete vorgegebene Schweitzer” (Wolff’s letter to Manteuffel, January 29 1748 [nr. 420], p. 162).

<sup>27</sup> WOLFF, *Deutsche Metaphysik* cit., § 627 where there is a caveat concerning the possible confusion of the two concepts; matter is pure passivity, since it can oppose resistance (§ 622), whereas the body is also active i.e., capable of changing its own state (§§ 623-624). Cf. also § 607 and § 626. On the same topic cf. WOLFF, *Der vernünftigen Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und der Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt, Anderer Theil* (1724, 1740), Olms, Hildesheim 1983 (henceforth “Anmerkungen zur deutschen Metaphysik”), §§ 228 f.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. C.T. WOLFE, *A happiness fit for organic bodies: La Mettrie’s medical Epicureanism*, in N. LEDDY

idea that the principle of movement did not lie in an external impulse acting on the 'disposition' of material elements, like in Descartes's physics, but directly in the 'organization' of matter itself, is what allowed the shift from the old mechanical perspective to the new non-mechanical one. According to La Mettrie "organised matter is endowed with a motive principle (*principe moteur*), which is the only thing distinguishing it from unorganised matter [...]; and everything that happens in animals, and everything that makes one animal unlike another, arises from differences in how they are organised"; "everything depends upon how our machine is wound up (*tout dépend de la manière dont notre Machine est montée*)"<sup>29</sup>. But it was precisely Wolff's erroneous opinion, i.e. the result of his historical and theoretical bias against materialism, that was the real filter that would prejudice the reception of La Mettrie in Germany.

### 3. Wolff's armed branch

Wolff obtained some reliable information about the identity of the author of *L'Homme machine* just at the end of January, and oddly enough not via Manteuffel and his active network in the *République des lettres*, but via the Secret Counselor von Bielefeld who was sent from Berlin to Halle on a diplomatic mission. From him Wolff learnt that a French and not a Swiss physician, a certain "Lametrie", who was compelled to leave France because of the charge of impiety and atheism, was the author of the ignominious book<sup>30</sup>. With unusual haste Wolff wrote to Manteuffel about the piece of news coming from Berlin<sup>31</sup>. Impressed by such an enthusiastic involvement, Manteuffel decided to act out one of his most successful strategies in the dissemination of Wolff's ideas; he planned the publication of a review – actually an 'extract' according the usage of the time

/ A.S. LIFSCHITZ (eds.), *Epicurus in the Enlightenment*, Voltaire Foundation, Oxford 2009, pp. 69-83: pp. 74-77. On the distance between La Mettrie's position and the Cartesian model of mechanism cf. A. VARTANIAN, *La Mettrie's L'Homme Machine: A Study in the Origins of an Idea*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1960, pp. 18-24; A. THOMSON, *Materialism and Society in the mid-eighteenth Century: La Mettrie's "Discours préliminaire"*, Droz, Genève 1981, pp. 40-46; ID., *Bodies of Thought. Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment*, Oxford University Press, New York 2008, ch. 6; K. WELLMANN, *La Mettrie: Medicine, Philosophy, and Enlightenment*, Duke University Press Books, Durham-London 1992, pp. 170-186.

<sup>29</sup> J.O. DE LA METTRIE, *L'Homme machine* (1747), in ID., *Œuvres philosophiques*, ed. by F. Markovits, Fayard, Paris 1987, vol. I, p. 109 and p. 71; cf. also p. 112: "Thought is so far from being incompatible with organized matter that it seems to me to be just another of its properties, such as electricity, the motive faculty, impenetrability, extension, etc.".

<sup>30</sup> *Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, January 30 1748 (nr. 422), p. 166. Wolff considered his source of information very reliable, since the Secret Counselor von Bielefeld had chance to examine directly La Mettrie's correspondence with the people at Frederick's court (*Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, February 12 1748 [nr. 428], p. 175).

<sup>31</sup> *Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, February 4 1748 (nr. 424), p. 169.

– in a proper Wolffian tone<sup>32</sup>. Wolff, who had no intention to get into a public quarrel with such an obscure figure, welcomed warmly Manteuffel's suggestion to commission the refutation of those materialistic oddities to some faithful representative of the Society of the Alethophiles. Within a few days Manteuffel forwarded Wolff's annotations, as well as the invitation to write a review of the book to Karl Andreas Bel (1717-1782), by that time extraordinary professor of Philosophy and librarian at the University of Leipzig, who had been introduced to Wolff as a "très zélé partisan de votre Philosophie"<sup>33</sup>. On February 9<sup>th</sup> Wolff was already sending back the revised drafts of Bel's text, carefully corrected and integrated<sup>34</sup>. This episode prepares the actual reception of *La Mettrie* in Germany, since the *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* was actually rediscovered only after the scandal generated by *L'Homme machine*. Wolff's aim in this campaign was unambiguous; the presentation of the thesis of *La Mettrie*'s book had to be preceded by detailed information about the identity and the recent past of his author in order to warn the readers. *L'Homme machine* was nothing other than one of the worse effects of the moral and cultural corruption that the Prussian court welcomed so warmly<sup>35</sup>. According to Wolff's (correct) conjectures *La Mettrie* came to Berlin by means of the recommendation of his compatriot Maupertuis<sup>36</sup>, whose power at the Prussian court was mysteriously accompanied by an embarrassing intellectual poverty<sup>37</sup>. Indeed the offer of hosting the 'Man-machine' matched the

<sup>32</sup> *Manteuffel's letter to Wolff*, January 29/30 1748 (nr. 421), p. 164: "Vos reflexions sur l'Homme-Machine, je viens de les communiquer au prof. Bel, qui est venu passer la soirée avec moi, et qui en fera peut-être usage, dans un ample extrait, qu'il s'est proposé de faire de ce petit traité"; cf. *Manteuffel's letter to Wolff*, February 6 1748 (nr. 425), p. 171.

<sup>33</sup> *Manteuffel's letter to Wolff*, July 5 1747 (nr. 339), p. 38.

<sup>34</sup> *Manteuffel's letter to Wolff*, February 6 1748 (nr. 425), p. 171; Wolff's reply on February 9 1748 (nr. 427), p. 173, and the request of integrations in a *post-scriptum* in *Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, February 12 1748 (nr. 428), p. 175.

<sup>35</sup> *Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, February 12 1748 (nr. 428), p. 175. *Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, February 20 1748 (nr. 430), p. 177.

<sup>36</sup> Maupertuis was born in Saint Malo too. Wolff's letter to Manteuffel, March 25 1748 (nr. 439), p. 192. Cf. *Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, February 29 1748 (nr. 432), pp. 180-181. On the intellectual closeness between Maupertuis and *La Mettrie* Wolff will write again some months later: "M.[aupertuis] ist nicht allein ein guter Freund von dem L'Homme machine, sondern auch mit ihm einerley Sinnes. Daher nicht zu verwundern, wenn er eine jenem anständige Sprache führet": *Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, September 8 1748, nr. 469, p. 233.

<sup>37</sup> On Wolff's and Manteuffel's disdain towards Maupertuis cf. their consideration concerning the prize essay competition on monads at the Royal Academy in Berlin: "Es würde auch sehr dienlich seyn, wenn die lateinische Schrifft dem Praesidenten Maupertuis in die Hände könnte gespielt werden, weil er von den deutschen Schrifften nichts lesen kan, und, wie ich leicht voraussehen kan, diese Schrifft so eingerichtet seyn wird, daß sie einem Frantzenen angenehm zu lesen, dem die trockene Wahrheit nicht nach seinem Geschmack ist, sondern bey dem ein bon-mot mehr gielt, als alle gründliche Ausführung" (*Wolff's letter to Manteuffel*, November 8 1747, nr. 397, pp. 127-128). On September 26 1748, Wolff repeated to his friend once again the real grounds of his scorn for what Manteuffel will call "l'érudition limitée" of Maupertuis (*Manteuffel's letter to Wolff*, September 29 1748, nr. 478, p. 248): according to Wolff the Academy in Berlin will suffer from his departure not only because "sie nicht wieder einen Mann

private interests of both the powerful persons of the court; Maupertuis managed to offer a safe asylum to his compatriot compelled to leave not only France, but also the Netherlands; Frederick the Great managed to show to the entire world that the practice of tolerance in his kingdom was really unlimited – an aim he seemed to care much more about than of the freedom of thought and expression of the disgraceful persecuted physicians<sup>38</sup>.

Bel's review appeared anonymously in the *Neue Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen* in Leipzig on February 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1748. Both the general opinion on the book, and the specific objections go directly back to Wolff. The criticism concerned basically three points: the idea that one could derive the complete identity of mental and physical states from their simultaneous occurrence; the idea that an organized body could be endowed with the capacity of thinking; the idea that thought and sensation can derive from movement, provided that every single corporeal fiber has its own principle of motion. In general Bel concluded his review with a quotation of Wolff's verdict: *L'Homme machine* was nothing but an "old molding dish now served in a French sauce that is not even spicy enough to cover its bad smell"<sup>39</sup>.

#### 4. In Wolff's footsteps

The idea that *L'Homme machine* was more a kind of odd and obsolete story than a real danger was not new at all. It was part of the general reaction of Germany to the triviality of the theses and arguments of the new philosophical attitude

von gleicher einsicht zum Praesidenten bekommen könnte, sondern weil nicht leicht einer wieder so viel Credit bey dem Könige haben würde, der das utile der Academie wie er befördern könnte, und dem sich in seinen in dieser absicht gethanenen Vorschlägen niemand zu widersprechen unterstehen dörffte, und Gegenvorstellungen zu machen" (nr. 477, p. 246).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. W. DILTHEY, *Friedrich der Grosse und die deutsche Aufklärung*, in Id., *Gesammelte Schriften. Studien zur Geschichte des deutschen Geistes*, vol. 3.6, Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, Göttingen 1992 (1901), pp. 116-117. Frederick asked Maupertuis to select some *hommes de lettres* of the French environment in order to introduce the new philosophical trend in the court in Berlin. Frederick promised La Mettrie optimal work conditions and a full freedom of thought and expression. Nevertheless the real situation La Mettrie found in Berlin was deeply different: Voltaire himself revealed La Mettrie's complaining about his condition in Prussia. Cf. THOMSON, *Materialism and Society in the mid-eighteenth Century* cit., pp. 11-12.

<sup>39</sup> *Neue Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen*, 16 (February 22 1748), pp. 138-141: p. 141: "ein altes und verdorbenes Gerichte mit einer Französichen Brühe wieder aufgetragen; diese ist aber nicht so stark gewürzt, daß man jenes davor nicht mercken sollte". Cf. also Formey's opinion on the book he had just received: "Nous avons un petit livre, qui fait quelque bruit ici, sous le titre de l'Homme Machine. Ce n'est au fonds qu'une repetition de choses qui ont été cent fois dites, et cent fois réfutées" (December 26 1747, quoted from H. OSTERTAG, *Der philosophische Gehalt des Wolff-Manteuffelschen Briefwechsels* (1910), reprint Olms, Hildesheim 1980, p. 164). Cf. also the article in the *Göttingische Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*, 25 (March 1748), pp. 260-262, concerning the review of *L'Homme machine* published in the new *Nachrichten einer hallischen Bibliothek*: "Aus diesen wird man erweisen, daß die neuen Feinde des Glaubens nichts neues hervorgebracht haben" (p. 260).

coming from France. This idea was already in the criticism of some other reactions that came out a few weeks before Bel's review, first of all in the *Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen* edited by Albrecht von Haller (December 1747)<sup>40</sup>, and in the *Nachrichten von einer hallischen Bibliothek* edited by the Halle theologian Siegmund Jacob Baumgarten (January 1748)<sup>41</sup>. Especially the latter offered a very clear proof of the image people had in Germany of the new French 'philosophical trend': he criticized "the by-now widespread manner of handling not only philosophy, but also other sciences and the whole realm of knowledge in a funny and witty way (*lustig und witzig*)", the charlatanism of those sharp free-spirits (*scharfsinnige Freigeister*) who consider themselves freethinkers "only because of their weird (*sonderbar*) opinions they consider new and outrageous, and because they reject principles which are common-sensical and have been repeatedly proved" (pp. 83-84). *L'Homme machine* was the perfect expression of that intellectual degeneration: it was nothing but the "abortion of a physician, a bad copy of the *Histoire de l'âme* and of the *Pensée philosophiques* ascribed to Diderot [...]; it aims at questioning the existence of God, of the cult, of the highest beatitude, of the survival of the soul after death". And it did it in a very awkward way: "its weapons are trimmed reeds and bad assorted undergrowth; its concepts empty words, and its demonstrations witty but insane tricks [...]; therefore no one has to fear that this work can be of any damage"<sup>42</sup>.

Once Bel's review was published the identity of the author of the scandalous book was no longer mysterious at all<sup>43</sup>. But Wolff's insistence on the necessity to reveal the real paternity of the work was not his only intervention in the final draft of the review. Wolff's general ideas on La Mettrie were to influence a big part of the German scene. The *Neue theologische Bibliothek* edited by the Göt-

<sup>40</sup> *Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen*, December 1747 (zweyte Zugabe), pp. 905-907: using a very common topic, the anonymous reviewer denounced that kind of philosophy which fits the demands of sensitivity, but not those of the intellect; indeed any intellectual approach would refuse to consider the activity of thought in its various manifestations as something that can be reduced to mere mechanical movements (*mechanische Bewegungen*) in the brain, or in some other physical component of the body. The reviewer doesn't seem to be Haller; actually the *Göttingische Zeitungen* had already published a review of the *Histoire naturelle de l'âme* (June 26 1747, pp. 413-416). On the polemic between Haller and La Mettrie in that journal cf. KNABE, *Die Rezeption der französischen Aufklärung* cit., pp. 121-148.

<sup>41</sup> *Nachrichten von einer hallischen Bibliothek*, 1 (January 3, 1748), pp. 75-84.

<sup>42</sup> *Nachrichten von einer hallischen Bibliothek*, 1 (January 30 1748), p. 82.

<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless there was still some caution in revealing the true identity of the author; cf. *Göttingische Zeitungen von Gelehrten Sachen*, March 25 1748, pp. 260-262: "Er ist weder ein Schweizer, noch ein Freund, noch ein Zuhörer des Hrn. Hallers. Wir getrauen uns zu versichern, daß er ein Franzose und mit Hrn. H. niemahls in der geringsten Bekanntschaft gestanden ist. Das Buch ist im Haag und in Leiden nach Würden verbrannt, und der vermessene Verleger mit einer starken Geldstrafe belegt worden. Wir wissen des Verfassers itzige Umstände, und den Ort seines Aufenthalts ganz wohl, finden aber wichtige Ursachen denselben nicht bekannt zu machen". Two months later, in May, the *Neue theologische Bibliothek* edited by the theologian and university preacher in Göttingen Friedrich Wilhelm Kraft (1712-1758) presented the essay as the work of a certain "de la M\*" (*Neue theologische Bibliothek*, 21 [May 1748], pp. 68-70).

tingen theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Kraft (1712-1758) rejected for instance the idea that the only difference between humans and animals lay in the different degree of organization of their matter (p. 69); but also the idea that thought could be explained in terms of motion, that the mind could be reduced to the body, and that one should accept that form of materialism, with its denial of the existence of God and of divine providence. Quoting Baumgarten, Kraft claimed that according to La Mettrie “human beings are scattered on the earth like mushrooms with no grounds nor aim, and it makes no difference to them if God exists or not”<sup>44</sup>. And it was just after one year that Wolff's judgment on the on the book definitely prevailed over the other possible interpretations, preventing any other reading of *L'Homme machine* from that which recognized in it a form of the classical materialism *à la* Hobbes.

In 1749 the *Göttingische philosophische Bibliothek* published the first complete review of the debate initiated by the publication of *L'Homme machine*<sup>45</sup>. The journal was directed by Christian Ernst von Windheim (1722-1766), a talented young philosopher who completed his education in Halle with Christian Wolff and got the title of *Magister* in 1745 under the supervision of the young Baumgarten. Being an active member of the intellectual life of the Prussian town, Windheim was in contact with a group of people (among them: Georg Friedrich Meier, Joachim Lange, Johann Friedrich Stiebritz, Johann Gottlob Krüger) who were providing a sort of renovation of Wolffianism by means of issues they derived from the theological sphere of the Pietists, from Christian Thomasius's eclectic tradition, and even from the empirical and experimental method of natural and medical sciences. Once he got his professorship first in Göttingen, then in Erlangen, Windheim retained his proximity to his philosophical roots: he based his Logic classes on Wolff's handbook, and his Metaphysics ones on Baumgarten's treatise. Being an extremely prolific author, deeply engaged in the circulation of knowledge, in 1749 he began the publication of the *Göttingische philosophische*

<sup>44</sup> *Neue theologische Bibliothek*, 21 (May 1748), pp. 68-70; Baumgarten's quotation is taken from the first issue of the *Nachrichten von einer hallischer Bibliothek*, 1 (1748), p. 80. As C.T. Wolfe suggests the image of human beings scattered on the earth like mushrooms was presented as a clear sign of atheistic ideas also in Bentley's (much-read) Boyle's Lecture from the late 17<sup>th</sup> c. (R. BENTLEY, *The Folly of Atheism, and (what is now called) Deism, even with respect to the present life, Sermon I* [1691], in *Sermons preached at Boyle's lectures*, in ID., *The works of Richard Bentley*, vol. III: *Theological writings*, Macpherson, London 1838, pp. 8-9: “Now let us suppose some great professor in Atheism to suggest to some of these men, that all this is mere dream and imposture; that there is no such excellent Being, as they suppose, that created and preserves them; that all about them is dark senseless matter, driven on by blind impulses of fatality and fortune; that men first sprung up, like mushrooms, out of the mud and slime of the earth; and that all their thoughts, and the whole of what they call soul, are only various action and repercussion of small particles of matter, kept awhile a-moving by some mechanism and clock-work, which finally must cease and perish by death”). The circulation of the Boyle's lectures among the theologians in Halle still deserves an autonomous investigation.

<sup>45</sup> *Göttingische Philosophische Bibliothek*, 3 (1749), pp. 198-273.



*Bibliothek* (in 8 volumes between 1749 and 1757), which collected reviews, extracts, and comments on the national and international philosophical news. The first volume began with a discussion of *L'Homme machine*<sup>46</sup>.

The deep influence of Wolff-Bel's review is evident from the very first lines of Windheim's discussion, which recalled some of its formulas almost literally. The author of the "despicable writing" aims at "defending materialism by means of warmed-over pretexts that he put in a new French sauce in order to make them seem more tasty; and at refuting the existence of God and the persistence of the soul after death"<sup>47</sup>. La Mettrie carries on his project presenting once again the apology of materialism already presented in the *Histoire de l'âme*. Beside offering a general view on the large debate that sprouted up in just one year due to La Mettrie's scandalous work, Windheim's review played a central role in the German reception of *L'Homme machine* in so far it – through an accurate selection of polemical writings – transmitted to the readers an image of the work filtered by Wolff's 'prejudice', unable to recognize what was 'new' in La Mettrie's materialism, and what made it incomparable with the earlier mechanistic materialism. The fortune of that image was huge. In 1774, for instance, Hennings still referred to Windheim's review in his successful *Geschichte der Seelen*, one of the most read and plundered works in the history of psychology<sup>48</sup>.

The review opened with *L'Homme plus que Machine*, the notorious reply of the Dutch publisher Elie Luzac<sup>49</sup> who belonged to the circle of liberal Protestants of the *République des Lettres*, inspired by the perpetual Secretary of the Academy of Sciences in Berlin Jean Henry Samuel Formey, and therefore close to Wolff's

<sup>46</sup> Another proof of his deep interest in cultural dissemination is his further project, the *Bemühungen der Weltweisen vom Jahr 1700-1750; oder Nachrichten und Auszüge von ihren Schriften, sonderlich den ausländischen, theils selbst verfasst, theils aus den berühmtesten Monatsschriften gesammelt*, that he would publish from 1751 to 1754. On Windheim cf. in general P. TSCHACKERT, ad voc. "Windheim, Christian Ernst von", in *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (ADB), vol. 43, Duncker & Humblot, Leipzig 1898, pp. 388-390; H. DOERING, *Die gelehrten Theologen Deutschlands im achtzehnten und neunzehnten Jahrhundert*, Karl Gottfried Wagner, Neustadt an der Orla 1835, vol. 4, p. 726.

<sup>47</sup> "Den Materialismus durch aufgewärmte Scheingründe, die er durch eine französische Brühe schmackhaft gemacht hat, zu vertheidigen, die Wirklichkeit Gottes, und die Fortdauer der Seele nach dem Tode zu bestreiten": *Göttingische Philosophische Bibliothek*, 3 (1749), p. 197 (henceforth WINDHEIM); Windheim announces the publication of an English translation of the book, in which it was considered a work by the Marquis d'Argens: *Man a Machine, translated from the French of the Marques d'Argens* (p. 198).

<sup>48</sup> J.Ch. HENNINGS, *Geschichte von den Seelen der Menschen und Thiere pragmatisch entworfen*, Gebauer, Halle 1774, pp. 22–23 fn. Windheim's selection doesn't seem especially tendentious since it is very hard to find refutations or defences of *L'Homme machine* in the anti-Wolffian milieu. Euler's *Enodatio quaestionis: utrum materiae facultas cogitandi tribuit possit nec ne?* – maybe one of the best refutations of materialism from an anti-Wolffian point of view – appears only in 1746.

<sup>49</sup> *L'Homme plus que Machine* (1748), in WINDHEIM, pp. 198-216. On Luzac's role in the *République des Lettres* cf. J.Ch. LAURSEN / J. VAN DER ZANDE (eds.), *Early French and German defenses of freedom of the press: Elie Luzac's essay on Freedom of expression, 1749 and Carl Friedrich Bahrdt's On freedom of the press and its limits, 1787 in English translation*, Brill, Leiden 2003, pp. 9-34.

rationalism. It followed the *Lettre d'un Anonyme pour servir de Critique ou de Refutation, au livre intitulé l'Homme machine*, anonymously published in the *Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen*<sup>50</sup> by Samuel Christian Hollmann, a Cartesian and opponent of Wolffianism, but nevertheless a sympathizer with the materialism of those physicians like Urban Gottfried Bucher who referred to Descartes's *Les passions de l'âme* and to Hobbes's *De corpore* as the main sources of inspiration of their ideas about the nature of human beings. Indeed Hollmann stressed that the *Maschinenmensch* displayed the same philosophical structure as Bucher's *Vertrauter Brief-Wechsel vom Wesen der Seelen*, so that the two works were "like two peas in a pod"<sup>51</sup>. Hollmann's *Lettre* had the merit to provoke La Mettrie's reaction: the *Épître à mon Esprit ou l'Anonyme persiflé* was then the third text Windheim presented in a long extract in order to show that "the Machine hadn't yet corrected its way of thinking"<sup>52</sup>. These polemical writings were followed by those texts which are still nowadays considered the main products of the German reaction to La Mettrie. First of all the *Commentatio de machina et anima humana prorsus a se invicem distinctis* by the Breslau physician Balthasar Ludwig Tralles, who aimed at avenging the honor and dignity of his discipline by contesting *L'Homme machine* from the point of view of medicine. With an explicit reference to Wolff's ideas, he claimed that medicine didn't lead directly to materialism, being on the contrary the best way to consider the complex nature of human beings<sup>53</sup>. Beside that, Windheim dealt with Adam Wilhelm Franzen's *Widerlegung der Französischen Schrift: L'Homme machine, nebst dem Beweiß der*

<sup>50</sup> *Lettre d'un Anonyme pour servir de Critique ou de Refutation, au livre intitulé l'Homme machine* (March 31 1748), in *Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sachen*, May 1748.

<sup>51</sup> Hollmann was a curious character who started his philosophical career in Greifswald (1722) and in Wittenberg (1723) during the worst years of the controversy between Wolff and the Pietists. Afterwards Münchhausen called him at the Georgia Augusta in Göttingen, but just once Wolff had definitely rejected that same offer. On Hollmann cf. U. THIEL, *ad voc.* "Hollmann, Samuel Christian", in H. KLEMMER / M. KUEHN (eds.), *Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century German Philosophers*, Bloomsbury Academic, New York 2010 (who considers him to be closer to Wolff's positions than I do here). K. CRAMER, *Die Stunde der Philosophie. Über Göttingens ersten Philosophen und die philosophische Theorielage der Gründungszeit*, in J. VON STACKELBERG (ed.), *Zur geistigen Situation der Zeit der Göttinger Universitätsgründung 1737: eine Vortragsreihe aus Anlass des 250 jährigen Bestehens der Georgia Augusta*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1988, pp. 101-143; on his authorship of the review cf. J.G. ZIMMERMANN, *Das Leben des Herrn Hallers*, Heidegger und Compagnie, Zürich 1755; the mentioned text is [U.G. BUCHER], *Zweyer guten Freunde vertrauter Brief-Wechsel vom Wesen der Seelen*, Haag [but Leipzig and Jena] 1713, 1723<sup>2</sup>; Hollmann suggested that *L'Homme machine* be considered a free translation of that correspondence.

<sup>52</sup> *Épître à mon Esprit. Ou l'Anonyme persifle* (1749), in WINDHEIM, pp. 247-254. The text was originally published in S.J. Baumgarten's *Nachrichten von einer hallischen Bibliothek*, 14 (1748), pp. 179-186.

<sup>53</sup> *Commentatio de machina et anima humana prorsus a se invicem distinctis* (1749), in WINDHEIM, pp. 216-236. Referring to Tralles F.A. LANGE's *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart*, Baedeker, Iserlohn 1873-1875, cap. IV, p. 414, claims that "In allen Hauptpunkten sind es freilich die landläufigen, der Wolffschen Philosophie entlehnten Beweise, die auch hier überall wiederkehren".

*Gegensätze*<sup>54</sup>, a work that offers a further confirmation of Wolff's influence on the early reception of La Mettrie, even though it clearly shows some speculative weakness that lead Aram Vartanian to include it among the "weakest rejoinders to *L'Homme machine*" since it "substituted religious dogmas for philosophical arguments"<sup>55</sup>.

All the mentioned writings, and each from its peculiar point of view, contribute to the general picture of Wolff's refutation of materialism, focused on the refutation of the hypothesis of a *materia cogitans*. Luzac's piece mentioned Wolff's arguments in their proper order, focusing on the opposition between activity and passivity, i.e. between composition and simplicity. "Indubitable experiences show that matter is passive, or that resting matter cannot start moving without the intervention of an external principle" (p. 200); movement cannot represent the origin of thought, since otherwise "cannonballs and bombs should be able to think as well" (p. 202). Beside that, if thought was the property of extended substance one should then face the old problem concerning its possible disposition among the parts of the compound: either it should be fragmented in them – with the consequence of missing the essential unity of thought – or it should be multiplied in vain in each single part of the body (p. 204).

While this refutation was based on a traditional metaphysical dualism, the *Lettre d'un Anonyme pour servir de Critique ou de Refutation, au livre intitulé l'Homme machine*<sup>56</sup> stressed another central item of Wolff's denial of materialism, i.e. consciousness. In fact Wolff claimed that conscience (*Bewußtsein*) was an essential component of thought: 'thinking' and 'being conscious' have for him one and the same meaning: "when we pay attention to our soul we perceive that we are conscious of ourselves, and of many external things. When it happens we say we are thinking, therefore we call *thoughts* the modifications of the soul it is conscious of"<sup>57</sup>.

According to Wolff, consciousness was a prerogative of simple beings, since no compound would ever be able to compare its own modifications in order to conceive them as distinct and as something different from itself<sup>58</sup>. Neither in

<sup>54</sup> *Widerlegung der Französischen Schrift: l'Homme machine, nebst dem Beweiß der Gegensätze* (1749), in WINDHEIM, pp. 254-273.

<sup>55</sup> VARTANIAN, *La Mettrie's l'Homme Machine* cit., p. 99.

<sup>56</sup> The *Lettre d'un Anonyme pour servir de Critique ou de Refutation, au livre intitulé l'Homme machine* cit., had the merit of provoking a reply by La Mettrie (who probably didn't read German). He replied with the *Épître a mon Esprit ou l'Anonyme persifle* (WINDHEIM, pp. 236-247). The French letter is the translation of the one published in the *Göttingische Zeitungen von gelehrten Sache*, 52 (1748) and 54 (1748).

<sup>57</sup> WOLFF, *Deutsche Metaphysik* cit., § 194, and §§ 193, 195.

<sup>58</sup> WOLFF, *Deutsche Metaphysik* cit., § 740; Id., *Psychologia rationalis* cit., § 90. On the difference between representations in the soul and in physical bodies cf. P. RUMORE, *Die Bilder der Seele. Vorstellung und Einheit*, in L. CATALDI MADONNA (ed.), *Macht und Bescheidenheit der Vernunft. Beiträge zur Philosophie Christian Wolffs*, Olms, Hildesheim 2005, pp. 111-122.

those cases which we understand intuitively as most similar to the representative activity of the soul – viz. mimetic representations, images in mirrors, or any kind of reproductions in a machine – material representations never cease being *repraesentationes compositi in composito* and become *repraesentationes compositi in simpliciter*, i.e. thoughts<sup>59</sup>.

In the *Lettre* Hollmann admitted his early inclination towards materialism, even though the arguments in favor of the materiality of the soul never managed to convince him at all (pp. 237-240). Being trapped in their mechanical explanations, materialists failed in their attempt to account for the undeniable phenomenon of *consciousness*, and of the *spontaneity* of the subject of thought: they failed to explain how “in all those mechanical operations we are conscious of ourselves, and of what was going on in us, and how can there in us be a capacity to produce spontaneous movement” (p. 239). Descartes himself, the real inspirer of the image of the man-machine, seduced by the idea of the general mechanical explanation of the world, was nevertheless compelled to find some place for consciousness and spontaneous movements within his system<sup>60</sup>. Hollmann's philosophical *summa*, *De stupendo naturae mysterio, anima humana sibi ipsi ignota*, rejected the idea that the soul has an immediate awareness of its own essence as an immaterial substance. On the contrary, it derived this kind of knowledge by means of discursive reasoning from the nature of its operations. Nevertheless the soul gained a kind of immediate self-knowledge: it knows it is a substance (therefore Hollmann was radically anti-Spinozist)<sup>61</sup>, which differs from the body (anti-reductionism)<sup>62</sup>. Understanding the soul as the result of the body's physiological processes, and denying its substantial nature *L'Homme machine* contested in fact precisely these cornerstones, and revealed its direct Spinozistic legacy, according to this interpretation: “At the end of his book he doesn't hide the fact that he is a Spinozist”; “according to me a Spinozist is a miserable and confused man, which should be pitied, and which one should try and help, if still possible, by introducing to him a couple of not-too-tricky remarks from logic, a clear explanation of what ‘one’ and ‘many’ mean, and what

<sup>59</sup> WOLFF, *Psychologia rationalis* cit., §§ 83 e 87; ID., *Deutsche Metaphysik* cit., § 217, §§ 738-740, and § 751.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. WINDHEIM, p. 243.

<sup>61</sup> WINDHEIM, p. 235: “Laßt uns nun ganz kühn schliessen, spricht er, daß der Mensch eine Maschine, und daß nur eine einzige Substanz in der Welt sey, die verschieden modificirt ist. Wie leichte läßt sich einem Spinoza bloß naschsprechen?”.

<sup>62</sup> Even if close to Cartesianism Hollmann has a polemical attitude towards some aspects of Descartes's dualism that seems to be influenced by Malebranche. It concerns mostly the idea of a ‘privileged way’ to access the the knowledge of the nature of the soul. In his *De stupendo naturae mysterio, anima humana sibi ipsi ignota* (Greifswald 1722, Wittenberg 1723; Göttingen 1750) he claims that the soul doesn't know itself better than it knows other substances: “ignorantia crassa est, qua mens nostra in sua ipsius cognitione laborat” (ed. 1750, p. 8).

kind of thing is a substance. Who has distinct concepts of those things, and is free from any prejudice will be ashamed if he spent even a quarter of an hour worrying about the confused ideas of a Spinozist” (pp. 244–245).

Consciousness, and the impossibility to explain its processes by means of mechanical laws represented for Hollmann the real defeat of materialism; facing this difficulty – as already stressed by Baumgarten – “reasonable physicians know they won’t be able for a long time yet to explain every modification that occurs in the human body, or to make their causes clear and comprehensible, their art being still very far away from a plain degree of certainty and evidence” (pp. 83-84). Similarly Tralles vindicated the so called *mechanische Ärzte* (p. 218) – like Schreiber (Wolff’s young compatriot<sup>63</sup>), Hoffmann, Boerhaave, and those who explained the functioning of human body by means of its mechanical structure – from the accusation of complicity with La Mettrie, resulting from his own naming of them as guardians of his mistakes. According to Tralles, those physicians never believed they could or wish to “explain everything going on in this small world through the world itself”; “in particular in their last days they were all deeply persuaded that the soul is completely different from the body, and grounded in this idea their tranquility in front of death, and their hope in an eternal beatitude” (p. 218). In this way Tralles averted the threat of tying the destiny of the physician to that of the materialist; he explicitly presented his *Commentatio* as a defense of “the honor of religion, and [of] the innocence of medicine” – and of Haller’s in first place, a very recurring topic within that debate on *L’Homme machine*; Tralles suggested to La Mettrie to study both of Wolff’s two Latin treatises on psychology (p. 221). “How could the H.M. manage to explain on the basis of the brain the freedom of thinking, the rapidity of judgment, abstraction, and other logical operations? He shows us and teaches that the most artificial machine can think. One hopes he won’t seek to appeal to the obscure ways of the occult qualities [as a solution]. How will he at last explain the moral human being in mechanical terms?” (p. 222).

Tralles’s arguments were the arguments of a physician who had a good philosophical (Wolffian) education too: he was very careful not to deduce more than a generic connection of physical and psychical processes from their empirical coexistence, nor the existence of an Author of nature and its finalistic orientation from the perfect integration of the corporeal organs, and their functions<sup>64</sup>; he did

<sup>63</sup> Cf. WOLFF, *Wie die Arzneykunst nach einer beweisenden Lehrart eingerichtet werden könne* (1731), in *Kleine philosophische Schriften I* cit., pp. 689-690, originally published as preface of J.F. SCHREIBER’s *Elementa medicinae physico-mathematica*.

<sup>64</sup> WINDHEIM, p. 224: “Aber wie leicht könnte er sich nicht davon durch eine genau Betrachtung des geringsten Gliedes seines eigenen Körpers überführen, wenn er nur nicht mit dem unglücklichen Spinoza die weisen Absichten, um welcher willen unser Körper mit Fleiß so und nicht anders ist gemacht worden, leugnete, und auf die fatale Nothwendigkeit in der Natur dränge”.

not conclude from the identical anatomy of human and animal brains that the soul reduces to the brain, but rather the idea that many of the cerebral functions are still unknown, and that it is therefore hasty to endow the brain with the faculty of thought (p. 220). Far from considering it a mere product of blind chance, Tralles also includes the fact that animals have no language in the wider project of the best possible world, according to which they were not provided with the instruments suitable to speak. Being himself a physician, Tralles was one of the few critics who took seriously into account La Mettrie's idea that each corporeal (i.e. material) fiber might be endowed with an internal active principle. Tralles considered such a force nothing but a *vis motrix*; even if movement might originate directly in the nerves, it does not explain how it could ever produce sensations, affections or ideas, i.e. to overcome the radical heterogeneity between thought and movement, between the activities that originate in the soul and those which occur within matter<sup>65</sup>. "Resting on a precise knowledge of the human body and of its mechanical laws, true medicine does not promote an erroneous idea of the human soul", viz. the knowledge of the so called *medici mechanici* (iatromechanical physicians) doesn't automatically lead them to materialistic positions<sup>66</sup>. This remark on Tralles's *Commentatio* opened the *Widerlegung* by Franzen, who had already published a *Kritische Geschichte der Lehre der Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (Lübeck 1747) where he proved to be a committed advocate of the immateriality of the soul, and of its immortality<sup>67</sup>. Franzen's *Widerlegung* appeared shortly after Tralles's refutation, which it is close to in many aspects, even though Franzen had no occasion to read Tralles's work before the publication of his own<sup>68</sup>. The affinities between the two writings go back to their common source of inspiration, which works as a general framework both for Tralles, whose analyses are more

<sup>65</sup> This argument is also used in his other successful work *De animae existentis immaterialitate et immortalitate cogitata* (Breßlau, 1774), which had an exceptionally wide circulation. Indeed it was first translated into German by Tralles himself under the title *Gedanken über das Daseyn, die Immaterialität und Unsterblichkeit der menschlichen Seele* (Göttingen, 1776), and then also into French as *Pensées de l'immatérialité et de l'existence de l'âme* (Vienna, 1775, also published as *Pensées sur l'existence et de l'immatérialité de l'âme*, Vienna, 1776), and into Italian (*Considerazioni del signor Baldassarre Lodovico Tralles consigliere ed archiatro [...] sopra l'immortalità e spiritualità dell'anima esistente*, Firenze 1780).

<sup>66</sup> Cf. the defense of iatromechanism in WOLFF, *Epistula gratulatoria in qua Vera philosophiae mechanicae notio explicantur* (1710), in ID., *Meletemata mathematico-philosophica* (1755), Num. II, Olms, Hildesheim 2003. Here (p. 730) Wolff explains that the expressions *philosophia mechanica / mechanisch philosophieren* indicate the bare explanation of phenomena on the basis of the natural laws of motion. "In this sense natural (as well as artificial) bodies are called machines: their actions derive indeed from the composition and interction of their parts according to eternal and immutable natural laws". Mechanism is not dangerous in itself: by means of the mechanical explanations one can grasp "the imprint of God's wisdom in the world" (WOLFF, *Ausführliche Nachricht von seinen eigenen Schriften* [1726], Olms, Hildesheim 1996, p. 237).

<sup>67</sup> A.W. FRANZEN, *Widerlegung der Französischen Schrift: l'Homme machine, nebst dem Beweiß der Gegensätze*, Jacobi, Leipzig 1749, Vorrede, p. 2\*; cf. the discussion in WINDHEIM, pp. 254-273.

<sup>68</sup> FRANZEN, *Widerlegung der Französischen Schrift* cit., Vorrede, p. 3\*.

inspired by natural sciences and medicine, and for Franzen who recalls instead theological and metaphysical arguments<sup>69</sup>. Beside the theological argument concerning the truth of revelation – whose refutation was for Franzen one of the strongholds of his polemic against *L'Homme machine* – his original contribution to the debate is to be found in the analysis and refutation of La Mettrie's idea of matter, according to which every single material part contains an internal principle of movement ruled by the brain, and responsible for the production of sensations and thoughts. This was how La Mettrie was able to “present in a new decoration (*ausschmucken*) the old belief of man and animals as machines” (§ 99, p. 309). Franzen's refutation developed on two different levels. The first concerned the movements that take place in the body: even though those movements originated in an internal principle of the corporeal components, they are not all of the same kind, some of them being voluntary, while others are involuntary. One could only admit that the latter derive from the mechanism of the body, but not the former, so that in conclusion it turned out to be unfeasible to admit only one principle for all movements. In order to justify spontaneous motions one was compelled to turn to the presence of a soul which evades the mechanical laws of bodies. Supposing that matter is active – by means of the principle of irritability or of some kind of sensitivity – this activity could never be a spontaneous one, but again a form of mechanical movement. For this reason – and here is the second level of the refutation – Franzen didn't admit any reduction of thought and sensations to such an internal active principle in matter (§ 72) on the basis of the divide between the deterministic realm of bodies, and the spontaneous realm of souls. But this second refutation followed Wolff's model of dualism, which differed from Descartes's: in the 5<sup>th</sup> section of his *Widerlegung* Franzen introduced in fact a sharp critique of the idea of the animal-machine along the same lines as Wolff's *German Metaphysics*, and Georg Friedrich Meier's *Versuch eines neuen Lehrgebäudes von den Seelen der Thiere* (Halle 1749), both well disposed to concede animals a soul, even though less perfect than the human one<sup>70</sup>.

Franzen's *Widerlegung* recognised in some ways La Mettrie's innovations in the field of materialism, but he denied firmly the plausibility of these ideas: more than as a worthy hypothesis, this doctrine was presented here as the *boutade*

<sup>69</sup> FRANZEN, *Widerlegung der Französischen Schrift* cit., Vorrede, pp. 2\*-3\*: “Mr Luzac had no other aim than to prove that matter cannot think, and to refute the main consequences that materialists derive from their mistake, without discussing every and each apparent reasons of our opponents. [...] Mr Tralles wanted mainly to show that true medicine which is grounded on a precise knowledge of the human body and of its mechanical laws, doesn't favor any wrong thoughts about the human soul at all. [...] In theology and philosophy I still found something to add, even though, as concerns some observations related to anatomy, I explicitly referred to him, and for this help I am grateful”.

<sup>70</sup> FRANZEN, *Widerlegung der Französischen Schrift* cit., § 107; cf. WOLFF, *Deutsche Metaphysik* cit., § 830, §§ 869-897.

of an insolent physician who was not familiar at all with the grounds of good metaphysics. Following the same conviction Windheim skipped this topic in his review of the *Widerlegung*, focusing rather on its old Wolffian legacy: the irreducibility of thought and movement, the exceptional phenomenon of consciousness, the heterogeneity between the two ontological realms beyond the concurrence of their modifications.

All these refutations were articulated in two main ideas: the opposition of thought and matter based on the opposition between activity and passivity; and the phenomenon of consciousness, which marks the difference between the proper idea, the *imago mentalis* and any *imago materialis*<sup>71</sup>. At the basis of this refutation was Wolff's general claim concerning the necessity and knowability of real essences against Locke's metaphysical caution, as well as Wolff's diffidence towards the validity of the harmonic principle among the substances, whose denial didn't lead directly, by the way, neither to the possibility of a reduction of the mind to the organization of the body, nor to their homogeneous metaphysical nature. In this way the refutations disseminated a clearly maimed image of La Mettrie's materialism, which will soon crystallize in German philosophy; its origins went back first and foremost to the idea of materialism Wolff had developed by then 20 years earlier during his controversies with Buddeus, but are also the product of a massive cultural strategy which guaranteed their hegemonic dissemination. The image of La Mettrie as a continuator of Hobbes' mechanistic materialism then spread its long-lasting influence, and one can find it in Euler – who conceived the man-machine as an expression of the same mechanical system of the puppet-theatre that was also the basis of (Wolff's) preestablished harmony<sup>72</sup> – in Gottfried Ploucquet<sup>73</sup>, in Spalding, in Kant, which then allowed the new generation of young thinkers in the 1770s to inaugurate in Germany a new materialistic trend now presented in a novel hylomorphic guise.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. WOLFF, *Psychologia rationalis, methodo scientifica pertractata, qua ea, quae de anima humana indubia experientiae fide innotescunt, per essentiam et naturam animae explicantur, et ad intimiorem naturae ejusque auctoris cognitionem pro futura proponuntur*, Frankfurt and Leipzig 1734, reprint. ed. 1740 Olms, Hildesheim 1972, §§ 83, 87, and §§ 113-114; *Deutsche Metaphysik* cit., § 751; P. RUMORE, *Die Bilder der Seele. Vorstellung und Einheit*, in CATALDI MADONNA (ed.), *Macht und Bescheidenheit der Vernunft* cit., pp. 111-122.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. L. EULER, *Briefe an eine deutsche Prinzessin über verschiedene Gegenstände aus der Physik und Philosophie*, written during his last years in Berlin (1760-1762), but published only between 1768 (vols. 1-2) and 1772 (vol. 3) with the financial support of the Academy of Sciences in St. Petersburg. Letter nr. 84 makes an explicit reference to the "puppeteer-marionette relation".

<sup>73</sup> G. PLOUCQUET, *Dissertatio de materialismo, cum supplementis et confutatione libelli: L'Homme machine*, Erhardt, Tübingen 1751.



**Abstract:** The paper retraces the early reception of La Mettrie's work *L'Homme machine* in Germany. It focuses in particular on the role played by Wolff and by Manteuffel's "Society of Alethiophiles" in promoting a scandalous image of La Mettrie's work by reducing it to the old formula of mechanistic materialism *à la* Hobbes. By defending Wolff's interpretation, Manteuffel contributed discretely but actively to the capillary dissemination of such an image, which was to become very soon the dominant one. By means of their collaboration Wolff and Manteuffel didn't only introduce a deep and long-lasting misunderstanding of La Mettrie's materialism in German philosophy; they additionally even vetoed any possible appreciation of his peculiar idea of active matter.

**Keywords:** Materialism; Mechanism; Hylomorphism; Manteuffel; Society of Alethiophiles; Karl Andreas Bel; Christian Ernst von Windheim.

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## Zwischen System und Experiment

Johann Gottlob Krügers *Versuch  
einer Experimental-Seelenlehre*

Nichts ist gewisser, als dass Vernunft und  
Erfahrung die beyden Grundsäulen aller  
menschlichen Erkenntniß sind.

J.G. KRÜGER, *Experimental-Seelenlehre*, § 2

### 1. Experiment und Metaphysik – Krüger als Wolffianer?

Im Jahre 1760 veröffentlicht ein noch unbekannter Privatdozent der Philosophie in Bützlow, einer Auslagerung der Universität Rostock<sup>1</sup>, einen moderat metaphysik-kritischen Text, hier heißt es:

„So ist sie [d. i. die Metaphysik] von dem Freiherrn von Wolff eingerichtet, den man nach der Prophezeiung eines grossen Mannes alsdenn noch mit Hochachtung nennen wird, wenn die mehresten seiner Verächter schon längstens werden vergessen sein; und ich sehe keinen hinreichenden Grund hievon abzugehen, die *Experimental-Seelenlehre* von ihr zu trennen“<sup>2</sup>.

Niemand anderes als Johann Nikolaus Tetens, in den 1770er Jahren selber einer der bedeutendsten empirischen Psychologen Europas, stellt hier mit Nachdruck fest, dass er alle Versuche zu einer metaphysikfreien, rein experimentellen Psychologie für unmöglich, insbesondere aber jene *Experimental-Seelenlehre*, die sein Helmstedter Kollege Johann Gottlob Krüger vier Jahre zuvor der Öffentlichkeit vorgelegt hatte<sup>3</sup>, für haltlos erachtet. Eine vollständige Abtrennung der Psychologie von der Metaphysik hält Tetens 1760 für gänzlich unmöglich. Diese Auffassung wird sich in den kommenden Jahren nur gering-

<sup>1</sup> Vgl. hierzu G. CAMENZ, *Die Herzoglichen Friedrichs-Universität und Paedagogium zu Bützow in Mecklenburg 1760-1789*, Gäusebrunnen-Verlag, Bützow 2004.

<sup>2</sup> J.N. TETENS, *Gedancken über einige Ursachen, warum in der Metaphysik nur wenige ausgemachte Wahrheiten sind, als eine Einladungs-Schrift zu seinen den 13ten October auf der neuen Bützowschen Academie anzufangenden Vorlesungen, entworfen von Johann Nicolaus Tetens*, Berger und Boedner, Bützow-Wismar 1760, pp. 4-5 (Hervorhebung GS).

<sup>3</sup> J.G. KRÜGER, *Versuch einer Experimental-Seelenlehre*, Hemmerde, Halle-Helmstedt 1756.