An article with the title ‘Absolutism’ promises insights into the political philosophy of Christian Wolff and may raise the expectation that the question to be discussed is once again whether Wolff supported absolute monarchy or whether he favoured a form of government that grants the subjects or citizens a greater or lesser degree of participation. This issue is not new and has been controversially discussed in the literature. While older works typically describe Wolff as a partisan of absolutism1, Marcel Thomann is among those who come to the opposite conclusion. In his view, Christian Wolff is the ‘early advocate of the modern liberal constitutional state whose laws are dictated by human reason and are to ensure the complete and free development of the individual’2. Therefore, Thomann regards the view that ‘Christian Wolff provided a philosophical justification for absolutism’ as ‘absolutely incomprehensible’3. Other authors rightly stress that Wolff carefully avoided any statement on the best form of government4. In fact, he emphasized that he had ‘no intention for a particular state’5 and in general he assumed that

that type of body politic is the best which best furthers the common weal and maintains public security, that is, where most people live happily together and are safe from external enemies (Dt. Politik, §223).

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Although such assertions do not necessarily exclude a factual preference for absolutism, there is much to be said for the assessment that it was Wolff’s aim to establish ‘a system which is suitable for the diversity of political reality without committing himself to one type of state that is legitimate in terms of natural law’.

As matters stand, the question about Wolff’s attitude to absolute monarchy does not get us very far, especially if we want to derive an unambiguous position from his theory of the state. Nonetheless, the question is not obsolete and comes up again when one asks about the political consequences of the ‘absolute’ claims with which Wolff connects his philosophy as a whole. He aims at a philosophy which is a science that lays claim to ‘absolute certainty’ and whose results therefore ‘need not and cannot be revised but are final’.

Of course, this has implications for political philosophy, both with regard to its content and with regard to its discursive position. Thus, Wolff’s theoretical absolutism leads us to a type of political absolutism which need not have much in common with the classical principle of *princeps legibus solutus*. We can assess the significance of such a ‘double absolutism’ if we consider statements that cannot be reconciled with an emancipatory notion of Enlightenment. Such ambivalences, i.e. elements of the theory which belong to the Enlightenment as an historical epoch but clearly contradict its emancipatory programme, are not unusual in Wolff’s philosophy. Therefore, the literature on Wolff has raised the paradoxical question of whether Christian Wolff as an exponent of the German Enlightenment can be assigned to the Enlightenment at all. But I will not try to answer this question here. My aim is to demonstrate some ambivalences in Wolff’s political philosophy in order to show that their unmistakably absolutist traits necessarily follow from Wolff’s theoretical absolutism.

In the following, I will concentrate on two issues. First, I examine the relationship between philosophy and politics, and then I analyze the political function of the ‘highest good’. At the end, I will come back to Wolff’s ‘double absolutism’ again.

I. – Philosophy and Politics

Since the ‘happy success’ of everything which mankind is determined to do is based on the ‘correct perception of truth’ (*Dt. Politik*, §309), it is perfectly clear to Christian Wolff that the complete bliss of the commonwealth is founded on ‘right philosophy’ (‘richtige Weltweisheit’). And correct philosophy is what Wolff


9. C. Wolff, *Von den Regenten, die sich der Weltweisheit befeissigen, und von den Welt-