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## WHAT IS SYMBOLIC COGNITION? THE DEBATE AFTER LEIBNIZ AND WOLFF

### 1. *A characterization problem*

The distinction between intuitive and symbolic thought, or cognition, was publicly introduced by Leibniz in 1684 and went largely unnoticed for nearly four decades, until Christian Wolff revived it in his *German Metaphysics*.<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the profound impact of Wolffian philosophy, the theory of the two kinds of cognition enjoyed its glory days. From the 1720s until the late eighteenth century, it was treated as a prominent topic by most handbooks of logic, metaphysics, and psychology. Philosophers of that period widely agreed in deeming Leibniz's distinction both useful and well-grounded. Many simply took it for granted that the whole of human cognitive activity could be correctly divided into two sets: the set of acts performed in the intuitive mode and the set of acts performed in the symbolic mode.

This general agreement notwithstanding, if we ask different authors what symbolic cognition is, we find a range of different answers. While some of these differences are minor, some affect substantive issues. What can explain such a diversity of theories based on the same fundamental assumptions? I argue that this variety was brought about partly by an ambiguity in one of Wolff's own attempts to characterize symbolic cognition. This hypothesis also offers a straightforward criterion for classifying the various positions on the basis of their deep similarities, without being misled by surface differences, and is thus a breakthrough in understanding the theoretical issues that are actually at stake.

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<sup>1</sup> Leibniz 1684; Wolff 1720, § 316-324. See the bibliography in Favaretti Camposampiero 2007 and 2009.

## 2. Wolff's ambiguity

In Wolff's *German Metaphysics*, symbolic cognition (*figürliche Erkenntnis*) is defined as the kind of cognition that represents things through words. It is opposed to intuitive cognition, which represents things themselves. The two definitions are stated by way of disjunction: "We represent to ourselves either the things themselves, or the things through words or other signs".<sup>2</sup> Wolff takes these two ways of cognizing things to be the only two possible modes: every act of cognition is either intuitive or symbolic.

The major difficulty is understanding what it means to cognize a thing "through words or other signs". Is Wolff referring to the fact that words and signs make us form in our mind representations of things, that reading the word "horse", for instance, makes the image of a horse come to my mind? Or does he rather mean that in symbolic cognition we do not obtain a representation of the thing itself, but only of the word or sign that stands for the thing?

On this point, Leibniz's formulation was clearer: symbolic thought consists in mentally using words "in place of the ideas (*loco idearum*)";<sup>3</sup> that is, in replacing the mental representation of a thing with the representation of the sign that stands for that thing. On the contrary, intuitive cognition has as its objects the things themselves, for it consists in directly perceiving the ideas of those things.

The passage in the *German Metaphysics* should also be understood in this way, as implying that having a symbolic cognition of something excludes entertaining a representation of the thing itself. Indeed, Wolff himself later characterized symbolic cognition in this fashion, by explicitly stating the negative clause: our cognition is symbolic "if it ends with the act by which we only express in words the content of the ideas or we represent it by means of other signs, but we do not intuit the ideas themselves named by those words or signs".<sup>4</sup>

Accordingly, the two modes of thought can be characterized as follows:

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<sup>2</sup> Wolff 1720, § 316. Unless differently specified, translations are the author's.

<sup>3</sup> Leibniz 1684, p. 587.

<sup>4</sup> Wolff 1732, § 289.

C1. Intuitive cognition is to represent to oneself the thing itself (that is, to think of a thing by means of our idea of it).

Symbolic cognition is to represent to oneself the thing through words and without forming a representation of the thing itself.

A straightforward version of C1 appears in Winckler's *Institutions of Wolffian Philosophy*:

The soul *intuits the thing* insofar as it is aware [*sibi conscia*] of the notion by which it depicts the thing within itself. On the contrary, the soul *symbolically cognizes* the thing, when it represents to itself the content of the notion [*ea, quae notioni insunt*] only by means of signs, and so is not aware of the notion itself.<sup>5</sup>

However, the passage from the *German Metaphysics* is ambiguous enough to suggest a different reading. It is possible to take the phrase “through words or other signs” to denote broadly any intervention of linguistic or symbolic items in mental activity. Wolff's characterization of symbolic cognition applies, then, to every kind of cognition obtained or expressed by means of signs, without excluding a simultaneous representation of the thing itself. According to this interpretation, the crucial difference between the intuitive and the symbolic modes consists not in the presence or absence of ideas of things, as in C1, but rather in the presence or absence of words. This outlook leads to an alternative characterization:

C2. Intuitive cognition is to represent to oneself the thing itself without using words.

Symbolic cognition is to represent to oneself the thing by using words.

This approach is paradigmatically expressed in Golling's dissertation on symbolic and intuitive cognition,<sup>6</sup> as well as in a psycho-theological work by the Wolffian Jakob Carpov: “We call *symbolic* the *cognition* by which we represent to ourselves things through signs, e.g. words; we call *intuitive* that by which we represent to ourselves things without signs”.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Winckler 1735, § 885.

<sup>6</sup> See Golling 1725, § 5: philosophers distinguish between “*eas repraesentationes, quae rem ipsam praesentem nobis exhibitam intuentur, et eam quae mediantibus quibusdam aliis rebus, cognoscendae rei destinatis, in animo excitantur [sic]. Illam Intuitivam, hanc Symbolicam vocant.*” Cf. *ibid.*, § 39: “Intuitiva cognitio est, quae sine signis acquiritur”.

<sup>7</sup> Carpov 1738, § 36.

### 3. *Thought and language at stake*

The opposition stated in C2 is between an entirely non-linguistic cognitive activity, devoid of any verbal or symbolic element, and an activity that is to some extent verbalized. C1 ascribes a wider extension to intuitive cognition, including not only thoughts that are purely intuitive but also thoughts that are to some extent supported by language. It excludes only purely symbolic (i.e. entirely verbalized) thoughts, whose representational content consists merely in linguistic expressions. C2 does the opposite. It includes among symbolic cognitions any thought that is expressed in language, even if it features a mental representation of the thing itself. Purely intuitive cognition alone is excluded.

Both solutions had their partisans in the eighteenth century. Indeed, divergence regarding the proper features of symbolic cognition resulted largely from differences in defining the term and its relation to the intuitive mode, and those differences ultimately arose from opposite readings of Wolff's ambiguous formulation in *German Metaphysics*.

There was and is, of course, the third option of rejecting any sharp divide between the two kinds of cognition, by reducing their difference to a matter of degree. Baumgarten's *Metaphysics* opens the door to this option: a cognition is symbolic "if the perception of the sign is greater than that of the signified [*signati*]", whereas it is intuitive "if the representation of the signified is greater than that of the sign".<sup>8</sup> In Baumgarten's view, what characterizes symbolic cognition as such is only the relative preponderance of linguistic or symbolic representations, not their exclusivity.<sup>9</sup>

Naturally, this struggle to determine the correct definition involved substantive issues concerning the relation between thought and language. For instance, one of the questions debated after the publication of *German Metaphysics* is whether a merely symbolic cognition is even possible, which amounts to asking whether there really are cognitive acts that correspond to C1's description of symbolic

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<sup>8</sup> Baumgarten 1739, § 620. Cf. Schwaiger 2001.

<sup>9</sup> A still further possibility consisted in radically rejecting Wolff's characterization and substituting an alternative one. As far as the author is aware, Crusius undertook the first attempt in this direction (1747, § 184).



cognition. Can our mind represent things just “through words” and manage without any representation of the things themselves?

A positive answer implies ascribing some cognitive autonomy to verbalized thought, while deeming the intuitive moment not to be essential to the cognitive process or at least to every stage of it. On the other hand, a negative answer is linked with the assumption that one cannot think of anything without forming some representation of the thing itself. Signs are thus supposed to have just an instrumental function – that of barely supporting our representational activity, which remains essentially intuitive in character. As a consequence, symbolic cognition is not characterized as lacking any intuitive element at all, for no cognition can be such, but rather as not purely intuitive, which is the position laid out in C2.

Thus, choosing between C1 and C2 implies answering the question of the real function of (linguistic) signs in our representational activity. We may tentatively say that partisans of C1 adopt, at least implicitly, a ‘strong’ conception of symbolic cognition, whereas partisans of C2 are more prone to a ‘weak’ conception.

#### 4. *The debate: Strähler against Wolff*

In what follows, I test the reconstruction sketched so far by examining a segment of the debate aroused by Wolff’s treatise. My focus is on selected polemical writings by Daniel Strähler, Jakob Friedrich Müller, and Johann Ulrich von Cramer. They all had been Wolff’s students. When Strähler attacked Wolff, Müller actively sided with his former teacher, but eventually he himself revolted against him, whereas Cramer remained an orthodox Wolffian throughout his life.

In his examination of Wolff’s *Metaphysics*, Strähler raises no objection against the distinction between intuitive and symbolic cognition, but he does not agree with Wolff’s views on their relation.<sup>10</sup> The disagreement begins where Wolff claims that symbolic cognition has several advantages over intuitive cognition, except when the

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<sup>10</sup> Strähler’s *Prüfung* (1723a, 1723b) marked the beginning of the first great polemic against Wolff: cf. Corr 1983, p. 8\*. Wolff’s reply was highly dismissive: see Wolff 1723, especially § 3.

latter is adequate, i.e. perfectly distinct.<sup>11</sup> Such advantages are evident in the case of sense perception, where using words and signs makes it possible first to single out the various components of a sensory representation and obtain a distinct perception of the object, and then to recognize the properties shared by different objects so as to form universal concepts by means of abstraction. Wolff's point is that, thanks to symbolic cognition, we can carry out cognitive tasks easily that would be extremely difficult for our minds in the intuitive mode.

According to Strähler, all of this is simply false. Although symbolic cognition makes intuitive cognition easier and more functional, the former has no advantage over the latter. The real value of symbolic cognition is not the use Wolff assigns to it, for words cannot make our representations more distinct. Hence, the cognitive function Strähler ascribes to linguistic signs is merely accessory: it consists in facilitating some basic tasks such as object identification and memorization. All that words offer is a mnemonic support with respect to the formation of universal concepts. Of course, words help us remember the things we perceive and their properties, and thereby contribute to the operations of comparison and abstraction, but that is all: "In no other way has the *cognitio symbolica* any use in the universal cognition, and in no other way do we get to the universal cognition through the symbolic".<sup>12</sup>

Strähler admits that symbolic cognition could in a sense extend the limits of intuitive cognition, since by inventing new combinations of words or signs we sometimes happen to discover otherwise unknown things. However, arbitrary combinations of words may easily result in inconsistent expressions, which denote impossible objects. So this use of symbolic cognition turns into a disadvantage, as Wolff should have known, since he and Leibniz had already noticed the problem.<sup>13</sup>

The reason why Strähler and Wolff disagree about the pros and cons of symbolic cognition is that they start from different assumptions. For Strähler, it cannot be the case that symbolic cognition makes our concepts distinct, because having distinct concepts is a prerequisite to exercising symbolic cognition. That is, we could not make use of words and signs in our thoughts if we had

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. Wolff 1720, § 319.

<sup>12</sup> Strähler 1723b, § 39.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, § 40.

not already achieved a certain degree of distinctness at the intuitive level. Indeed, Strähler sees no reason to deny that intuitive cognition can itself be distinct.<sup>14</sup> Symbolic cognition is not regarded as alternative to the intuitive: it simply accompanies a process of thought which remains to some extent intuitive throughout. Words do not replace our mental representations of things, but simply call them to mind when needed. Symbolic cognition, although occurring “through words”, still has the things themselves as its direct objects: its opposite is not the representation of the thing itself (for every form of cognition consists in this, according to Strähler), but rather the representation of the thing without any use of words at all.<sup>15</sup> In other words, the way Strähler understands the intuitive/symbolic distinction conforms to C2: on the one hand, there is pure, non-verbal intuitive cognition and on the other, there is cognition supported by symbolic items, but still imbued with intuitive content.

Starting from such a premise, Strähler simply cannot share any of Wolff's claims about the features of symbolic cognition. He cannot even understand them, since they are incompatible with the characterization he endorses. This gap reveals itself clearly when Strähler discusses Wolff's claim about our ability to know the simple beings of which the world is made up. After proving the existence of simple beings, Wolff explains why we cannot know them “from experience”, but only “through reflection”.<sup>16</sup> Presumably misled by Wolff's unfortunate comparison between simple beings and arithmetic units, Strähler reads the passage as claiming that simple beings are objects of symbolic cognition, just as numbers are. He thus objects that we cannot form any distinct idea of such “physical minima” either intuitively or by means of symbolic cognition: “Not *intuitively*, since this cognition is incompatible with our sense organs and therefore also with our senses. Not *through the symbolic cognition*, since this

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<sup>14</sup> Wolff (1720, §§ 414–415) maintained that, since pleasure arises from an intuitive cognition of perfection, it only requires a clear perception, not a distinct. Strähler disagrees: “Daß die Lust aus der anschauenden Erkenntniß kommt, macht nicht, daß dazu keine deutliche Erkenntniß erfordert wird. Denn die anschauende Erkenntniß involviret nicht Undeutlichkeit” (1723b, § 84).

<sup>15</sup> Accordingly, when Strähler (1723b, § 39) claims that by means of words we can imagine again a previously perceived thing more easily than we would do without words (“ohne Wörter”), his criterion is clearly the presence or absence of the linguistic medium.

<sup>16</sup> Wolff 1720, resp. § 83 and 86.

originates *from the intuitive*".<sup>17</sup> Strähler concludes that we can talk about physical minima only according to what we know about real compounds. We can state with certainty that there are physical minima, since without them there would not be any real compounds, but the true nature of such atomic entities must remain hidden to us.

Strähler thus sets narrow limits on our intuitive cognition of the external world:

S1. If an object cannot be cognized through the senses, then it cannot be cognized intuitively.

However, he also maintains that symbolic cognition "originates" from intuitive cognition, so that:

S2. If an object cannot be cognized intuitively, then not even a symbolic cognition of it is possible.

Strähler adopts what amounts to a strict empiricist position. All that we can know of the external world is what our sensory organs can make us know, and symbolic cognition provides no additional epistemic access to physical objects.

### 5. Müller against Strähler

In 1726, Jakob Friedrich Müller publishes a reply to Strähler. Against S2, he argues that since the number of things we can intuitively cognize is low, then if Strähler is correct the number of things we can symbolically cognize would be equally low. It is obvious that this is not the case; hence, it is not universally true that symbolic cognition "originates" from the intuitive.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the argument Müller deploys to vindicate Wolff does not reflect Wolff's actual position. According to Wolff, symbolic cognition of a given object requires a previous intuitive acquaintance with that object, or it is mere verbiage.<sup>19</sup> Understood in this way, the claim that symbolic cognition "originates" from the intuitive is genuinely Wolffian,

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<sup>17</sup> Strähler 1723a, § 51.

<sup>18</sup> "Weiter ist allzu universell geredt, daß die cognitio symbolica aus der intuitiva entstehe; dann sonst hätte man von wenigen Dingen auch eine cognitionem symbolicam, da man von wenigen eine intuitivam hat, und haben kan" (Müller 1726, § 51).

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Wolff 1732, § 328 n.: "Pendet enim cognitio symbolica ab intuitiva, quam supponit et ad quam refertur."

and Müller is wrong to criticize it.<sup>20</sup> Such a misunderstanding suggests that Müller does not properly comprehend Wolff's theory of cognition, which is confirmed by objections Müller raises some years later against his former advisor. Before addressing that point, let us consider some key passages from Wolff's first philosophical book.

### 6. Müller against Wolff

In the second chapter of his so-called *German Logic*, Wolff states a crucial claim for the theory of symbolic cognition:

We have not always the idea of the thing before our mind [*vor uns*], when we speak or think of it; but are satisfied, when we imagine, we sufficiently understand what we speak, if we think we recollect that we have had, at another time, the idea which is to be joined to this or the other word, and thus we represent to ourselves, as at a distance only, or obscurely, the thing denoted by the term.<sup>21</sup>

In this way, human communicative and cognitive activities are made to a large extent independent from the mental representation of the objects of speech. Behind this coupling of external and mental discourse ("when we speak or think of it") lies the assumption that even the latter can be entirely verbalized. That is, there is a mode of thought which consists in mental utterance of words, whereby words are used in place of the ideas of things (as Leibniz put it). Just as we can *talk* about anything without representing it to our minds or thinking of the meaning (*Bedeutung*) of the words we utter, so we can also *think* of that thing without presently forming a representation of it. Hence, the following statement can be ascribed to Wolff:

T1. It is possible to think of a thing without having the idea of that thing before the mind.

This manner of thinking of things without recalling their ideas is nothing else than symbolic cognition, even though the *German Logic* does not introduce the term. A distinction is introduced, however,

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<sup>20</sup> Strähler is in turn wrong to conclude that Wolff's simple beings are unknowable. In fact, Wolff claims that we can know what they and their properties are in a form of discursive knowledge obtained by inference and not by cognitive contact with the object. Cf. Wolff 1720, § 86; Wolff 1724, § 27.

<sup>21</sup> Wolff 1713, ch. 2, § 5 (transl. in Wolff 1770, slightly modified by the author). Cf. Leibniz 1684, p. 588.

which is relevant to understanding how symbolic cognition works: the distinction between the idea of the thing signified by the word and the idea of the sound of the word. Indeed, what makes this sort of verbalized thought possible is that it does in fact have some representational content. This content, though, is not provided by the idea of the thing itself but by the acoustic image of the word that stands for that thing.

In 1731, this doctrine becomes the target of Müller's criticism. Müller has grasped Wolff's distinction between ideas of things and ideas of words,<sup>22</sup> but he objects that T1 is false: even granting that one may *talk* about a thing without representing it to the mind, it is certainly impossible to *think* of a thing without having the idea of that thing present to the mind. The objection is notably terse, but hints at two arguments for T1's falsity. First, it appeals to empirical evidence: "When thinking of something, anyone can experience at every moment that he represents it to himself, and, therefore, that he has an idea of it before his mind [*vor sich*]"<sup>23</sup>

Second, it raises the suspicion that T1 entails a contradiction. Müller appears to hold that the regular connection we experience between thought and conscious representation is not a mere fact, but a sign of conceptual entailment: thinking of a certain object entails having an idea of that object present in the mind. On this assumption, the claim that it is possible to think of a thing without having its idea present in the mind descends quickly into absurdity.<sup>24</sup> Does Müller thereby mean to deny the very possibility of symbolic cognition, considered as a mode of thought whereby words, instead of things, are represented to the mind?

### 7. Cramer against Müller, and reply

In the same year of 1731 Cramer addresses Müller's criticism by trying first to clarify what it means to have an idea before the mind. According to Cramer, Wolff's controversial passage concerns "a clear idea [*Begriff*], of which one is aware, and which represents to him the

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Müller 1731a, § 10.

<sup>23</sup> Müller 1731a, § 22.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*

thing as it were present”.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, “having an idea before the mind [*vor sich*] is something different from merely having an idea, for it is the same as directing our attention to our being aware of it, which occurs only when the idea is clear”.<sup>26</sup> Cramer’s point is the distinction between virtually having an idea stored in the mind and actually considering it. In Cramer’s view, Wolff does not deny that thinking of something requires having an idea of it, but rather denies that what is needed, in the very moment when one thinks of something, is a presently clear idea or a conscious representation of that thing.

Second, Cramer addresses the empirical evidence that Müller advances. Suppose that I am talking and I want to determine whether I have before my mind an idea of the thing about which I am talking. To do so, I must form a conscious representation of that thing. It follows that this representation or idea “is not immediately present when one thinks of the words”.<sup>27</sup> Thus, experience does not show that we always have before our mind a clear idea of what we are talking about. In fact, it shows the contrary: in order for a clear idea of the thing to be present to me, I must somehow retrieve it and focus my attention on it. Moreover, even the phenomenon of verbiage proves that Wolff is right. If speakers had at any moment clear representations of the things they are talking about, there would not be so many people uttering “empty words” without connecting any ideas with them. For Cramer, the same phenomenon holds in verbalized thought, when one thinks of words without uttering them.

Third, Cramer dismisses Müller’s objection as based on a misreading of Wolff’s text. Müller has taken the occurrence of “thinking” in T1 to mean “thinking without words” and has thus ascribed to Wolff the following statement:

T2. It is possible to think of a thing both without words and without having the idea of that thing before the mind.

Assuming that “thinking” means “thinking without words”, Müller has an easy task in asserting that Wolff is wrong, since T2 is patently false. Indeed, there is no thinking without either ideas or words, for “when I think of the thing, I represent to myself in my thought either

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<sup>25</sup> Cramer 1731, § 46.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

words or, if I abstain from words, its idea".<sup>28</sup> According to Cramer, the context shows that Wolff's statement is about an entirely verbalized thought, which is just like speech in that it consists merely in the inner utterance of words.<sup>29</sup> Cramer's reading of T1 amounts to the following:

T3. It is possible to think of a thing by representing only words to the mind and without having the idea of that thing before the mind.

Müller retorts, however, that representing a string of words to the mind means simply *talking* about a thing in one's thought, which is different from *thinking* of that thing.<sup>30</sup> Thus, it by no means is possible to think of a thing without having its idea before the mind. Müller's main target is the view that inner speech constitutes a mode of thought that is an alternative to the intuitive representation of the thing itself. Against this view, he maintains that the mental representation of words, as a sort of endophasy, falls within the realm of speech and does not pertain to thought. For Müller, uttering words cannot be called "thinking of something".

In conclusion, this debate shows that Wolff's early opponents were especially hostile to what I have called the "strong" conception of symbolic cognition. Indeed, this radical conception, which put the most stress on the cognitive function of language, was championed throughout the eighteenth century almost only by the most orthodox Wolffians.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> "So siehet man leicht aus dem Contextu, daß das Gedenken, so wie das Reden bloß mit Worten geschiehet, nämlich es ist einerley ob ich die Worte vorbringe, oder ob ich mir dieselbe gedenke" (*ibid.*).

<sup>30</sup> Müller 1731b, §15. This *Rechtfertigung* appeared as an appendix to the second edition of Müller's *Zweifel*.

<sup>31</sup> Eclectic Wolffians were less inclined to it. Nicolaus Burkhäuser (1773, §197), for instance, explicitly rejected C1 to adopt C2.



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