

Christian Wolff, *Rational Thoughts on the Social Life of Mankind* (1721)

Abstract

Christian Wolff (1679–1754) was one of the most celebrated—and controversial—philosophers of the eighteenth century. He rose to a professorship in natural philosophy at the University of Halle, an academy known for its connections to Pietism. Wolff's lectures on rationalism antagonized his pietist colleagues, and their complaints to King Friedrich Wilhelm I led to the king's demand that Wolff leave Prussia or risk execution. This passage, excerpted from Wolff's 1721 text *Rational Thoughts on the Social Life of Mankind*, provides Wolff's description of the foundations of human society.

Source

Chapter 1: Basics of human society

1) Why man may not live in solitude.

An individual is bound to serve others in a variety of ways with his property, his labor, his help, and his example. Because he cannot fully meet these obligations as long as he lives alone in solitude, indeed cannot even perfect his own situation in isolation as well as when he lives among others, for he is obligated to make the best of his situation to the fullest extent possible, and so he is not to live in isolation from other humans like animals, but rather humans are bound to live together and with each other, so that one can promote the other's happiness, to the extent that each can. Animals can live in isolation from the others because they do not need much and in particular because they cannot learn much from each other to improve their situation. Their body is composed of their limbs in such a way that the nature of those circumstances in which they find themselves determines their useful movements.

2) What society is.

When people come together as one to unify forces to promote thereby their common good, they give themselves over to a society together. And accordingly that society is nothing other than a contract of individuals with unified forces whereby they promote their common good.

3) The composition of the common welfare.

The unimpeded progress towards promotion of the common good which one hopes to achieve through unified forces is called the welfare of society. There is a good reason for this movement. For we cannot view the welfare of a society as anything other than the greatest good that a society of that nature can achieve. For this consists of unimpeded progress towards greater perfection. Thus we cannot seek the welfare of a society in anything other than unimpeded progress for the promotion of the common good.

4) Aims of society and how they are distinguished.

Because we strive to preserve this welfare through society, it is the aim of society, and society is a means to advance the common welfare. Because every society has a common welfare, and cannot exist without one, every society has its own particular aim, which distinguishes it from others. And societies must distinguish these patterns within their aims, and then make decisions with which one can achieve these.

5) Which societies are right and not right.

Because every society is a contract, but no contract is valid as long as the two parties, or even one of them, make such promises as run counter to the laws of nature, no society can be right which has as its

aim anything which runs counter to the laws of nature, or in which one or both parties promises anything which runs counter to them. On the other hand, all societies are in accordance with the laws of nature when neither side is promised more than is in accordance with these laws.

6) A society constitutes a single person, and what follows from this.

Because in a society two or more people become united to combine their forces and advance their common good, they are in this instance not to be viewed differently than as one individual, and accordingly have a joint interest: and thus it is contrary to the nature of a society that one seeks to pit the interest of one against the interest of the other, or (what amounts to the same), the welfare of one against the welfare of the other. And it thus becomes clearer that it is not right if one member of a society seeks his own welfare without regard for, or even at the expense of, the welfare of another.

7) When one may not remain in a society.

Just as one is not obligated to uphold a contract that runs counter to the laws of nature, no one is required to remain in a society which is unjust. And just as one is not obligated to uphold a contract into which one was intimidated or tricked, one is not required to remain in a society into which one was drawn by fear or deception.

8) It is expanded further.

Again, because a society is formed in the interest of the common good, but this is not upheld if one or more parties seek their own advantage at the expense of the others, the party which is thereby injured is not obligated to remain in the society should he be able to separate himself from it without incurring even greater losses. For if the circumstances are such that he cannot exit the society without incurring even greater losses to himself, then he is admittedly obligated to endure the lesser injury and remain in the society.

9) Instances in which one is not allowed to renounce the society.

Because no one is allowed to damage the other, we cannot remove ourselves from or renounce a society—in other words, we are not free to declare that we do not want to remain in it—so long as the other will thereby incur injury. And if we do so despite this, we are obligated to compensate him for the losses. And the opposite is clear, that we can renounce it, if this does no harm to the other, and even more so if we would incur losses if we should remain part of it, but the other party would not profit from our losses.

10) What is not to be tolerated in society.

Because all those who live alongside and with each other in society should employ all their forces in order to achieve that aim to which end they formed the society, it cannot be permitted that one or the other take any actions that are counter to this aim. If, however, this should happen, the losses caused must be repaid by the guilty party, and the others have the right to employ all means necessary to cause him to fulfill this obligation.

11) Central laws of society.

Namely, that the welfare of the society is the primary end to which one commits to it, all other aims are to be arranged such that they are in the end a means to this primary aim. So this is the rule that the parties that live together in a society should follow in their actions, to the extent that they live together like this: Do whatever advances the welfare of the society and desist from anything which hinders or damages it. And because we are obligated to conduct ourselves according to this rule, this is the ultimate law of a society, and one does not say without cause that the common good is the highest or final law in a society.

12) When the common welfare of a particular party is to be granted preference.

Thus, if it should happen that the particular welfare of a single party who lives within the society is not

compatible with the common welfare and it should thus be necessary to make an exception, then the common welfare must be given priority over the particular, and the particular thus placed after the common welfare. One must be careful, however, that one does not take the common welfare further than the aim of the society demands.

13) When strangers are to be considered after those within the society.

Again, because the various people who live together in a society are to be viewed as a single person in respect of their common welfare, but we are not obligated to help others within it, if we would thereby have to neglect our own [needs], no one is obligated to help others if this would disadvantage the welfare of those who live in society with us. For this reason, our own are to be given priority over those who do not live together with us in society.

14) How far a society can place obligations on others.

Similarly, because the various individuals who live together in one society are to be viewed in regard to their common welfare as a single person, other societies are also to be viewed as other people. And according to this, what one person owes another, one society likewise owes the other. Thus a society is not obligated to help another to achieve that which it could do on its own, but is [obligated to provide that help] which it cannot do on its own, but we have the power to do.

15) Differences within societies.

Those who live next to each other in a society are called members. And when those members are individual people, one calls it a simple society: but if the members are simple or less composite societies, a composite society. Because one can view the simple societies as individual persons, one can also view the composite as simple.

Source: Christian von Wolff, *Vernünfftige Gedancken von dem gesellschaftlichen Leben der Menschen und insonderheit dem gemeinen Wesen. Zu Beförderung der Glückseeligkeit des menschlichen Geschlechtes. Den Liebhabern der Wahrheit mitgetheilet von Christian Wolffen*. Halle: Renger, 1721, p. 1–9. Available online: https://www.deutschestextarchiv.de/wolff_gesellschaftlichesleben_1721.

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