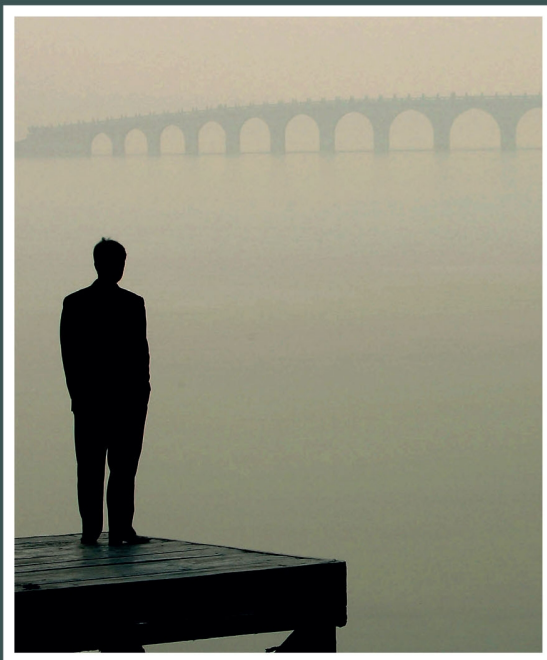


Bloomsbury Studies
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German Philosophy

The Human Vocation in German Philosophy

Critical Essays and 18th Century Sources



Edited by
Anne Pollok &
Courtney D. Fugate

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The Human Vocation in German Philosophy

Bloomsbury Studies in Modern German Philosophy

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Critical Essays and 18th Century Sources

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Figure 1.1. Johann Joachim Spalding (1796) by Anton Graff (1736–1813). Photo courtesy of Cabinet of Prints and Drawings of the State Museums in Berlin – Prussian Cultural Heritage. Photographer: Volker-H. Cutter.

Anne Pollok

To my family

Courtney D. Fugate

To my mother and father, you were my sunshine

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Notes on Contributors

Brady Bowman is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the Pennsylvania State University. His research interests focus on early modern rationalism and classical German philosophy, with an equal emphasis on themes in practical and theoretical philosophy. He is the author of *Hegel and the Metaphysics of Absolute Negativity* (2013) as well as numerous articles on Hegel, Kant, Jacobi, Schelling, and other figures of the period.

Reinhard Brandt is Professor Emeritus at Philipps-Universität Marburg, where he has lived and taught since 1972. From 1987 to 2002, Brandt served as the director of the Marburger research group for the continuation of the Academy Edition of Immanuel Kant's Works, for which he meticulously edited important volumes such as *Lectures on Anthropology and on Physical Geography*. Brandt's works center on issues in aesthetics, philosophy of law, and philosophy of animals, in particular during the Enlightenment and Antiquity. He is a member of various academies in Germany, and has also published many articles in Italian, and for the general public in the *FAZ* and other venues.

Courtney D. Fugate is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University, USA. He is the author of *The Teleology of Reason: A Study of the Structure of Kant's Critical Philosophy* (2013), editor of the *Cambridge Critical Guide to Kant's Lectures on Metaphysics* (2019), and *Kant and Baumgarten on Metaphysics* (2018). His two most recent books are *Baumgarten's "Elements of First Practical Philosophy": With Kant's "Reflections on Moral Philosophy"* (with John Hymers, 2020) and *The Philosophical Writings of Johann Nicolaus Tetens. Volume 1: Tetens's Writings on Method, Language, and Anthropology* (with Curtis Sommerlatte and Scott Stapleford, 2022).

Michael Gregory is a Doctoral Candidate at the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen. He is writing a dissertation on Kant's *Naturrecht Feyerabend* and its relation to Kant's natural law republicanism. In addition, he writes on figures surrounding the development of Kant's political philosophy, including Gottfried Achenwall (see his recent "Kant's *Naturrecht Feyerabend*, Achenwall and the Role of the State," 2021) and August Rehberg ("Kant and Rehberg on Political Theory and

Practice,” forthcoming). Mike also works on twentieth-century Kantians, such as Ernst Cassirer (“History, Freedom and Normativity in Cassirer,” 2021).

Ansgar Lyssy is currently researcher at the University of Heidelberg, working on a project on causality in Hegel, funded by a grant from the Thyssen Foundation. In 2020, he finished his *Habilitationsschrift* at LMU Munich, a yet unpublished monograph titled *Humankind and Humanity in Kant*. This research was funded by a grant from the German Research Foundation. Notable publications include *Kausalität und Teleologie bei G. W. Leibniz*, Stuttgart: Franz-Steiner (*Studia Leibnitiana*, Special Issue No. 48, 2016); three anthologies on Kant and the philosophy of the eighteenth century, and several papers on Leibniz, Kant, Hegel, and other related thinkers.

Laura Anna Macor is Associate Professor of History of Philosophy at the University of Verona. She was previously a Humboldt Fellow at the KU Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, a Marie-Curie Fellow at the University of Oxford, and Assistant Professor at the University of Florence. She is interested in German philosophy, with a special focus on the Enlightenment and early Idealism, which she deals with from an interdisciplinary perspective, open particularly to literature, theology, and the history of language. Her publications include *Die Bestimmung des Menschen (1748–1800)*, *Eine Begriffsgeschichte* (2013), and the co-edited volume *Hegel y Hölderlin, una amistad estelar* (2021).

Giulia Milli is a PhD student at the University of Genova, within the Northwestern Italian Philosophy Consortium (FINO). She graduated from the University of Pavia with a bachelors thesis on the relationship between disinterestedness and interest in Kantian aesthetic judgment, and with a masters thesis on the Kantian sublime; she carried out part of the research for the masters thesis at Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg, as a visiting student. Her PhD project concerns the issue of feeling in Kant through an aesthetic-anthropological lens; the project aims to show the connection between feeling and the *Bestimmung des Menschen* in Kantian thought. She published a previous article on the Kantian sublime: *Una lettura antropologica del sublime kantiano* (2020).

Anne Pollok is Research Assistant at Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz. After her appointment as Lecturer for the Thinking Matters Program (former Introduction to the Humanities) at Stanford University, she earned tenure and promotion in 2019 at the University of South Carolina. She is the author of *Facetten des Menschen. Zur Anthropologie Moses Mendelssohns* (2010), as well as

numerous articles on the human vocation in the eighteenth century, mainly focusing on Schiller, Mendelssohn, and Kant. She also works on Ernst Cassirer's philosophy and culture and the self-formation of woman intellectuals in the eighteenth/nineteenth century (latest publication: "A *Wunderblume* and Her Friends: How Bettina Brentano-von Arnim Develops Individuality Through Dialogue," 2021).

Niels Wildschut was a doctoral fellow in the research project "The Emergence of Relativism" at the University of Vienna, and received his PhD in the history of philosophy in 2020. He published "Proteus and the Pyrrhonists. Historical Change and the Universal in Herder's Early Works" (2018) and "Analogy, Empathy, Incommensurability: Herder's Conception of Historical Understanding" (2020), and is the co-editor of *The Emergence of Relativism. German Thought from the Enlightenment to National Socialism* (2019). He currently works as a political risk analyst and leads public policy research projects.

Allen Wood is the Ruth Norman Halls Professor of Philosophy at Indiana University, Bloomington. His interests are in the history of modern philosophy, especially Kant and German idealism, and in ethics and social philosophy. Wood has held regular professorships at Cornell University, Yale University, and Stanford University, as well as various visiting appointments at Oxford, the University of Michigan, and the University of California/San Diego, and affiliations with Freie Universität Berlin and the Rheinische-Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn. Among his most important publications are his (together with Paul Guyer) for the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, as well as *Kant and Religion* (2020), *Fichte's Ethical Thought* (2016), *The Free Development of Each* (2014), and *Kantian Ethics* (2008), among many others, which are translated into many languages.

Günter Zöllner is Professor of Philosophy (Emeritus) at the University of Munich. He studied at the University of Bonn, the École normale supérieure, Paris, and Brown University. He has been a Visiting Professor at Princeton University, Seoul National University, Emory University, McGill University, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, the University of Bologna, and Huanzhong University of Science and Technology. Recent book publications include: *Res Publica: Plato's "Republic" in Classical German Philosophy* (2015); *The Cambridge Companion to Fichte*, coedited with David James (2016), *Philosophy of the 19th Century: From Kant to Nietzsche* (2018), and *Hegel's Philosophy: An Introduction* (2020).

Note on the Translations and Acknowledgments

This volume contains the first contemporary translation of Spalding's *Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen* in its first version from 1748, as well as an extended translation of Abbt's and Mendelssohn's epistolary discussion around the *Doubts* and the *Oracle*, which preceded Mendelssohn's famous *Phädon* (first 1767); the letters are rendered in English here for the first time.¹

A. Spalding's Vocation

The translation of Spalding's work is accompanied by an exact facing-page edition of the original first edition, which has been compared throughout with modern editions of the same text. The decision to retain original spelling and punctuation was based upon two considerations. Firstly, there currently exists no modern edition of this kind, and hence anyone desiring to check more recent editions against the original would have to read the text in Fraktur. Secondly, current spelling and editorial practice sometimes hide distinctions or ambiguities inherent in eighteenth-century German (for example, between the adjective "wohl" and the adverb "wol," as Timmermann has pointed out). The page numbers in the margins of the German text are those of the first edition.

B. Mendelssohn and Abbt

The translation of the discussion between Mendelssohn and Abbt is based on the *Jubiläumsausgabe* edition of Mendelssohn's writings (JA 5/1:617–37: *Doubts and Oracle*, the letters from JA 11 and 12/1). Both Mendelssohn and Abbt had a real knack for words and tones, and hence the translator sought to preserve them as

¹ Anne Pollok's translation of Abbt's *Doubts* and Mendelssohn's *Oracle* can also be found here: "Thomas Abbt and Moses Mendelssohn: *Doubts and Oracle regarding the vocation of man*," in: *The Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 39.1 (2018), 229–61. The present translation is a hopefully improved version of this previous attempt; the letters that precede the published *Doubts and Oracle* offer a better impression of the complexity of the respective positions.

much as possible. Abbt in particular seemed to have aimed at an apt imitation of Spalding's writing style. Some of his direct quotes from the original are rather vague—for clarity, the missing nouns or parts of sentences that were left out in the respective “quote” are provided in brackets.

Some metaphors and a number of sentence structures employed are awkward or rather colloquial, but were deliberately kept as they are indeed awkward in the original; in particular, the letters were not quite written for a general public and should not be artificially brushed up as if they were. This translation is not meant to correct Abbt's and Mendelssohn's German but rather to give the reader an authentic impression of their language and style. Note that Abbt in particular (or maybe the typesetter—the undervalued source of creative punctuation in the eighteenth century) used commas, semicolons, hyphens, and colons every once in a while (and too often without good reason) as periods—a confusing feature that is here cautiously aligned with modern usage. Terms that allow for multiple translations and might offer various connotations in the sentences wherein they function (or which I indeed translated in different ways, such as “*Weltgebäude*” or “*Bestimmung*”) are referenced in the German original in the footnotes. Whenever Abbt or Mendelssohn quote (very liberally) from Spalding's work (in the 7th edition) I referenced the respective passages in the 1748 edition in its English version in this volume. Obviously, incomplete sentences were completed; the added portions are in brackets as well. All footnotes are from the translator.

C. Reinhard Brandt's Work

For the translation of Reinhard Brandt's text we relied on the Meiner edition from 2007. Most footnotes contain Brandt's own commentaries; further references by the editors are given in brackets. We surely hope that this translation will help to make more readers aware of Brandt's work; he was Anne Pollok's first (delightfully ironical) academic teacher of philosophy, and will never be forgotten in this capacity.

D. Acknowledgments

We sincerely thank all contributors to this volume for their work and their intellectual curiosity. It has been so very good to work with you! Our thanks also to the editorial team at Bloomsbury, in particular Colleen Coalter, who has been with us every step of the way.

Abbreviations

Unless indicated below, all editions are cited by (Abbreviation vol.:page).

- AA Kant, Immanuel (1900–), *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften. Akademieausgabe*, Königliche Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften (ed.), Berlin: de Gruyter. Unless otherwise noted, translations are from the Cambridge Kant Edition. When applicable cited vol.: page.line(s).
- A/B Kant, Immanuel, *Critik der reinen Vernunft* (1st edition 1781/2nd edition 1787).
- AVW Abbt, Thomas (1780–1), *Vermischte Werke*, Friedrich Nicolai (ed.), Berlin und Stettin; reprint 1978, Hildesheim: Olms Verlag.
- FGA Fichte, Johann Gottlieb (1962–2012), *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, Reinhard Lauth et al. (eds.), Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog. Cited section, vol.: page.
- FHA Herder, Johann Gottfried (1985–2000), *Werke in zehn Bänden*, 10 vols., Günter Arnold et.al. (ed.), Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag.
- GW Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1968–), *Gesammelte Werke*, Hamburg: Meiner Verlag.
- JA Mendelssohn, Moses (1929–1932, 1971–), *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, Ismar Elbogen, Julius Guttmann, Eugen Mittwoch, Alexander Altmann, Eva J. Engel (eds.), Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog.
- SpKA Johann Joachim Spalding (2001–2013), *Kritische Ausgabe*, Albrecht Beutel (ed.), Division I: *Schriften*, vols. 1–6/2; Division II: *Predigten*, vols. 1–6, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. Cited division, vol.: page.
- StA Hölderlin, Friedrich (1943–85), *Sämtliche Werke. Stuttgarter Hölderlin-Ausgabe*, Friedrich Beissner, Adolf Beck (eds.), Stuttgart: Cotta.
- TWA Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich (1969–71), *Werke in zwanzig Bänden: Theorie-Werkausgabe*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

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4	<i>Critique of Pure Reason</i> (1781) (pp. 1–252), <i>Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics</i> (pp. 253–384), <i>Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals</i> (pp. 385–464), <i>Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science</i> (pp. 465–566)
5	<i>Critique of Practical Reason</i> (pp. 1–164), <i>Critique of the Power of Judgment</i> (pp. 165–486)
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9	<i>Logic</i> (pp. 1–150), <i>Physical Geography</i> (pp. 151–436), <i>Pedagogy</i> (pp. 437–500)
10–12	<i>Correspondence</i>
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23	<i>Preparatory Studies and Notes</i>

Introduction: Defining the Dynamics of Being: How the *Bestimmungsfrage* Became a Driving Force in the German Enlightenment and Beyond

Anne Pollok

“*Quid sumus et quidnam victuri gignimur*”?¹

A man, seen from behind, more or less featureless, stands at the misty shore of a body of water, looking out. In the background: a bridge, obscured in fog (or is it smog?). On the one hand, Guang Niu’s photograph that we chose as the cover for this volume shows the perpetual human hope for a genuine connection with one another, the building of bridges that should help us avoid loneliness; on the other hand, this very bridge, being shrouded in mist, also reminds us of the havoc we wreck on this earth, rendering those attempts at reaching others even more fragile.

To be sure, some of these associations would be foreign to the philosophers translated and discussed in this volume. However, what we still share with their attempts to define the human vocation is a common human condition and, further, a common human need for the means to cope with said condition. We, Courtney Fugate and Anne Pollok, as editors of this volume, hope to keep an important discussion going,² a discussion focused on the issue of who we are

¹ “Who are we? Born for which kind of life”? This line from Persius’ *Satires* (Satire 3, line 67) served as a motto for Spalding’s *Bestimmung des Menschen*, is mentioned by Abbt in his *Doubts concerning the Human Vocation*, and was subsequently taken up by countless others, more prominently among those being Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Antiquissimi de prima malorum humanorum origine philosophematis* (his dissertation from 1792, see HKA I/1, 61, see Brandt 2007, p. 10 and Macor 2015, pp. 137–8).

² Important previous research was done by Hinske 1999 for Kant’s conception of the human vocation; both Pollok 2010 and Macor 2013 revisited the discussion between Abbt and Mendelssohn and stressed its importance; Macor in particular also deepened our understanding of Spalding’s contribution, as well as Albrecht Beutel’s excellent critical edition of Spalding’s works, Georg Raatz (2014), *Aufklärung als Selbsteutung: eine genetisch-systematische Rekonstruktion von Johann Joachim Spaldings Bestimmung des Menschen*, Tübingen: Mohr, and Grazyna Jurewicz (2018),

and what we should be, a discussion that, in part, was launched in the second half of the eighteenth century among a few thinkers in Germany.

In contrast to the discussion of the *Bestimmung des Menschen* in those eighteenth-century German-speaking lands, referencing this topic in the anglophone world immediately presents us with two deep-seated problems of translation, which are indicative of the conceptual depth of this issue, namely, how to translate “*Bestimmung*” and how to translate “*des Menschen*.” And, since this series is devoted to translating important discussions in German-speaking lands of the modern era, we will start with this problem.

I

“Man” or “Human Being”?

Let us, for simplicity’s sake, tackle the second question first, as it is reflective of more contemporary concerns. Usually, “*Mensch*” has been translated with “man,” blissfully oblivious to all things gender. Today, we can and should translate “*Mensch*,” not with just one part of it, “man” as in the German *Mann* (male), but as *recte* “*human being*,” as inelegant as it may sound in certain phrases. However, for capturing the spirit of the Enlightenment discussion, neither “human being,” nor even “humanity”—which is perhaps even more saturated with contemporary associations—are adequate. It is true that a discussion concerning the latter began in the Enlightenment, with Jean Jacques Rousseau, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, and, most prominently, Johann Gottfried Herder, who authored *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (1784–91) and *Briefe zur Beförderung der Humanität* (1793–97), among other titles containing a reference to “*Menschheit*” (for further information on this, see the chapters in this volume by A. Wood, Lyssy, and Wildschut). “Humanity,” however, is too wide and at the same time too closely associated with normative elements to serve as the perfect translation of “*des Menschen*” in this context. When we look at the phrase “*Bestimmung des Menschen*,”

Moses Mendelssohn über die Bestimmung des Menschen: eine deutsch-jüdische Begriffsgeschichte, Hannover: Wehrhahn. Jannidis 2002 explored the eighteenth-century usage of the phrase “*Bestimmung des Menschen*,” whereas Di Giovanni 2005 highlighted the role of it in the conception of freedom (from or through religion) in the Enlightenment. Whereas Fichte’s considerations of the human vocation are well reflected both in the anglophone and German discussion, and Herder’s philosophy also gains more and more attention, some additional work on less noted figures such as Thomas Abbt, Isaak Iselin, and August Wilhelm Rehberg still needs to be done. May this volume be just the beginning.

the mention of “*Mensch*” combines both descriptive and normative elements. Hence, we chose the much neater *human vocation* (and not *humane vocation*, which would rather capture the humanistic aspect of *Humanität*), and occasionally *vocation of the human being*.³

Turning back to the first question, concerning the translation (and scope) of the term “*Bestimmung*,” in what follows, I will try to portray the richness of the German term, as well as its career as a characteristic aspect of German philosophy of the second half of the eighteenth century.⁴ As we shall see, it refers to the *definition* of the human being, its nature, but also encapsulates the issue of the *human vocation*, or a *task or calling* that a human being, or even *all of humanity* has to follow or realize. “*Bestimmung*” has thus both a *descriptive* and a *visionary* dimension; it captures the essential trajectory of the individual as well as the “human race” as a whole.

II

Bestimmung as Definition: Human Nature

On the one hand, “*Bestimmung*” refers to *definition*. In order to know what a certain thing is, we need to define its constitutive elements. Accordingly, in order to define the human being, we need to figure out what sets us apart from inorganic stuff, plants, and animals—a task as old as philosophy. This is the question regarding so-called “human nature.” Definitions of what it is to be human range from as broad as “being part of the living world,” i.e., being organic, to more specific suggestions, such as being a “rational animal,” a “symbolic animal,” a “*homo faber*,” or even a “*homo ludens*.” Apart from serving to delineate what the most essential features of human beings are, these attempts to define humanity also reveal of the prominent philosophical discussions of their respective times. For present purposes, it is indicative that the discussion of the definition of the human being in eighteenth-century Germany includes issues of rationality, morality, and faith (or its striking absence).

³ A corresponding volume on the Vocation of Woman is planned. There were countless such pamphlets and books from the second half of the eighteenth century onwards, some of them going through two or more editions. Among those works are essays that justify the status quo, but also more progressive attempts, such as Amalia Holst’s *Über die Bestimmung des Weibes zur höheren Geistesbildung* (1802, recently translated by Andrew Holst for Oxford University Press) or Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel’s *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* (1792).

⁴ Very interesting with regard to the *phrase* is Jannidis 2002 (see also D’Alessandro 1999, pp. 21–2). Further remarks on this issue are found in Hinske 1999, Pollok 2010, ch. I, 1, and in particular in Macor 2013.

The attempt at a definition thus quickly moves to a determination of our specific abilities, all of which share the feature of not being part of what we bring into the world, ready-made, but rather what we have to develop and bring to perfection through our own efforts. Thus, the question concerning the definition of human “nature” is quickly transformed into the question concerning the human *task* of being, and human perfectibility. As Johann Joachim Spalding writes in his *Meditation on the Vocation of the Human Being* from 1748, the very book that launches the debate on this issue: “It is, for once at least, worth the effort to get to know why I am here and what, rationally, I ought to be” (SpKA I 1:5, see here p. 21). Nearly all thinkers assumed that human beings came into this world with defects, but that they ought to develop their abilities and hence become more perfect. For this reason, A. Wood stresses in his essay the option to translate “*Bestimmung*” with “*Entschlossenheit*”: a *resolution* or *steadfast purpose* (see here A. Wood, p. 164).

III

Bestimmung as “Vocation” or “Determination”

The human being’s *Bestimmung* is not captured by naming a set of qualities, but by delineating the dynamic features of its perfectibility in relation to human rational, moral, and religious capacities. By the *determination* of these capacities, philosophical reflection considers the human *call* (*vocation*) to perfection, to the continual development of human capacities in light of a certain goal, but also in relation to their practical application in a profession (*Beruf*, see here Zöller 125–6). For most of the eighteenth century, this goal is situated beyond the material world and oriented by a respective faith; most texts discussed in this volume are situated within a Judeo-Christian, protestant framework. However, perfectibility in this time-period must also be understood within the framework of Leibnizian rationalism and metaphysics: development towards perfection here means attaining a progressively clearer, more distinct, and ultimately exhaustive determination of a certain set of qualities, which also brings with it a higher degree of “reality” itself. We can even say, in a sense, that perfection is the decisive term for German philosophy of the eighteenth century, in particular for the so-called “Leibnizian-Wolffian” version of rationalism. With “perfection,” Leibniz himself marks the multitude and diversity of the affirmative features in a thing, the expressions of its potency and the harmonious interplay of its different aspects in a single unity, bound together by a maximum of universally valid laws.

Christian Wolff defines it accordingly: “*perfectio est consensus in varietate, seu plurimum a se invicem differentium in uno*” (“Perfection is the consensus in one of a variety or of many things that are internally differentiated,” see *Philosophia prima, sive ontologia* (1730, § 503). For human beings, perfection is a goal, something to be attained. We find this stress on the dynamic element of perfection, for instance, in Christian Garve’s *Overview of the Most Prominent Principles of Moral Theory* (*Übersicht der vornehmsten Principien der Sittenlehre*, 1798),⁵ where he reformulates Wolff’s definition of perfection as “the conformity of the manifold present in a thing into one” (“*die Uebereinstimmung des in einem Dinge vorhandenen Mannigfaltigen zu Einem*,” Garve 1986, pp. 178–9). In a footnote he further remarks:

I use the expression which is common among Wolffians even though it remains a bit obscure. It should indicate the conformity of parts to reach a shared final aim, or to support the activity of a certain main part, or to produce a certain form, or all of the above at the same time. *Perhaps the indeterminacy of the expression is the best indicator for the worth of the definition.*

Garve 1986, p. 179, emphasis added

Moses Mendelssohn likewise stresses this richness in significance in his *Letters on Sentiments* (1755; see remark l, in later editions remark r). Whereas Leibniz sometimes defines the perfection of the soul by the level of clarity and distinctness in its perceptions, Wolff stresses the “shared striving to sustain” a level of perfection (*Theologia naturalis*, vol. 2, § 15). Mendelssohn aims to combine these two views in order to conceptualize simple, but at the same time dynamically complex beings; a move that we can already identify in Leibniz’s notion of the monad and its striving towards ever clearer and more distinct perceptions. This also connects the notion of perfection to that of happiness, as it is the state of eudaimonia that is reached as more and more perceptions become clear and distinct.⁶

In the *Second Discourse* and the *Emile*, Rousseau introduced the notion of *perfectibilité* to the German discussion. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Mendelssohn, Samuel Heinrich Reimar, and Johannes Nikolaus Tetens, among others, adopted it from this more pedagogical line of thought (and not so much from

⁵ Garve also stresses that perfection only pertains to humans and animals, which “as living and rational creatures are conscious of themselves” (Garve 1986, p. 178). We need to pay closer attention to the principles that keep things together (not to a static order of things in one moment in time), and thus be aware of the dynamics, rather than the “facts.”

⁶ See *Monadology*, §§ 10–19.

Leibniz, as Hornig 1980, p. 224 points out).⁷ But needless to say, it was a Leibnizian understanding of Rousseau that these thinkers advanced. According to this view, human beings come into this world with a set of capacities that need to be developed and thus brought to fruition. The goal was not only perfection, but also agency, self-efficacy, and maturity, all of which point to the normative dimension of the term (see Pollok 2010, pp. 64–6).

The problem was just that this normative dimension needed, but lacked, an accepted foundation. This dynamic notion of perfection, borrowed from Leibniz and enriched by ideas coming from Rousseau, was being employed at a time in which Leibnizian and Wolffian metaphysics was quickly losing its foothold; and this is partly why nearly all the authors discussed in this volume seek to establish a new framework for what is essentially the same concept. But instead of a consensus, the period witnessed a fierce debate and a competition of differing visions, such that it comes almost as an afterthought when Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel complains much later: “Indeed perfectibility is somewhat indeterminate [*etwas Bestimmungsloses*] like changeability as such; it is without aim or goal, without measure for change: the better, the more perfect, at which it aims, is something rather indeterminate” (TWA 7:447).

In discussions concerning the human vocation, the two poles that frame this dynamic definition, namely human nature and the human vocation itself (one indicating the starting point, the other the goal of human development), stand in powerful tension with one another. What is particularly troublesome is the inclusion of human beings *in nature*, i.e. all what exists on this earth, and at the same time the exceptional position of humanity as the one entity that *supersedes* “mere nature.” How and in what ways could and should the trajectory of human nature be deflected or overruled in view of its divine or supersensible vocation? This question transcends human experience; the principles by which our perfection could be understood go beyond what a *Psychologia empirica* can offer. The dilemma seems clear: either we allow metaphysics to limit the lessons of experience, or we side with experience but are then forced to give up on attaining certainty of our final vocation. But feisty as philosophers are, they sought to have it both ways.

⁷ Hermann Samuel Reimarus (1766,³ 1772⁴), *Die vornehmsten Wahrheiten der natürlichen Religion*. For him, perfection is not a property or attribute, not even as potential, but as an effective power of the soul (see Hornig 1980, p. 226). Johann Nikolaus Tetens in his *Philosophical Essays on Human Nature and its Development (Philosophische Versuche über die menschliche Natur und ihre Entwicklung, 1777)* characterizes human perfectibility as a “power over oneself,” a form of autonomous agency that is the marker of the human soul (Hornig 1980, p. 227).

Thinkers such as Herder already assume that human beings are not a “vessel for an absolute, independent, unchanging happiness, as the philosopher defines it,” but that our image of it “changes with every situation and location” (*Himmelsstriche*, FHA 4:38). Ultimately, the answer to the question regarding the final aim of humanity rests on the respective theory of the human constitution. Human beings as sensible beings seek their ultimate happiness in pleasure; as rational beings, they seek it in the cognition of the true and good, or in ultimate virtue. But however the ultimate goal is formulated, it has repercussions on the formulation of the meaning of human existence on earth or within a limited domain of possible experience. What we can make of ourselves within our lifespan might not be enough to fulfill what we conceive of as our actual vocation as the bearer of divine perfection. This inevitably leads to the need for a theodicy, since it is patent that not all human beings are going to reach their final aim of happiness (in whichever form) in this life, and that many will not even reach a moderately happy existence in accordance with their virtue or worthiness. Formulating a final aim towards which we direct our actions is of little use if it does not in fact help us reach said aim. Also, once individual happiness is at stake, no guarantee of the merely general happiness of mankind will suffice; a human being’s capacity for perfection, so wonderfully entailed in our perfectibility, calls for its fulfillment, not for its deferral onto others, or onto such an abstract notion as “humanity.” If we cannot become deserving of happiness (and actually become happy at some point), then we might very well lose the incentive to strive for that aim. For this very reason, most attempts at explaining the human vocation examined in this volume contain their own version of, and argument for, personal immortality.

IV

The Human Being and Humanity as a Whole

As dissatisfying as any referral to the concept of “humanity as such” may be, the concept of *determination*, or *vocation* even, brings with it this further dimension of “human nature:” the common or shared dimension of *Menschheit*, that is, *humanity*, as a collective term that is at once descriptive and open-ended, but also normative as a constitutive way of being. Not all of the philosophers discussed here assume personal immortality, and for them, the idea of a continuation of the human task within humanity as a whole is of central importance.

Can the individual fulfill its vocation or is this possible only for humanity as a whole? Is significant progress towards perfection in any way possible for me or just for me as part of humanity? According to Leibniz's grand theory presented in his *Monadology*, or Rousseau's *Discourses*, an individual is rarely understood through and by itself alone, but rather almost always with reference to others. Human beings are deficient in that they do not come into this world already formed, and in that they might very well end up in less than perfect condition. We lack certain instincts and we are dependent upon an appropriate environment—an environment that must contain other human beings who care for us, provide for us, and speak to us. Human beings are in need of society, and hence their own personal happiness is intimately entangled with the happiness of others. In the same way, one's possible personal perfection is not limited to oneself, but lies, at least in part, in what one transfers to the next generation. But does this dependence also indicate that mankind is going through a similar course of perfectibility—that the human vocation is also the goal for all mankind, understood as a collective reality? This brings with it the questions of our development in *history*, whether it does or should have a direction and, if so, what that direction might be.

Human perfectibility, paired with human freedom, also indicates the possibility of human corruptibility, as Rousseau diagnosed it in the *First Discourse*. This complicates the issue further, since now human development, no matter whether it be on the individual or the collective level, does not necessitate an upward direction towards perfection. It could very well also lead to corruption and decline. Whenever human beings develop together, they are bound to make mistakes—which might amount not to progress, but to a regress into a deeper state of chaos and corruption. Is it only the individual immortal soul that could ever reach the goal of perfection? The essays on Kant and Mendelssohn in this volume (A. Wood, Milli, Wildschut, Zöller, and Brandt) will examine how these authors addressed such issues.

V

Initiating the Debate: Spalding

Despite all the theoretical and fundamental conceptualization that preceded, it was undoubtedly Johann Joachim Spalding who gave the discussion its name. The distinctive combination of descriptive and normative elements in his account from 1748 had a profoundly stirring effect on philosophers of the

middle- and late-eighteenth century, making the *Bestimmung des Menschen* a “basic idea” of the Enlightenment.⁸ Spalding’s work of the same title went through several editions,⁹ expanding in length with each of them while being widely discussed and copied throughout the period. As one scholar has noted, this work indeed reflects the self-image of the German Enlightenment (D’Alessandro 1999, p. 22). As yet another describes the book:

The formula of the human vocation in the title is at the very latest in 1800 so conventionalized that we can describe the reader’s expectations thus: prototypically, this title indicates a text for an educated audience of independent thinkers. The work calls upon one specific field, and that is the determination [*Festlegung*] of the goal in life of one human being in accordance with our knowledge of human nature as such. Deduced from this are reflections about morality, pedagogy, and religion. The meaning thus determined is cloaked in an aura of special relevance and importance. Five aspects are associated with this title: human nature; progress of culture; humans and society; immortality; and humanity’s ultimate goals: happiness, virtue, humaneness, or formation of individuality.

Jannidis 2002, p. 87

Spalding’s pious “essay” (*Aufsatz*), as he himself calls it,¹⁰ is a reflection on the mode and end of our being. In a monologue—later dubbed an “act of existential reassurance [*existentielle Selbstverständigung*]”¹¹—the text’s narrator recasts the way towards certainty of himself and his true essence (SpKA I, 1:193). Even though Spalding later felt compelled to link his argumentation more explicitly to his Christian faith,¹² large portions of his general argument rest on empirical evidence and introspection, with the idea being that anyone can become certain of their vocation by this same method.

⁸ Macor 2015, p. 128, with further references, prominent among those of course Hinske 1999, p. 3 and Beutel, Albrecht 2014, p. 75.

⁹ Beutel in SpKA I, 1:xxv–vii, and Macor 2015, pp. 128–9 count eleven legal editions, and twenty-nine (!) editions and translations in total during Spalding’s lifetime. A very important string of editions for Spalding’s reception in Germany is the reprint of the fourth edition from 1752 in Friedrich Christian Oetinger’s *The Truth of Sensus Communis* in the first edition from 1754 and the second from 1781 (see Macor 2015, p. 135): this paved the way for Hegel’s and Hölderlin’s reading of Spalding.

¹⁰ See Johann Joachim Spalding (1804), *Lebensbeschreibung*, ed. Georg Ludwig Spalding, 21, Halle: Waisenhaus.

¹¹ Beutel in SpKA I, 1:xxxii.

¹² Johann Melchior Goeze persuaded Spalding to declare, in an appendix to the third edition of his work, that his philosophy was not opposed to Christian revelation but rather complemented it (see Johann Joachim Spalding (1749), *Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen*, pp. 26–32, Berlin: Johann Jacob Weitbrecht). His main argument: if religion had not been revealed to the world, we would not know anything about nature either.

The narrator ponders the reason for his existence and to what end he should live. The quasi-Platonic¹³ “ladder of pleasures” that he encounters ascends from sensual pleasure to the “pleasure of the spirit” (SpKA I, 1:65, here 29), all the way up to the active practice of virtue (79, here 31). Only in the latter activity does the narrator, however, become aware of the connection among all beings and his particular perfection within the common good (87, here 39). This allows him to overcome the limitations of individuality and it reveals his connection to the divine and true religion (135, here 43), which ultimately guarantees the individual’s eternal ascent to ultimate perfection (167, here 51).

For this purpose, Spalding brings the main strands of the then-prominent, so-called Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy in Germany together with the ideas of Francis Hutcheson and Shaftesbury.¹⁴ After all, it is not so much a strict exercise in ratiocination favored by the rationalists, but an exploration of the human moral (and religious) sense as discussed by Hutcheson and Shaftesbury that leads the “I” towards answers. Shaftesbury in particular wanted to move away from any form of *Schulphilosophie* towards a philosophy concerned for the place of human beings within nature—not fighting against, but embracing their being and allowing them to put into words and theories what they already felt within themselves. Only a philosophy that is genuinely concerned for its addressees, i.e., human beings, can actually tell them anything about their end; and this is exactly what Spalding set out to do.

In a similar vein, Spalding attempts to showcase the two pillars of divine consolation for us, as we become aware that our earthly happiness and our ability to fulfill our higher vocation is in danger of being cut short at any moment.

a) Per his argument, the perpetual capacity for perfection is not a human weakness, but represents our particular promise. The necessity of our improvement indicates the possibility of its fulfillment—granted that there is a just and good God. In Spalding’s argumentation this necessity provides the ground for rational faith. This he combines with the assumption of the unity of the soul; it is not only the center of all reasoning, feeling, and willing, but it is as a unifying force also outside of time, not subject to it. Death, in this reading, stops being an absolute limit and becomes rather a change on the phenomenal level.

¹³ See, for instance, *Symposium* 210A–211D.

¹⁴ Although Hinske 1994, pp. 138–9, Altmann 1982, pp. 99–100, and Riedel 1985, p. 167 stress the Leibnizean influence, Tonelli 1974 and Schollmeier 1967, pp. 16–18, as well as Adler 1994a, pp. 126 and 128–9, Sauder 1981, p. 153, and Heinz 1992, p. 264, Schwaiger 1999, pp. 8–10 pay heed to the influence by Shaftesbury. Spalding was well-read in British philosophy, in particular Shaftesbury, whom he also translated (Beutel in SpKA I, 1:xxviii).

Of course, this move aggravated his critics. Not without reason, Johann Melchior Goeze points out a major flaw in Spalding's argument: he infers the real, even the necessary from the possible, when he reasons that our need for immortality is its proof (Goeze 1748, p. 9, cit. in Beutel in SpKA I, 1:xxxix, versus the closing remarks in Spalding 1748, p. 25, here 57). This latter aspect is brought one step further with the argument for justice:

b) With reference to a distributive right in the afterlife, the danger of worldly misgivings and misfortunes are sought to be neutralized. If we cannot fulfill our vocation in this life, it is no matter, as we will have time to do so after death. If we suffered evil—or even: committed it—there is no need to despair: it will be set right again in an afterlife, as God is good and would not permit wrongdoings to persist. Very clearly Spalding is here a representative of a theory of compensation in which any bad deed on this earth is thought to be balanced out by a retributive force in the afterlife (see, for instance, SpKA I, 1, 21, here 49). The argumentation brings the theory of redistribution and the theory of perfectibility together: if we can cognize both God and the good life, so Spalding, then we should also be justified in thinking that a reasonable order of the world is real—and even that any seeming disruption of this order is ultimately going to reinforce said order through a proper punishment and redistribution in the afterlife. In this view, misfortune cannot be but a test.

Not only Abbt, who planned a review of the seventh edition from 1763, was irked by the heavy undertones of the human need for vengeance in this justification. Also, it seems to weaken the moral worth of a good deed if it was done for an expected reward, and not for its own sake.

Spalding's argumentation is not, however, a reflection of Leibnizian rational religion (even though he characterizes God's actions as "according to the strictest rules and following the most noble purposes", SpKA I, 1, 22, here 51). For him, not any rational conception of God, but revelation is the highest expression and ultimate aim of his little reflection. The ultimate hope rests in divine revelation, as he already stresses in the first addition (*Anhang*), published as a reply to Goeze in the third edition from 1749,¹⁵ as well as in the third section on "religion:" our soul shall concentrate on revelation, as any other path leads into darkness.

Even if Spalding in the first edition considers the possibility that the proofs won't hold (SpKA I, 1, 24–5, here 57), he quickly asserts that "it is way too

¹⁵ See Beutel in SpKA I, 1:xlvi, Spalding 1749, Anhang 1, p. 202.

important to me that these ideas should be true.” Interestingly, this is no longer contained in the seventh edition from 1763—the edition that sparked the discussion between Abbt and Mendelssohn (see Spalding 7/1763, 55). But even then Spalding references the “all sweetening idea” (ibid., 56) of divine revelation, which reconciles us with the idea of death.

Maybe the editor of the critical edition, Albrecht Beutel, goes a bit too far when he calls this a “regulative idea . . . of transcendental relevance” (see Beutel in SpKA I, 1:xxxiv and xlii, see also Pollok 2010, ch. I.1, p. 77). Ultimately, Spalding did not require a firm theological or philosophical proof, but rather wanted to draw out what a soul already obscurely felt. The main weight of his argument in the *Vocation* rests on the human ability to find the ultimate proof within oneself. This is much closer to the common sense philosophy Spalding was so invested in translating than in any proto-Kantian undertaking.

This only changes in the last version of this book from 1794, which manifests the influence of Kant’s critical philosophy on Spalding’s notion of the human vocation in theoretical as well as practical regard (see Macor 2013, §39, pp. 304–10). Reason, as Spalding states now in an addition to the section “Pleasures of Spirit” (*Vergnügen des Geistes*), is only limited by itself; it cannot offer us perfect insight, but enables a true expansion of our soul. In the section on “virtue,” Spalding remains faithful to his earlier adoption of Shaftesbury’s moral sense philosophy, but gives it a decidedly Kantian flavor: our insight into our duty is immediate through practical reason; the moral law is sharply distinguished from rules of prudence. Spalding still keeps morality and feeling close together, as the “I” can become conscious of its moral superiority and bask in the positive emotion coming from this insight—but at the same time he stresses that this feeling must not be the ground for morality as such.

Spalding’s work proved to be immensely influential—not only by providing a memorable phrase (see Jannidis 2002), but also by provoking considerations of human *Bildung*, human historicity, and the earthly but also metaphysical telos of humanity in general. For many of these debates, though, it is not adequate to consider Spalding as the sole influence, but rather as having captured the “tenor of the time.” We also need to take a further contribution to the discussion into consideration—Thomas Abbt’s and Moses Mendelssohn’s debate concerning the human vocation and its influence on Mendelssohn’s *Phädon*, which in turn influenced Kant’s reflections on one of the ideas of pure reason, namely, immortality.

VI The Existential Potential of the Debate

This little debate¹⁶ is a true gem among the late Enlightenment discussion of the human vocation (and, concomitantly, an updated version of Leibniz's theodicy). In a letter to Mendelssohn on February 20, 1764, Abbt laments the bad state of his contemporaries' philosophies of mankind, especially in light of Spalding's work (see JA 12/1:36, here p. 64). The ensuing discussion between Abbt and Mendelssohn culminated in the published exchange in the *Doubts and Oracle Concerning the Human Vocation* (see here ch. 2, pp. 68–90). These two essays were originally published anonymously in 1764 under the pretense of being two parts of a book published in Schinznach, 1763.¹⁷ They also re-appeared under the names of both Abbt and Mendelssohn in an edition of the *Phädon* published in Amsterdam in 1767,¹⁸ and later in the third volume of Abbt's *Vermischte Werke*.¹⁹ In his *Doubts*, Abbt spells out his disagreement with Spalding most succinctly, concentrating on the latter's consolatory argument for further perfection beyond the death of the individual (see JA 5/1:625–6, 628, here pp. 77–9). What, Abbt asks, allows us to view ourselves as the ultimate aim of perfection, as self-sufficient units of worth—especially, if it could just as well be the case that we are either part of a haphazard conglomeration of accidents or part of an overall plan that includes us as mere means and not ends (JA 5/1:626–7, here 78)? In the letters to Mendelssohn that follow the public debate, we can see Abbt's unwavering focus upon the individual as an end in herself. He never tires of asking Spalding (and Mendelssohn) to what end each one of us, rather than “man in general,” is destined. Mendelssohn's first answer in the *Oracle*—which was essentially, “just look more closely, and you will see”! (JA 5/1:630, here 83)—did nothing to alleviate Abbt's concerns. For Mendelssohn, the fundamental openness of the individual's progression towards perfection itself is the answer, rather than something to be questioned. In his letters (and his *Phädon*), he thus attempts to use Abbt's questions to formulate an ultimate limit case for philosophy according to which the question regarding someone's individual destiny is no

¹⁶ See Pollok 2010, pp. 70–2 where I discuss the literature around 1765; ultimately, we can see that Mendelssohn's and Abbt's discussion gave the publications with the same title an undeniable push.

¹⁷ The two essays were published consecutively in *Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, ed. Friedrich Nicolai, Moses Mendelssohn, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (Berlin: Nicolai, 1764), 5–60.

¹⁸ The full title is: *Phädon, or On the Immortality of the Soul, In Addition with the Doubts and the Oracle Concerning the Human Vocation*, Amsterdam 1767.

¹⁹ See Thomas Abbt, *Freundschaftliche Correspondenz*, in AVW 3:174–200, and 208–22.

longer philosophical. Observations of the sort: “we *do not* quite know how such and such works” do not lead to conclusions such as: “we *cannot* know how it works” (see JA 12/1:92, here 102). Ultimately, all Mendelssohn asks for is an assurance that the world is ordered rationally according to the principle of sufficient reason; in contrast, Abbt desires an answer that goes well beyond any human capacity of comprehension.

It is indeed a shame that Abbt did not live to reply to Mendelssohn’s further attempts at an answer to the question of the vocation of man in his *Phädon*, which Mendelssohn devoted to his then-deceased friend (JA 3/1:7), whose premature death in 1766 at the age of twenty-seven was one of the great losses for eighteenth-century philosophy. It would have been thrilling to read Abbt’s reviews of both the *Phädon* and Mendelssohn’s later *Remarks on Abbt’s Amicable Correspondence* (1782), where Mendelssohn, again, favors an optimistic self-limitation in fundamental questions²⁰—reviews that would have quite possibly been furious. In the latter text, Mendelssohn wrote:

But what if one wants to know in sufficient detail in which particular form we will continue, in what region, with what kind of ethereal body, and with what kind of senses and extremities [*Gliedmaßen*] we will live and thrive [*leben und weben*]? At this stage, humble reason steps back, a finger on her mouth [*mit dem Finger auf dem Munde*]. . . . Not even revelation can give us further instruction in this regard, since then she would have to speak a language we cannot understand, and presuppose basic ideas [*Grundideen*] that we do not have.²¹

Mendelssohn’s writings are expressions of this limitation of the scope of reason. But he did not advocate keeping quiet and guarding reason’s borders. Instead, he aimed to *explicate* the knowledge that we can grasp to build a more certain foundation for our dealings with the world. The wonderful assurance of the soul’s personal immortality that Mendelssohn sought to prove in his *Phädon* was highly praised, but also heavily criticized, most prominently in the second edition of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. Instead of this being a metaphysical truth, it is reduced to an (though practically necessary) idea of reason.²²

But what the discussion between Spalding and his readers, as well as between Abbt and Mendelssohn, also shows is the importance and concomitant fragility of philosophical communication. Overall, works concerning the human vocation

²⁰ For a reflection on the continuation of the discussion of the question concerning the vocation of man in Johann Gottfried Herder, see Pollok 2010, chapter V.2, Pollok 2018, Beiser 2011a, and here Wildschut.

²¹ JA 6/1:42–3.

²² See on this Guyer 2020, in particular chapter I 4. and 5.

were generally seen as *Popularphilosophie*, targeting a wider audience and hence not engaging in all-too-intricate philosophical arguments. Those were reserved for other books, and hence also for a much more limited audience. This might be part of the reason as to why Mendelssohn's concept of the human vocation remained more widely available than Kant's demanding alternative, and also why *On the Human Vocation* became one of Fichte's most successful works (see here D. Wood).

VII The Aftermath

We could say that in the wake of Kant's critical project, as well as of the counter-Enlightenment that would give birth to Romanticism and Idealism, the philosophical debate concerning the *Bestimmung des Menschen* as conceived by Spalding and other figures of the period came to an end. As Jannidis notes, this is not necessarily the end of the popular debate: many of the relevant works see a second or third edition, retaining the interest of a wider audience. Particularly popular are those that offer advice for the education of girls, offering a firm definition and determination of their abilities and options; although, overall, these attempts seem mostly aimed at keeping a status quo.²³

But, even in "philosophy proper," the task to spell out the meaning and direction of human life was not abolished. Philosophers such as Herder (see here Wildschut), Schiller (see Pollok 2019 and 2020), Kant (see here A. Wood, Zöller, and Milli), Fichte (see here D. Wood), and Hegel (see here Bowman) continue the discussion concerning the human vocation under fundamentally new conceptions of its framework and in contradistinction to Spalding's metaphysical and practical consolations. Schiller aims highest, as he formulates our vocation as becoming similar, or equivalent even, to God: "God-likeness [*Gottgleichheit*] is the vocation of man" (Schiller, *Nationalausgabe* vol. 20, p. 10). Kant is more modest: Ultimately, it is the final aim of all of humanity to aspire to divine perfection—a task to which we ought to devote all human reasoning and acting.

²³ See Angelika Feurer (1789), *Die Bestimmung des Weibes zur Hausfrau, Mutter und Gattin*, Braunschweig: Campe, Wilhelmine Halberstadt (1808, 1825, 1827), *Briefe über Moralität, Würde und Bestimmung des Weibes. Jungen Frauenzimmern geweiht*, Kassel, Hamburg, Christian von Bomhard (1815), *Symposion von der Würde der weiblichen Natur und Bestimmung. Deutschen Frauen und Jungfrauen gewidmet*, Bamberg, Johann Chr. Sommer (1794, 1807), *Über innere und äußere Bestimmung des Jünglings, nebst einer Abhandlung über die Bestimmung des Mädchens*, Halberstadt.

In their discussion of Enlightenment in 1784, Mendelssohn and Kant distinguish between the roles of human beings as human beings and as citizens;²⁴ a distinction Fichte then takes up in his *Vocation of the Scholar* (Macor 2015, p. 133, see here D. Wood), and which we can trace well into the discussion of *human* rights in contrast to national rights. Hegel's concept of "spirit," on the other hand, can be understood as taking seriously the idea of the human being as a unique and non-reducible realization of "something authentically divine" (see here Bowman), while arguing against the worth of *Popularphilosophie*, which Hegel saw represented in Spalding (and, see above, in other such *Bestimmungsliteratur*).

An important development within the discussion is thus the move away from metaphysical or religious questions toward issues in morality (and also history and politics, see here Gregory), whether it pertains to the will of the individual or the will of humanity. The question concerning the human vocation thus pertains not to the individual alone, reasoning by themselves about their individual vocation, but also to the human being as part of "the general connection among rational beings" (see Macor 2013, § 40, p. 312, and here A. Wood, Wildschut, D. Wood, Bowman). The religious vocation might have still reigned in Fichte's *"Atheismusstreit"* (Macor 2013, §41), as Spalding was mentioned by Fichte's assailants as among the "good" philosophers in contrast to the "bad," i.e., atheist ones following Kantian rigorism, such as Fichte. It is quite telling that Fichte's subsequent *Appeal to the Public* (1798) instrumentalizes the very same Spalding, too, suggesting that it was his book that put "a first seed of higher speculation into the youthful soul, and whose works so fittingly characterize the striving for the transcendent, the everlasting" (FGA I.5, pp. 446–7). This also characterizes his own, Fichte's, work. Despite some skeptical reactions by those who sensed that Fichte rather wanted to downplay the differences between his thoughts and Spalding's (see Macor 2013, §41, 319), he insisted on the similarities, naming his own reflection on the issue after its famous predecessor. The philosophy of objective divine perfection becomes the philosophy of the subjective, but universal will in its *Wechselwirkung* with others.

The quest for the human vocation also lingers in the development of the German *Bildungsroman*, as well as in German Romanticism, such as Hölderlin's *Fragments* and the *Hyperion*, or Hegel's *The Positivity of Christian Religion* (see Macor 2015, p. 127, and here Bowman). Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* seems to echo Abbt's existential concerns when the protagonist wonders about our human

²⁴ See Pollok 2010, ch. IV.3, Pollok 2020a, Macor 2015, p. 131.

vocation, as we stem from nothing, go nowhere, and can believe in nothing. And still, in our decisive departure from merely biological life, human beings aim for the stars, even in light of the possibility of eternal emptiness (see *Hyperion*, 11th letter, StA 3:45). At times, it is the desire to be one with nature (“To be one with all, that is the life of the god, that is heaven for the human being,” 2nd letter, StA 3:9), which is not just a Spinozistic dream but also represents the ultimate fantasy of the rationalists: the fundamental unity in a life above and beyond this earth. And, similar to Spalding’s argumentation, it is the sheer overabundance of power and force (*Kraft*) that points us beyond what is possible on earth (8th letter, 3:41).

It is noteworthy, though, that *Hyperion* references these existential questions as “destructive” (StA 3:45). Kant already captured the problematic nature of our quest to understand the human vocation quite well in his *Critique of Pure Reason*: that our reason is damned to pose questions that it cannot answer. In the end, the fundamental questions (“Who are we?” “To what end are we here?”) had to be reformulated, so that they would not force us against the boundaries of our own thinking (and even our feeling).

Hegel’s discussion of the term, as well as Fichte’s ultimate reference to it surely go beyond the limits of this introduction; but this is no matter, as they are discussed in Bowman and D. Wood in this volume; whereas Macor’s contribution ultimately traces Spalding’s influence up to Foucault. All contributions make abundantly clear how fruitful Spalding’s notion of the human vocation is for understanding and discussing the major philosophical tenets in eighteenth century Germany. We hope that this volume will deepen these discussions.

Part One

Translations

Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen

Johann Joachim Spalding
(1748)

——— quod — ad nos

Pertinent et nescire malum est agitamus—

Hor.

Quid sumus? et quidnam victuri gignimur?—

Persivs.

- 3 Ich sehe, daß ich die kurze Zeit, die ich auf der Welt zu leben habe, nach ganz verschiedenen Grundregeln zubringen kann, deren Wehrt und Folgen daher auch unmöglich einerley seyn können. Da ich nun unläugbar eine Fähigkeit zu wählen, und in meinen Entschlüssen eines dem andern vorzuziehen an mir finde, so muß ich auch hiebey nicht blindlings zufahren, sondern vorher nach meinem besten Vermögen auszumachen suchen, welcher Weg der sicherste, anständigste und vortheilhafteste sey. Manche Erfahrungen haben mich schon in Dingen von geringerer Wichtigkeit gelehret, daß die quälende Empfindung der Reue nach vollbrachten Handlungen nicht in meiner Gewalt ist; desto mehr würde ich mir hernach vorzuwerfen haben, wenn ich nicht die ernsthafteste Überlegung auf dasjenige gerichtet hätte, worauf mein eigentlicher Wehrt und die ganze Verfassung meines Lebens ankömmt. Es ist doch einmal der Mühe wehrt, zu wissen, warum ich da bin, und was ich vernünftiger Weise seyn soll.
- 4 Die Beyspiele der Menschen neben mir sind mir in diesem