



MORE THAN I CAME FOR
CATHERINE WILSON

Catherine Wilson, Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, is Visiting Presidential Professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. From 2009–12, she was the Regius Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen, and until recently she was Anniversary Professor of Philosophy at the University of York. Her main research areas are 17th- and 18th-century history and philosophy of science and contemporary moral theory from a naturalistic perspective. She is the author of *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (2008); *Moral Animals: Ideals and Constraints in Moral Theory* (2003); *The Invisible World: Early Modern Philosophy and the Invention of the Microscope* (1995); and *Leibniz's Metaphysics: A Historical and Comparative Study* (1989/2011), as well as other books and articles on these themes. – Address: 28 Chelmsford Rd. London, E18 2PL, United Kingdom. E-mail: cww899@gmail.com.

It was a dark, cold, late afternoon the day after New Year's when I arrived at Tegel with my great big suitcase. My panicky and numerous phone calls to the *Empfang*, prompted by the fear that no one would be there to let me into my new flat, proved unfounded. Although, ominously, no one answered the phone, all went smoothly once I arrived at Wallotstraße 19. This friendly efficiency was the norm: throughout my stay, any small but urgent request – for a postage stamp or a lighter duvet, to fix the dishwasher drain – was met without delay. Fussy mealtime requests were treated as no bother at all. Meanwhile, in the first week on site, the academic staff helped integrate me, making sure I knew about the other philosophers in Berlin with common interests and how best to connect with them.

As I came to the Wiko in mid-year – I do not recommend this, but it was my only option because of my two employers – I came into an already established social life and an already set colloquium schedule and ongoing language lessons. I signed up for two hours per week of private lessons with Eva von Kügelgen, as well as the Wednesday course. Paweł, James, Jean-Philippe, Irina, and Vladimir turned up in varying patterns, and as spring came and went, we performed increasingly colorful and linguistically competent versions of the one-person performance “What I did Last Week”. Under Eva’s well-informed direction, we dipped into some classics of 20th-century German literature, including Thomas Bernhard, Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger (a shock), and Walter Benjamin. Benjamin, I have to admit, kind of defeated us. I rounded out my German language education by reading recent blockbuster/trashy English novels translated into German, which I picked up at the Oxfam shop on the Kurfürstendamm. I recommend this self-instruction method, along with watching a lot of TV, because it avoids the problems of high style that need to be left to truly advanced learners.

Where my actual project on 18th-century materialism and Kant’s philosophy was concerned, I made reasonable progress. By way of explanation, for a long time, most historians of philosophy assumed that German philosophy had gone straight from a form of dogmatic, metaphysical *Schulphilosophie* (crowned by the multi-volume works on God, the soul, and the world by Christian Wolff) straight to the “critical” philosophy of Immanuel Kant. My intention was to search for documentation of what I suspected to be a massive, but largely invisible “third body” influencing the Kantian path. This deflecting influence was a philosophy of nature based on essentially Epicurean (sometimes only semi-correctly identified with Spinozistic) principles, namely atheism, materialism, and critique of civilization. This naturalism posited the purely physical origins and end of the world, the eventual extinction of the human species, and the supreme ethical relevance of happiness and the avoidance of suffering in political and personal affairs.

I found that third body, as I had hoped, represented not only by the incursion of the French materialism of the *Encyclopédie* into German awareness and by Frederick the Great’s unabashed hedonism, but also in the psychological writings of the Göttingen School. In the process, I was led down many other interesting highways and byways, into Prussian social history, determinism and the opposition to the death penalty, and the “theory of women” in 18th-century anthropology. One surprise in conducting this research was that looking up names and topics on Google Scholar in Germany turned up completely different results from searches in the USA or the UK; my research simply

could not have been done outside Germany. And the ability of the Wiko librarians to turn up anything one asked for, often within 24 hours, made research flow, because everything came to hand just when it was needed.

As a historian and philosopher of science, I was an enthusiastic attendee at the many colloquia concerned with animal behavior and mentality and their evolutionary background. In my year, such talks were abundant, featuring the very latest research on elephants, bees, “the dark”, and bats. Swapping papers with Tim and Lars led to some good discussion on animal awareness, and Lars and I wound up writing a joint article for a popular science magazine, *Aeon*, on the topic why we might think insects have phenomenal awareness of their world.

An everyday feature of the Wiko and of Berlin generally that I especially appreciated was the honor system. We Fellows, with our magic fobs, had the freedom to come and go at all hours. We were trusted not to steal the open shelf library books or bottles of beer or to abuse the copy machines. This freedom – very different from the lockdown mentality of so many institutions elsewhere – kept me in a seriously relaxed and good frame of mind, as did the absence of turnstiles and gates in the U-Bahn and S-Bahn.

What I will perhaps most remember about my stay is the combination of intellectual force and individuality in the other Fellows and in the *Verwaltung*. Although weekday reading and writing often seemed interrupted by meals, colloquia, language classes, and special events, I don’t regret for a minute their obligatory or semi-obligatory character. I didn’t leave on July 15th with a finished book manuscript, but I did leave with new knowledge and convictions, with admiration for the sophisticated presentation skills of the Fellows, and with a much deeper exposure to fields outside my own.