

The Year 1786 and *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*,
or
Popularphilosophie in Crisis

Abstract: “The vocation of humankind” was a common theme of discussion for Popularphilosophie during the second half of the 18th century. It was introduced in 1748 by J. J. Spalding with a tract entitled *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, and it ran its course in the decades that followed until it reached a conclusion, but also a new start, in 1800, with a tract by Fichte by the same title. The conceptual distance traversed by the German Enlightenment in this half century can be measured by the difference in the humanism espoused by the two tracts. In this paper I first describe Popularphilosophie; I then comment on Mendelssohn’s contribution to the discussion in his exchange with Thomas Abbt; I finally argue that Jacobi’s dispute with Mendelssohn in 1785 raised the issue of the possibility of true human agency: it thereby cast doubts on the ease with which the Popularphilosophen, Mendelssohn foremost among them, were given to shift from Bestimmung as “determination of nature” to Bestimmung as “personal call,” or from the metaphysical concept of “Plan der Natur” to the religious trope of “Vorsehung,” or Providence. The road to Fichte’s tract was thus laid open.

1. 1786: a historical panorama

By all accounts, the year 1786 was a turning point for *Popularphilosophie*,¹ that widespread

¹I keep the term in German because the connotations associated with the English “popular” would fail to do justice, and might even misconstrue, the very specific philosophical phenomenon which the German term designates. There was nothing “popularizing” in a vulgar sense about *Popularphilosophie*. The latter was a philosophical movement based on the premise, typical of the Enlightenment, that reason is a faculty inherent to all human beings and that its truths are therefore irresistible once clearly and distinctly perceived. It was therefore morally incumbent on philosophy to reach out to the people at large in order to promote reason and social order universally. Philosophy had to have a pedagogical dimension. The best example of a *Popularphilosoph* whose activities extended well into the nineteenth century was Karl Leonhard Reinhold.

philosophical movement of the late *Aufklärung*. In retrospect, a coincidence of events made the year iconic for the intellectual upheaval that the German Enlightenment was to undergo in its concluding years. 1786 saw the death of Moses Mendelssohn, Lessing's friend who the year before had published *Morgenstunden*, arguably the most elegant exposition on classical Lockean and Wolffian principles of *Popularphilosophie*.² The year immediately after saw the publication of Adam Weishaupt's *Über Materialismus und Idealismus*.³ This too was an exposition of *Popularphilosophie*, certainly not as elegant as Mendelssohn's but conceptually a lot more interesting. It was conducted on lines completely different from Mendelssohn's and exposed the materialism lurking in the naturalism of *Popularphilosophie*. More *au courant* than Mendelssohn, Weishaupt also advanced a conception of "experiential *a priori*" that arguably was a viable alternative to Kant's. Because of his perceived materialism (and for other more personal reasons), Weishaupt was not a much quoted author in the Germany of the day. However, he was not for that any the less notorious. He was the founder of the *Illuminati*, the society that secretly promoted from within the Masonry (itself a secret society) a radical program of social reform.

1786 also saw Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi corresponding with Hamann on the public display of mourning that the Berliners (as Hamann called those wrong-headed promoters of Enlightenment reason) were bestowing on the Jew Moses.⁴ Jacobi had been the instigator of the recent dispute with Mendelssohn on the meaning of Spinoza. Many believed that the

²*Morgenstunden, oder Vorlesungen über das Daseyn Gottes*, Erster (1785). I shall cite Mendelssohn according to the *Jubiläumsausgabe*, by Volume, Part (when required), and page(s) number.

³"*Idealismus*" must be understood here in its pre-critical meaning, i.e. in a purely psychological sense.

⁴Johann Georg Hamann, *Briefwechsel*. The relevant letters are to be found in Vol. 6, dated from January 1786. Hamann felt pangs of remorse upon Mendelssohn's death because he had failed to reassert his friendship with the man despite his hostility to his thought. Yet he thought that Jacobi's main fault had been to presume truth in a Jew. Letter No. 939.

bitterness of the dispute had been the immediate cause of Mendelssohn's demise. The circumstances that had led up to the dispute, and the interests that motivated all those who were caught up in it, were complex, and, fortunately, in no need of rehearsing here. One thing, however, is clear. In the course of the dispute Jacobi had succeeded in bringing Spinoza to the centre of the philosophical discussion of the day. In this way he, like Weishaupt, had brought to light the materialism that was implicit in *Popularphilosophie*. But he had done it with intentions completely different from Weishaupt's, namely, in order to unmask what Jacobi believed to be the anti-humanism implicit in the rationalism on which the whole Berlin Enlightenment movement was based. In Jacobi's view, Spinoza's pantheism was the only consistent, and honestly self-conscious, upshot of this rationalism.

Finally, in 1786 Karl Leonhard Reinhold began to publish in the *Teutscher Merkur* the first series of his influential Kantian Letters, in which he presented Kant as alone capable of reconciling Mendelssohn's reason with Jacobi's faith. He thereby initiated a process of adapting *Popularphilosophie* to Kant's Critique of Reason and, by implication, also the Critique of Reason to *Popularphilosophie*.⁵ Reinhold certainly knew of Weishaupt. He had been an active member of the *Illuminati* even when still a priest in Vienna and very likely the uncovering and official proscription in 1785 of the society in both Austria and Bavaria had precipitated his flight to Protestant Germany. As one recent commentator has put it, in 1786 Reinhold was replacing Weishaupt with Kant as the Messiah of Enlightenment Reason.⁶ Of course, neither Jacobi nor Reinhold could have known at the time that others, notably Fichte, would accept Jacobi's diagnosis of Spinoza's relation to the Enlightenment but instead of rejecting Spinoza's system would take it as the basis for a completely new conception of reason. Despite Reinhold's efforts at domesticating the Critique of Reason for popular diffusion, it was Spinoza who was to dominate the

⁵This must be qualified. According to Hinske, the Jena theologians had already begun the process. But Reinhold began doing it in a way that caught universal attention. Cf. Norbert Hinske, "Die Kritik der reinen Vernunft und der Freiraum des Glaubens."

⁶Martin Bondeli, *Einleitung* to Karl Leonhard Reinhold, *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie*, Vol. 1, p. xxxvii.

subsequent reception of Kant. As of 1786, the chain of events had thus already been set in motion that would culminate in 1800 with the publication of Fichte's *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, or *The Vocation of Humankind*.

The mention of this tract is significant. The title deliberately harked back to another tract, by the same title, that the Lutheran theologian Johann Joachim Spalding had published in 1748, and had subsequently repeatedly re-published in revised editions, each time adapting it to the most recent intellectual trends. The tract had occasioned a wide exchange of opinions on the theme of the vocation of humankind that long captured the interest of the *Popularphilosophen*. All the luminaries of the day participated in the discussion. In the case of Mendelssohn, the contribution took the shape of an exchange of letters with his young friend Thomas Abbt that finally led, in 1784, to the publication of two brief pieces, one by Abbt that expressed doubts about the nature, if any, of a human vocation, and the other by Mendelssohn in the form of an "Oracle" rebutting precisely such doubts.⁷ I shall come to these writings. The point now is that, looking back at Fichte's tract with that of Spalding in mind, one can see from the gulf that separated the humanism of the two works how 1786 had marked indeed a turning point in *Popularphilosophie*. After the Spinoza dispute (*der Spinozastreit*), and once Spinoza had been dragged into the reception of Kant's Critique, it was simply no longer possible to engage in a discussion about the vocation of humankind with the kind of natural innocence that had been possible for Spalding. Whether one accepted Mendelssohn's opinion that Spinoza's pantheism, if duly amended, would logically lead to Leibniz's theory of pre-established harmony,⁸ or, on the contrary, Jacobi's argument that it was Leibniz's theory that, stripped of its many ambiguities, led to Spinoza's pantheism, in either case the metaphysics that lay at the basis

⁷*Briefe, die neueste Litteratur betreffend*, Part 19, Letter 287. *Zweifel über die Bestimmung des Menschen*, pp. 8-40; *Orakel*, pp. 41-60. *Jubiläumsausgabe*, Vol. 6.1, pp. 9-25. I regret that these two pieces were not included in Dahlstrom's translation into English of Mendelssohn's writings.

⁸Mendelssohn thought that Leibniz owed a conceptual debt to Spinoza. *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755), Erstes Gespräch, 1, 12; Zweites Gespräch, 1, 14-15.

of both Leibniz's and Spinoza's systems, and was at the heart of *Popularphilosophie*, had come into question. The issue was whether this metaphysics was capable of supporting the personalist values that also belonged to the heritage of *Popularphilosophie*, or, more precisely, whether it was capable of supporting the idea of a human vocation that would be more than just the product of natural determinacy. Quite apart from later developments, and abstracting from Jacobi's own intentions in the whole affair, the fact is that the dispute had succeeded in publicizing the internal inconsistencies of *Popularphilosophie*. As of 1786, *Popularphilosophie* was in crisis. Had the dispute occurred in less troublesome circumstances, without personal prejudices and the general nastiness of human nature clouding the issues, Mendelssohn might have recognized that he had himself good reasons to raise doubts about any naturally pre-determined human vocation. But the doubts would have been of quite a different kind than Abbt's.

This is the point that I want to develop – not the Spinoza dispute itself, even though I shall have to return to it at the end. First, I must consider *Popularphilosophie* itself. I have already alluded to its internal inconsistencies. The vision of reality that it offered, however, had its strengths, and these were formidable enough to entice the minds of many, Mendelssohn foremost among them. The question I turn to first is, what were these strengths?

2. *Popularphilosophie*

In an important 1994 article that explored affinities of thought between Mendelssohn and Kant already noted by Alexander Altmann,⁹ Norbert Hinske called attention to several instances of how Kant's language was influenced by Mendelssohn's. Even more important, he documented evidence showing that the Abbt/Mendelssohn exchange was instrumental to the historical turn that Kant eventually gave to his anthropology. With his usual scholarly rigour, Hinske did not claim for this evidence strict demonstrative force (148). But the

⁹Norbert Hinske, "Moses Mendelssohn und die Kreise seiner Wirksamkeit." Alexander Altmann, *Prinzipien politischer Theorie bei Mendelssohn und Kant*, as cited by Hinske.

evidence is convincing nonetheless, and the claim is of conceptual as well as historical importance. I shall return to it. More to the point at the moment is that, in thus working out these lines of connection between Mendelssohn and Kant, Hinske also provided compelling evidence of how much Spalding's tract influenced the late *Aufklärung*. Spalding made ample business of his little work, re-publishing it to the end of the century. From the first edition, however, he had already raised the three questions that the critical Kant was later to pose – namely, “What can I know?” “What must I believe?” “What may I hope for?” – and had even answered them, in effect at least, as Kant later did.¹⁰ He had done so, moreover, in a spirit that was typical of the Enlightenment, namely, as one intent on securing for himself a “system of life by which he could abide for all times,” thus resolving once and for all doubts that otherwise plagued his mind. He intended to do this, in a manner reminiscent of Descartes, first by setting aside all prejudices, and then by basing his judgements exclusively on what he could accept as undeniably true on the strength of observation and on inferences necessarily drawn from the latter.¹¹ Spalding was speaking

¹⁰I have treated this theme in *Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind*, cf. pp. 7-10.

¹¹“Er fasset also, nachdem er lange genug die plage eines unbefestigten und von entgegengesetzten Eindrücken beunruhigten Gemüths erfahren hatte, die unparththeyischen und ernsthaften Entschluß, die Untersuchung dessen, was er seyn soll, von forne anzufangen, nichts als Wahn anzunehmen, oder als Vorurtheil zu verwerfen, was ihm nicht bey dieser neuen und strengen Prüfung in solcher Gestalt erscheinen würde, das, was er auf die Art unläugbar findet, zu sammeln und zu verbinden, den nothwendigen Folgen daraus ohne Weigerung Beyfall zu geben und nachzukommen, und also ein system des Lebens bey sich feste zu setzen, waren er sich zu allen Zeiten halten könne.” “Having suffered long enough the plague of an unstable mind, one troubled by opposing impressions, he [i.e., the writer] had resolved in earnest and with equanimity to examine what he should be, starting from the beginning. He had resolved not to accept anything as true, or reject anything as prejudice, which would not appear as such by this rigid new test; to collect and join together all that he found in this way undeniable, and to draw from it the necessary consequences...; thus to establish for himself a secure system of life by which he could abide for all times.” [my translation] I am citing from a later by later but still pre-Critique

for *der Mensch* in general. What is striking about this *Mensch* is that he does not appear worried, as a traditional Christian would, about his standing before God; is not concerned about giving thanks to his creator; or, for that matter, whether by his conduct he proclaims the glory of the creator's works. He is concerned, first and foremost, with his own peace of mind – with some assurance that, with the right attitude and the right conduct, he can count on at least a modicum of happiness. He is also confident that, through reflection and observation, he will find evidence of a universal order of things that will provide him with precisely this assurance. It is this confidence that makes Spalding's musings different from the reflections of classical pagan authors on the nature of happiness. The latter did not see themselves as part of a grand intelligent plan. They saw themselves as mere accidents (at times the mere playthings of the gods) in a cosmos which, although constantly re-assembling itself in order to retain internal harmony whenever the latter was disturbed for whatever reason, did not do so according to a foreordained plan that encompassed its every individual part. Spalding's universe was governed by precisely such a plan.

The conceptual basis for this belief was the metaphysics of Leibniz (at least as popularized by Wolff) and the psychology of Locke. I deliberately juxtapose the two. The view that the rationalism of the one and the empiricism of the other stood opposed, and that, historically, their conflict gave rise to Hume's scepticism, was a piece of propaganda on behalf of the alleged therapeutic virtues of critical philosophy for which Reinhold was mainly responsible¹² – though not without strong hints from Kant.¹³ For one thing, though Hume's scepticism routinely came in for discussion in the literature of the day, epistemological scepticism itself was not perceived as a serious problem in the Germany of the *Aufklärung* – at least, not as anything that the Leibniz/Locke combination could not

version of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (Leipzig, 1774), p. 3 (my translation).

¹²Among many possible texts, cf. *Über das Fundament des philosophischen Wissens*, pp. 44-47. English tr., *Between Kant and Hegel: Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, translated with critical notes and introductory studies by George di Giovanni and H.S. Harris, pp. 56-57.

¹³KrV, A x.

cope with.¹⁴ Mendelssohn's attitude in this respect was more typical. "Thanks be to those trusty guides," he once had occasion to exclaim, "who have led me back to true knowledge and to virtue. To you, Locke and Wolff! to you, immortal Leibniz! I erect an eternal monument in my heart. Without you I would have been lost forever."¹⁵ Obviously, Mendelssohn did not see any conflict of immortals there. On the contrary, the *Popularphilosophen* had been singularly successful in construing the "reason" of the rationalists as an extension of the "feeling" of the empiricists, and, at the same time, in integrating the latter into an otherwise reason-dominated construal of experience. This synthesis of rationalism and empiricism is precisely what made their philosophical position both accessible and attractive to the public at large.

We clearly see this synthesis at work in Mendelssohn's *Letters on Sentiments*, where feeling is taken to be a physiologically pre-programmed representation of the state of the body that substitutes for the representation that the intellect would otherwise provide conceptually. As contrasted with this intellect's representation, which would be clear and distinct, feeling is obscure. Yet its contribution is necessary to the economy of experience, because, for one thing, a complete conceptual analysis of the body's organism would exceed the power of the intellect, and, for another, were the intellect capable of such a complete analysis, the labour required for the task would pre-empt the possibility of the immediate gratification (*Begeisterung*) which, as a matter of fact, accompanies the natural feeling of organic perfection. For the work of the intellect to yield this sensuous gratification, its analytically attained concepts must first be made to collapse into the confused representations which are typical of feeling. It is in this way, inasmuch as in the

¹⁴The threat of metaphysical scepticism came after Kant, from Solomon Maimon, and was occasioned by Kant himself.

¹⁵"Dank sey jenen getreuen Wegweisen, die mich zur wahren Erkenntniß und zur Tugend zurück geführt haben. Euch Locke und *Wolf!* Dir unsterblicher *Leibniz!* stifte ich ein ewiges Denkmahl in meinem Herzen. Ohne eure Hülfe wäre ich auf ewig verlohren" (my translation). *Über die Empfindungen, Jubiläumsausgabe*, Vol.1, p. 65. In context, one should add Lord Shaftesbury to the list of immortals.

course of experience the intellect relaxes its otherwise reflective but necessarily incomplete representation of objects, thus *fusing together* the representation's many details into the complete but *con-fused* apprehension of feeling, that, according to Mendelssohn, the æsthetic realm of the beautiful arises. In the overall system of experience, feeling is both the organic precursor of reason and its collaborator.¹⁶ Mendelssohn saw no problem in wedding Shaftesbury's theory of sentiments to Wolff's psychology.

But it is at yet another level – more metaphysical than psychological – that *Popularphilosophie* wonderfully succeeded in synthesizing empiricism and rationalism. For this I have to return to Weishaupt and his already mentioned 1787 treatise.¹⁷ This treatise consists essentially of an exercise in worlds-modeling. Weishaupt begins by defining an object of experience as the product of a compact struck between the energy of a mind and the energy impinging upon the latter from things outside it. Then, taking as his starting point the various worlds of objects that the five human senses construct, each in virtue of its specific energy (for instance, the visual world and the aural world), Weishaupt proceeds to envisage a whole series of other possible worlds, each as would appear to a mind endowed with two or more of the senses that we know. The series can be expanded with reference to other possible senses that we do not know about but which can conceivably exist, all of them in a variety of combinations. Add to these possible sense-worlds such other worlds as would appear to minds whose senses are modified by reason, or to minds endowed with reason alone, and the series can be made to extend *in infinitum*.¹⁸

¹⁶Cf. *Über die Empfindungen*, Briefe 4-5. Also, *Rhapsodie oder Zusätze zu den Briefen über die Empfindungen*, 1, 392-294.

¹⁷I have treated this theme extensively in *Freedom and Religion*, pp. 44-49. Occasionally I follow this earlier treatment *verbatim*.

¹⁸Pp. 94 ff., pp. 185ff. It is interesting to note that Weishaupt denies the validity of the notion of a gradation of perfections, or of classes of beings of different perfections. He takes the very idea of a class to be a function of our ignorance. Perfection is always individual. It is to be measured within a given world on terms specific to just that world. All concepts ought eventually to refer to individuals (pp. 153-157, 159).

This is by itself an already interesting conceptual construction. Weishaupt's next step is however even more interesting. On that construction, by running across all the envisaged possible worlds, starting from the ones for which immediate empirical evidence is available,¹⁹ one should *ex hypothesi* be able to identify elements that are common and necessary to all, since without them each would not be a world (175ff.). These elements would thus constitute a necessity which is at once empirical (since derived from observation of experience), yet *a priori* (because, once recognized, it is recognized as necessary). This result had the far reaching implication that, on its basis, any absolute distinction in experience between truths of reason and truths of fact disappeared. Weishaupt repeatedly expanded on this consequence in his many subsequent works,²⁰ arguing against Descartes that there is continuity between sensation and conceptualization, and, against Locke, that the concept is autonomous despite its continuity with sensation, for it is governed by requirements that are specific to it. It is possible, therefore, to justify *theoretically* the belief in the truth of empirical representations that all men share *in fact*. As Weishaupt says, "The ground of my representations . . . lies *in the position that the soul holds at different times among the other parts of the world; in the differing self-manifesting influence that the objects with which the soul coexists exercise according to that*

¹⁹The belief that, on the basis of experience, one can infer the possibilities of other future worlds, was an Enlightenment scientific commonplace. See, for instance, Charles Bonnet's *La Palingénésie philosophique*. Peculiar to Weishaupt is that he denies that the transition from world to world entails a gradation of perfections, and that he applies this principle also to the varieties of moral systems found in human history (pp. 204ff.).

²⁰For instance, in *Über die Gründe und Gewisheit [sic] der Menschlichen Erkenntnis. Zür Prüfung der Kantischen Kritik*, pp. 208, in §§ 46; and also repeatedly in his voluminous *Über Wahrheit und sittliche Vollkommenheit*, Part 1, 1793; Part 2, 1794; Part 3, 1797. This last part includes a very interesting Appendix, "Concerning the Origin of the Doctrine of Ideas" ("Über den Ursprung der Lehre von der Ideen") in which Weishaupt insists that all knowledge is of individuals, and that all philosophical errors can be traced to the beliefs in "universal ideas."

position.”²¹ Each side, i.e., the soul and the objects, must express the other. Any other assumption leads to theoretical as well as practical absurdities.

As I have already suggested, this theory of factual necessity was Weishaupt’s answer to Kant’s recent notion of an *a priori* of experience. But it also addressed itself, past Kant, to the metaphysics of Leibniz/Wolff. The latter, too, recognized the presence in experience of an ineliminable moment of facticity. But it explained it as the consequence of the distance that supposedly separated “the best of all possible worlds” from “all possible worlds” – a distance that had to be bridged by God’s choice. Weishaupt now explained it on the basis of the difference that separates the world generated by our set of organs and such other worlds as are the results of the compact that other sets of organs establish with their immediate environments. *For us*, this world is the one from which every analysis of experience must begin. This is a *de facto* necessity, but one for which an explanation can always be given on the assumption of some other set of organs. That there is necessity, therefore, is guaranteed – without the necessity, however, ever being absolute, and yet not any the less ineluctable for that. All this demonstrated, of course, the conceptual resourcefulness of *Popularphilosophie*. The immediate net result, however, was that in Weishaupt’s system the world lost the moral aura that it had in the system of Leibniz/Wolff. Weishaupt had rid it of the intentional lines that pervaded the latter by showing how its presumed harmony could be attained on purely mechanistic causal relations. The naturalism of *Popularphilosophie* could easily turn into materialism, and this is what made the metaphysical issue of a vocation of humankind – of a *Bestimmung* which, in keeping with the ambiguity inherent in the German word, is at once “determination” and “call” – problematic.

²¹“Der Grund meiner Vorstellungen liegt sodann *in der jedesmaligen lage der Seele unter den übrigen Theilen der Welt, in der nach dieser sich verschiedentlich äussernden Einwirkung der Gegestände, mit welchen sie coexistirt,*” § 39, p. 162 (my translation).

3. Abbt's "Doubts" and Mendelssohn's "Oracle"

According to Altmann (132), the summary of the Abbt/Mendelssohn exchange was deliberately intended by the authors to recall Pierre Bayle's attack on rational theology and Leibniz's reply to it in his *Essais de Théodicée* – witness Abbt's conjuration at the beginning of his presentation of the spirit of Bayle, and Mendelssohn invoking the witness of Leibniz while pretending to speak in the name of the "blue-eyed" daughter of Jupiter (6.1, 10 and 21). Spalding's thesis, as stated and defended by Mendelssohn, is this: "The true vocation of man here below – such as fool and wise alike, albeit in unequal measure, fulfill – is therefore the *cultivation in accordance with divine aims of the faculties of the soul*, for it is to this that all man's actions on earth are directed".²² Hinske, in view of his intention to document Mendelssohn's influence on Kant, concentrates in his article on one specific bone of contention between the two friends, namely, whether the reality of this supposed vocation, as so defined in terms of the realization of God-appointed human faculties, can be gathered from the current state of human affairs. Abbt's doubt is summed up in the question: "If it is the case that all that can be developed must, up to a certain degree, be developed, why is it that on earth so many thousand capacities never come to be developed to the measure here possible?"²³ As for Spalding's further claim that, if to the observation of things as they are now one adds the consideration that this present life is intended as a preparation and test of one yet to come, then everything falls clearly into place, Abbt offers the tart retort: "Especially in view of the large number of children who are born only to die soon after? It is astonishing how one could

²²"Die *eigentliche* Bestimmung des Menschen hienieden, die der Thor und der Weise, aber in ungleichem Masse, erfüllen ist also die *Ausbildung der Seelenfähigkeiten nach göttlichen Absichten*; denn hierauf zielen alle seine Verrichtungen auf Erden" (6.1, 20; my translation).

²³"Wenn alles, was entwickelt werden kann, bis auf einem gewissen Grad entwickelt werden muß: woher rührt es, daß so viele tausend Fähigkeiten hier auf der Erde nicht einmal zu dem mäßigen hier möglichen Grade der Entwicklung kommen?" (6.1, 17; my translation).

talk oneself into believing that sense can be made of their premature death on the ground that this life is only a testing ground while, on the contrary, it is precisely this premature death that makes nonsense of this life as only a testing ground.”²⁴ Mendelssohn’s replies to these challenges of Abbt are, for their part, just as reassuring as the challenges are discomfoting. Who is to say that what *appears* to us as a stunted development of the human faculties is not, in the greater order of things, the right degree of development required for precisely that order? How can one judge what is *here* possible while ignoring intentions that transcend this “here”?²⁵ Does the death of infants subvert the idea that this life is a preparation for another? The fact is that no human life, however brief, does not already constitute a cultivation, however inchoate, of the powers of the soul. Infants do not die “. . . without some accomplishment of their souls.”²⁶

It was this opposition of views which, Hinske believes, would have assumed in Kant’s mind the shape of an antinomy. Both sides of the opposition could be argued for. On the one hand, one can argue that there is evidence that man’s call here on earth is to develop the natural powers of his soul. On the other hand, that there is no such evidence can also be argued for. This is the antinomy that Kant resolved by claiming that the perfection to which individuals are called is only to be achieved, and only in due time, by the human species as a whole. Perfection, as a determination (*Bestimmung*) to which everyone is called (*Bestimmung as Anruf*), belongs exclusively to the species. Here is where

²⁴ “Vorzüglich in Absicht auf die grosse Anzahl derer bald nach der Geburt wieder sterbenden Kinder? Es ist erstaunend, wie man sich hat bereden können, dieser frühzeitige Tod werde daraus begreiflich, weil dieses Leben nur ein Stand der Prüfung sey; da doch aus demselben gerade unbegreiflich wird, wie dieses Leben ein Stand der Prüfung syen könne” (6.1, 16-17; my translation).

²⁵ “. . . Mit Vernachlässigung weit wichtiger Absichten? Getrauen Sie sich hierauf zu antworten?” (6.1,24)

²⁶ “. . . ohne irgend eine Fertigkeit ihrer Seele ausgebildet zu haben” (6.1, 24; my translation).

Kant gave to his anthropology its at the time unprecedented historical dimension.

As we shall see, Mendelssohn did not approve of this move by Kant.²⁷ But the point now is that, to the extent that Kant had indeed formulated an antinomy in his mind and the Abbt/Mendelssohn exchange had been the inspiration for it, he had seriously misread Abbt.²⁸ Spalding had raised the issue of a vocation of humankind in order to ascertain whether it was possible to gather sufficient evidence from the world at large in order to rest assured that, if one just acted rightly, one would eventually attain perfection and enjoy the happiness consequent upon it. The issue was one of conduct, of ascertaining the norm of the behaviour by which the human being must abide in order to find his pre-appointed place within the overall order of things – it being assumed as indubitable that there is such an order. Abbt himself clearly stated the issue in the motto prefixed to his tract. “*Quid sumus? et quidnam victuri gignimur?*” “What are we? and what do we ever give birth to if we happen to prevail?” His many sceptical doubts were raised for the most part as *ad hoc* replies to Spalding’s individual optimistic claims. His main argument, however, was that, inasmuch as the assumed overall order in fact exists (and apparently Abbt himself did not doubt the fact), to look for a norm of conduct specific to humankind, i.e., to look for a specifically human vocation, is futile, because any evidence that we might believe to have gathered in its support would be overruled by virtue of requirements dictated by the greater order of things, or, if not overruled, certainly absorbed into the latter. For a specifically human vocation, therefore, one would have to rely on a divine revelation that exceeds the scope of reason alone. As Abbt says: “One must once again distinguish the *vocation* that *humankind* has *in common* with all the other beings of this cosmos [i.e. *Bestimmung* as “determinatoin”] from the *vocation* [i.e. *Bestimmyng* as “vocation”] that belong to it as a *particular species of being*, at a *particular place*. One cannot derive the latter from the former,

²⁷See Note 34 below.

²⁸Hinske, for his part, admits that his presentation of Abbt’s position is deliberately truncated (p. 142).

and *it alone* uncovers for us the Godhead's secret regarding humankind. It appears that a revelation, and a revelation alone, can instruct us on the matter"²⁹ (6,1. 15) Kant's antinomy, in other words, did not address itself to Abbt's doubts at all, for its resolution, by appealing to the perfection of the human species in general (presumably as part of the *Weltgebäude*) begged the question which, at least for Abbt, was at issue in his exchange with Mendelssohn, namely, the vocation of individual men here and now, "an einer *besondern Stelle*."

Abbt had actually already made his point, artistically and all the more effectively for that, at the beginning of his tract, in the form of a parable of the human situation which Altmann rightly describes as Kafkaesque (134). A prince had brought regiments of soldiers from a distant land, but for purposes known by nobody, officers and soldiers alike. The progress of the march was slow and came to a halt when, for reasons also unknown, secret orders were issued to encamp until further notice. With the suspension of any immediate mandate for action, the soldiers gave themselves to all forms of conduct, some of which contravened army ethos. Individuals, moreover, were known suddenly to disappear. Where they went and why, perhaps on secret orders from the prince, nobody knew. To be sure, some claimed to know, but their credibility, because of the way they otherwise comported themselves, was seriously in doubt. As for the officers, since they did not know for what purposes they were in charge, and, moreover, since they were sensitive to the possibility that the conduct of individual soldiers, though unruly by accepted army protocols, might well be in tune with the prince's still unknown ulterior motives and might well have been sanctioned by him, were at a loss as to what extent to enforce army discipline. I need not

²⁹ "Man unterscheidet doch einmal die *Bestimmung des Menschen*, die er mit allen andern Dingen dieses Weltgebäudes *gemeinschaftlich* hat von derjenigen, die ihm als einer *besondern Gattung von Wesen*, an einer *besondern Stelle*, *eigen* ist. Aus der ersten läßt sich die letztere nicht schliessen, un *diese allein* entdeckt uns die Geheimnisse der Gottheit über ihn. Eine Offenbarung, scheint es, kann einzig und allein uns darüber belehren." (6.1, 9; my translation).

dwell on the details of the parable. Its point is clear. To the extent that we consider ourselves as acting out a part in a grand play of which, however, we do not know the script, there is no telling whether what appears to us as a norm for sorting out right from wrong, good from evil, sense from nonsense, is, according to the grander order of things as scripted in the play, completely subverted precisely as norm. As Abbt puts it, who is to say whether a Domitian, an Attila, a Borgia or a Caligula, are happy or unhappy? Who is to say whether what appears to me to be unhappiness is in fact self-incurred punishment? (Cf. 6.1, 17) Better to assume, in order to avoid the doubts agonizing officers and soldiers alike in Abbt's parable, that there is no scripted play at all. At least one can then concentrate on what makes sense or nonsense in the here and now, according to norms only relevant to precisely this here and now. As Abbt says, adding to this here and now the hope of a future existence does not help, for there is no guarantee that the predicaments that trouble us in the present existence would not equally trouble us in the hoped for extended one (6.1, 15).

One cannot altogether blame Kant for having missed Abbt's point. Mendelssohn had missed it too. His response to the agony of the protagonists of Abbt's parable was that they should have been able to recognize from the tasks to which they were daily called to perform what their prince had in store for them (6.1, 19). These tasks had an end and a perfection of their own, from which the further ends for which they were the means could have been inferred – all of them, means and ends, subordinated to the unity of divine purpose. “In the divine order, *the unity of the final end* rules. All subordinated ends are at the same time means; all means are at the same time final ends. Think not that this life is merely preparation, the future life merely final end. Both are means, both are final ends. God's purposes, and the alterations of each and every substance, proceed with equal steps to immensity.”³⁰ To be sure, one

³⁰ “In der göttlichen Ordnung herrscht *Einheit des Endzwecks*. Alles untergeordnete Endzwecke sind zugleich Mittel; alle Mittel sind zugleich Endzwecke. Denke nicht, dieses Leben sey bloß Vorbereitung, das künftige bloß Endzweck. Beyde sind Mittel, beyde sind Endzwecke. Mit gleichen Schritten gehen die Absichten Gottes und die Veränderungen einer jeden Substanz ins Unermeßliche fort” (6.1, 21; my translation).

can also argue that, since order does not countenance the presence of anything out of joint within it (*etwas verrückt*), and since it is assumed that order prevails, there should not be any question of development. If this is the argument, then Mendelssohn's reply is that development consists precisely in recognizing that what *appeared* (*schien*) to be out of joint, *was* (*war*) in fact not so (6.1, 22). "Nothing goes fruitless. Not what is evil, and would the good be without fruit?"³¹

This is how immersed Mendelssohn was in the metaphysics of Leibniz/Wolff – so immersed as not to see that, if in this world the "out of joint" (*verrückt*) only appears to be so, that it is not out of joint *in fact*, then the contrary might very well also be the case. Who is to say that whatever order we deem to hold in our immediate life-context is not *in fact* only an imagined order – that, *in fact*, chaos ultimately prevails? Inasmuch as one cannot identify ends which, albeit limited in their scope, are nonetheless *absolute* ends, i.e., such as cannot be subordinated to any further purpose and on which, therefore, one can securely anchor the meaning of one's life – as long, in other words, as everything acquires meaning only in virtue of everything else – then the possibility of distinguishing between appearance and reality, between means and end, right and wrong, is undermined. This was precisely the point of Abbt's parable. What gave to the situation in which soldiers and officers alike found themselves in the Prince's army its Kafkaesque quality was not the lack of immediately perceived ends. As the parable goes, as soon as the advance came to a standstill, individuals immediately set out doing their own thing. It was rather the belief on the part of everyone concerned that there was an overarching purpose transcending their perceived ends that put into question the validity of such ends as *in fact* ends – the belief, in other words, that they were acting out an already scripted action. The situation was especially difficult for the officers when it was their turn to punish perceived transgressors, that is, when the distinction between right and wrong – when what constituted *evil*, in other

³¹"Nicht ist ohne Frucht verlohren. Das Böse nicht, und das Gut sollte es seyn?"(6.1, 22; my translation).

words – was the issue.

Altmann, the sympathetic biographer of Mendelssohn, says that it was not “Mendelssohn[’s] wish to justify evil by declaring its conformity to God’s purposes. The problem of evil is submerged in the recognition of the great harmony in which everything is either created or admitted as contributing to the perfection of the whole” (135). To deny evil certainly was not Mendelssohn’s wish. But the vagueness of the metaphor to which Altmann is forced in order to make his point betrays the fragility of Mendelssohn’s position. What does it mean to “submerge” evil into a greater order, yet not deny it as “evil”? Easier to stay with Weishaupt’s system where each world attained its norm of perfection, and of the lack thereof, on the basis of the compact established within it between a set of organs and their environs – where, more accurately, the world itself was generated by precisely this compact. The norm governing it might have been specific to it alone and in this sense, therefore, relative to it. *For it*, however, i.e., as long as one restricted one’s knowledge to it alone, it was absolute. But, as we have already noted, this “relative absoluteness,” paradoxical as it was, was achieved by Weishaupt by emptying the universe of intentions that would run across it, so to speak, holding it together *a priori*. Not that Weishaupt denied a universal order of things. The point, rather, is that his materialism made such an order the result of a mechanical coincidence of worlds. An individual agent caught up in these worlds, therefore, would at least be able to gauge the relative value of his actions by the consequences immediately flowing from them. At *that* particular point of the confluence, but there alone, that was all that counted.

But no matter: the common belief was in a necessary order of things naturally determined and, whether the necessity was mechanically generated *a posteriori* (as *per* Weishaupt) or teleologically motivated *a priori* (as *per* Leibniz/Wolff), inasmuch as an agent’s actions fell within this greater order, the relation of the actions to the agent – ultimately, the agent’s self-identity precisely as agent – came into question. This was precisely the problem confronting officers and soldiers in Abbt’s parable. Note that the problem was not one of lack of knowledge, as Abbt himself thought. This only showed how

much Abbt himself, no less than Mendelssohn, was bound to the conceptual habits of *Popularphilosophie*. The problem was rather one of too much knowledge, for it was to the extent that one knew, or at least believed, that his or her actions were controlled by intentions or had consequences that transcended them that doubts as to *what* one was *actually* doing, and *why*, arose. Had one known, as if *sub specie æternitatis*, the whole order of things, then one would have no alternative but to see oneself simply submerged into it – his or her agency merely a way of being, a mode or a mere appearance, of the whole. But how did this view square with the personalist values that were also very much part of the ethos of *Popularphilosophie*, the products of its religious heritage?

In his *Orakel* Mendelssohn had portrayed himself as speaking through the mouth of the cerulean-eyed daughter of Jupiter, Leibniz's spirit the witness to her utterances. But there was also another character in fact present on the scene and interfering with the proceedings, his interference all the more disturbing as his presence was unnoticed. This was the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,³² he who had called his people to a special vocation and, as most people believed in the Germany of Mendelssohn, had of late also extended this call to humankind in general. This call addressed itself to irreducibly responsible agents and thereby established the possibility of sin, that is, of an evil that was both personal and irreducible. The personal values that motivated much of the Enlightenment were motivated by precisely this call. It was not clear, however, whether, within the context of the metaphysics of *Popularphilosophie*, the requirements of personal responsibility and personal evil that the values presupposed could be saved. This was the problem. The *Popularphilosophen*, Mendelssohn foremost among them, were given to obfuscate the issue by routinely sliding in their pronouncements from *Vorsehung*, with all

³²In the course of his epistolary exchange with Abbt, Mendelssohn wrote to his friend: "Mit dem Kaltsinne eines deutschen Metaphysikers hülle ich mich in meinen kahlen Mantel, und sage wie Pangloß: *Diese Welt ist die Beste!*" – this in the very letter which he abruptly broke off with: "Jedoch der Sabbath gehet an! Leben sie wohl, mein bester Freund!" (12.1, 53) "Pangloss" and "Sabbath" seem to be a paradoxical juxtaposition.

the religious notes that “Providence” brings into play, to *Plan der Natur*, as if they two amounted to the same thing while in fact they did not. In brief, the problem was one of agency, of the possibility of irreducible individual responsibility. The paradox of *Popularphilosophie* was that it held on to religiously inspired personalist values while at the same time professing a metaphysics incompatible with them. This was the paradox, and it was bound to break out in the open, as in fact it did at the time of the Spinoza Dispute.

4. Mendelssohn’s reservations and the crisis of *Popularphilosophie*

I am back at the Spinoza Dispute, but not without first noting that there had been occasions when Mendelssohn himself had felt the need to qualify his adherence to the commonly accepted belief in universal order. Kant’s reaction to his dispute with Abbt was a case in point. It found expression in the 1784 essay, “Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View,” where Kant, among other claims, had advanced the hypothesis that it is possible on the whole to look at the history of the human species as the fulfillment of a hidden plan of nature (*ein verborgenes Plan der Natur*) devised to bring about the perfect political constitution required for the realization of all the natural predispositions of the species itself, not of the individuals of the species.³³ Now, at a meeting of the *Mittwochgesellschaft* dedicated to a discussion on the theme of “the best state constitution,”³⁴ Mendelssohn, while not referring in his *votum* to Kant by name, agreed nonetheless with one thesis advanced in *Idee*, namely that man needs adversities,

³³*Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*. The essay was published in the *Berlinischer Monatsschrift*, November 1784, 385-411. Cf. *Zweiter Satz*, p. 389; *Vierter Satz*, p. 392.

³⁴“Über die beste Staatverfassung,” 6.1, 145-148. See also Altmann’s notes on pp. xxxii and 253, and, also relevant, pp. xxvi-xxix. Altmann does not give a date for the meeting. Mendelssohn’s position as expressed in this *votum* was nothing new. It is typical of Mendelssohn’s political theory, as Altmann rightly points out in his notes.

even evil, in order to be spurred on to use and develop his faculties.³⁵ He distanced himself from Kant's essay, however, on two other crucial and closely related issues. First, against Kant's idea of a perfect political constitution to which the history of the whole human species is allegedly directed, Mendelssohn argued that there cannot be just one single perfect constitution. On the contrary, there must be many, where "perfect" is defined by how well a constitution is suited to meet the circumstances that individual humans must confront because of their particular historical situation. Second, Mendelssohn argues that men have potentials that belong to them precisely as individuals. It is possible, therefore, that they will go on realizing such potentials as individuals even though the constitution under which they live has attained its limits and their society has come to a political standstill or has even begun to regress. This must be the case because, according to Mendelssohn, the perfection of human beings as individuals is the determining goal of the perfection of society, and not the other way around. In other words, inasmuch as there is a secret plan of nature promoting perfection, the promoted perfection must be, first and foremost, that of individuals. Here is the relevant text:

"Everything rests on the big question: *what is the vocation of man, and what is he to do here on earth?* – If his vocation is the progression to a higher perfection, than man is end, society means. Men will need various kinds of social ties for their advancement [. . .]. *The final end is not the advancement of society but of men* [. . .]. The progression of men can well coexist with the *standstill* or even the *regression* of humanity even though at the same time necessarily bound to either."³⁶

³⁵Cf. *Vierter Satz*, pp. 392-394. This is a thesis which is internally fraught, of course, with serious conceptual and moral difficulties.

³⁶"Alles beruht auf der großen Frage: *was ist die Bestimmung des Menschen, und was soll er hier auf Erden?* – Ist seine Bestimmung Fortgang zu höherer Vollkommenheit, so ist der Mensch Zweck, die Gesellschaft Mittel. Die Menschen werden verschiedene Arten von gesellschaftlicher Verbindung zu ihrem Fortgang brauchen [. . .]. *Der Endzweck is nicht Fortgang der Gesellschaft, sondern der Menschen.* [. . .] *Fortgang der Menschen*

Mendelssohn had made the same point, in even stronger language, in a communication with August Hennings of 1782, with reference to his just published comments on his correspondence with Abbt.³⁷ “Nature’s end is not the perfection of the human species. No! [It is] the perfection of man, of the individual!”³⁸ He had also made a very similar one when objecting to his friend Lessing’s idea of history as an education of humankind in general, rather than of individual men.³⁹

Hinske comments *en passant* that Mendelssohn conceived the vocation of humankind according to traditional eschatology. Perhaps he did.⁴⁰ But here is the rub. How did that eschatology square with the metaphysics of the cerulean-eyed daughter of Jupiter of which Mendelssohn was otherwise the champion? The problem, as we have just suggested, was one of agency – of the possibility of truly individualized and, therefore, responsible action. Not that this was a problem original with *Popularphilosophie*. In one

kann mit *Stillestand* oder auch *Rückfall* der *Menscheit* gar wohl bestehen ja zuweilen nothwendig verbunden seyn” (6.1, 140; my translation).

³⁷Altmann refers to this letter (6.1, 242) and also to the relevant passages in *Jerusalem*. Mendelssohn’s recently published work is *Moses Mendelssohn’s Anmerkungen zu Abbt’s freundschaftlicher Correspondenz* (Berlin & Stettin: Nicolai, 1782).

³⁸“Nicht die Vervollkommnung des Menschengeschlechts ist Absicht der Natur. Nein! Die Vervollkommnung des Menschen, des Individui”(13, 65; my translation)

³⁹*Jerusalem* (8.162).

⁴⁰This is a surprising statement on the part of Hinske. Inasmuch as Christian eschatological imagery might have been still at work in the background of the philosophical idea of a final consummation of all things in perfection that Altmann attributes to Leibniz and Wolff, and to Mendelssohn as well, this would only show how much the philosophers of the age had simply lost the meaning of that imagery. In Christian belief, the effect of the expected final judgment (*Urteil*, κρίσις) would have been to part the wicked from the good – in other words, not to absorb evil into a greater universal perfection but to finally make it visible, to eternally confirm it precisely as evil.

way or other, it had nagged Christian theologians from the beginning. But it had become especially acute with *Popularphilosophie* because the reason that the latter professed was allegedly “pure,” and it therefore precluded the options that the theologians always had of falling back on religious imagery. Here is where Jacobi’s dispute with Mendelssohn becomes important, because, for all his faults (and by all accounts they were many), Jacobi’s merit was to raise the problem precisely as one of agency and as specifically caused by the reason of the Enlightenment. As Jacobi had said to Lessing, with words with which he then confronted Mendelssohn, on Spinoza’s position,

the only function that the faculty of thought has in the whole of nature is that of observer; its proper business is to accompany the mechanism of the efficient causes. The conversation that we are now having together is only an affair of our bodies; and the whole content of the conversation, analyzed into its elements, is extension, movement, degree of velocity, together with their concepts, and the concepts of these concepts. The inventor of the clock did not ultimately invent it; he only witnessed its coming to be out of blindly self-developing forces. So too Raphael, when he sketched the School of Athens, and Lessing, when he composed his *Nathan*. The same goes for all philosophizing, arts, forms of governance, sea and land wars – in brief, for everything possible.⁴¹

Jacobi admired Spinoza because he, more than any other philosopher, had had the courage

⁴¹“Wenn es lauter wirkende und keine Endursachen giebt, so hat das denkende Vermögen in der ganzen Natur bloß das Zusehen; sein einziges Geschäft ist, den Mechanismus der wirkenden Kräfte zu begleiten. Die Unterredung, die wir gegenwärtig miteinander haben, ist nur ein Anliegen unserer Leiber; und der ganze Inhalt dieser Unterredung, in seine Elemente aufgelöst: Ausdehnung, Bewegung, Grade der Geschwindigkeit, nebst den Begriffen davon, und den Begriffen von diesen Begriffen, Der Erfinder der Uhr erfand sich im Grunde nicht; er sah nur ihrer Entstehung aus blindlings sich entwickelnden Kräften zu. Eben so Raphael, da er die Schule von Athen entwarf; und Lessing, da er seinen Nathan dichtete. Dasselbe gilt von allen Philosophen, Künsten, Regierungsformen, Kriegen zu Wasser und zu Lande: kurz, von allem Möglichen.” *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, pp. 18-19. For the translation, see *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel ‘Allwill’*, p. 189.

to bring the principle on which classical metaphysics was based to its ultimate conclusion – namely, that nothing genuinely new, i.e., nothing for which one could truly claim responsibility, was possible: “What distinguishes Spinoza's philosophy from all the other, what constitutes its soul, is that it maintains and applies with the strictest rigour the well known principle, *gigni de nihilo nihil, in nihilum nil potest reverti*” (59). In these passages, incidentally, Jacobi was contrasting mechanic or exclusively efficient causality with final causality. But the “finality” that he had in mind was that of the intentionality that directs self-motivated actions. It had nothing to do with Leibniz’s pre-established harmony which, as a matter of fact, Jacobi thought logically led to what he called Spinoza’s fatalism (24).

To Jacobi’s pious disquisitions that only served to cloud the issue and poison the tenor of the dispute, Mendelssohn replied:

I shall pass over too the noble retreat under the banner of faith which you propose for your own part. It is totally in the spirit of your religion, which imposes upon you the duty to suppress doubt through faith. [. . .] My religion knows no duty to resolve doubts of this kind otherwise than through reason; it commands no faith in eternal truths. I have one more ground, therefore, to seek **conviction**.⁴² (230).161-162)

That was up to Mendelssohn to judge. The point at issue, however, was whether the reason specific to the Enlightenment, not reason in general, was one that could resolve the doubts that Jacobi – no longer Abbt – was raising. Once these doubts had come on the scene, the road lay open to Fichte’s *Bestimmung des Menschen*. As of 1786, *Popularphilosophie* was in crisis.

⁴²“So lasse ich auch den ehrlichen Rückzug unter die Fahne des Glaubens, den Sie von ihrer Seite in Vorschlag bringen, an seinen Ort gestellt sey. Er ist völlig in dem Geiste Ihrer Religion, die Ihnen die Pflicht auflegt, die Zweifel durch den Galuben niederzuschlagen. [. . .] Meine Religion kennt keine Pflicht, dergleichen Zweifel anders als durch Vernunftgründe zu heben, befiehlt keinem Galuben an ewigen Wahrheiten. Ich habe also einen Grund mehr, **Überzeugung** zu suchen,” p. 161.

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