

Hen kai pan: Spinozistic Figurations in Early German Idealism

The first edition of Jacobi's *Spinoza-Buchlein* included two poems of Goethe. The first stood in the text immediately after the title page, carrying the name of its author. The second was the one that had been the occasion of Jacobi's famous conversation with Lessing at Wolfenbüttel. It was now being attached, without title and without mention of the author, to Jacobi's record of that conversation—just as anonymously as it had been originally presented to Lessing. Both poems call upon the Gods, the Undying Ones, but in totally opposite moods. In the first, they are being praised because they are Man Writ Large:

And we revere	Und wir verehren
The Undying Ones	Die Unsterblichen,
As if they were human,	Als wären sie Menschen,
In their great deeds	Täten im Großen,
As the best of us	Was der Beste im Kleinen
In our little doings are	Tut oder möchte.
Or might be.	

In the second, the same Gods are declared to be 'wretched' ('nichts ärmers unter der Sonn als euch') because they too, like men, are subject to higher powers that control their existence, yet, unlike men, do not have the option of rebelling against such powers—of enjoying themselves as if they were free, however aware of their limitations:

Here sit I, shaping Men	Hier sitz' ich, forme Menschen
In my likeness:	Nach meinem Bilde,
A race that is to be as I am,	Ein Geschlecht, das mir gleich sei,
To suffer and weep,	Zu leiden, zu weinen,
To relish and delight in things,	Zu genießen und zu freuen sich,
And to pay you no regard—	Un dein nicht zu achten,
Like me!	Wie ich!

To the first readers of the *Spinoza-Buchlein*—Mendelssohn included—the juxtaposition of the two poems, even the presence in the book of Goethe, must have been puzzling indeed. The general public had no idea that Goethe was the author of the second as well as the first piece. Most of all, it knew nothing of Jacobi's 1774 encounter with his younger contemporary, yet already famous poet; nor did it know that Spinoza had been the subject of the passionate discussion that took place between the two men at the time. To us, with the advantage of hindsight and of the knowledge we have of the Jacobi-Goethe tumultuous

relationship, the two poems are, on the contrary, highly revealing. For one thing, their very presence in the *Buchlein* is testimony that the disinterring (*Aufgrabung*) of Spinoza had begun long before Jacobi was to make it an object of philosophical reflection. It had begun in the medium of the literary culture of the *Sturm und Drang*. Jacobi knew this much. However counterproductive his efforts were to be, his intent in the *Buchlein* was to exorcize the philosopher's spirit, already let loose poetically, by reinterring his body conceptually. It might well be—though this is a question open to discussion—that Goethe's pantheism had been the unspoken object of Jacobi's attack on philosophy in his original conversation with Lessing; and that later, after Lessing's death, Jacobi's ulterior motive in wanting to reveal to the world the alleged Spinozism of the recently departed man might well have been to indict Goethe of pantheism along with Lessing. Mendelssohn was to be only an instrument of this scheming.

These speculations apart, even more revealing about Goethe's two poems is the strangely nuanced message that, together, they convey *to us*. According to the first poem, the mysterious powers that Man divines [*ahnden*], and enshrines in the images of the Gods, transcend nature. Man has an intimation of their presence because he knows that he is himself capable of rising above the chain of events otherwise controlled by blind, unfeeling [*unfühlend*], nature. According to the second, these same powers are however the ones that bind the Gods as well as Man to that chain. And though Man is portrayed in both poems as a noble Doer of Deeds, the only deed of which he seems capable according to the second, and which sets him apart from both nature and the Gods, is his Promethean resolution of going on to exist as if he were free, in full realization that he is not. The first poem is bathed in a mood of serenity inspired by the belief that, though bound to the cycle of existence like all things of nature, Man is none the less capable of judgement and choice, hence, unlike nature, can strive even for what 'cannot be'. In the second poem, the mood is somber instead, now inspired by the tortured realization that Man's knowledge does not save him from the inflexible laws of 'die allmächtige Zeit'. The point of Man's striving can only be, therefore, the striving itself. Both moods are perfectly consistent with a vision of Man's place in a universe defined by *hen kai pan*, the Spinoza inspired motto that Jacobi attributed to Lessing. Goethe was pinning his humanism on precisely the presumed capacity on the part of an individual to steer between the two moods, appreciating the validity of both without however abandoning himself to the extremes of each. To any reader in full

knowledge of his authorship, the two poems, as they stood in Jacobi's *Buchlein* apposite one another, would have clearly conveyed this balancing act lyrically. Later in life, in *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, Goethe was to give a more cerebral expression to the same ambiguous vision, this time through the irony exercised throughout the work on its central character.¹ Wilhelm's attempt to define a social personality for himself is bound to fail, for individuality is only an appearance, and, when all is said and done, humans can only play at being 'somebody'—can never actually be one.

This, of course, was decidedly not Jacobi's intended message. His interest in the first poem—which, incidentally, he dropped in all subsequent editions of the *Spinoza Letters*—lay in the noble picture of Man that could be abstracted from it. Jacobi was now setting it down as the premise, so to speak, of all his subsequent arguments. The abstraction was performed by perhaps the not altogether honest device of selectively printing in bold [hervorheben] words that, together, impressionistically declared Jacobi's position. Through the things that he *kennt*, Man comes to *glauben* in higher powers, and, in virtue of this belief, can strive after *das unmögliche*, thereby freeing himself from *Glück*, the blind accidentalities, of *Natur*. Knowledge leads to faith, and faith makes Man free. This was Jacobi's opening statement. His heavy accentuation [Hervorhebung] of words left nothing of the poetic suppleness of Goethe's image of 'höhern Wesen'. It precluded the possibility, which in Goethe's poem is poetically left open, that Man's sense of freedom might be just an illusion. It is this possibility that provides the conceptual link to the second poem which Jacobi was on the contrary opposing to it. Unbeknown to the first readers of his *Spinoza-Letters*—but certainly not to Goethe—Jacobi was playing the poet against himself. And this was a serious strategic error on his part. For playing on the poet's own ground exposed him to the poet's vision, and it was not clear whether Jacobi was in a position of controlling the seductive power that vision might have on others. Even worse, Jacobi was to dare the same strategy on Spinoza as well, whose *hen xai pan* lay just below the surface of Goethe's poem. On the one hand, he was accusing the philosopher of nihilism; on the other hand, he was also defending him against the crude misinterpretation of his thought common at the time, even praising him for his intuitive sense of truth. Lessing had had good reasons to wonder aloud, during his conversation with Jacobi, whether the latter was himself a Spinozist. Mendelssohn, and some among the early readers of Jacobi's *Buchlein*, thought the same. Indeed, in the *David Hume* of 1787, and again in the 1789 second edition of the *Spinoza-*

Letters, Jacobi was to go so far as to capitalize, quite explicitly, on what he thought were profound insights of Spinoza in an effort to propose, against Kant, his own theory of reason and of freedom. This, I repeat, was a strategic mistake. For the *hen kai pan* carried an inexorable logic of its own, even more powerful than any poetic seduction. And there was no playing with it without running the risk of finding oneself driven by it. So it is that Jacobi, as he engaged in his debate over the body of Spinoza, unwittingly drew the blueprint of early Idealism.

I shall return to Goethe's poems at the end. It is this last point that I now want to develop. Though nowhere developed systematically, there is in Jacobi a coherent, even powerful, theory of knowledge. (It is, of course, of the early Jacobi that I am speaking.) It is in this theory, moreover, that we have the clearest illustration of the intricate relationship that Jacobi bore to both Spinoza and Kant. In the theory, 'reason' carries a complex signification that defies simple definition. According to one level of meaning, reason's function for Jacobi is to 're-present' [vor-stellen], through images and concepts, a reality that must be assumed as already present to the knower 'directly'[unmittelbar]. Knowledge through reason is therefore only second-hand acquaintance [Bekanntshcaft]—at best 'recognition' [Anerkennung] rather than 'cognition' [Erkenntnis].² It follows that rational 'knowledge' [Kenntnis] (if one can call it such), or 'science', is a step by step regression from one representation to another, along a path that might indeed skirt the intended reality but never touches it. Moreover, since the ground of the bond connecting any two representations lies outside them in the supposed [vorausgesetzte] reality, the picture of the world that thus emerges through the representations (when these are considered in abstraction from any intuition of that reality) is necessarily mechanistic. It is held together by purely external relations.³ There is no room here for subjectivity, i.e. freedom and spontaneity. A subject who thinks of itself as part of this picture acquires the same distance with respect to its own activities as separates any representation and its intended reality. It must become an observer of its own presumed acts—a pure object for itself and no longer a subject.⁴

As defined so far, 'reason' is the reason of rationalistic metaphysics. It is comparable to Spinoza's '*mens*', understood as a principle of ideation; or to Kant's '*Verstand*'. Now, Jacobi rejected the results to which 'reason' leads when understood *exclusively* in this sense. He did not, however, deny the legitimacy of the meaning. On the contrary, that reason should function (at least at one level of experience) in the way just

described necessarily followed from the one assumption that Jacobi in fact shared with both Spinoza and Kant. And that was the belief that existence is prior to the reflection of thought—that the latter, therefore, lacks autonomy of operation. It needs the control of intuition. So far as Spinoza was concerned, Jacobi found evidence of this privileging of existence over reflection of thought in Spinoza's recognition—for which Jacobi admired and praised him—that truth is its own criterion; it is intuitively apprehended. Spinoza had not just included existence as a predicate of God's essence. He had made God's essence, rather, consist in God's existence. One does not prove that God exists inferentially, but must rather begin with God's existence as the all pervading presence from which the meaning of everything else derives.⁵ With respect to Kant, Jacobi had found early evidence of this same tendency in his essay on the only possible proof of God's existence. To be sure, Kant's only conclusion in that essay was that, since possibility presupposes actuality, inasmuch as we deal in possibilities, we must constantly presuppose some necessary actuality. Unlike Spinoza, Kant had denied that we can assign any special attributes to this presupposed necessary actuality—least of all the kind of attributes we normally associate with God. None the less, the tendency to give priority to existence over essence, actuality over possibility, intuition over reflection, was clear in both.

And Jacobi was definitely partial to this tendency. To Spinoza as well as to Kant, he granted that reflection cannot retrieve its origin reflectively; also recognized the consequences of this limitation of reflective conceptualization. His only complaint against the two philosophers was that, in his opinion, they had not been able to contain these consequences but had defined the relation of reflection to its presupposed reality according to abstractions that were themselves the products of reflection. Spinoza had of course granted that we have an intuitive awareness [Begreifen] of the truth of first principles. But, according to Jacobi, he had then fallen victim to the metaphysical tradition by expressing the content of his primordial intuition in a concept of 'substance' which is, again according to Jacobi, an extreme product of reflective abstraction. As such, the concept represents an extreme point of objectification that utterly falsifies the insight into the dynamic nature of reality that actually underlies all of Spinoza's thought.⁶ Kant, for his part, had denied the possibility for us of intellectual intuition, except as a regulative idea, and had relied instead on so-called 'sense intuition' for the immediate point of contact between reflection and pre-reflective existence. But since sense intuition is itself according to Kant a subjective mental

state that attains objective status only in the medium of conceptual reflection, Kant found himself in the paradoxical situation of having to rely on the idealizing function of reason in order to bring reflective objectification to completion, while at the same time claiming that any such idealization is itself a purely subjective process intrinsically devoid of truth. In Jacobi's opinion, it was a matter of playing one kind of subjectivity against another kind of subjectivity, and, in the process, of creating the illusion of objectivity. The net result, for Spinoza as well as Kant, was that the realm of individualized experience, which alone ultimately counted for Jacobi, was left floating in mid air, so to speak—a series of essentially indeterminable (hence ultimately illusionary) individuals, the experience of which is unexplainable except on the assumption of a finite intellect. But the presence of such an intellect, for Kant no less than for Spinoza, was itself an irreducible surd.

Jacobi repeatedly hinted at the affinity that he detected between the critical Kant and Spinoza. He could have actually made a strong case for this suspected affinity in 1790, with reference to §§ 75-78 of the *Critique of Judgement*—the same paragraphs that the young Schelling singled out as especially rich in philosophical content.⁷ Kant's argument there is that the discursiveness of the understanding is a function of human finitude. If, *per impossibile*, we were to assume the standpoint of an intuitive intellect, all the distinctions between universals and particulars—even more significant, all the distinctions that the modal categories express—would disappear, and we would thereby be left with nothing but an 'is is'. The clear implication—which Kant however does not draw—is that the world of nature such as the theoretical scientist construes, and no less so any teleology of human action based on the moral law (since this too depends on the discursiveness of reason), would thereby have to be declared mere epiphenomena. In other words, though Kant himself found any connection between himself and Spinoza ridiculous, when the content of human experience as conceived by him (the realm of natural events and of human actions both included) was measured against the ideal norm of a possible intuitive intellect, there was little, if any difference, between it and the world of Spinoza's modes when considered in abstraction from the substance that constituted their true reality. Both were but the products of the limitations of human intellection.

Jacobi's intention was precisely to save both Spinoza and Kant from the nihilism that he saw implied in their respective positions. Such was indeed the complex relationship that he bore to the two philosophers. And the only way to achieve this end was to find a way

of bridging the gap between reality and reflection that the two, in his opinion, had still left open. But how was one to accomplish this feat? The temptation, at this point, is to bring immediately into play Jacobi's famous *salto mortale*, or to fall back on his language of 'faith' [Glaube]. The move would provide indeed a quick resolution to Jacobi's problem. But the price to pay for it would be to portray Jacobi simply as an irrationalist fideist, thereby dismissing from the start his repeated claim (which I instead believe should be taken seriously) that the irrationalists were the philosophers, and that what *he* meant by 'faith' was in fact true knowledge [Wissen]. Here is the place, rather, to introduce another side of the early Jacobi's complex meaning of 'reason'. We find it elaborated by Jacobi explicitly, but probably without full awareness of its implications, in the *David Hume*.

I am referring, of course, to the dialogue's text of 1787, still undisturbed by the distracting notes added in 1815, or corrupted by the slight yet significant modifications also introduced at that later date in the text itself. Distilled from the many twists and turns of dialogue style argumentation, Jacobi's reflections follow this course:

The starting point is the denial, because contrary to fact, of the fundamental assumption of classical empiricism—namely, that experience begins with purely subjective representations, and that belief in external objects is arrived at only by way of an inference based on the passivity of some of these representations. This assumption inevitably leads to Hume's scepticism. Jacobi rejects it off-hand on the ground that, as a matter of fact, a subject cannot be aware of himself—aware also, therefore, of the alleged subjectivity of some of his representations—without defining his 'self' in opposition to some admittedly external object, i.e. without immediately referring his representations to something other than himself. The very possibility of subjectivity entails the possibility of objectivity. Jacobi's classical formula for this position is, 'No "I" without a "Thou"'. (Here the 'Thou', I add patenthetically, is ambiguous, for it can stand just as well for another 'I' limiting the first 'I' but at the same time being limited by it, or for a transcendent 'Thou' (say, God) that limits without being limited. More about this in due time.)

Hume had denied that we have consciousness of any definite 'self'. Any such denial, however, is possible (even according to Hume, I should gloss) only if one assumes a purely theoretical standpoint with respect to one's 'self'. But, as Jacobi exclaims, we act [handeln]; we are agents, and become aware of ourselves precisely as we act.⁸ Self-awareness [Selbstbewußtsein] originates in a subject's feeling of power [Kraft] that

accompanies all action but becomes significant only inasmuch as, in its discharge, it finds resistance. Such a resistance immediately implicates the presence of an external something that must exist in itself—for otherwise the resistance would not be serious—and thereby provides the original feeling of power with a reality check. Now, representation is called into play as the reflective attempt on the part of the subject to sort out the difference between his own self and the external obstacle resisting his power. This is a formula that brought together in an original unity the three components of consciousness, namely feeling, sense representation, and reflective conceptualization, that Kant had instead sought to synthesize externally. The reference to Kant here is not arbitrary, for once the pieces of his formula are in place, Jacobi proceeds in the dialogue with a series of arguments to show how it is possible to arrive at all the categories that Kant, for his part, had proposed *a priori*, by *descriptively* identifying, rather, the basic conditions that define distance between the ‘self’ and its ‘other’.⁹

It follows that ‘reason’, according to this theory now developed by Jacobi, is indeed a reflective faculty, though, even as reflective, it is not necessarily abstractive (as according to the other meaning of ‘reason’ earlier defined). For its representation [Vorstellen] is still part of, and continuous with, the original effort on the part of a self at defining its own limits in action in the face of a transcendent reality. Reason is not, therefore, a faculty that necessarily supervenes on the ‘senses’ *a priori*, but a more refined (‘deliberate’, I am tempted to gloss) form of an otherwise still fundamentally sensible representation. As Jacobi puts it, the greater the sensibility of a subject, the greater the subject’s rationality also. The two, ‘senses’ and ‘reason’, are inextricably bound together.¹⁰ Or, as he will say in the *Woldemar*, reason could never have arisen out of dumb sensibility (*Sinnlichkeit*): the senses [Sinnen] must have *sense* [Sinn], i.e. (I gloss) must have been implicitly rational, from the beginning.

If we take the *David Hume* seriously, Jacobi’s contribution to the problem of bridging the gap between immediacy and reflection is thus the simple device of pointing to a phenomenon in experience in which an otherwise immediate mental state with no particular determination of its own (namely, an indefinite feeling of power) is *at once* externally disturbed *and* internally represented (i.e. reflectively determined *as* so disturbed), thereby assuming the well determined, yet still residually immediate, shape of a ‘self’ actively confronted by an obstacle. This was a brilliant move on Jacobi’s part. In the

dialogue, the supposed ‘feeling of power’ is rhetorically associated with Hume. I have suggested elsewhere also the unspoken presence in this part of the dialogue of Thomas Reid.¹¹ The manifest influence of both these British philosophers does not, however, in any way detract from the fact that the overwhelming influence in Jacobi’s mind is still Spinoza. (It only shows, I may add parenthetically, how creatively fluid philosophical thought still was at this late period of the Enlightenment.¹²) Jacobi himself alerts us in the dialogue to Spinoza’s presence, as he contrasts Spinoza’s concept of ‘representation’ with Hume’s. There is no scepticism in Spinoza, because, I am now quoting,

...although the representations only *accompany actions* according to Spinoza, still the two *implicate* one another; they are inseparably joined together in one and the same indivisible being and consciousness.... The same individual wills and acts simultaneously....in accordance with the constitution of his particular nature..., and he displays all of this for his viewing in his consciousness, with more or less obscurity, or clarity. However much the individual may be determined from the outside..., he must be able to be effective on his own, since otherwise no effect could occur or be sustained through him—nor, for that matter, could it even make its appearance in him. [109]¹³

It is difficult to point to any definite text in Spinoza that Jacobi might have had in mind here. But if we take Spinoza’s *conatus*—a striving that can meet resistance—as a physical event that none the less includes a psychic moment (it is displayed for ‘viewing’, in Jacobi’s language), Jacobi’s connection to Spinoza becomes apparent. In the *David Hume*, Jacobi has given an analysis of all that goes into this ‘coming into view’ of an otherwise purely natural event—an analysis performed from the standpoint of an experiencing subject. The ‘viewing’ consists in a ‘feeling’—i.e. a mental state in which, in taking hold of itself, a subject must at the same time recognize the presence of a possibly obtruding other; on the basis of which, therefore, the subject can begin to define its distance with respect to that ‘other’.

This, I repeat was a brilliant move on Jacobi’s part. Yet, it is here that his difficulties also begin. We know that from the beginning Jacobi was uncomfortable with the idea of ‘reason’ as a higher form of sensibility advanced in the dialogue, obviously because of the naturalism that it implied. But there was an even greater, though not unrelated, problem that threatened. We must shift our attention here to the two sets of propositions with which Jacobi prefaced the second edition of the *Spinoza-Letters* (1789)—one set

denying, the other asserting, that man is free. It might seem at first that, with these two sets of propositions, Jacobi was setting up an antinomy in opposition to Kant's. But in fact there was no antinomy in his case, for the two sets were both controlled by one single claim—the claim, namely, that beings (at least, created beings) exist in determining relationships that entail an irreducible element of passivity as well as activity on both sides. The claim has the effect of precluding the possibility that the first set of propositions ('man is not free') can stand on its own as an irrefutable conceptual whole. As Jacobi argues, just as in the determining interplay between finite beings one must assume on each side a source of 'passivity' that allows each to be limited by the other, so one must also equally assume in them a countervailing source of 'activity'. This source is irreducible. It follows that, though mechanism is indeed both possible and necessary so long as there are things opposing one another, a totally mechanistic organization of them such as is presented in the first set of propositions—one that would reduce all things to an infinite tapestry of external relations, *eo ipso* allowing no room for individual freedom—is an impossibility. It exists only in the minds of the philosophers, the product of their perverse passion for abstraction that inevitably leads to the reduction of all finite things to mere nothingness.¹⁴

Jacobi's argument here is of course a further application of his 'No "I" without a "Thou"' formula.¹⁵ Note, however, that the stated interplay of passivity and activity cannot consist for Jacobi in two symmetrically opposite plays. Though there cannot be passivity without activity, there must be a sense in which activity, for its part, escapes the limiting function of passivity. For, if that were not the case, if 'activity' and 'passivity' ran across the universe in every part of it—in some parts the one side displaying a greater degree of intensity than the other; nowhere, however, either side crowding out the other totally—then 'freedom' might indeed be attributed to some parts, but only comparatively, as representing a higher degree of activity, nowhere, however, as disrupting the continuity that otherwise reigns on the universal scale of activity/passivity ratios. One might have thereby kept at bay the absurdity of a purely mechanistic system, not however dispelled the absurdity altogether or overcome the naturalism that goes with mechanism. (Spinoza as well as Kant, incidentally, knew this.)

Jacobi was aware of this consequence. In the second set of propositions, he quite consequentially proceeded to assert the reality of a 'freedom' understood as an original source of activity that unequivocally transcends all natural relations. His witness for the

assertion is the phenomenon of ‘conscience’. And Jacobi immediately associated the reality of this ‘freedom’ with the reality of an infinite and absolutely transcendent Being—God—whose presence is just as undeniable as, according to Jacobi, unconceptualizable. As I suggested parenthetically above, the ‘Thou’ in Jacobi’s formula, ‘No “I” without a “Thou”’, is ambiguous. It now becomes clear, in Jacobi’s second set of propositions (‘Man is free’), that that Thou can, and *must*, mean, not just another finite ‘I’, limiting as well as being limited by the first ‘I’, but a transcendent Thou that limits both ‘I’s—limits them positively by determining them in such a way that prevents them from being absorbed in a network of finite relationships [Beziehungen].

Here, however, is precisely where Jacobi’s problem lay. It might have appeared that with his second meaning of reason as a higher form of sensibility—a meaning that combined the immediacy of feeling with feeling’s bringing itself to view as it takes reflective distance with respect to an obstacle—that with this meaning, with which Jacobi (to tell the whole story) was uncomfortable from the beginning, he had finally brought reflection back to immediacy. He had resolved, in other words, the problem that affected both Spinoza and Kant. But it was now clear that, unless the limiting obstacle was a transcendent ‘other’ that *positively* determines a subject of experience, the latter risks being caught up again in the indefinite web of finite relationships. The reprieve was only provisory. I have stressed ‘positively’, because, if the determination were only negative—if the transcendent ‘other’ stood simply as the nothingness of the subject—then, the essentially illusionary nature of all individual reality would be the necessary consequence. Jacobi would have slid back to Spinoza, or to the Kant of §§ 75-78 of the *Critique of Judgement*.

And how was Jacobi to revise his original analysis of the feeling of power in order to prevent this slide? How was he to revise it in order for the feeling to bring to view, not just a limit, but the Absolute Limit before which a ‘self’ is irrevocably thrown back upon itself and has no choice, therefore, but to take responsibility for what he is? As I have said, in the second set of propositions Jacobi moved indeed to put limits to the mechanism which, as he recognized, is an inevitable dimension of finite existence, by citing ‘conscience’ and the sense associated with it of an Absolute Other. But more needed to be said about this ‘conscience’ and its alleged witness, for what was there to prevent it from being taken, instead of a witness to anything transcendent, as a symptom rather of a sick organism? That’s how Spinoza, for one, had interpreted the phenomenon. To claim, moreover, as

Jacobi did in the same place, that it is impossible, indeed even contradictory, to want to *know* such absolutes as freedom and God, since by definition they escape conceptualization, was to raise yet another problem. What was the meaning of the ‘non-knowledge’ [Nicht-Wissen] being claimed? Does one *not* know freedom and God in the same sense as Kant claimed one does not know the ‘thing in itself’? If that were the case, however, Jacobi would have been vulnerable to precisely the same objections that he had so eloquently raised against Kant in the Appendix to the *David Hume*. Or was the ‘non-knowledge’ to be understood, rather, as a form of quietism? Was this to say, in other words, that we have indeed intuitive knowledge [Wissen] of God, but that such a knowledge escapes conceptual expression, since the latter is reflective and, therefore, necessarily limiting; that growth in wisdom, therefore, consists fundamentally in the shedding, through a process of mental ascesis, of the very finite standpoint on which conceptualization depends? This would have been indeed a conceptually coherent position. The problem was that it was essentially Spinoza’s. And Jacobi had made his philosophical debut attacking Spinoza’s monism precisely because of the nihilism that he claimed it entailed so far as individual things are concerned.

In brief, Jacobi was being overtaken by the logic of the *hen xai pan* that he had set out to refute. This is what I meant, at the beginning, when I said that it was dangerous strategy on his part to engage Spinoza on his own grounds. And to see how, as I also said, in thus contending with Spinoza, Jacobi was unwittingly drawing the blueprint for early German Idealism, one only has to turn to the very early Fichte—more specifically, to the § 2 that Fichte added to the second edition (1793) of his *Versuch einer Critique aller Offenbarung*.¹⁶ The addition was Fichte’s contribution to the then on-going debate between C.C.E. Schmid and Reinhold on the nature of the freedom of the will, and was in part dependent on the definitions of the faculty of desire [*Begehrungsvermögen*] and of *Trieb* that Reinhold had sketched at the conclusion of his 1789 *Versuch einer neuen Theorie des menschlichen Vorstellungsvermögens*.¹⁷ It was also a reflection on Kant’s recently published essay on radical evil. There is much in the *Theorie des Willens* developed in the paragraph that would deserve careful study but cannot concern us here. The important point for us is how, in sketching for the first time his theory, Fichte was putting his finger on precisely the problem in the relation of reflective conceptualization and immediate intuition that was constantly pushing Jacobi, against his intentions, either in the direction of Kant or of

Spinoza.

The problem is that a purely self-contained activity, such as free volition would have to be, cannot be conscious of itself—for consciousness requires objectification, and this last requires, in order to be serious, the control of an ‘other’ towards which the mind is in some respect passive. It requires sensibility, in other words. Thus, in order to be conscious of itself, volition would have to stand in some form of passivity with respect to itself, thereby falling short of its supposed unconditioned activity. The problem, in other words, is that our sense of freedom requires consciousness of being free; yet this consciousness (*self-consciousness included*) is bound to the passivity of the sense, whereas unconditionally self-generating activity excludes any such passivity. The danger of illusion to which any supposed consciousness of being free is liable—the possibility that freedom might be only an idea, or conscience a pathological phenomenon—is due precisely to this juxtaposition of opposite requirements. Nor would it help to introduce intellectual intuition here, for, as Fichte will however point out only some years later, consciousness of any such intuition poses the same problem as consciousness of freedom. Certainty *that* we have it, requires faith.

Now, early in his paragraph, Fichte had introduced the concept of *Trieb* (impulse). It is a crucial concept because it expresses a state of mind which is at once passive and active. It is (if I may gloss) an active, inchoatively reflective, appropriation of an otherwise passively received influence. It is the equivalent of Spinoza’s *conatus*, or Jacobi’s originally objectifying feeling of power. Fichte shows that it is possible to attain through the influence of reflective reason a whole gamut of ever more refined forms of this *Trieb*, and to construe on their basis a whole world of human desires, without however ever transcending thereby the bounds of nature. Schmid’s naturalism—the same naturalism that had also threatened Jacobi in the *David Hume*—derived its strength from precisely this possibility. The question now is whether *Trieb* can be further so modified as to allow for a type of self-consciousness that would synthesize within itself such opposite extremes of activity and passivity as our consciousness of freedom requires, thereby break free of the naturalism to which this consciousness is otherwise held hostage.

For his answer, Fichte turns to ‘the feeling of self-respect’. ‘Feeling’ is indeed part and parcel of the sense-economy of the mind, hence a suitable object of consciousness. In ‘feeling’, however, consciousness is self-directed. To be sure, there still is a received sense

material at play that acquires in ‘feeling’ the form of either ‘attractive’ or ‘repulsive’. In this respect, ‘feeling’ is still a form of *Trieb*. ‘Feeling’, however, does not simply appropriate a *de facto* natural reaction to a given state of affairs by actively transforming it into the subjective states of either ‘attraction’ or ‘repulsion’. This is what happens in *Trieb*, however much reason might have refined it. On the contrary, in ‘feeling’ there is a new distance established with respect to the presupposed sense material, for ‘feeling’ is no longer just a subjective reaction to it but also a reflection on the reaction itself—an expression, that is, of whether the reaction is either appropriate or inappropriate. Though one might not help being involved in a certain situation and react to it in a certain way, one can still feel either comfortable or uncomfortable about it. In other words, though still falling on the side of sensibility, in the form of ‘feeling’ *Trieb* already exhibits the reflective properties that define reason. ‘Feeling’ is normative.

This result does not come as a surprise. From the beginning of his paragraph Fichte has explicitly been trying to establish a gradation between reason and sensibility—just as Jacobi had done in the *David Hume*. Where does Fichte however identify in this new shape of consciousness the kind of radical rapture from given nature that would give final witness to the authenticity of our consciousness of freedom? Here is where Fichte turns to the note of ‘respect’; more precisely, to feeling qualified as ‘respect’. ‘Respect’ is always ‘respect for an other’—an ‘other’ whose presence is manifested in the feeling itself in the form of an *Affektion*. And ‘*Affektion*’ entails the passivity of sensibility. In this case, however, the passivity is experienced, not as produced directly from the ‘other’, but as self-induced rather before a presence [*Anwesenheit*] that has already pre-empted whatever ground one might have thought to occupy—before which, therefore, the question of who one is, and where one stands, first becomes truly significant. This ‘other’ is absolutely transcendent, not in the sense that it lies at an unbridgeable distance, but in the sense rather that it is inescapable. Accordingly, ‘respect’ is essentially also ‘self-respect’, since it consists in the active adoption of the proper attitude of passivity towards this inescapable ‘other’.¹⁸ This other is therefore felt indeed as an external constraint, but, again, the *externality* of the constraint here at issue is only the product (if I may now help myself with a Kierkegaardian expression) of an ‘acoustical illusion’. It is really self-induced. It takes the form, according to Fichte, of an *interest* in promoting the cause of the ‘other’.

What is this ‘other’? Fichte’s answer is that it is ‘reason’. Reason’s influence on the

senses is of course manifest throughout experience. It is only *in* the ‘feeling of respect, and *because* of it, that the primordial relation that obtains between it and the senses is however finally revealed as a matter of fact. The senses are affected by reason, not as if by a ‘thing in itself’, under the positive influence of an external cause, but internally and negatively, as if when confronted by reason the senses were stepping on a territory already occupied. And it is because of this unique kind of internally experienced passivity that our consciousness of ‘being free’—in effect, a capacity to take a normative stand with respect to what we happen to be by nature—that this consciousness is made possible as ‘consciousness’, and, as consciousness of ‘being free’, though never unproblematic, can none the less be taken as credible.

One must pause a moment here to admire the analytical skills of Fichte. With his genetic reconstruction of the origin of the feeling of self-respect, Fichte has found a way of expressing from within the standpoint of subjective consciousness—i.e. without ever abandoning the medium of the concept—the presence in this consciousness of a radically limiting ‘other’ the apprehension of which, for Kant as well as Spinoza, would require instead abandoning the limits of consciousness. By the same token, he has expressed also in the medium of the concept the point within consciousness where the latter literally *finds* itself wrested from nature. In effect, Fichte has already taken the step of adding a subjective dimension to Spinoza that will define to the end the program of post-Kantian German idealism. The note of ‘respect’ on which Fichte capitalizes comes of course from Kant. But it was Jacobi who had brought attention to the problem of reflection’s apparent incapacity to retrieve its immediate, existential, basis; Jacobi, who had stated the problem with reference to Spinoza and had drawn, quite perspicaciously, the connection between him and Kant; Jacobi again, who had introduced the trope of the ‘I-Thou’, and had provided the schema for the construction of feeling as a reflective appropriation of the ‘other’. In expanding on Kant, Fichte was situating critical philosophy in a larger (in fact: Spinozistic) conceptual context defined by Jacobi.

I am not saying that Fichte was thereby satisfying Jacobi. On the contrary, he was now demonstrating beyond doubt the danger to which Jacobi had exposed himself in engaging the philosophers in battle on Spinozistic grounds. It was clear now that the ‘other’ had to be impersonal—the ‘Thou’, so far as it limited any ‘I’, only a reflectively construed ideal, a sort of impersonal person. All this was anathema to Jacobi. It is significant that in

in 1789, in one of his appendices to the second edition of the *Spinoza-Letter* in which he criticized Herder, Jacobi was to use as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the latter's conception of an impersonal God a trope that Fichte had actually used in 1787 to describe the process by which an otherwise anonymous agency (*Aktuosität*) first acquires objective determination. It is (so the trope goes), as if the unconscious 'were to give itself an eye'. By appropriating, but in a negative sense, Fichte's trope, Jacobi was criticizing both Fichte and Herder—killing two birds at once, so to speak. He was however being disingenuous, for he had been the one who had provided the basis of the trope in the *David Hume* in the first place, in his schematization of the 'feeling of power'. Confronted by Fichte, he was forced to fall back on what had been, in his encounter with Lessing, the original meaning of his *salto mortale*. One must simply know when to stop to philosophize. As Reinhold will say, at a time when he was writing under the direct influence of Jacobi, aber der Philosoph 'würde nothwendig Atheist seyn wenn er nichts weiter als Philosoph seyn könnte'.

It's of the very early Fichte that I have spoken. And Fichte, even in his first period, was to refine his position repeatedly. Hölderlin, and then Schelling, will distance themselves from Kant as Fichte never did, thus giving even greater scope to Spinoza's presence. They will take their phenomenal starting point elsewhere than in the 'feeling of self-respect', and their consequent concept of reason will accordingly be different. But I am not here to rehearse all the moves of early idealism. (I must bring this paper to a conclusion!) There is one more brief point, however, that I want to make—one that brings me back to Goethe and finally elicits Spinoza's presence in yet another form. We must consider that Goethe's fine balancing act between his two visions of humanity, or his later ironic view of the human self; or again, the old Hyperion's recollection of the events of his past life that stripped them of their original immediacy but at the same time endowed them with a new, transcendent, immediacy of beauty; or, for that matter, Fichte's sense of guilt incurred while stepping on holy ground—all these were ways of expressing subjectively the finite human being's relation to Spinoza's *causa sui*. Jacobi would have nothing of the humanism implied by those constructions. So far as he was concerned, the human being [der Mensch] stands before God as a person before another person. Yet, in one fundamental respect, he belonged with the rest on the side of Spinoza.. And that was because, like Spinoza—sey er Benedictus—, all of them, Jacobi included, were still drunk with God. They all assumed that the truly real somehow stands outside the human phenomenon. Perhaps they might have been

better advised, might have given rise to a better humanism, had they looked for the truly real within the phenomenon itself instead, in the logic that gives rise to historical sense.

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Provisional and Incomplete Notes

1. [Margarethe Wegenast, 1990]
2. Spinozabriefe, pp. 162-163, 172 & footnote. David Hume, pp. 182 ff.
3. Cf. Spinozabriefe (1789), pp. 424-425, 429-430.
4. Spinozabriefe, pp. 18-19.
5. Kierkegaard repeats this point referring to both Spinoza and Jacobi.
6. Cf. David Hume, pp. 65 ff; 101 ff. Spinozabriefe (1789), Supplement VII, pp. 402-404, 408 ff., 419-420.
7. Cf. F.W.J. Schelling, 'Vom Ich als Princip der Philosophie' (1795), Werke (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1971 ff.), Vol. II, p. 175.
8. (Jacobi, 1787: 102ff)
9. Jacobi, 1787:111-121; 119-20, & 120, note 25.
10. (Jacobi, 1787: 125-34). In Woldemar, Jacobi says that reason could not arise out of dumb senses—the latter must already have sense cf. p.138 of my book
11. See the record of Jacobi's 1788 oral comments regarding Reid, in *Wilhelm von Humboldts Tagebücher, 1788-1789*, ed. Albert Leitzmann (Berlin: Bher, 1916), 58, 61. See, also, di Giovanni, 1997.
12. Jacobi actually says that he is dependent on Spinoza for the seminal idea of his present method of deriving reflective representations from the senses. (Jacobi, 1787: 120, note 25)
13. Cf also Curley, under conatus.
- 14.. (Jacobi, 1789: xxxv-xxxvi)
15. (Jacobi, 1787: 63-65)
16. *Versuch einer Critik aller Offenbarung* (Königsberg: Hartung, 1792). An English translation is available. *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation*, tr. Garrett Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978).
17. We know that Fichte had been meditating on Reinhold's *Versuch*. See his notes as published in AA. Complete.
18. The question is whether we should think of respect as being directed in the first place to humanity in general or to oneself. The point, of course, is that, in being directed to oneself, one thereby establishes the universal validity of one's (thereby 'moral') self.