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and Barbara Santini

G. Bernard, L. Fonnesu, M. Glatzel, K. Hong,
T. Mauri, B. Santini, S. Schick, M. Tangorra,
P. Valenza, D. Vanden Auweele, Y. Xia

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Reason in Check. Philosophy of Religion in Classical German Philosophy

v *Introduction*

Giulia Bernard and Barbara Santini

Essays

1 *Job's Loneliness. Theodicy and its Failure in Kant's Thought*

Luca Fonnesu

21 *St. John 1.1 or Luke 23.46? Fichte and Jacobi on the Truth of Christianity*

Stefan Schick

51 *Die Bedeutung des religiösen Bewusstseins in den Psychologievorlesungen Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermachers*

Matthis Glatzel

75 *Il destino del cristianesimo nella filosofia della religione di Hegel*

Pierluigi Valenza

103 *The Borders of an Uncertain Object. Nature, Desire and Magic in Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*

Manuel Tangorra

- 133 *Die anthropologische Konzeption in Hegels Religionsphilosophie und ihre Problematik*
Kaiyuan Hong
- 157 *From Religious Philosophy to Philosophy of Religion. A Path in Schelling's Late Philosophy*
Tommaso Mauri
- 179 *Revealing Reason's Limits and Rebuking Heidegger: Schelling's Late Thoughts on God and Religion*
Dennis Vanden Auweele and Yu Xia
- 207 *Mitteilung of the Absolute: Performing Knowledge in the Philosophy of Religion*
Giulia Bernard
- 239 *Religionsphilosophie: kein Abschied von der Letztbegründung. Hölderlin und die Gottesfrage im Ausgang von Kant*
Barbara Santini

Book Reviews

- 253 A. Tomaszewska, *Kant's Rational Religion and the Radical Enlightenment. From Spinoza to Contemporary Debates*
(Paola Rumore)
- 259 B. Norris, *Schelling and Spinoza. Realism, Idealism, and the Absolute*
(Giovanni Temporin)

- 265 P. Dews, *Schelling's Late Philosophy in Confrontation with Hegel*
(Michael Hackl)
- 271 M. Feldmeier, *Freiheit und Rationalität. Zur Rolle F.H. Jacobis im Denken Søren Kierkegaards*
(Roman Winter-Tietel)

ST. JOHN 1.1 OR LUKE 23.46? FICHTE AND JACOBI ON THE TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY

by Stefan Schick*

Abstract. In his Letter to Fichte (1799), Jacobi welcomes Fichte as the «true Messiah of speculative reason». Fichte, in turn, celebrates Jacobi as the «clearest thinker of his era». Nevertheless, Jacobi constantly rejects any alleged affinity between his un-philosophy and Fichte's transcendental philosophy. For Fichte, this rejection is due to Jacobi's misconception of the transcendental presuppositions of his un-philosophical standpoint of life. Analyzing both Fichte's and Jacobi's diverging philosophies of religion, the paper shows that Fichte misconceived Jacobi's main philosophical intentions and, subsequently, failed in his attempt to integrate Jacobi's original philosophical concerns into his transcendental philosophy. To thus demonstrate both the incommensurability of Fichte's and Jacobi's respective philosophies of religion and the legitimacy of Jacobi's point of view, the paper analyzes Jacobi's and Fichte's diverging remarks on the truth of Christianity in their interdependent late philosophies.

Keywords. Christianity; Faith; Knowledge; Speculation; Life Form

1. Introduction

The relationship between Jacobi and Fichte is both intriguing and hard to understand: in his famous *Letter to Fichte* (1799), Jacobi welcomes Fichte as the «true Messiah of speculative reason»¹ and declares Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* the completion of Kant's transcendental philosophy. Fichte, in turn, celebrates Jacobi as the

* Universität Leipzig

¹ F.H. Jacobi, *Jacobi an Fichte*, in *Werke 2,1. Schriften zum transzendentalen Idealismus*, ed. by W. Jaeschke and I.-M. Piske, Hamburg, Meiner, 2004, pp. 190-259, p. 194; Eng. trans. by G. di Giovanni, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, Montreal et al., McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994, pp. 497-536, p. 501.

«clearest thinker of his era»² and as «a contemporary reformer of philosophy along with Kant»³. In April 1796, Fichte writes in a letter to Jacobi: «Yes, dear sir, we fully agree; and this agreement with you shows me more than anything else that I am on the right path»⁴. Thus, Fichte insists on the uniformity of their respective philosophies⁵. One can even read Fichte's different versions of the *Science of Knowledge* as attempts to synthesize both Kant's transcendental philosophy and Jacobi's philosophy of life⁶. On the other hand, Jacobi constantly rejects any alleged affinity between his unphilosophy and Fichte's idealistic philosophy⁷.

² J.G. Fichte, *Zweite Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre*, in *Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften Band I,4: Werke 1797-1798*, ed. by H. Gliwitzky and R. Lauth, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1970, pp. 209-270, p. 236; Eng. trans. and ed. by Daniel Breazeale, *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1994, p. 68.

³ Id., *Sonnenklarer Bericht an das größere Publikum*, in *Gesamtausgabe Band I,7. Werke 1800-1801*, ed. by R. Lauth and H. Gliwitzky, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1988, pp. 165-274, p. 194; Eng. trans. by D. Wood, *Jacobi's Philosophy of Faith in Fichte's 1794 Wissenschaftslehre*, in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and the Ends of the Enlightenment. Religion, Philosophy, and Reason at the Cruc of Modernity*, ed. by A. Hampton, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023, pp. 245-266, p. 247.

⁴ Id., *Gesamtausgabe Band III,3: Briefe 1796-1799*, ed. by R. Lauth and H. Gliwitzky, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1972, p. 18; Eng. trans. by the author. See also M. Ivaldo, *Wissen und Leben. Vergewisserungen Fichtes im Anschluß an Jacobi*, in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Ein Wendepunkt der geistigen Bildung der Zeit*, ed. by W. Jaeschke and B. Sandkaulen, Hamburg, Meiner, 2004, pp. 53-71, p. 54.

⁵ Cf. Id., *Gesamtausgabe Band III,2: Briefe 1793-1795*, ed. by R. Lauth and H. Jacob, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1970, p. 202, p. 391, p. 393; Id., *Briefe 1796-1799*, p. 334; Wood, *Jacobi's Philosophy of Faith*, pp. 245-266.

⁶ Cf. R. Lauth, *Fichtes Verhältnis zu Jacobi unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle Friedrich Schlegels in dieser Sache*, in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Philosoph und Literat der Goethezeit*, ed. by K. Hammacher, Frankfurt a. M., Klostermann, 1971, pp. 165-197, p. 173.

⁷ To mention just one example: on February 13, 1800, after having read Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen*, Jacobi complains to Jean Paul that this writing was intended to «abort the fruit of my letter to him», and that it made him feel so sick that he had barely been able to finish it (F.H. Jacobi, *Briefwechsel I,12*, ed. by W.

For Fichte, this rejection is due to Jacobi's misconception of the transcendental presuppositions of his un-philosophical standpoint of life⁸. His urge to convince Jacobi both of the affinity of their philosophical concerns and the superiority of his transcendental standpoint shapes Fichte's philosophy until his death⁹. In 1806, Fichte thus sends Jacobi his *Instructions for a Blessed Life, or the Doctrine of Religion* together with an accompanying letter: «I am convinced that, from now on, we are both going to agree. For, if I am not completely mistaken, this is exactly what you have always been aiming at»¹⁰.

As productive as Fichte's controversy with Jacobi has certainly been for the evolution of Fichte's philosophy, Fichte both misconceived the main intentions of Jacobi's philosophy and, subsequently, failed in his attempt to integrate Jacobi's original philosophical concerns into his transcendental philosophy. The following reflections show this for Jacobi's philosophy of religion¹¹.

Thus, the paper is neither interested in Jacobi's influence on Fichte's philosophy in general nor in Jacobi's impact on Fichte's philosophy of religion in particular. Instead, it analyzes both the incommensurability of Fichte's and Jacobi's respective philosophies of religion and the legitimacy – not the superiority, which

Jaeschke and B. Sandkaulen, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 2018, p. 193; Eng. trans. by the author).

⁸ Cf. Fichte, *Briefe 1796-1799*, p. 334; Id., *Gesamtausgabe Band III,6: Briefe 1806-1810*, ed. by E. Fuchs et al., Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1997, p. 330; Id., *Gesamtausgabe Band II,5: Nachgelassene Schriften 1796-1801*, ed. by H. Gliwitzky and R. Lauth, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1979, pp. 194, 120; Id., *Gesamtausgabe Band IV,3: Kollegnachschriften 1794-1799*, ed. by E. Fuchs et al., Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 2000, p. 342; Ivaldo, *Wissen und Leben*, p. 56f.

⁹ See, for example, I. Radrizzani, *La Destination de l'homme – La réponse de Fichte à la Lettre ouverte de Jacobi*, «Études Germaniques», CCLXXVII, 2015, pp. 33-56.

¹⁰ J.G. Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe Band III,5: Briefe 1801–1806*, ed. by H. Gliwitzky and R. Lauth, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1982, p. 356; Eng. trans. by the author.

¹¹ For a broader perspective, see B. Sandkaulen, *Jacobis Philosophie. Über den Widerspruch zwischen System und Freiheit*, Hamburg, Meiner, 2019, pp. 201-244.

would require further arguments¹² – of Jacobi’s point of view. To this end, the paper analyzes Jacobi’s and Fichte’s diverging remarks on the truth of Christianity in their respective late philosophies in four aspects: (2) their respective views on the truth of Christianity; (3) their different relationships of knowledge and faith; (4) their diverging concepts of God as life; (5) their differing conceptions of Christianity as a life form.

2. *The Truth of Christianity*

In his popular lectures *Instructions for a Blessed Life* from 1806¹³, Fichte strictly opposes the metaphysical and the merely historical content of the Christian doctrine. Whereas the metaphysical content of this doctrine is nothing but an expression of reason, «beyond which there is no truth»¹⁴, its historical content is of no philosophical interest anymore.

As only the Gospel of St. John presents Christ’s rational metaphysics, it is the only Gospel of any philosophical value¹⁵. But even in this Gospel, one has to distinguish between its historical and thus contingent elements and «that in it which is true in itself,

¹² As a consequence, the paper is neither concerned with the plausibility of Fichte’s interpretation of Christianity nor with possible inconsistencies arising between Fichte’s *Blessed Life* and his late *Wissenschaftslehre*.

¹³ Fichte gave these lectures in Berlin between 12 January and 30 March 1806. The list of participants includes highly respected men and women from society and politics. Cf. H. Verweyen, *Fichte’s Philosophy of Religion*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Fichte*, ed. by D. James and G. Zöllner, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2016, pp. 273-305, p. 287.

¹⁴ J.G. Fichte, *Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben*, in *Gesamtausgabe Band I,9: Werke 1806-1807*, ed. by R. Lauth and R. Gliwitzky, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1995, pp. 1-212, p. 115; Eng. trans. by W. Smith, *The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Vol. II*, London, Chapman, 1849, p. 380.

¹⁵ Since the patristics, the Gospel of St. John has been considered the metaphysics of Christianity. See: T. Kobusch, *Das Johannesevangelium: Metaphysik der christlichen Philosophie. Von Origines bis J.G. Fichte*, «Recherches de théologie et philosophie médiévales», LXXXI, 2014, pp. 213-235.

true absolutely and for all time»¹⁶. According to Fichte, the very essence of the Gospel of St. John is to be found in its prologue:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. [...] And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us¹⁷.

For Fichte, this prologue is identical to his metaphysics of the absolute and «the spirit, the innermost root, of the whole doctrine of Jesus»¹⁸. Fichte thus turns Jesus into the first teacher of his metaphysics. To comprehend this truth, one merely has to interpret the prologue literally, instead of taking it as a collection of metaphors and images¹⁹.

According to Fichte, the innermost truth of the prologue is its annihilation of the Jewish and heathen notion of creation. In contrast to the Pauline idea of an arbitrarily willing God, the Gospel of St. John characterizes the divine as nothing but the absolute and unchangeable unity of being. As this pure being in itself, God cannot create an «independent and real existence of finite things»²⁰ by God's arbitrary will. For Fichte, the denial of creation and God's arbitrary will is the strongest argument for the truth of Jesus' doctrine as it is presented in St. John's Gospel. For reason, too, cannot conceive of the creation of an independent world. Such creation can only be posited as an incomprehensible miracle that is opposed to reason.

¹⁶ Fichte, *Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben*, p. 117; Eng. trans., p. 382.

¹⁷ John 1.1-5; 14 (*New American Standard Bible*, Anaheim, California, Foundation Publications, 1995).

¹⁸ Fichte, *Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben*, p. 117; Eng. trans., p. 383.

¹⁹ Cf. *ivi*, p. 117; Eng. trans., p. 383. The following reflections do not consider the accuracy of Fichte's interpretation of St. John or Christianity in general.

²⁰ *Ivi*, p. 118; Eng. trans., p. 383.

With its annihilation of the notion of creation, the Gospel of St. John is the antithesis of both the Pauline elements in the Christian doctrine and the Jewish *Genesis* that claims: «In the beginning God *created*»²¹. In contrast, St. John posits Christ the *logos* as being with God and in God from all eternity. Fichte conceives of this coequality of God and the *logos* as the metaphysical truth that there can be no becoming in God. Christ the *logos* is the Ex-istence (*Daseyn*) of the

inward and hidden Being in himself [*Seyn*], which we are able to conceive of in Thought, he has an Ex-istence [*Daseyn*], which we can only practically apprehend; but yet this Ex-istence necessarily arises through his inward and absolute Being itself; – and his Ex-istence, which is only *by us* distinguished from his Being, is, *in itself and in him*, not distinguished from his Being²².

From the beginning, the *logos* is God's Ex-istence, i.e. God's manifestation and revelation. The term 'logos' expresses that God's existence has the character of knowledge or is nothing but the consciousness of the absolute being in itself. The phrase «All things came into being through Him [the word]»²³ reveals that the world only exists in and for this consciousness as an object of knowledge and comprehension:

The Ex-istence [*Daseyn*] of God is original and underived like his Being [*Seyn*]; the latter is inseparable from the former, and is indeed in all respects the same as the former: and this Divine Ex-istence, in its substance, is necessarily Knowledge; and in this Knowledge alone has a World, and all things present in the World, arisen²⁴.

²¹ Ivi, p. 118; Eng. trans., p. 384.

²² Ivi, p. 119; Eng. trans., p. 385.

²³ John 1.3 (NASB 1995).

²⁴ Fichte, *Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben*, p. 119f.; Eng. trans., p. 387.

The Christian doctrine that the *Word* became flesh and assumed a personal human being conveys the unity with God of *any* individual who – just as Jesus Christ – «gives up his personal life to the Divine Life within him»²⁵. The doctrine does not imply a historic matter of fact but an ethical norm and a metaphysical truth: the human individual must annihilate one's individuality and particularity to become one with God²⁶. That this insight had not existed before the teaching of Jesus is of merely historical interest but not morally or metaphysically relevant. The historic Jesus as the first teacher of the metaphysical and ethical doctrine we have just outlined is thus philosophically irrelevant²⁷.

Alluding to Anselm of Canterbury's famous dictum and summarizing the results thus far, one could say with Fichte: «Only the fool says in her heart: God is a person»²⁸. Divine absoluteness metaphysically excludes any personality and individuality as anyone

²⁵ Ivi, p. 120; Eng. trans., p. 388.

²⁶ Thus, according to our interpretation, Jacobi's remark in his *Kladden* that Fichte's *Anweisung* is a guide to one's self-annihilation is well justified (F.H. Jacobi, *Nachlass Band I,2: Die Denkbücher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobis*, ed. by S.V. Krebs, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 2020, p. 471). In opposition to this interpretation, Ivaldo does not approve that Fichte's ethics would demand the self-annihilation of the human being (M. Ivaldo, *Leben und Philosophie: Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben als Antwort auf Jacobis Nihilismus-Vorwurf*, «Fichte Studien», XLIII, 2016, pp. 172-185, p. 185). But I think that Ivaldo rather misconceives Jacobi's critique of Fichte's *Anweisung* as an existential version of his previous allegation of nihilism against Fichte. Yet, this is not the case: for Jacobi, Fichte demands that one shall only annihilate one's particularity and finitude, which in truth is one's non-being, in order to affirm only God's absolute being, which is the true being in oneself (F.H. Jacobi, *Nachlass Band I,2*, p. 471).

²⁷ Fichte is well aware that his own philosophy, his culture, etc. proceeded from Christianity as a historical matter of fact. Without the introduction of Christianity, «we might have been nothing of all that we are» (Fichte, *Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben*, p. 122; Eng. trans., p. 390). For Christianity introduced the metaphysical and ethical truth of our absolute identity with God into the history of humankind. But only the metaphysical truth, not historical matters of fact «can give us Blessedness» (ivi, p. 122; Eng. trans., p. 391). How we attain unity with God is arbitrary.

²⁸ With reference to the Psalms, Anselm of Canterbury says in his *Proslogion*: «Or can it be that a thing of such a nature does not exist, since 'the Fool has said in

who understands herself and the notion of God realizes²⁹. Ethically, it is the aim of both the true Christian and the true philosopher to annihilate her personality and sensuality. Even the Gospel of St. John, as it addresses Jesus Christ as an empirical, sensing, and suffering individual, is at least questionable. Its truth, just as the truth of Christianity in general, can be reduced to the first five verses of its prologue.

Let us now turn to Jacobi: for Fichte, the Gospels are untrue insofar as they characterize Christ the *logos* as a sensing person. In contrast, focusing on the humanity of Jesus Christ, Jacobi takes quite a different approach to the truth of Christianity³⁰. According to his *On Divine Things*, it is exactly the connection of two outcries of Christ suffering on the cross that expresses the truth of Christianity:

At the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, *Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?* which is translated, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’³¹

and

Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit³².

It is already remarkable that Jacobi picks Mark 15.34 as a manifestation of the truth of Christianity. Whereas Fichte thinks that one has to remove all Jewish remnants from the Gospels to find

his heart, there is no God’ [Ps. 13: 1; 52: 1]» (Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion* ch. II, in *The Major Works*, ed. by B. Davies and G.R. Evans, Oxford University Press, Oxford-New York, 1998, pp. 82-104, p. 87).

²⁹ J.G. Fichte, *Die Principien der Gottes-, Sitten- u. Rechtslehre*, in *Gesamtausgabe Band II,7: Nachgelassene Schriften 1804-1805*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1989, pp. 369-490, p. 378.

³⁰ In his writing *Von Gottes Sohn, der Welt Heiland. Nach Johannes Evangelium* from 1797, J.G. Herder, too, criticizes the metaphysical interpretation of Christ in favor of a ‘humanistic’ interpretation. See: Kobusch, *Johannesevangelium*, p. 221.

³¹ Mark 15.34 (NASB 1995).

³² Luke 23.46 (NASB 1995).

the essence of Christianity, this passage is a reference to Psalm 22.1: «My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?»³³.

But the following reflections do not stress this difference. Instead, they associate Jacobi's quotations from the Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke with a substantially revised passage from a letter originally sent to his friend Hamann on June 16, 1783, that Jacobi published in the first volumes of his works:

Our senses, our understanding, and our will are bleak and empty. The ground of all our speculative philosophy is just a large hole. We look into this hole in vain. [...] Give reasonable advice to the righteous one, who, by fear, has been pushed to this bleak place; who is looking for salvation; and who is only kept alive and strengthened by pious prevision. Light is in my heart, but it is extinguished as soon as I try to comprehend it by reason. But which of these two clarities is true?³⁴

The composition of the passages from Mark and Luke answers the question. Whereas the quotation from Mark voices the vanity of human understanding, Luke 23.46 answers this outcry with the light that the human being can find in her 'heart'.

The opposition between Jacobi and Fichte is striking: Fichte considers the truth of the Christian doctrine a demonstrable metaphysical truth of the absolute being that transcends or even annihilates Christ as a human individual. The true Christ is nothing but the absolute knowledge of God's pure being in itself. In contrast, Jacobi conceives of Christ on the cross as the truth of the human condition. This human condition can be outlined as follows. As Jacobi shows in his confrontation with Fichte, the alleged autonomous understanding of the human being can neither grasp freedom, truth, nor reality. The God of pure reason is merely an idolization of our speculative rationality which is only an empty identity. Pure reason cannot recognize a living and personal God

³³ Psalm 22.1 (NASB 1995).

³⁴ F.H. Jacobi, *Werke. Erster Band*, Leipzig, Fleischer, 1812, pp. 366-367; Eng. trans. by the author.

but only an abstract and indeterminate absolute. Lacking any determination, this God of autonomous reasoning is identical to absolute nothingness. God as the ideal of autonomous (theoretical) reason is perfect nothingness, as Jacobi writes to Buchholtz in May 1786:

It is increasingly clear to me that the bare religion of reason is idolatry that necessarily has to purify itself into atheism. The God of the theists is nothing but the idolized *human* reason; its ideal. Human reason, broken down into its elements, is nothing. Its ideal, consequently, is the ideal of bare nothing: i.e. a plain absurdity³⁵.

Therefore, the living and personal God cannot be posited by pure reason but can only be revealed to the intellect. The suffering Christ on the cross in the Gospel of Mark voices the nihilism of human reason that considers herself forsaken by God. As Jacobi explains in his *Letter to Fichte*:

Just as this world of appearances, if it had all its truth in the appearances and no deeper meaning, if it had nothing to reveal apart from them, would become a ghastly phantom before which I would curse the consciousness where this horror has its genesis, and would call down Annihilation upon it like a Divinity, so too everything that I called good, beautiful, and holy, would become for me a non-entity that shatters my spirit and tears the heart out of my breast, the moment I accept that it exists without connection in me to a higher and *true* Being, without being in me only *symbol* and *image* of this Being; if all that I have in me is only empty consciousness and *poesy*³⁶.

³⁵ Id., *Briefwechsel. Gesamtausgabe I,5. Briefwechsel 1786*, ed. by W. Jaeschke and R. Paimann, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 2005, p. 213; Eng. trans. by the author.

³⁶ Id., *Jacobi an Fichte*, p. 210; Eng. trans., p. 515.

In contrast, as the passage from the Gospel of Luke shows, Christ eventually recovers his faith in the God that is the truth «that is not my creation, but that created me. This truth was supposed to bring wealth into my emptiness, and bring light into the darkness surrounding me»³⁷. According to Jacobi, it is only by a *salto mortale* that one can shift from the delineated nihilism of pure reason to the faithful state of mind. But we have to be very careful not to misconceive Jacobi's *salto* as a leap into religious faith or even Christian revelation³⁸.

Through a 'secular' reading of Jacobi's leap into faith, I will try to show that Jacobi interprets Christianity in a secular existential manner. But first, let us pause here for a moment and summarize our results thus far: for Jacobi, the truth of Christianity is its revelation of the human condition as a finite and individual person. In contrast, Fichte considers the metaphysical truth of Christianity as the purely rational doctrine of God as an unchangeable and absolute being in itself. Christ the logos is the absolute consciousness of this being. The ethical truth of Christianity is the doctrine of the obligation to annihilate one's individuality and finite nature.

³⁷ Id., *Drei Briefe an F. Köppen*, in *Werke 2,1. Schriften zum transzendentalen Idealismus*, ed. by W. Jaeschke and I.-M. Piske, Hamburg, Meiner, 2004, pp. 332-373, p. 351; Eng. trans. by the author.

³⁸ See B. Sandkaulen, *Grund und Ursache. Die Vernunftkritik Jacobis. Systeme der reinen Vernunft und ihre Kritik*, München, Fink, 2000, p. 60; W. Jaeschke and A. Arndt, *Klassische deutsche Philosophie nach Kant 1785-1845*, München, Beck, 2012, p. 25. Di Giovanni misses the central concern of Jacobi's philosophy, namely individual freedom when he suggests that Jacobi «had entered the philosophical fray in the first place because of religious concerns», looking for a God to whom he could «address[] his prayers» (G. di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion in Kant and his Successors. The Vocation of Humankind, 1774-1800*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 24). According to di Giovanni, Jacobi later even fell «in line with the new religious positivism of Schleiermacher and Fries» (ivi, p. 78). See also: ivi, p. 239. For a rejection of this position see S. Schick, *Die Legitimität der Aufklärung. Selbstbestimmung der Vernunft bei Immanuel Kant und Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, Frankfurt am Main, Klostermann, 2019, pp. 470-492.

3. *Faith and Knowledge*

Thus far, we have seen the following: according to Jacobi, pure understanding results in nihilism, fatalism, and atheism. Therefore, our cognition of truth, morals, freedom, and God cannot be based on demonstrable, metaphysical facts but must be based on faith. As Jacobi writes in his *Letters Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza*: «Faith is the element of all human cognition and activity»³⁹. Faith for Jacobi is thus not just *one* element amongst other elements of cognition and activity, but it is *the* element in which and through which we cognize and act.

Yet, beginning with Mendelssohn and the *Berliner Aufklärer*, Jacobi's «salto mortale»⁴⁰, through which he extricates himself from both Spinoza's fatalism and Fichte's nihilism, has often been misunderstood as a leap into religious faith or even Christian confession⁴¹. But Jacobi rejects Mendelssohn's identification of his faith with the Christian faith. As he explains in *David Hume*:

Mendelssohn had saddled me, *without the slightest cause*, with Christian motives which were, in fact, neither Christian nor mine⁴².

³⁹ F.H. Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, in *Werke 1,1. Schriften zum Spinozastreit*, ed. by K. Hammacher and I. Piske, Hamburg, Meiner, 1998, pp. 1-270, p. 125; Eng. trans. by G. di Giovanni, *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn*, in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, Montreal et al., McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994, pp. 173-251, p. 234.

⁴⁰ Cf. *ivi*, p. 20; Eng. trans., p. 189.

⁴¹ Cf. *ivi*, p.179; Eng. trans., p. 355; Id., *Briefwechsel. Gesamtausgabe I,3. Briefwechsel 1782-1784*, ed. by P. Bachmaier et al., Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1987, p. 345.

⁴² Id., *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus. Ein Gespräch*, in *Werke 2,1. Schriften zum transzendentalen Idealismus*, ed. by W. Jaeschke and I.-M. Piske, Hamburg, Meiner, 2004, pp. 5-113, p. 21; Eng. trans. by G. di Giovanni, *David Hume on Faith or Idealism and Realism. A Dialogue by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, in *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, Montreal et al., McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994, pp. 253-338, p. 265.

However, one has to admit that at least some passages in Jacobi may have contributed to this misconception, such as his appeal to Lavater's *Pontius Pilatus* (1782) in the first edition of his *Spinoza Letters*, by which he justifies his concept of faith⁴³. But because of the ambiguity of this appeal⁴⁴, the second edition replaces it with an appeal to *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius, the famous Epicurean philosopher⁴⁵. This shows that Jacobi's leap into faith is not motivated by his Christian creed. Rather, it is motivated by the consciousness of free agency which is always and only present in our practical engagement with the real world⁴⁶. As Jacobi confesses in his *Spinoza-Letters*:

I have no concept more intimate than that of the final cause; no conviction more vital than that *I do what I think*, and not, *that I should think what I do*. Truly therefore, I must assume a source of thought and action that remains completely inexplicable to me⁴⁷.

According to Jacobi, Spinoza's philosophy demonstrates that freedom cannot be an element within a consequently rational philosophical system⁴⁸. Nevertheless, our consciousness of freedom is always already present in our rational world orientation and life praxis. Therefore, Jacobi's *salto mortale* out of the philosophical system is not motivated by an immediate conclusion from atheism against atheism but from fatalism against fatalism:

⁴³ Cf. Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 145; Eng. trans., p. 250.

⁴⁴ Cf. *ivi*, p. 125; Eng. trans., p. 234.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁶ To this, see especially: B. Sandkaulen, *Salto mortale*, in *Jacobi Wörterbuch Online*, ed. by B. Sandkaulen, S. Schick, and O. Koch, URL=<https://jwo.saw-leipzig.de/articles/b20f4bde>, accessed 5 June 2023.

⁴⁷ Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 28; Eng. trans., p. 193.

⁴⁸ *Id.*, *Jacobi an Fichte*, p. 236; Eng. trans., pp. 531-532.

The whole thing comes down to this: from fatalism I immediately conclude against fatalism and everything connected with it⁴⁹.

Put differently, ‘the elastic point’ of Jacobi’s *salto mortale* is not speculation’s denial of religious faith but of our individual consciousness of free agency: «The center, the *punctum saliens* of Spinozism is fatalism»⁵⁰. Our consciousness of freedom, which is our «inner, *certain spirits*»⁵¹ must be considered «the root of philosophy»⁵². Be it in science, art, technology, or morals – whenever we apprehend these works as purposive human creations and not as products of natural processes, we consider them as works of «an *autonomous* force in the actions, the works, and the characters of man»⁵³. Thus, the human spirit «attests to what it proclaims *with its deed*, for no action, not even the least one, can happen without the influence of the faculty of freedom, without the *contribution of spirits*»⁵⁴.

According to Jacobi, freedom is the existential presupposition of our life praxis. Whereas Fichte would have surely approved of this thesis, he would have definitely denied Jacobi’s assertion that *only* our common-sense experience of leading a free existence testifies to the fact of freedom⁵⁵. For Jacobi, the actuality of freedom

⁴⁹ Id., *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 21; Eng. trans., p. 189.

⁵⁰ Id., *Nachlass I,1. Die Denkbücher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobis*, ed. by S. Krebs, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 2020, p. 3. In contrast, Ivaldo considers the understanding of faith «as the consciousness of the *practical* nature of the human being» an innovation of Fichte by which Fichte opposes Jacobi’s «*originally*» theoretical understanding of faith (Ivaldo, *Wissen und Leben*, p. 63f.; Eng. trans. by the author).

⁵¹ Jacobi, *Jacobi an Fichte*, p. 235; Eng. trans. by the author.

⁵² Id., *Über die Lehre des Spinoza. Erweiterung der dritten Auflage*, in *Werke 1,1. Schriften zum Spinozastreit*, ed. by K. Hammacher and I. Piske, Hamburg, Meiner, 1998, pp. 335-356, p. 341; Eng. trans. by the author.

⁵³ Id., *Jacobi an Fichte*, p. 235; Eng. trans., p. 530f.

⁵⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁵ Cf. also B. Sandkaulen, *Philosophie und Common Sense. Eine Frage der Freiheit*, in *Jacobi und Kant*, ed. by B. Sandkaulen and W. Jaeschke, Hamburg, Meiner, 2021, pp. 193-210.

can only be experienced in this practical way, it cannot be proven in a speculative system. The idea of freedom gets annihilated whenever a scientific system tries to construe it. It is the insight into the speculative annihilation of this fundamental truth of our life praxis that motivates the *salto mortale*:

Reason that has fallen into poverty and has become speculative, or in other words, *degenerate* reason, can neither commend nor tolerate this practical path⁵⁶.

Jacobi's leap into faith is thus not motivated by religious faith. It is not a *salto* into Christianity or the abyss of God's mercy as Friedrich Schlegel insinuated. Quite the contrary, Jacobi's faith should not be identified with religious consciousness at all but with our consciousness of free agency⁵⁷. This consciousness of freedom is the presupposition of conceptual knowledge; but as its absolute presupposition, it cannot be comprehended by conceptual knowledge⁵⁸.

Let us now come back to Fichte: in a letter to Jacobi, dated 31 March 1804, Fichte criticizes Jacobi's alleged view that there is always something in our knowledge that cannot be comprehended by the concept. Against Jacobi, Fichte suggests that the insight into this conceptual incomprehensibility, i.e. the comprehension of the incomprehensible as incomprehensible, is the true insight into the very nature of philosophy⁵⁹.

⁵⁶ Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 118; Eng. trans., p. 232.

⁵⁷ Cf. Sandkaulen, *Grund und Ursache*, p. 26.

⁵⁸ This might again seem similar to Fichte's deduction of the categories from the absolutely free act of the *That-Handlung*. Yet, contrary to Fichte, Jacobi does not deduce the categories from an absolute consciousness but, especially in his *David Hume*, from our action experience of being free agents in the real world. For Jacobi, other than Fichte, this experience cannot be deduced. To this, see: S. Schick, *Which Comes First – Acting or Judging? F.H. Jacobi's and Hegel's Foundations of a Metaphysical Pragmatism of Freedom*, «Idealistic Studies», LII, 2022, pp. 169-188.

⁵⁹ Cf. Fichte, *Briefe 1801-1806*, p. 237. To Fichte's elaboration on this thought in the different versions of his *Science of Knowledge* as from 1804 see S. Schick, *Widerspruch und Dialektik in der Spätphilosophie Fichtes*, «Fichte Studien», 2024 (forthcoming).

In another letter to Jacobi, dated 8 May 1806, Fichte takes up this issue. He explains to Jacobi that «the concept conceives absolutely everything except itself»⁶⁰. Otherwise, the concept would not be absolute. But one can still comprehend the incomprehensibility of the absolute concept. Furthermore, this incomprehensibility is just posited by our comprehension. Yet, as Fichte seems to suggest, Jacobi has never reached this highest insight of speculation⁶¹.

As can be seen from these letters, Fichte tries to persuade Jacobi that his late philosophy brings Jacobi's philosophy of faith to a higher level: whereas Jacobi – allegedly – just maintains the incomprehensibility of the absolute, Fichte's late philosophy comprehends its incomprehensibility.

Let us elaborate on this idea. In contrast to his early *Science of Knowledge*, Fichte's late philosophy does not identify absolute knowledge with the absolute itself anymore. Instead, it considers knowledge only a picture of the absolute, whereas the absolute is characterized as immanent, absolute life⁶². Consciousness is not the absolute itself but merely the external form of existence of the absolute. The absolute «underlies knowing as both consciousness and concept [*Begriff*]. [...] Consciousness is at the same time the appearing, the phenomenon, and the image of absolute life»⁶³.

But the absolute cannot be comprehended by comprehension. By analyzing our comprehension in its nature as comprehension, the philosopher comes to the following insight: whereas our comprehension presupposes the absolute, it can never grasp the absolute in its immanent being⁶⁴. But for Fichte, this insight can never motivate a leap out of speculative thought, since it is this

⁶⁰ Fichte, *Briefe 1801-1806*, p. 356; Eng. trans. by the author.

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 356.

⁶² Cf. Id., *Die Wissenschaftslehre in ihrem allgemeinen Umrisse dargestellt*, in *Gesamtausgabe I,10: Werke 1808-1812*, ed. by R. Lauth et al., Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 2005, pp. 321-346, p. 336.

⁶³ F. Seyler, *Fichte in 1804: A Radical Phenomenology of Life? On a Possible Comparison Between the 1804 Wissenschaftslehre and Michel Henry's Phenomenology*, «The Journal of Speculative Philosophy», XXVIII (3), 2014, pp. 295-304, p. 298.

⁶⁴ Cf. Seyler, *Fichte in 1804*, p. 300.

thought that posits the absolute as incomprehensible. As Fichte explains in his *Science of Knowledge* (1805)⁶⁵:

But now pay attention to your thinking! Was it not your thinking, in which you posited, projected the being?⁶⁶

The fundamental axiom of Fichte's late philosophy is thus not a *salto mortale*, but the annihilation of conceptual comprehension by conceiving of the absolute in its inconceivability⁶⁷. The ultimate concept of the absolute is the concept of its incomprehensibility⁶⁸. But Fichte insists that this is nevertheless a concept. Only the absolute concept can conceive of the inconceivable absolute as inconceivable⁶⁹. Therefore, the absolute can only reveal itself in the conceptual annihilation of the concept. The fundamental law of the absolute concept is to be posited and at the same time annihilated in its position. But to this end, the concept of the absolute must first be posited. Thus, the second *Science of Knowledge* from 1804 explains:

If the absolutely incomprehensible is supposed to manifest itself as it is, namely subsisting by itself only, the notion

⁶⁵ Cf. J.G. Fichte, *4ter Vortrag der Wissenschaftslehre*, in *Gesamtausgabe II,9: Nachgelassene Schriften 1805-1807*, ed. by R. Lauth and H. Gliwitsky, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1993, pp. 173-312, p. 186.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ To this idea and for further literature on this thought, see, again, Schick, *Widerspruch und Dialektik*.

⁶⁸ See W. Janke, *Einheit und Vielheit. Grundzüge von Fichtes Lebens- und Bildlehre*, in *Einheitskonzepte in der idealistischen und in der gegenwärtigen Philosophie*, ed. by K. Gloy and D. Schmidig, Bern et al., Peter Lang, 1987, pp. 39-72, p. 42, pp. 47-50; Id., *Vom Bilde des Absoluten. Grundzüge der Phänomenologie Fichtes*, Berlin-New York, De Gruyter, 1993, p. 12.

⁶⁹ See C. Asmuth, *Das Begreifen des Unbegreiflichen. Philosophie und Religion bei Johann Gottlieb Fichte 1800-1806*, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1999, p. 23. «An sich = positive Selbstvernichtung des Lichts, in ihm selber» (Fichte, *4ter Vortrag*, p. 221). Concerning Fichte's comprehension of the absolute in its incomprehensibility and as incomprehensible see: S. Schick, *Contradictio est regula veri. Die Grundsätze des Denkens in der formalen, transzendentalen und spekulativen Logik*, Hamburg, Meiner, 2010, pp. 273-278.

needs to be annihilated. But to be able to be annihilated, it must be posited. For the incomprehensible is only intelligible in the annihilation of the notion⁷⁰.

And it seems to be directed against Jacobi when Fichte says:

It is not by thoughtlessness and lack of energy that we do arrive at this annihilation but by highest thought, the thinking of the absolute immanent life [...] which denies its applicability and thus annihilates itself through itself. This reasoning now [...] is the realistic one⁷¹.

4. *The God of the Living*

We have seen that both Fichte and Jacobi do not transcend conceptual knowledge on account of theological or confessional reasons. But they transcend this knowledge differently: Jacobi by a *salto mortale* into our consciousness of agency; Fichte by the comprehension of the incomprehensibility of the absolute and the resulting annihilation of the concept. These respective negations of conceptual knowledge are connected to two different concepts of God and Christianity: an impersonal *versus* a personal God.

In a letter to Reinhold, dated 8 January 1800, Fichte writes:

God's consciousness may yet go through. We must admit a connection of the divine with our knowing that we cannot appropriately think otherwise than as a knowing, materially considered, but not according to the form of our discursive consciousness. It is only the latter that I deny, and I will deny it as long as I possess the power of reason⁷².

⁷⁰ J.G. Fichte, *Wissenschaftslehre 1804/II*, in *Gesamtausgabe II,8: Nachgelassene Schriften 1804*, ed. by R. Lauth and H. Gliwitzky, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1985, pp. 2-422, p. 57.

⁷¹ Ivi, p. 168.

⁷² Id., *Gesamtausgabe Band III,4: Briefe 1799-1800*, ed. by R. Lauth and H. Gliwitzky, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1973, pp. 180-181; Engl. trans. *Fichte's Philosophy of Religion*, p. 285.

In his later philosophy, Fichte radicalizes this thought, as he reduces consciousness to the existence (*Dasein/Existenz*) of God⁷³. It is thus obvious that Fichte's God cannot be the God that we usually conceive as Christian, namely a personal God. Fichte's concept of God, as he presents it in 1804, is only the immanent reality itself⁷⁴, «the *Unity*, the One, true cohesive in itself»⁷⁵. God is «nothing but a cohesive singulum of life and being which can never come out of itself»⁷⁶. This unity is neither the pure identity of Fichte's 'absolute I' from the Jena *Science of Knowledge*, Schelling's indifference, nor Hegel's identity of identity and difference. Rather, it is only the absolute without any further relational predicate⁷⁷. From this absolute, one must negate any property.

This immanent being without any determination must have reminded Jacobi of Spinoza's God, who, according to Jacobi, «is the *pure* principle of the actuality in everything actual, of *being* in everything existent»⁷⁸. According to Jacobi's Spinoza, «an absolute individual is just as impossible as an individual Absolute»⁷⁹, Spinoza's God, just as Fichte's, «is thoroughly without individuality»⁸⁰.

Fichte's concept of God is thus further proof to Jacobi that the human mind cannot transcend nihilism by speculation but only through our experience of being free causes in the world⁸¹. Therefore, in opposition to Spinoza's speculative concept of God, Jacobi

⁷³ Cf. Id., *WL 1804/II*, p. 160. See A. Schnell, *Die drei Bildtypen in der transzendenten Bildlehre J.G. Fichtes*, «Fichte Studien», XLII, 2015, pp. 49-65, p. 51f.

⁷⁴ Cf. C. Asmuth, *Transzendentalphilosophie oder absolute Metaphysik? Grundsätzliche Fragen an Fichtes Spätphilosophie*, «Fichte Studien», XXXI, 2007, pp. 45-58, p. 49.

⁷⁵ Fichte, *WL 1804/II*, p. 10; Eng. trans. by the author.

⁷⁶ Ivi, p. 242; Eng. trans. by the author.

⁷⁷ Cf. Id., *Briefe 1801-1806*, p. 113. See also Janke, *Einheit und Vielheit*, p. 49.

⁷⁸ Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 39; Eng. trans., p. 199.

⁷⁹ Ivi, p. 22; Eng. trans., p. 190.

⁸⁰ Ivi, p. 39; Eng. trans., p. 199. For the difference between Fichte's nihilism and Spinoza's pantheism from Jacobi's point of view see B. Sandkaulen, *Sein in allem Dasein*, in *Jacobi-Wörterbuch Online*, ed. by B. Sandkaulen, S. Schick, and O. Koch, Version v2, URL=<https://jwo.saw-leipzig.de/articles/v2/bacb2871>, accessed 5 June 2023.

⁸¹ Jacobi, *Jacobi an Fichte*, p. 218; Eng. trans., p. 522.

had already explained to Lessing: «But, my *credo* is not in Spinoza. [...] I believe in an intelligent personal cause of the world»⁸². In practicing our freedom, we reveal to ourselves a personal and intelligent God as the source of our causality of freedom.

Jacobi's God, who reveals herself in our personal consciousness of freedom, is neither Spinoza's immanent nor Fichte's pure being in all existence. For Jacobi, God is not an impersonal 'What' but the absolute personal and individual 'Who'. For this reason, Jacobi prefers the God of the Bible over the God of Spinoza:

The God of the Bible is more sublime than the God that is just an absolute [...]. Therefore, my philosophy asks: *who* is God; not: *what* is He? All '*What*' belongs to nature⁸³.

With his *credo*, Jacobi thus opposes both a purely speculative concept of God and what he calls religious materialism, i.e. faith in an external revelation through divine scriptures or miracles. His *credo* is neither based on religious faith nor a speculative idea but on our consciousness of freedom. This consciousness of freedom is always already present in our life praxis. Therefore, the way to our cognition of God can only be practical and not syllogistic⁸⁴. But Jacobi also maintains this revelation through our consciousness of freedom against 'religious materialism'. In 1784, he writes in a letter to Herder: «The entrance to the sanctuary is either in the human being or nowhere. [...]; his freedom is the arcane Shekhinah»⁸⁵, i.e. the dwelling of God's divine presence in us. The only miracle that reveals God is our human freedom⁸⁶:

Created after His image. God in us: this is the tidings that we have of Him, and the only possible one; with it, God

⁸² Id., *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 20; Eng. trans., p. 189.

⁸³ Id., *Über die Lehre des Spinoza. Erweiterung der dritten Auflage*, p. 342; Eng. trans. by the author.

⁸⁴ Cf. Id., *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 145; Eng. trans., p. 249.

⁸⁵ Id., *Briefwechsel 1782-1784*, p. 326; Eng. trans. by the author.

⁸⁶ Cf. Id., *Jacobi an Fichte*, p. 234; Eng. trans., p. 530.

has revealed Himself to man in a living way, ever propagating, for all times. A revelation through external appearances, call them what you will, can at best stand to internal, *original* appearances only as language to reason⁸⁷.

Since the practice of our freedom is based on our intelligence and personhood, our freedom does not reveal the source of this freedom as an abstract being but as an intelligent and personal God⁸⁸. The source of our freedom cannot be a product of a natural mechanism or an abstract being⁸⁹. Our *practical* self-recognition (and not pietistic sensibility) is thus our inner revelation of God:

Hence, the *spirit* of man is that which recognizes *God*; he perceives it, he has the *presentiment* of it concealed in nature; he *learns* of God in his chest, he worships it in his heart. This is his *reason*: to him the existence [*Daseyn*] of a god is more manifest [*offenbarer*] and certain than his own. Reason is not where this revelation [*Offenbarung*] is not⁹⁰.

First and foremost in our experience of freedom as a power to overcome our egoistic interests, God is revealed to us as the source of this power:

Whoever knows how *really* to elevate himself with his spirit above nature, with his heart above every degrading desire, such a one sees God face to face, and it is not enough to say of him that he only believes in God. And were his philosophy also atheist; were his opinions atheist by the

⁸⁷ Ivi, p. 219; Eng. trans., p. 522.

⁸⁸ Cf. ivi, p. 250.

⁸⁹ Cf. Id., *Von den Göttlichen Dingen und ihre Offenbarung*, in *Gesamtausgabe Band 3. Schriften zum Streit um die Göttlichen Dinge und ihre Offenbarung*, ed. by Walter Jaeschke, Hamburg, Meiner, 2000, pp. 3-138, p. 18; Eng. trans. by P. Livieri, F.H. Jacobi's 'On Divine Things and their Revelation'. *A Study and Translation*, Montreal, 2019, Phil. diss., p. xvii.

⁹⁰ Ivi, p. 10; Eng. trans., p. x.

standard of the (I believe correct) judgment of natural reason that calls a God who is *non-personal* a God *who is not*, a non-entity; were he even to give the name ‘atheist’ to his system, still his sin would only be a *matter of thought*, a bungling of the *artist*, *in* words and *in* concepts, the fault of the *brooder*, not of the *man*. Not the *being* of God, but only his *name*, would be denied by such a one⁹¹.

Our practical love for the eternal, the true, the beautiful, the good, and justice reveals both the divine source and end of this love⁹². When we overcome our sensual impulses to realize the idea of the good in us, we experience ourselves as supernatural freedom and reason. In our virtues, we actualize and habitualize this freedom and reason. In this actualization, we give birth to the God within us:

Yet, we know about God and his will because we were born from God and we are created in his image [*Bild*], we belong to his species and his race. God lives in us, and our life is *hidden* in God. Should God not be present in us in this way, i.e. *immediately* present with his image inside our innermost *self*, then what – apart from him – should bring knowledge of him?⁹³

*God's wisdom does not descend upon an evil soul, nor does it dwell in the enslaved body of one who is subject to vice*⁹⁴.

With Julius Guttman and Leo Strauss, we might thus call Jacobi's philosophy of religion an existential one in contrast to the idealistic one. But there is one important difference between Jacobi and the existential philosophy of Kierkegaard, Sartre, etc. For Jacobi, our experience of freedom is not associated with fear but

⁹¹ Id., *Jacobi an Fichte*, p. 216; Eng. trans., p. 520.

⁹² Cf. Id., *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 167-168; Eng. trans., p. 348.

⁹³ Id., *Von den Göttlichen Dingen*, p. 41; Eng. trans., p. xxxv.

⁹⁴ Id., *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 137; Eng. trans., p. 243.

with the joy of the power of our free will that can overcome our natural drives⁹⁵:

The idea of a virtuous being originates in the enjoyment of virtue; the idea of a free being, in the enjoyment of freedom; the idea of a living being, in the enjoyment of life; the idea of one like unto God, and of *God* himself, in the enjoyment of what is divine⁹⁶.

Furthermore, this freedom is only possible as we already know the good our freedom is aiming at, at least in an undetermined manner. This knowledge or promise of the good is the presupposition for our moral progress:

We cannot get to what is better until we have thrown away what is worse, *only based on good faith*; what is present for what lies ahead in the future; what we can see for what we cannot see. My dear son, God may give you the exalted confidence that enables you to do so. This confidence is the light of His mercy⁹⁷.

This confidence in us, Jacobi also calls grace. In a letter from 1781, Jacobi explains to Lavater that he knows of no doctrine more plausible and better justified than the doctrine of the Christian order of salvation, i.e. the doctrine that the human being, in her path towards moral perfection, requires God's grace⁹⁸. In his published *Fliegende Blätter*, Jacobi, too, refers to the concept of grace: «He who expels the doctrine of grace from the Bible annihilates the whole

⁹⁵ See J. Stolzenberg, *Was ist Freiheit? Jacobis Kritik der Moralphilosophie Kants*, in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Ein Wendepunkt der geistigen Bildung der Zeit*, ed. by W. Jaeschke and B. Sandkaulen, Hamburg, Meiner, 2004, pp. 19-36, p. 35.

⁹⁶ Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 137; Eng. trans., p. 243. See also Stolzenberg, *Was ist Freiheit?*, pp. 27-28.

⁹⁷ Id., *Briefwechsel. Gesamtausgabe I,2. Briefwechsel 1775-1781*, ed. by P. Bachmaier et al., Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 1983, p. 243; Eng. trans. by the author.

⁹⁸ Cf. *ivi*, p. 382.

Bible»⁹⁹. But, as we have seen, Jacobi secularizes the meaning of grace and transforms it into a structural element of our experience of freedom.

5. *Christianity as Life Form*

For both Fichte and Jacobi, the Christian religion is not merely a theoretical doctrine but – perhaps even first and foremost – an ethical way to live one’s life. But after the previous considerations, it will not come as a surprise that Fichte’s and Jacobi’s conceptions of the Christian form of life are fundamentally different.

According to Fichte, religion is the absolute position of life. As such, it is only subordinated to the science of knowledge which is the absolute position of reason. Both positions ‘swallow’, i.e. overcome the doctrines of ethics and law¹⁰⁰.

The science of knowledge *demonstrates* that «[t]here is absolutely no Being and no Life beyond the immediate Divine Life»¹⁰¹. In contrast, the true Christian has no scientific or rational knowledge of this truth but lives her life according to this insight.

According to Fichte, Jesus was the first to teach that humanity is absolutely identical to the «Godhead, as regards what is essentially real in the former»¹⁰². In the actions of a human being that is inspired by God, «it is not man who acts; – but God himself, in his primitive and inward Being and Nature, acts in him, and fulfills his work in Man»¹⁰³.

As only the absolute being *truly is and acts*, whereas individuality is rather the privation of being, both the Christian and the philosopher seek to annihilate their individuality and peculiarity. The

⁹⁹ Id., *Fliegende Blätter*, in *Werke. Sechster und letzter Band*, Leipzig, Fleischer, 1825, pp. 131-242, p. 192; Eng. trans. by the author.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Fichte, *Die Principien der Gottes-, Sitten- u. Rechtslehre*, p. 381; Asmuth, *Begreifen des Unbegreiflichen*, p. 154.

¹⁰¹ Fichte, *Die Anweisung zum seeligen Leben*, p. 115; Eng. trans., p. 379.

¹⁰² Ivi, p. 189; Eng. trans., p. 403.

¹⁰³ Ivi, p. 115; Eng. trans., p. 379.

ethos of the Christian life is to overcome personal identity and become indistinguishable from the absolute and one with it. To become one with the absolute, one has to fulfill God's will. This means that the human being has to give up her particular will and annihilate her willingness for something.

For Jacobi, Fichte's imperative to will nothing is again merely the ideal of an allegedly pure autonomous reason. Contrary to Fichte, Jacobi assumes that pure self-determination is impossible for human beings. Instead, they must presuppose the good as something given:

But for created beings, pure *self-determination* is impossible. Something objective must be *given* as an initiating cause¹⁰⁴.

Since *pure* reason can presuppose no good that is not posited by itself, pure reason can only result in an abstract and formal moral principle: «*accord of a man with himself, a fixed unity*»¹⁰⁵. The highest obligation posited by pure reason is the inane formal identity and unity of the self, which is formulated by Kant's categorical imperative. This formal identity is not a substantial unity, no substantial good. In its perfection, the moral will of pure reason is a will that strives for nothing.

In contrast, for Jacobi, all true religion is based on the inner revelation of our experience of being a free person who can will some presupposed good. The personal God reveals God's own actual reality in our consciousness of being a person, whenever we practice our freedom, distinguish ourselves from nature, and aim at something good instead of something pleasurable. By becoming a person, we give birth to the God within us:

The degree of our faculty for distinguishing ourselves from external things, extensively and intensively, is the degree of our personality, that is, the degree *of elevation of our spirit*. Along with this exquisite property of reason, we receive the

¹⁰⁴ Jacobi, *David Hume*, p. 94; Eng. trans. by the author.

¹⁰⁵ Id., *Jacobi an Fichte*, p. 212; Eng. trans., p. 517.

intimation of God, the intimation of HE WHO IS, of a being *who has its life in itself*. *Freedom* breathes upon the soul from there, and the fields of immortality become visible¹⁰⁶.

In the practice of our freedom, God is already always with us. This is the true meaning of Jacobi's confession to mysticism when he writes: insofar as Christianity is 'mysticism', «it is the only true philosophy of religion to me, that one can think of; the less I make progress with the historic faith»¹⁰⁷. But Jacobi's mysticism does not dissolve the human consciousness into the absolute. Quite the contrary, he identifies the consciousness of the absolute with the individual's action consciousness of freedom.

The Christian love for «diving under»¹⁰⁸ remains strange to him. The outer appearance is just a medium for our imagination. True religion does not have a specific exterior form. Instead, he understands the Christian revelation as a truly *humane* revelation:

I became aware that, ever since they were searching for God wholeheartedly, all human beings were searching for a *Christ*; a being of all beings who would know *humanly*, too; who would care for us *humanly*; a near and certain tie between the lowest and the highest creature; a creator who would *absolutely* take pity on all his creatures¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁶ Id., *David Hume* p. 99; Eng. trans., p. 329.

¹⁰⁷ Id., *Briefwechsel I,9: Briefwechsel Januar 1791 bis Mai 1792*, ed. by W. Jaeschke and R. Paimann, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 2015, p. 26; Eng. trans. by the author. In January 1794, Jacobi writes to Stolberg that, «according to their mystical elements», he considers «all theologies equally true»; according to their non-mystical elements he considers them equally untrue (Id., *Briefwechsel I,10: Briefwechsel Juni 1792 bis September 1794*, ed. by W. Jaeschke and R. Paimann, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 2015, p. 310; Eng. trans. by the author.

¹⁰⁸ Id., *Briefwechsel I,11: Briefwechsel Oktober 1794 bis Dezember 1798*, ed. by C. Goretzki, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 2017, p. 241; Eng. trans. by the author.

¹⁰⁹ Id., *Briefwechsel 1782-1784*, p. 391f.; Eng. trans. by the author.

In a letter to Herder from November 1784, Jacobi writes:

What would religion be without a *Christ*, a close and certain tie between the highest and lowest beings?¹¹⁰

And in his *Spinoza Letters*, Jacobi writes:

This is how the voice of one preaching in the wilderness cries out, too: 'In order to do away with the infinite *disproportion* between man and God, man must partake of a divine nature, and the Divinity take on flesh and blood'¹¹¹.

Just as in his use of the concepts of grace, revelation, and faith, Jacobi also secularizes the incarnation of God¹¹². By realizing one's own morality, the human being gives birth to the God within the self:

God himself should be born in man, if man wants to have a living God instead of a mere *idol*¹¹³.

The God we have, therefore, is the *one who became man in us*, and it is not possible to acknowledge any other, even through better instruction; for how would we ever understand any other? Wisdom, righteousness, goodwill, free love, are not *images* but *forces* of which we acquire the representation only in use, *in independent activity*. Man must already have performed actions with these forces, therefore; he must have acquired virtues and the concepts of virtues, before any instruction about the *true* God could reach him¹¹⁴.

¹¹⁰ Ivi, p. 384; Eng. trans. by the author.

¹¹¹ Id., *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, p. 117f.; Eng. trans., p. 231.

¹¹² See already O. Bollnow, *Die Lebensphilosophie F. H. Jacobis*, Stuttgart, Kohlhammer, 1933, p. 115.

¹¹³ Jacobi, *Von den Göttlichen Dingen*, p. 42; Eng. trans., p. xxxvi.

¹¹⁴ Id., *Jacobi an Fichte*, p. 219; Eng. trans., p. 523.

Since each perfect moral being is an incarnation of God, all ethical human beings form an invisible church:

There is only one community of all saints, only one but *invisible* church. To this church do profess Christ, Epaminondas, Socrates, Fenelon, Johann Arndt, Hamann – all souls that truly love and adore, independent of the guise of belief, customs, and prejudices that may cover this love¹¹⁵.

Therefore, do away with all form! And alone *this* proposition shall be certain: *the best man will always have the best religion!*¹¹⁶

My philosophy professes itself to the *invisible* church¹¹⁷.

6. Summary

As mentioned in the beginning, after having written his *Instructions for a Blessed Life*, Fichte was convinced that this writing expressed exactly what Jacobi had always been aiming at¹¹⁸. But as the preceding comparison of Jacobi's and Fichte's respective philosophies of religion has shown, Fichte's and Jacobi's general ontological and ethical intentions are contradictorily opposed and therefore incompatible. For Fichte, finite beings, insofar as they are finite and natural, are nothing. They only are insofar as they are

¹¹⁵ Id., *Briefwechsel I,12: Briefwechsel 1799-1800*, ed. by M. Köppe, Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt, frommann-holzboog, 2018, p. 310; Eng. trans. by the author.

¹¹⁶ Id., *Wider Mendelssohns Beschuldigungen*, in *Werke 1,1. Schriften zum Spinozastreit*, ed. by K. Hammacher and I. Piske, Hamburg, Meiner, 1998, p. 310; Eng. trans. by the author.

¹¹⁷ Id., *Über die Lehre des Spinoza. Erweiterung der dritten Auflage*, p. 353; Eng. trans. by the author.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Fichte, *Briefe 1801-1806*, p. 356.

identical to the absolute¹¹⁹. Therefore, ethically, one has to annihilate one's finitude, individuality, nature, and all that distinguishes one from both the absolute being and all the other finite, individual beings. In contrast, for Jacobi, individuality is the fundamental ontological concept¹²⁰. This leads to a completely different ethic, as Jacobi himself observes in his *On Divine Things*, with apparent respect to Fichte's *Introduction for a Blessed Life*:

And still, the spirit dwelling inside man who rises above nature is by no means a spirit rejecting or opposing nature, it does not want to tear men apart: this kind of separation would mean annihilation. Everything that exists, except God, belongs to nature, and cannot stand but in connection to it. Hence, everything outside God is *finite*, and nature is the *sum [Inbegriff] of the finites*. Annihilating nature would entail the annihilation of creation. This foolish desire has been requested by the wise men of the world in the most different ways. Even recently has rung loud the call: man, make up your mind, cease to be yourself and let God exist alone, only then will you be helped and blessed¹²¹.

¹¹⁹ See, e.g., A. Quero-Sánchez, *Sein als Freiheit. Die idealistische Metaphysik Meister Eckharts und Johann Gottlieb Fichtes*, Freiburg-München, Alber, 2004.

¹²⁰ Concerning this difference, see again: Sandkaulen, *Jacobis Philosophie*, pp. 201-244.

¹²¹ Jacobi, *Von den Göttlichen Dingen*, p. 103; Eng. trans., p. xc.