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The Death-Defying Leap from Nihilism to Transcendence

F.H. Jacobi's Idea of Transcendence

Peter Jonkers

Introduction

In this essay I want to examine a historical example of the clash between immanent transcendence (including radical immanence) and radical transcendence. Its concrete setting was a series of controversies that took place in Germany around 1800, involving some of the most prominent German philosophers, such as Mendelssohn, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. They caused an enormous stir among the intellectual circles of that time¹ and considerably reinforced the already existing suspicion against philosophy's capacity to think God or the absolute along the lines of immanent transcendence. In particular, philosophy was accused of annihilating God's transcendence, and eventually of bringing about the death of God. In sum, the interpretation of immanent transcendence in modern philosophy was suspected of being nothing but radical immanence in disguise; if pressed hard, it could eventually be unmasked as nihilism, a term that was introduced into the philosophical debate for the first time in the wake of this clash.

The key figure in all these controversies was F.H. Jacobi, a self-trained philosopher who, probably precisely because he

¹ Goethe, referring in his *Dichtung und Wahrheit* to the pantheism-controversy, wrote that it had "the effect of an explosion, revealing the most intimate relations between respectable men. Up to then, the people involved were not even aware of these relations; they were completely latent in a society that was so enlightened for the rest." In his *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* Hegel gives a similar comment on the pantheism-controversy: it was "like a bolt from the blue." Cf. Hegel 1971: XX, 316-17.

was an outsider on the philosophical scene, was able to reveal a fatal flaw at the heart of modern philosophy. In his view, its ultimate goal is to develop a purely immanent “philosophy of one piece” that aims at deducing everything, including God or the absolute, from an immanent logical principle. By doing so, it reduces God to a moment of thinking, thereby annihilating his transcendence. Because of this tendency, Jacobi rejects modern philosophy as atheistic and as leading inevitably to nihilism.

However, it is worthwhile to analyze the debate between Jacobi and his contemporaries not only for historical reasons, but also for systematic ones. First of all, the concept of immanent transcendence has been a traditional paradigm for thinking the relation between the immanent world and the transcendent God.² While medieval thinking, which was embedded in an overarching religious framework, managed to keep the obvious tension that inhered in the very concept of immanent transcendence in balance, it fell apart in modern philosophy, resulting in a complete dichotomy between radical immanence, which was the domain of rational (philosophical and scientific) reason, and radical transcendence, which could only be intuited by a subjective faith. Hence Jacobi’s fundamental critique of radical immanence foreshadows the major transformations of the concept of transcendence as developed by other philosophies in the nineteenth century and especially the twentieth. In particular, Kierkegaard’s idea of radical transcendence is clearly inspired by Jacobi’s philosophy, and various contemporary interpretations of radical transcendence and transcendence as alterity (e.g. as developed by Barth, Levinas, Marion, Derrida, Deleuze, and others) also criticize the modern shape of immanent transcendence in a vein similar to that of Jacobi, without, however, being directly influenced by his thinking. Second, Jacobi not only criticizes the modern interpretation of immanent transcendence but also offers an interesting alternative that has become the object of in-depth research only recently. Traditionally, under the influence of Hegel’s critique of Jacobi in *Faith and Knowledge* and other more recent interpretations, Ja-

² Cf. essay to this volume by Wessel Stoker, as well as the contribution by Danie Goosen below.

cobi's attempt to think radical transcendence philosophically has always been framed as irrational and hence his philosophy in general as one of subjective feeling. However, as I will show below, this interpretation is erroneous.³ A more adequate interpretation of this aspect of Jacobi's philosophy shows that it is a continuation of a line of thought set out by Plato and consists of an immediate, intellectual awareness of radical transcendence, which can only be elucidated but never demonstrated by reason.

In the next section I will analyze Jacobi's critique of philosophy's annihilation of transcendence as he develops it in the wake of two important controversies in which he was involved, viz. the pantheism controversy of 1785 and the atheism controversy of 1799. Then I will examine his attempt to free himself from the nihilism that results from modern philosophy by performing a death-defying leap, as well as his project to think radical transcendence philosophically.

Understanding's Propensity to Annihilate all Transcendence

Jacobi defines understanding in general as "a faculty of reflection on sense intuitions, a faculty of dividing and re-uniting in concepts, judgements, and conclusions" (JWA 2: 205).⁴ It can only conceptually *reflect on* but never actually *perceive* reality. Only through the senses do we perceive sensory reality, whereas our awareness of the supersensible is the result of an intellectual intuition that he first calls faith and in his later writings reason, as we shall see in more detail in the next section. Hence, in comparison to the immediacy of sensory perception and intellectual intuition, understanding is secondary. Nevertheless, it is not only useful but even indispensable for humans as natural, conditional beings for keeping themselves alive. In particular, through its capacities of abstraction and re-unification understanding produces experience-based concepts, such as reality,

³ For a detailed critique of this line of interpretation, cf. Sandkaulen 2000: 38, footnote.

⁴ I will refer to Jacobi's works as JWA, followed by the number of the volume and the page.

substance, succession, etc., as well as the propositions and conclusions derived from them. This enables the human being “to examine what is stable in the instability of nature that surrounds and pervades him” (JWA 1: 248). Hence, the content of understanding stems from the perception of a given reality, whereas its form is of its own making. As a conceptual activity

philosophy [receives] its *form* from understanding alone, as the general faculty of concepts. Without concepts ... a true appropriation of any truth whatsoever is impossible. Conversely, the proper *content* of philosophy is given by reason alone [at least as far as the intuition of the supersensible is concerned]. Reason produces no concepts, builds no systems, forms no judgements but, *just like the external senses*, only reveals, proclaims positively. (JWA 2: 401f.)

Obviously, as regards the distinction between the content and the form of our knowledge, Jacobi is clearly dependent on Kant’s famous distinction, but, unlike Kant, he defines reason as an immediate, intellectual intuition of something real that hence precedes understanding. This analysis of the indispensability of understanding for our knowledge of the sensory as well as of the supersensible reality shows that it is completely erroneous to take Jacobi as a misologist, who would repudiate understanding and replace it by an irrational faith. In his own words, this nickname is “the worst that a philosopher can be called” (JWA 2: 387 footnote).

In spite of its indispensability for humans, understanding has a very problematic aspect as well, viz. its propensity for self-sufficiency. In order to attain this, it has to free itself from its dependence on a given (super)sensible content, and to produce the latter autonomously. Actually, understanding thus annihilates the transcendence of reality—including God’s transcendence—as something prior to thinking, and simultaneously creates a world of its own making. It is a world of images, in which

signs and words take the place of substances and forces. We appropriate the universe by tearing it apart, and creating a *world of pictures, ideas and words* that is proportionate to our powers but quite unlike the real one. We understand perfectly what we thus create, to the extent that it is our

creation, and we do not understand what cannot be created in this way. Our philosophical understanding does not reach beyond its own producing activity. (JWA 1: 249)

Consequently, the balance between the form and the content of our knowledge is disturbed, leading to a reversal of the hierarchy between objects and words or concepts: from now on: things have to conform themselves to concepts, instead of the other way round, thereby obviously criticizing Kant's Copernican revolution. Eventually, this leads to a completely immanent philosophy that annihilates all transcendence, including God as an extra-mental reality, and whose final aim it is to become like God in His creating activity. Jacobi's aim through his involvement in the two controversies, examined below, was to uncover this nihilistic tendency by the analysis of two very influential schools of modern philosophy, viz. pre-Kantian metaphysics and (post-)Kantian idealism.

The Pantheism Controversy

The immediate cause of the pantheism controversy was Jacobi's publication of his correspondence with Mendelssohn in 1785 on Spinoza's philosophy (*Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*). He informed Mendelssohn, who was working on a biography on the late G.E. Lessing, that the latter had told him at the end of his life that he was a Spinozist (JWA 1: 8f., 16f.). Apart from the fact that such a qualification was anything but harmless for the memory of Lessing, since Spinozism was generally considered heterodox, what was really at stake here went far beyond this: it was an attack on Enlightenment philosophy as such, of which Lessing was the most important deceased representative and Mendelssohn the most prominent living one. With his *Spinoza Letters*, Jacobi reinforced the already existing suspicions that modern philosophy was leading inevitably towards pantheism and fatalism, thus proving its incapacity to think God as a free, transcendent being and humans as free, living persons. If these suspicions proved to be true, could this kind of reason still be taken as a legitimate way to think reality in general and God in particular? This is the fundamental question with which Jacobi confronted the philosophy of his time. Everybody involved immediately noticed its vital importance. That is why Kant, Mendelssohn, and other

proponents of the Enlightenment reacted so vigorously in various newspapers and journals to Jacobi's publication of the *Spinoza Letters*.⁵

In order to set forth Jacobi's argument, I will start with a famous quote from his *Spinoza Letters*:

Lessing: ... The orthodox concepts of the Divinity are no longer for me; I cannot stomach them. *Hen kai pan!* I know of nothing else. ... I: Then you must be pretty much in agreement with Spinoza. Lessing: If I have to name myself after anyone, I know of nothing else. (JWA 1: 16)⁶

This remark, which Jacobi put into Lessing's mouth in order to highlight the latter's doubts about the traditional Christian concept of God and his assent with Spinoza's conception of God as an all-encompassing substance, went right to the heart of the ongoing debate on the religious orthodoxy of Enlightenment philosophy. Jacobi, however, was not primarily concerned with Christian orthodoxy but with the devastating effects of understanding on humankind and society in general. He considers the expression *hen kai pan* ("one and all"), "the highest concept in the *understanding*" (JWA 3: 132), to be the key term for illustrating its general drive towards self-sufficiency. Hence, this expression does not only serve as a description of Spinoza's substance but also as a shortcut for the "spirit of Spinozism" that Jacobi thinks to be present in modern philosophy as a whole and especially in (post-)Kantian idealism.⁷ He defines it in the following way:

⁵ For an overview of the enormous philosophical response to the pantheism controversy, cf. Christ 1988: 140, n. 263.

⁶ The expression *hen kai pan* ("one and all") can be considered to be the paradigmatic phrasing of the concept of immanent transcendence in modern philosophy. It was of vital importance for not only Jacobi but also Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling, albeit for totally different reasons. For a discussion of this concept, cf. Jonkers 2007: 110-15.

⁷ It is noteworthy that Jacobi explicitly refers to some passages from the *Critique of Pure Reason* to show that they "are entirely in the spirit of Spinoza" (JWA 1: 96).

The finite is in the infinite, so that the sum of all finite things, equally containing within itself the whole of eternity at every moment, past and future, is one and the same as the infinite thing itself.... This sum is not an absurd combination of finite things, together constituting an infinite, but a whole in the strictest sense, whose parts are only within it and according to it, can only be thought within it and according to it. (JWA 1: 95f.)

This shows that the “one and all” is an internally differentiated infinite unity, encompassing all the finite. The consequences of this interpretation of reality as a whole are dramatic. First, precisely because this infinite substance is a whole in the strictest sense, it always prevails over the finite, individual things, so that the multiplicity of finite things does not have any autonomy with regard to the infinite substance. Even more so, “individual things ... are *non-entia*; the indeterminate infinite being is the one single true *ens reale, hoc est, est omne esse, & praeter quod nullum datur esse*” (JWA 1: 100). For Jacobi, the “one and all” is the clearest illustration of understanding’s propensity to unify the real variety and individuality of reality by subsuming it under a limited number of abstract concepts. Moreover, this “one and all” cannot have any real consequence or duration and hence no coming into being and perishing or change either, since it presupposes that everything in it is simultaneous, that the real effect coincides with the totality of its real cause, which implies that it makes no sense to speak about beginning or end. Hence, “consequence and duration must *in truth* only be a certain way of intuiting the manifold in the infinite” (JWA 1: 20) but without any reality.

Second, through his analysis of the phrase *hen kai pan*, Jacobi draws the attention of his readers to some dramatic but inevitable consequences regarding God’s transcendence and his personhood. Because the “one and all” includes everything from eternity in itself, whoever accepts it as the basic ontological principle has to posit

an indwelling cause of the universe eternally unalterable *within itself*, One and the same with all its consequences.... This immanent, infinite cause has, as such, *explicite*, neither understanding nor will. (JWA 1: 18f.)

Hence, the "one and all" inevitably leads to materialism, determinism, and fatalism as regards both the infinite substance and finite beings. The first aspect becomes apparent in Spinoza's theory of the first cause:

The first cause cannot act in accordance with intentions or final causes; it cannot have an *initial* ground or a *final* end for performing something, any more than that it can in itself have a *beginning* or *end*. (JWA 1: 19f.)

The second aspect is an inevitable consequence of the first: if the "one and all" is the basic ontological principle, it becomes impossible to think the human person as a spiritual, self-determining, free being who acts to realize certain ends; he can only be conceived of as a corporeal being, with natural drives and mechanical ways of behaviour.

If there are only efficient, but no final causes, then the only function that the faculty of thought has in the whole of nature is that of observer; its proper business is to accompany the mechanism of the efficient causes. The conversation that we are now having together is only an affair of our bodies. (JWA 1: 20f.)

When we focus on the consequences of the pantheism controversy for the question if philosophy is capable of thinking God's transcendence, it is obvious that, for Jacobi, Spinoza's "one and all" is an example of its annihilation, implying that it is identical to atheism. But because Jacobi is convinced that the spirit of Spinoza's philosophy formulates the very principle of understanding in general, this qualification applies to modern philosophy as such. Finally, Jacobi formulates an even more fundamental problem, which is still implicit in the *Spinoza Letters* but will become much more prominent and pressing in the years following. It does not so much concern the content but the style of Enlightenment philosophizing, which is clearly demonstrative in the strong sense of the word. If all demonstration inevitably ends in determinism, fatalism, and finally in atheism, then the existence of a personal, provident, transcendent God simply cannot be demonstrated by reason. From this conclusion the fundamental question arises: If all philosophy is necessarily bound to understanding, then it is per se incapable of thinking

God's transcendence, implying that He is only accessible through faith, as radically separated from knowledge. Or is philosophy able to take another route than a demonstrative one while remaining a conceptual discipline?

The Atheism Controversy

In 1799, some fifteen years after the pantheism controversy, Jacobi participated in the discussions surrounding the atheism controversy. As a consequence of the publication of his *On the Foundation of Our Faith in a Divine Government of the World* and his *Appeal to the Public*, Fichte had lost his position at the University of Jena. Again, this controversy caused quite a stir because many intellectuals considered the interference of the civil and ecclesiastical authorities in academic affairs outrageous. In March 1799 Jacobi wrote a letter to Fichte that he published in the fall of that same year, supplemented with some extra texts he had written, under the title *Jacobi an Fichte*. He intended it to be a "moderating voice" in the whole debate, which became apparent from his statement that it is unjustified to accuse Fichte's philosophy of atheism in the ordinary sense of the word, "since transcendental philosophy cannot, as such, be *atheist* any more than can geometry or arithmetic. But for that same reason it cannot in any sense be *theist* either" (JWA 2: 192).

In this letter Jacobi shows that transcendental idealism as such, including not only Fichte but also Kant, inevitably leads to nihilism.⁸ In order to substantiate this qualification, one needs only to see how understanding's *modus operandi* prevails in these philosophies. As we have seen, understanding "is the faculty of their [i.e. of all objects of knowledge] destruction and reconstruction *from a bare scientific point of view*," so that in the end, "it is nothing but this very producing *in thoughts*" (JWA 2: 198). This implies that not only Spinoza's concept of the infinite substance but also Kant's and Fichte's idea of the trans-

⁸ According to Jacobi, the only difference is that Kant's idealism is less radical than Fichte's, who prefers to be loyal to the complete immanence and coherence of his system than to admit that there is a place of truth to which science has no access, which is expressed by Kant's famous doctrine of the thing in itself. Cf. JWA 2: 192.

cidental ego, its idealistic counterpart, are examples of this method. Because the concepts of understanding abstract from all diversity in the world and among human persons, they eventually destroy all transcendence. But besides its destructive effect, understanding also has a constructive aspect: it creates a concept as the fundamental principle of the whole of reality, be it the infinite, all-encompassing substance, of which all particularity is only a mode, or the transcendental ego, which autonomously produces the non-ego. This is why Jacobi qualifies this kind of philosophy as a completely immanent one, “a philosophy of one piece” in which the understanding and its principle are the alpha and omega, containing everything. The following quotation illustrates the twofold activity of the understanding:

Obviously, everything must be given in and through reason, in the I as I, in the selfhood of the I alone, and must be already contained in it, if pure reason is to be able to deduce everything alone, from itself alone.... The philosophizing of pure reason must therefore be a chemical process through which everything outside reason is changed into nothing, and reason alone is left. (JWA 2: 201)

Understanding something completely means destroying its objective, external reality completely and reconstructing it in a purely conceptual way, that is, as an immanent moment of understanding itself. Thus, the final result of the appropriating activity of understanding is nihilism, implying the end of every form of transcendence, including God's.

The consequences of Jacobi's characterization of idealism as intrinsically nihilistic are far-reaching. Idealism, just like any other immanent, scientific philosophy, is essentially atheistic, regardless of whether it presents itself as such. Because of its tendency to be completely self-sufficient, understanding is incapable of *finding* God as an external, transcendent, personal reality but only *constructs* Him as an immanent concept. Such a conceptual God is the highest that understanding is capable of, and it shows the apex of its appropriating activity. But for Jacobi, such a God is an idol, since it is a human construction. In order to show the crucial importance of what is at stake here Jacobi formulates the following dilemma:

Nothingness or a God. If [man] chooses nothingness, he makes himself unto a God, that is, he makes a *phantom* into God.... God is, and is *outside me, a living, self-subsisting being*, or I am God. (JWA 2: 220)

The Death-Defying Leap from Nihilism to Transcendence

If philosophy is identical to understanding, it is unable to withstand the latter's propensity to nihilism. However, Jacobi does not want to draw such a fatal conclusion but sets out to develop an alternative kind of philosophy that is able to think God's radical transcendence in a different way. The way in which this alternative is phrased already shows that Jacobi does not opt for a leap into the irrational, or "into the abyss of God's mercy," of which F. Schlegel accused him (Schlegel 1858ff. [vol.2]: 77). But an immanent critique of the philosophies of his time is not an option either, since Jacobi would then be inevitably stuck in their nihilistic outcome, which is precisely what he wants to overcome. Therefore, he prefers to enter the philosophical scene of his time not so much as its critic but as a "privileged heretic" (JWA 2: 198). Concretely, this means that he wants to escape from the monopoly of understanding through a death-defying leap or a *salto mortale*, as he calls it.⁹ First of all, it is Jacobi's free, personal decision, since "demonstrating" the superiority, let alone the scientific truth of his position, would shut the door on the development of his alternative to the philosophy of understanding. Second, this leap, in spite of its death-defying character, is anything but fatal, because after having performed it, Jacobi lands again on his feet in a new domain. Finally, there is no steady transition between these two standpoints because they are separated from each other by an abyss: "Who takes nature as his point of departure [as the understanding obviously does], does not find God, He is *either first or not at all*" (JWA 1: 348). With the metaphor of the *salto mortale*, Jacobi highlights a specific aspect of transcendence, viz. the transcendence of his own "non-philosophy" with regard to the "sole-philosophy" of

⁹ For an excellent overview of the problem of the death-defying leap, see Sandkaulen 2000: 11ff.

his contemporaries. It is a consequence of his answer to the fundamental question: Is philosophy all there is, or does reality always transcend its philosophical conceptualization?

Of course, Jacobi's death-defying leap raises the question of the rational nature of his "non-philosophy." To delineate his standpoint as clearly as possible from the one of understanding, he calls it at first "faith" and later "reason" in order to counter the irrational connotations that the word "faith" had aroused among his contemporaries (JWA 2: 375). It is important to note that Jacobi's idea of reason differs fundamentally from Kant's: whereas the latter conceives it as a faculty of the highest principles of our thinking, to which no corresponding object is given, Jacobi's conception of reason is in line with Plato's idea of an immediate, intellectual intuition of the ideas as objective, supersensible realities. Moreover, whereas, in Jacobi's eyes, the understanding autonomously constructs its own objects, reason is a faculty that presupposes the reality of the supersensible or the spiritual. This means that it does not create an idol of its own making but observes God as a spiritual, transcendent person who reveals himself through human reason. However, Jacobi's use of the term "revelation" is not restricted to the religious or the spiritual field; it also includes the observation of the sensory world. He calls the knowledge that we have a body and that there are other bodies and thinking beings external to us a "veritable and wondrous revelation" (JWA 1: 116). The reason for doing so is to distinguish his own realism as clearly as possible from Kant's and Fichte's transcendental idealism and their nihilistic outcome.

Jacobi has several grounds for calling reason a faculty of observation. First, the notion of observation makes clear that the supersensible is revealed to reason from outside. Unlike understanding, reason does not demonstrate God's existence but only intuits His immediate revelation. Furthermore, defining reason in this way implies that there is an insurmountable difference between the observing person and the observed object, thus cutting off any tendency to reduce the latter to a moment of the former, as nihilism does. The supersensible world is *given* to reason, as an objective, transcendent reality. Nevertheless, there is also an essential communality and participation—in the Platonic sense—between the two, because they are both

of a spiritual nature. Reason is “on the one hand a faculty, observing a divine presence, *outside* and *above* man; on the other, it is a faculty that observes a divine reality *in* man, and—as this divine itself” (JWA 3: 29). Finally, Jacobi calls reason, just like sensory experience, a faculty of observation because he wants to stress that they share immediacy and originality as essential characteristics, although their object is of course radically different. Hence, observation is a “first-hand knowing,” whereas “conviction by proofs is certainty at second hand ... and can never be quite secure and perfect” (JWA 1: 115; JWA 2: 375).

In the important seventh supplement to the *Spinoza Letters* Jacobi gives another answer to the question of the relationship between understanding and reason or, as he defines it here, between adjective and substantive reason:

Is man in possession of reason or is reason in possession of man?
 If we understand by reason the soul of man *only in so far as* it has distinct concepts, passes judgements, and draws inferences with them, and goes on building new concepts or ideas, then reason is a characteristic of man which he acquires progressively, an instrument of which he makes use. In this sense, *reason belongs to him*. But if by reason we mean the principle of cognition in general, then reason is the spirit of which the whole living nature of man is made up; man *consists* of it. In this sense man is the form that reason has assumed. (JWA 1: 259f.)

The radical opposition that Jacobi formulates here is not a massive one between understanding and reason as such but between an instrumentalist or adjective (as he will call it later) kind of reason, which leads to pantheism and atheism, and a substantive reason, which is the human spirit, and hence analogous to God as a spiritual being.

Stressing the radical difference between reason as a faculty of observation and understanding as a faculty of conceptualization and reflection raises the question if reason is not bound to remain ineffable, speechless. This would make a philosophical exposition of God as a transcendent being impossible, since philosophy is more than an intellectual intuition or a mystical experience of divine transcendence; it has to express it through

words and concepts. It is clear that a philosophical exposition of God cannot have the character of rational proofs of his existence, as was the case in theistic metaphysics. Instead, Jacobi does not want to demonstrate (*beweisen*) but only to show (*weisen*) or “to expose” (*darstellen*) the spiritual. Moreover, humans can become aware of God only through a divine life, implying that “the path towards knowledge of the supersensible is a practical, not a theoretical, purely scientific one” (JWA 1: 342). From this, it becomes apparent that, for Jacobi, a philosophical exposition of God’s transcendence has the character of verbally expressing an intuited secret that can never be fully revealed. Hence, “the *expression* [of the author] is always inferior to the thing he *presents*” (Jacobi 1825: 206).

In his *Spinoza Letters* Jacobi offers an excellent example of the nature of such a philosophical exposition, although it does not concern God but other spiritual matters. Two young Spartans, Spertias and Bulis, have been sentenced to death by the satrap Xerxes. However, the rich Persian Hydarnes tries to persuade them to live under the rule of Xerxes so that they can remain alive. Against all expectations, especially those resulting from calculative understanding, the Spartans reject his offer, saying:

Your counsel ... befits *your* experience but not *ours*. Had you tasted the happiness that we have enjoyed, you would advise us to sacrifice our possessions and our life for it... How could we live here ... and forsake our land, our laws, and *such* men as we voluntarily undertook this long journey in order to die for. (JWA 1: 131)

This quotation shows the way in which Jacobi takes a story about the individual, practical behaviour of concrete persons as a point of departure for his exposition of a spiritual reality. Spertias and Bulis did not want to demonstrate the truth of basic spiritual “facts,” such as the love for their native country or their pride of its laws and culture, but testified to them existentially, in the sense that they were even prepared to give up their lives for the sake of these truths. They

probably had less facility in thought and reasoning than the Persians. They did not appeal to their understanding, to their fine judgement, but only to *things* and their desire for

them. Nor did they boast of any virtue; they only professed their heart's sentiment, their affection. They had no philosophy, or rather, their philosophy was just history. (JWA 1: 132)

This shows how Jacobi conceives his philosophical way of thinking God's radical transcendence as an alternative to the nihilistic tendencies of modern philosophy, reducing immanent transcendence to radical immanence. It unifies reason, being a faculty of observing God as a personal, spiritual reality, and philosophical exposition of this reality through words and concepts. Precisely because God is a living Spirit, he reveals himself in particular spiritual experiences of persons, implying that philosophy has to take these concrete experiences as its point of departure. In the story above, Jacobi makes this clear by opposing a purely "scientific" approach, consisting of theoretical thinking, propositions, and demonstrations, to concrete, real things, such as native country, laws, and compatriots, that can only be intuited by reason. Applied to a philosophical exposition of God, this means that its starting point is in the biblical stories, such as the "saga" of the creation of heaven and earth, and the story of God's self-revelation to Moses (JWA 3: 103ff.; 112ff.). Moreover, the reasonable intuition of these things is not an abstract, detached kind of knowing but a committed attitude of concrete individuals. For his philosophical approach to God's transcendence, this implies that it is a kind of exposition, resulting from a fundamental sympathy between the philosopher and the object of his thinking, God.

Sympathy with the *invisible* reality, life and truth is *faith*. The more feeling for the invisible in nature and in humans someone shows, the more effective and active the invisible appears to be in such a person. (JWA 6: 236)

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