

The Wall or the Door: German Realism around 1800

De muur of de deur: Duits realisme rond 1800

(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de Universiteit Utrecht op
gezag van de

rector magnificus, prof.dr. G.J. van der Zwaan, ingevolge het besluit van
het

college voor promoties in het openbaar te verdedigen op woensdag 19
juni

2017 des middags te 2.30 uur

door

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geboren op 23 juni 1985

te 's-Hertogenbosch

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In memory of my father

ISBN: 978-94-6103-062-7

Acknowledgements:

This book was made possible through generous funding from the NWO (Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research), as part of the project ‘Thinking classified - Structuring the world of ideas around 1800’ (project number 360-20-330).

I want to thank Paul Ziche for his enduring support. Over the last four years, he has been exceptionally encouraging with regards to my own commitment to independent research and new ideas.

I also want to thank Fred Beiser and Joan Farrenkopf for making me feel welcome during my stay in Syracuse, NY during my stay there as a Fulbright scholar. I am also grateful for Ives Radrizzani, for graciously making the manuscript of the *Denkbücher* available.

Finally, in my personal life, I want to thank my partner, Eline Janszen, and my family and friends for their help, in providing invaluable warmth and leisurely activities during the last four years.

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Introduction

1. Realism as a philosophical position

One of the most prominent defenses of philosophical realism was put forward by George Edward Moore. In 1903, he presented his hands as external objects in the world and concluded from this that an external world with *at least two objects* in it exists. Moore here clearly understood realism as a common-sense attitude for which one can argue by relying on ordinary perception and understanding. For many decades, this kind of realism, argued for by common-sense arguments, has been an archetype of philosophical realism. Another important development in thinking about realism in the 20th century has been scientific realism, which is concerned with the specific truth of scientific theories. In more recent years, drawing on the German idealist, phenomenological and French philosophical traditions, a continental realism has emerged. Some adherents to this realism are Quentin Meillassoux and Markus Gabriel.

The type of realism that I will cover within the space of this book will be familiar to *none* of these types of realists. First of all, it will seem unfamiliar because it is a reconstruction of realism in a time period and in a context (German philosophy in 1780-1820) that is normally considered to be far from realist in outlook. Instead, the standard accounts of the history of philosophy characterize this period as the heyday of German idealism. Secondly, the realism covered in this book will seem unfamiliar because it is of a kind that no one today would readily associate with that term. In the Moore-tradition, we have come to associate realism with a resolutely common-sense approach. In everyday understanding, “realism” came to mean that we take things at face value. Because the kind of realism I am going to present here is so alien to our assumptions, I have even heard some scholars of German philosophy claim that there was no German realism to match German idealism. If I can show that there is a kind of

German realism around this time, we will have to adjust our notion of what realism can be, as well as rethink the trajectory of the history of philosophy and the history of the concept of realism. And if we are not to quarrel over the meaning of the term “realism”, then we will have to admit at least *another* conception of realism alongside these more traditional and contemporary forms of realism.

I therefore take up two general tasks for this book. First of all, I must make it plausible that there is indeed a realism or realist movement present in this period. One might expect this to be a difficult task considering my claim that German realism around 1800 is very different from what we now likely associate with realism. Fortunately, the historical material bears out this point beyond all doubt. This should be clear already from the fact that a number of books have “realism” placed emphatically in their titles, such as Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus* (1787), Erhard Georg Friedrich Wrede’s *Antilogie des Realismus und Idealismus* (1791), Joseph Rückert’s *Der Realismus, oder, Grundsätze zu einer durchaus praktischen Philosophie* (1801) and Franz Joseph Molitor’s *Der Wendepunkt des Antiken und Modernen oder Versuch den Realismus mit dem Idealismus zu versöhnen* (1805).

The first clear indication that there was a realism around this time, and moreover that realism indeed formed a broader philosophical movement, can be found in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s claim in *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus* (1787) about what ‘we realists’ believe (see [p.169]). This publication was enormously popular as well as influential for the early reception and criticism of Kant’s philosophy. Jacobi will therefore be our principal figure, and I will show, throughout my book, that there are many other references to realism and many other uses of Jacobi’s realist arguments in the public debate in Jacobi’s time. My second task is to elaborate exactly what systematic commitments these realists have. In order to achieve

this, I will not compare it to a notion of realism that is familiar to today's readers, because this will not help us in understanding what concerns motivated the realists, and how these influenced their arguments and methodology. Since we tend to be much more aware of these concerns where today's types of realism are concerned, a direct comparison would not provide a very enlightening encounter, because we would hold realism around 1800 to our own standards without an attempt to reconstruct what their own standards were.

Beyond these two concerns, which primarily aim at answering the reader's initial questions encountering this book, I also want to partially answer the question likely to arise once a reader is satisfied with my answers to the above two concerns, namely, the question: Why, if the realists movement was really so important, have nearly all accounts of the history of philosophy forgotten German realism around 1800? There are some notable exceptions, such as, Zöller (2000) and Pluder (2012). But a first, tentative answer to this question has in fact already been given, at least in as far as today's accounts are concerned: Philosophical scholarship is not aware of this type of realism because it is so very different from today's versions of realism. It is *so different* in fact, that it is hard to identify as a realism at all, despite authors like Jacobi claiming that they are realists. We will, in part, show how German realism around 1800 was slowly changed into a, to modern eyes at least, more recognizable type of realism during the 19th century. For now, it is important to realize that realism around 1800 emerged in a period in which many terms were still without a canonical definition or a clear semantic range (cf. realism, empiricism) and many philosophical terms were only just being coined (cf. relativism, nihilism). The degree to which terminology changed, or was given novel meaning, is indicated by the fact that the realists, at no point in the debate, or in their private correspondence, make any effort to compare or connect their type

of realism to the medieval type, and Jacobi explicitly emphasizes that it is a wholly *new kind of realism*.

The title of this book refers to a question that Johann Georg Hamann poses to Jacobi in response to the latter's attempt to formulate his philosophical position, which we will recount in chapter 1. Throughout the book we will, at times, return to this issue. Hamann gives us two options for reading a philosophical position, as a *wall* or as a *door*. This can still be worked out in several different ways, which is why I utilize this imagery as a versatile way of gauging the development of realism. The tension this imagery introduces between a wall and a door suggests a blockage and a passageway respectively, thereby giving the wall a negative connotation. However, in relation to the Kantian project, we can also construe the wall as a limiting project, which curtails illegitimate incursions and protects a sanctuary. The door then becomes an opening onto uncertain vistas. As I'll show, the full range of these vistas can be found with the realists. They at the same time want to indicate limits *and* allow free entry (see chapter 1 and 2 for an account of the limitations that are involved in this account). One of the chief tasks of this book is to determine what kind of attempts they seek to block and what kind of vistas they believe that their philosophical position allows entry to.

2. The difficulty of characterizing Jacobi

If we are to present Jacobi as the founder of a group of realists, there are several problems in interpreting his work that we should discuss. The following approaches to Jacobi's position all limit the ability to examine Jacobi as a realist in different ways: by shifting the focus towards criticism or religion and disregarding certain aspects of his argumentation.

Ernst Cassirer remarked that, while Jacobi's criticism of Kant has been immensely influential, his own answers to the

problems he introduced have lived a ‘short ephemeral life in history.’¹ This is in itself an illustration of the lack of study into the group of realists that Jacobi was associated with. I hope to demonstrate that realism around 1800 was neither short-lived (having direct adherents for at least 30 to 40 years) nor ephemeral (exerting influence not only on all of the idealists, but also on many other well-known philosophers of the 19th century). In order to show the full complexity of the realist position I’ll criticize many of the readings of Jacobi and his followers that Jacobi’s contemporaries put forward. In particular, I will be critical with respect to the then dominant trend of these readings of ascribing a strongly religious position to Jacobi. Although some of the popular terminology that Jacobi utilized might initially suggest that to be the case, I will show that Jacobi objected heavily to this characterization. There generally seem to be two variants of these readings. The first we find in both Schelling’s (‘Jacobi completely coincides with the perspective of the greatest theological rationalism’)² and Hegel’s claim that Jacobi’s philosophy remains within subjective revelation.³

The second variant can be found in the early responses to Jacobi’s work as *Schwärmerei*, as engaged in a kind of religious enthusiasm. I will recount some of these claims in chapter 1. In a way this claim is diametrically opposed to the idea of Jacobi as an orthodox theologian. This reproach presents him as adhering to a kind of “lived” religious experience that connotes a commitment to a specific religious world-view. This world-view supposedly introduces its metaphysical and theological commitments into its notion of the ethical good and sociability. Perhaps this idea emerged due to Jacobi’s debate with Mendelssohn who, as a part of the Berlin Enlightenment circle, sought to prune superstitious

¹ *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, Band III, p.18.

² *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke*, Band 10, p.170,175.

³ *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel Gesammelte Ausgabe*, Band 20, p.104.

views from our everyday experience. This reading of Jacobi's position is often coupled with a reading of him as a supernaturalist who claims an access to the divine that supersedes and invalidates all other experience.

The implication of both readings of Jacobi as pursuing a strongly religious agenda is that he ultimately will not defer to rational argument, since either orthodoxy or piety take the place of rational arguments. The true philosopher, on the other hand, does not concede argumentative power to gospel or tradition on any point and must individually verify arguments with a purview of objective truth. By and large, this reading ultimately leads one to not taking Jacobi seriously as a philosopher, and subsequently excuses him from the strict standards to which we would hold a philosopher's account.

Although Jacobi's work is often taken up in this sense, the notion of religious faith is, strictly speaking, conspicuously absent among the key features of his realism. We also find him adhering to a strict individualist approach to reasoning, placing a large emphasis on the individual application of rationality, although he rejects some traditional approaches to the use of philosophical proof. When we take Jacobi's adherence to the primacy of the individual seriously, it becomes difficult to reconcile this position with one which might defer to religious precepts. It is possible that Jacobi ultimately also adhered to an applied individualist conception of religion, but if this is the case he never explicitly incorporated it in his philosophical position. The fact that Jacobi is principally a realist becomes apparent nowhere more distinctly than in his engagement with *other realists*, whom he selects and accepts neither for their theological orthodoxy, nor for their religious piety. None of these glosses take into account that Jacobi despised these ways of reading him, or that he maintained that he should be judged as a philosopher. I propose that the least we can do is extend him this courtesy. I find myself in full agreement with George Di

Giovanni's claim that Jacobi was, in the final count, *no more, nor less* religious than a secular Enlightenment thinker.⁴

A final interpretive framework in which Jacobi is often put in lieu of realism is skepticism. This seems to me to be a woefully inadequate approach to Jacobi's position, since his core view is that there are realities and processes that we have to accept, even though we have every reason to doubt them. Generally, these are the realities and processes which we have to accept as existing, if we want to take our ability to act and reason (which is a kind of act) seriously: personality, drive, freedom, etc. The realists do not refer to themselves as skeptics, which shows that characterizing them in this way was not as obvious to them as it might seem to us, based on the way we tend to carve up the positions in philosophy today. That is, in and of itself, an interesting contrast, which might lead us to rethink the rigid separations we have made between idealism, realism, skepticism and empiricism.⁵

⁴ Di Giovanni, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwilt* (1994) p.41-43. 'On the face of it, in other words, Jacobi's attitude towards religion was typical of the Enlightenment humanist. He simply accepted as a universal fact of human nature that religion is an indispensable dimension of experience and that nothing is subjectively more certain than God's presence in the cosmos. But few in his day would have thought or felt otherwise.' 'We know, from Wizenmann, that at first he maintained at least a psychological distance from Christian believers.' 'In brief, Jacobi's religiosity was thoroughly secular in nature. His fondness for biblical allusion and pious Christian effusions might seem to indicate otherwise. But there is no reason to believe that he looked upon the Bible as more than a source of historically sanctioned wisdom, or that he quoted from it in any spirit other than he also quoted, often in the same breath, from pagan sources.'

⁵ My reading will thus depart from recent attempts to frame Jacobi's contribution to the discussion around 1800 in terms of skepticism. Cf. Horstmann, 'The Early Philosophy of Fichte and Schelling', in *Cambridge Companion to German Idealism* (2000) and Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (2005).

3. Methodology and choice of corpus

I have chosen to provide both a historical and a systematic account of realism around 1800, using historical developments in order to contextualize the arguments and concerns (especially in chapter 1, 3 and 5), and also analyzing the composition of a historical edition as an indicator for systematic concerns (in the case of Jacobi's *Werke*, in chapter 4). The realists around 1800 are identified as a group through their sharing a common problem, and the most closely knit part of the group, the inner circle if you will, was tied by a correspondence network and the occasional personal meeting. Jacobi was at the center of this network and was responsible for formulating the type of realism that all of these authors adhere to in one way or another. I have therefore found it necessary to place a large emphasis on his work in order to make clear what he brought to the agenda of the realist cause. The development of a clear conceptual decision that can be found at the core of German realism around 1800 (chapter 2) is essential for the identification of other realists who do not explicitly present themselves as such. Through this close association, and the way in which many realists referenced Jacobi's work, they were identifiable as a group to the public at large.

Jacobi self-identifies as a realist. Some of the authors considered here likewise self-identify as realists (Bouterwek, Rückert, Reinhold, Krug), but other authors do not identify themselves as such (Herder, Köppen, Neeb). The analysis of the type of realism that Jacobi was concerned with in chapter 2 will allow us to conclude that these authors adhere to a conceptual decision that is similar, if not identical, to the one made by Jacobi. Since Jacobi was actively concerned with cultivating a group which largely shared his view (to which all of these authors belong), I have elected to consider these authors as part of the group of realists as well. I have therefore established my corpus based on Jacobi's correspondence, and on some of the prominent discussions of and references to Jacobi's work (cf. Rückert, Krug)

where I believe Jacobi's concerns and concepts were taken up in interesting ways (Krug) or led to interesting discussions (Rückert).

Most of these authors are scarcely discussed by scholars. Therefore, lacking a serviceable repertoire of secondary texts, this book will have to function as an exploratory foray into the interpretation of their positions and their relevance. One notable exception is Jacobi, and I have noted where I disagree with the approach in the literature on Jacobi in the relevant chapters. In fact, I argue that these misinterpretations of Jacobi's position contributed to the development of German realism around 1800 being largely forgotten over the course of the 19th century.

The points at which the realist influence on the public philosophical debates comes to the foreground most powerfully are their contributions to popular controversies like the *Pantheismusstreit* and the *Atheismusstreit*. This has been the preferred way for many recent historians of philosophy to characterize Jacobi's position. However, this approach has a dangerous side-effect in that it tends to describe Jacobi's position by way of the impact of these polemical disputes, as recounted by more canonical authors (such as Kant, Reinhold and Hegel). This approach is understandable, due to the notorious difficulty of interpreting Jacobi's texts, their many allusions, and his unwillingness to reproduce every step of his arguments in agreement with traditional standards of clarity. A closer examination of Jacobi's works and letters shows that he was opposed to many of these readings of his works, such as Kant's and Reinhold's charge of enthusiasm and the popular characterizations of his works as being of a religious nature. What also becomes immediately evident through his letters is that Jacobi was in fact supported by a network of allies and disciples, who have been left out of the popular accounts of this episode in the history of philosophy. Taking solely the impact of polemical controversies as a point of departure is thus not very conducive to understanding Jacobi, let alone how he can be considered to be the primary representative of a realist tradition that has slipped through the

cracks of historiography. My approach to these popular controversies is therefore not to disregard them, but to recount them *within* an account of a growing realist network of authors. More than anything, it is the examination of Jacobi's epistolary network that reveals a sizable amount of authors who were sympathetic to his position and who, either explicitly through self-description, or implicitly through a shared conceptual repertoire, can with some degree of veracity be described as realists.

At times I will critically engage with some of the more prominent responses to the realist position, for instance Allison's reading of Jacobi as a transcendental realist and Michelet's reading of Jacobi and Herder as philosophers of belief. This effort is actually an important part of providing an account of German realism around 1800, and I feel I would be remiss as a historian of philosophy if I would not address it. Far from having "gone native," I believe the defense of the realist position against some of its more common detractors will provide the reader with a better understanding of the aims, complexity and deep underlying problematic that the realists were committed to. For instance, my account of the disappearance of this type of realism during the latter parts of the 19th century depends on my intervention to defend Jacobi, in order to make it fully cogent that this disappearance occurred principally because of interests *other* than a systematic reproach of his position. Similarly, the systematic positions of Jacobi and Fichte require my critical intervention in order to delimit the obverse of this dilemma: to make the reader aware of the *limitations* of the realists' methodology and of their way of addressing certain problems. Although it requires more authorial intervention, I believe this to be the correct strategy in approaching the problems that the realists deal with, to a degree of complexity that not only the realists themselves adhered to, but also to the degree that they entered into the public philosophical debates at the time (even beyond publications). Exploring the problems in this depth will hopefully raise the discussion from understanding an

author as the sum of what he wrote in his texts, towards a semblance of a living historical individual, in a vibrant public debate, who might well have raised certain critical arguments himself and might have heard these counter-arguments himself.

In order to achieve this aim, I have steered away, whenever possible, from using today's popular or dominant descriptions of the realists' position that are obviously not native to their own account. Presenting them in *wholly* Kantian or Hegelian terms is therefore out of the question, although these were of course positions that the realists encountered. Frequently, systematic approaches remain stuck within a certain tradition or approach. This way of dealing with the history of philosophy makes it difficult for underappreciated approaches to philosophy, like those of the realists, to fully come to light in their original argumentative and problematical complexity. I will use the systematic approach only to aid the understanding of the specificity of the realism that is at stake. On the other hand, purely historical approaches tend to paint in broad strokes, so that even when they deal with minutiae of texts, they are primarily concerned with the development of a concept, often within a single tradition of thought, and its significance for this tradition. My sole organizing principle of historical exposition is the attempt to understand the realists (as a group with shared concerns), and to this end I make no fundamental distinctions between authors who had a large influence on the history of philosophy (Herder, Reinhold) and those who did not (Köppen, Neeb). In short, my approach attempts to strike a balance between both historical and systematical approaches, in order to make salient the way in which German realists around 1800 conceived of their position and what they thought this meant for the practicing of philosophy.

In terms of substantiating the relationship between historical reconstruction and the attempt to show a discussion that was more complex than the arguments that happened to be raised in publications, I take the identification of common problems and

conceptual decisions to be my main focus. The combination of historical chapters with the one on group concepts and the chapters on systematic aims and limitations are therefore a necessary juxtaposition. By doing this I hope to avoid a lopsided account that does not answer the intuitive questions that readers might have, such as ‘what does one gain by adhering to this position’ and ‘what kind of an attraction did this realism hold for people of this time?’ By sticking to only one of the three types of analyses, these questions would not have been answered satisfactorily.

I have given preference to the identification and conceptual analysis of the group of realists that first emerged in response to Jacobi. Naturally, the characterization of ‘realism around 1800’ can be taken in a much broader way, if one also examines the way realism is used by authors like Schlegel, Schleiermacher and even Fichte, Schelling and Hegel.⁶ However, the strategy adopted here consists in establishing what realism was according to i) the one who established it (Jacobi) and ii) according to those who chose to follow and develop this position in their own particular ways. The analysis of the debates and conceptual decisions that this group of realists took will hopefully aid future research into the distinction between the group of realists discussed here, and the way realism was taken up as a response to the discussions around 1800. I fear that any study which does not sufficiently examine these features of the core group of realists, will find it difficult to clarify what the underlying arguments and concerns are, since many of these later authors attempt to further modify the initial notion of realism. To give but one example, if one does not understand Jacobi’s objections to Spinozism in

⁶ This is what Pluder attempts to do in *Die Vermittlung von Idealismus und Realismus in der Klassischen Deutschen Philosophie* (2012).

relation to his realism, one will not notice the profound reversal when Schlegel refers to ‘Spinoza’s realism.’⁷

4. Overview

Architectonically, I will provide a historical analysis of how the realists participated in public controversies and of how they functioned as a network of authors, as well as an in-depth analysis of the systematic position that Jacobi articulated late in his life, and Fichte’s position as a response to realism.

Chapter 1 will present an analysis of the arguments and concerns that Jacobi had during the *Pantheismusstreit*. Beiser (1987) covers the debate between Jacobi and Mendelssohn admirably, so we will focus on the issues that were important for Jacobi and how the group of authors that followed him can be considered to be a proto-realist group. Overall, this chapter will set the stage for the concerns involved in realism.

Chapter 2: An analysis of the conceptual decisions that bind the realists together. We will consider the first exposition of realism as it is specifically self-identified by Jacobi and then explore the ways in which Jacobi’s conceptual decisions bear on the views of Herder, Reinhold and Neeb. In the course of this analysis, it will become clear which features make one a realist and which arguments would quickly place one outside of the group. Jacobi’s approval functions as a way of tying the group together, although he is at the same time reluctant to voice his disapproval (about Herder and Reinhold) and very quick to agree to attempts to develop the realist position in a progressive sense (Neeb).

⁷ Eichner, Hans (Ed.), *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, Abt.1 Kritische Neuausgabe, Band 2, p.311-322.

Chapter 3: This chapter will expand on the usual reading of Jacobi's contribution to the *Atheismusstreit* by considering his larger involvement in the philosophical formulation of the problem of nihilism. It will demonstrate that many realists would follow Jacobi's reading of nihilism, and the way in which this led directly to a confrontation with Schelling and Hegel.

Chapter 4: Based on his mature philosophical exposition, this chapter will explore Jacobi's realism based on its focus on practical philosophy. Finally, it will present some critical remarks on this practical philosophy itself and in relation to Kant, in order to explore the limitations of this account.

Chapter 5: Following the realist expositions of his former students Köppen and Rückert, this chapter explores how Fichte responded to realism in his 1804-5 Berlin lectures. A critical analysis will show the similarities and differences between Fichte and Jacobi. This chapter will also briefly examine Krug's position and the way in which many of his concepts, including his notion of relativism is a direct response to the realists.

Chapter 6: This chapter will reconstruct the dominant reception of realism after Jacobi's death during the 19th century, and will compare it with some of the emerging new notions of realism in this period.

The conclusion will synthesize the conclusions that we can draw about German realism around 1800. In order to aid scholars, I have seen fit to add two appendixes. Appendix 1 is a biographical list, providing basic information on the authors discussed in this book. Appendix 2 is a dictionary of some of the more characteristic terminology used by these realists.

5. Prospective readership

This study is primarily aimed towards historians of philosophy, but the degree of complexity of these discussions and the fact that realism calls into question some of the core philosophical methods still in use today might be of interest to readers with a more general philosophical outlook as well. I am, however, strictly committed to the thesis that the significance of these philosophical developments can only be made apparent in their full philosophical complexity if they have been submitted to considerations to their historical complexity. Those readers who want to skip the historical reconstruction of the realist approach and the debates they enter into (chapters 1-3, 6) are advised to turn first to the more systematic chapters (chapters 4-5) and the conclusion. Additionally, this volume can also function as a point of entry for readers with an interest in the history of realism or of German philosophy during this period.

Finally, I have chosen to translate the German source material into English whenever I cite it. It is my hope that, in the future, this will help in the build bridges between certain sectarian discussions in the history of philosophy and a wider audience. I believe that some of these texts more than merit being available in an academic *lingua franca*.

One of the reasons why Jacobi had so much trouble making his position clear to the philosophers in his time is his commitment to the use of language in its most broadly shared and applied meaning. He made no effort to appeal to the still heavily Latin-dependent philosophical discourse (publishing scholarly works in German had only been accepted for a few decades). For instance, when he uses ‘wirklich’ it is always in reference to reality, never as the antipode to ‘möglich,’ as a German analogue to the Latin set actuality/possibility. Similarly, when he refers to ‘Wesen’ it is always in reference to a being, rather than to an essence in the broad sense. This tendency likely confused many academic

philosophers, even up to the 19th century. I have therefore seen it fit to translate Jacobi's words in the sense in which they are meant, which in this case means that I cannot follow the same conventions that one might follow for translating Kant or Hegel.

“I know,” he went on, after a pause that he devoted to the study of his cigar ash, “I have been negligent. The fact is - it isn’t a case of ghosts or apparitions - but - it’s an odd thing to tell of, Redmond - I am haunted. I am haunted by something - that rather takes the light out of things, that fills me with longings.....”

— H.G. Wells, *The Door in the Wall*

1. The *Pantheismusstreit*: proto-realist origins

The *Pantheismusstreit* was a profoundly influential dispute in the 1780's. Jacobi was one of the main participants and it introduced his philosophical ideas to the wider public. It also evoked a response to Jacobi's position that Jacobi was so dissatisfied with that he wrote *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus: ein Gespräch* (1787) partly in response to it. If we want to understand Jacobi's realism, we must first examine what realist arguments were already put forward in Jacobi's contributions to this debate and to what type of responses Jacobi objected.

1. The main philosophical arguments behind the *Pantheismusstreit*

The substantial German reception of Baruch Spinoza's philosophical work received an enormous impulse in 1785, due to the publication of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (hereafter *SB*, for *Spinoza-Buchlein*)⁸ The context of the debate surrounding this text has received ample attention from scholars.⁹ Put concisely, Jacobi engaged in a conflict with Mendelssohn concerning the Spinozism of the, then already late, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. In this chapter, I will briefly present the problem that Jacobi put forward in this book, which anticipates some key ideas of what he would

⁸ Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (1785).

⁹ In English scholarship most notably in Frederick Beiser's *Fate of Reason* (1987), the introduction to di Giovanni's edition of Jacobi's *Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill* (1994) and in German scholarship, one may still consult Heinrich Scholz' *Die Hauptschriften zum Pantheismusstreit zwischen Jacobi und Mendelssohn* (1916). Beiser admirably reconstructs the debate between Jacobi and Mendelssohn and Scholz' provides valuable information of the reception of the key texts.

later present as “realism” in 1787. In addition, I will examine which authors shared all or some of these ideas of those who had a close relationship with Jacobi. The general reasoning behind this approach is to examine Jacobi’s ideas *before* he identified himself as a realist in several publications of the *Pantheismussteit*, in order to show that these ideas were initially shared by a few authors with whom he had close personal ties.

Anyone familiar with Spinoza’s *Ethica* will conclude that Jacobi’s Spinoza is a strange creature. For instance, Spinoza’s insistence on the infinity of attributes is completely absent in Jacobi’s characterization of Spinoza. Jacobi also doesn’t seem to be interested in the affects and treats Spinoza as if he was only concerned with *thinking* and *being*. Jacobi focuses on the fact that both attributes are one in God as a unified substance, which is at the same time an immanent God. As a historical or systematic reading of Spinoza, this has considerable flaws. It is safe to assume, on the basis of the heated debates that followed, that Jacobi was trying, through discussing Spinoza, to convey a problem that he personally felt strongly about. What is this personal problem? It is concerned with the *limits of the philosophical method of demonstration*.

The core of this argument is that *anyone* who attempts to demonstrate by using syllogistic proof is bound to end up as what Jacobi calls a ‘Spinozist’; someone who reduces all substance to thought is a pantheist in the sense that, with regard to what we cognitively construe as reality, everything is divine. Jacobi holds that the pantheist is really, when forced to the fullest conclusion of his position, an atheist insofar as this pantheism does not allow for any religious doctrines or stances. The Spinozist should not ‘hide behind this froth’¹⁰ of pantheism in which everything is divine and should rather admit his atheism, since his notion of the divine is merely a representation in the mind that is produced by

¹⁰ *SB*, p.171.

demonstration, and does not grasp God at all, like it propounds to do. Jacobi's problem is thus with the pretension of having a cognition of the divine, a cognition which he believes to be non-existent. Secondly, since Spinozism is the logical outcome of every position that takes recourse to demonstration with regard to metaphysical entities or grounds (its object being an exhaustive account, after all), Jacobi argues that this is a problem that should concern *all philosophers*, in as much as philosophy is considered to be dependent on demonstration (as it arguably was in the universities of the time, due to the dominant role of Wolffianism).¹¹ Thirdly, to the extent that demonstration ultimately aims at an exhaustive systematic account, it is inherently fatalistic, which is a moral variant of what we would now call determinism, implying that there is no freedom for the human being.

This three-pronged attack, which in fact didn't really attack Spinoza as such, but rather used him to attack the pretensions of philosophical demonstration, shook young German philosophers to their very core, because it besieged exactly the philosophical ideals of many of their teachers. Jacobi fashioned Spinoza into a dark reflection of Leibniz in his attempt to show that Leibniz uses the same method of syllogistic proof. Jacobi's own alternative to the use of demonstration that he intends to show to be illegitimate remained an outline at best in *SB*. Nevertheless it is not surprising that Jacobi's Spinoza book was taken up as an ambitious analysis of philosophical method. Two of the most famous responses were those put forward by Reinhold and Kant, which I will discuss at the end of the chapter.

But it is also unsurprising that Jacobi's book was not taken up as presenting a clear alternative to what it criticized. In fact, his slightly polemicized account seemed to criticize the entirety of philosophy as essentially leading to pantheism. The later sections

¹¹ *SB*, p.172. 'Every avenue of demonstration leads into fatalism.'

of the book, where he seems to present his own account, are cryptic in their references to belief and revelation and we will only be able to make complete sense of their meaning through Jacobi's retroactive account of them. Johann Georg Hamann wrote to Jacobi expressing a similar confusion: Did Jacobi want to be a *wall* or a *door*?¹² Hamann leaves open what these two options would represent, but we can take up this choice as an open question of how Jacobi's realism should be understood.

Jacobi has often been characterized as erecting a wall in terms of his criticisms of Kant, Fichte and Schelling, as well as his supposed skepticism, and Jacobi's incorporation into many historiographies of the development of post-Kantian philosophy by and large reflects this tendency. To my knowledge, his attempt to provide a 'door' has never been fully examined. After the publication of the *SB*, Jacobi would explicitly present his position as a *realism*. We will now discuss the main aspects of this position, as they relate to the group of authors that formed among Jacobi's close friends. These ideas are intimately connected to the conditions under which the Spinoza-book was put together.

After his wife and son had passed away, Jacobi spent the last months of 1784 with Herder in Weimar, at Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's invitation.¹³ At a later point, Jacobi contacted Hamann and asked to criticize what had become known as 'the packet': the letters between Jacobi, Mendelssohn and Herder. The initial contact between Hamann and Jacobi was facilitated by the poet Matthias Claudius, also known under his penname Asmus. It is clear that Asmus had a vested interest in the *SB*, because he published a short collection of reviews of it, including Mendelssohn's response,¹⁴ entitled *Zwei Recensionen in Sachen der Herren Lessing, M. Mendelssohn, und Jacobi* (1786). Jacobi was likely thinking of some, or all of these men, when he wrote 'we realists,'

¹² *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Briefwechsel, Band 3, p.47.

¹³ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Briefwechsel, Band 3, p. 303.

¹⁴ *Moses Mendelssohn an die Freunde Lessings* (1786).

and some of their ideas certainly informed, or are in accordance with, his own, at that time still unnamed, alternative to Spinozism. It should however be noted that many of these ideas had not yet been developed, and that it would take the publication of Jacobi's next book to make it fully clear to himself as well as to how his position might be at odds with authors like Hamann and Herder.

Still, Jacobi's initial debts to Hamann run deep. At least since 1759 Hamann defended the position that belief [*Glaube*]¹⁵ is a core component of any proposition, to such a degree that reason's only function is to provide skeptical counter-arguments which show that we are *epistemically ignorant* and that, in the end, any claim only rests on belief.¹⁶ Jacobi's tentative alternative to Spinozism drew heavily on this idea of belief as the fundamental structure of any claim, which makes the distinction between hypothetical claims and claims we are actually invested in. Jacobi further developed Hamann's position, in order to account for *convictions of certainty*. When we are convinced by rational grounds, we have actually, prior to this, first acquired a belief that itself contains a conviction of certainty:

How could we strive for certainty, unless we were already acquainted with it in advance? How can we be acquainted with it, other than through something that we already cognize with certainty?¹⁷ This leads to the

¹⁵ It is a point of contention how one should translate *Glaube* (faith or belief). For Hamann it is clear that it at the very least refers to belief, since he develops his notion in explicit reference to Hume. That does not necessarily exclude the religious application of *Glaube*, since belief can also have that sense in English. See chapter 2 for Jacobi's use.

¹⁶ Hamann, *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* (1759).

¹⁷ As we will see in chapter 2, Jacobi would later reserve 'cognition' [*Erkenntnis*] for particular perceptions and conceptions. This would mean that the immediate certitude is not so much cognized as felt, in this case. The preface to the 1789 edition of *SB* is ambivalent about the possibility of there being immediate cognition, p.xxi-xxii. See chapter 2 for a more technical definition of cognition.

concept of an immediate certainty, which not only needs no grounds, but excludes all grounds absolutely, and is simply and solely *the representation agreeing with the thing being represented*. Conviction [*Überzeugung*] from grounds is second-hand certainty. Grounds are only characteristics of a similarity with a thing of which we are certain.¹⁸

Demonstrated grounds or proofs, between which Jacobi does not distinguish, in Jacobi's view, leave out an important aspect: the initial *acquisition* of beliefs and the fact that beliefs are held by *living* persons. Jacobi draws some far-reaching conclusions from this idea:

It follows therefore that the actions of men must not be derived from their philosophy, but rather that their philosophy must derive from their actions. Their history does not originate from their way of thinking, but rather, their way of thinking originates from their history.¹⁹

Any personal position (and any philosophical position as well, in as much as it is held with conviction by a living human being) is historically constituted. Jacobi argues that we should treat it accordingly, and not like a building of thought which we might inhabit or condemn as uninhabitable, as seems to be Immanuel Kant's preferred metaphor for a philosophical edifice.²⁰ In the conclusion to the book, Jacobi thus argues that, if we want to improve the thought of an age, we must not attack barren depersonalized positions, but attack the 'life style' [*Lebensweise*] through which these opinions are put forward.²¹ Presumably, this is also Jacobi's reason for presenting his thought in this peculiar way (as a collection of letters and responses in a somewhat confusing

¹⁸ *SB*, p.162-3.

¹⁹ *SB*, p.185-6.

²⁰ Kant, *Logik: ein Handbuch zu Vorlesungen* (1800), in the Academy edition, AA 9:25, to point out but one of many references.

²¹ *SB*, p.186-7.

state of organization). He means to capture his opinions in what he believes to be its genuine dimension: the fact that real concrete persons use demonstration to convince their readers and students of (to Jacobi's mind) patently false ideas.

Jacobi's books on Spinoza and on David Hume have similar structures: an autobiographical account, a critical analysis focusing on epistemic methodology and, finally, a positive rendering of Jacobi's own position. Too little attention has been given to these final sections in the scholarly reception of Jacobi's works, but these seem to contain the best formulations of Jacobi's own position. This structure also reflects Jacobi's wish to convey his position as a lived, historically constituted position.

Jacobi also asks the question of what ideas should guide the education of young people. Jacobi's argument is based on the fact that the age in which the young will reach adulthood will not be the age of those in adulthood at the time of writing, and that we should renounce commitment to any current age insofar as we engage in the education of the young. We can then conclude that Jacobi's position is an attempt to make room for a future world, in this case by utilizing the observation that our philosophical positions are actually historically constructed and personally held convictions.

Jacobi's last remark on what option we are left with reads as follows: the road to cognition [*Erkenntniß*] can be followed neither by way of syllogism nor by way of mechanism, but is secret [*Geheimnißvoll*].²² This is the foundational idea of what will later become Jacobi's realism: we must accept that the origin of our cognition must remain fundamentally hidden and cannot be discovered through reasoning, nor can it even function as a foundation for reasoning as such.

²² *SB*, p.211.

2. Wizenmann: *The Death of a Youth*

An eager contributor to the 1784 discussions on Spinozism and pantheism was the young Thomas Wizenmann, who, upon reading some of Mendelssohn's and Hamann's letters, drew a conclusion about activity:

It just seems to me, that it follows from your own philosophy [Jacobi's], that the superiority of belief and doing must happen before that of cognition [*Erkennens*]. Then, when this is true, that 'man does not do what he wills, but wills what he does': so it must also be true that 'man does not do, what he cognizes, but cognizes what he does.'²³

Jacobi agreed²⁴ and incorporated the conditional nature of action into end of the book. Wizenmann would later raise the stakes of Jacobi's argument in his book *Die Resultate der Jacobischen und Mendelssohnschen Philosophie* from 1786.²⁵ The fact that this anonymously published book was initially attributed to the much more famous Herder suggests that there was a general perception of the proto-realists as writers with similar views, even if there wasn't a suitable collective label to consider them together yet. This might have led to the grouping of Herder and Jacobi, to which Wizenmann was later added. On the whole, Wizenmann argued, with Jacobi and Hamann, that belief is far more central to humankind than reason. We use belief and not reason to perform everyday actions and we usually ignore reason almost entirely. Jacobi's position is therefore not dark at all, but very sensible, Wizenmann argues.²⁶ Reason, according to Wizenmann, in a very compact definition, consists in comparing two (or more) things.

²³ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Briefwechsel, Band 3, p.401.

²⁴ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Briefwechsel, Band 3, p.408.

²⁵ *Die Resultate der Jacobischen und Mendelssohnschen Philosophie* (1786), hereafter *Resultate*.

²⁶ *Resultate*, p.19. Some of the Berlin enlighteners claimed that Jacobi was dark in their reviews. See Scholz, p. LXXXIV.

But in order to make a comparison, there needs to be a posited *relation* between the two terms, be it an a priori or an a posteriori relation.²⁷ The problem is that God cannot be considered in a relation (at least not exhaustively, by definition) and that reason therefore cannot produce proof of the existence or non-existence of God. The same goes for the existence of things. Lacking proof and demonstration, all that we are left with is subjective belief (in that we cannot provide legitimate proof of it), not just in God, but also in the existence of simple things. Like Herder and Jacobi, Wizenmann describes this immediate relation to the things we experience as *feeling* [*Gefühl*] and *revelation* [*Offenbarung*], two terms which can be considered to be conceptual flagships of the realists, referring to a special sense of immediacy and a givenness of Being, respectively.²⁸ Jacobi had already used the terms in *SB*, but Wizenmann presented the arguments that led to their use clearly for the first time.

In a short article ‘An den Herrn Professor Kant, von dem Verfasser der Resultate Jacobi’scher und Mendelssohnscher Philosophie’,²⁹ in which Wizenmann both elaborates his position and distances himself from the notion of a transcendent God which had been attributed to Jacobi. He elaborates that cognition of really existing things starts with feeling, which is taken to be a belief if we intend to reason about it.³⁰ In the distinction between belief and knowledge, he seems to follow Hamann, who claimed that reason necessarily leads to epistemic ignorance: we simply have no ability to know individually existing things, since we only relate

²⁷ See chapter 2 for an account of how this relationism in terms of cognitive claims develops in the works of Jacobi and Herder.

²⁸ *Resultate*, pp. 21-22.

²⁹ ‘An den Herrn Professor Kant, von dem Verfasser der Resultate Jacobi’scher und Mendelssohnscher Philosophie’ in *Deutsches Museum* I (1787); hereafter *An Kant*.

³⁰ *An Kant*, p. 118. This might well be the source of the conflation of feeling and belief that Reinhold would attribute to Jacobi as late as 1804.

to existence through feeling.³¹ Drawing on the idea from the *Resultate* that we do not need reason for everyday tasks, he suggests that feeling is our regular way of relating to existing things, while belief is a term that we use when we try to express the existence of things in epistemic claims, but fail to do so. This distinction is clearer than the way Jacobi himself will develop his position in terms of belief, since it is not presented as a response to an attempt to demonstrate existence.³² On the other hand, we can also say that this distinction was inherent in Jacobi's emphasis on 'lifestyle', since this emphasis implied the existence of common-sense ways of relating to existence. This emphasis on real life also finds its way into Wizenmann's alternative Jacobi's notion of God. Wizenmann prefers the Biblical God, because the Bible suggests a long history of non-philosophical cognition of God.³³ The inherent criticism is clear: Jacobi and Mendelssohn focus too much on the philosophical way of accounting for God. Even though Jacobi presents the *SB* from the outset as a criticism of the aims of philosophy through demonstration, he remains caught up in the philosophical discourse himself.

In the end, Wizenmann refers to his Biblical God in terms of *conviction*, and argues that this notion of God is where he differs from Jacobi, whose notion of God he also calls a conviction, but a conviction of a God which only occurs 'through analogy with the inconceivable human power of the will'.³⁴ In the rest of the article, Wizenmann criticizes Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Shortly after the publication of the article Wizenmann passes away. He did not live to see Kant's response in the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* or the development of realism to which he had contributed so much through his clear explications of the problem involved in cognizing existence.

³¹ Hamann, *Werke* II, p.57-82.

³² As we'll see in chapter 2, Jacobi's relationship to feeling is also more complex than Wizenmann's view.

³³ *An Kant*, p. 119.

³⁴ *An Kant*, pp. 117-119.

3. *Asmus: The Poet in the Wings*

Not everyone's commitment to Jacobi's cause was as clear-cut. Since he was not involved in the metaphysical/epistemic debate, Claudius' commitment to the group of realists that we have discerned up to this point has sometimes been questioned.³⁵ On the surface, his long review of the relevant publications in the *Pantheismusstreit* seeks to mediate between two camps (or three, if we count Lessing), between Jacobi and Mendelssohn. However, Claudius' proto-realist commitments become apparent when one pays attention to the arguments that he uses to bring about this mediation: i) The dead can justifiably be dissected for the use of the living. This is an argument for Jacobi's use of Lessing and Spinoza, 'the master of demonstration.' ii) The living all have a presentiment [Ahndung] of truth and, lacking a direct recourse to truth, have arrived at their (theoretical) position through *conviction*.³⁶ Arguments (i) and (ii) refer to the conviction that was an integral part of Jacobi's positive arguments in the *SB*. Claudius' commitment to the realists' cause then seems obvious: although Mendelssohn also had conviction that stemmed from his life, Claudius ultimately declares Jacobi's victory, since Mendelssohn would have argued that his demonstrations are based on something more objective than a mere subjective conviction, which implies that he would deny his 'lifestyle', according to Jacobi.

Another indication that the poet Asmus is committed to realism can be found in the title page of Claudius' reviews, which bears two epigraphs and an illustration. The first epigraph is from Horace³⁷ and implies that Claudius' intent is to appease offended gods more effectively than through costly sacrifices. A clue to the identity of the offended gods might be offered by the illustration below this epigraph, which depicts an owl and some moles sitting

³⁵ For instance by Herbert Rowland in *Matthias Claudius: Language as "infamous Funnel" and Its Imperatives* (1997), p. 215.

³⁶ Claudius, *Sämtliche Werke* 5, p. 174.

³⁷ 'An offering that will appease the offended Gods, with the pious cake and crackling salt.'

on a hat, which seems to be a renaissance theatrical symbol for darkness³⁸. This might be an ironic inversion of the Berlin Enlightenment, the members of which were angry at Jacobi at the time for having ‘annoyed to death’ their friend and colleague Mendelssohn.³⁹ Owls and moles are both creatures that thrive and hunt in the darkness, but are relatively helpless in the light.

The next epigraph provides an explanation for this inversion of the popular characterization of the Enlightenment. It is taken from the preface of renaissance editions of Virgil’s *Aeneid*: ‘I am he who once tuned my song on a slender reed ----- but now on Mars’ ruggedness.’⁴⁰ This is likely a reference to the war that the Berlin Enlightenment figures now waged on Jacobi. The darkness in question would then be a reference to the darkness that these defenders of polite society now displayed in their emotional outrage.

³⁸ Brownell Salomon, *Critical Analyses in English Renaissance Drama: A Bibliographic Guide* (1979), p. 497. Jacobi would later question the torch metaphor for reason in his *David Hume*, arguing that a torch illuminates one thing but makes everything else dark. *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus. Ein Gespräch* (1787), p.179.

³⁹ Cf. Johann Heinrich Schulz’ polemical attack on Mendelssohn, especially its title: *Der entlarvte Moses Mendelssohn, oder der völlige Aufklärung des räthselhaften Todverdrusses des M. Mendelssohn über die Bekanntmachung des Lessingschen Atheismus von Jacobi* (1786).

⁴⁰ These lines actually originate from Virgil’s previous works: *Eclogues* and the *Georgics*.

Zwey Recensionen u.

in Sachen der Herren

Lesing, M. Mendelssohn, und Jacobi.

Molibit aversos Penates
farre pio et saliente mica.



Ille ego qui quondam gracili modulatus avena
----- at nunc horrentia Martis.

1 7 8 6.

Such coded tactics might seem needlessly complicated, but many authors used them at the time, drawing on the works of Horace and Virgil in order to convey a message that poetically encapsulates the message of Claudius' reviews. Asmus poetically conveyed that he was on Jacobi's side against his detractors. Such an allegiance was to be expected, since Claudius would soon become part of Jacobi's extended family by marriage.

4. Jacobi's notion of truth

If we look at Jacob Hermann Obereit's *Die verzweifelte Metaphysik*⁴¹, which appeared in the same year as Wizenmann's *Resultate*, the novelty of Jacobi's position becomes apparent. Obereit's essay deals with similar problems, reacting to Kant and Wizenmann by intervening as 'the fairy of metaphysics',⁴² in order to show that the lack of recourse to an absolutely true God, as the ultimate ground of being, leads to *nothingness* in every instance. In a later publication that year,⁴³ Obereit would coin the term 'nihilism' as a modern philosophical term. We will examine nihilism and its relationship to realism in chapter 3. Jacobi's position criticizes philosophical methodology, and claims that there is no definite certitude to be had through a truth-claim that is reached through demonstration. Although he assumes that there is 'the true', we are barred from having epistemic access to it, and it thus remains something to which human cognition only indirectly relates. The difference between the two authors can be made apparent if we render Obereit's position in the following way, following Plato's Theaetetus and in today's epistemology Gettier:

knowledge = justified true belief

⁴¹ *Die verzweifelte Metaphysik* (1787).

⁴² *Die verzweifelte Metaphysik*, p.28.

⁴³ *Der wiederkommende Lebensgeist der verzweifelten Metaphysik; ein kritisches Drama zu neuer Grund-Critik vom Geist des Lebens* (1787).

Oberreit is not particularly clear as to what belief is supposed to be (similarly, in today's discussions, belief also receives little attention comparatively), nor how exactly we go about connecting particular propositions to what he calls the 'real-metaphysics' of divine truth. He accepts that demonstration cannot yield justified knowledge of God, but he does seem convinced that our beliefs *can* be justified, but never explains why. Jacobi's response to the problem is to bar our access to 'the true' in terms of inference from particular propositions altogether, leaving merely our subjective conviction of the certainty of these particular propositions as a belief. This could be rendered in the following way:

Truth

~~justified true~~ belief

The line between truth and ~~justified true~~ belief signifies that we cannot prove that a belief is true, in this account. This is a thesis that is present in many Jacobian positions: if beliefs have no inherent hierarchy, since one belief is no truer than another, beliefs are, at a formal level, decidedly *univocal*. By this I mean that all belief-claims have the same value *qua belief*, due to the fact that there is no clear way of distinguishing false from true beliefs. It should be mentioned that Jacobi is exclusively concerned with pointing out the inaccuracy in the claims of philosophers who overstep the bounds of their cognition in one way or another.

5. The project of realism, in outline

The main points of *SB*, at least in as far as Jacobi's subsequent realism is concerned are the following:

- i) The inconceivability of the origin of experiential content.

- ii) The impossibility of distinguishing singular ‘original’ objects in experience (i.e. we cannot demonstrate the existence of a thing on its own).
- iii) There are methodological problems with demonstrating metaphysical claims if they are applied beyond the scope of our conscious cognition.
- iv) The univocity of all belief claims.
- v) The historical constitution of conviction in feeling/belief and a discussion of the kind of “lifestyle” that follows from this.

To what extent can we say that Jacobi took up Hamann’s challenge to be a wall or a door? That depends on how one understands the metaphor. Being a wall might mean presenting a clear limitation. Surely Jacobi has attempted to present a limitation. A door, on the other hand, might provide access to another space from a (perhaps limited) earlier space. If there is a door in this sense, we could understand Jacobi as firmly locking it, in order to block any attempt to transcend the limits of cognition.

But can we understand Jacobi as providing access as well? Is his door a gateway to the outside, to an unlimited space of possibilities? Or does the door lead from one enclosed room to another, which perhaps reproduces the original limitations? As to the first option, there are intimations in Jacobi’s position that certainly *could* be developed in the direction of unrestricted spaces, such as the emphasis on future generations, the idea of ‘lifestyles’ and the theoretical univocity of belief. However, Jacobi never fully commits himself to these options, as will become especially apparent in the next chapter.

I propose that we look at an anecdote that in many ways lies at the core of the problems in *SB*, in order to find one of the most general but also typical programmes of what would become realism. Jacobi recounts his conversation with Lessing and famously claims that this venerable man was actually a Spinozist. I

would argue that, seen from the perspective of the realism that Jacobi would formulate, the most important idea that the anecdote about this conversation refers to the specific relationship between *conceivability* and *inconceivability*:

Lessing: And he who does not want to explain?

I [Jacobi]: He who does not want to explain what is inconceivable [unbegreiflich], but only wants to know the boundaries of where it begins, and only wants to discern [erkennen] that it is there: of him I believe that he gains the most room for genuine [ächte] human truth in himself.

Lessing: Words, dear Jacobi, words! The boundaries that you want to set cannot be determined. And on the other side you give open field to flights of fancy, non-sense and blindness.

I: I believe that all boundaries can be determined. I don't want to set any, but rather find those that have already been set and leave them intact. And as to non-sense, flights of fancy and blindness...

Lessing: Those are at home everywhere where complicated concepts rule.

I: Even more where made-up concepts rule. The blindest, non-sensical belief, if not the dumbest, also has its highest throne there. Once someone has lost himself in explanations that are certain he blindly accepts every consequence that is drawn from it by way of syllogism[.]⁴⁴

This short exchange contains the seeds of Jacobi's realism, even if he had not fully developed the means by which he wanted to discern the boundaries of the inconceivable. Note that he took care to contradict Lessing's mistrust about setting limits. A shrewd polemicist like Lessing was of course well aware that someone who

⁴⁴ *SB*, p.30-1.

propounds to maintain limits often covertly attempts to invent and subsequently police the very limits that he claims to merely defend, as is often the practice of moralists, for instance. Jacobi offers no proof that his boundaries are the actual boundaries of inconceivability, most likely because he had not developed a methodology to do so. As I will show, I believe that Jacobi's realism must be understood as an attempt to find these limits through the examination of the limits of *conceivability* [Begreiflichkeit] as we find it in use in applied practical rationality.

The positions that he criticizes in this passage provide an important clue to how he believes that this project must be undertaken. Already in *SB*, Jacobi had argued for the essential importance of 'life style' where philosophical arguments are concerned. Jacobi's criticism would apply to someone who has, by fallacious reasoning, accepted as true a concept that has no real referent, and who consequently lets himself be led by the arguments that follow from this concept, rather than those which follow from his own beliefs. The model of this type of self-delusion is most likely the Spinozist. One may ask here: if we lose our self, to whom is it lost? We will see in chapter 2 that this idea leads Jacobi to advocate the importance of individuality and of applied practical reasoning. In response to Lessing's retort (cited above) that complicated concepts like, arguably, Jacobi's subsequent realism, might give license to 'non-sense, flights of fancy and blindness', Jacobi argues that he prefers complicated concepts to made-up concepts.

This is what sets Jacobi apart from Wizenmann's choice for a kind of common-sense consensus, drawn from a community's adherence to the Bible. Jacobi favors the more complicated and philosophically refined approach. The next paragraph shows the direction that Jacobi's project will take:

In my judgment, the greatest service of the researcher [Forscher] is to disclose *existence* [Dasein], and to reveal... Explanation is a means to him, a pathway to a destination, an approximation – never a final goal. His final goal is that which does not allow itself be explained: the inexplicable, immediate, simple.⁴⁵

When read in conjunction with the previous passage, it becomes clear that Jacobi seeks out the immediate and the inconceivable only in order to determine its boundaries, with the intention to discern the true scope of human freedom. This practical dimension will be examined in chapter 4, while chapter 2 will examine how Jacobi believes that reality or, in this case, existence can be helpful in this perspective.

As previously mentioned, the response to *SB* among philosophers like Kant and Reinhold was far from positive. Kant, in his 'Was heißt: sich im Denken orientieren' assumed, perhaps understandably due to the lack of clarity in Jacobi's use of the term belief, that Wizenmann's view on the value of historical (that is, Christian) belief was wholly Jacobi's. During that time, Reinhold was making a name for himself with the publication of the *Briefe über die kantische Philosophie* in *Der Teutsche Merkur* during the years of 1786 and 1787. One of the popular goals of these letters was to intervene in the *Pantheismusstreit* in favor of Kant's philosophy. To that end, Reinhold makes a number of statements on Jacobi's position, many of which seems to have challenged Jacobi to produce another book that, in part, attempts to correct Reinhold's reading of *SB*. Reinhold took Jacobi to be a supernaturalist, someone who is convinced of the supernatural nature of God:

⁴⁵ *SB*, p.31-2.

And if Jacobi had grasped the entirety of Kant's view, we would not have received his outstanding new presentation and sharpening of the proofs of atheism, which likewise seems to be just what the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* now calls for. Moreover, we would have one less striking example to offer of how much the efforts of even the most profound and astute men must fall short whenever they want to pass over reason entirely in their accounts of having a conviction regarding God's existence.

If, as the author of the well-known *Resultate* (who, according to Jacobi's own assurance, fundamentally grasped his opinion) assures us, it was unfamiliarity with the spirit of Jacobi that prompted Mendelssohn to consider Jacobi's belief to be theological and orthodox, then it seems to have been no less an unfamiliarity with the spirit of Kant that prompted Mr. Jacobi to confuse his historical belief with the philosophical belief that the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* demonstrates, and to suppose that for the last six years Kant has been teaching the same thing as his own view. Given the way in which Mr. Jacobi explained his belief, it was very excusable that Mendelssohn arrived at the idea of regarding this belief to be something not unlike common orthodoxy.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ In *Der Teutsche Merkur* (1786) 3.Viertelj, pp.139-140. If we consider that Reinhold assumes Jacobi to adhere to historically transmitted faith, one might argue that *Glaube* should be translated as faith here, rather than belief. In order to maintain the continuity of the use of the term, I have opted to also translate it as belief.

On this last point, Reinhold is probably right. As it happens, Jacobi himself was far from happy with these ways of explaining his notion of belief. Belief, for him, was neither religious orthodoxy nor historically transmitted belief. On the other hand, Reinhold is also right in that Jacobi's notion of belief is very different from Kant's notion of belief. For this reason, the early parts of *David Hume über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus. Ein Gespräch* (1787) attempt to explain just how he meant the term. Even more problematic is Reinhold's attributing to Jacobi a wholesale dismissal of reason (which he here takes to be a demonstration) in favor of a historical belief:

The famous dispute between Jacobi and Mendelssohn offers us an example[.] Here I shall take up the already cited statement that the opponent of metaphysical proofs puts forward: 'Every path of demonstration ends up in fatalism.' If this statement is correct, and if all of these paths of reason that lead to fatalism (or even just a single one of them) are unavoidable or irrefutable by means of reason, then the contradiction between reason and belief is decided. Then either reason is necessarily without belief, or belief is necessarily irrational, and reason would tear down by means of demonstration what it builds up by means of the moral law or – as Mr. Jacobi would have it – what it accepts on the testimony of history.⁴⁷

This passage might have the distinction of being the first account of Jacobi's position that frames it explicitly as an irrationalism *opposed* to reason. As I'll show in chapter 2 and 4, according to Jacobi's own account this is far from a correct assessment. This

⁴⁷ *Der Teutsche Merkur* (1787) 1.Viertelj, p.19.

sets up what Jacobi would attempt to show in his next book: how belief is not opposed to rationality but is rather an essential part of it.

As his memory of that remote childish experience ran, he did at the very first sight of that door experience a peculiar emotion, an attraction, a desire to get to the door and open it and walk in. And at the same time he had the clearest conviction that either it was unwise or it was wrong of him - he could not tell which - to yield to this attraction. He insisted upon it as a curious thing that he knew from the very beginning - unless memory has played him the queerest trick - that the door was unfastened, and that he could go in as he chose.

– H.G. Wells, *The Door in the Wall*

2. Realism around 1800 as negative realism

2.1 Jacobi's negative realism

In the previous chapter we have discussed the events that led Jacobi to write *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus: Ein Gespräch* (1787) (hereafter *DH*). Jacobi here addressed Kant's objections⁴⁸ to the first edition of the *Spinoza-Büchlein* (hereafter *SB*), which Jacobi called the 'mischief of the Kantian orientation',⁴⁹ in a way which shows that Jacobi's position is not merely 'schwärmerisch'. In part, it is also a counter-attack, especially with regard to the appendix, which endeavors to show the value of Jacobi's realism over Kant's position. However, if it was Jacobi's attempt to clarify his position, he does not do this in any traditional sense, and indeed many initial responses to *DH* were fairly negative about what was perceived as a text in a rather dark style. The dark style, and the reactions to it, show that Jacobi was still working towards a full articulation of his position in *DH*. For an assessment of Jacobi's style that is probably fairly representative of the time, we can turn to Karl Heinrich Ludwig Pölitiz's *Die Philosophie unseres Zeitalters in der Kinderkappe*, which provides short outlines of the works of many popular philosophers in 1800:

His manner of speaking is a veneer of a higher, brilliant power. At times it becomes completely dark and unintelligible, at other times it suddenly sinks into banalities. He leaves clarity, order and repose behind him.⁵⁰

Hamann never gave Jacobi a comprehensive review, but complained bitterly about Jacobi's lack of clarity.⁵¹ Hamann wrote

⁴⁸ 'Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?', in *AA* 8:131.

⁴⁹ *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, Band 6, p.131.

⁵⁰ *Die Philosophie unseres Zeitalters in der Kinderkappe* (1800), p.288-9.

⁵¹ *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, Band 6, p.146.

to Jacobi that *DH* was too much to digest on a sober stomach, suggesting that Jacobi should first have given his readers something that is easy to digest, like some accessible definitions or clear references to the arguments in the texts he is directly objecting to, before elaborating his own position. Instead, while he was writing *DH*, Jacobi was likely still toiling with the development of his position, to which he had only partially hinted in *SB*. In *DH*, Jacobi is responding to several popular objections, defends his terminology referring to Hume and Leibniz, and only comes to a central systematic framing through the prefatory remark and the appendix, which were clearly written after the main body of the book. Our approach will therefore use the lens of this framing in order to interpret the core of the text, in the hopes of dispelling some of this notorious darkness. Following Hamann's analogy, we will first take some standard fare (in the form of Jacobi's fundamental concepts and his response to Kant) before we are forced to drink Jacobi's strong 'wine' (his realism).⁵²

1. What is "negative realism"?

We will take care not to repeat what was, in Hamann's view, Jacobi's mistake, and will therefore have to attempt to provide a succinct definition of his realism, which in truth is our own way of providing a succinct definition of the realists around 1800, before commencing our analysis of the key ideas of the text. This is not a label used by the protagonists themselves, but I introduce "negative realism" in order to characterize what is specific about their position.

There are some indications in Jacobi's works that he, at times, also described the problem directly in terms of the negative/positive distinction, showing that this characterization is not altogether anachronistic. The first of these occurs in *DH*,

⁵² *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, Band 6, p.113-4.

where he states ‘that all our cognition is based on the positive’.⁵³ One might wonder why he frames the problem in this way. Evidently, cognition is not the same as the thing it is based upon, and should, in its relation to the positivity of reality, be considered to be negative, as wholly dependent on the positive. As we’ll shortly see, this also means that, when cognition attempts to make claims about this positivity, it does this only according to its own negative nature. Another reference can be found in a turn of phrase in the selection from Jacobi’s *Denkbücher* that he published near the end of his life under the title *Fliegende Blätter* (1817):

In nature, in reality and truth in general, everything is positive. In the understanding and *its* possibility, everything is negative, because in the understanding everything stands under concepts, and the most comprehensive concepts are always the emptiest.⁵⁴

Those readers who are familiar with today’s Kant scholarship might be wondering why I do not describe Jacobi as a transcendental realist. Put simply, I do not believe that he is one. Transcendental realism is a position that Allison has elaborated on, based on Kant’s own notion.⁵⁵ In Allison’s account, Jacobi is one of the historical adherents to transcendental realism. At the end of this section I will show why I disagree with this description of Jacobi’s position. It is described as ‘intuitive’⁵⁶ and ‘theocentric’,⁵⁷ but these are mostly designed to highlight the strength of Allison’s reading of transcendental idealism, about which I will remain agnostic for the purposes of this book. I am thus not interested here in how Kant is ultimately to be understood, but rather in what Jacobi wants to show about his own position through the reference

⁵³ *DH*, p.181.

⁵⁴ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5, p.411

⁵⁵ Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism* (2004).

⁵⁶ *DH*, p.xvi.

⁵⁷ *DH*, p.xv.

to Kant's position. We will return to the issue of transcendental realism at the end of our reading of *DH*, in order to show how Jacobi does not belong to this position if we go by Kant's own words. Allison's ultimate conclusion, that Jacobi is a transcendental realist who 'demands a God's-eye account of what it is that really supplies the matter of cognition'⁵⁸ is not supported by any textual evidence in Jacobi's works, nor have I found in Allison's account any passages that might have led him to this conclusion. The following analysis of *DH* will show why this reading is incorrect.⁵⁹

Negative realism is ostensibly more in line with Strawson's definition of the doctrine of transcendental *idealism*: 'reality is supersensible and [...] we can have no knowledge of it'.⁶⁰ Throughout this chapter, the similarity between negative realism and transcendental idealism will be a recurring feature. By acknowledging this similarity, I intend to ultimately show how Jacobi's position differs from transcendental idealism. The "reality" that negative realism refers to in this case is something that is continuously taken to be *outside* the scope of cognition. However, as we will see, negative realism only uses this claim as a point of departure and subsequently interrogates it as the cognitive claim that it inherently is. This further destabilizes Allison's tacit opposition of Kant's idealism versus Jacobi's realism, as Jacobi accepts much of what we would characterize as idealist argumentation. Jacobi would rather have us ask why we are wont to assume that there "is" a reality beyond cognition at all.

At this point, one might raise the question why the realists around 1800 should be considered to be *negative* realists. Why are they not straightforward realists? And, if they are not exactly realists in a modern sense, does that mean that they are idealists? In short, what historical and textual reasons can be brought forward

⁵⁸ *DH*, p.73.

⁵⁹ I suspect Allison is conflating Vaihinger's reading of Jacobi's criticism of Kant with what is Jacobi's actual position.

⁶⁰ Strawson, *The Bounds of Sense* (1966), p.16.

in support of the interpretative thesis that the realists around 1800 were *negative* realists? In this chapter, I will show the type of arguments in Jacobi that make it impossible for members of the realist movement to be characterized as “realists” in the sense that we generally associate with the label today. The type of arguments subsequently became a widely shared hallmark of realism around 1800. Additionally, we must attempt to understand why Jacobi thought that his type of realism was a completely new one, which led him to declare: ‘I am a realist, like no man has been before me’.⁶¹ At the very least, this seems to imply that his position is different from Kant’s notion of empirical realism.

In order to provide an exposition of the specific kind of realism that the realists around 1800 adhere to, I will first need a minimal thesis of what a “normal” *positive* realism would be. Here we can adopt a characterization that is fairly non-problematic from a contemporary perspective: *realism is that position which takes certain objects to exist, independent of our cognition*.⁶² “Cognition” may be taken broadly here, so as to include the contents of our consciousness, including representations, concepts and reasoning. This definition introduces some of the key elements at stake in realism. I say ‘certain objects’, because realism often uses this central commitment to the existence of external objects to distinguish between ‘real’ objects and things that are *less than real*, whether they are mental delusions masquerading as real objects, insubstantial ideals or non-existent deities. In many cases someone characterizes himself as a realist because of the critical framework that this offers from a scientific or philosophical perspective.⁶³ In such cases, realism presupposes that there are also things that are *not* real, or

⁶¹ Letter to Jean Paul, 16th of March 1800, in *Aus Jacobi's Nachlaß*, Band I (1869), p.239.

⁶² Both of these aspects (existence and independence) are attributed to realism in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy article ‘Realism’.

⁶³ To name but the foremost of those with which we will concern ourselves: Realism is a viable position in fields as varied as politics, literature and law, indicating a position that accepts the world as it is.

only *seem* to be real, and this often implies that realists have an eliminativist program. Another common assumption that is made by realists is that what makes an object real, i.e. existing independently of ourselves, is, at the same time, something we can cognitively verify. In other words: *reality is a distinct attribute that our cognition is capable of discerning*. This relation between cognition and realness is a shared assumption among realists but is rarely critically explicated. There is an underlying access problem in terms of how we can know that we grasp something real. With regard to the clause ‘independent of our cognition’, we can thus remark that realists generally claim that, while these real objects exist outside of our cognition, they also appear *inside* of our cognition. This way realism assumes that we have an access to reality but does not address the question of how reliable this connection between cognition and its object really is. Some of these assumptions function very well in tandem with scientism or the social project of the Enlightenment.

Negative realism, on the contrary, accepts that we have to assume something that is “real” in the sense of being independent of our cognition, but at the same time also accepts the idealist argument that, even if this is the case, our cognition has no way of convincingly recognizing it. This reality, and the way it becomes present to us, can only be described as present to us in a negative way. This realism is negative in the sense that it maintains that an account of reality can only occur negatively, that is, by giving an account of the limits of our cognition, and arguing that rationality can only operate as it does within these limitations if it is dependent on reality in a way that remains inconceivable. In other words, negative realism refers to existence (in its mind-independence) by way of reference to the way reality enters or affects our cognition (in perception). As such, it makes strong epistemic commitments, opposed to taking some sort of mysticist stance in its conventional meaning of attempting a union with God, a stance that is already precluded by negative realism.

Many might object that this is merely the starting point for a more refined idealist position, in the vein of Kant or Fichte. If that were the case, the realists around 1800 would not have entered into the heated debates they had with the idealists. We therefore require an additional step, which is the defining characteristic of the realists around 1800 as a group with a shared position which has still has eluded all readings of Jacobi that I am aware of: for these realists, *the claim that there is an externality beyond cognition is part of the necessary framework of our cognitive processes*, because beyond particular epistemic claims even the staunchest idealist or skeptic is still tacitly committed to something that is external to himself. The realists do not take this claim as a proof for the existence of mind-independent reality, but as a necessary feature of the structure of thought as such: a necessary feature that furthermore even occurs when we seek to provide meta-accounts of cognition, like Kant attempted to do with the Copernican turn. We will examine the particulars of this feature throughout our analysis of Jacobi's *DH*.

One might be tempted to relate Jacobi's negative realism to the way Kant defines idealism in his refutation of idealism, as 'the theory that declares the existence [Dasein] of objects in space outside us to be either merely doubtful and *indemonstrable*, or false and impossible'.⁶⁴ At a first glance one might take Jacobi's realism to conform to this definition, especially considering the arguments covered in chapter 1. Jacobi maintains that the way in which we cognize an object does not imply that the predicates of this cognition are true of any corresponding real thing or of an absolutely external thing (that is, a non-relational thing i.e. a thing that is not already related to a framework involving relations to a mind). Kant's definition limits itself to objects in space, so it cannot apply to Jacobi's negative realism, because Jacobi believes that space and time are concepts of that are derived from perception.⁶⁵ So when we say of a perceived thing that it has extension, we are

⁶⁴ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B274-5.

⁶⁵ *DH*, p.174/2.

able to do this because we have previously formed a concept of space, which is based on a generalization of perceptions that we've previously had. Consequently, there is no time or space *pur sang* beyond the particular claims in which we attribute these concepts to things that we perceive (and of course the initial perceptions that allowed us to formulate a concept of space). When we have a concept of space, we can say of a thing that it is spatial, but what we are really saying is that we perceive it to be in a certain relationship (with other objects, but possibly also with our own contents of consciousness). As we'll see in chapter 4, Jacobi does not believe that our own existence can be proven by referring to our persistence in time, because this likewise implies relationality. The "real" in negative realism concerns a reality that we cannot construe to be made up of relations, because this presupposes too much of our own cognitive apparatus.

The final definition that will aid our reading of *DH* we will take from Günther Baum. Although I believe his interpretation of Jacobi's own type of realism is flawed,⁶⁶ he recognizes correctly that *naïve realism* is essentially the point of departure in Jacobi's book. In a way, Jacobi develops a kind of internal criticism of this position that leads towards his own type of realism. Baum defines this naïve realism as a position that 'explains nothing, but only accepts the facts of experience as such, without questioning [these facts] further'.⁶⁷ It is possible that Jacobi considers this naïve realism as an innate attitude that we find commonly distributed among people. We will now consider *DH* by first looking at its prefatory note and then moving on to the appendix. These two sections are to function as the meal that Hamann requested, the meal needed before the reader can drink the heavy wine that is Jacobi's position.

⁶⁶ See the end of this section for specific critical remarks.

⁶⁷ Baum, *Vernunft und Erkenntnis* (1968), p.105-106.

2. *First course of the meal: The prefatory note to David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus: Ein Gespräch*

We will now show that many, if not all, features of positive realism were unacceptable to the realists around 1800 (particularly eliminativism, since for them, there is no convincing standard according to which one perception can be more true than another), even though they did accept the general thesis of realism: that there is something real independently of our cognition. In the prefatory note to *DH*, Jacobi provides one of the clearest textual indicators for his preference for a negative realism over a positive realism.⁶⁸ Here Jacobi reiterates his position from *SB*: *reason only deals with relations*.⁶⁹ He now reframes the problem of that book in terms of existence: he was primarily opposed to a philosophy that denies the idea that reason can only deal with relations, a philosophy which claims that reason can grasp the real existence [wirkliche Dasein]⁷⁰ of things and properties without remainder. In *DH*, Jacobi does not seem committed to the thesis that all philosophy must ultimately be committed to a pantheism (therein grasping existence) if it is to be consistent, that is, if it is to solely rely on itself (see [p.33]). Likely, this does not mean that he completely drops the arguments behind this thesis, because they will return in another guise in the criticism of nihilism during the 1790's. In not holding this view now, Jacobi is able to engage idealism critically and to position himself as a realist without directly dealing with the question of whether this means that his own position is a pantheism (in his own sense in *SB*), or whether philosophy has to be redefined to the degree that there can be a philosophical position that is not completely foundationally self-reliant if it is able

⁶⁸ The note was removed in the (de facto second) *Werke* edition (volume 2) that Jacobi edited himself, likely because the text was preceded by an extended preface to the volume.

⁶⁹ *DH*, p.iv.

⁷⁰ *SB*, p.96.

to recognize this lack of complete foundational independence.⁷¹ In the latter case, one could read his claims in *SB* as not committed to attacking philosophy as such, but rather as attacking the extreme case of a philosophy that requires nothing beyond its own system, and does not even require a philosopher. Be that as it may, the claim that reason can directly show the existence of things in an *apodictically* certain way functions as the lynchpin for the division that Jacobi creates between idealism and realism, most notably in the appendix to *DH*. Jacobi presents the philosophy that makes the claim of direct cognitive access to reality as a type of *naïve realism*. It is difficult to determine who exactly is taken to adhere to this position and Jacobi seems to have a type of empiricist Kantian in mind as someone who is ultimately naïve about his cognitive access to reality. At the very least, the argument applies to anyone who primarily reasons on the basis of causality, the principle of sufficient reason and the *ex nihilo nihil fit*, in the sense that these principles presuppose that rational cognitive access to external existence is non-problematic.⁷² To attack this characterization as a straw man argument would, however, miss the point of the strategy behind Jacobi's raising of this point, as we will soon see.

Jacobi now raises the point that optimists with regard to rational cognitive access (he is likely thinking of Wolffians here) implicitly already deny that sensible cognition [*Erkenntniss*]⁷³ can

⁷¹ Note that Jacobi uses the phrase 'my philosophy', suggesting that he is no longer reserving that term for a completely self-reliant rational edifice, p.v.

⁷² *DH*, p.226.

⁷³ I have chosen to render '*Erkenntniss*' as 'cognition', rather than as 'knowledge.' This avoids the conflation of '*Erkenntniss*' and '*Wissen*', since Jacobi always keeps these terms separate. For him, cognition is merely the content of our consciousness, but it does not hold a claim to any strong sense of certitude or truthful knowledge. If one does not recognize this distinction, Jacobi's criticism of idealism will be read as one-sidedly in favor of sensibility over rational thought and it will become impossible to make sense of Jacobi's commitment to realism, which, strictly speaking, emerges as a result of this distinction.

have apodictic certainty in its claims concerning actual existence. After all, if we could gain any degree of certainty there, why would we bother making the claim that reason can directly and verifiably grasp existence? Jacobi himself grants this point, which alone should put the nail in the coffin of any reading of his position as sensiblist, as only relating the contents of cognition to sensible impressions (put forward by Baum, for instance). His opponents would likely disagree, but Jacobi argues that, unless they shed this naiveté about epistemic access, they are essentially committed to the idea that reason can directly and no-problematically grasp existence. It is for this reason that Jacobi introduced the term *belief* [Glaube] in *SB*.⁷⁴ Belief signifies the lack of existential certitude in sensible [sinnliche] cognition, and in this sense ‘belief’ is a negative term. With this claim, Jacobi is aligning himself with Hamann’s anti-reductionism with regard to experience, because we have no immediate guidelines with which we can determine when precisely sensible cognition is illusory or false, and when it is true. Ultimately, Jacobi thus denies apodictic certitude for *both* kinds of cognitions, *rational and sensible*. He now provides his own, more restrictive account of reason: reason is the ‘mere ability [bloße Vermögen] to perceive relations distinctly’⁷⁵, which means that it ‘*forms propositions of identity and judges according to it*’.⁷⁶ According to Jacobi, the only apodictic certainty involved in the functioning of reason is the affirmation of merely identical propositions. So reason only provides apodictic certainty in the event that it is confronted with tautological propositions, at which point it affirms

⁷⁴ *DH*, p.iv.

⁷⁵ *DH*, p.iv.

⁷⁶ *DH*, p.iv. It is probable that Jacobi’s distinction between sensible cognition and reason as a more abstract ability is derived from Hamann, who distinguished sensible cognition from a reason that ‘everywhere abstracts the images of external things into signs.’ According to Hamann, this merely leaves us with parables [Gleichnisse] to intuit truth and the essence of things. *Schriften*, Band 1, p.99. I refer to the original edition, because Nadler’s historical-critical edition only contains the, greatly expanded, manuscript version of Hamann’s *Biblische Betrachtungen*.

that they are identical. Later on, Jacobi will make the point that reason, as guided by the structure of identity, can only form identity statements, that by virtue of this structure cannot reach, as it were, beyond themselves. Reason thus cannot function as an access to externally existing objects, even though it conveys the sense of grasping the object as it “really” is (whereas reason in fact discerns an identity that cannot strictly be found in sensibility).⁷⁷

Therefore, in Jacobi’s view, neither kind of cognition yields apodictic certitude with regard to external existence. With regard to sensible cognition the only course of action that we have is to give any and all propositions that stem from it the status of *belief*. Interestingly, it is at this point that Jacobi strongly begins to identify himself as a realist:

Thereupon I, as a *realist*, must say: all cognition can only come from belief, because *things* must be *given* [gegeben] to me, before I am able to see into relations.⁷⁸

To contemporary readers it might seem as if this constitutes an admission of a ‘myth of the given’-style sensiblist position, but Jacobi actually agrees to a certain extent with Sellars in that he believes that many of the suppositions underlying the myth of the given are untenable. In the above formulation, Jacobi responds directly to the idealist rebuttal of his position that, in the total absence of apodictic certitude (excepting of course the tautological certitude of identity in reason) within our cognition, as Jacobi has claimed, the conviction that actual things outside of us exist is also

⁷⁷ DH, p.221. Cf. Hamann’s formulation in *Sokratische Denkwürdigkeiten* second section p.49: ‘Our own existence [Dasein] and the existence [Existenz] of all things outside of us must be believed and can be taken in no other way.’

⁷⁸ DH, p.vi.

only an instance of belief.⁷⁹ Jacobi grants this point, essentially barring all direct cognitive access to the referent of his realism.

We will shortly discuss what exactly it is that limits cognitive access according to Jacobi. It is important to note that, in granting this point, Jacobi also grants that his position shares some basic features with idealism, at least in terms of not allowing this kind of direct access to mind-independent external entities bypassing cognition. Jacobi does maintain that we are affected by something real that is independent of our cognition. He argues that we never have a form of access that is not already shaped by our cognition. In this way, Jacobi's position is far from that of skepticism. Like idealism, Jacobi is in effect providing an internal critique of accounts of epistemic access. No proposition that we might formulate about external entities can have apodictic certainty, and thus all propositions that we state have only the status of a belief. On the other hand, Jacobi argues, we find ourselves already committed to the thesis of things being 'given', because otherwise there would be no relations to be discerned, whereas we so clearly "experience" our experience as changing continually. In contradistinction to any classical formulation of idealism, Jacobi does not believe that the content of our cognition is wholly spontaneously produced by the mind.

However, if our receptivity to givenness is not to contradict the fact that there is no apodictic certainty in cognition, Jacobi has to claim that whatever is given is not accessible to cognition as such, even though we have to assume that it is given. Otherwise, no change would take place in experience. After all, if we could perceive the given as such, we would not register the change in our perception. Since we do not perceive the way in which the given turns into our perceptions (which are even separated into externally and internally perceived) we experience change instead of a whole of givenness that affects us. This is

⁷⁹ *DH*, p.vi.

actually a novel argument: we register change because we lack the capacity to understand how perception is given to us. Jacobi's approach to this issue might be an attempt to approach change and the receptivity of the mind in a more fundamental way than Kant, who argued that we register change in ourselves only in terms of the form of time and that we are receptive only to sensibility (which correlates to perception in Jacobi). In his attempt to introduce the givenness of perception as inconceivable, Jacobi is pointing towards a process of our reception of the given that is not part of consciousness as such, in fact can never become part of consciousness because it is constitutive of the operations of the mind as applied to changing experience, and is therefore fundamental to human cognition. Conversely, time is, for Jacobi merely a concept derived from relations in perception.

In other words, although the given remains opaque to cognition, we have to assume that something is really there and given if it wants to assume its own possibility. Jacobi's own type of realism is therefore completely *negative* with regard to cognitive access to reality and the way in which it is given to us.

We must now determine why, given these features of his position, which display some key similarities with idealism, Jacobi can still be committed to a form of realism. A hint with regard to this problem can be found in Jacobi's claim that he was already an adherent of realism in *SB*.⁸⁰ The passage in *SB* that Jacobi refers to explicitly draws out the point about the givenness of reality, without explicitly referring to it. Rather, it sketches the problem in abstracto:

How can we strive towards certitude, when we are
not already acquainted [bekannt]⁸¹ with it, and

⁸⁰ *DH*, p.vii.

⁸¹ I have chosen not to translate to 'bekannt' with 'known' for the same reasons I have not translated 'Erkenntniß' with knowledge. See note 5.

how can we be acquainted with it, other than through something that we already recognize with certitude? This leads to the notion of an immediate certitude [unmittelbaren Gewißheit], which not only requires no ground, but simply excludes all grounds and singularly and solely is *the coinciding of the representation with the represented thing*.⁸²

First of all, we have to clarify the terminology here. In *DH*, Jacobi used “certitude” only with regard to apodicticity. In this passage, he uses it with regard to the mind-independent existence of things, of which he admits that the epistemic attitude that we need to take towards it is an instance of belief. How can we read these two passages in tandem? First of all, I believe it would be a mistake to claim that the immediate certitude to which Jacobi is referring is the same as the kind of epistemic conviction that we attach to belief, because that would make every belief claim that we make ipso facto immediately certain. That is a thesis which Jacobi would not want to commit to, although it is how he is often read, as a *Glaubensphilosoph* who values belief over knowledge or anything else. A claim in reference to an external existence is something entirely different from the of immediate certitude, which we always already find in our possession, but which only applies to the origin of our beliefs, not to the specific determinate content of the belief claim. ‘We are all born into belief’, according to *SB*,⁸³ and that implies that we nowhere have absolute certitude. But still, this does not impede our striving for certainty. We have never seen anything that is apodictically certain, but we feel as if we would “know it when we see it”, as the expression goes. It is this prior measure of certitude to which Jacobi is referring in the above passage.

Additionally, it would be very awkward to speak about certitude as a knowable object.

⁸² *SB*, p.162.

⁸³ *SB*, p.162.

How does this constitute a *realist* position? Jacobi believes that the connection between epistemology and independent reality is implicitly presupposed in all of our claims. Dealing with this connection in this way might seem like a typically idealist approach. Reality is cognitively inaccessible and reaches us in a way that remains inaccessible to cognition. This is exactly what Jacobi means when he uses the term ‘immediately’: whereas cognition is mediated, an *immediacy* is something which we can only indirectly and indistinctly point towards. It is this very immediacy that provides us with the measure of certitude, because it can only be conceived of as indubitable, even from the perspective of mediation. At the very least, Jacobi’s realism can be found in the necessary assumption that our representations [Vorstellungen] coincide with reality because we must consider them as given. This is what many readers take to be Jacobi’s adherence to the certainty of sensibility. That does not at all mean that the specific claims about sensible cognition are now apodictically certain. It merely means that we *cannot help but* assume that the objects in our cognition correspond to existing things outside of us and that it is this implicit claim of which we are immediately certain. All of this seems very Humean, which is not surprising considering the title of Jacobi’s book. It was exactly this implicit claim in many philosophical arguments, including those of the naïve realists, which Jacobi sought to make explicit. Jacobi’s negative realism shows that no particular claim derived from cognition can become apodictically certain by virtue of cognition, because cognition is unable to account for particular actual existence. Jacobi therefore writes in *SB*:

We then obtain all representations merely through qualities which we assume [annehmen], and there is no other road to real cognition, because [in the

case of] reason, when it gives birth to objects, they
are figments of the mind [Hirngespinnster].⁸⁴

These assumptions of qualities do not transfer any special certitude to the particular contents of consciousness. One of the features of Jacobi's negative realism that we can derive from this is that discursive reasoning (that is, reasoning by way of inferences) cannot ascertain the validity of what makes itself possible. In this case, the existence of a mind-independent reality that precedes representations and the certainty that we seek on the basis of this original existence are the basis for these ways of reasoning, that is, they give basic *content* and, in terms of certainty, *epistemic aims*. Therefore, Jacobi concludes in *SB*:

So then we have a revelation [Offenbarung] of nature, which does not only command, but forces each and every human to believe, and to assume [anzunehmen] eternal truths through belief.⁸⁵

In this way, Jacobi recognizes that the claims that we make about existence in negative realism can only be expressed in terms of propositions which have the form and epistemic force of a belief. He conceded this point to the idealist, as we've seen above. Beyond this point, much of *DH* is devoted to elaborating how that which the prefatory note describes as 'given' can be designated as 'revelation'.⁸⁶ We will shortly return to this issue. Jacobi's strategies

⁸⁴ *SB*, p.163-64.

⁸⁵ *SB*, p.164.

⁸⁶ One of the somewhat off-putting features of *DH* is that Jacobi stubbornly refuses to distance himself from the religious notions that caused such misunderstandings in *SB* (belief, revelation). Instead, he seeks to show that the notion of that his opponents use is incorrect with regard to their common use. Although the underlying argument about common language use is interesting, the fact that he did not try to appease his critics even a little still leads to many misconceptions about Jacobi's position. It remains difficult to ascertain whether this was actually the common usage at the time, since we lack a sufficient amount of sources

of designating the immediacy of revelation, which we cannot but presuppose as lying at the origin of our cognition, change over the years, although he consistently refers to it as *immediate*. As we'll see in chapter 4, towards the end of his career, Jacobi will distinguish between several distinct kinds of immediacy, one of which is located in nature, that is, in the sensible world.

The singular feature of Jacobi's realism can be found in the fact that we distinguish between a realm of the mediate (which is where our conscious cognition operates) and a realm of the immediate (through which we are affected in a way which is inaccessible through mediation, but also makes mediation possible) by way of our dependence on certain types of *necessary thinking*. In other words, we find that our cognition operates in a certain way and not in another, which gives us the indication that we have found the limit of our ability to conceive (analogous to Wittgenstein's limits of language). In the above passage, Jacobi also refers to nature as that which is *external* to cognition, but which we can only designate *through* rational cognition. Jacobi will illustrate this deceptive paradox through his reading of Kant in the appendix of *DH*.

3. *Second course of the meal: Appendix 'On the transcendental philosophy'*

In a departure from the form and style of the rest of the text, in this appendix Jacobi analyzes Kant's position with explicit reference to passages in the first *Kritik*. Kant's philosophy, as Jacobi argues in the appendix to *DH*, is in many ways in a position that is similar to his own. Kant adopted many points of the idealist,

for popular language use and meaning. The scholar of the history of philosophy remains relatively blind on this count. We can draw an analogy to our own common language use of these terms, which in part seems to validate Jacobi's claim. It is perhaps worth noting, however, that I have not found a contemporary of Jacobi who explicitly contradicts him on this point.

such as the merely subjective nature of causality and time⁸⁷, to the point that he was an idealist himself. Jacobi verbatim reproduces several passages from the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* where Kant seems to rely on just such an assumption of an external and independent object or, as Kant at one point puts it, a transcendental object that is an ‘unknown ground of appearances’.⁸⁸ Jacobi concludes that, since transcendental idealism is completely organized towards understanding our experience of empirical objects, i.e. those objects that are solely in our representations, it has no way of knowing anything about a transcendental object, despite Kant’s introducing it.⁸⁹ He raises the point that we could only cognize it though the ‘production’ of a synthetic unity in the manifold of intuition and that this unity is represented by ‘the object = x’. However, this act of identification, which we’ve seen is what Jacobi views as the activity of reason, does not offer any certain knowledge, neither in terms of rational cognition (which would here just be the still enigmatic activity of reason to produce identity claims, since there is no other identity or relation to compare it with), nor in terms of sensible cognition (since this was wholly concerned with empirical objects).

Although he does not go into great detail, Jacobi nonetheless concludes that we can know nothing of the transcendental object by relying on transcendental idealism. If we place this in line with what we have previously learned about Jacobi’s position in the previous section, this includes the claim that we neither know what a transcendental object is, nor how it should relate to our reasoning, beyond the fact that we ascribe a *positive* epistemic status to our reasoning, and in this sense *believe* in it. This peculiar status of the transcendental object is not merely Kant’s problem, since Jacobi argues that it is typical for *all* human

⁸⁷ DH, pp.211-12 and pp.215-16, respectively.

⁸⁸ DH, p.214.

⁸⁹ DH, p.220.

reasoning. For this reason he concludes that the transcendental object:

[must] be merely assumed as the intelligible cause of any appearance at all, [and] only through that can we have something that corresponds to sensibility as a receptivity.⁹⁰

This is the most perceptive part of Jacobi's reading of Kant: even though Kant argumentatively extricates himself from a kind of impression-theory of sense in that he favors transcendental idealism, the premises of Kant's theory must nonetheless first be assumed in order to reach the point where one can follow the argumentation towards a transcendental idealism. This means that Kant's transcendental idealism *de facto* presupposes a Jacobian negative realism, in the sense that the transcendental object allows Kant to think of sensibility and the appearances as a whole under receptivity. Furthermore, Jacobi raises this point in order to show that *any position* must start from negative realist presuppositions if it does not want to depart from the assumption that it understands experience in a way that ascribes to the subject a fully spontaneous role that, in Jacobi's analysis, amounts to solipsism.

What many who oppose Jacobi's distinction between mediacy and immediacy (especially in the Hegelian school) misconstrue, is the fact that recognizing a mediation as a mediation should at least commit us to an assumption of a corresponding immediacy, as Jacobi now argues:

[T]he word sensibility is without all meaning, when it is not understood as a distinct real medium [Medium] between [a] real and [another]

⁹⁰ DH, p.221.

real, an actual mediation *from* something *to* something[.]⁹¹

If we are committed to making any kind of knowledge claim, even one of a minimal type, like the one Kant reserves claims about the structure of our experience, we have to assume that sensibility is a *medium*, in Jacobi's view. Tempting as it might be to read this term in the modern sense of communication, Jacobi likely refers to the Latin context of the word. A medium is thus a halfway point or middle (or something that is common to several, which does not seem to apply here).⁹² According to Jacobi, this medium is what allows us to assume that our knowledge claims actually pertain to something external, exactly because we assume that this external 'real' immediately affects our sensibility. We might not be able to conceive of the exact way in which it affects the medium, but we cannot understand sensibility in another way, as a midway point between reality and our conscious cognition. This presupposition of sensibility as a medium is the reason why we find it necessary to verify epistemic claims. If we believed that all of our claims were correct because we self-caused them, there would be no reason to start a project of the magnitude of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*.

In this case, the characterization of the medium as immediately affected refers to the fact that the exact way in which this affection occurs is cognitively inaccessible, exactly because it makes cognition possible. The medium brings together two sides, of which the immediate affective side remains inconceivable for the cognitive side. The medium introduces a distinction between these two sides. It would completely violate Jacobi's negative realism to claim that the assumption of the immediate constitutes a kind of knowledge, because we have no way of verifying beforehand that this assumption itself is certain, that is, that it bears on our

⁹¹ DH, p.222.

⁹² For an exposition of this meaning close to Jacobi's time see *Ainsworth's Latin Dictionary: Morell's Abridgment* (1828), p.310.

reasoning with apodictic certainty. We can also note that, to a certain degree, this also means that the medium (sensibility) and the other end (the reality that affects us) must also be taken to be real, according to Jacobi. He does not elaborate on this point here, but considering his later expositions on the matter I believe it should be understood as the direct consequence of assuming sensibility as a medium: we have to assume the medium and the resultant cognition to be real as well.

It is interesting to note that Jacobi's taxation of transcendental idealism does in no way constitute a *refutation*. Rather, he shows that there is an inherent negative realism *within* transcendental idealism. This might be the reason why Jacobi's relationship to Fichte was not one of outright hostility (see [p.197]) and that Fichte even to a certain degree granted this point. What Jacobi does conclude, is that, because Kant forgets about one end of the medium, as he appeared to do, it remains up in the air to what extent our cognition spontaneously transforms the message. After all, if it is impossible to reconstruct in what way reality affected us, there is no way of determining if our cognition of reality is correct. According to Jacobi, the best candidate for this unknowable and thus "blind" ability of transformation is the role that the imagination plays in Kant's philosophy. Despite the fact that this devalues the achievement of Kant's philosophy in terms of our the security of our knowledge claims, Jacobi still takes the fact that Kant, perhaps unwittingly, made this profound problem in human cognition apparent to be a major achievement in itself: 'our entire cognition is then nothing but determinations of our own selves, knotted in consciousness',⁹³ in the face of which transcendental idealism can claim 'no other ground than thoroughgoing absolute ignorance.'⁹⁴

⁹³ DH, p.225.

⁹⁴ DH, p.229-30.

Put another way, if we assume that a knowledge claim is true *because* we can legitimately attribute absolute certitude to it, Jacobi argues that the traditional ways of attributing certitude to a claim, through either reason or sensibility, are either impossible (sensibility) or seemingly trivial or misleading (reason). However, Jacobi does not deny certitude completely: it seems undeniable that we have an intuitive understanding of it, and even have some measure for it. It is for this reason that Jacobi connects certitude to immediacy, thereby resulting in the state of affairs that any attempt to bring certitude into mediation, or, more specifically, into particular knowledge claims, is illegitimate. As Jacobi puts it, someone who holds fast to a *specific* certitude, such as the fact that things that appear external to us are actually external to us, must deal in ‘*blind certitude*’ because we have reasonable doubt concerning our ability to prove this claim.⁹⁵ In this instance, immediate certitude has crossed the gap towards mediation illegitimately. In the face of this, Jacobi applies the term ‘belief’ to whatever cannot strictly be proven.⁹⁶

This brings us to the first of many avenues of reasoning that Jacobi attacks on the basis of this negative realism: what we perceive to have causality cannot be reliably applied to reality or real ‘things’. Jacobi is explicitly following Kant’s position on the thing-in-itself here (although perhaps not for the same reasons as Kant): there is no way of inferring claims about a phenomenal thing to a supposed corresponding thing-in-itself and we can never extricate ourselves from the conclusion that phenomenal

⁹⁵ DH, p.22.

⁹⁶ The notable exception to this, Jacobi adds in parentheses, is ‘our instantaneous [augenblickliches] consciousness’, which will become important when we consider Jacobi’s full position in chapter 4. Considered from his mature position, Jacobi probably means to say that our consciousness itself is not perceived but rather intuited immediately. Curiously, Di Giovanni’s translation of the text omits this exception.

perceptions only pertain to subjective determinations, even though they ‘appear to us *as* outside us.’⁹⁷

Having examined the general framework of Jacobi’s realism, we can now consider the main points he develops throughout *DH*.

4. Revelation and immediacy

One of the central notions in *DH* is that of “revelation” [Offenbarung]. Jacobi reserves the term for the explanatory mode involved in naïve realism, to which Jacobi refers as empirical realism⁹⁸ (following Kant) and ‘resolute’ [entschiedene] realism⁹⁹ (because adherents are often adamant, even in the face of skeptical doubt). Jacobi is not wholly dismissive of this position, but he believes that it can be more thoroughly examined from a philosophical standpoint. This position is realist with regard to the claim that things are taken up as actually external and in its tacit claim that all cognition ultimately derives from sensible cognitive access to these external things.¹⁰⁰ Jacobi then remarks that this position can offer no justification for these claims, and that the word that the general public uses for this set of implicit claims, revelation¹⁰¹ (as in the process through which things reveal themselves to us), properly expresses something that is ‘veritably miraculous’¹⁰² [wahrhaft wunderbar]. That is to say, this type of realist offers no explanation beyond the mere fact of his own conviction and is not committed to providing rational arguments in support of its convictions.

⁹⁷ *DH*, p.21

⁹⁸ *DH*, p.21.

⁹⁹ *DH*, p.50

¹⁰⁰ *DH*, p.51.

¹⁰¹ Jacobi most likely means to tie into the common language use of the terms, as in ‘This has been a revelation to me.’

¹⁰² *DH*, p.51.

It is at this point that Jacobi intercedes. He remarks that this realism cannot respond to the idealist or skeptic. The naïve realist solution to the problem is against ‘the genuine [ächte] spirit of philosophy’, in his view.¹⁰³ Jacobi’s own position, which he has previously described as that of the ‘genuine [eigentlicher] realist’¹⁰⁴ is designed to solve exactly this problem. What might easily be overlooked in this passage, is the fact that Jacobi actually criticizes the reference that the naïve realist might make to the immediacy of external objects in order to defend his own position. He recognizes that this claim is made because we have no cognitive access to what is ‘*actually* mediated’¹⁰⁵ [eigentliche Mittelbare] in the appearance of externality. He disagrees with the naïve realist claim that this problem necessitates that we recognize a ‘natural means’¹⁰⁶ [natürliches Mittel], by which he refers to the recourse to revelation that is made by the naïve realist, as drawing an inference from ‘remote and highly incomplete experiences’¹⁰⁷ to something that is represented. A reference to the natural means in which objects reveal themselves to us thus only begs the question as to how we, in turn, cognize these natural means (for example: the senses), the concept of which can only refer to very incomplete or indefinite experiences.

In short, Jacobi’s criticism with regard to the naïve realist entails two points: i) the naïve realist does not answer the idealist’s doubts concerning the external existence of things, and ii) his explanation of this externality does not really explain anything at all, because it does not recognize that the premises that serve as grounds upon which it is concluded revelation is the means of access to externality are based on incomplete experiences.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ *DH*, pp.53-54.

¹⁰⁴ *DH*, p.21.

¹⁰⁵ *DH*, p.53.

¹⁰⁶ *DH*, p.53.

¹⁰⁷ *DH*, p.54.

¹⁰⁸ *DH*, p.55-56.

Jacobi's own, more refined notion of an immediacy that stands opposed to cognition introduces an idealist argument. Describing the externality of things as immediacy is only part of the account, because, in claiming that the external object has 'reality'¹⁰⁹ (is a 'Wirkliches'), we are actually also claiming that *we*, who are cognizant, are really existing. This is a form of internality that stands opposed to externality and that is tacitly assumed to be real when we speak of something outside of us, and both appear to us in the form of a 'twofold revelation'.¹¹⁰ It is between these two poles that immediacy takes place according to Jacobi. He argues that this is the exact state of affairs that any recourse to representations [Vorstellungen] presupposes: the fact that before understanding takes place, before cognition and mediacy can be spoken of, we have to recognize that we presuppose the reality of internality and externality, as an opposition that predates and structures our cognitive claims. This sounds a lot like Reinhold's 'Satz des Bewußtseins', which is not that odd considering the fact that both authors develop several of Kant's conclusions.

We've seen that Jacobi presents a similar analysis of Kant's position in the appendix. This passage offers us a lot more in terms of the implications of this position. For instance, it means that cognition is never completely reducible to claims about external objects, which in turn implies that the naïve realist cannot take recourse to a "neutral" or non-problematic access to an externally real world, because cognition is equally the product of internal consciousness. Jacobi argues that the latter 'contributes just as

¹⁰⁹ DH, p.64.

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 'Nothing enters *into the soul* between the taking to be true [Wahrnehmung] of the real as external to me and the real in me'. Jacobi takes this moment to say that this 'internal consciousness and the external object' are the same as the 'I and you, which also appeared in *SB* and sometimes recur in Jacobi's other texts. Although he does not draw out the implications, this appears to either mean that all cognition of others starts with the construal of the other person as an external object or that externality has the same basic structure as the way in which we construe of another person.

much'¹¹¹ as the external object, although this does not seem to be a reference to any measurable contribution, but rather to the fact that, since immediacy lies in the interaction between the two, we are, strictly speaking, forced to say that the two sides are equal because their exact point of intermingling remains inconceivable to us. The naïve realist must concede that the external object cannot be conceived of without an internal consciousness. Conversely, it also means that the idealist has to give an account of the external object that accords it an equal status to that which he accords to internal consciousness. He cannot reduce the externality to a representation held within internal consciousness, since it is exactly this externality that must be presupposed in order to account for the degree of passivity that the internal consciousness has with regard to representations (for instance: the spontaneity of the contents of experience).

The fact that Jacobi adopts the term 'revelation'¹¹² in order to describe this immediate and inconceivable interconnection of internality and externality means that he applies his previous characterization of that notion to this connection: it is 'veritably wondrous', in the sense that this connection is the absolute zero point of our explanatory schemes. As will soon become abundantly clear, Jacobi believes that our philosophical accounts become impotent when we try to infer something about this revelation (which is why he describes it as immediate), which he believes to be a more fundamental characterization of the naïve realist's intuition. It is solely for the origin of external and internal perceptions that Jacobi reserves the term 'taking to be true'¹¹³ [Wahrnehmung]. Interestingly enough, it is through grappling with the nature of cognition as mediacy that Jacobi concludes that immediacy lies

¹¹¹ *DH*, p.63.

¹¹² *DH*, p.64.

¹¹³ *DH*, p.64. I apologize for taking recourse to such an oddly constructed translation, but since *Empfindung* and *Wahrnehmung* need to be systematically distinct, I thought it necessary to translate the latter as taking-to-be-true.

between these two perceptions. It is important to note that Jacobi does not object to the naïve realist as such, but that his own adherence to the spirit of philosophy leads him down this avenue of research that prompts him to formulate a stronger position of realism.

5. The sources of Jacobi's relationism between external and internal perception

Although his explication of the implications for realism is novel, Jacobi's core claim that external perception and internal perception are inextricably related is not Jacobi's own invention. Since Jacobi does not credit anyone for this insight, I will briefly discuss two likely authors, any one of which, if not both, might have been the source for this relationism. The most famous is, of course, Kant who, in his attack on rational psychology, discussed the way in which 'outer sense' and 'inner sense' are both dependent on time. Since time is, according to Jacobi not a form of intuition, but a concept of the understanding (succession)¹¹⁴ that is ultimately derived from experience, this means that inner sense cannot yield a reliable access to the soul, because we already find it filtered by the understanding (at the very least through time, which presupposes a relation between two states of affairs). In a way, Jacobi thus radicalizes Kant's specific arguments against rational psychology towards a way of characterizing the limits of our mode of explanation, showing that the soul or the self as such remains outside of our perception and that any inference from perception towards the self is illegitimate.

While he could very well have derived the limitations of internal and external perceptions from Kant's characterization of inner and outer sense, it seems unlikely that Kant is also the source for Jacobi's characterization of these perceptions as relational. For a likely source we need look no further than Reinhold's *Briefe über*

¹¹⁴ *DH*, p.174/2.

die kantische Philosophie, specifically the sixth letter. It presents the conclusions that Kant drew from his criticism of rational psychology in outline.¹¹⁵ For instance, Reinhold underlines the idea that we need to assume an ‘inconceivable essence of our soul’.¹¹⁶ Reinhold also remarks that the distinction between the soul and the body arises from experience and that this fact cannot be ‘reasoned away’. Ultimately, this distinction is nothing more than a ‘distinction [Verschiedenheit] of the predicates of inner and outer sense’.¹¹⁷

We can then follow Jacobi’s next step: if this is true of these concepts, this must be true of all concepts: they are derived from perception and are integrally produced by the understanding. The relationality between external perception and internal perception is an expression of the way in which the understanding grasps perception, through which we can only distinctly grasp an internal perception through a relation to external perception and vice versa. Reinhold’s version of this argument for the body and the soul, whether he really meant to imply this by ‘distinction’ or not, certainly evokes this relationality in the case of body and soul. It is difficult to describe a soul without describing it as animating a body, and conversely, it is difficult to describe a body without describing it as animated by a soul. The concepts seem to be related. At the very least, this seems to be true of the Cartesian and Leibnizian approaches, which are the traditional referents for the discipline of rational psychology.

We should be clear about the shift in methodology that Kant first introduced: we no longer infer claims about real things, but only about the things insofar as we have concepts about them, and Jacobi’s realism in particular is committed to elaborating the implications of this shift.

¹¹⁵ As it was printed in *Der Teutsche Merkur* (1787), 3 Viertelj, pp.67-88.

¹¹⁶ *Merkur*, p.72

¹¹⁷ *DH*, p.64.

6. *Negative realism and its uses*

An application of negative realism can be found in Jacobi's criticism of grounding, a type of proof in metaphysics whereby the being of one thing is proven by its relation to another thing, that serves as its "ground." This criticism is effectively a way to apply Jacobi's own realism to his reasoning in *SB*. In Jacobi's view, grounding must be understood in its literal sense, if it is to make any sense at all. When we attempt to ground something, we are claiming that it rests on something else, by virtue of which alone it is actual. This operation commits one to the thesis that, in using rational grounding, one claims to have cognitive access to both the thing to be grounded and the ground it rests on. This thesis is often expressed as the principle of sufficient reason.¹¹⁸ Jacobi has previously argued that cognition must refer to a presupposed external thing that is separated from an internal thing. Internal and external perceptions are bound by a relation, which also means that they are immediately given as related, as non-identical. Jacobi has reason to dispute the legitimacy of the operation of grounding because it violates this immediacy by, in effect, claiming that conscious cognition can bridge the gap and grasp the external thing in its full determinacy. Consciousness can only grasp this immediacy as a relation, as mediation. The operation of grounding violates the precepts of negative realism in that it disregards the fact that our cognition is limited to the relationality between internal and external perceptions.

Jacobi more directly objects to another implicit feature of the operation of grounding, which will become important for his reception of Schelling:

The principle of ground is easy to explain and demonstrate. It says nothing more than Aristotle's *totum parte prius esse necesse est* (the whole is

¹¹⁸ *DH*, p.93.

necessarily prior to its parts) and this should be called nothing else than *idem est idem*, from this perspective.¹¹⁹

How does it follow that the claim that the part precedes the whole amounts to the fact that two propositions are declared to be identical? We've seen that, for Jacobi, apodictic certainty lies in the recognition of the equivalence of certain identity claims. Identity is a feature of rational cognition, but cannot be inferred to apply to real entities. In Jacobi's opinion, we have no way of verifying that particular instances of perceived identities can in any way be found in reality. This point lies at the core of the argument that Jacobi is making here. Since identity is only legitimately found in rational cognition, which, as a concept, is subsequently derived from sensible cognition, Jacobi can state that 'we only become conscious of the manifold in a representation'.¹²⁰ This is the natural implication of Jacobi's negatively realist conclusions concerning identity. What, after all, would it be to recognize a manifold in reality without making an identity claim? Really existing things are not perceived, we merely perceive relations. This point is important to note, since Jacobi's notion of immediacy intentionally avoids all of the problems involved in the ancient problem of deciding whether the one or the many are primal. With regards to immediacy, we simply have no way of deciding.

Ultimately, in the example Jacobi is criticizing in this passage, the illegitimacy of the derivation of the possibility of a thing from the actuality of a thing, the error can be described as confusing the emergence of a thing in our representations (as part or as a whole) with the emergence of the thing itself (from immediacy). At best, the principle of sufficient reason can draw conclusions about representations. Jacobi vehemently objects to the idea that these conclusions also hold for external things

¹¹⁹ *DH*, p.94.

¹²⁰ *DH*, p.94.

themselves. Hence, the operation of grounding has no way of legitimately relating a (perceived) part to a (real) whole, and ultimately merely expresses the operation of rational cognition to affirm identity (for instance: that the concept of a part relates to the concept of a whole, and relating a part to the whole is merely the reiteration of this identity of the part), which cannot actually apply to externally real things. Over and above its pretention, the principle of sufficient reason thus only expresses the pre-existing identifications already made on the basis of representations, which are in turn the mediate result of our cognitive apparatus.

This criticism applies to Jacobi's own method as well. We've seen that he frequently shows that certain things have to be assumed for cognition to be possible. However, as we've seen in Jacobi's criticism of Kant, this argument is always supported by a reference to the necessary way of thinking about something, and not about the attempt to infer knowledge about how cognition is possible (in terms of its origins). It seems that, in Jacobi's view, the necessary way of thinking of something is always the most useful one. This contention provides some insight into the problems that Jacobi faced in his attempts to provide types of evidence that do not occur through traditional avenues of demonstration.

Jacobi attributes the public response to *SB* to an inability to understand the problems involved in providing a rational ground. In his estimation, whenever the public hears of someone who refuses to provide a rational ground, it will assume that this person is an advocate of 'blind belief'.¹²¹ This is largely in line with the early perceptions of Jacobi's works, particularly with those that we've seen put forward by Reinhold and Kant in chapter 1. Jacobi also refers to the way in which he was characterized during the Starck affair¹²² and the reviews of his own and Wizenmann's works

¹²¹ *DH*, p.19.

¹²² A defamation suit which Johann August von Starck brought against the Berlin Enlighteners for accusing him of obscurantism. Jacobi

that appeared in the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*.¹²³ It should go without saying that Jacobi is not opposed to reasoning as such, but merely to a type of reasoning that he believes to be particularly weak and illegitimate when seen from the standpoint of his negative realism. On the other hand, the popular response to *SB* is fairly understandable, since it is only with the articulation of negative realism in *DH* that Jacobi's opposition to the principle of sufficient reason gains any kind of argumentative clarity with regard to how one can adhere to a position that objects to the principle of sufficient reason.

Near the end of *DH*, Jacobi develops the status of reality as seen from the perspective of negative realism. Whereas, up to this point he had largely discussed the necessary perception of externality (in addition to an internal consciousness), he now argues that, with regard to our representations, the 'real itself' [*Würkliche selbst*]¹²⁴ cannot be presented [*dargestellt werden*] in the mere representation'.¹²⁵ Strictly speaking, this means that reality is not a property or characteristic (similar to Kant, not a predicate¹²⁶), and cannot be legitimately found in our conscious cognition, nor apply to any epistemic claim. Here, we find another example of Jacobi's attempt to show that the gap between 'immediate taking to be true [*unmittelbaren Wahrnehmung*]'¹²⁷ and mediate representations or

cautiously defended Starck because he believed that the Berlin Enlighteners, with whom he had clashed himself, were attempting to destroy those who opposed them.

¹²³ *DH*, pp.15-16, 28.

¹²⁴ I translate 'das Würkliche' as 'reality' rather than 'actual' because the latter would confuse the issue. 'Actual' would suggest a logical relationship with possible, which is exactly what Jacobi seeks to question and ultimately destabilize. Choosing to translate with 'reality' avoids the implication of inference from actual to possible.

¹²⁵ *DH*, p.139.

¹²⁶ Cf. Kant's claim that existence is not a predicate, in *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B629.

¹²⁷ *DH*, p.140.

cognitions cannot be crossed. In the same way, he argues, consciousness cannot be presented outside of consciousness:¹²⁸

Perception of reality and the feeling of truth,
consciousness and life are one and the same thing.

How should we conceive of these disparate issues as being in the same class and even as being identical? Jacobi gives us no clues, but I would argue that what all of these have in common is that they are immediately perceived and, strictly speaking, cannot be articulated, or even grasped, from the perspective of mediation, which amounts to making them the same thing for consciousness. Jacobi might have encountered misinterpretations of his position on exactly this point (as some of the things enumerated above were mentioned in *SB*), since he added a footnote to this discussion, in which he begs the reader ‘not to forget what is meant here by immediate’ and refers the reader back to the discussion about revelation.¹²⁹

From all of this we can conclude that this type of reality, the type of reality that is only negatively present to cognition, is only indirectly and indistinctly *felt* as a subject-independent truth. It should be remarked that Jacobi goes to great pains to characterize our means of accessing this reality as ineffable, indirect and negative. For instance, we don’t know truth itself, but we *feel* it, which is receptive in a way that does not claim mastery or direct access.¹³⁰ In this way, our cognition *presupposes* the existence of external reality, but any attempt to make this determinate can never proceed beyond the formal or general assumption or feeling, because attributing any kind of determination to it might open the doors to a correspondence theory that would be extremely

¹²⁸ *DH*, p.140

¹²⁹ *DH*, p.138.

¹³⁰ See the next section for an analysis of the common reference point in feeling for both Jacobi and Herder, as based on the works of Sulzer, and the different conceptual decisions in all three accounts.

suspicious from the point of view of Jacobi's negative realism. These disparate issues are considered together only in the sense that we register them indirectly. Even referring with Kant to a manifold, would go too far for Jacobi, and would be saying nothing at all about external reality, because our construal of a manifold is based on mediation and its peculiar way of relating to externality.

Jacobi's emphatic reference to immediacy is therefore meant to designate these ineffable, yet completely necessary, presuppositions for our cognition, which, he *de facto* argues, we should consider to be more fundamental to our cognition than any type of mediated reasoning. This argument also extends to our own existence of which we only have a 'feeling of existence'.¹³¹

Strictly speaking, I cannot have a representation of [the I], because the characteristic of its essence is *to distinguish itself from all perceptions and representations*. It is that which I, in the proper understanding [im eigentlichsten Verstande], call my *self*. Of this reality, I have the most complete conviction, the most intimate consciousness, since it is the very source of my consciousness, which is the subject of all of its alterations.¹³²

What Jacobi is introducing here is a central notion of the self, which remains distinct from any content of consciousness, and which houses the agency that presupposes the externality of the object and the interiority of consciousness. This self operates under the same parameters as the soul in Leibniz, to which Jacobi refers copiously in this last part of the book.

What is characteristic for Jacobi's approach is the fact that even the self is subject to negative realism. It must be assumed as real, because it is the condition of all cognitive operations, but we

¹³¹ *DH*, p.173.

¹³² *DH*, p.175.

only have an indirect and indefinite feeling of its existence. The reasons for this should be obvious by now: any account of the self must proceed through mediation and is therefore, by its very nature, illegitimate reasoning, because we do not have a conscious cognition of the self in its full efficacy. Relating the notion of the self to Jacobi's doctrine of negative realism shows where the standard interpretations of Jacobi as a *Gefühlsphilosoph*¹³³ go awry: while Jacobi does recognize that certain special kinds of feelings should properly be recognized as referring to something more fundamental than certain types of reasoning, these feelings neither constitute an indubitable access, as a kind of primal intuition (since feelings are a response to something, not an access to the thing itself), nor are feelings *grosso modo* more important than reasons (since Jacobi only refers to two feelings here: the feeling for our existence and the feeling for truth). Instead, Jacobi treats feelings in a formal way: they do not allow us to further determine what is felt, or what exactly it was that evoked the feeling (nor are they, strictly speaking, *applied* in our practical action), but if carefully examined, these formal feelings should be acknowledged as essential parts of the human individual, which might serve to remind us that we do exist and do have an intimation of there being an absolutely objective truth. Jacobi thus introduces an indefinite feeling in order to show what we generally assume, but can neither prove nor directly cognize.

Most of the very last part of the *DH* is dedicated to showing two things: how the understanding functions as a primary framework for human cognition, despite the fact that all contents of human cognition are derived from immediate sensibility and the role that the notion of God plays with regard to human cognition, as a special type of category, separate from the understanding.

¹³³ These readings were already abounding in Jacobi's day. See Thorild's letter to Reinhold from January 12th 1800: 'Thus Jacobi only wants to feel and Bardili only wants to think.' In: *Reinhold's Leben und litterarisches Wirken* (1825) p.283.

Since both problems are heavily entrenched in Jacobi's negative realism, and will help set the stage for a comparison with Herder, Reinhold and Neeb, who we will discuss at length.

There are generally two ways of approaching the understanding, here understood in the traditional sense as that set of basic concepts that help us make sense of experience. These two approaches can be described as the rationalist and the empiricist approach, although it would be quite hard to make these positions overlap neatly with the complex positions of those philosophers that we tend to associate with these labels. We make use of these two approaches to the understanding only to highlight how Jacobi's approach is unique.

The rationalists tend to claim that they do not doubt the legitimacy of the understanding and its categories, and that the concepts of the understanding are not only applicable to experience but express the basic structure of reality (or at least provide a non-problematic and direct way of expressing reality). As a consequence, the rationalist cannot provide an account of how the understanding genetically develops in the human mind, since he is limited to the affirmation of the efficacy of the full grown understanding as such.

The empiricist, on the opposite side, would claim that all contents and structures of human cognition, including the understanding, are ultimately derived from experience. He tends to describe the understanding as a complex aggregate of concepts. The rationalist, on the other hand, takes the understanding to present the objective logical laws of reasoning. This means that the empiricist is able to provide a *general* genetic account of the development of the understanding, but at the cost of two limitations to his account. For one, he is unable to account for *specific* concepts of the understanding (for instance, how we come to understand time through basing the concept of succession on experience) because he has no way of specifying what happened in

past experience without already presupposing those same concepts of the understanding which he sought to show as developmentally acquired. Secondly, he is unable to explain why one seems to have the concepts of the understanding in common with the rest of mankind, that is, he can't explain why heterogeneous experiential conditions yield homogeneous concepts.

If the concepts of the understanding truly derive completely from experience, this would seem to commit the *realist* to some tricky reasoning about a generalizable structure of experience that accounts for some seemingly species-wide shared concepts in the understanding. It is not coincidental that *DH* is a book composed of a synthesizing commentary that brings two philosophers, who can be read as adherents of empiricism (Hume)¹³⁴ and rationalism (Leibniz), together in a surprising way. Jacobi's enduring argument is that these philosophers have positions that are actually closer to one another and a great deal more inventive than they are commonly considered to be. Due to his negative realism, Jacobi must object to both positions. To the rationalist he must object because Jacobi has to uphold a strict distinction between the immediacy of perception (as given) and mediate cognition. Thus, although we are free to affirm the cognitive application of the understanding, we can neither verify it in perception, nor claim that it is an apt or non-problematic access to reality. We need a genetic account of the concepts of the understanding because, if we did claim that concepts of the understanding somehow derive from immediately given perception, we would be obliged to consider these concepts to be above all reproach. In this case, we would have to assume that the understanding, and the cognitive reasoning based upon it, is a form of access to reality, because, as previously stated, we have to assume that the self is real in some way. However, the only access

¹³⁴ Hume never described his position as empiricist but, due to the way Sulzer initially introduced Hume's first *Enquiry*, he was generally considered to be in this camp.

to reality in this case would be to that exercised by the human being, and not to externality as such. We will see in chapter 4 that this self-spontaneous solipsism would create insurmountable problems for Jacobi's account of the self and its practical agency.

Jacobi would object to the empiricist that the understanding, as stated before, seems to have a special place in human cognition in that it organizes particular claims (time, space and causality tend to be organizational ways of structuring claims).¹³⁵ In that regard, some credence must be given to the implicit rationalist claim that the understanding holds a special place in cognition. It is for these reasons that Jacobi opts for a genetic account of the understanding that attempts to avoid all of these problems. His solution is to maintain the conceptual status of the understanding, meaning that it derives, like all concepts, from the immediate perception of something 'really [wirklich] present'.¹³⁶ How does this distinguish cognitions arrived at on the basis of the understanding from any other cognition?

Jacobi argues that we need the understanding for a different problem: that of inter-subjectivity. We need the understanding to make sense of the *supposition* that there is another individual. The understanding therefore has a special status because, without it, we cannot conceive of an individual in the same way in which we consider ourselves to be an individual. Catching ourselves in this supposition, we discover how important the complex of concepts that we call the understanding is:

¹³⁵ Although we have not discussed it, Jacobi, like most of his contemporaries except Kant considered space and time to be concepts of the understanding. We will see that most realists follow him in this regard, although by that time this claim had become an explicit renunciation of Kant's attempt to make space and time forms of intuition.

¹³⁶ Starting with what would be page 177, the original edition of *DH* starts numbering its pages again with page 171. In order to keep track of this printing error, we will refer here to page 175/2.

Accordingly, as an individual is posited, we must, at the same time, necessarily also posit within him the notions of unity and multiplicity, of acting and suffering, of extension and succession.¹³⁷

In a way, the projects of the rationalists and the empiricists have skirted around this point, since what these positions have in common at the core of their claims is the assumption that reasoning is in some way tied to communicability: why else would they bother to put their reasoning in words, other than in an attempt to convince others (which presupposes that the other can understand their reasoning)? Jacobi thus prioritizes the understanding as that which construes the supposition of an other mind as a rational agent that is capable of similar reasoning to us and, presumably, this also holds true in the practical sense: we can construe the other mind as a rational agent that is capable of the same kind of purposive rational action as we are.

7. *"Distinctness" as a key epistemic quality of rationality*

Although one might easily miss it, distinctness is actually an important epistemic quality in Jacobi's account of rationality. We will now reconstruct what he meant by this idea. Once we understand Jacobi's conception of distinctness, we find that his arguments for negative realism are of great importance for this idea. As an explanation of the *nature* of the understanding, this explanation is not very convincing. It also does not explain the understanding's genetic development. For this reason, Jacobi attempts to tie the understanding to the restrictions that are specific to the human being. We should take note of his method of reasoning here: the only moment at which the understanding occurs to us as essentially different from regular cognition is the moment when we try to conceive of an individual and find

¹³⁷ DH, p.174/2.

ourselves needing to ascribe the concepts of the understanding to the individual. This also provides an indication of how Jacobi will conclude *DH*.

It should first be noted that ‘the individual’ does not necessarily *only* refer to human beings as it is also used to refer to animals. Jacobi contends that animal cognition is similar to human cognition and that animals do not merely function mechanically.¹³⁸ At the same time, we are also inclined to say that human cognition is more complicated, perhaps even that it is more effective than animal cognition in terms of determining a scope of action. Jacobi’s articulation of this difference is that human beings have generally attained a higher degree of ‘distinctness’¹³⁹ [Deutlichkeit] in consciousness. We will explore Jacobi’s technical definition of life in chapter 4, but for now it is important to note that Jacobi attributes consciousness, as a representation that presupposes an external something and an internal consciousness, to every form of life. This might create the impression that he is claiming that animals have a type of self-consciousness (since consciousness involves the internal perspective), but all he really intends to say is that an individual involves consciousness and that the basic structure of consciousness can only function *through* these presuppositions, even though the individual in question might not recognize it as such (this recognition would be a self-conscious reflexive complexity).

A very simple example might illustrate Jacobi’s point here: for an animal to have an expectation of being fed, its consciousness of the expected food object can only be possible because its cognition of it (again, however limited such a cognition may be)

¹³⁸ *Werke*, Band 2, pp.8-9.

¹³⁹ *DH*, p.176/2. This concept is likely derived from Sulzer’s analysis of reason, to which Jacobi frequently refers. Cf. Sulzer, *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften*, Band 1 (1773), 201. Sulzer speaks of ‘degrees of distinctness in consciousness.’

can internally be conceived of as an attainable external object. Therefore, even in a being with only a relatively undifferentiated form of individuality, the presupposition of an external and an internal must be present, although this necessity can easily remain unrecognized. What, then, does it mean to be more *distinct*?

Distinctness depends on the distinctness of consciousness, that is, on the degree in which we, intensively or extensively, distinguish ourselves from the things outside of us.¹⁴⁰

So, according to Jacobi's conception of distinctness, we can say that human cognition is more distinct than that of the animal *if* it is able to more carefully distinguish between ourselves and the things outside of us. In essence, Jacobi claims that self-cognition must necessarily occur through a distinction from an external something. We've seen that Jacobi has gone through great pains to show the enormously complex applications of these relatively simple opposites. For instance, although we tend to externalize our representations, we might realize (with Kant) that these representations are, in their appearing (and certainly as cognitions) more indicative of an internal cognitive apparatus than they are of an external something. Consequently, we may realize that, despite the former being the case, we have to recognize a reality that can only be negatively construed, according to the way in which we *do not* have access to it and furthermore that we are, by virtue of this underlying schema of externality/internality, obliged to construe our immediate relation to this reality as something external to us.

This chain of reasoning forces one to recognize the necessity of the external-internal schema as a presupposition of all consciousness. Within Jacobi's model of distinctness as an epistemic feature, all of these moves must, at the very least by analogy, be increasingly more distinct than they are in animal

¹⁴⁰ DH, p.176/2.

cognition. Similarly, Jacobi concludes that, when an individual has not achieved a higher degree of epistemic distinctness between its internal and external perceptions, we might well call it ‘non-rational’¹⁴¹. This remark is not as clumsy as it seems, because, given this account, rationality actually doesn’t become maximally effective until the individual has achieved a certain degree of distinctness, most notably the distinction between the external thing and the internal concept of it. This distinction allows us to perform complex actions, reasoning and the revision of concepts, and ultimately affords us a greater sphere of agency. After all, in an everyday frame of reference we utilize the word ‘rational’ for a similar sophistication of mental acuity and casually deny the rationality of someone who is unable or unwilling to attain such a sphere of agency.¹⁴² In this line of thought Jacobi objects to popular enlightenment conceptions of reason as an instrument (like the torch), where ‘reason has degenerated into a mere style and methodology’.¹⁴³

Jacobi’s conception of rationality does not simply proceed by analogy with the animal. He is committed to a model of distinctness that, to a certain degree, can be *perfectible*. Jacobi introduces an interesting subversion of what is usually meant by perfectible, by first introducing a genetic account of the notion of God, who is the ultimate standard for perfectibility in terms of self-sufficiency and absolute freedom.¹⁴⁴ In a revision in the *Werke* version of the text, Jacobi introduces the problem succinctly albeit cryptically:

To understand this exalted being, so see into his nature, to *explain* [ergründen] it, is called to search for God, which makes us *become* God. How

¹⁴¹ *DH*, p.177.

¹⁴² This remark is but one of many examples where Jacobi uses common language use as something his account has to be in line with.

¹⁴³ *DH*, p.178.

¹⁴⁴ *DH*, p.177/2.

foolish! We are amazed, even terrified, because, for us finite beings, who are therefore necessarily restricted and conditioned in our existence and acting, and who are thus essentially imperfect, a being that is *only in himself*, a thoroughly *perfect* [vollkommenste] being, appears [erscheint] as an *impossible* being. What kind of a creator would not also be bound to appear for a creature?¹⁴⁵

The last question is a rhetorical one, asked by Jacobi's fictional discussion partner. It is designed to show how problematic our notion of God is with regard to the claim that our cognition must be assumed to originate in perception. Any attempt to go beyond this would proceed through our mediation and fails to recognize that the explanation that this supplies makes us become God, since we explain God by virtue of our own mediation. The *notion* of God presents us with a puzzle, because it cannot appear in perception, which is limited to experience. Reasoning that utilizes this notion will thus dictate that it is impossible for God to appear to us. What is important for our understanding of distinctness is that the standard of perfectibility that we utilize for distinctness is not derived from the understanding itself, but is rather derived from an inconceivable God.

The notion of a totally non-intuitable (and therefore impossible) and perfect God must originate somewhere, since Jacobi eschews innate ideas. Jacobi solves this problem through a reference to the myth of a golden age, which is traditionally located in a period in which man was perfect (as opposed to his current ruinous state). Jacobi now speaks of the I, or the soul, the specific individuality of man, as a *distinct* entity:

What *distinctly expresses* the *I* in man is *said to be* [heißt] his reason and that **is** [sic] his reason. If the

¹⁴⁵ Jacobi, *Werke*, Band 2, p.275.

I is in accord with itself in its acts, then it is in accord with reason. – Therefore, when the I *accords*, although merely in line with its own drives [Trieben] and the laws of its possible agreement, then it governs itself or is governed by its reason alone. The possibility or impossibility of such a self-governance depends on the objects that the soul strives for. These strivings [Bestrebungen] can be restricted in such a way that their goals can only be achieved by its reason alone, that is, through itself in as far as it has distinct concepts. And when such a state of restriction is the golden age, it might well be achieved.¹⁴⁶

Notice the reference to distinctiveness as the expression of reason's essential activity. The higher insight into the internal-external distinctions with regard to cognition is supposed to safeguard the I's self-governance, on this account. How can this be the case? We can unpack this claim through a simple example. We've seen that one of Jacobi's early foils was the empirical realist, who is forced to assume that there is something real that "fills" our sensibility (and subsequently our cognition) without causing a rift between immediacy and mediation. How would the empirical realist be able to claim self-governance, if his position forces him to conclude that all of his experience and all of the contents of his cognition, the only things that he can recognize as essentially belonging to his I, are either dictated by a deity (as in the first notion of revelation that Jacobi discusses and rejects) or is part of a natural mechanistic causality? Conversely, the rationalist might aspire to unattainable moral or practical ends, such as the highest good or the perfect state. Jacobi would rebuke these attempts as well because of his claim that it is *distinctness* that allows us to connect our drives to attainable goals. Jacobi's position dictates that a practical goal must always be in accord with the highest degree of distinctness, and that

¹⁴⁶ *DH*, pp.195-196.

goals that violate negative realism are therefore, strictly speaking, unattainable. For example, an attempt to reconcile the human being with a pantheist account of substance would be an impossible goal, because it lies beyond the restrictions of the I's self-governance: any notion of substance that attempts to escape the limits of mediation is still an externalization that is internally conceived.

We have previously seen Jacobi claim that the highest degree of distinctness is a condition for the perfectibility of the human being. This is why Jacobi remarks that if we call the explication of the way in which human cognition is restricted (which is what distinctness amounts to, from a practical perspective) the golden age, which is traditionally associated with a perfect humanity, it can be considered to be an attainable perfection.

8. *God and rationality*

What does all of this imply for the notion of God? The interpretations of Jacobi as a purely religious thinker would likely attribute a traditional notion of God to Jacobi. However, Jacobi's notion of God is not at all traditional and, as I'll show, continually elaborated on in conjunction with Jacobi's negative realism. Jacobi argues that 'the more and the longer' the self-governing I¹⁴⁷ 'exerts itself in order to learn about God and another world, it will only, in the end, see more distinctly that it sees nothing, and will cease to direct itself towards an empty place.'¹⁴⁸ Jacobi thus claims that, from the perspective of distinctness, from that of practical self-governance, one must slowly let go of the attempt to learn about God or another world (i.e. heaven). Why would this be the case? Jacobi has *re-contextualized the attempt to know as a practical act*, using 'attempting to learn' instead of to 'know' as his model.

¹⁴⁷ Jacobi writes 'self-governing eye' which is an analogy for the I that we have not discussed.

¹⁴⁸ *DH*, p.196.

One of the main characteristics of knowledge is that it is a product of human action, which is more in line with today's scientific emphasis on the practical side of knowledge than the epistemological position which was maintained by most of Jacobi's contemporaries (i.e. who relate knowledge to a system of philosophy which is, in turn, made possible by a metaphysica specialis). This means that knowledge claims are not based exclusively on their truth value, but on a specific set of conditions Jacobi presented above: namely, i) that we have the drive to attain this epistemological goal (achieving knowledge) and ii) that the target of this goal is attainable. More narrowly defined from the highest point of distinction, which is an extension of Jacobi's negative realism, knowledge cannot pertain to really externally existing things, but expresses a relation that can only be judged in terms how well it grasps the limitations of human nature (including our attainable actions) and our representations. The golden age is then a state in which we have attained the distinctness that is required in order to determine which sphere of action is possible in relation to distinct though attainable goals. The heights of rationality are therefore defined practically, rather than theoretically.

In essence, what Jacobi is saying is that we must abandon any attempt to submit religious matters to reasoning (at least in terms of mediation). This does not constitute an atheism as such, but it does mean that one of the principal restrictions of the human being is that he cannot have a perception of God, nor consequently, a cognition of him. A new passage in the *Werke* edition of *DH* reformulates the problem in a provocative way:

Temples and Altars – not just the visible ones but also the invisible ones – must gradually sink down [einsinken], and finally completely disappear.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Jacobi, *Werke*, Band 2, pp.279-280.

Jacobi is saying that one of the biggest obstructions to the perfectibility of man is the attempt to perceive and know God and divine things in the sensible world. This evidently extends to any place of worship and perhaps, via the reference to invisible altars, also to other practices of reverence, such as the reverence for reason that the members of the *Aufklärung* held fast to.

The core argument against this state of affairs, at least as it is presented in the first edition of *DH*, is that reverence for God (or divine things) in the world limits our self-governance in that it ultimately does not involve an attainable object, and therefore does not recognize the limitations of human nature. We can imagine what Jacobi might be thinking of: that the attempts to appease transcendent deities cannot correlate to attainable goals and that this energy might be better spent in making distinct which goals are actually attainable and how to attain them.

What does it mean to say that God, as far as our cognition is concerned, is an ‘empty place’, or rather an empty notion? Jacobi is careful to characterize any reference to God in a way that makes it as non-determinate and immediate as possible:

And we have seen that the concepts, judgments and syllogisms, the whole weaving [Gewebe] of our thinking must be referred back to the *perfected perception* and its advancement [Fortgang], or the progress [Progression] of consciousness. Not only *can* it be referred back, but when we do not want to be misled in our own reason, it *must* be referred back. Therefore, what we cannot *perceive* of God *in this understanding*, that can in no other way be experienced or made aware [erfahren oder gewahr werden]. Because, once again, we experience and become aware only **with** the understanding and **with** reason, not **through** the understanding and **through** reason, *as if they were specific powers*. [...] In

actuality they are *the perfect perception itself*, the *noble life*, **the highest existence that we know**.¹⁵⁰

Since the understanding and reason are not separate powers¹⁵¹, Jacobi argues that they must be expressed in practical ways by how we *use* perception. In this reference to use, Jacobi actually integrates all of man's abilities within an account of mental activity. We cannot have a perception of God and there is no way that the *notion* of God can relate to an intuition of an actual or real God, in Jacobi's view.

The last point that Jacobi makes with regard to this subject, before he concludes the book by citing a long passage from Pestalozzi, is perhaps one of the densest passages in the book, primarily because it introduces some new notions, but also because it obliquely draws the final conclusions on the origin of the notion of God. However, having connected up the central notions of the book, we are now in a position to make sense of it:

The degree to which our abilities, intensively and extensively, distinguish ourselves from things outside us, is the degree of our personality, that is, the *highness of our spirit* [Geisteshöhe]. With this most delectable [köstlichsten] characteristic of reason we receive a **presentiment of God** [Gottesahndung], a presentiment of HE THAT IS THERE: a being, *that has his life in himself*. – From then on, *freedom* wafts [weht] against the soul, and

¹⁵⁰ *DH*, pp.200-202.

¹⁵¹ At this point Jacobi does not attempt to integrate the two, but from the way reason is tied to recognizing identities and then to relations, it is obvious that he takes reason and the understanding to be part of an the applied nature of rationality within an individual. Starting in 1788, Jacobi starts to expand and integrate his account of reason.

the realms [Gefilde] of immortality open themselves.¹⁵²

Because of the preceding we know that this presentiment can offer nothing that has the quality of a perception or can relate to a claim with apodictic certitude, let alone present a special intuition that functions as an epistemic access. This means that God can never be known, because Jacobi's negative realism restricts such an indeterminate presentiment from providing knowledge of God. It is essential for our understanding of this passage that Jacobi says that this presentiment is given by reason *in response to* the fact that we distinguish ourselves from things outside of us internally and externally. Put another way, the notion of God is a result of this structure in us, since Jacobi has limited God to expressing identity equivalences. Immediately after the bombastic 'he that is there' Jacobi offers the clarification that this presentiment concerns a being 'that has his life in himself'. In other words: a being that is self-sufficient.

We must also conclude that this presentiment has an as yet undisclosed causal relationship with the process of distinguishing ourselves by way of the internal-external schema. This entire process is what finally engenders freedom for the human being. This is to be expected, considering the fact that the distinguishing of ourselves through the internal-external schema makes it possible for us to counteract certain ways in which we seem to be determined by external processes, by virtue of our being able to grasp the way in which we are restrained by an external factor. Once we make this distinct within our schema, we can find that the self that has this cognition is something different from that which we find to be externally restrained. We will see in chapter 4 that Jacobi utilizes exactly this line of reasoning for his practical philosophy.

¹⁵² *DH*, p.202.

Jacobi does not present a complete explanation of the use of this presentiment of God or its relationship to practical action in *DH*. Jacobi often ends his texts with highly cryptic passages, and *DH*'s conclusion, despite being followed by the appendix, is no exception. We will provide a more comprehensive examination of this question in chapter 4, on the basis of Jacobi's other works. In that same chapter [p.238], we will attempt to answer the question of what Jacobi's solution to the problem of inter-subjectivity was, which he introduced in *DH* in relation to the application of rationality. The project of *DH*, which can be best construed as a rephrasing of rationality from the perspective of negative realism, has been quite comprehensively articulated through the final reemphasis that God can neither be known nor perceived. Returning to the initial formulation of the activity of reason back in the prefatory note, we can see that reason actually does a great deal more than merely recognizing tautologies, even though it still does not provide us with apodictic certainty. Reason, as a 'mere ability to perceive relations distinctly', is not 'restricting' in terms of possible application, but in terms of the accord between human nature and representations. The relation that is made distinct thus is actually what makes claims about externality possible and allows for the practical use of representations.

Jacobi is attempting to provide a fully integrative account of rationality that paves the way for practical action, even as it extricates itself from the correlationist claim inherent in cognition (that our representations correspond to real things). More importantly, he presents a picture of human cognition that is neither nature's nor God's plaything (evading the popularly conceived excesses of Hume and Leibniz), while showing the importance of these concepts with a purview of the optimal functioning of rationality. Historically, his major innovation lies in the recognition that both cognition and reasoning are based on a core structure of internalization and externalization, that need not and more importantly *cannot* claim a one-to-one correspondence to

mind-independent reality without severely violating the strictures of negative realism. What's more, Jacobi even to a certain degree applies these strictures to his own account, showing that any claim about reality, including one that negatively claims that an existing real thing remains outside of conscious cognition, is also dependent on an externalization in making this claim. Jacobi's relationalism would have him assume that this external claim expresses, via relation, something about internality. It is for this reason that Jacobi does not attribute a specific reality to those immediate affections we find or take-to-be-true in ourselves: that is, it is to avoid submitting their origins to the external-internal scheme of our claims. In this way, the basic claim of negative realism (that an absolute external remains inconceivable to mediation) is itself the utmost (or most 'distinct', in Jacobi's terminology) expression of mediation and reasoning. Of course, this is the way in which Jacobi resolves the epistemic commitments concerning rationality, but this is also the point where his practical philosophy takes over the focus of accounts of rationality.

9. Responses and recent readings

At this point we must return to Hamann's response to *DH*. He objected to the fact that Jacobi's discussion partner in the dialogue cannot function as a stand-in for the critical reader, because he is altogether too amenable to Jacobi's position.¹⁵³ To be sure, this character becomes somewhat superfluous towards the end of the book, but Jacobi is following a long tradition of philosophical dialogues in which the discussion partner is, by almost any reader's standards, too easily convinced by the character that is the mouthpiece of the author. To really set up a strong critical opponent would require a diametrically opposed position that will not yield on any fundamental point to his opponent. This

¹⁵³ *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, Band 6, p.127.

is really the core of Hamann's criticism: the appendix appears to set up the realist as a true opponent of the idealist, which is further supported by a part of the title of the book ('idealism and realism'), and this gives the reader the impression that these positions are the core subject of the book. This is no doubt a careless formulation on Jacobi's part, who, as we have seen, and as Hamann objects,¹⁵⁴ provides multiple forms of realism (empirical realism, resolute realism and genuine realism) that together form a thorough account of naïve realism and its commitments, and nowhere is there a clear definition of idealism. As I have tried to show above, Jacobi in fact develops his own position as a strong realism that incorporates arguments and concerns from naïve realism and idealism, leaving him with what I have characterized as a negative realism. In this way, although he never confirmed or denied it, Jacobi is, in his own way, in agreement with Hamann's conclusion that philosophy should be composed of both idealism and realism.¹⁵⁵ Since he was never committed to making an absolute opposition between the two, a realism that utilizes idealist arguments remains possible for him, yet there is no trace of a kind of fundamentally idealist commitment that takes precedence over all other commitments.

One of the more insistent standard readings of *DH* is one that reads Jacobi as a sensiblist in the British/Scottish tradition. Most of these readings seem to originate in Hegel's *Glauben und Wissen*, and this reading was most recently reiterated by Pluder (2012). This reading seems problematic mainly because it does not have the explanatory power to deal with some of the more puzzling passages in *DH*. I also believe my reading holds a greater degree of congruence with Jacobi's other writings which are almost always left out in this sensiblist reading. An actual refutation of this reading would require a line-by-line comparison of the interpreted

¹⁵⁴ 'I now know no better what reason, belief, idealism and realism are.' *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, Band 6, p.126.

¹⁵⁵ *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: Briefwechsel Gesamtausgabe*, Band 6, p.114.

passages, which I cannot go into in this book in order to focus on the larger exploration of German realism around 1800. I hope that the full impact of Jacobi's negative realism, as well as its plausibility as an explanation of what Jacobi is doing in *DH*, will become apparent when reading the entirety of this book. I will therefore focus on a few key points of contention with the sensiblist reading, using Pluder's book as a recent statement of this reading.

First of all, this reading depends on the general equivocation of belief and revelation,¹⁵⁶ which leads to the claim that Jacobi holds all particular claims to be immediately certain.¹⁵⁷ This, I think, is clearly not Jacobi's view. Secondly, the importance of the relational character of the external-internal schema is not explicitly taken up by this interpretation. One need only count how many times Jacobi uses the phrase 'internally and externally' as a subordinate clause throughout all of Jacobi's works, starting with *DH*, to notice how important this connection is to Jacobi. Pluder claims that Jacobi believes particular claims about external things are somehow capable of directly grasping reality, in essence tacitly assuming the validity of our ways conceptually framing of them.¹⁵⁸ This is exactly what Jacobi *objected to* in naïve realism, so it is impossible that this is his view. Whereas Jacobi recognizes the continuous character of the relation between external things and ourselves, Pluder assumes that he is referring to a supposed mind-independent totality in which we ourselves are contained,¹⁵⁹ or that Jacobi is somehow committed to a dualistic separation between

¹⁵⁶ *Die Vermittlung von Idealismus und Realismus in der Klassischen Deutschen Philosophie*, p.66. Pluder fails to recognize the two versions of revelation that Jacobi distinguishes.

¹⁵⁷ *Die Vermittlung*, pp. 84-85. The title should serve as a warning that Jacobi's notion of immediacy is difficult to fit into this framework.

¹⁵⁸ *Die Vermittlung*, p.82. Jacobi's use of 'objective' is read in the Hegelian sense.

¹⁵⁹ *Die Vermittlung*, p.83.

subjective mind and real body.¹⁶⁰ On the whole, the external-internal schema is read as a classic dualism, whereas it is clearly a conceptual distinction concerning specific instances of distinctness, and as such, refers to a process *within* the self, according to Jacobi. This interpretation leads Pluder to conclude that on Jacobi's view reality offers us relations immediately¹⁶¹ (hence making Jacobi committed to an extreme form of sensibilism or phenomenism). My own reading, however, has shown that the relations that Jacobi refers to throughout the text are relations between internality and externality in the process of bringing about distinctness under constraints of practicality, and as such do not refer to entities, much less a totality thereof, existing in a completely mind-independent reality.

Many other accounts of Jacobi's realism in the secondary literature adhere to this sensiblist reading. For instance, see chapter 4 of Günther Baum's *Vernunft und Erkenntnis* (1968). I would suggest that the main reason for this sensiblist interpretation having become the dominant reading of Jacobi lies in the fact that realism is generally only approached from the problematic of the external world. Thus, discussing externality is always taken to be about external things, while internality is taken to concern something like internal mental states. In fact, none of these readings recognize that, for Jacobi, immediate revelation lies *between* externality and internality, and cannot for that reason just be construed as revelation *about* external reality. This way, Jacobi works on both themes in tandem by making the (mediated) contents of the internal-external schema into the post-factum outcome of nonconceptualized immediacy.

Thirdly, the assumption that Jacobi's main opponent in the text is a proponent of idealism seems to be made without any

¹⁶⁰ *Die Vermittlung*, p.78. Whereas Jacobi claimed that we can only have belief about our body in *DH* p.31.

¹⁶¹ *Die Vermittlung*, pp.55-56,59.

textual evidence.¹⁶² In contradistinction to this claim, I've argued that Jacobi's main concern was making the position that we now tend to call the *naïve realist* more philosophically robust (while, in the process of this argument, changing it entirely). In effect, interpreters have been duped by the title of *DH* (as an idealism versus realism), just as Hamann feared. Finally, what is presented as problematic in Jacobi's position, the idea that the 'fact of external things' is 'disavowed' and therefore the entire reality is degraded to a 'product'¹⁶³ should actually be considered to be the upshot of Jacobi's position, a claim which makes a lot more sense if you accept that his primary target is not to combat idealism in all of its forms. Despite the fact that we are forced to present reality as external, and thus present it as already implicated in the relationship of an external-internal schema at the core of our mode of representation, we cannot extricate ourselves from the need to represent reality, nor can we convincingly deny that there is a way of construing reality that cannot be subsumed under this schema. Jacobi has merely located the limits of our way of representing reality. Overall, Pluder's reading is strongly Hegelian (and polemical to the point that his study culminates in Hegel's view on bringing idealism and realism together), and is therefore emblematic of this standard reading of Jacobi, which distorts or disregards the important epistemic features that I have pointed out in this section.

The characterization of Jacobi's realism as a *negative* realism has hopefully been shown to be a fruitful way of exploring the key ideas presented in *DH*. We will use this same notion in order to explore the way the other realists in this chapter, who represent the most systematically advanced exponents of this grouping, can be seen as relating to a shared set of problems. We can confidently utilize it in order to examine what the overall philosophical project of realism around 1800 was as developed from this position, in

¹⁶² *Die Vermittlung*, pp.63,68.

¹⁶³ *Die Vermittlung*, p.88.

Jacobi's later works, in the other realist's texts and even in someone with more idealist leanings, like Fichte.

Finally, we are now in a position to say definitively whether or not we can characterize Jacobi, following Allison, as a transcendental realist. Kant provides three characteristics of transcendental realism:

- i) Space and time are given in themselves.
- ii) Outer appearances are things-in-themselves.
- iii) Because objects of the senses must have existence in themselves apart from sense, we cannot verify their reality through our representations of them.¹⁶⁴

Ultimately, Kant objects to the transcendental realist because the latter claims that the representations are things-in-themselves. This illegitimately applies space and time, the forms of intuition, to the things-in-themselves. To a certain degree, the transcendental realist is committed to the same conclusions that the sensiblist reading would claim Jacobi is committed to. For instance, the transcendental realist would claim that our representations of appearances are certain because they refer to actually existing things-in-themselves. Kant, however, places the focus on the illegitimacy of making the relations we perceive through space and time into features of reality itself, thereby making the appearances into dependable features of existing things-in-themselves. Jacobi's view on space and time is complex. For him both are concepts that are based on concrete perceptions. That however does not make our concepts of time and space uniform and immutable, since it is possible that person A has a more robust notion of space than person B.

¹⁶⁴ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A369.

Kant's concern boils down to the fact that the transcendental realist has a tendency to illegitimately attribute the determinations of objects that he has acquired from the appearances to real things. As we've seen, Jacobi only ascribes certitude to the immediate revelation of sensibility, not in the way an object appears to be as external to us. This is made evident by the fact that an externality is always in a relation with internality, as both both related terms mutually constitute the relation. All of this comes back to Jacobi's post-Kantian argument that particular claims about something in (external) sensibility are already (internally) structured by the understanding. It therefore makes no sense to claim that a particular claim derived from sensibility has immediate certitude, because this claim is mediate. Jacobi already makes this clear in the prefatory note by accepting the tacit claim that certitude cannot be found in sensibility. The only aspect of sensibility that has any immediate certitude is the revelatory givenness of it, but we cannot relate to this other than in the interconnected forms of perception: as a complex of externality and internality. A version of this claim is made by Herder (as we'll see in the next section), Fichte, and of course, Hegel. However, I feel that it is important to repeat that Jacobi's argument stems from what we must necessarily think if we want to think of our rationality as capable of specific engagement in our practical activity, rather than a commitment to a more extravagant metaphysical thesis.

My contention is that the fact that Jacobi rigidly separates the mediacy of particular claims about representations and the immediacy of revelation by way of his negative realism means that ipso facto he *cannot* be a transcendental realist. In the appendix, Jacobi famously argued that he could neither live with nor without the thing-in-itself. One could claim that his externality-internality schema is a way to circumvent this deadlock that he saw in Kant: the thing in itself then becomes an externalization (reality) that persists in how we conceive of our cognition even after we admit

the idealist arguments that are built into the negative realist position. Allison admirably argues for the relevance of the thing-in-itself/appearance distinction in Kant's approach, but Jacobi's position offers a more dynamic approach to this same model by arguing that conscious cognition presupposes and utilizes the external-internal schema in all of its claims.

In terms of the development of realism, we find that Jacobi's *DH* is one of the earliest, and perhaps still the most comprehensive, formulations of negative realism. What is noteworthy here is the fact that the text seemingly refers to different kinds of realism (empirical realism and stubborn realism), which are ultimately reducible to naïve realism on the one hand and negative realism on the other (Jacobi's realism or genuine realism), shows that Jacobi was trying to explicate his negative realism in a conceptual landscape in which the term realism was still not very clearly defined as a philosophical position. Jacobi's attempt to formulate the way in which he is a realist made it possible for many other authors to adhere to realism, starting in the 1790's, with Herder, Reinhold and Neeb. Herder presents an interesting point of comparison because he had a similar theoretical point of departure and, as Jacobi's realism gained popularity, would consciously try to move closer to this position.

2.2 Herder as a realist

1. Perception and Cognition

Johann Gottfried Herder is a complex author to discuss. Not only does his work cover four decades, but his topics and commitments also routinely change over the course of this extended period. I have chosen an account of how the overall trajectory of realist themes in Herder's works change over the course of this period. This means that I will not cover the context of the individual works except where it seems absolutely necessary. The main issue that I want to resolve is to what degree Herder could be considered in agreement with the basic arguments surrounding negative realism.

To begin with, Herder and Jacobi share many intellectual interests and even some fundamental systematic features. For one, both are empiricists in the sense that they believe that all cognition originates in experience and that there is no divine inspiration or recollection of divine ideas that directly informs cognition.¹⁶⁵ Both authors subscribe to the thesis that the way in which perception reaches us is inconceivable to cognition itself.¹⁶⁶ Herder started writing on cognition during the 1770's and Jacobi (who did not start advocating realism until 1787) undoubtedly greatly benefited from Herder's work. This, together with their common frame of reference in Hamann's work, might explain why some of the terms that Herder used during this time also recur in Jacobi's *DH*.¹⁶⁷ One of the most interesting examples of this is Herder's use of the term 'medium' in *Von Erkennen und Empfinden der menschliche Seele* (multiple versions of this essay are extant: 1774, 1775 and 1778). We cannot think of cognition as producing all of its contents on

¹⁶⁵ Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8 (1892), pp.193-195

¹⁶⁶ *Sämtliche Werke* VIII, Band 8, p.265. The terminology is Herder's here. Perception in Herder's sense, as we'll see, corresponds to immediate revelation in Jacobi.

¹⁶⁷ In addition to this, the two frequently met and corresponded.

the one hand, because we have the impression of being affected by something that is not itself cognition in any relevant sense but which is something *before* or *beyond* it.¹⁶⁸ On the other hand, we cannot think of this process of affection as simple and non-problematic, because it is not accessible to cognition as such. This necessitates that we think of the way in which our cognitive apparatus is affected as a *medium* that prepares (selects, forms, etc.) our cognition in an inconceivable way and is also equally inconceivably worked upon by reality. Ultimately, though, Jacobi *integrates* the function of sensibility within an account of rationality in which perception is already structured as relations between internal and external perceptions that can be fully intuited and conceived of by the understanding insofar as the specific content of perceptions is concerned.

At the time he wrote the essay, prior to *DH*, Herder could be considered an adherent of negative realism, at least in terms of the tenet of the inconceivability of the original construction of cognition:

that our cognition only comes from perception
[Empfindung], the object must come to us
through *secret bonds* [Bande], through a hint [Wink]
that teaches us cognition.¹⁶⁹

As we've seen, Jacobi reserves the term perception for the immediate revelation *which has separated itself into internal and external perceptions*, and which can then become the content of discrete cognitions. For Jacobi there is no essential distinction between perception and cognition, but rather between revelation and our 'taking-to-be-true' of it on the one hand, and perception (and our subsequent cognition of it), on the other. We've also seen that, for

¹⁶⁸ In truth, both terms are deficient in the sense that they refer to time and space respectively, which Jacobi and Herder both believe to be concepts of the understanding.

¹⁶⁹ *Sämtliche Werke* VIII, Band 8, pp.197-198.

Jacobi, cognition is that which consists in a particular relation between these two terms. Jacobi can be said to have conceived of the forms of internality and externality as a kind of medium, because it is that in which perception appears to us.

Herder way of framing the incommensurability of cognition and perception in this text might well have influenced Jacobi's arguments in *DH*. In the earliest version of the essay, Herder calls the explanatory gap between the two an 'abyss' [Abgrund].¹⁷⁰ Herder is quick to frame this problem in terms of truth, speaking of a 'first *inception* of truth [erste Empfängnis der Wahrheit]' of which syllogism can teach us nothing.¹⁷¹ This can also be read as an early version of the realist argument: since syllogisms can only deal with cognition (conceptual content), they cannot teach us anything about the way in which we first perceive truth (rather than conceive *of* it). The presupposition of this argument is, of course, a notion of truth that is not wholly a feature of human cognition but of a reality that our cognition seeks to express correctly.

Subsequently, Herder launches an investigation into what the medium between perception and cognition might be. His account focuses on the problem of the senses:

[With] the senses there is a *medium* in place, a certain mental *bond*, without which sense does not attain objects [Gegenstände], nor can the objects enter into the sense, and which we *must* trust and believe in, for all sensible cognitions.¹⁷²

The medium is thus a middle point between two ends. In this case it is a very specific connection between the objective world and our mind. Evidently, Herder locates the problem of the gap between

¹⁷⁰ *Sämtliche Werke* VIII, Band 8, p.238.

¹⁷¹ *Sämtliche Werke* VIII, Band 8, p.170.

¹⁷² *Sämtliche Werke* VIII, Band 8, p.186.

perception and cognition in the fact that we do not know exactly how our sensory organs are affected by objects, leading to the fact that, *insofar as cognition is limited*, the two are incommensurable, lack a common feature or standard. The medium in question lies in this connection between the sensing and that which is sensed. Herder is in line with Jacobi in that he argues that we must believe in this connection, although Jacobi would object to the way in which the problem is phrased, since the problem is still framed in a way that is steeped in cognitive constructs, like the sense organ in general, which we never directly experience in its activity.¹⁷³

Herder goes on to give specific examples of the way in which sense organs are dependent on something other than themselves, such as the fact that the eye produces nothing without light. In this case the medium would be that unknown way in which light is captured and processed by the eye. This way of framing the problem of affection could give the impression that we might have solved it today through the scientific study of optics, and this illustrates the way in which Herder's formulation of the problem is less refined than Jacobi's in *DH*. At the very least, Herder does not distinguish between the necessary explanatory gap between perception and cognition and the ideal situation in which we would have enough knowledge to understand the way in which specific sense organs are physically affected. A thoroughgoing exploration of just how comprehensively the nature of cognition makes the grasping of reality impossible is a key feature of the type of negative realism that Jacobi sought in his allies. We'll see that he objects to some of Herder's works that did not examine the problem in this specific sense. This is but one example of how systematic issues were a determining factor for acceptance into the group of realists, the sole judge of which was Jacobi himself, as a *de facto* founder of the movement.

¹⁷³ *DH*, pp.50-54.

Herder further suggests that the medium is not so much a feature of the human individual, but that it is, in fact, primarily dependent on God:

Miraculous organ of essence, in which everything
lives and perceives! The ray of light is a hint
[Wink], His finger or wand [Stab] in our soul.¹⁷⁴

Herder's account, at least at this point, does not have the epistemic focus that can be found in Jacobi's position. Herder is, in fact, committed to a type of monism,¹⁷⁵ that tries to integrate human cognition within the natural world. He frames this unity by taking recourse to God's point of view, by saying that the connections of human cognition and the natural world can only truly be governed by a divine entity. We will return to this point, because it will feature heavily in Herder's later affinity for Spinoza.

It is important in this context to remark that, despite adhering to a sort of divine interaction or pre-established harmony between perception and reality, Herder does not believe that we have a perfect and direct retention of all the possible ways in which reality could affect us:

Also, the object can be something completely different for a thousand other senses, in a thousand other media. It can be, in itself, altogether an abyss, of which I detect no scent [wittre] or pre-sentiment [ahnde]. For me, only that which my sense and its medium give me is there, the former the gateway, the later the index-finger of the divinity for our soul. Outside of us, we sincerely [innig] know nothing: without sense,

¹⁷⁴ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.187.

¹⁷⁵ Or at least, this seems to be the consequence of his arguments.

our world-edifice is a knot [Knäuel] weaved out of
obscure irritations [Reize].¹⁷⁶

Herder leaves a lot of room for a reality that is entirely different from the way in which we cognitively construe it. Herder seems to belong to the camp of realists when he characterizes reality (or the world outside of sense, as he calls it) as an ‘obscure abyss’¹⁷⁷ and when he says that we ‘have no taste for reality’.¹⁷⁸ The characterization of a human conception of the world, which does not or cannot recognize a spontaneous input from reality, as a knot or a weaving, does bring to mind some of Jacobi’s later similes of a cognition that only recognizes itself, for instance, in reference to the *Wissenschaftslehre*, where he likens it to a knitted sock and the characterization of the human being as a knot which cannot be untangled (see [p.227]).

All of this suggests that Herder’s early essay may have greatly influenced Jacobi, and the program of the realists in general, to a much greater degree than is commonly assumed. Nonetheless, at this point in his career, Herder holds fast to a type of monism that is overseen and orchestrated by God, which, one assumes, leaves very little room for individual human freedom. He furthermore characterizes the medium as incomprehensible.¹⁷⁹ Herder characterizes God’s role in orchestrating the medium between object and sensory organ as that of a musician who plays string music and thus orchestrates the arrangement of the knots of our cognition.¹⁸⁰ On the one hand, we have the metaphor of orchestrating or making music, which Herder reserves for his monist account of how the connection between nature and the mind is organized. On the other hand, there is the way in which we cognitively conceive of the world that we can understand only as a

¹⁷⁶ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, pp.187-8.

¹⁷⁷ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.190.

¹⁷⁸ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.215.

¹⁷⁹ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.190.

¹⁸⁰ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.190.

knot of ‘obscure irritations’ of our senses. The way Herder connects these two approaches (monist God’s eye view and internal cognition) is by arguing that sense is given to a medium. In response to this, Herder bemoans that, if he only had the right power and know-how to present God’s playing of the strings, he would understand how it all fitted together. This shows that Herder thinks of God in analogy with the human intellect.

Herder characterizes the medium in a very particular way:

And this medium of our self-feeling and mental consciousness is – language.¹⁸¹

Although this characterization of the medium is counterintuitive and certainly unconventional for the time, in proposing language as a special ability in man that is, in a way, higher and more potent than reason, Herder explicitly places himself in line with Hamann’s views. Herder also notes that this characterization of language is a departure from his earlier views on the matter in *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (1772).¹⁸² Perhaps exactly *because* of the nature of the medium Herder does not go into great detail as to how exactly language operates as a medium. According to him, language and ‘word’ must ‘come to the aid of our *most intimate* seeing and hearing, to awaken and guide it’.¹⁸³ It is evidently the naming of that which we see that Herder considers to be the essential element of the human contribution to this process: ‘The human being gapes at images and colors until he *speaks*, until he, internally in his soul, *names*’.¹⁸⁴

However, Herder does not locate naming in a type of creativity or imagination, but rather in the divine, which is

¹⁸¹ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, pp.196-7.

¹⁸² *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.197.

¹⁸³ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.197.

¹⁸⁴ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.197.

‘awakened’ in us by language.¹⁸⁵ In fact, the importance that language has, as a medium, makes us completely *dependent* beings:

Our cognition is then, although it admittedly *is* the deepest self *in us*, not as autonomous, voluntarily choosing, as one believes. Besides everything (that has been said up to now), that our cognition only comes from perception, one can see that the object must come through *secret ties* [Bande], through a *hint* [Wink], which *teaches* us to cognize. This teaching, this sense of otherness [eines Fremden] that imprints [einprägt] itself in us, gives our thinking its whole form and direction. Without all seeing and hearing and inflow from outside, we would grope around in deep night and blindness, if the instruction has not earlier been thought *for us* and had not imprinted ready-made thought-formulas in us.¹⁸⁶

This is largely in line with the basic negative realist precepts: with their insistence upon the fact that there is an inconceivable way in which cognition is constructed out of reality and that we are not able to comprehensively reconstruct this causality (that we nonetheless have to assume). However, in the Jacobian variety of negative realism, the fact that we cannot understand how the revelation of sense is “imprinted” on us does not mean that it was not our own sensory apparatus that enacted it and provided the rules for how cognition would be formed. Jacobi would probably contend that Herder is admitting too much to his argument by completely yielding to the conception of a divine language on this point, where admitting the unconscious functioning of our sensory apparatus would suffice.

¹⁸⁵ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.197.

¹⁸⁶ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, pp.197-8.

The argument that Herder provides concerning the importance of language for cognition is characteristic of his way of thinking. He provides a *genetic proof*, that is, a proof that refers to a specific course of development, in order to show how specific relations or connections occur in the development of the human being. In this case, he refers to the fact that when a child learns to see, he at the same time learns to speak which, in tandem, allows him to think.¹⁸⁷ I will not take into consideration the validity of this proof in itself but instead remark on the *kind* of proof that Herder is utilizing here. It is in line with Jacobi to the degree that it points towards a way of tying together that remains inaccessible to us. It is not in line with Jacobi's sense of negative realism in that Herder's depiction of the development draws from a conception of a prior development that we have not consciously lived through (e.g. that we were all children once does not entail that we consciously know what that development was like). I am supposing that Jacobi would not utilize this type of genetic proof because these proofs draw on a cognitive construal of what the development of the child was like that we cannot examine outside of our conceptual mediation of that development, so ultimately this genetic argument would not, in Jacobi's view, provide a neutral proof (although it remains unclear whether or not Herder was actively attempting to frame his work in these terms).

2. Herder's *experimental recourse to feeling*

Herder is in need of a non-cognitive tether between the divine orchestration and human cognition that we nonetheless can account for consciously: otherwise his explanation would simply beg the question: that is, how can we even conceive of the idea that God orchestrates nature and the mind, if we know neither whether reality nor the organization of our senses are so orchestrated? He attempts to solve this problem by introducing two orders of 'feeling'. Firstly, there is *universal feeling*, which is our feeling for the

¹⁸⁷ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.197.

‘noble knowledge’ of God that enters into our cognition or makes our cognition the way it is and secondly, *self-feeling*, which Herder describes as the ‘conditio sine qua non, the lingering clod [Klumpel], that holds us in place’.¹⁸⁸ Herder thus, in effect, inverts the centrality of the self that we found in Jacobi, and places the self in a relation of complete and utter dependence upon God, who supplies the self with its thinking. From this perspective, Herder also frames freedom. The first step towards freedom, he argues, is to recognize that we are *not free* with regard to our cognition. If we then accept this form of universal feeling, we also partake in the freedom of God’s spirit.¹⁸⁹ This is a kind of monist argument in that it places freedom not so much in us, but in the sense in which we are united with God. This approach is a bit of a paradox, because freedom is framed as a dependency, but we are supposed nevertheless to inherit some modicum of freedom from God’s spirit.

What kind of recourse to feeling is Herder taking here? Like Jacobi, he does not refer to feeling in a commonsensical way, that is, in terms of mere emotions or bodily states. In the way in which they figure in Jacobi’s arguments, feelings cannot be classified as cognitions per se. Although he doesn’t go into detail about this point in *DH*, the reason for this might lie in the fact that they do not contain enough (or any) determinations that would allow a feeling to become a determinate cognition and, at least in Jacobi’s case, feeling itself neither expresses discrete relations nor posits the external existence of something outside us. Although today we might find this distinction non-evident, in Herder and Jacobi’s time it was fairly commonly accepted that feelings were something other than cognitions. The origin of feelings is unclear, in both Herder and Jacobi’s accounts, yet they do function as a type of *indeterminate sign* that we are affected by something or aware of something. At best, they function as *indirect* proof of something

¹⁸⁸ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.200.

¹⁸⁹ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 8, p.202.

external, but that is not usually how they are utilized in arguments by most of the realists. Rather, *feelings are a proof of the fact that we think that we are affected by something of which we are necessitated to posit its existence*, yet in a way that does not lead to knowledge in any way. Given the gap between reality and cognition, a ground can only be designated indirectly, and the weight of a designated ground in a proof only has relevance for the individual subject reasoning about it, rather than for an objective chain of reasoning, independent of any subject whatsoever.

One might wonder why feelings are recurring features in the realist arguments. The historiographical analysis of realism in terms of a sensiblist account¹⁹⁰ might explain this fact by referring to the influence of English and Scottish writers, but the notion of feeling in both Jacobi and Herder is too idiosyncratic and systematically restricted to be wholly derived from this tradition. I would argue that the source of this notion of feeling should in fact be found in the works of the Wolffian philosopher Johann Georg Sulzer, to whom we have seen Jacobi refer multiple times in *DH*. Herder also wrote his *Erkennen und Empfinden* essay with Sulzer in mind. It was Sulzer, for instance, who formulated the question for the Academy prize essay to which Herder was an answer. This is more than just lip service, because Herder uses the notion of feeling that he puts it forward in this text in later publications as well. A closer look at the Sulzer text that Jacobi referred to in *DH*, *Zergliederung des Begriffs der Vernunft*¹⁹¹, reveals that there are further similarities with Herder's thought.

Naturally, since he is part of the Leibniz-Wolff school, Sulzer is, in some way, influenced by the works of John Locke, to

¹⁹⁰ For an account of this reading see Baum, chapter 6. In order to attempt to explain feelings, Baum conflates them with beliefs, which he then refers to sensory input. Jacobi never authorizes such a conflation, and neither does Herder. Feeling refers to something entirely different and, admittedly, more complex for the realists.

¹⁹¹ In: *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften*, Band 1 (1773).

whom both Leibniz and Wolff integrally respond. However, Sulzer's formulation of the main question of his treatise shows that he is departing from the English sense of feeling:

If we presuppose the inner *feeling* (in an, for us, inconceivably produced way, by means of the active power of the soul and through a certain organization of the body), *how does the ability to rationally think and conclude* [schliessen] *arise?*¹⁹²

The inner feeling, which is supported by the active power of the soul, immediately produces the ability to have ideas.¹⁹³

I want to say then that all ideas that we have from the bodily world [Körperwelt], from extension, from movement, from forms [Gestalten], from colors, and so on, would be completely different were our senses organized differently.¹⁹⁴

According to Sulzer, feeling is the way in which we are affected by a reality that remains inconceivable with regard to the way in which it leads to rational thinking. The last passage should make it clear that Sulzer would object to Herder placing the complete determination of cognition in God's hands. Sulzer believes that our senses are organized to produce our cognition, and that we have no way of knowing exactly how they do that. He reserves the term 'feeling' for the special way in which the senses interact with reality. This is different from both Jacobi and Herder in that their notion of feeling does not directly relate to the senses, but it is also similar to Jacobi and Herder to the degree that Sulzer uses 'feeling' in order to designate something that is prior to cognition and thus remains inaccessible to it. As in Herder and Jacobi, this does not

¹⁹² *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften*, Band 1, p.247.

¹⁹³ *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften*, Band 1, p.248.

¹⁹⁴ *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften*, Band 1, p.249.

necessarily mean that reality is exhaustively sensed by man: ‘if bodies had attributes that correlate to none of our senses, we cannot have a sensible idea of it’.¹⁹⁵ Seen in this way, Sulzer might represent an influential source for what became some of the basic features of negative realism.¹⁹⁶

The peculiar status that feelings have for the negative realists necessitates that we be critical of them, since we might feel many things that do not necessarily show us something as important as our existence. As we will see, Jacobi will vehemently object to the kind of orchestra-directing God that Herder claims that his universal feeling refers to. In his *Denkbücher*, Jacobi argues that we have to critically examine feelings and can never accept them at face value.¹⁹⁷ Self-feeling is a good example of this critical use of feelings in *DH*. It forces us to posit the existence of a core unity of all our cognitions and contents of our consciousness, be it a self or a personality. It stands the test of our critical examination, in that we have to assume it in order to think of ourselves as having any cognition at all. However, Jacobi would never accept it as a proof that has validity with respect reality or for other persons, it merely brings us to realize a certain necessity of our thinking.

¹⁹⁵ *Vermischte Philosophische Schriften*, Band 1, p.249.

¹⁹⁶ Cf. Jacobi’s admission in the *Denkbücher*: ‘As a youngster of twenty years old, I read Sulzer’s theory of perception.’ Kladde II. The *Denkbücher* will be published in two volumes in 2018, in the *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi Briefwechsel - Nachlaß*, edited by Ives Radrizzani. Sadly, the page numbering is not known at the time of my writing this. Due to this unavailability, I will also render the original German: ‘Als Jüngling von 20 Jahren las ich Sulzers Theorie der Empfindungen’.

¹⁹⁷ *Denkbücher*, Kladde II. ‘A wholly dark or a wholly simple feeling cannot be a feeling of something [Etwas]’. ‘Ein ganz dunkles oder ganz einfaches Gefühl, kan[n] nicht ein Gefühl v[on] Etwas seyn’. ‘A mere feeling only contains itself and cannot be compared with a distinct cognition, and can thus also not contradict it’. ‘Ein bloßes Gefühl enthält nur sich selbst u[nd] kann mit einer deutlichen Erkenntniß nicht verglichen werden, folglich auch nicht deselben widersprechen’.

3. *The extent of Herder's realist commitments in the 1780's*

We've seen that Herder already adhered to some key realist ideas during the 1770's, but did his ideas develop during the time in which he was in close collaboration with Jacobi, during and after the *Pantheismusstreit*? In order to answer this question, we will consider two key texts from this period. During this time, Herder developed his ideas about two of his most famous interests: a comprehensive philosophy of history and a monism that incorporates man into the world, or as he would argue a few years later: into God. In 1785, Herder publishes the second volume of his *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, in which he outlines his views on humankind. It shows him aligning his universal feeling further with a Sulzerian conception of feeling as the way in which the senses are affected by reality:

Every man has his own measure, as it were his own tuning [Stimmung] of all sensible feelings with each other.¹⁹⁸

The most universal and most necessary sense is feeling, [it] probably adds more complexity to our ideas than we suspect.¹⁹⁹

Herder is looking for a way to give this notion of feeling (which previously functioned as a conceptual reference point for the incomprehensibility of the gap between perception and cognition) a place *within* his monist account of history, and his main method of argumentation is, once again, genetic. In order to accomplish this, he remarks that feeling can be impaired by certain climatic circumstances, such as excessive heat or cold.²⁰⁰ By pointing to the fact that our reception of sensory data is sometimes impaired by environmental circumstances, Herder wants to accomplish two

¹⁹⁸ Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 13 (1887), p.291.

¹⁹⁹ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.292.

²⁰⁰ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.291.

tasks: i) he is attempting to explain the divergence of sense abilities throughout different regions of the world and ii) he is integrating his account of universal feeling within a monist worldview, while retaining this account of impaired sense as an explanation of heterogeneity of sense. It is unlikely that Sulzer would be amenable to such a use of feeling. Jacobi would certainly be suspicious of this attempt, because it exchanges negative realism for a conceptually structured monist account, thereby ignoring the gap between perception and cognition. This might explain the remark in Jacobi's *Denkbücher*, which stated that he was not impressed with Herder's *Ideen*.²⁰¹

A concept that may be similar to Herder's earlier use of self-feeling is the so-called 'feeling of existence',²⁰² which Herder describes as 'indispensable' and as responsible for our happiness. However, if the feeling of existence is the successor of Herder's earlier self-feeling, it remains unclear how he believes that this feeling of existence relates to the self and in what way we should consider it a feeling at all. Another possible candidate for what Herder first characterized as self-feeling is 'the feeling of self-activity'.²⁰³ According to Herder, this feeling has an active role in the sense that the creator has installed it in us in order to 'stir us to act and reward us with the sweetest wage of a self-completing act'.²⁰⁴ Curiously, Herder believes that this feeling lets us forget the way in which we were determined by our development (Herder again refers to our childhood in this case) and, in a way, *deceives* us into believing that we are able to act in a completely self-determining way. Jacobi would distrust this way of making our experience of freedom into a divine deception, and his *Denkbücher* reveal that he was extremely concerned with maintaining freedom

²⁰¹ Kladde II.

²⁰² *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.337.

²⁰³ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.343.

²⁰⁴ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.343.

for the individual human being.²⁰⁵ Herder, on the contrary, introduces this deception of freedom in order to offer a criticism of the philosopher who believes himself to be in an ‘idealistic world’, as Herder describes it, where he takes himself to be completely free. The point of this criticism is that these philosophers, and Herder does not specify whom he has in mind here, believe that reason can operate separately from sense, because they are completely deceived by this feeling. At this point, Jacobi had not published any overt defense of freedom, so Herder was probably not even aware that, in defending Jacobi’s position in the *Pantheismusstreit* in this way, he was actually dismissing something that Jacobi believed to be very important.

This volume of the *Ideen* shows many signs that Herder was on Jacobi’s side in the *Pantheismusstreit*, for instance in his criticism of speculative reason,²⁰⁶ and his reiteration of the claim that words which do not refer to experience should be doubted.²⁰⁷ Overall, Herder introduces many kinds of feelings, which all function as a kind of demonstration without a proof structure. One gets the impression that Herder is slightly abusing the possibilities involved with the use of feeling, at least from the perspective of Jacobi’s negative realism. The variety of feelings, and the lack of reflection on the limits of applying them is something that Jacobi was also guilty of in his published works. But with Jacobi, unlike Herder’s feeling of self-activity, feelings are never utilized in order to deceive our ordinary ways of thinking. Herder’s more liberal use is therefore a good example of the fact that his position is different from Jacobi’s, despite Herder’s adherence to negative realism in some cases (like the gap between perception and cognition).

Beyond his conception of feelings, Herder remarks that all senses find their medium at the moment in which they are

²⁰⁵ Kladde I.

²⁰⁶ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.394.

²⁰⁷ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, pp.297-9.

created,²⁰⁸ which does not explain much in terms of Herder's conception of the medium, but *does* show that he is intent on incorporating the medium in the monist-genetic account that the book attempts to solidify. Furthermore, he develops the relationship between perception and language, by stating that 'expelling air', an oblique reference to speech, 'is the only, or at least the best means for our perceptions and thoughts',²⁰⁹ Herder claims that we cannot understand the way in which speaking and hearing work together to form a comprehension of language, because it occurs through an inconceivable bond.²¹⁰ In this passage, it becomes clear that Herder needs language to do a lot of explanatory work for his account, more than most of today's readers would likely find convincing. For instance, on Herder's view, it is language that makes the different (potentially completely different) experiences between individuals commensurable²¹¹ and it is only through language that we even become human and are capable of loving one another.²¹²

In the end, Herder's theory of language is subordinated to his realist commitments. For one, language cannot express 'things [Sachen], but only names' to the degree that language, which makes reason possible in Herder's view, cannot cognize 'things, but only their characteristics, which it names with words'.²¹³ While this merely reiterates the fact that we have no direct access to things through conscious cognition, by implication it also claims that the higher potential for reason in man (higher than the recognition of characteristics) does not provide access to existing things *either*, but is merely dependent on the same language that makes the connection between perception and cognition possible in the first place. From this claim we can infer that the medium of language

²⁰⁸ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.349.

²⁰⁹ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.356.

²¹⁰ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.356.

²¹¹ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.355.

²¹² *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.357.

²¹³ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.358.

only adds qualities or characteristics to our cognition and that our signification of these characteristics is the sole source of higher reasoning.

This is not to say that Herder believes that rational discourse is insignificant. He merely believes the claim that reason has direct access to reality, and thus has any special ability to express truth, is false. He offers two deflationary readings, designed to illustrate the dependence of rational discourse on language. Metaphysics, he argues, is merely an ordered register of names, abstracted from any observation in experience. Similarly, science deals with ‘derived singular external characteristics [of things] that do not touch their inner existence, because we have no organ to sense this.’²¹⁴ Herder believes that reason is limited to the sum of signification. He therefore refers to reason as a calculator [Rechenmaschine],²¹⁵ because it only deals with tokens, mere empty representations on an abacus, instead of real things. The origin of rational discourse in language is the source of error and opinion, according to Herder: the genesis of concepts in us is mediated by language.²¹⁶ As a substantiation of the rather deficient way in which the human being forms his concepts (at least with regard to existence) Herder offers an argument from design: we cannot have been created for mere speculation or pure intuition [Anschauung], because we are simply not very well-equipped for it.²¹⁷ Naturally, Herder’s argument is predicated on the validity of the claim that our creator was an optimally *effective* creator.

Interestingly, Herder does not exclude the *possibility* of a pure intuition, but argues that, if we had it, it would remain completely immediate. The inability to directly perceive existence leads Herder to conclude:

²¹⁴ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.358.

²¹⁵ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.361.

²¹⁶ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.358.

²¹⁷ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.358.

We know of no power in the essence [of things], we also cannot come to know of this, because even that which vitalizes us, which thinks in us, we only enjoy and feel, yet we do not know it.²¹⁸

He who does not trust his senses is a fool and must become an empty speculator.²¹⁹

Herder's realism thus even extends to our own existence, since we only relate to our existence in a second-hand way. It is significant that Herder uses feeling to refer to a secondary or reactive process and does not use it as a primal sense, as an immediate intuition. This again shows that Herder's entire use of feeling lacks a definite characterization. Sometimes feeling is put forward as an affection, sometimes as a condition, and sometimes even as a divine deception. Whereas Jacobi's use of feeling is one that can be described as restrained and not by and of itself relevant for his reasoning, Herder's use is rather unstable, and he seems to use it when he needs to refer to an inconceivable and indefinite, yet strangely convincing process.

We must now turn to the first edition of Herder's *Gott: Einige Gespräche* (1787), which provides further evidence that Herder's views are not entirely in line with Jacobi's negative realism, at least insofar as it was available in print to him through *SB* at the time when Herder wrote *Gott*. By and large, Herder intended his dialogue to dispel the most persistent rumors about Spinoza's position, partly by referring to his texts and partly by comparing him favorably with more accepted philosophers like Leibniz and Shaftesbury. However, as Herder remarks in the preface, we should not judge the book as a mere rehabilitation of Spinoza, because the main arguments follow from the 'trail of my thought.'²²⁰ Herder starts this book, by characterizing the public

²¹⁸ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.358.

²¹⁹ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 13, p.362.

²²⁰ *Gott: Einige Gespräche* (1787), p.v.

perception of Spinoza as a ‘thundercloud’ that robs the world of ‘God’s countenance’.²²¹

The principal reason why the German speaking public was now more concerned with Spinoza’s position than ever before was because Jacobi had published his *SB* two years earlier. To all eyes at the time, Herder’s *Gott* must have been seen as an attack on Jacobi, a view that is supported by some of the later parts of the book where Herder explicitly distances himself from Jacobi’s *SB*:

Secondly, I can suffer just as little that Jacobi does not accord with the conception that I have just put forward of Spinoza’s system[.]

Because according to my conclusions Spinozism is not, like he thinks of Spinoza, an atheism[.]²²²

One could ask Herder what problem is, if he simply disagreed with the characterization of Spinoza as an atheist. However, a closer examination of the text shows that Herder is also responding to some of the key concepts in *SB*, which were put forward as Jacobi’s own, at this time still proto-realist, view.

Herder tries to offer an interpretation of the use of belief in *SB*, which he took to be what is endangered by a Spinozist atheism. However, Herder’s own notion of belief is much more conventional than Jacobi’s. At least, if we follow Jacobi’s retroactive account in *DH*. Jacobi understood belief as the investment that we have in particular epistemic claims, as a kind of

²²¹ *Gott* (1787), pp.1-2.

²²² *Gott* (1787), pp.147-8. It should be noted that the dialogue is not crafted in the same way as a Platonic dialogue or as Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* would be structured, in that Theophron, the main protagonist, is clearly a stand-in for Herder, and that Philolaus, his main discussion partner, is initially there to espouse the public misconceptions about Spinoza. In the later parts Philolaus is convinced of the relevance of Spinoza’s position, and becomes a more charitable critical questioner of Theophron. Herder shares Jacobi’s strategy in *DH*.

certitude that goes beyond epistemic verification and reaches beyond the specifics of the claim towards the certainty of the revelation of all perceptual content. Herder, on the contrary, describes belief in a much more confessional way:

Well, belief admittedly occurs when one trusts his senses or reason; but the expression is rather unconventional with the German philosophers. Belief in the other testimony [Zeugnis], as is done in the testimony of the tradition, perhaps of an anonymous sage, is a completely different thing, whose worth must therefore be estimated through different rules. In these rules I cannot leave out reason.²²³

Herder points out a fundamental point of contention in the popular reception of *SB* which had also irked Jacobi: the fact that many of his readers took his notion of belief to refer to the way in which German philosophers generally wrote about the subject, namely as a reasoned account of how biblical testimony makes Christianity a well-informed religious choice.²²⁴

For his part, Jacobi had maintained that it was belief in the Humean sense, as referring to the various particular claims that we are personally convinced of without being certain about how the claim stands as a candidate for knowledge. Hamann's famous example of this type of belief, although he uses it to show that he is more consistent in following it than Hume himself, is that we need belief in order to eat an egg.²²⁵ The English language distinguishes

²²³ *Gott* (1787), p.150.

²²⁴ In *Berichtigung einer Rezension*, Jacobi responds to a reviewer of *DH* who had complained that Hume had not meant the theological notion of 'faith' when he refers to 'belief'. Jacobi dismisses the complaint on the grounds that he had not meant it in that way either (as was the assumption of the reviewer) and remarks that it is incorrect to attribute Wizenman's position to himself. In: *Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5, pp.115-7.

²²⁵ Letter to Kant in *AA*, 10:15.

the two types of belief neatly by calling the religious sense ‘faith’, rather than ‘belief’. Herder is thus pointing out the source of the misunderstanding in the fact that Jacobi used a word, without defining it, in a sense which in the German philosophical and theological discourse was not accustomed to. In part, then, the reception of *SB* stems from the fact that the German reception of Hume was not very advanced at the time. In addition to this, Jacobi’s reference to belief is also slightly more complex than the way in which Herder characterizes it. Jacobi’s reference to Hume was intended as an example of the ordinary language use of ‘belief’, to which Hume was also referring, in Jacobi’s view.

Going back to the passage cited above, what does this distinction tell us about Herder’s own position? For Herder reason is not only regulative but also seems to be *constitutive* for the construal of belief or faith as ‘testimony’. This is evident in his characterization of the first type of belief, which he ties *either* to the senses *or* to reason, suggesting that reason can independently construct claims without input from the senses. Herder subsequently approvingly cites the same passage from *SB* that Jacobi refers back to in *DH*, about the fact that reasoning can neither deny nor obviate the fact that everything is based on experience, even man’s ‘noble powers’. Herder reads this passage as a support for the *empirical* origin of cognition, which consequently invalidates concepts that do not derive from experience as ‘empty phantoms’.²²⁶ This constitutes Herder’s attempt to mediate in the conflict, since he claims that both Jacobi and Mendelssohn would agree that all cognition derives from experience, although it shows that Herder is unwilling to fully distance himself from Jacobi. This provides us with little by way of placing *Gott* within the account of Herder’s commitment to realism. For that we have to look into his account of Spinoza.

²²⁶ *Gott* (1787), p.153.

Herder tries to explain the gap between God and our finite existence by drawing on his prior negative realist distinctions concerning the sense organs. In Herder's account, the divine power has given existence to everything in our finite frame of reference (including our organs themselves):²²⁷

We do not know, what power is, or how it works,
much less how the divine power has produced
something and discloses itself to everything
according to its own way.²²⁸

In a way, this preserves the negative realism concerning the manner in which we are affected in our perception and the degree to which power remains inconceivable to us. However, the particular phrasing of 'disclosing' could lean too much towards a substance monism for the standards that were set out by Jacobi. All of this depends on whether the divine power is God himself or God's creation. There is no problem if Herder is saying that we do not know how the senses are affected, and that we nonetheless have to say that something is disclosed. However, if the divine power *is* God, which the fact that this passage is a defense of Spinoza certainly strongly suggests, that would mean that the speculative conceptual construal of God (because the concept at least includes unity, power and causality) is placed *before* perception. This would amount to a patent violation of the criticism of speculative reasoning that Jacobi outlined in *SB*, because it argues *de facto* that there is an inaccessible causality that works on us, and the cause or ground of which is God. At no point does this argument account for the access that Herder seems to have to God as a *conceivable* cause of perception. In other words, from the perspective of negative realism, Herder leaves the reality prior to or unfiltered by cognition altogether *too determined*. In not answering this problem, which should certainly have been pertinent to Herder, since *Gott* is

²²⁷ *Gott* (1787), p.48.

²²⁸ *Gott* (1787), p.49.

partly a response to *SB*, Herder's book at the very least falls prey to the same problem that Jacobi suffers from: a lack of clarity in the definitions of its key terms.

As part of his effort to clarify his position in *SB*, Jacobi published appendixes in the second edition of *SB* that explicitly critically engaged with the way in which Herder dealt with these issues. Naturally, he objected to the central issue, the notion of 'God' which is:

only a word without meaning, a mere empty shell
that remains.²²⁹

In essence, this is an extension of the point we just discussed as a possible deficiency of Herder's method: because it is not clear how God affects us, we can only relate to him as a highest cause, which is a conceptual 'shell', even by Herder's *own* standards, empty of empirical content.

4. An appeal to Jacobi

A careful comparison of the two editions of *Gott* reveals an overwhelming amount of cosmetic and stylistic changes that show Herder heavily concerned with the style of his text. There are also many significant changes, the most obvious being that Herder extended the title to *Gott: Einige Gespräche über Spinoza's System nebst Shaftesbury's Naturhymnus*. We will focus on the changes that will improve our understanding of Herder as a realist. This 1800 edition removes the discussion of Spinoza's relevance and its historical roots in the *Pantheismusstreit*. Specifically he omits all references to Mendelssohn. The reasons for this must be sought in the dramatic changes in the philosophical landscape: partly because of its controversial and ambivalent position on Spinozism, German idealism had become the most fashionable philosophical

²²⁹ Jacobi, *Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 1, p.221.

development in many German states by this time.²³⁰ Although the historical context of the *Pantbeismusstreit* was of virtually no interest a mere thirteen years after the fact, the status of Spinozism was still hotly debated. Herder's new edition thus found many grateful readers in a philosophical climate where both Schelling and Fichte were trying their respective hands at presenting their philosophy in a Spinozist style (around 1801).²³¹

Like the first edition of *Gott*, the second edition was also not merely concerned with correcting the public recriminations of Spinozism, but also attempted to present the consequences of Herder's trail of thought as it had developed up to that point. Jean Paul Richter, who worked closely with Herder during these final years of his life, reported to Jacobi that Herder sought to move his position closer to Jacobi's.²³² The fact that Jean Paul, who (as far as we can tell from the letters between Jacobi and himself) understood Jacobi's position very well, was working with Herder during the period in which, as we will see, he became more in line with negative realism than he had ever been, could well mean that Herder, had not understood the full complexity of Jacobi's realism up until that point.²³³

The new edition added a second preface, which characterizes the new public view of Spinoza's God as 'a despotic, blind Polyphemus, who has been robbed of his eye'. This is meant to reflect the view of the Spinozist system as a fatalism without a governing supernatural intelligence observing affairs, turning the world into a place of despotic causality. The overall solution that

²³⁰ Fichte is somewhat of an exception, who was more influenced by the arguments in *SB* than Schelling and Hegel. He, however, also becomes more amenable to Spinoza after 1800.

²³¹ Schelling, of course, had proclaimed much earlier that he was a Spinozist (at least as early as 1795).

²³² Roth, Friedrich, *Auserlesener Briefwechsel*, Band 2, p.283.

²³³ Jean Paul reports to Jacobi: 'Herder is now writing his second edition of *Gott* and has erased even the smallest slight against you.' Jacobi, *Auserlesener Briefwechsel*, Band 2, p.283.

Herder presents for this problem is the same: we don't know the way in which the divine power works on us, and this inconceivability negates the fatalism that is ascribed to Spinoza's God.

One of the most interesting additions to the book is an extended discussion of the notion of *personality*. Jean Paul likely imparted to Herder the idea that personality is one of the central notions of Jacobi's realism. The 1787 edition shows that Herder had earlier arrived at the same conclusion, but in 1800 Herder was more sympathetic to Jacobi than he had previously been, and he thus expanded this passage.²³⁴ There he dismisses the application of personality to God as 'anthropopathic', meaning that we (incorrectly) ascribe human feelings, in this case to God. We will discuss the significance of the notion of personality for Jacobi's philosophy in chapter 4. For now, it will suffice to examine one of Herder's most original contributions to the realism debate around 1800: an analysis of the ordinary language use of personality, which is in favor (albeit sub rosa) of Jacobi's attempts to place it before or beyond any cognition. Herder calls the analysis of this common use a 'philosophical approach', which also shows that he is, at this point, in line with Jacobi who considered this reference to ordinary language use and the practical use of concepts to be an essential component of his philosophical position.²³⁵ Herder's analysis of the central anecdote of *SB* is that Lessing was interested in Jacobi's position *because of Jacobi's notion of God as a person*. In the 1800 edition of *Gott*, Herder does not attack this notion but *praises* it as an entirely new idea.

Herder's defense of this point is actually quite surprising. Whereas theologians use the notion of personality in relation to God, he argues, they do this in order to account for the trinity, by saying that there are persons *in* God. They never argue that God is

²³⁴ *Gott* (1787), p.133.

²³⁵ *Gott* (1800), p.158.

a person. Herder then turns to ordinary language use of ‘person’ and ‘personhood’ in order to show what this new philosophical notion might entail:

Person (prosopon) was known as *facemask*, and after that as *theatrical character*. Through this, it draws attention to the uniqueness of a character [Eigentümliche eines Charakters] as such, through which one distinguishes oneself from another. This is how the word entered the common life. ‘He’, people say, ‘*plays* his *personage* [seine Person]. He brings his *personality* to the thing’. Etc. In that way, people oppose the person to the *thing* [Sache], always signifying something *contrasting* [Abstechendes], and distinctively *individual*. So it went in *judicial speech*, and in the variety of *classes*.²³⁶

Herder is retracing the fact that, in ordinary language as well as in its Greek origins, *person* was opposed to *thing* and held a singular use in distinguishing individuals both from one another and from things. We will see that it is exactly this peculiar quality that motivates Jacobi’s placing it before (or beyond) any mediation. However, how would such a notion apply to God?

Can we apply some of these *prosopoeie* to God?
He is neither *facemask* nor *mask*, neither a *person of class*, nor an *outlined character*, who is there with others and plays among them.²³⁷

Herder is careful to note that saying that someone plays a character is not to say that he is playing a role. The pure notion of personality refers to ‘some incomparable essentiality and truth’.²³⁸

²³⁶ *Gott* (1800), p.158-9.

²³⁷ *Gott* (1800), p.159.

²³⁸ *Gott* (1800), p.159.

As little as God *has the reputation* of a person, so little does he play a person, and so little does he affect personalities, has a personal way of thinking that is delineated by others, etc. *He is. Like him, no one is.*²³⁹

This way of approaching God reaches an impasse. Herder cannot admit a personal God without having to completely rewrite *Gott*. At this point, one of the interlocutors raises the idea that perhaps it is not the highest intelligence, but rather the unity of self-consciousness that amounts to personality.²⁴⁰ This effectively shifts the discussion back to the human individual. Herder's stand-in in the dialogue concludes that the 'inner self-consciousness forgets the appearance of the person [...] so completely' that this will not do for personality either. We will see that Jacobi held a similar view: we are forced to admit or ascribe personality, but at no point do we see its components or origin. In this way, although he does not explain on what side of the argument he falls considering the personality of God, Herder is fully in line with the realist position that personality has the same inconceivable origin as reality, as far as our cognitive capabilities are concerned: while remaining inconceivable to mediation, we nonetheless find ourselves immediately depending upon and trusting in it. Herder's analysis of the words in which sense adds some interesting features to the notion to which Jacobi might not have been wholly opposed: personality is *inalienable* and is what makes us stand out as individuals *amongst* and *against* other individuals and things. What's more, there is a kind of *playfulness* about personhood, which is not wholly fictive, but which makes us consider other persons in the same way in which we consider theatrical characters. They are imbued with motivations, desires and interiority, but the specific determinations of these qualities in no way depend on the notion

²³⁹ *Gott* (1800), pp.159-60.

²⁴⁰ *Gott* (1800), p.160.

of personality employed, and can thus be constituted as epistemic claims, i.e. “I believe John wants to take a walk.”

The new conclusion to the fifth conversation in *Gott* suggests that Herder ultimately does not believe that personality can be found in the unity of self-consciousness, rather personality relates to the selfhood that always seems to accompany a unity of consciousness, but which is neither perceived nor conceptualized in any determinate fashion.²⁴¹ It is obvious that this practical idea of personality closely follows the negative realist strictures as Jacobi explicated them:

Thus the conviction of our self, the principle of our individuation, lies deeper than where our understanding, our reason and our fantasy can reach. They have found it, Theano, as concept and as perception, that it lies in the word *self* itself. Self-consciousness, self-activity, they make our reality, our existence. On them rests the ladder of all our educated and uneducated abilities, drives and activities, which reaches from the earth to the heavens.²⁴²

In essence, the oblique way that we have of referring to our ‘self’ is the basis of all of our human activity. This is a thoroughly realist position, in that, even though we have no way of properly conceiving of the self, we nonetheless still depend on it with a great degree of efficacy.

²⁴¹ *Gott* (1800), p.295.

²⁴² *Gott* (1800), p.296.

5. *A Metacritique: exploring the understanding and reframing reason*

The final text of Herder's that we will consider is the two volumes of his *Metakritik* in which Herder critically comments upon Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*. Hamann had earlier written a review of Kant's first *Kritik* with this title, and Herder was evidently trying to complete this project with an integral commentary of Kant's text. Since it is an integral commentary on the text, we will not consider the minutiae of his discussion of Kant but will again focus on the aspects of this approach that develop Herder's realist commitments. The *Metakritik* is a text that is prone to infuriate the reader because it lacks any clear programmatic statement. It does, however, develop several typically Herderian concepts towards a position that is more closely in line with a Jacobian realism. At the very least this seems to have been Herder's intention.²⁴³ Considered from that perspective, Herder's project is one of the first attempts to situate realism in relation to the critical philosophy, which has been its covert discussion partner since the *Pantheismusstreit*.²⁴⁴ Like many German realists during the 1790's and Jacobi before him, Herder is unwilling to completely dismiss the importance of the critical philosophy but is intent on showing that many of the more arcane doctrinal points of Kantian transcendental idealism (such as the claim that time and space are forms of intuition, rather than concepts derived from experience) are, in his view, completely nonsensical and unnecessary.

One of the main methods that he uses to support his position is a kind of *speculative word history*. With this move, he develops Jacobi's underlying standard of ordinary language use and applies it to his own genetic method. Although he never provides an argument for his use of this method, he seems to assume that the *historical* development of a word (such as, in the second volume

²⁴³ Jacobi, *Auserlesener Briefwechsel*, Band 2, pp.283-4.

²⁴⁴ Cf. Jacobi's description of the Herculean nature of Kant in the next section on Reinhold and Neeb's similar attempt to situate Jacobi's position in relation to Kant in the section on Neeb.

of the *Metakritik*, ‘reason’), also shows its *correct* meanings and uses. This argument presupposes two conditions that are very difficult to substantiate convincingly: i) the continuity of history and of the development of languages, and ii) the immutability and persistence of the referents of these words and of their particular uses. Beyond that, Herder is also assuming that the way in which *he* was able to trace the origins of a word completely captures the full extent of its meaning, which looks fairly weak considering the scant amount of sources that he utilizes. From what little Jacobi has written by way of an elaboration of his views on language,²⁴⁵ he seems to envision a much greater degree of variability the senses and application of words in ordinary language use, and his reference to ordinary language use should be understood as explicitly favoring the language use of *living* persons, especially as an aid in communication. In contrast, Herder is committed to a much more homogenized connection between history and experience, where the words that we use maintain their use throughout the existence of humankind. This immutability of language suggests that Herder is still committed to his thesis from *Ideen*: language is a kind of divine intervention that allows us to bridge radically different experiences in communication.²⁴⁶ The tacit assumption that what he has found in historiographies and lexicons is representative of the development of language and provides a complete account, seems to be guiding Herder’s approach. It might also explain why he can be satisfied in his approach with such a small sampling of etymology.

Throughout the *Metakritik*, Kant is criticized for abandoning this original canon of language use. Curiously, Herder also criticizes metaphysical terminology because we can no longer reconstruct the experiential impressions that once accompanied

²⁴⁵ In appendix VII to the second edition of *SB* and *Zufällige Ergießungen eines einsamen Denkers* in *Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5.

²⁴⁶ For instance, Herder argues that many cases of dissensus and misunderstanding occur due to a deficient use of language, *sämtliche Werke*, Band 21 (1881), pp.19-20.

them in their Greek or medieval origins. Ostensibly, one would think that the divine intervention that Herder takes to be driving our language would solve this problem by inserting our own experiential impression within the hollowed out terminology. However, Herder is unilaterally critical of any attempt to reinvigorate the lost context of metaphysics, calling the purported impressions that are connected to metaphysical terminology ‘phantasma’ and ‘delusional imagery’ [Wahnbilder].²⁴⁷ Simply put, he believes that his contemporaries, who believe that they can still experience the impressions that were once connected to this terminology, are wrong. Since he has Kant in mind (for instance, in his reference to amphibolies and antinomies), Herder is in line with the realists around 1800 here. He delivers a criticism in the vein of Jacobi’s notion of nihilism: words are used with the conceit that they have reference to a common sphere of experience, even though these words are actually derived and only instilled by personal delusions.²⁴⁸

Herder offers two personal additions to this criticism. First, he is unwilling to dismiss the metaphysical terminology and tradition wholesale and claims that this terminology once had reference to an experiential context that has since been lost. This shows that even very abstract terms refer to a living experiential context for Herder. This is likely in virtue of these terms being a linguistic intervention which, as we have seen, plays some divinely inspired role, according to Herder, for instance, in relation to love. Secondly, Herder believes that the introduction of these metaphysical terms, that have been hollowed out, have lost their experiential referent, are instead filled with personal delusion, and ‘imperceptibly accompany and mould thoughts’, seemingly to the

²⁴⁷ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.122.

²⁴⁸ More than likely this criticism was inspired by Herder’s enthusiastic reception of *Jacobi an Fichte*: ‘First on your Fichte! Herder has read it more than once with delight and praised everything [...]’ Jean Paul to Jacobi. Jacobi, *Auserlesener Briefwechsel*, Band 2, p.283.

detriment of our own experience.²⁴⁹ This thesis has a broader scope than the overall argument of nihilism, because it claims that empty terminology and reasoning does not simply pacify our agency, but actually *infiltrates* our reasoning to the degree that it overwrites (or perhaps undermines) our experiential content. Jacobi has a similar claim about words losing their direct reference,²⁵⁰ but he does not apply this claim in his criticism of nihilism. All of this brings into question Herder's *criteria* for determining what historical traditions have been interrupted and are thus irrevocably lost (in terms of the original metaphysical terminology) and which pieces of our metaphysical vocabulary remain consistent with their original coining and continue to endure in the metaphysical vocabulary of Herder's time.

Having reconstructed the reasoning behind Herder's use of word history as best I am able to, I will now look at the other arguments that Herder offers for his views. One of the views that carry over from Herder's previous works is the idea that we shouldn't consider the understanding and reason as *fixed* forms, but rather as active, applied *abilities*. Herder will thus object to the presumption that pure reason tells us anything about what reason *does*. He continually tries to show that, for instance, separating sensibility and the understanding serves no purpose and moreover creates unnecessary philosophical problems. This leads him to ultimately argue for the ubiquity of the understanding insofar a human cognition is concerned. From this perspective, Kant's attempt to understand the pure functioning of reason and understanding become highly suspect.

One of the main ways in which Herder seeks to destabilize the Kantian edifice is by pointing to the relationality²⁵¹ and historicity of the terms that Kant uses, *as they are conceived by the*

²⁴⁹ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.122.

²⁵⁰ *Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5, p.205.

²⁵¹ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, pp.146,148.

understanding. The so-called ‘a priori’, for instance, only relates to what is ‘posterior’ to it, not to some absolute ground. Herder argues this point in a negatively realist way by arguing that a ‘prius before all a priori’ cannot be related to, by Kant’s lights, the ‘inner datum according to rules of the understanding’.²⁵² Because these terms are *of* the understanding, and can only be construed *relationally* in terms of ‘inner and outer experience’, no one is able to really think an absolute prius, because that would be to ‘think oneself *outside of oneself* [hinauszudenken]’.²⁵³ Thinking outside of oneself is beyond the abilities of human reason, in Herder’s view. This argument continues Herder’s earlier realist views, while also applying Jacobi’s emphasis on the inextricable relationality of the understanding in all of our claims. Another example of this line of argumentation can be found in Herder’s attempt to correct Kant’s use of intuition [Anschauung]. Herder believes that we should call the process wherein ‘dark perception’ moves to the understanding ‘not intuiting, but becoming aware [innewerden]’.²⁵⁴ This not only introduces a type of negative realism wherein it is impossible to demonstrate whether our conceptions are correct, but also for an act of appropriation: ‘the given now belongs to it’ (the soul).²⁵⁵

This is largely in line with the overall structure of considering the content of our experience (which is, as shown above, perception, according to Jacobi) as both given and, more distinctly, as our own, in terms of the interconnection between the internal and external forms. Herder is slightly more aggressive in showing the disconnection between perception (which, as noted, corresponds to revelation in Jacobi) and cognition. Jacobi opts for connecting the two only in terms of an attribution of certainty in the specific contents of perception (in his sense). When Herder makes ‘being’ into the ‘primal concept’ of reason and into one of

²⁵² *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.24.

²⁵³ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.24.

²⁵⁴ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.41.

²⁵⁵ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.44. Cf. the equation of conceiving as appropriation, p.90.

the first categories of the human understanding, in an attempt to rewrite Kant's table of categories, he is attempting to make the concept of being into that which 'knots together' [knüpft] all judgments of the understanding and is presupposed by all rules of reason. In short: 'Being is the ground of all cognition', and this concept is found applied everywhere in cognition.²⁵⁶ In effect, the concept of being is not distinct from 'being' as it is independently from out cognition (i.e. some radically mind-independent reality).

One could challenge Herder according to his own standards of relationality and raise the objection that just as with the 'a priori', as a concept, 'being' relates to 'nothingness', which is in turn what we use to define 'being'. One could then ask whether the concept of being can legitimately be considered to be the same as being, if it is still a relational term. However, Herder has explicitly structured his account to obviate this problem. For one, being is the primal concept of *reason*, not of the understanding (which deals with relations). As such, it knots together the judgments of the understanding in that its claims, in terms of 'objects, true, knowing, essence',²⁵⁷ refer to 'something existing, something certain, something fixed', in which we find the concept of being *already applied*. Secondly, Herder claims that 'nothingness is a non-concept: even the word is not there, unless one disposes of something'.²⁵⁸ This last remark is in reference to the fact that the German word 'Nichts' can be reconstructed as a negation of 'Ichts', in the same way in which the English word 'nothing' is a negation of 'thing' (no-thing). This is actually a fairly convincing argument, insofar as our notion of 'nothing' seems to already be a concept that is derived from the abstract notion of a thing. Rather than a fundamental metaphysical concept, 'nothing' is thus eminently dependent on the notion of being, in Herder's view.

²⁵⁶ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.62.

²⁵⁷ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.63.

²⁵⁸ *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 21, pp.62-3.

Although he does not explicitly state it, this idea is actually a typically Herderian development of a negative realist theme: having developed being into something that all our cognitive operations depend upon (likely based on Kant's famous footnote on existence²⁵⁹), Herder is actually arguing that being is not derived from experience, like most concepts. It is not even, as we would now arguably maintain, an abstract concept, but rather a fundamental component of our cognition, and we only perceive its referent (being or existence) through its working within our cognition as a power: 'In *working* [Wirkung] power [Kraft] reveals itself; according to its nature it *shapes* itself, it *organizes*'.²⁶⁰ Subsequently, this also makes power into one of the primary categories of the understanding, since we can only come to understand being through it. The use of 'revelation' in terms of being's working through us ('existence must *reveal* itself'²⁶¹) significantly brings to mind Jacobi's position. It is questionable, however, whether Jacobi would go so far as to explain the understanding as, essentially, the working of being, since this way of describing being involves a notion of externality that invites associations with a type of monism (making a direct connection between self-activity and revelation, which might lead to inferential arguments). Jacobi clearly considered this approach to be dangerous.

Herder still maintains a negative realism in that our cognition of a thing does not necessarily represent the thing but only that aspect that discloses itself.

We call the impressions on our sense, in as far as we *notice* them, *perception*. [...] *We found something* that discloses [mittheilende] itself to us. We *must*

²⁵⁹ Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Bxxxix.

²⁶⁰ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.67.

²⁶¹ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.67.

(this is what the impression effectuates) take part in it.

That which discloses itself is not the whole object itself, but something of it, that can be disclosed. The object stays [...] what it is.²⁶²

At this point our sense organs register the impressions, effectively creating a plurality of impressions.

Organized unities and multitudes flow [...] together in us, from all senses.

We stand in a stream, flooded by impressions of a powerful world that discloses itself to us.²⁶³

Consequently, Herder is firmly opposed the ‘conformation’²⁶⁴ [Conformation] of objects through the senses,²⁶⁵ which would be the core claim of naïve realism, because this conformation can only occur or be prepared through the complex set of concepts and judgments of the comprehensive understanding (for instance, in the sense that its concepts introduce similarity and distinction).²⁶⁶ The way in which we sense objects thus conforms to the understanding, not the senses. Herder is unwilling to even acknowledge naïve realists as realists:

The [...] type of viewer of the world who holds *everything that appears to him to be the thing itself*, would like to call themselves *realists*, although they

²⁶² *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, pp.82-3.

²⁶³ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.83.

²⁶⁴ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.101.

²⁶⁵ The senses are also described as being inconceivably worked upon by a ‘medium’. *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.101.

²⁶⁶ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.101.

actually, in as far as they trust the senses, earn the name *sensualists*.²⁶⁷

In a way, this was also Jacobi's strategy in *DH*: to show that the most extreme formulation of realism is both more robust than and presupposed by the naïve realist and his trust in the senses. The fact that Herder is protective of the realism label in conjunction with the above argumentation suggests that he does believe himself to be a realist in Jacobi's sense. His subsequent argumentation closely echoes *DH*. He argues that the naïve realist lives in an idealistic universe, a fantasy world that is only constructed out of 'sensible impressions' and 'vibrantly perceived types'.²⁶⁸

Another process to which Herder applies negative realism is the schemata, or what Herder calls the 'meta-schemata', between concepts and the words we use to designate these concepts, which are far from clear to consciousness.²⁶⁹

As one might expect, Herder also applies negative realism to the conception of the self. We are not whole: our 'existence is becoming'.²⁷⁰ We thus do not know what kind of process works through us and leads to our cognition, we only notice the workings of its power in us, as discussed above. In this way, Herder places practical principles at the core of the human being, speaking of an understanding that is always in the process of (and thus always explicitly implicated in) experiencing.²⁷¹ Since the understanding cognizes relations, Herder concludes:

*A philosophy that separates the necessary knotting
[Verknüpfung] of these connections, annihilates all
philosophy and even the essence of our understanding itself.*

²⁶⁷ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.161.

²⁶⁸ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.161.

²⁶⁹ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, pp.119,124.

²⁷⁰ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.153.

²⁷¹ *Sämmtliche Werke*, Band 21, pp.151-7.

Its work is to recognize what an inner and an outer belongs to, even to the extent that, when it thinks about itself, it must make itself into an object. If I get rid of this *Outside-me*, so that the universe only becomes a reflection of my inner, then I am no further than when I declare my inner to be a reflection of the universe.²⁷²

All of this is completely in line with Jacobi's conclusions in *DH*, about the fact that our explanatory models are parasitical on the schema of internality and externality as a way of structuring claims.

6. *Concluding remarks on Herder as a realist*

From the preceding we can conclude that the assumption that the gap between perception and cognition is unbridgeable from the perspective of conscious cognition had been a core framework of Herder's thought from the 1770's up to 1799. Since this distinction effectively predates Jacobi's more elaborate account of realism in 1787, it is probable that Jacobi's account of realism there is partially influenced by Herder's. But it should be added, that it is Jacobi who first uses the term 'realism' to describe this set of negative realist problems, and Herder only sometimes obliquely supports this label through showing certain problems in Kant and by way of his favorably citing Jacobi's work.²⁷³ Herder's commitment to Jacobi's sense of negative realism was most pronounced in the *Metakritik*, and was used to considerable effect to attack some of the more problematic aspects of Kant's philosophy (claims to purity, overly rigid distinctions, lack of clarity about the function of language, etc.). On the other hand, it remains unclear to what extent Herder is still committed to his monist position and adherence to the divine source of language. I have

²⁷² *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.181.

²⁷³ Cf. *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 21, p.150.

tried to show where these positions might still motivate Herder's approach. We can consider him as a realist around 1800, but one who at the same time uses the negative realist approach critically, but never shows that he grasps the method and its implications as clearly as Jacobi did. Ultimately, Herder was likely more opposed to the philosophical excesses that the realists criticized than interested in what the position had to offer philosophically in its own right. The critical standard that I have used throughout this section is what problems or contradictions Jacobi or a different negative realist would find in some of Herder's works. This approach, I hope, has helped to chart some aspects of the difficult relationship between Herder and the realists around 1800.

Whereas Herder remained ambiguous about his allegiance to Jacobi's realism throughout most of his career, Reinhold publicly committed himself to both Jacobi and realism around 1800. We must now consider whether he saw these two commitments as essentially the same.

2.3 Reinhold as a realist

Reinhold is interesting for our purposes because, as he changed his position from Kantianism to Fichtianism to Bardilianism, his assessment of Jacobi's position changed accordingly. One may be inclined to assume that Reinhold became a realist in Jacobi's sense around 1800, because this period saw extensive private discussions between the two men and Reinhold became a public advocate of realism at that time. I will show that Reinhold's adoption of Jacobi's realism is not as clear as a first glance at his intellectual trajectory might lead one to conclude. In order to make this point palpable, I will trace the initially friendly communication between Jacobi and Reinhold and show that there was a much more complicated discussion on the underlying conceptions of realism between negative realism and Reinhold and Bardili's rational realism. Since Reinhold's understanding of Jacobi changes over time, he is an interesting author to examine with regard to how systematic issues dictated the allegiances with Jacobi and the other realists.

1. Overtures of friendship

Although the two men were initially at odds due to Reinhold's critical attitude towards *SB*, the first clear overtures of reconciliation between Reinhold and Jacobi occurred in 1789, when Reinhold sent Jacobi a letter in which he praised the second edition of *SB* and made him the gift of *Versuch einer neuen Theorie des menschlichen Vorstellungsvermögens*.²⁷⁴ This led to a general softening of Reinhold's characterization of Jacobi in print, and ultimately to him committing himself to Jacobi's position in a way that I will attempt to determine in what follows. In the following, I will show how some aspects of Reinhold's position during this period in which he

²⁷⁴ Reinhold *Korrespondenz*, Band 2, p.172.

was more receptive to Jacobi were similar to or perhaps already predisposed for a rapprochement with Jacobian realism. Although in many cases it is difficult to show that he derived theses from Jacobi or Herder (with whom he had a close relationship before he became a Kantian²⁷⁵), these issues do explain why some features of realism presented such an attractive research avenue to Reinhold. Conversely, Jacobi's response makes it clear why he, despite previously considering Reinhold an 'adversary', was open to a dialogue that could bring the two of them closer together.

Jacobi's letter shows in and of itself how hostile most responses to *SB* were: Jacobi writes that he considers Reinhold to be the first of his adversaries who recognizes what he set out to accomplish in *SB*, as a criticism of the method of speculative philosophy.²⁷⁶ We've seen in chapter 1 how Reinhold, despite his dismissal of the ultimate use of Jacobi's solutions, is very positive about Jacobi's contribution to the debate with Mendelssohn. Jacobi writes that he had wanted to contact Reinhold some months earlier, after having read what would become the introduction to the *Versuch*²⁷⁷ and that he wanted to warn Reinhold that he made 'my mistake' in trusting the public too much, that he was giving their ability to understand Reinhold's text too much credit. In fact, Jacobi warns, the public is a 'beast'. Jacobi was still hurt by what he considered to be the deficient reception of some of the core points of *SB*. The fact that Reinhold *was* appreciative endeared Reinhold to him and might also explain why he was reluctant to publicly attack Reinhold even after 1800. Jacobi concludes his letter by writing: 'I think, dear excellent man, that the seed of our

²⁷⁵ It was Herder who officiated the marriage between Reinhold and his wife, and Reinhold defended Herder's *Ideen*.

²⁷⁶ Reinhold *Korrespondenz*, Band 2, p.179-80.

²⁷⁷ The expression of climbing to the 'limits of the comprehensible' might have sparked Jacobi's interest, since it is similar to Jacobi's project to conceive of the limits of the inconceivable. Cf. *Versuch einer neuen Theorie des menschlichen Vorstellungsvermögens* (1789) in *Karl Leonhard Reinhold Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 1, p.18.

acquaintance shall sprout and bear good fruits'. Reinhold writes back that he hopes that the first of these fruits will be friendship.²⁷⁸ He also confides in Jacobi that he does not consider most of his colleagues at the universities to be interesting thinkers and laments those who believe that thought has a 'market value', in reference to the way in which philosophers were dependent on money in their position at the university. In response to Jacobi's observation that Reinhold trusts the public too much (like Jacobi himself does), he says that he is *only* writing for his 'kindred spirits' [Geistesverwandten], and not for the majority of the professors in philosophy.

Whatever one may make of Reinhold's periodic shifts in philosophical positions, it is clear that his thought at least was never primarily motivated by careerist motivations or money money and fame.²⁷⁹ It is obvious that Jacobi, who had been deeply hurt by the disinterest of the university professors, agreed wholeheartedly. This does not seem to mean that Reinhold is uninterested in the traditional positions that were put forward by philosophers at the universities, since a sustained feature of his texts is the attempt to organize all of the possible positions in relation to his relevant concerns order to respond to them. It does seem to imply that his main motivations in doing this did not derive from the need to relate to philosophers who were influential at universities, but rather a certain view of the positive project of a philosophical science. This is likely a strategy that Reinhold adopted from Kant, but still applied at a large scale during his period of Bardilianism.

Reinhold was becoming disillusioned with life at the university and with the discourse of academic philosophy at large. Although this is not as evident in his publications at the time (the

²⁷⁸ Reinhold *Korrespondenz*, Band 2, p.225.

²⁷⁹ Reinhold's later adherence to Bardilianism would gain him almost universal disdain, for instance.

Versuch had appeared in the meantime, and the first *Beyträge zur Berichtigung bisheriger Mißverständnisse der Philosophen* would appear that same year, in 1790), it does explain why Reinhold would go out on a limb multiple times to explicitly support what, to the established philosophers, were extremely eccentric thinkers, in the cases of Fichte, Jacobi and Bardili. In his own way, Reinhold thus shared Jacobi's disillusionment with the way philosophy was being done at the universities. Although Reinhold managed to remain part of the academic establishment throughout most of his life, Reinhold's desperation is palpable when he concludes that he *knows* that he will not grow old in academic life.

In the same letter, Reinhold promises to represent Jacobi's position more carefully in future publications. Although he admits that he might have done Jacobi an injustice by grouping him with Schlosser under the position of supernaturalism, he promises to correct this. In his response,²⁸⁰ Jacobi addresses the elephant in the room: Kant. If Jacobi and Reinhold are to find some common ground, Jacobi must at least accept some tenets of Kant's position, since Kant's philosophy is Reinhold's most important philosophical commitment at this point. Jacobi praises Kant as a 'Hercules among thinkers' and writes:

The difference between you and me on this point lies in the fact that you believe that Kant has produced a thoroughly new system that is opposed to older philosophies, while I, on the other hand, believe that he has only completed those philosophies and has caused a revolution that simply cannot be avoided any longer. In short, he makes the epoch, is a hero to whom I'll gladly defer as long as he wages war, but under

²⁸⁰ *Reinhold Korrespondenz*, Band 2, pp.234-8.

whose law I cannot live and am against, during
peacetime.²⁸¹

This passage gains its full significance when read in conjunction with Jacobi's remarks on Kant in *Jacobi an Fichte* in 1799 that we will discuss in chapter 3. For now it is important to recognize Jacobi's profound *ambivalence* towards Kant. Kant is seen at once as a revolutionary in the field of philosophy of almost epic dimensions, but also someone whose rule does not sustain life. We will see in what way this is true for Jacobi. He remarks that Kant's 'thoroughly compact' idealism devours all other systems.²⁸² He explains that he has been working on a publication on Kant, but refrained from contradicting Kant in public, because people tend to treat Kant like a prophet and because Kant seems to be overly concerned with establishing his own infallibility.

It is possible that Reinhold was starting to develop a similar ambivalence towards Kant's philosophy, which he was now fundamentally transforming in the *Beyträge*. And indeed, he writes back to Jacobi that he considers Kant's transcendental idealism to be 'a technical way of representing: an elaborate machine, that I admire, but take to be unnecessary'.²⁸³ He also assures Jacobi that he does not believe that the critical philosophy that he aims at is an idealism.

Besides the fact that there are several ways in which Reinhold may already have been predisposed towards a Jacobian position during the late 1780's, there is also an important difference. Whereas *Jacobi* uses seemingly religious terminology but uses it in an, arguably, non-religious, unorthodox way, *Reinhold*, who was a monk in his youth, uses similar terms in an orthodox way. In fact, many of Reinhold's texts throughout his career refer to the existence of God. Although their seemingly common

²⁸¹ *Reinhold Korrespondenz*, Band 2, p.236.

²⁸² *Reinhold Korrespondenz*, Band 2, p.236.

²⁸³ *Reinhold Korrespondenz*, Band 2, p.254.

terminology masks it, it might well be the case that Reinhold's and Jacobi's positions are more dissimilar on this topic than might on the surface seem to be the case, especially if we are disposed to read Jacobi along the lines of some of the standard interpretations that I have criticized.

2. Comparing 'through' Jacobi

In his letters to Baggesen in 1791, it is clear that Reinhold has developed an appreciation for Jacobi, to the point of recommending *DH* because it offers many new lines of thought.²⁸⁴ He praises Jacobi for being the first among the opponents of critical philosophy to recognize that its theoretical principles lead to practical philosophy. This characterization of Jacobi as a theoretical trailblazer is one that Reinhold will retain throughout the early 19th century. The source of this reevaluation of Jacobi was likely the second edition of *SB*, which had appeared in 1789. In it, Jacobi argued for the primacy of practical action, using the same terminology that Reinhold also uses in this letter (key terms being: personality, drive, instinct, mechanisms). In other words, and perhaps somewhat surprisingly, Reinhold was appreciative of Jacobi's practical philosophy *even while* he adhered to the *Elementarphilosophie*. There is, moreover, no indication that he took Jacobi to be a realist at this time.

Reinhold's *Sendschreiben an J.C. Lavater und J.G. Fichte über den Glauben an Gott* (1799) provides an excellent overview over the way in which Reinhold understood Jacobi's position just before the turn of the century. He characterizes it as a 'lively conviction of certitude'.²⁸⁵ Reinhold especially values Jacobi for being 'as I now understand, the *first* and *only* one who has *also* presented [the] *comparative* position in clear consciousness.'²⁸⁶ Reinhold believes

²⁸⁴ Reinhold *Korrespondenz*, Band 3, pp.13-4.

²⁸⁵ Reinhold, *Sendschreiben an J.C. Lavater und J.G. Fichte über den Glauben an Gott* (1799), p.7.

²⁸⁶ *Sendschreiben*, pp.7-8.

that Jacobi has been the only one at that time who was able to step outside of both speculative thought *and* his (Jacobi's) own position in order to carefully assess both. Reinhold then cites the epigraph from *DH* about dogmatism and skepticism, which suggests that he believes that Jacobi's project in *DH* was to maintain both positions. Since we've seen that the interrogation of the naïve realist and the idealist have been essential steps through which Jacobi arrived at his own realist position, one might wonder what Reinhold means to say here, since he essentially separates Jacobi's position from its critical framework. It would seem likely that Reinhold still identifies Jacobi with the Wizenmannian account of the true religious conviction, but praises him for distancing himself from that position and from speculation.

The part of the book that reproduces one of Reinhold's letters to Fichte provides a concise account of Reinhold's interaction with Jacobi:

For some days I have been in Eutin personally, and it becomes more plausible to me with every discussion I have with *Jacobi* that I must take a position between *his* and *yours* if I am to understand *you* and *at the same time myself, completely*. He has completely freed my imagination that in part was still occupied with the *letter* of the *Kantian*, and was shackled to this doctrinal system. Through *him* I have become intimately acquainted with the spirit of your philosophy, as I have become intimately acquainted with the spirit of the *Kantian* philosophy through you.²⁸⁷

Given the way in which Reinhold characterizes Jacobi as having two positions, it is safe to conclude that Reinhold did not believe that he had to move closer to what he took to be Jacobi's actual

²⁸⁷ *Sendschreiben*, p.78.

position (the conviction of certitude) but rather to his *comparative* position, which he understands as Jacobi's skeptical distance from other positions, since this would be the ideal position from which he could evaluate Fichte. This is an early signal that Reinhold was starting to outright *oppose* transcendental idealism, as he would do explicitly two years later. However, it remains to be determined what Reinhold thought that Jacobi's own position truly was, since he mainly seems to be interested in Jacobi for his 'comparative' criticism of idealism. Reinhold utilizes Jacobi's arguments concerning reality and certitude only as a criticism of speculation:

That *philosophical knowing*, in all the independence that it has *for* itself and *through* itself, at the same time cannot do without *belief* that is separate from itself (and even only through it), has become much more plausible to me, through *Jacobi*.

[...] and that philosophical knowing can only be connected with that *real reality* [reellen Realität] which is elevated *through that* relationship *over mere speculation*.²⁸⁸

Reinhold goes on to say that it is this relationship that is taken to be certain in belief. Taking this into account, it is probable that even though Jacobi and Reinhold had become allies in their criticism of the speculative or idealist methodology, Reinhold did not agree with Jacobi's realism. After all, Reinhold only seems interested in how a philosophical science has to acknowledge its relationship with the 'real reality'. In this sense, the *Sendschreiben* preludes to Reinhold's shift to Bardili and is not a real confrontation with Jacobi's realism. Reinhold is concerned with saving philosophy from the excesses of speculation, rather than with the negative realist problems involved in making claims about reality. What is also absent in Reinhold's account is the focus on

²⁸⁸ *Sendschreiben*, pp.79-80.

practical application and the individual, which are all aspects that, as we'll see, are absent in Bardili as well, but which Jacobi takes to be essential. Finally, Reinhold introduces the 'feeling of the real'.²⁸⁹ This real is inconceivable but also, in Reinhold's view, the real *is* God. This connection between what we assume or construe to be real, on the one hand, and God on the other, is in violation of the negative realist arguments against the inference from mediated logic towards metaphysically real entities, as it was set out in *SB*. In effect, Reinhold is suggesting that God is being, which, in Jacobi's view, leads back to pantheism, and which is exactly, as we'll see, one of the things that the negative realists object to in Reinhold and Bardili's *rational realism*.

3. Rational Realism

Later, in December 1799, after Reinhold had publicly moved closer to Jacobi's position and, to a certain degree, distanced himself from Fichte, Reinhold started corresponding with Christoph Gottfried Bardili, who was Schelling's cousin. Reinhold became keenly interested in Bardili's *Grundriss der ersten Logik* (1800), which Reinhold would come to read twelve times.²⁹⁰ In their correspondence, Reinhold first characterized Bardili's system as a *rational realism*.²⁹¹ In order to determine in what way Reinhold was interested in this rational realism, we first need to examine what kind of realism it is (evidently a non-rational realism) and to what kind of idealism it stood opposed. Next to no research has been done on the subject of rational realism. A notable exception is Rebecca Paimann's *Das Denken als Denken: Die*

²⁸⁹ *Sendschreiben*, pp.83-4.

²⁹⁰ As reported in Zoeppritz, *Aus F. H. Jacobi's Nachlaß, Ungedruckte Briefe von und an Jacobi und Andere*, Band 1, p.267.

²⁹¹ Reinhold, *Briefwechsel über das Wesen der Philosophie und das Unwesen der Speculation* (1804), p.82. Bardili himself had never presented his system as a realism before.

Philosophie des Christoph Gottfried Bardili (2009). My contribution to this field of research will be the connection between Jacobi's realism and rational realism.

How was Bardili's realism different from Jacobi's? In his earlier *Briefe über den Ursprung einer Metaphysik überhaupt* (1798), Bardili had explicitly appealed to Jacobi.²⁹² Despite this overture, we know that Jacobi did not approve of Bardili's system, even though he never publicly disputed it. For one, Friedrich Köppen, Jacobi's disciple, published a review article of Bardili's book from which we can draw the main points in which Jacobi objected to Bardili.²⁹³

Köppen's article, 'Versuch einer kurzen Darstellung des Bardilischen Systems, nebst Bemerkungen über dasselbe'²⁹⁴ heavily focuses on Bardili's primary principle: *thinking as thinking*. This means our thinking as abstracted from all content and application. In thinking qua thinking, we find absolute unity, which we discover to be absolute because it can be infinitely repeated. We reach this point of 'thinking as thinking' through annihilating the content of thought via abstraction. Köppen remarks that this feature of Bardili hardly seems opposed to the 'new speculative philosophy'.²⁹⁵ On the whole, Bardili is in favor of an ever-increasing abstraction, because it makes our thoughts stronger.²⁹⁶ In this abstraction, the 'matter' [Stoff] of thinking is annihilated.²⁹⁷ The Jacobian aspect of Bardili's system seems to lie in his characterization of this matter for thought, because he believes that a taking-to-be-true

²⁹² Bardili, *Briefe über den Ursprung einer Metaphysik überhaupt* (1798), pp.4,82.

²⁹³ Jacobi wholeheartedly approved of this criticism. Cf. *Aus F. H. Jacobi's Nachlaß, Ungedruckte Briefe von und an Jacobi und Andere*, Band 1, p.289.

²⁹⁴ In *Der Genius des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*, 1801, Band 2.

²⁹⁵ 'Versuch einer kurzen Darstellung', p.130.

²⁹⁶ 'Versuch einer kurzen Darstellung', p.139.

²⁹⁷ 'Versuch einer kurzen Darstellung', p.140.

[Wahrnehmung] is involved where something is given, which is not thought itself, but which becomes the content of thought.²⁹⁸

Köppen criticizes Bardili's position (which at that time was not yet publicly known under the label of 'rational realism') with negative realist arguments, and focuses on its basic principles and methodologies. The first problem that he raises is that the absolute unity that one grasps through thinking as thinking is ultimately God, as the ground of all being.²⁹⁹ If this is true, one should try to get nearer to him in our thinking and our doing. The problem, according to Köppen, is that we have to deny, even annihilate our particular beliefs, our investments in the world, in order to do this (this is Bardili's process of abstraction).³⁰⁰ That would violate Jacobi's conclusions regarding the fact that we have to believe in our epistemic investments in the world, because we at the same time assume that all perceptions are taken-to-be-true through revelation. If there were a God who would command us to deny this, this would go against the natural use of our rationality.

Köppen now characterizes Bardili's God as 'a *thought of God*', and in this process draws attention to the fact that Bardili does not adhere to a key notion of Jacobi's realism: namely, that the concept that we have of something must be considered to be distinct from the thing we have a concept of. This is the reason why Jacobi would famously claim that a knowable God is no God at all. Köppen now turns to Bardili's attempt to derive 'the whole edifice of human knowing from a single principle'.³⁰¹ He objects: 'but the thought of God distinguishes itself from all others in that it is simply inconceivable and is not subjected to any closer determination'. God as an absolute unity thus cannot overlap neatly with our understanding of perception as a form of 'revelation' [Offenbarung] and thus as being, in the last analysis, inconceivable

²⁹⁸ 'Versuch einer kurzen Darstellg', p.140.

²⁹⁹ 'Versuch einer kurzen Darstellg', p.182.

³⁰⁰ 'Versuch einer kurzen Darstellg', pp.182-3.

³⁰¹ 'Versuch einer kurzen Darstellg', p.183.

(as Jacobi argued in *DH*) and infinite (in relation to finite experience). In a formulation that, at least in part, most likely derives from Jacobi, since it ties in perfectly with the final passages of *DH*, Köppen argues that the thought of God is of a very peculiar nature, because it:

closes the circle of my knowledge on all sides. I reach Him when, in feeling, my impotence [Ohnmacht] and limitation says: *here you conceive of nothing, here everything is miraculous*.³⁰²

We will engage with the practical implications of this impotence that introduces the thought of God *and* freedom in chapter 4. What is important for the discussion between negative realism and Bardili's rational realism is that Bardili is accused of not respecting the limits of the inconceivable.³⁰³ By placing the conceivable within something that is properly inconceivable (God), one infers something about the inconceivable that ends up making the inconceivable altogether too conceivable (the absolute unity of being) and consequently also makes the conceivable into something inconceivable: how does the conceivable derive from absolute being, and why must we annihilate it in abstraction? Another way of presenting the difference between Jacobi and Reinhold/Bardili is to focus on their respective conceptions of revelation and the miraculous, while the Reinhold/Bardili took revelation in the traditional theological sense in which God reveals himself to us as some kind of manifestation or disclosure of content, the former took it in a commonplace sense, the ordinary language usage by which something is 'revealed'. Jacobi's sense though not necessarily is related to God in any way, but should be considered as 'miraculous' insofar as the process of revelation itself is inconceivable, and in this sense is 'miraculous'.

³⁰² 'Versuch einer kurzen Darstellg', pp.183-4.

³⁰³ Cf. 'Versuch einer kurzen Darstellg', p.207: 'How do I know that God is one thing or another?'

The final point of contention that I will discuss is the fact that Bardili places the locus of both humanity and philosophy outside of the human individual: in the class ‘thinking as thinking’. Köppen objects that it is entirely unmotivated to make pure thought the ‘peak of philosophy’.³⁰⁴ Like Jacobi, Köppen contends that the only way to properly account for rational thought is to look at its *application* by the individual in particular circumstances. If we can’t refer to practice, for instance, how do we know which abstractions we should pick? In Köppen’s view, the only criterion in this case is whichever suits our goals the best.

From this selection of Köppen’s most potent critical arguments, we can conclude that Bardili was very far from Jacobi’s realism. We must then determine why Bardili’s system, in its rebranded form of ‘rational realism’, could be considered to be a more systematic successor to Jacobi’s position.³⁰⁵

In the first volume of *Beyträge zur leichtern Übersicht des Zustandes der Philosophie beym Anfange des 19. Jahrhunderts* (1801) Reinhold describes Jacobi as holding ‘a position different than mine’.³⁰⁶ This marks the first occurrence in print that Reinhold enthusiastically supports Bardili under the rational realism label³⁰⁷ and announces that he no longer believes that transcendental idealism is the ‘true philosophy for science’.³⁰⁸ The referent of this realism is ‘being’ [Seyn], which we grasp through thinking as thinking (and that is why it is a *rational* realism). In the preface to the second volume of the *Beyträge*, which appeared that same year, Reinhold remarks that a proliferation of realisms have sprung up in

³⁰⁴ ‘Versuch einer kurzen Darstellg’, p.185.

³⁰⁵ This sentiment was shared by at least one other author: Friedrich Christoph Jensen, who wrote a book designed to convince Jacobi to convert to Bardilianism: *Briefe über Wahrheit, Gott, Organismus und Unsterblichkeit* (1803).

³⁰⁶ *Beyträge*, Band 1, p.xii.

³⁰⁷ *Beyträge*, Band 1, p.71, where Reinhold identifies rational realism with ‘the *true philosophy*.’

³⁰⁸ *Beyträge*, Band 1, p.xi.

response to Kant's claim that his transcendental idealism is also an *empirical realism*. He dismisses subsequent notions of realism as still caught up in this Kantian split: Fichte's theoretical idealism is a *practical realism* and Bouterwek's *practical realism* is a theoretical skepticism. In addition to this, he adds that Schelling developed a *physical realism*.³⁰⁹ Jacobi remains surprisingly absent from this lineup. The reason for this absence is probably not that Reinhold believed Jacobi's position to be wholly unconnected to realism, but rather that he did not count Jacobi among this list of enemies.³¹⁰ Jacobi was, after all, a known critic of transcendental idealism. Reinhold adds more varieties of realism in his account of the history of philosophy, as it leads up to rational realism. In order to do this, Reinhold presents Leibniz and Spinoza as 'systems of demonstrative realism'.³¹¹ And in the fifth volume of the *Beyträge*, while attempting to attack the presuppositions of speculation, Reinhold also refers to a 'metaphysical realism' and an 'absolute realism'.³¹²

In 1803, in that same volume, Reinhold once again presents the argument that was meant to convince Jacobi: beyond the excesses of the claims of knowledge that Jacobi opposes (the claims that Reinhold takes to be speculation and transcendental idealism) we are not just limited to '*non-knowing* and *belief*' because we can also have '*a cognition of thinking*'.³¹³ However, as we have seen, since the way in which Reinhold and Bardili characterize this thinking and the way in which it relates to the equivocation of God with being, Jacobi simply cannot consider this to be a convincing argument. Apparently, Reinhold believes that Jacobi is actually in agreement here, and he believes that God is the '*only principle* of the

³⁰⁹ *Beyträge*, Band 2 pp.iv-v.

³¹⁰ Bouterwek's position in this list is difficult to assess, since he was, in his own view, a realist in Jacobi's sense. It is possible that he earned a place on this list due to his open and unmitigated hostility to Bardili.

³¹¹ *Beyträge*, Band 2, p.30.

³¹² *Beyträge*, Band 5, p.viii.

³¹³ *Beyträge*, Band 5, p.70.

cognition of being’, which we reach ‘*from and through God himself*.’³¹⁴ This phrasing heavily implies that God is substantially incarnated in the ‘being’ we have access to in the cognition of thinking.

Although Reinhold published Jacobi’s text on Kant in his *Beyträge*, the rift between Jacobi on the one hand and Reinhold and Bardili on the other would only grow. Reinhold’s 1804 review of Köppen’s book on Schelling (see chapter 3 and 5) shows Reinhold taking a fairly hostile stance against Jacobi and presents for us the best entrance to how he understood Jacobi’s position.³¹⁵ Reinhold takes the occasion to review the book to criticize Jacobi and barely mentions Köppen’s book. His earlier characterization of Jacobi as having *two* positions returns in a much less sympathetic way. The comparative position is now presented as an *indifferent skepticism*, in relation to which Jacobi rebels with a ‘*feeling of the salto mortale*’, which leads him into the ‘territory of *belief*’.³¹⁶

Here, Reinhold again conflates several terms of Jacobi’s terminology,³¹⁷ evidently concluding that all of these terms essentially amount to ‘belief’, likely taken in the theological ‘faith’ sense. Again Reinhold does not seem to think it necessary to discuss the particulars of this position or of the account of belief that he attributes to Jacobi. His initial reading of the *SB* is still in effect, and Reinhold probably had no idea in what sense Jacobi considered his own position to be a realism. He goes on to attack the application of Jacobi’s so-called ‘indifferent skepticism’ with respect to speculation. Because Jacobi is, in Reinhold’s view, limited in this view to the position of speculation, his entire

³¹⁴ *Beyträge*, Band 5, p.71.

³¹⁵ It is possible that Reinhold was more candid because the review was anonymous. Bardili recognizes that the review is Reinhold’s in a letter. In: Ernst Reinhold, *Karl Leonhard Reinhold's Leben und litterarisches Wirken: nebst einer Auswahl von Briefen Kant's, Fichte's, Jacobi's und anderer philosophirender Zeitgenossen an ihn* (1825), pp.328-9.

³¹⁶ *Jenaische Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, Num. 95 (1804), p.131.

³¹⁷ See also his reference to ‘believing feelings’, *Jenaische Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, p.133.

account is restricted to the criticism of speculation and should really be called a ‘*negative* speculation’.³¹⁸ When Jacobi’s criticism of ‘apparently clear concepts’ shows that they are actually deeply connected and complicated, he is in essence saying that it is impossible to have clear concepts and that distinctions between ‘illusion, appearing and being in itself’ are patently unclear. This claim, however, *internally reintroduces* exactly these distinctions, but now takes them as ‘indistinctly represented [Undeutlichvorgestellt-werden]’, as ‘not-thought, but merely felt’.³¹⁹ This insistence on a ‘not-thought’ is naturally unacceptable for Reinhold, whose Bardilianism demands that everything can and must be thought in the absolute unity of thinking as thinking.

Reinhold’s assessment, however, also accurately presents a paradoxical feature of Jacobi’s realism, exactly that feature which makes it a *negative* realism: the fact that we *can conceive of the way in which reality remains inconceivable to us*. Jacobi was fully aware of the fact that the way of pointing towards a reality that cannot enter cognition forces us to adopt odd formulations that seem to reproduce exactly the distinctions that make our cognition suspect in terms of the contentions concerning our ability to grasp reality (I have shown this to be the overarching systematic point of the appendix to *DH*). This is why he is forced to employ formulations like ‘really real’ which, rather than introducing a naïve or transcendental realism, actually attempt to make us understand that cognition is essentially limited, not just in its ability to grasp reality, but also evidently in its ability to express this limitation. What Reinhold considers to be Jacobi’s fatal weakness is actually part of Jacobi’s explicit formulation of negative realism: he attempts to formulate a modest philosophical account about the limits between the conceivable and the inconceivable without drawing conclusions that potentially alienate us from our existence as individuals.

³¹⁸ *Jenaische Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, p.132.

³¹⁹ *Jenaische Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*, p.133.

In 1805, Bardili writes to Reinhold that he will write a text through which he hopes to convince Jacobi that the latter's 'philosophy of feeling' can be incorporated within 'our' system.³²⁰ Soon thereafter, Bardili did in fact publish this text. *Noch zwey Worte über das logische Grundverhältniss* (1806) seems, however, to have fallen on deaf ears.

Jacobi's final and private judgment on Reinhold is thus one of condemnation: 'Such an inconceivable man, this Reinhold! Such brilliance and such obtuseness has probably never been found in one man together. The spontaneity exhausts all receptivity in him'.³²¹

We can conclude that although Jacobi and Reinhold seem to have had intimate discussions on philosophical matters at one point, Reinhold ends up essentially following Fichte's reading of Jacobi's position: a reading that tacitly accepts Jacobi's position as a valid one, but also sets it up as distinct from a properly *philosophical* one. This view ultimately dictates that Jacobi's position should be incorporated within the philosophical position. However, the way in which this incorporation is supposed to take place bears the unmistakable marks of an attempted refutation. Nevertheless, Reinhold does seem to have adhered to negative realism in some sense, albeit perhaps unknowingly, in his acceptance of the criticism of speculation. We will now turn to the final author of this chapter, who rounds up the different ways that realist arguments were applied. Johann Neeb is a fascinating author because he did *exactly* what Jacobi wanted: understand the key points of his view, and developed it in the direction of a clearer and more progressive systematic philosophical position in its own right.

³²⁰ Reinhold's *Leben*, p.333.

³²¹ Jacobi, *Auserlesener Briefwechsel*, Band 2, p.432.

2.4 Johann Neeb: ‘the senses are not the gateways to things’³²²

It probably has become clear by now that the most prominent friends of negative realism tend to write in a very peculiar way, using philosophically unorthodox terminology like ‘belief’ and ‘revelation’ in order to argue their specific points as well as go about their respective criticisms of traditional and accepted methods in philosophy. This did not help their case among those working within the universities. It is safe to say that academic philosophers were far more likely to have a standardized vocabulary and canonical descriptions of particular important terms. This in part explains Kant’s public reaction in the essay ‘Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?’, describing Jacobi’s philosophy as associated with ‘whims’ [Grillen].³²³ The philosophers and theologians at the university were accustomed to a certain way of presenting arguments, and were loath to recognize any arguments that did not conform to their readily accepted conventions. For a long time, this was the tenor of the reception of Jacobi’s work.

As we’ve seen, the public perception of Jacobi’s position suffered from the added problem that his most popular work of the time, the *SB*, did not take the time to explain or develop the alternative that Jacobi proposed. This resulted in the fact that during the 1780’s and 1790’s the majority of practicing philosophers and theologians did not really take Jacobi seriously, and it was not until a later generation (most notably the German idealists, but also philosophers like Fries) gained university positions that Jacobi started to become more accepted and taken up as espousing a philosophically cogent position. By and large, the same was true of Herder until he published the *Metakritik*. Notable exceptions during this time were Reinhold, who wrote an early

³²² Johann Neeb, ‘Die Humanität der Jacobischen Philosophie’, *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1 (1817), p.252.

³²³ Kant, *AA*, 8:143.

defense of Herder's *Ideen*, and Jean Paul, both of whom became realists. Interestingly, each adopted a diametrically opposed strategy for their expression of realism. On the one hand, Jean Paul distanced himself even more from traditional presentations of philosophical arguments, radicalizing the literary presentation of ideas as it was adopted by Jacobi in his novels *Allwill* and *Woldemar*. Reinhold, on the other hand, tried to explain his realism by adopting the traditional norms of university exposition, for instance by writing a historiography of philosophy and entering polemical debates seeking comprehensive refutations.

Johann Neeb, whom Jacobi called the resurrected Wizenmann,³²⁴ seems to have attempted to bridge the divide between a traditional and an atypical, more modern presentation by showing, in a relatively traditional way, how traditional conceptions of demonstration and proof do not suffice for addressing the problems that the realists were attempting to put on the philosophical agenda (the negative realist problem). Although he did not have the time to contribute more than a few texts to the realist cause (he was, along with all philosophers in the conquered territories, expelled from his position by Napoleon), Neeb argued, furthermore, that it was a task for philosophy to find a solution to this problem. In other words, rather than scoff at the lack of rigor in presentation, philosophers needed to adapt their methods to these problems in order to maintain their intellectual commitments in the face of the realist problems. We will now examine the way in which Neeb presented this problem.

Neeb published the article 'Unmöglichkeit eines speculativen Beweises für das Dasein der Dinge: Widerlegung des Idealismus aus Gründen der praktischen Vernunft' in

³²⁴ Aus F. H. Jacobi's Nachlaß, *Ungedruckte Briefe von und an Jacobi und Andere*, Band 1, p.224.

Niethammer's *Philosophisches Journal* in 1795.³²⁵ From the first lines it is immediately clear that Neeb's frame of reference is Jacobi's realism, since he applies the Pascal quote that served as the epigraph to *DH* to the discussion between realism and idealism:

I am not sure if one should also speak of the dogmatic systems of *realism* and *idealism* in Pascal's final judgment on dogmatism and skepticism: 'Reason embarrasses the *realists*, nature mocks the *idealists*'. It still seems uncertain, whether it betrays the strength or weakness of reason that it has made it its task to investigate the *existence* of things.³²⁶

Leaving open the question of whether realism and idealism must always be dogmatic systems, Neeb raises a question that leads to the core of this dispute: Should reason investigate existence in the first place? He adds that, from the perspective of common-sense, all proofs that idealism offers seem 'ridiculous', and common-sense feels, moreover, that its own proof is incontrovertible. This essentially reproduces Jacobi's characterization of the stubborn realist in *DH*, that I called the naïve realist. Evidently, this common-sense position is what Neeb refers to as dogmatic realism. Rather than now adopting Jacobi's approach, which consisted in recourse being made to ordinary language use as the basis of the convictions referred to by the naïve realist (belief or revelation), Neeb instead opts for discussing the root problem in the dispute: the notion of *proof*. He takes up the task of investigating 'the nature of proof' in order to determine whether the realist proofs hold up to the standards of a philosophical investigation.³²⁷

³²⁵ Niethammer (ed.), *Philosophische Journal einer Gesellschaft deutscher Gelehrten*, Band 6 (1795).

³²⁶ *Philosophische Journal*, p.118.

³²⁷ *Philosophische Journal*, p.119.

According to Neeb's account, proof is the connecting of one proposition with another (A-B), whose truth I either suppose [annehme] or understand. It is the matter [Stoff] and form of A that achieves the conviction in me that A 'belongs' to B in terms of its matter and form. The connection of these connected propositions is thus also the logical ground of our cognizing the connection. A's matter and form either determine B's matter (in the case of analytical proof) or its form (synthetic proof). A cannot only determine the form of B, because (in order to even cognize a connection) we must have earlier had the matter of B in our consciousness. This means that a synthetic proof also presupposes a third term that supplies the matter of B, the proposition to be proven that makes this matter conscious. Neeb argues that a philosophical proof is different from a mathematical proof, where A is to B as kind is to genus, or an intuition is proven as belonging to a form of representation. Only in the case of analytical proof (meant in the Kantian sense: predicate concept is *contained* within the subject concept) do proofs in mathematics and in philosophy agree.

For synthetic proofs, Neeb argues for a specific procedure:

The whole distinction between this philosophical proof and that mathematical demonstration is that, in the former, the fact [of consciousness] that mediates the synthesis is *given* a priori through the nature of the cognitive ability [Erkenntnisvermögens] in a *singular* way. In the latter, the imagination *produces* the fact [of consciousness] according to a rule of the understanding that is given through the cognitive ability.³²⁸

³²⁸ *Philosophisches Journal*, p.122.

In Neeb's view, if there were no givenness or production in either case, there would be no proof. He argues that the philosophical proof deals with givenness, which must be properly analyzed by the philosopher, because it is only by virtue of this givenness that we can even attempt to prove a connection between A and B.

Having outlined this theory of proofs, Neeb now applies it in order to refute (dogmatic) idealism and (naïve) realism. Since reality or existence is not an attribute or even a representation, but rather the positing of the thing itself [Dinges selbst], the (naïve) realist cannot show that the (dogmatic) idealist incorrectly proves that reality does not exist.³²⁹ Conversely, if one wants to prove that the connection between a representation and a thing can be revealed, one should also apply the critique of the given to the (naïve) realist's claims. In order to clarify this point, Neeb offers two examples of questions that one could answer by offering proof:

i) Does God exist outside of my reason?

ii) Does paper exist outside of my understanding?³³⁰

The existence of God outside of reason is often denied by philosophers, according to Neeb, because 'the logical necessity of a judgment does not imply the existence of an object'. Hence, while we may offer logically consistent proofs of the existence of God, 'the logical [proof] is not a proof of *real existence*'. Since the notion of God is only given through reason and not a direct grasping of the existence of a thing, we will never be able to convincingly infer the existence of God from its mere concept. Conversely, it is sensibility that offers the matter for the concept that we have of paper, but not for its existence.

³²⁹ *Philosophisches Journal*, p.123.

³³⁰ *Philosophisches Journal*, p.124.

Thus far the realist seems to have the upper hand. At this point, however, Neeb structures the text as an analysis of the attacks that the idealist and the realist might make on each other's position. The idealist now asks the 'realist in the Kantian school': Are not both cases the same, because in the case of paper, the understanding becomes transcendent when it presumes to move from the representation to the '*genuine* [eigentlichen] object'?³³¹ This forces the 'dogmatic realist' to conclude that 'either everything that I think *is* (exists)' or the understanding is also unable to lead to 'objective existence.'³³² According to Neeb, the realist does not want to concede the first option because he wants to maintain a distinction between 'reality and fantasy'. This lands him 'stuck in the net that the idealist has set out'.³³³ Finally, the realist must adhere to the Kantian distinction between appearances and things-in-themselves, in order to maintain a distinction between something that appears real but is not and something that remains real but doesn't appear.³³⁴

The argument continues for a while longer, but Neeb eventually concludes that when we follow the 'essence of proof',³³⁵ the skeptical idealist will always refute the dogmatic realist. But the obverse holds true as well: the dogmatic idealist is unable to deal with the existence of things because he is unable to prove the *non-existence* of things from the nature of his representations.³³⁶ This argument is the first hint that Neeb is moving towards the stance of negative realism. He concludes that a skeptical idealism must 'surely tolerate *formal realism*'.³³⁷ The argument that Neeb provides is Jacobian: the skeptical idealist assumes the distinction between the representation in the understanding and the represented that is

³³¹ *Philosophisches Journal*, p.125.

³³² *Philosophisches Journal*, p.126.

³³³ *Philosophisches Journal*, p.127.

³³⁴ *Philosophisches Journal*, p.128.

³³⁵ *Philosophisches Journal*, p.132.

³³⁶ *Philosophisches Journal*, p.133.

³³⁷ *Philosophisches Journal*, p.133.

outside of understanding. Although this doesn't explicitly evoke the connection between the internal and the external form, the fact that Neeb calls it a *formal* realism should attest to the fact that he doesn't believe that this formal realism grasps reality directly. Another clear Jacobian conclusion that Neeb draws is that man is naturally more predisposed to action than to speculation. 'Truth is only a condition of morality, not the final goal of man'. Neeb concludes that the internal mode of explanation that the skeptical idealist employs does not warrant the assumption of other minds [Geister]. Although Neeb does not develop this thought further, see chapter 4 for some of the implications of this problem for the realist position. Neeb's conclusion is also replete with Jacobian terminology: belief (in explicit reference to Jacobi) and revelations of nature.³³⁸

We can construe Neeb's article as a response to a common reading of Jacobi's position. It is often put claimed that Jacobi assigns belief the position of being better proof than syllogistic demonstration (by Reinhold, for instance). Neeb, in playing devil's advocate (the idealist), attempts to show that philosophical proofs fall flat when they address questions concerning existence. This implies that feeling cannot function in the role of adjudicator of existence claims either (nor does Jacobi use feeling in this way). Like Jacobi, he utilizes idealist arguments to force the naïve realist to adopt a better kind of realism.

It is surprising that Neeb developed his ideas on Jacobi's realism without direct communication with Jacobi. It would not be until 1799 that Jacobi writes to Heinrich Schenk about his recent discovery of Neeb's works. He praises Neeb for having 'perceived and thought himself into' Jacobi's philosophy.³³⁹ In fact, Jacobi seems to be completely unaware of Neeb's 'Unmöglichkeit' article at this time and praises Neeb's *Vernunft gegen Vernunft* (1797) in

³³⁸ *Philosophisches Journal*, p.135.

³³⁹ Jacobi, *Auserlesener Briefwechsel*, Band 2, p.286.

particular for so closely explicating the ideas of *Jacobi an Fichte* that it might be thought that Jacobi plagiarized Neeb. This is high praise. It also suggests that Neeb has correctly understood Jacobi's position, in *DH* and has accurately anticipated its development.

One of the things that Neeb adds in *Vernunft* to his previous account of proof is the introduction of a juridical metaphor. On the juridical metaphor offering proof for a particular claim we can also have an immediate certitude of affection, whereas proof is limited to mediation. Despite a lack of proof, we can admit 'testimony' [Zeugnis] on the basis of specific ways of representing the relevant facts (this is Neeb's version of necessity in our thinking).³⁴⁰ That is to say, a testimony can convince us of something's being the case even if the connection between the testimony and the thing testified about lacks a satisfactory proof or explicit logical connection.

In 1817, Neeb wrote a short article on 'the humanity of the Jacobian philosophy'.³⁴¹ Although it stems from a much later period, this article allows us to conclude that Neeb understood Jacobi's position very well, even to the point that it received Jacobi's stamp of approval.³⁴² Neeb characterizes Jacobi as a special kind of dualist: one who practically separates nature from God and theoretically separates being and thinking. We will see in chapter 4 how Jacobi himself articulates the practical side of his position.³⁴³ For now, I will pay special attention to how Neeb presents the main propositions of Jacobi's philosophy, since it amounts to an

³⁴⁰ Johann Neeb, *Vernunft gegen Vernunft* (1797), p.13.

³⁴¹ Johann Neeb, 'Die Humanität der Jacobischen Philosophie', *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1 (1817), pp.243-56.

³⁴² Jacobi only objected to one minor issue: the fact that Neeb equated the understanding with the power of thought [Denkkraft]. Jacobi argues that animals can understand, but not think. Jacobi, *Auserlesener Briefwechsel*, Band 2, pp.464-70.

³⁴³ Since this text already takes into account the large emphasis on reason over the understanding in the new introduction to the second volume of Jacobi's *Werke*, we will not discuss Neeb's reception of it here.

implicit endorsement of these features of Neeb's account. More than Jacobi himself did, Neeb's article elaborates the scientific implications of Jacobi's position.

In terms of knowledge in the broader sense (that is, without apodictic certainty), Neeb writes that, according to Jacobi, the understanding relates to 'logical mechanisms', which of course enable us to act in the world, but do not allow for any inference to speculative concepts. The world can thus only be considered as a mechanical structure: this also means that we cannot make inferences about the purposiveness of the whole of this structure.³⁴⁴ In using the term 'mechanism', Neeb refers back to early modern use. For Neeb and Jacobi this means using causality and identity in order to anticipate the behavior of and make use of the natural world. It is important to note that, unlike Herder and the *Frühromantiker*, Jacobi emphatically prefers to characterize the way we conceive of the natural world as mechanical, rather than as an organic or living edifice. The reason for this is that our conception is thoroughly limited by the understanding. As we'll see, a notable exception is other minds or personalities, but this ostensible extension of our ability to understand actually occurs as a moral ascription or self-identification rather than as a set of epistemic claims. This structure explicitly acknowledges the fact that epistemic claims are always structured as a relation between an external and an internal term, so it foregoes the mechanical structure altogether by virtue of a self-identification.

Neeb also presents Jacobi's philosophy as open to science, although under negative realist limits: 'All *real* science ultimately rests on belief'.³⁴⁵ This actually represents one of Neeb's own twists in presenting Jacobi's position. Compared to Jacobi, Neeb uses 'belief' in a slightly more abstract, even polemical way. As we have

³⁴⁴ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1 (1817), p.244.

³⁴⁵ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.245. Neeb had previously characterized the products of immediacy for cognition as belief.

seen, in *DH* ‘belief’ referred to our investment in the validity of specific claims about perception. Neeb now uses ‘belief’ to refer to the totality of this feature of our epistemic framework. He defines belief in terms of the conclusion he drew in 1795, adding Jacobi’s strictures concerning the necessary connection between the inner and outer perception: ‘The principle of belief is the *unconditioned* presupposition of the *accord* [Uebereinstimmung] of being with the representation of the inner and the outer’.³⁴⁶ He shows that he is fully aware of the negative realist restrictions concerning this necessary connection: ‘The knotting of taking-to-be-true [Wahrnehmung] with perception, that consciousness of an external through an internal ([or] an internal through an external), of a *different* [verschiedenen] existence that is for us through an *independent* [eigenes] self-feeling, is an inconceivable mystery’.³⁴⁷ The distinction between taking-to-be-true and perception shows that Neeb is acutely aware of the distinctions in *DH* that we referred to above. Neeb further remarks that the human mind conceives of this mystery because it is its ‘life-principle’.³⁴⁸ This is an excellent example of an implementation of the project of conceiving of the inconceivable: we cannot thoroughly understand how this knotting takes place, but we nonetheless can conceive of the fact that it occurs: it must, however, remain a mystery due to the limitations of proof. This is as far as we can come in conceiving of the immediacy that we presuppose in our cognitive process.

Neeb still adheres to his conclusions regarding demonstration from the 1795 article in claiming that ‘all being and all reality’ is ‘inaccessible’ to demonstration.³⁴⁹ This actually has a demarcating effect on the conception of science in that ‘proving existence ends with annihilating this reality for the scientific

³⁴⁶ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.246.

³⁴⁷ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.246.

³⁴⁸ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.246.

³⁴⁹ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.245.

perspective'.³⁵⁰ Knowing receives a special definition within the scope of mediation: 'The principle of knowing is the provable *identity* of the objective unity of concept and the manifold of the intuition'.³⁵¹ Knowledge is bound by the legitimate scope of proof, and thus cannot directly concern reality. Neeb also directly ties this to the project of developing the limits of conceivability: 'We conceive that which we reconstruct [nachbilden], make, can construct. [...] Science, our work, we understand'.³⁵² From this perspective, he repeats his 1795 criticism of idealism. It is impossible to scientifically refute idealism, Neeb contends, and adds that 'it is equally impossible to seriously affirm it practically'.³⁵³ Chapters 3 and 4 will show why practical philosophy becomes such an important issue in dealing with idealism. Note that Neeb's argumentation strategy repeats several of the tropes of Jacobi's: Neeb does not attempt an annihilating refutation of idealism, because many idealist arguments are incorporated, just as in Jacobi's version of realism. Rather, as a methodology, idealism is argued to be restricted to the theoretical sphere.

One of Neeb's conclusions is that 'the senses are not the gateways to things',³⁵⁴ precisely because they do not allow reflective access to anything, and thus do not allow us to prove the existence of "real" things. The striving to understand everything thus 'suffers no two suns', meaning that it cannot depend on the understanding and real things accessed through the senses, and knowing should thus be limited to the understanding. 'Unscientifically' there is a 'feeling of an objectively distinct real [Realen]', but it is not in the interest of the scientific understanding to recognize this.³⁵⁵ With all of this Neeb attempts to show that, despite the enduring 'dread'³⁵⁶

³⁵⁰ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, pp.245-6.

³⁵¹ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.246.

³⁵² *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.246.

³⁵³ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.247.

³⁵⁴ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.252.

³⁵⁵ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.252.

³⁵⁶ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.252.

that the word ‘belief’ instills in many, there is no essential conflict of interest between Jacobi’s philosophy and scientific practice and theory-building. However, we should have no illusions about the essential process of the understanding (and its ultimate aim of practice) here: it attempts to obviate the problem of proving existence by replacing it with an ideal (or conceptual) version of it.³⁵⁷ In this way it only deals with ‘hollow larvae’ of existence. This is why Neeb warns against the isolation of the understanding as a power of the mind. Once we integrate it, we become aware that we understand because reason strives towards action.³⁵⁸

Sadly, Neeb never acquired another university position and became a civil servant. This accounts for the lack of extended studies produced by Neeb after 1803.³⁵⁹ As a young heir to realism, Neeb was unable to live up to Jacobi’s expectations, since these civil commitments only allowed him to produce short articles. His interests during this time were ephemeral. In his own (metaphorical) words: ‘here I hit my foot on a stone and I directed my power or my anger, there a flower on the road caught my gaze and I am delighted to express it’.³⁶⁰

An author who in some ways follows realist precepts in Jacobi’s sense, and who gained some notoriety in the debates around 1800 was Friedrich Bouterwek. We will not discuss his position extensively, because, as Jacobi remarked,³⁶¹ many of his key ideas seem to be derived from Neeb. Ultimately, he advocated a realism that focuses on the feeling of our existence and absolute conviction, which he called practical realism.

³⁵⁷ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.253.

³⁵⁸ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.254. More on this notion of reason in chapter 4.

³⁵⁹ According to Neeb himself. Johann Neeb, *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1 (1817), p.iii.

³⁶⁰ *Vermischte Schriften*, Band 1, p.iv.

³⁶¹ Jacobi, *Aus F. H. Jacobi’s Nachlaß, Ungedruckte Briefe von und an Jacobi und Andere*, Band 1, p.222.

2.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have examined the specific sense in which Jacobi considered himself to be a realist. The small selection of other authors provides a first perspective onto what Jacobi might have been hoping for when he spoke of ‘we realists.’ It is safe to say that, at the time that Jacobi wrote these words, there was no such group, and in that sense the statement had a performative, foundational function. Although Jacobi likely assumed that the authors who were discussed in chapter 1 were sympathetic to the key ideas behind his realism, the complicated position that was put forward in *DH* would only gain followers a few years after its publication. Saying ‘we realists’ in this book³⁶² was then a call to take up arms against enemies, who perhaps did not yet realize they were enemies of the camp of realists to come, and for allying with combatants who had not realized that they had a stake in the war, nor that there was a war going on at all. It is significant that this call to arms is framed as a criticism of Kant, that Hercules in the philosophical landscape. In fact, Jacobi did not disagree with many of Kant’s conclusions but believed that a stronger realist position could be taken up that, as we’ve seen in *DH*, partly opposed Kant’s empirical realism.

Since I have shown that Jacobi had a systematic framework that is inseparable from his realism, I have examined according to what internal systematic features these authors are in line with this realism or substantially diverge from it. The varying degrees to which each author is in line with Jacobi’s realism allowed us to reconstruct some of the problems surrounding Jacobi’s realism: whether that was in terms of commitments, terminology, arguments, interpretation or ambiguity. This provides us with a solid framework from which to critically assess the limits of the negative realist approach in chapters 4 and 5. First, we will examine the enormous part that the realists played in the

³⁶² *DH*, p.216.

formulation of 'nihilism' as a philosophical problem, the elaboration of what all of the above authors admired in Jacobi: namely, the criticism of idealism.

It cannot be denied that, while we have seen that for Jacobi there is no conceivable connection between God and mind-independent reality, the connection between these two becomes a substantial issue in Herder, Reinhold and Bardili. Although this connection is, strictly speaking, in violation of Jacobi's realism, there might be some historical reasons for this. Jacobi put forward his realism as referring to a reality that is separate from cognition. This is very similar to negative theology, as it has been discussed in philosophy and theology, where it is elaborated how we cannot know God. It is possible that God here functions as a paradigm for reality, in the sense that the arguments that were put forward in defense of the unknowability of God are applied to everything else that we take to be mind-independent (including, to some degree, the self or subjectivity as such). The fact that Jacobi also adheres to the unknowability of God would seem to strengthen this hypothesis. However, this connection only seems to hold in that it follows a similar strategy, since we have also seen that Jacobi has a positive program based on his negative realism. In this positive side of his position he tries to give an account of applied rationality that minimalizes the need for appeal to metaphysics and theology in our everyday actions and the practice of philosophical. Any use of God is not religious in any organized, institutional or zealous way, since it is exactly these traditional associations with his religious terminology that Jacobi objects to and which ultimately led him to introduce more neutral terminology in the new introduction to *DH*.

Perhaps Jacobi initially, in the first edition of *SB*, saw the appeal of using religious or theological terminology, possibly stemming from Lessing's discussions with theologians. His inability or unwillingness to present his own position clearly in this text likely led to a persistent impression of him as a religious zealot.

God undoubtedly functions as a central paradigm for Herder, if we consider his Hamannian view of language and his Spinozist view on being. Reinhold, particularly with regard to his Bardilianism, also seems committed to this connection. However, we should note that their references to 'God' is purely conceptual, designed to introduce a theoretical model for the origins of cognition and is not overtly concerned with religious devotion either. The very reference to a 'really real' reality (which effectively suggests that there is something that is only "dubiously" real) functions as a delimitation of our cognitive abilities.

Negative realism attempts to coherently integrate the human abilities within the self or individual, not as they are considered-in-themselves, but in their practical engagements with the world. The limits of its claims and the capabilities of understanding are its primary object of interest. The enduring structural argument of negative realism is that we have to take heed of the necessary way of thinking about externality and the self, which posits that there is a clear limit between the inconceivable and the conceivable. The task is that we must find out at which points we are confronted with the inconceivable and find ways of recognizing when this is the case. As will become clear from the first three chapters, the realist critique continuously intervenes when a philosopher is in danger of i) not providing a satisfactory account of these necessities to thinking (as in the case of naïve idealists) or ii) transgressing the limit of conceivability (in the case of Fichte and Schelling).

There is also a way in which realism is a kind of political response to the professionalization (and in Reinhold's case commodification³⁶³) of philosophy at the universities. From this perspective it is easy to understand Jacobi's initial ire against

³⁶³ See chapter 2 for the exasperation that Reinhold's colleagues caused him. He believed they were not interested in thought but only in being paid.

philosophy. He later attempts to formulate a philosophical position that avoids all of the excesses he and the other realists were opposed to. Of course, such an effort could only be consistently undertaken by authors with independent financial means (like Jacobi and Herder) and were thus not dependent on the universities. In some way, this is also what impeded young adherents of realism to make substantial contributions. Neeb was ultimately unable to regain a position in his region. Despite their difficult relationship, Jacobi attempted to give Reinhold an appointment when he became the President of the Academy of Science in München in 1807. Reportedly, Reinhold's appointment was blocked because he had been a catholic monk in his youth, and he had to remain in Kiel.³⁶⁴ Köppen received an appointment in Landshut in 1807 through the intervention of Jacobi. Due in no small part to the initial outsider position that the realists held with regard to the university, no realist ever exceeded Jacobi's fame, and they remained dependent on his influence.

It is worth comparing the ages of these authors. Most notably, we can discern several different generations of the development of post-Kantian philosophy. Jacobi and Herder only differed by one year and had previously established reputations. Reinhold was about fifteen years their junior. Neeb, Köppen and Bardili were all much younger, and were all students during the 1790's, when Jacobi started to become known as a realist. Jacobi was likely intrigued by these authors, who had come to intellectual maturity during a period of plural philosophical systems, which shows that the lines of inspiration were also reciprocal. If we consider these generations strictly in terms of their place in post-Kantian philosophy, Jacobi and Reinhold are clearly some of the first and well-known post-Kantians. Herder, Köppen and Bardili all make their most notable post-Kantian contributions to the debates in the 1790's to early 1800's.

³⁶⁴ *Reinhold's Leben*, pp.106-7.

The most important general line that the realists share is a common terminology, that derives from Jacobi's use of terms in the *SB*, that evokes religiosity (belief, revelation, etc.), a trend continued somewhat by Neeb (testimony). There is also a shared critical relation to feelings. Overall, the realists are unwilling to completely leave feelings out of the account of rationality and treat them experimentally, sometimes trying to subsume them (Reinhold, Bardili), sometimes inventing new ones to override certain avenues of reasoning (Herder). All of these authors take feeling to be a non-determinate experiential occurrence incapable by itself of yielding concrete cognitions. There is also a sense in which feelings are meant to provide a universal basis in lieu of a universal foundational principle. For most of the realists, especially those closest to Jacobi's view, some feelings signal the limits of our understanding in a universal way. There are some concerns which function in a clearly demarcating way, which separate those who do not follow Jacobi's position as closely from others who do. One of these concerns is obviously the criticism of the limits of demonstration and the idealist method, but also the focus on the individual, practical and applied reasoning, is also decisive for the camp of realists.

In this chapter, I focused primarily on the epistemic aspect of this main type of realism around 1800. It has become clear that initially Jacobi was primarily concerned with conceiving of the limits of our epistemic claims. In terms of Hamann's question about whether Jacobi wanted to be a wall or a door, it seems fairly clear that he was initially mostly concerned with erecting walls around our rationality, not in order to safeguard the areas outside of the wall from rationality but to protect our rationality from overextending itself beyond its limitations. Jacobi feared that expanding this empire of speculation, would hinder the functioning of rationality in its applications.

Leaving this sense of the metaphor behind, there is also a way in which this delimiting of rationality opens up, a doorway

towards practical action. It is with this sense of the metaphor that Jacobi would be concerned from 1789 onwards, which we'll discuss in chapter 4.

Now that I have the clue to it, the thing seems written visibly in his face. I have a photograph in which that look of detachment has been caught and intensified. It reminds me of what a woman once said of him – a woman who had loved him greatly. “Suddenly,” she said, “the interest goes out of him. He forgets you. He doesn’t care a rap for you – under his very nose.....”
– H.G. Wells, *The Door in the Wall*

3. German realism and the origins of philosophical nihilism

The history of scholarship on nihilism has been one that can be characterized as an ongoing gesture of reaching back further in time in an attempt to explain this curious hybrid notion that has been applied to both the *cultural* and the *philosophical* spheres. As such, claims regarding the origin of nihilism have been sliding back further and further in history, leading back as far as the ancient sophists and skeptics. In order to not completely lose track of how this notion entered our lexicon and risk the notion becoming an umbrella term used to diagnose any and all modern phenomenon that displeases us, I propose to trace the emergence of the term, as the German 'Nihilismus', in a relatively constrained period of time, starting from its first emergence in 1787 and ending around 1810.³⁶⁵ Besides avoiding the aforementioned problems, this approach offers several advantages: i) historically, it will present new research, both qualitatively, in terms of the semantic, argumentative and cultural development of the use of nihilism and in the quantitative sense, in that it draws attention to uses of the term which have received little to no attention in previous accounts of nihilism, ii) we are not particularly concerned with the (at least from today's perspective) paradigmatic formulation of nihilism put forward by Nietzsche. That is to say, we can examine a notion of nihilism that does not stand or fall with the validity of Nietzsche's conception of nihilism or his philosophy at large. This approach, moreover, can offer a novel way of examining Nietzsche's

³⁶⁵ Some possible points of entry into the public lexicon are F.L. Goetzius' *De nonismo et nihilismo in theologia* (1733) the theologian Johann Andreas Cramer's 1786 translation of Jacques Bénigne Bossuet's *Einleitung in die Geschichte der Welt und die Religion*, Band 7. The book refers to *Nihilianismus*, as the idea that a God who is man is nothing. These uses do not refer to philosophical issues in relation to the term. In France, the term periodically occurs, for instance in Montaigne's *Essais* (1572), tome 2, chapter 6, Montaigne ends with a reference to 'la nihilité de l'humaine condition.'

formulation and its status both as a result and as a continuation of the development of the notion of nihilism for future research.

Usually, the argument is put forward that the notion of nihilism is one that changes definition throughout the course of its history.³⁶⁶ As a counterpoint, I will show that the earliest German use of ‘Nihilismus’, besides the fact that it is the earliest use of philosophical nihilism, is actually a remarkably *coherent* notion, which will be used by the German realists and their extended network in order to critique the aims of philosophical reflection. The most important differences do not lie in the formulation of the notion itself but in the way the initial three users of the term responded to its perceived *consequences*.

Finally, a short word on the use of the word nihilism we will discuss: neither the pejorative (‘you nihilist’) nor the self-identification (‘we are nihilists’) applications of nihilism with which we are likely familiar, were in use during this early period of the development of philosophical nihilism. ‘Nihilism’ was used exclusively in more narrowly defined philosophical debates, especially, in the typically realist vein, in order to designate an inevitable consequence of thought, when thinking is construed within the idealist framework.

1. The Desperate Metaphysics: Obereit’s notion of nihilism

Jakob Hermann Obereit (1725-1798) has the honor of introducing the term in the German philosophical discourse (although he renders it in the French style, as ‘Nihilisme’ blending with his references to ‘Spinozisme’ and ‘Spiritualisme’). Obereit lived the life of a vagrant and was dependent on the graces of scholars and aristocrats he met on his travels. There is no indication that Obereit was influenced by another philosophical

³⁶⁶ For instance in Goudsblom (1980).

formulation of nihilism in his conception and the creative way in which he introduces the term would certainly suggest that nihilism, as we have come to know it, was originally a wholly Obereitian invention. The fact that Obereit was a medical doctor makes it all the more remarkable that he was the first to diagnose the thought-disease that is nihilism. Besides being a doctor, Obereit was interested in religion, philosophy and the kabbalah. In 1787, he responded to the *Pantheismusstreit*, the conflict between Moses Mendelssohn and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi about the apparent pantheism/atheism implied in Spinozism, just as its focus had shifted because of the publication of Thomas Wizenmann's *Die Resultate der Jacobischen und Mendelssohnschen Philosophie*. In this book, as we've seen, Wizenmann, a young author who had been a close member of Jacobi's circle of confidants for the past few years, restated Jacobi's skeptical conclusions in a very clear and concise way and added to this the conclusions concerning the subjective nature of experience put forward in Kant's first *Kritik* and how it followed from this that a proof concerning the existence of God was impossible.

It was in response to this state of affairs that Obereit published his *Die verzweifelte Metaphysik*, a short pamphlet whose title would come to designate Obereit's entire project. Why was metaphysics so desperate? It could no longer entice man to commit to something beyond the toils of his existence, since the final ground of all its efforts could no longer be proven to exist. Without this final ground that bestows reality to them, all things are *nothing*, since nothing is for itself (everything is merely a subjective appearance, in the Kantian idiom). In the pages of this pamphlet, Obereit did not yet refer to this problem as nihilism. The use of this term would not happen until the book which he published later that same year, under the title *Der wiederkommende Lebensgeist der verzweifelten Metaphysik*. This sequel of sorts is written as a dialogue between four principal characters (and a few minor characters): the (desperate) Metaphysics, Humanity, Nihilism and Eternity.

Nihilism is described as following a ‘spirit of annihilation’ which leaves nothing but ‘the vanity of vanities’.³⁶⁷ Philosophical nihilism first emerges as a personage, as someone who speaks. The first words that Nihilism speaks are:

What are you doing humanity! With metaphysics?
Do you want to be adrift in melancholy
[Grillenfängerei] again? That time is over. Work,
work you must, for bread and for the poor, who
multiply daily. Humanity for humanity!³⁶⁸

It is curious that the first utterance of nihilism personified occurs in a reference to the fall from grace. Obereit apparently believed that humanity is no longer with God in paradise, but has to work the land for its continued existence. Since Obereit connects this reminder to Nihilism the character, he believes that if this is all that our lives have to offer, we are in a bad situation. Nihilism, as a true representation of an aimless existence of labor without hope for salvation, tries to dissuade humanity from believing in metaphysics, which might restore our hope. Obereit thus argues that we need metaphysics if we want to avoid nihilism.

The overall story of the dialogue unfolds as follows: Nihilism makes Metaphysics desperate and Humanity, who is the personalized point of view of all human beings, feels lost. Nihilism then calls on several characters to attest to the fact that Humanity has very little to offer by way of edifying positions if it cannot take recourse in the classical project of metaphysics. Nihilism concludes: ‘Reality without appearance [Schein] is completely unknown to us as it is in itself, after Kant. Wherefrom then, does the desire for it stem that runs throughout human nature?’³⁶⁹ Finally, Eternity emerges by way of *deus ex machina*, in order to attest to the fact

³⁶⁷ Obereit, *Der niederkommende Lebensgeist der verzweifelten Metaphysik* (1787), p.14.

³⁶⁸ *Der niederkommende Lebensgeist*, p.14.

³⁶⁹ *Der niederkommende Lebensgeist*, p.107.

that Humanity has a third mode of intuition beyond the Kantian space and time. It is the intuition of eternity which grounds the understanding by providing an unchanging truth that is beyond reproach and which guarantees that the application of our understanding is correct, thereby legitimating the logical categories and the principle of non-contradiction. One cannot help affirming that we have a special mode of intuition that is open to the understanding, which grounds the sensible contents of the understanding, or as Obereit has Humanity say:

As understanding, reasonable [beings], one can really do nothing else [than proceed through the understanding].³⁷⁰

Why then is metaphysics so desperate? For one, Obereit has to rely upon an intuition rather than on knowledge. Secondly, metaphysics requires a religious attitude to prevent nihilistic consequences. Obereit realizes the consequences of nihilism, but it is unlikely that he will have convinced many readers of the intuition of eternity, for which he offers no arguments. His only argument is that we need to have such an intuition because the consequence would be nihilism. It is the intuition of eternity that provides thinking with the ‘real-ground’ that allows it to not have to think only nothingness.³⁷¹ Obereit argues for an immediate cognition of eternity, that will instill the subjective finitude that is presented by the critical philosophy with a real-ground, that helps it avoid nihilism.³⁷² ‘If nothing is actual, then nothing is possible as well’, Obereit writes.³⁷³ In this he has a similar framing of the problem as the realists: if we have reason to doubt the certitude of our

³⁷⁰ *Der wiederkommende Lebensgeist*, p.80.

³⁷¹ *Der wiederkommende Lebensgeist*, p.65.

³⁷² The discussion of which Obereit’s book forms the tail end did not focus on Kant’s attempt to make transcendental philosophy ‘objectify’ his conclusions. This attempt would only be seriously examined and contested around 1790.

³⁷³ *Der wiederkommende Lebensgeist*, p.66.

cognition, how are we to guarantee that they correlate to reality (what Obereit calls actual) and subsequently, how do we still function as free agents who can change reality (what Obereit refers to as ‘nothing is possible’)?

Obereit’s solution is where he resolutely differs from negative realism, because his immediate cognition *de facto* functions as a conscious cognition. Although he barely develops this point, it forms the core of his notion of nihilism: if nothing has independent real existence, then there is nothing for man to manipulate and thus practical acts become *impossible*.

One of the few persons who Obereit praises is Jacobi, cementing the contention that it was the *Pantheismusstreit* that sparked off Obereit’s reflection on nihilism. In his special intuition of eternity a divine essence both grounds human cognition and is also the origin of this cognition. This divine essence, eternity, allows us access to a supernatural world beyond spatio-temporal appearances, a world wherein we find both immortality and truth.³⁷⁴ Obereit laments that the ‘strict ideal-philosophers’ have lost respect for ‘common human understanding’, which apparently includes a conscious cognitive access to the eternal.³⁷⁵ He also praises Mendelssohn for being the only one who orients himself on this common human understanding. This discussion prefigures the later discussions surrounding limits of philosophical reasoning.

Finally, some conclusions should be drawn from the way Obereit employs nihilism as a consequence of an avenue of

³⁷⁴ Interestingly enough, this model of a ground which is at the same time the essence of cognition as an act is one taken up to characterize the notion of freedom by Jacobi (in an appendix to the 1789 second edition of the *SB* which was also appended to *Jacobi an Fichte* in 1799) and later also by Fichte. Neither Jacobi nor Fichte did ever concede that the intuition through which this model offered immediate knowledge automatically rescues metaphysics and humanity, as Obereit seems to believe. More on Jacobi’s notion of freedom in chapter 4.

³⁷⁵ *Der niederkommende Lebensgeist*, pp.71-72.

reasoning tailored to persons. Despite the fact that Eternity is the deus ex machina who saves the day, it is Nihilism who interrogates and criticizes others and is the last one to speak and tally up the new state of affairs. It would thus be a mistake to dismiss Obereit's text as merely a chagrined indictment followed by an unconvincing solution. Obereit formulates nihilism as the consequence of a certain line of argumentation. If anything, he plays up the distress of metaphysics after Kant in a dramatic form.

To sum up, we can characterize the steps in Obereit's argument in the following way:

- i) Kant has shown that our experience presents us with nothing but subjectively constituted appearances: things for us are nothing in themselves.
- ii) Humanity desires reality, not mere appearance.
- iii) If we are to maintain a relation to reality, and thus the objective validity of the principle of non-contradiction and the logical categories, we need an intuition that is not spatio-temporal.
- iv) This intuition concerns eternity, because if it were to remain finite, it would still concern appearances.
- v) It is the object of this intuition that acts as a real-ground for both the objects of appearances and our logical reasoning. Traditionally, this object is God.

2. Blind eyes and fake windows: Jenisch's notion of nihilism

After Obereit's *Wiederkommende Lebensgeist* it seems that many years passed without nihilism becoming a widely known concept. When it finally reoccurs in Daniel Jenisch's *Über Grund und Werth der Entdeckungen des Herrn Professor Kant in der Metaphysik, Moral und Aesthetik* (1796), it shares many similarities with Obereit's account. Philosophically, Jenisch could not have been more suited to the task, being a former student of both Kant and Hamann. After his studies, Jenisch moved to Berlin to become a preacher. As a preacher with an interest in Kantianism, it should come as no surprise that he shares many of Obereit's concerns, although as a good Kantian he can accept none of his solutions.³⁷⁶

One of Jenisch's addition to the conceptualization of nihilism lies in the fact that he responds to *Fichte's* transcendental idealism, which he likens to a blind window:

Through transcendental idealism our reason is clearly nothing other than a *blind window*, through which we see into creation, without even the slightest reality in the things [Wirkliche an den Dingen] (even the existence of real things as an unknown, and it certainly permits us eternal-uncognizable something = x), without also cognizing the slightest reality in things. That unity, purposefulness and admirable composition of the things in nature – they are nothing without our

³⁷⁶ I disagree with Gillespie here, who downplays Obereit's importance and claims that Jenisch is the most important precursor of the notion of nihilism. In: Gillespie (1995), p.65. As mentioned above, I would rather stress the continuity of the notion of nihilism throughout this period, although there are some key differences in the way the individual authors *respond* to the consequences of the notion.

pure intuitions, forms of thought and laws of thought, nothing at all.³⁷⁷

In Jenisch's view, the blind window that transcendental idealism offers gives the impression of offering a view to the outside world but in fact does not do so at all. Jenisch also relates this blind window to a blind eye: 'Our reason [is] only a *dark, dim eye* [with regard to the] genuine truth'. In Jenisch's view, the perspective that transcendental idealism offers has a 'very appropriate similarity with the so-called "blind window" that merely has the form of a window, which usually is actually part of the wall, that does not let the eyes peer through'.³⁷⁸ Perhaps Jenisch was inspired to make this comparison through Jean Paul Richter's *Rede des toten Christus*, which had appeared earlier that same year, and which read:

and when I look up at the Godly eye from the immeasurable world, an empty bottomless eye-socket stares back at me³⁷⁹

According to Jenisch, transcendental idealism does not solve the problem of nihilism with regards to providing veritable access to the reality of the things we perceive, Jenisch reads transcendental idealism in the same way as Obereit: since all things are merely subjective appearances we thus have no access to reality. Transcendental idealism, in Jenisch's estimation, merely gives us the *impression* of gaining access to reality. Jenisch then concludes that 'the thought of the idealist nihilism of human cognition' is 'almost more gruesome than the thought of the eternal annihilation of my own existence'.³⁸⁰ Obereit's formulation of the consequences of nihilism was the same: if we lose God as an intuitable final ground,

³⁷⁷ *Über Grund und Werth*, pp.405-6.

³⁷⁸ *Über Grund und Werth*, pp.272-273.

³⁷⁹ Jean Paul, *Blumen- Frucht- und Dornenstücke oder Ebestand, Tod und Hochzeit des Armenadvokaten F. St. Siebenkäs im Reichsmarktflecken Kulschnappel*, Band 1 (1796), p.427.

³⁸⁰ *Über Grund und Werth*, p.273.

we lose everything, including the immortality of the soul. Being a religious man, the eternal annihilation of his soul is the foremost of Jenisch' worries, but the fact that all human cognition as such is null and void and ends in nothingness is distressing enough to tempt him to substitute it for his more parochial concern. Jenisch presents us here with a short psychological micro-response, which will resound when the discussion transitions in earnest towards the non-religious more philosophical concern in Jacobi's *Jacobi an Fichte*. Jenisch' texts present us with a shift from the Obereitian worries which, although philosophically formulated, Obereit relatively easily resolves through faith in an immediate intuition. Jenisch moves the issue towards what will become Jacobi's concerns, the philosophical problem of nihilism as a problem for all individuals (and not merely for an abstract notion of humanity), since in this case philosophy is nothing more than thorough reflection. Everyone utilizes reflection and can potentially end up with nihilism.

Throughout the text, Jenisch searches in vain for ways to escape nihilism. Yet, despite 'overwhelming sense-evidence', he maintains that the possibility of nihilism persists. We can always 'slip into powerlessness', no matter how sure of ourselves we are that we cannot.³⁸¹ One of the tentative avenues of escape that Jenisch considers is presented by the 'beckoning' [hinwinken] of the ideas of reason.³⁸² Although we cannot know the origins of the ideas of reason (such as God), they beckon us towards their origin. Seemingly unable to convince himself through any of these possible options for escaping the consequences of nihilism, Jenisch does not develop this approach any further. One year later, he published *Sollte Religion dem Menschen jemals entbehrlich werden?* (1797) in which he announces a solution which worked for him personally but not before once again lamenting the problem before him:

³⁸¹ *Über Grund und Werth*, pp.273-274.

³⁸² *Über Grund und Werth*, p.281.

Nothing, nothing, thoroughly nothing in the divine is something sensible in our thinking I.

What a notion! The only and true name of the divine is 'inconceivable'.³⁸³

Out of the blue (and in the space of a single page) Jenisch suddenly declares that this transcendental idealist notion of God is not as atheistic or nihilistic as he had previously thought. Since the subjective conclusions of Kant's philosophy incline us towards dogmatism, we have no option except to trust our need for a belief in God, even though we can attain no proof of this being the case whatsoever.³⁸⁴

Jenisch draws conclusions that are similar to Obereit's, albeit formulated in a way that exudes respect for Kant. Despite the limited capabilities of reason, we are still *overwhelmed* by the notion of a supremely elevated sublime, the intuiting of which overrides Jenisch's doubts. It is exactly the pretension of humanity to know the sublime that is given up through critical philosophy, leaving us at the mercy of the divine. This last move is resolutely different from Obereit, who merely carves out a third form of intuition, beyond time and space. Jenisch here clearly demonstrates that he is a student of both Kant and Hamann: we can only commit to a position once we have first skeptically interrogated it.³⁸⁵ Jacobi makes the same move. It is likely that Jenisch was directly inspired by Jacobi to make this move, as Jacobi was considered to have delivered an important early criticism of Kant. Undoubtedly the most famous use of nihilism during this time is Jacobi's open letter to Fichte, *Jacobi an Fichte* (1799).

³⁸³ *Sollte Religion dem Menschen jemals entbehrlich werden?* (1797), p.173.

³⁸⁴ *Sollte Religion dem Menschen jemals entbehrlich werden?* (1797), pp.175-176.

³⁸⁵ Where Kant needed critical philosophy to arrive at transcendental philosophy, Hamann needed skepticism in order to arrive at a Socratic ignorance coupled with Humean belief.

3. Nailing Fichte to the cross: Jacobi's notion of nihilism³⁸⁶

Like some other texts of Jacobi's,³⁸⁷ there are serious hurdles on the road to attempting an interpretation of *Jacobi an Fichte*. There are several opaque passages, which can only be fully understood once one knows the relation of this text to the debate of the *Atheismusstreit*, to which it still is a contribution. During the *Atheismusstreit*, Fichte was accused of being an atheist and subsequently gave up his position in Jena. Jacobi intervenes in the discussion by dismissing the idea that Fichte is an atheist, but he does so by introducing nihilism as a position that relates to the methodology of Fichte's philosophy and to the relevance of the idea of God. In addition to this, there are several passages that, as I'll argue, can only be understood with specific contextual evidence. For one, we have to take into account Jacobi's negative realism, specifically the arguments that were put forward in *SB* and *DH*. Another contextual issue is that Jacobi seems to believe that Fichte has in some ways been influenced by Jacobi's earlier publications. Whether this is actually true in Fichte's opinion or not, Fichte's letter to Jacobi from 1796 certainly supports this assumption.³⁸⁸ Jacobi's text alternates between praise and criticism of Fichte. Given that Fichte was, to some extent, inspired by Jacobi's works, Jacobi is when he praises Fichte, in a way also praising himself,

³⁸⁶ We are here foregoing an analysis of Friedrich Schlegel's note on nihilism from 1797 in reference to 'Witz' in literature. Since he does not further develop the notion of 'nihilism' himself, it is virtually impossible to discern what he actually took the notion to mean. In terms of the historical lines of transmission of the notion of nihilism, it suffices to say that Schlegel could have picked it up from Jenisch, who was a preacher in Berlin, where Schlegel had just settled at that time. *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, band 18, p.27.

³⁸⁷ At the time of his death, Jacobi owned neither Obereit's nor Jenisch's works. See: *Die Bibliothek Friedrich Heinrich Jacobis – Ein Katalog*. Stuttgart: 1989. He did own Cramer's translation of Bossuet.

³⁸⁸ Fichte, J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe III, Band 3, p.18. Fichte writes to Jacobi: 'Yes, loyal noble man, we are in complete agreement and this agreement with you proves to me more than something else, that I am on the right path'.

insofar as Fichte affirms some of his ideas. Another problem of interpreting the text is that Jacobi's reading of Fichte is highly idiosyncratic. Rather than reading all of Fichte's works and taking the most recent to be the best account of Fichte's position,³⁸⁹ I will argue that Jacobi takes Fichte's *Ueber den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre oder der sogenannten Philosophie* (1794) (hereafter *Begriff-Schrift*) to be the primary account of the whole of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.

While Jacobi does not accuse Fichte's system of atheism, he does use the occasion to make the point that a system that purports to proceed fully and only through knowing, like the *Wissenschaftslehre* does, must eventually come into conflict with Jacobi's own negative realism. One of the polemical problems is that, while the *Wissenschaftslehre* is not atheistic, Fichte, as the person who produces the *Wissenschaftslehre*, cannot be a theist.³⁹⁰ We've seen in chapter 2 that Jacobi objects to a knowable God, because this reduces God to something that can be given characteristics. There is then no recognizable aspect of God that is inconceivable, he fully becomes understood by way of his concept as conceptually mediated (taken up by means of a determinate concept). We will see in chapter 4 that Jacobi also objects to the complete elimination of God, because he believes that the idea of a God has significance for the construal of ourselves as capable of being practical agents. Whether he is ultimately a theoretical atheist and practical theist or a believer in a hidden God in the sense of, for instance, Cusanus, Jacobi is consistent in that he never discusses a God that is absolutely "real" in the sense that he exists independently of our consciousness.

This means that the actual existence of God cannot be the issue here, since Jacobi's negative realism holds that anything we want to say about God makes the inconceivable

³⁸⁹ Fichte already argued in the 1795 letter, that his practical philosophy, would solve Jacobi's problems with Fichte.

³⁹⁰ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, pp.192-3.

conceivable. Jacobi is essentially claiming that we need a practical idea of God, which must remain separate from determinate cognition. The problem that Jacobi perceived in Fichte's work is that in Fichte's framework of building up the world from the interplay between I and non-I in the *Wissenschaftslehre*, this entire process takes place in the realm of knowing. Jacobi believes that this also is true of Fichte's supposed parity of the I and the not-I, because he ultimately subsumes all of the possible contents of the I and the not-I to the (absolute) I.³⁹¹ We've seen that Jacobi himself is committed to the parity of the internal and the external, which he here refers to as the 'I am' and the 'there are things outside me'.³⁹² In *DH*, Jacobi argued that this parity itself has the status of a presupposition that we take-to-be-true, and that this parity derives from the relationality in perception. In other words, this parity lies in the fact that neither internality nor externality has priority in our epistemic claims and that we must take them to be on a par, as essentially related. We can then understand why he would object to what he perceives to be Fichte's claim: that this parity itself can be known. It would violate negative realism by going beyond the contents of perception and claims to understand how this relationality came to be.

In Jacobi's view, Fichte cannot escape universal mediation, with its nihilist implications, because all of the particular content of consciousness cannot occur through the immediate taking-to-be-true of the relationality of perceptions which remains inconceivable to reflection, but rather through a thoroughly knowable and thus mediated substrate that finds its place between I and not-I. This seems to be the lynchpin of Jacobi's reading of Fichte and the degree to which Fichte is taken to be the 'messiah of

³⁹¹ *Aus F.H. Jacobi's Nachlass, Ungedruckte Briefe von und an Jacobi*, Band 1 (1869), p.201. In a letter to Christian Wilhelm Dohm: 'that we now fight everything with this, and finish it, heaven and earth and everything in between, and violently laugh at the old God our lord, who we cannot be'.

³⁹² *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.194.

speculation.³⁹³ Another way to frame the conflict is through this passage in *DH*:

I cannot have a representation of [the I], because
the characteristic of its essence is *to distinguish itself*
from all perceptions and representations.³⁹⁴

Jacobi might not object to a Fichtian notion of an absolute or pure I, but would maintain that, even though we ascribe our activity to it, it must remain inconceivable, or rather, only negatively present for conscious cognition in the givenness of perception.³⁹⁵ If we take this I as the sum of all knowing (which Jacobi understands to be the project of the *Wissenschaftslehre* through the *Begriff-Schrift*) we lose the specific negative realist function of the I, such that it cannot ‘distinguish itself from all perceptions and representations’. In *Jacobi an Fichte*, Jacobi points out that this aspect is missing in Fichte’s approach: ‘that *unpersonal personality*, that mere I-ness of the I without a *self*’.³⁹⁶ Not unlike the ending of *DH*, Jacobi connects this self, which remains free of all contents of our consciousness, to God:

God lives in us, and our life is *hidden* in God. If he
were not present, *immediately* present through his
image in our inner *self*: what should he proclaim to
us [uns kund thun]? Images, tones, signs, that only
bring to cognition what was already
understood?³⁹⁷

Jacobi often connects God to the self in this ambiguous way. It is essential to his argument that the only reliable (non-determinate)

³⁹³ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.194.

³⁹⁴ *DH*, p.175.

³⁹⁵ The claim in the *Begriff-Schrift* that the first principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre* cannot be proven would then meet with Jacobi’s approval. *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe I, Band 2, pp.138-9.

³⁹⁶ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.212.

³⁹⁷ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, pp.218-9.

sense of ‘God’ is that he is immediately present, and this can only be found in our self. Even the ways in which God can proclaim himself are indefinite despite being in some way mediate (images, tones and signs all refer to something beyond themselves). The ambiguity (is it God who makes the self or is it the self that makes God?) is the core issue of Jacobi’s complaint against Fichte. Realizing this, we must read Jacobi’s ultimatum ‘God is, and is *outside of me*, a living being subsisting in itself, or **I am God**’³⁹⁸ as favoring the second option.

Notice that Jacobi does not render the two options in the obvious way. The option is *not* either an external or an inner God, but either an external God or I *am* God. Since Jacobi emphasizes the relationality of the forms of internality and externality, it is clear that any decision about God cannot play out in terms of this opposition, which would once again submit God to mediation.³⁹⁹ The option of an external God should thus be objectionable to Jacobi. His alternative, is an existential claim: God is the I. When Jacobi writes ‘or I am God’, this needs to be understood as ‘God is the I’, in Jacobi’s sense of the I (as an indispensable self). To be sure this does not refer to Fichte’s ‘unpersonal’ notion of the I, but to Jacobi’s I that remains inconceivable to itself. Given the preceding passage’s ambiguity about the relation between the self and God, and Jacobi’s insistence on keeping the self separate from perception and representation, we must propound ignorance about God even as we assume his existence in the exact same way in which we propound ignorance about the self, even as we assume its existence. We, in fact, have no way of distinguishing the two.

There is, however, a more subtle point that Jacobi makes in terms of religious veneration:

³⁹⁸ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.220. The special emphasis that Jacobi places on ‘ICH’ here is sadly lost in translation, so I have rendered it in bold.

³⁹⁹ See also *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.193: ‘A God that can be *known* is no God.’

Created after his image: God in us. That is the proclamation of him that we have, and the only possible one. With that, God reveals himself to man as living, ongoing in all time. A revelation through external appearances, call it what you want, can at best relate to inner *origins*, in the same way as speech relates to reason.⁴⁰⁰

This passage makes an important point, which Jacobi also stated in *DH*: external veneration (such as, presumably, shrines and churches) is irremediably related to internal origins. Jacobi's conclusion is somewhat different here, however: if we attempt to get rid of the external signs of veneration, we inevitably also, in some way, get rid of inner origin that is related to the self:

But if I, *understanding* myself above him [mich über ihn verständigend], annihilate and bring shame to that idolatry [Götzendienst], I must also annihilate everything that is connected with him. I must annihilate from my soul the religion of love, for example I must mock all incentive and inspiration of something HIGHER, to banish from my heart *every* devotion, *every* adoration.⁴⁰¹

One can speculate as to why Jacobi does not characterize the elimination of idolatry as the perfection of rationality, as he did in *DH*, and rather emphasizes the importance of maintaining the relation between an inner adoration and its externalized forms (see [p.52]). A historical explanation might be that Jacobi saw firsthand what a similar ideal brought about in the French Revolution. A systematic explanation might be that he had since developed his practical position more (starting with the second edition of *SB* in 1789) and now believed that it was essential to maintain a volitional

⁴⁰⁰ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.219.

⁴⁰¹ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.221.

component towards love for other individuals. If we understand this as a heretofore unrecognized shift in Jacobi's ideas about religious veneration, Jacobi's complaint against Fichte's attempt to annihilate idolatry is an intriguing case in which Jacobi can be seen as arguing against his own former position.

Whatever the reason may be, while Jacobi maintains a negative realist characterization of the self and God, which leaves him no choice but to remain ambiguous about any possible distinct identities between the self and God, he stresses that we should not strive to eliminate our religious devotion that is directed towards external perceptions (such as altars and churches), because these are merely expressions of related inner adoration. This does however, stretch the way in which Jacobi has talked about perceptions until now. Evidently, we now can treat an inner devotion, which immediately (and apparently imperceptibly) seeks out its object in externality, as a kind of perception. This is a good candidate for the underlying theory behind Jacobi's references to love. At any rate, Jacobi seems to uphold his negative realism in that he does not claim that this internal veneration is either the self or God.

How does this problem relate to Fichte's position? Jacobi is not critical of Fichte's supposed atheism but rather takes the *Wissenschaftslehre's* rejection of God as a symptom of a larger problem. This is the problem of nihilism as Jacobi sees it:

I therefore claim: man finds God, because he can only find himself in God. And he is inconceivable in himself, because the essence of God is necessarily inconceivable to him.⁴⁰²

Here we find this ambivalence again: due to the negative realism involved in making claims about God and the self, both remain inconceivable and indiscernibly connected:

⁴⁰² *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.220.

Necessarily! Because otherwise a *supra-divine* power would reside in man and God would have been devised by man. Then God would only be a thought of the finite, *something imagined*, which is not the highest, *only in itself subsisting* being, that is the free originator of all other beings, the beginning and the end. Since this is not the case, that is why man loses himself as soon as he goes against finding himself in God as his originator⁴⁰³, in a way which is inconceivable to his understanding,⁴⁰⁴ as soon as he wants to ground *himself only in himself*.⁴⁰⁵

This point relates to Fichte if we keep the *Begriff-Schrift* in mind:

Therefore, if our presupposition is to be correct, and there is an absolutely first principle of all knowing, the content of this principle must be that which contains all possible content, and must itself be contained in no other.⁴⁰⁶

If the absolute I is nothing other than the totality of possible contents of knowing, that means that nothing remains inconceivable: neither God nor the I. The distinction is subtle: we must find ourselves in God, but if we do this via the understanding we misconstrue God in the way in which he relates to our self. If we construe the self as thoroughly conceivable, we essentially do the same:

⁴⁰³ I have chosen to translate 'Urheber' as originator due to the context. Finding oneself in a creator does not make sense, given the arguments.

⁴⁰⁴ The original version reads 'Vernunft' here. Jacobi changed this to 'Verstande' in the *Werke* version because he no longer limited reason to the mediation of the understanding, *Werke*, Band 3, p.48.

⁴⁰⁵ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.220.

⁴⁰⁶ *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe I, Band 2, p.142.

Everything then gradually dissolves in its own nothingness. However, such a choice is open to man, this single choice: *nothingness* or a *God*. Choosing nothingness he makes himself into a God. That is to say, he makes God into a *specter* [Gespenst], because when there is no God, it is impossible that man and everything that surrounds him is not also merely a *specter*.⁴⁰⁷

Jacobi's presentation is confusing here. In the previous paragraph, Jacobi had argued that the only way to a dignified idea of God is through 'ethical ennobling', and that the only God that we have is a God which becomes man in us, which cannot be directly cognized as a God.⁴⁰⁸ This seems in favor of a non-external God that is really our self, at least as far as we can understand him. Due to the fact that Jacobi argues *for* external idolatry in the paragraphs after the ultimatum, one might be inclined to believe he is advocating an externally existing God. However, I would argue that the ultimatum cannot be read as a conclusion of the paragraph about conceivability cited above. Even though it immediately follows this paragraph, nothing gives the impression that Jacobi is in favor of an external notion of God, and as I have shown, there are many indications that it should be read in the opposite way, as arguing for the ambiguous connection between the self and God. The slightly larger space between the two paragraphs in the original edition might suggest that the ultimatum is rather the conclusion to the entire preceding set of paragraphs, where he cites his own previously unpublished text. These are exactly the paragraphs where Jacobi argues for a God that lives in us. While we are forced to say that we are God, if faced with an externally perceived (and thus knowable) God, we cannot eliminate external idolatry, because that would lead to the elimination of internal adoration as well (presumably this is its own kind of nihilism, where we are unable to

⁴⁰⁷ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.220.

⁴⁰⁸ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.219.

invest affection in others). It then seems that the choice for God or nothingness is a *practical* choice, and that the affirmation of God is, at the same time, an affirmation of our practical agency, which need not necessarily lead to superstition (with respect to superstition, Jacobi seems to share Fichte's skeptical outlook) but which must lead to some action.⁴⁰⁹

We can understand Jacobi's argumentation as an attempt to show what the necessary conditions of the applied rationality that he described in *DH* are. He tries to find these conditions by pointing out the way in which the agency of the self remains inconceivable and inexhaustible in perceptions and representations. This is also how he goes about accusing idealism of being a species of nihilism:

I find nothing but miracles, secrets and signs outside of the mechanism of nature, and have a terrible aversion to nothingness, the absolute undetermined, the through and through empty (these three are one: the Platonic infinite!), especially as object of philosophy or aim of wisdom. The grounding of the mechanism as well as the nature of the I and the not I, arrives at the mere nothing-in-itself, and therefore is taken up, seized and carried away in my transcendental being (personally, so to speak), to empty out the infinite. It would want to fill it as an infinite nothingness, a pure-wholly-and-only-IN-AND-FOR-ITSELF, if it were not impossible.⁴¹⁰

Jacobi attributes this *filling* to Fichte's attempt to ground the nature of the I and not I by, in a way, taking recourse to the infinite. In saying that the sum of the possible content of the absolute I is its

⁴⁰⁹ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.221.

⁴¹⁰ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, pp.214-5.

nature, Fichte attempts to fill a bottomless void, the self that we take to be real, with an abstraction from perception. It is this strategy of idealism to which Jacobi objects, and which he calls nihilism.

This point is further brought out when Jacobi likens the *Wissenschaftslehre* to a knitted sock. One may take this sock as a complete edifice, made from knitting a thread between ‘continual limitations’.⁴¹¹ The individual knits bring the I and the not-I together but, as Jacobi argues, this would not occur without the productive imagination of a finger that brings them together. The *Wissenschaftslehre*, as an edifice, thus refers to something else, ‘an addition’ of ‘reality’, that cannot be incorporated within the account of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself, something that must strictly remain inconceivable.

One can contest whether this criticism applies to Fichte’s actual position. Fichte’s first reaction was that he could not understand how this criticism could be directed *against* him, and he furthermore suggested that he did understand the problem of nihilism.⁴¹² His formulation of this problem shows that he has either read Obereit, Jacobi’s previous formulations of the problem, or both (which is probable since Obereit was Fichte’s friend). Some formulations in the *Begriff-Schrift* are arguably problematic with regard to the later presentations of the project that Fichte puts forward, and it could even be argued that he never meant to say that the I and the not-I can be known in a direct and total sense in the first place. What Fichte abstractly calls ‘knowing’, as it applies to the I and the not-I, generally closely resembles what Jacobi himself has called ‘distinctness’, in that the one is not reduced to the other, but rather the relation between the two is made clear to an ever increasing degree.

⁴¹¹ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.204.

⁴¹² *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe III, Band 3, p.334.

Jacobi complained that Fichte borrowed his term and argument in the final part of *Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800).⁴¹³ It is more likely, however, that Fichte sought to bring out the more Jacobian aspects of his own position in this publication. Moreover, it has been argued that these aspects were there from the beginning.⁴¹⁴ Aspects that are referred to in this debate show that there are a lot more similarities between Jacobi and Fichte's respective positions. Fichte seems to a certain degree to subscribe to at least some of the arguments put forward by negative realism, but there are some important differences that only fully emerge in Fichte's later work (see chapter 5).

One of the clearest responses that Fichte put forward to the charge of nihilism can be found in *Aus einem Privatschreiben* (1800), which is directed against all of Fichte's opponents in the *Atheismusstreit*. It does have a response that is clearly directed towards Jacobi:

we go through concepts, to shorten the road, to get to the goal faster, which must ultimately be an acting again, in as far as our whole thinking cannot have been an empty game [leeres Spiel].⁴¹⁵

Evidently, Fichte knew what was at stake (the fact that if we focus only on concepts we lose track of reality), and to a certain degree seems to have agreed with Jacobi. He even adds the proviso that if 'at the end of the day, nothing is changed through my philosophy, my philosophy was false'.⁴¹⁶ Fichte then ultimately defers the conceptualizations that his *Wissenschaftslehre* offers to their practical use, which means that practical application offers the criteria of whether a concept is valid or not.

⁴¹³ *Aus F. H. Jacobi's Nachlaß, Ungedruckte Briefe von und an Jacobi und Andere*, Band 1, p.240.

⁴¹⁴ Di Giovanni (1997).

⁴¹⁵ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe I, Band 6, p.373.

⁴¹⁶ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe I, Band 6, p.377.

Considering the fact that Jacobi only mentioned nihilism once in this text, it may perhaps be surprising that it was taken up so broadly by the realists as a criticism of the idealists. A likely reason for this is the fact that it provided a good way to summarily refer to the body of criticism that Jacobi had offered since 1785. Mentioning ‘nihilism’ was then a way to show your allegiances, as we’ll see in the works of the authors that we will discuss in the rest of this chapter. There is certainly a continuity between the use of nihilism in Obereit, Jenisch and Jacobi. If they did not all use the word nihilism to describe a shared problematic, one might be excused for thinking that these authors were unrelated beyond the fact that they respond to Kant’s transcendental idealism in some way. However, Obereit and Jenisch were part of Jacobi’s extended network through Hamann.⁴¹⁷ Letters from Hamann show that Jacobi was at least aware of Obereit’s ‘desperate metaphysics’-project.⁴¹⁸ He might even have been in contact with Obereit for a longer time, but only some (unrelated) fragments of Obereit’s 1791 letters to Jacobi are extant. Since Obereit was a vagrant, he would have had little opportunity to maintain a stable correspondence, lacking a stable home address.⁴¹⁹ The fact that these three authors are not just bound by a common problem, but also use the same neologism to describe it and were part of the same extended social network leads me to conclude that it is highly likely that there were some direct lines of influence.

4. Nihilism as a weapon in the battle between realism and idealism

It is remarkable how popular Jacobi’s framing of reflection as leading to nihilism became among the realists, considering the

⁴¹⁷ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Briefwechsel, Band 4, p.230.

⁴¹⁸ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Briefwechsel, Band 6, p.67.

⁴¹⁹ It is remarkable how impotent scholarship of this period becomes when it cannot take recourse to an extant correspondence. All that we know of Obereit the person is, strictly speaking, hearsay.

fact that Jacobi used it only sparingly. It is not Jacobi's solution on which the other realists dwell. One explanation for the focus on the problem rather than the solution may be found in the ferocity and ad hominem way in which Schelling and Hegel attacked realists such as Jacobi, Reinhold, Krug, Rückert, Weiss and Salat in the *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie*. Since Hegel was at this time not publicly renowned and was then considered a lesser disciple of Schelling's (when he was considered at all), most of the counter-offensive focused on Schelling's attacks. In quick succession, Bouterwek, Reinhold, Salat, Köppen, Jacobi and Weiller's responses were published in 1803 and 1804. Of these, Jacobi's trusted disciple Friedrich Köppen and Jacobi's friend Katejan von Weiller decided to direct nihilism, as Jacobi had previously presented it, as a critical assessment against the two authors of the *Kritisches Journal*.

According to the realists, their project is not, as Schelling and Hegel maintain, to 'want to have a philosophy without any philosophy',⁴²⁰ thereby valuing the common human understanding above philosophy, but rather a philosophy that recognizes a problematic tendency in reflection. They argue that, when starting to do systematic philosophy, we must reject the temptation to make claims regarding philosophy's ability to uncover the origin of experience. This position made the realists naturally opposed to Schelling and Hegel, who during this time were using concepts such as that of the "absolute" to recuperate exactly this avenue of

⁴²⁰ In the *Kritisches Journal* Schelling and Hegel (speaking as 'we') claimed that this was 'the suffering of the time' as symptomatically embodied by Rückert and Weiss. *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling Historisch-kritische*, Band 11.1, p.177. A charitable reading might claim that Schelling and Hegel were fine-tuning the method of holding a person to be emblematic for a societal woe. This is the only explanation I can offer for their blatant disregard of what most of the realists actually write, at least in so far as this does not coincide with the readings presented in the *Kritisches Journal*. The reading of Jacobi in *Glauben und Wissen* is an exception, but also somewhat suspiciously disregards those texts that might contradict Hegel's reading.

research. The realist counter-attacks cemented Jacobi's notion of nihilism as a pivotal and divisive feature of the public debate.

No one was left to emphasize the earlier formulations of nihilism. Obereit, the medical doctor who had invented nihilism (which is a kind of mental disease that effects our agency or our existence), had died destitute in Fichte's house in Jena in 1798. This occurrence is not without a wry sense of irony: since Fichte, as the messiah of nihilism (as Jacobi would have it) was the personification of the inevitability of nihilism within certain tendencies of thought, as he pushed reflection to the point where one has to recognize that, without external suppositions, reflection naturally proceeds to the annihilation of the mind-independent existence of its content. Jenisch met a sad fate as well: he disappeared without a trace in Berlin in 1804, leaving only his umbrella. Two explanations for his disappearance were raised which, also not without a tragic sense of irony, neatly overlap with his two responses to nihilism: i) he committed suicide by way of drowning, which correlates to the annihilation of human cognition as a meaningful edifice, or ii) he joined a monastery, which correlates to the belief in a transcendent God despite a prevailing lack of proof.⁴²¹

Köppen's book *Schellings Lehre oder das Ganze der Philosophie des absoluten Nichts* (1803) can be seen as the central and certainly as the most extensive response to the *Kritisches Journal*, mainly because it implicitly had Jacobi's seal of approval by including an appendix with Jacobi's response to 'Glauben und Wissen'. Köppen was a former student of Fichte's, who had become Jacobi's disciple, to the degree that he was trusted to finish editing Jacobi's texts when illness prevented their expedient completion. Formed by this trajectory of apprenticeship, Köppen was the embodiment of Jacobi's philosophy: having first moved through Fichtianism, then

⁴²¹ For an exposition of all accounts surrounding Jenisch death, see *Friedrich Schleiermacher Kritische Gesamtausgabe* Band 5, pp.LXXII-LXXIII.

coming face to face with nihilism, and finally having chosen to turn away from it in favor of Jacobian realism. Köppen's book presented a narrative that was likely premeditated by Jacobi himself. The book moved the criticism of nihilism away from Fichte and towards Schelling and is specifically directed against the latter's *System des transcendentalen Idealismus* (1800). Whereas Fichte had merely shown that reflection inevitably leads to nihilism but might be saved from all-out nihilism through some key commitments to realism (see chapter 5), Schelling, in Köppen's view, lavished in nihilism.

Köppen claims that Schelling's system is neither realism nor idealism but only nihilism:

In truth, the Schellingian system is neither realism nor idealism. That question does not even have a meaning. That is why it is nihilism.⁴²²

For further systematic discussion of Köppen's approach, see chapter 5. Köppen is critical of the use of an ultimate abstraction, or rather of an abstraction that abstracts from everything, in Schelling's use of the 'absolute'. In using this trump card, he raises the charge that one loses the initial particular instances that were first abstracted from, the things on which the ladder of abstraction rests. Köppen argues that, since speech is always involved in understanding or cognizing through abstraction,⁴²³ if there is no concrete point of departure involved, the absolute can only relate back to the empty word involved, a signifier without reference, which is ultimately *nothing*.⁴²⁴ Since Schelling claims to have access to an original and absolute construction, rather than to particular

⁴²² Köppen, *Schellings Lehre oder das Ganze der Philosophie des absoluten Nichts* (1803), p.85.

⁴²³ *Schellings Lehre*, p.2.

⁴²⁴ *Schellings Lehre*, pp.4-5.

things, Köppen declares that this system is ultimately a ‘constructive nihilism’.⁴²⁵

Köppen delivers a warning about what would happen if mankind becomes completely engulfed in a Schellingian nihilism:

If mankind should save itself from the achievement of complete waning [Erschlaffung], in which it is bogged down with nihilism, the fruit of its age; if it is to be healed from the gradual dying away of any kind of vigor; if it is not murdered in the night that is no *night* anymore, because it never lights up a day, once decaying in the grave of all virtues: as it must relinquish the concretion [Konkretenz] of good and evil, God and nothing, freedom and necessity. Only a *something* [Etwas] ensouls and *enspirits* [begeisteret] mankind; the nothing leaves them hollow, *dispirits* them. The fullness of life is awakened in us by spirit [Begeisterung]. We then strive upwards to higher dignity [Würde] and escape the bleak emptiness.⁴²⁶

One recognizes in this passage a restatement of Jacobi’s realism: *something* is needed for our rationality to be applied, for it to be ensouled and enspirited. The point about the night is reminiscent of Hegel’s famous criticism of Schelling’s position as one that presents a ‘night in which all cows are black’ in the preface of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1807). It is likely that Hegel follows the general implication of Köppen’s analysis of Schelling there: recourse to the absolute (or an original construction of the sensible) leaves us unable to deal with concrete determinations. The claim is that even as an abstraction, Schelling’s absolute does

⁴²⁵ *Schellings Lehre*, p.87.

⁴²⁶ *Schellings Lehre*, p.204.

not function well because it does not allow us to descend the ladder of abstractions and permits us to explain particular determinations in our experience. Access to the absolute, even if it were possible, in the realist view cannot offer us any new explanations. Ultimately, the absolute is something that appears to be an attempt to reflect on all possible content of reflection, yet adds very little as a reflective act. The opposition between ‘enspiriting’ and ‘dispiriting’ also suggests the operative concept of the *Phänomenologie*: “spirit”. If the critical allusion to Schelling in the *Phänomenologie* is really a call-back to Köppen’s criticism of Schelling, we might be able to understand Schelling’s response to Hegel (and their subsequent break) better: it suggests that Hegel, his comrade at arms, had betrayed Schelling to what was once their common enemy, to the realists.⁴²⁷

Köppen takes Schelling’s position as the most total nihilism because it leaves no room for the ‘enspiriting’ of man towards a ‘higher dignity’ (higher than mere reflection, that is). Likely, this suggestion is meant in Jacobi’s sense: the nihilist position leaves us as a mere observer who can only perceive but cannot act. Reflection is, in this view, aimed at making practical agency possible. Although Köppen does not fill in the gaps of this reasoning, by showing that this is the ultimate result of Schelling’s position, the force of this argument lies in the idea that abstraction is limited by the various determinations from which we abstract. At the very least, he must then be of the opinion that Schelling, by favoring an ultimate abstraction in the absolute, from which there is no possible direct line of deduction towards the genesis of individual determinations does not consist in a real abstraction, but one which completely cuts us off from the contents of our reflection. This determinate content is what we think through in order to decide courses of action, and in this sense, it is an indispensable requirement for our agency.

⁴²⁷ *Briefe von und an Hegel*, Band 1, p.194.

In a way, the argument is then that the unintended effect of Schelling's position is the *misrecognition of the conditions of human agency*. Köppen even mentions that the night of the absolute is not even really a 'night in which all cows are black',⁴²⁸ since it is not opposed to the day, which would entail a cognitive attempt to provide determinations about the day by positing the night as its opposite. In other sections he affirms the Jacobian juxtaposition of man between a nature to be dominated and a sense of ultimate power which is inconceivable (God), making it more than likely that he is presupposing Jacobi's solution.⁴²⁹

The continuity between the nihilism of a reflection that only recognizes itself and Schelling's use of abstraction from nothing to nothing can perhaps best be put in this way: whereas Fichte was aware of the fact that thinking must occur in certain determinate ways, which could result in nihilism if it were the only thing that we value, Schelling, in Köppen's reading, does not recognize the problems that are inherent in this methodology. In some ways, Schelling uses two argumentative strategies which are both nihilistic when seen from the realist perspective. One method is abstraction, which propounds that the broadening of our horizon in the act of abstraction but does not sacrifice concrete determinations. The other method consists in the adoption of an absolute that is accessible to cognition and contains everything possible and actual. Likely, Schelling would contend that abstraction ultimately results in the notion of the absolute, but the realists would oppose this more as a form of mere self-deception (since there is no way of having access to an original construction or the totality of everything) in which one suspends abstraction in favor of the adoption of a word which does not correspond to anything.

⁴²⁸ *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel Gesammelte Werke*, Band 9, p.17.

⁴²⁹ *Schellings Lehre*, p.205.

There were some other significant usages of the term ‘nihilism’ in the realist counter-attack against the idealists. One of these occurred in the first volume of the theologian Weiller’s *Der Geist der allerneuesten Philosophie* (1804) where he simply concurs with Köppen’s conclusion that absolute nihilism is a better name for Schelling’s system than absolute idealism.⁴³⁰ A second, more important reference to nihilism was made by Jakob Salat, who seems to have admired Jacobi only from afar, in the first volume of his *Vernunft und Verstand* (1808). This publication functions both as a thorough review of the entire discussion between the realists, Schelling and Hegel, and the Kantians (which is the topic of the second volume of Salat’s book), and Salat’s attempt to formulate an approach to philosophy which adequately deals with all the problems that were put forward during these discussions (in the first volume). Salat also agrees with Köppen and Jacobi that the Kantian and Schellingian systems can be more aptly called nihilism.⁴³¹

According to Salat’s notion of philosophy, there is no opposition between idealism and realism, because the truly ideal is at the same time the truly real.⁴³² He thus opposes idealism to materialism and realism to nihilism.⁴³³ Salat utilizes a more traditional (Platonic and somewhat Kantian) notion of reason than Obereit and Jacobi do. For Salat, all truth stems from reason and that which does not depart from reason leads to nothing and thus to nihilism. Since realism is so strongly opposed to nihilism, there cannot be an unreasonable realism in Salat’s view.⁴³⁴

⁴³⁰ *Schellings Lehre*, p.195. In 1800, Bouterwek also refers to nihilism, in support of Jacobi’s analysis of transcendental idealism. In: Bouterwek, *Anfangsgründe der speculativen Philosophie* (1800), p.226.

⁴³¹ Salat, *Vernunft und Verstand* (1808), Band 1, p.337.

⁴³² *Vernunft und Verstand*, p.323.

⁴³³ *Vernunft und Verstand*, p.324.

⁴³⁴ *Vernunft und Verstand*, p.324.

Salat's taxonomy of the problem of nihilism has some definite virtues for understanding the way realism has been tied up with nihilism. Furthermore, it explains why the camp of realists had no qualms about incorporating aspects that we tend to think of as belonging exclusively to the camp of idealists. In Salat's typology, idealism and realism are complementary enterprises that deal with the same philosophical (rational) content but are fighting different enemies. We see a similar redescription of labels in response to the problem of nihilism in the works of Wilhelm Traugott Krug.⁴³⁵

Whereas after Jacobi's exposition of nihilism, the other realists seem to refer to nihilism mainly in a small number of publications that respond directly to Schelling and Hegel, Krug had the most sustained engagement with the conception of nihilism during a relatively short period: three publications from 1801 to 1802. As mentioned before, a lot of his engagement with the problem of nihilism involves the redescription of labels. We will deal more extensively with Krug's own position in chapter 5.2. A year before the first issue of the *Kritisches Journal* in 1801, Krug already attacked Schelling's system as nihilistic in his *Briefe über den neuesten Idealismus*.⁴³⁶ Krug introduces a distinction between *transcendent* realism and *transcendent* idealism, which lead to the defective positions of materialism and nihilism respectively. The nihilism to which a transcendent idealism leads is described as a mere doing and acting which has no insight into where this acting leads and lacking insight into its activity while being active, will not come to results. Most probably the type of activity that Krug has in mind is the Fichtian type which *includes* the process of reflection. Since there is no way to stop the mere activity of acting, nihilism, in

⁴³⁵ A brief reference to nihilism can be found in Friedrich Ast's *Entwurf der Universalgeschichte*, Band 1 (1810), p.122. This text might be a candidate for the first application of the term to ancient Greece. Ast was Köppen and Salat's competitor in the University of Landshut and likely picked up the term through them. The text was presented to Ast's students in 1808.

⁴³⁶ Krug, *Briefe über den neuesten Idealismus* (1801), p.65.

this description, can only end in nothingness.⁴³⁷ What is lost in this annihilation is the sphere in which our actions mean anything in a moral or practical sense, due to the fact that we lack the relevant insight into our actions. Even though it refers to the Fichtian notion of activity, this characterization is very similar to Jacobi's nihilism for which we become mere observers. This criticism, if we apply it to Schelling, also bears a striking resemblance to the way Köppen criticized Schelling: nihilism here entails a fundamental lack of insight into what one is really doing in reflective activity.

In Krug's view, it is obvious that such a blindness to methodological considerations would not allow one to escape the circularity of a philosophical theory attempting to explicate its own foundations, in Krug's view. In *Entwurf eines neuen Organons der Philosophie oder Versuch über die Prinzipien der philosophischen Erkenntnis* (1801) Krug further develops these distinctions:

If one want wants to deduce being from mere knowing, then there arises a *transcendent* or *dogmatic* idealism which, if implemented consistently, ends in *nihilism*, because all being, in that case, changes in a mere *thinking* and *being-thought* [Gedachtwerden], and all reality of thinghood [Sachheit] loses itself at the same time, in the *absolute emptiness* or *negation*. The I is nothing, but only thinks; and outside of the I there *is* also nothing, but something is only thought. Everything thus, that we would like to think as a *real*, vanishes and dissolves into a *semblance* [Schein], which is *nothing*, because nothing *is*.⁴³⁸

Once again taking up the idea of a transcendent idealism, Krug specifies how this attitude leads to nihilism. Strictly speaking, this is

⁴³⁷ *Briefe über den neuesten Idealism*, p.99.

⁴³⁸ Krug, *Entwurf eines neuen Organons der Philosophie oder Versuch über die Prinzipien der philosophischen Erkenntnis* (1801) p.74.

an elaboration of Jacobi's formulation in *Jacobi an Fichte*, which becomes apparent through Krug's emphasis on *consistent implementation* of idealism (or nihilism as the consistent implementation of reflection). In order to fully understand Krug's use of the being/thinking dichotomy, it should be pointed out that he had previously concluded that consciousness is an inconceivable connection or knot of being and thinking and that it is not decidable which has the original primacy⁴³⁹ (see chapter 4 for Jacobi's account of this problem). Krug is thus not simply advocating that being must remain independent of thought because all thinking springs from it, since that would be materialism. It is his primary concern to maintain this inconceivability at the beginning of reflection, in order to counteract the inherent tendency in reflection leading to nihilism, by avoiding the circularity a philosophical theory faces when it attempts to understand its foundations.

At the end of the *Entwurf*,⁴⁴⁰ Krug draws out the implications of nihilism that Jacobi pointed out: if we want to do philosophy scientifically, in the attempt to submit all things and processes to reflection, we remain caught in a circle. Krug thus creates a division in Jacobi's notion of nihilism by distinguishing nihilism into two kinds i) one kind based on thorough reflection and ii) another kind that does not recognize the method employed in reflection. In the former case we have seen that Fichte is taken up as the messiah of philosophy, by showing how, through an examination of the method of reflection, reflection by itself leads to nihilism. The latter kind remains a form of transcendent idealism and is obviously directed at Schelling; it engenders a nihilism that remains undiagnosed and is therefore all the more harmful. The trick for Krug, following the way Fichte has examined reflection,

⁴³⁹ *Entwurf eines neuen Organons*, p.27. Note that Krug uses thinking and knowing as interchangeable and also uses the real/ideal distinction to designate the same problem.

⁴⁴⁰ *Entwurf eines neuen Organons*, pp.103-109.

seems to lie in accepting the limitations of cognition in general and in philosophical cognition in particular. This is Krug's final divorce from the Reinholdian ideal of certitude, because he concludes that philosophy can only assume the plausibility of its activity by acknowledging these limitations (as opposed to the other sciences, which can still utilize philosophy in order to question its foundations⁴⁴¹). This roadblock on the royal road of reflection, which is designed to prevent circularity, is the acknowledgement of the fact that philosophy is, from its inception, confronted with inconceivability and that the way in which a philosophical theory can originate from the specificity of the content of experience and the original synthesis of being and knowing in consciousness remains impossible to explain. We can conclude from Krug's position that it is only in philosophical cognition that we find such a roadblock, because, as a discipline that places no limits on the scope of reflection (as opposed to a particular science), philosophical cognition cannot reach beyond the scope of its own reflection.

In *Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Philosophierens und die verschiedenen Systeme der Philosophie in Rücksicht ihrer allgemeinen Gültigkeit: eine Beilage zum Organon* (1802) Krug favorably cites the final pages of the chapter on knowing from Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800), in a note appended to his reference to 'true nihilism'.⁴⁴² Krug seems to suggest that Fichte has once again made it clear how mere reflection, if followed consistently, leads to a nihilistic position. It is important to note that these remarks of Fichte's facilitate the conclusion of the book, which consists in an attempt to solve its epistemological problems by taking recourse to belief. This shows that Fichte on the whole agreed with Jacobi's assessment and, perhaps even from the start, chose to evade the implications of nihilism by adopting a non-conceptual and thus non-reflective element in the form of belief.

⁴⁴¹ *Entwurf eines neuen Organons*, p.107.

⁴⁴² *Über die verschiedenen Methoden*, pp.34-38.

5. Conclusion

Originally, philosophical nihilism was conceived as a pathology inherent in either the philosophy current at the time or in thinking as such, and which is only avoidable if we take radical steps to ameliorate it. This means that nihilism is not so much a historical thesis about a stage in Western culture, the malaise that emerges at a certain moment in time, which is how Nietzsche would famously characterize it, but a more prevalent tendency in philosophical reflection. Nevertheless, for the negative realists, it seems that the tendency of nihilism emerges at a specific historical point in the form of German idealism (if we include Kant in that label). Jenisch remarked, for instance, that nihilism did not seem to be a problem at an earlier point in history and that there is no indication that it occurred to any of the great minds in the history of philosophy.⁴⁴³

Two competing explanations for this observation are put forward by the authors we have covered: i) nihilism, and consequently transcendental idealism, are aberrations in thinking (which was Obereit and Jenisch' view), or ii) no one had brought thought to its logical conclusion before Kant and Fichte (which is the view of Jacobi and the Jacobian realists). The split in these readings brings nihilism to its clearest philosophical formulation, since, starting with Jacobi, it is intermingled with a respect for transcendental idealism for leading thought to its natural conclusion and showing the need for a radical move if we want to maintain our ability to act in the world or want to engage in philosophical study of the world.

In a way, Jacobi's formulation of nihilism is not as dependent on a notion of God as Obereit's, Jenisch' and even as Nietzsche's formulation would be. A similar criticism to the criticism of nihilism was essentially put forward in Jacobi's analysis

⁴⁴³ *Über Grund und Werth*, p.274

of Kant's position in the appendix to *DH*: if we try to explain human cognition by a purely internal account that is fully conceivable by reflection, without assuming an externality (be it as a real thing, a transcendental object, a thing-in-itself or an immediacy that may or may not refer to God), we run into blatantly counter-intuitive claims, which are unable to explain human agency, including but not limited to, the account of how and why one is able to give an account of human cognition at all. Jacobi's negative realism is poised to designate this absolute externality in a way that resists the attempt to submit it to reflection.

The notion of philosophical nihilism as we have explored it in this chapter, marks a sustained development from a theological conception of nihilism towards a content that almost exclusively can be applied to specific types of philosophical accounts, all of which seem to have heavy ties to transcendental idealism. More than that, the philosophical notion of nihilism was utilized in public debates so heavily that it immediately eclipsed the relatively specialized use of the term in theology and became part of the public lexicon. A significant indication of this development can be found in Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *Néologie, ou Vocabulaire de mots nouveaux, à renouveler* (1801). Mercier believes that language is a divine gift and that we should thus rejoice when new words emerge: 'I perceive such a happy revolution attached to a new word'.⁴⁴⁴ He does not only include 'NIHILIST or NOTHINGIST [Rienniste]' among his vocabulary of neologisms, but also uses 'nihilism' in his preface in order to describe 'modern French metaphysicians':

They have the tone of the dry school of nihilism.
They have resolved, I believe, out of malicious
vengeance, to make me perish with boredom and
impatience. The logomachy of these new doctors

⁴⁴⁴ Mercier, *Néologie, ou Vocabulaire de mots nouveaux, à renouveler* (1801), tome 1, p.lxij.

replaces the old scholastic forms: it is the poison of thought, of sensibility, of virtue and style. Their discordant and useless theses [are] the true waste of science, which the celebrated Kant knew how to strike down with indelible contempt.

You do not understand yourselves: we hear Descartes, we hear Leibniz, we hear Wollaston, Shaftesbury, Kant, and we understand that you are perfectly hollow. The first step towards wisdom is to distinguish what is false.⁴⁴⁵

Although it is unclear to which French metaphysicians Mercier is referring, this use of the term shows that some of the critical force of the way in which ‘nihilism’ was used in Germany in the period we discussed had rapidly reached the French context. Many aspects return in Mercier’s diatribe: the fact that nihilism somehow is unnatural in that it poisons thought, eliminates virtue and sensibility and the fact that the nihilistic position is empty at its core, is hollow. Mercier’s lemma on the topic also shows an important change in the use of the term:

NIHILIST or NOTHINGIST. [One] who does not believe in anything, who is not interested in anything. A fine result of bad philosophy, which prances about in the big *Dictionnaire encyclopédique*! What does she want us to do? Those Nihilists.⁴⁴⁶

Whereas in the German context, ‘nihilism’ was a label that was applied to a philosophical position, it was evidently not possible to call a person a nihilist. Mercier shows that this was possible in the French context. Some years later, Krug picks up on this distinction in the different language contexts:

⁴⁴⁵ *Néologie, ou Vocabulaire de mots nouveaux, à renouveler* (1801), tome 1, p.lx.

⁴⁴⁶ *Néologie, ou Vocabulaire de mots nouveaux, à renouveler* (1801), tome 2, p.143.

In French one also calls someone a ‘nihilist’ who, in company and especially in civil company, is of no significance (only counts, does not weigh in or is considered), likewise does not believe in anything in religious matters. Such social or political or religious nihilists are more numerous than all philosophical or metaphysical nihilists, who want to negate all things that are, in a scientific way.⁴⁴⁷

It also seems that the French use has at this time become so well known that one can now also call someone who adheres to the philosophical (non-religious) form of nihilism, a “nihilist”, in the pejorative adjective sense (e.g. “you nihilist!”), which is a novel distinction that Krug does not seem to have noticed.

Having shown how the realists took part in the development of the notion of philosophical nihilism, we will now attempt a more in-depth exploration of Jacobi’s position as he presented it. Such an exploration will show what kind of philosophical stance Jacobi believed that his realism made possible.

⁴⁴⁷ Krug, *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften, nebst ihrer Literatur und Geschichte*, Band 5 (1838), p.83.

Then, he said, he had a gust of emotion.
He made a run for it, lest hesitation
should grip him again, he went plump
with outstretched hand through the
green door and let it slam behind him.
And so, in a trice, he came into the
garden that has haunted all his life.
It was very difficult for Wallace to give
me his full sense of that garden into
which he came.

— H.G. Wells, *The Door in the Wall*

4. Jacobi's Practical Philosophy in the *Werke*

Throughout the previous chapters we have examined the realists from some of the key controversies in which they were involved as well as considered the central problematic governing some of their key publications. This historically fragmented approach, however, does not present Jacobi's position in its most robust systematic way, particularly the importance that he places on practical philosophy, remains outside this perspective. Jacobi attempted to make a systematic presentation of his position accessible in the edition of his *Werke* (1812-1818),⁴⁴⁸ that he edited himself. This attempt itself already suffices to remedy the common criticism of Jacobi as a *Gelegenheitsdenker*.

Having provided an exposition of the problem of nihilism for the realists in chapter 3, I will now consider the issue of what philosophical position Jacobi's negative realism amounts to. Central to this interpretation is the fact that Jacobi is often taken to be merely a critic of Kant and subsequent post-Kantian idealists. Against this trend in Jacobi interpretation, I will attempt to display the main features of Jacobi's philosophical project, focusing on its own criteria and mode of presentation, in order to assess its philosophical merits. We have seen that *DH* stops just short of explaining Jacobi's perspective on practical philosophy and that *Jacobi an Fichte* heavily refers to practical concerns in order to criticize nihilism. It is then not surprising that practical philosophy forms an important part of Jacobi's position. This aspect has received very little attention in the Jacobi scholarship. Jacobi is also not the last of the realist authors to relate realism to practical philosophy: Joseph Rückert, for example, prominently argued for a practical turn as well (see [p.270]).

⁴⁴⁸ Additional volumes containing mostly letters would be published after Jacobi's death until 1825.

When examined closely, Jacobi's position has the characteristic of being intensely concerned with practical philosophy, particularly in terms of the subjective foundations of action. As we have seen in chapter 3, in Jacobi's view there are at least three sorts of content arrived at in terms of immediate access: nature, self and God. I want to arrive at a systematic reconstruction, so I will connect various texts together in order to present the practical core of Jacobi's project. An important result of this investigation will be a better understanding of the mutual ordering of these immediate contents.

In order to accurately reconstruct Jacobi's views, I propose a novel approach. Near the end of his life, Jacobi undertook an edition of his own *Werke*, most of which he was able to publish during his lifetime (only *Woldemar* and two volumes of letters were published by different editors). While in the previous chapters, we have followed the historical context in which Jacobi and the other realists published their texts, I propose we now take the *Werke* as a single body of work, which presents a specific narrative with an internal coherence. As far as I know, this approach to the *Werke* has not been taken up before. Günther Baum believes that there is a coherent systematical concept of Jacobi's position, which is covered up by the polemical form of his texts, but he does not refer to the *Werke* as the way into understanding this concept.⁴⁴⁹ Walter Jaeschke claims that the *Werke* edition adds nothing new and merely presents the texts in their historical sequence.⁴⁵⁰ As I will argue, this seems to be demonstrably untrue. In Jacobi's own time, publishing an edition of one's works as a culmination of one's own views was already unique⁴⁵¹, but to do so in a specific way which guides the reader through the key concepts and concerns of

⁴⁴⁹ Baum, *Vernunft und Erkenntnis* (1968), p.131.

⁴⁵⁰ Jaeschke, 'Ein Vernunft welche nicht die Vernunft ist. Jacobis Kritik der Aufklärung', in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: Ein Wendepunkt der geistigen Bildung der Zeit* (1998).

⁴⁵¹ Jacobi's attempt was preceded by Schelling's aborted attempt in 1809 and succeeded by Goethe's successful attempt.

the philosophy presented in these works, as I will show Jacobi did, was incredibly innovative. Since I have previously discussed Jacobi's negative realism and critical interventions in the *Pantheismusstreit* and *Atheismusstreit*, I will now focus on the new ideas that the *Werke* leads its readers to, specifically Jacobi's practical philosophy, which remained somewhat undeveloped in *DH*. Interestingly, despite novel accents and shifts in focus, Jacobi, for his part, professed that the *Werke* did not present a change in his views, but rather that the only thing that has changed is that he understood himself better, leading to an increased capacity to make himself understandable to others.⁴⁵²

Secondary literature on the topic of Jacobi's practical philosophy is scant. Some important advances have been made by Stolzenberg (2004), Crowe (2014) and Koch (2013). None of these proceed through a reference to Jacobi's realism or approach the *Werke* in the same way as I propose.

1. Sequencing the texts

Generally, one would undertake the reconstruction of a philosophical position by assembling a corpus of an author's *philosophical* texts and working through them *chronologically*.⁴⁵³ In Jacobi's case, this strategy is difficult to maintain due to the fact that his philosophical texts are rarely without a literary component and that, conversely, his two novels present philosophical arguments. Also, Jacobi broke up the chronological order of presentation in his *Werke*. Fortunately, also, Jacobi himself provides us with a solution to this problem, in the form of his edition of the *Werke* in which he made some minor corrections to the texts that

⁴⁵² *Aus F.H. Jacobi's Nachlass, Ungedruckte Briefe von und an Jacobi*, Band 2 (1869), p.131.

⁴⁵³ By and large, this is how the new critical edition of Jacobi's works, edited by Hammacher and Jaeschke, presents Jacobi's texts.

he included in this edition, and for which he wrote three new prefaces. We will disregard the merely chronological renderings of his letters in volumes 4.2 and 4.3 as supplements that appeared after his death, under the oversight of different editors.

What becomes evident when examining Jacobi's organization of the project of editing his *Werke*, is that it does not at all follow a chronological order of publication. Instead, each volume is organized around one or two longer texts, joined by some shorter texts and a selection of letters. What did Jacobi say about his organization of the *Werke*?⁴⁵⁴ In the new preface to volume 4, Jacobi responded to a reviewer of earlier volumes who would have preferred a chronological organization by being flippant about this choice of presentation.⁴⁵⁵ He remarks that the order in which to put *SB* and *DH* is a difficult issue, because the second edition to *SB* came out after *DH* and refers to its arguments. Jacobi explains that he preferred to rush out in a *Werke*-edition some texts that were not easily available, had not seen print or were scattered throughout journals. This second point does not address the real problem: why did Jacobi believe these texts worthy of being reproduced in his *Werke* over other texts that fit the same descriptions, but were not reprinted?⁴⁵⁶ A third point made by Jacobi about the organization of his project concerns his decision to make *Eduard Allwills Briefsammlung*,⁴⁵⁷ the first text of the first volume and, in essence, its centerpiece.

This text saw two substantially different versions, the first in 1775-1776 and the second in 1792. Included in volume 1 of the *Werke* is the later version, and it is not the earliest text included in the *Werke* by far. The reason for this, Jacobi says, is that

⁴⁵⁴ Since we are so intensively following Jacobi's edition of his *Werke*, we will refer to that edition in this chapter, rather than to the new edition.

⁴⁵⁵ *Werke*, Band 4, p. vi-x.

⁴⁵⁶ A glance at the new critical edition reveals that there were many shorter texts that Jacobi did not select for his *Werke*.

⁴⁵⁷ Hereafter referred to as *AW*.

this text functions as a ‘universal key’ to his philosophy.⁴⁵⁸ If Jacobi’s philosophy is, in the final tally, to function as a door and not as a wall, it seems essential for Jacobi’s reader to have the key to this door.⁴⁵⁹ If *AW* has an important point to make concerning Jacobi’s philosophy, are we then not legitimated to assume that the rest of Jacobi’s selection similarly develops his position from this starting point? In a posthumous collection of Jacobi’s letters we find a letter to Friedrich Jakobs from 1813, which sheds some light on the plan behind the organization of the *Werke*⁴⁶⁰:

The sequence of these writings themselves will then present the undistorted history of my philosophical development and make it easy on the perceptive reader to cognize in which sense they together amount to a system and in which sense they do not.

Evidently, the story the *Werke* tells does not correspond perfectly to the publication history of the texts included in it but nevertheless provides us the best way into the complicated construction that is Jacobi’s position. We will take up the task to reconstruct this position, following the organization of the *Werke*, and by highlighting specific issues that help advance our understanding of Jacobi’s position. In order to do this effectively, we cannot linger on the internal structure and historical context of the individual texts. Our first stop is *Allwill*, the universal key.

⁴⁵⁸ Jacobi notes in a letter that especially the 1792 preface to *AW* is one of his clearest texts. *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s auserlesener Briefwechsel*, Band 2 (1827), p.92.

⁴⁵⁹ Jacobi included the letter from Hamann where he asked him about the wall or the door in this volume.

⁴⁶⁰ *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s auserlesener Briefwechsel*, Band 2 (1827), pp.436-437.

2. *The first volume: fundamental components of subjectivity*

Allwill provides a concise account of Jacobi's views of how a human being functions in his basic activities, specifically in the novel's preface and in an 'Addition'. The operative notions here are *personal existence* and *self-consciousness*. As living creatures, we find ourselves compelled to act through 'instinct' [Instinkt] which is a 'self-activity' [Selbstthätigkeit]⁴⁶¹ (an active relation that the human being has with himself), with the goal to preserve and maintain our personal existence.⁴⁶² Jacobi specifies this personal existence:

the *self-consciousness*, the *unity* of reflected consciousness by means of continuous *consistent* knotting [Verknüpfung]: -- *coherence*.⁴⁶³

Jacobi describes personality as the self-consciousness of the *unity of reflection*. One might wonder why Jacobi places such an emphasis on reflection here, considering his formulation of nihilism as the ultimate consequence of thoroughgoing reflection within a certain chain of reasoning. The answer to this can be found in the reference to *knotting*.⁴⁶⁴

Throughout his work, Jacobi refers to a "knot" in cases for which we discern a process of the interconnection of multiple components that we are unable to determine in their original composition or unable to discern the whole from the parts. The reason for this difficulty is that negative realism applies to self-consciousness as well (this was what was called the 'self' in chapter

⁴⁶¹ *Werke*, Band 1, p.xii.

⁴⁶² *Werke*, Band 1, p.xiv.

⁴⁶³ *Werke*, Band 1, p.xiv.

⁴⁶⁴ I have translated 'Verknüpfung' as knotting and not as connecting, because I believe that Jacobi often refers to the figurative aspect of this word: something is irrevocably tied together, knotted in a way which cannot be unraveled. This sense also covers the negative realism involved: we cannot understand self-consciousness by unraveling a sequence of particular contents of our reflection.

3 [p.68]). Every activity factively presupposes the knot originating from the tying together our existence and our consciousness, and likewise every reflection already presupposes self-consciousness, so self-consciousness can never be directly proven within reflection. This is also Jacobi's criticism of Kant's deduction of the role of the synthesis in the transcendental analytic of the first *Kritik*: try as we may, we can never untangle this synthetic structure, this knot, and even our deduction of its elements (such as, the categories) is suspect, because we utilize the result (cognition) in the deduction.⁴⁶⁵

A similar knot lies at the core of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness is the continual process of reflected consciousness becoming coherent and continuous with all previous reflected acts and contents of consciousness in the unity of our personality. It is thus important to recognize that Jacobi believes that self-consciousness can never really be fully understood through reflection. The cohesion of the contents of consciousness, insofar as it enters into reflection, thus remains incomprehensible with regard to its origins or full functioning. It follows that self-consciousness cannot grasp the unreflected or the unconscious. I will return to the issue about how this sequentially generated unity of self-consciousness relates to personality later on. For now, since reflection fails, Jacobi makes recourse to an innate process, which he calls 'instinct', and which is oriented towards maintaining our personal existence. Instinct cannot be the sum of our thoughts but takes over the function of self-consciousness in making thought possible. Jacobi merely remarks that instinct is oriented towards whatever advances personal existence and the unity of reflective consciousness.

There are, then, two general goals for instinct: a *simple goal*, which is to keep us alive and a *complex goal*, which is to provide continuity in reflection when the determinate ends associated with

⁴⁶⁵ *Werke*, Band 3, p.80.

the first goal are within reach. With these two goals of instinct in mind, we can now turn to Jacobi's *Allwill*.

The novel *Allwill's Briefsammlung* is a type of Bildungsroman, comprised of several letters. The main character, Allwill, is quite literally *all will*, and over the course of the novel the reader is made aware of the effect an individual who asserts his will without developing his ethical potential and concerning himself with the effect his actions have on those around him. The ethical aims of the text emerge when Jacobi remarks that the pure workings of this instinct can be called the pure will which, when philosophically examined, leads one to an 'indisputably available categorical imperative, of ethicality'.⁴⁶⁶ However, since *Allwill* is a novel about undeveloped ethical potential, Jacobi only brings up this point in a note. The bare structure of instinct, the mere sustaining of personal existence, is not enough for Jacobi, because the unnamed author of the 'Addition', who is most likely meant to be Jacobi himself accuses the character Erhard of the following:

You lack *intimacy* [Innigkeit]; a deep consciousness of the *whole man*, an ability that is his [eigenes], which follows from this deeper consciousness. A *self-nourishing* [sich selbst nährenden], *strengthening, in itself thriving sense and spirit!*⁴⁶⁷

It is evidently not enough to just maintain our own personal existence. Merely following our instinct would leave us limited, without intimacy or depth. Jacobi is arguably right to remark that there seems to be more to human life than maintaining our existence. Jacobi argues that these deeper features of the human spirit can only be characterized as being 'intimate' and 'deeper'. In what respects, however, are we exactly going 'deeper'? Jacobi has previously defined self-consciousness merely as a knotting together

⁴⁶⁶ *Werke*, Band 1, p.xi.

⁴⁶⁷ *Werke*, Band 1, p.229.

of a series of conscious reflections, and of the contents of these reflections.

The solution to the problem of a life without depth seems to lie in what he has here tentatively called the ‘sense and spirit’ that nourishes itself. Even today, many would be inclined to agree with Jacobi that a human life requires a certain depth and would maintain that a life that is merely occupied with surviving is not satisfying, *often pointing towards a ‘deep’ and ‘intimate’ dimension in man as being essential* for a satisfying human life. As we shall see, it is in this human need for a deeper life that Jacobi locates our capacity for ethical action, which is significant because to a certain degree, and in this respect even more rigorously than Kant, he completely divorces ethical action from the sphere of needs and ends. Jacobi does not intend to explain at this point how this is supposed to work, because this would require additional argumentation, to which volume 2, 3 and 4.1 of the *Werke* are devoted. Still, Jacobi has to undertake the task of carefully elucidating this drive towards ethical action and show if and how this relates to reflection, which, up to this point, seems to be completely unconnected.

Whereas instinct is tied to preserving our life, Jacobi introduces the notion of *drive* [Trieb] as specifically associated with the intimate dimension of being human in an ethical sense:

Drive, which does not know itself and its object
[Gegenstand] at first, resounds through them as a
lively word in our chest.⁴⁶⁸

Drive can relate to our consciousness, but this does not mean that it becomes known. According to Jacobi we can become conscious of it *as an inconceivable origin*. Because it is not patently evident that the ethical drive exists it is possible that certain human beings have no such ethical sense. In this context that would mean that they have not become aware of this drive in themselves. It is unclear

⁴⁶⁸ *Werke*, Band 1, p.230.

whether Jacobi believes that knowing the ethical drive as an inconceivable origin is a necessary condition for one to be able to act ethically, although that seems unlikely. Perhaps the epistemic operation here only refers to how far we can probe into the foundations of our ethical action. The fact that self-consciousness has to be attained in a highly peculiar way is elaborated in the following passage:

Illusions and shadows surround us. We do not even cognize the essence of our own existence. We shape everything with our image, and this image is a changing figure. Every I that we call our *self*, is an ambiguous [zweideutige] birth from all and from nothing: our *own* soul a mere appearance..⁴⁶⁹

In this passage we can recognize one of the central tenets of negative realism from *DH*: our own existence cannot be consciously cognized (without contradiction). Evidently, the image of our 'self' is what we use to shape everything, but even this self is changing in an ambiguous relationship with its contents (at once everything and nothing). We cannot have a full cognition of the workings of our self as such. We are, then, left with an *immediate* intuition of the self that can never become a determinate cognition:

And yet an *appearance* [Erscheinung] which nears the essence! Self-activity and life reveal themselves immediately in it. That is why pure feeling in *our* soul is the original image [Urbild] of all *being*. It is its pure sense, of all imaging [bildende] power, its pure drive, the heart of nature. In this way, the infinite fills a lively, seeing, regulating, *determining* spirit..⁴⁷⁰

⁴⁶⁹ *Werke*, Band 1, p.231.

⁴⁷⁰ *Werke*, Band 1, pp.231-232.

This is the first example of Jacobi giving a constitutive place to ‘pure feeling’. In *SB* and *DH*, the function of feeling remained undeveloped. Here, however, pure feeling is the receptivity of perceptions (we are filled by the infinite), and the human being also receives his essence through it, as an active (seeing, regulating, determining) being. The use of ‘revealing’ suggests that this is a given taking-to-be-true (perception) in the same way as in *DH* (see [p.67]). This is a characteristically Jacobian move: using something that is usually thought of as dark and irrational (feeling, in this case), affirming that it is dark from the perspective of conscious cognition (in line with his negative realism), and showing that we in fact need to affirm that this irrational thing is required if we want to have a consistent and applicable notion of rationality that resembles the way in which rationality is actually used. Jacobi naturally does not refer to some emotion, but specifically to one feeling that has something to offer: pure feeling. What we must learn from this for our purposes is that such a pure feeling, which is where Jacobi also locates the source of our ethical drive, cannot be conceived of through mediation, but can only be registered immediately, as a purely practical feeling. This purely practical feeling moreover, has no necessary relation to any determinate conception of our own individual identity. This identity, after all, can only be put forward on the basis of conscious reflection. Jacobi’s ethical drive must then be understood as bringing about a highly uncompromising ethics, which is, to a large degree, indifferent to our current thoughts and conceptions.

This is clearly a highly peculiar conception of ethics, but Jacobi explains how this ‘drive’ is supposed to function as follows:

The *object* [Gegenstand] of the unconditioned drive, which we call the *fundamental drive* [Grundtrieb], is immediately the *form* of the being [Wesen] whose drive or active [wirkende] ability it is. To preserve this form in existence, to express itself in him, is its unconditioned goal and the

principle of all self-determination in the creature
[Kreatur] [.]⁴⁷¹

Whereas the preface to *Allwill* highlighted the character of instinct as a separate process that ensures our continued existence, now that Jacobi has introduced drive as an example of immediate feeling which he describes as the central core of all human activity, more than any bodily or dispositional characteristic, it can even be called the *essential form of the human being*, since the drive overlaps to a much greater extent with the potential actions the human being might undertake than instinctual needs do. Needs and drive refer to one another,⁴⁷² but in this connection Jacobi also applies negative realism in his claim that we have no way of concluding that one stems from the other, since their ‘ground’ cannot be ‘uncovered’ [unerforschlich].⁴⁷³ Instead, Jacobi argues that need and drive have a ‘common beginning’.⁴⁷⁴

In comparison with Kant’s practical philosophy, Jacobi’s approach has some definite advantages.

Only the concerns of the drive, a certain coherence to *preserve*, *continue*, to *advance*, do we cognize and even then [only] as necessary; because an unknotted [unverknüpftes], a *finite* being that does not knot itself [verknüpfendes] (internally and externally) is a non-thing.⁴⁷⁵

Here we see Jacobi’s clearest application of negative realism to ethics. Since the drive is an immediate taking-to-be-true (which in this case becomes a taking-to-be-good),⁴⁷⁶ and in this sense is a

⁴⁷¹ *Werke*, Band 1, p.238.

⁴⁷² *Werke*, Band 1, p.258.

⁴⁷³ *Werke*, Band 1, p.258.

⁴⁷⁴ *Werke*, Band 1, p.259.

⁴⁷⁵ *Werke*, Band 1, pp.238-239.

⁴⁷⁶ That would be a ‘Gutnehmung’. Jacobi likely does not use ‘Wahrnehmung’ in the case of ethics because it does not primarily involve

form of pure feeling, we do not have direct access to it in consciousness, but only discern its concerns. This application of the conception of drive shows itself in our interests and concerns, which we find as a knitted relation between internality and externality.

Instinct, as the preservation of our existence, is now apparently integrated into the conception of drive, at least insofar as we have to assume drive and need as having a common beginning. Jacobi stresses that drive must not be understood as a blind striving for 'its own free actuality', because its essence is '*relation*' and it wants 'satisfaction'.⁴⁷⁷ To the degree that the drive is not blind it is applied to something. In this way, Jacobi emphasizes the relationality and application of the drive respectively. This is where ethics proper enters the account of the living being. To a certain degree, this is also the distinction between life in general and the rational being that strives towards truth and goodness in-itself.⁴⁷⁸ The rational being strives 'towards a complete life, a life oriented towards itself: it demands independence, autonomy, freedom!'⁴⁷⁹ Here, as ever, negative realism applies: though Jacobi opts for caution at this point, and adds the restriction: 'But in such a *dark, dark intuition* [Ahndung] only!' The striving towards autonomy and freedom does not necessarily overlap with the way in which we could conceptualize these ideas (concept versus the real activity).

Finally, Jacobi remarks that drive, despite striving to maintain our existence on a general level, is oriented towards eternity rather than towards death and finality.⁴⁸⁰ This remark belies another aspect of Jacobi's ethics: ultimately, the threat or fear of

an epistemic operation. Instead, he appears to rely on the inextricable effusion that 'Trieb' evokes.

⁴⁷⁷ *Werke*, Band 1, p.239.

⁴⁷⁸ *Werke*, Band 1, p.239.

⁴⁷⁹ *Werke*, Band 1, pp.239-40.

⁴⁸⁰ *Werke*, Band 1, p.240.

death cannot dissuade us from acting if we remain engaged in the higher activities of the drive, for instance, in an ethical conflict in which we risk our lives. Additionally, this means that there is, strictly speaking, no possible final goal and final satisfaction of the drive within our lifetime. The satisfaction that Jacobi previously tied to the drive thus cannot be the satisfaction consisting in the realization of a final goal, but can only be the satisfaction achieved *in or through* the application of the drive, that is, when the drive stand in relations with courses of action and achievable ends.

We will now turn towards the other texts in volume 1. *Zufällige Ergießungen eines einsamen Denkers in Briefen an vertraute Freunde*⁴⁸¹ is the second longest text after *AW* and serves the function of making some key philosophical points. It is likely included in this volume because it provides some important addenda to the theory of subjectivity outlined in *AW*. The text reiterates that ‘personal consciousness’ is a complex notion, due to our existence in time.⁴⁸² Since our personal consciousness is irremediably tied up with temporality, we cannot imagine a non-temporal life. Furthermore, Jacobi argues that this notion of personality is irrevocably tied to our existence as a rational being:

In so far as we generate this notion, we generate ourselves as a rational being *in the appearances*, while we hold on to it and perpetuate it, we retain ourselves as such.⁴⁸³

We have seen that the serial generation of our personal existence proceeds through the unity of self-consciousness. This interconnectedness of personal identity, rationality and temporal existence might seem confusing and unclear at first sight, but when we consider this interconnectedness as a sign of the knot at the basis of our subjective existence, we can understand how Jacobi’s

⁴⁸¹ Hereafter referred to as *ZE*.

⁴⁸² *Werke*, Band 1, p.277.

⁴⁸³ *Werke*, Band 1, p.277.

negative realism leads him to this conclusion. Our temporal existence, which results in the fact that the contents of our consciousness continuously change, causes us to generate a notion of personality that can contain these various contents and to posit a persistent self-identical entity throughout. We require this notion if we want to make plans and act accordingly.

This is where rationality comes in. Our rationality is tied to perceived appearances in the sense that it deals with perceptions in relation to which we can consider ourselves to be agents. What are we left with when we think of ourselves without particularity or individuality? It is not clear, but disregarding all things that distinguish us from other individuals, we can ask: What is the core framework that remains after this abstractive operation of ‘emptying’ [Ausleerung]?⁴⁸⁴ What remains after this emptying is precisely whatever personality *means*. Since it is this personal existence that allows us to consider ourselves, it stands to reason that every time we find ourselves able to reflect on ourselves, we notice that we *are already in possession of* a personality.

This reference to an ‘emptying out’ might seem surprising considering Jacobi’s criticism of nihilism. However, this is merely Jacobi’s way of showing the limits of our ability to conceive of something: emptying our tacit conceptions of ‘personhood’ from all associated temporal and sensible content, we find a sense of personality which is the fundamental *process* within which our theoretical and practical concerns are carried out without our even needing to take notice. It is then not necessary for existence, or perhaps, the activity of personality, that we discern personality *as* something inconceivable.

It remains difficult to find the correct way of formulating what Jacobi adheres to in this sense of realism. All regular ways of referring to existence are made impossible by making the

⁴⁸⁴ *Werke*, Band 1, p.276.

abstractive account of personality such a crucial carrier of our practical engagements. And Jacobi seems to be redefining existence here, or perhaps, the set of conditions necessary for discerning our existence by way of reference to certain necessary and undeniable processes. Even describing something as inconceivable, although it is clearly part of Jacobi's project to conceive of the inconceivable, combines epistemically positive and negative terms. Nonetheless it is the project of Jacobi's negative realism to draw attention to the inconceivable in this way. Personality functions whether we recognize it as a process or not. Nihilism, conversely, would be the position that concludes that anything that cannot be submitted to conscious cognition is not real. Nihilism would make the kind of personal existence that Jacobi refers to impossible, because it is impossible in the nihilistic position to recognize an existence that remains outside of our understanding. Since the nihilistic position can only use conscious cognition in order to draw up a plan for practical action, it essentially dismisses that which is supposed to make human beings into agents capable of initiating courses of action in the first place. And neither would the nihilist be able to recognize the strivings of the drive, because it cannot acknowledge the drive as an inconceivable source of action. The way in which Jacobi talks about 'emptying out', thereby drawing our attention to his plea of pure feeling, is akin to the way in which Kant refers to 'purity' (for instance, in the phrasing in 'pure reason'): the point is not to disregard the impurity of content but to attempt to follow an essential process so far as we can conceive of it.

At this point, Jacobi introduces the distinction between ourselves, as rational beings, and animals:

The merely animal consciousness also presupposes such a knotting. However, the animal does not raise itself to personality, that is, to reason, which is not merely developed from

sensibility [Sinnlichkeit], but something that stands out [Hervorthuendes] from sensibility.⁴⁸⁵

Jacobi does not attempt to explain reason as a special ability with which man is endowed but rather as the ability to distinguish personality from sensibility. Our personality is then a continuous process through which we stand out from sensibility. This also seems to imply a process through which reason is applied to sensibility. Apparently this process is personality, which is not directly presented in sensibility. Jacobi calls 'our *identity* and *personality*' the 'greatest certainty of our existence', and thus 'the fundamental truth of all other cognition'.⁴⁸⁶ In placing personality at the apex of our cognition, of our rationality and our ability to act in any complex, premeditated way, Jacobi places something that we can only relate to by emptying out all the contents of reflection at the core of human nature. It should be mentioned, moreover, that Jacobi does not introduce any fundamental orientation or directedness into human cognition.

Unbeknownst to us, personality introduces the distinction between our reflection and ourselves. Jacobi previously emphasized this point in both *DH* and in *Jacobi an Fichte*. This arrangement is highly significant for Jacobi's philosophical position, because it naturally opposes him to those who would define human nature substantively, and to any approaches to subjectivity that does not recognize the inconceivability of the personality at the core of our practical engagements. Both of these two approaches, the practical approach in denying the inconceivability of personality and the theoretical approach in treating human subjectivity substantively, lead to nihilism. As we shall soon see, Jacobi ascribes to personality a productive function within cognition that even goes beyond ensuring the unity of self-consciousness. Interestingly, this does not commit Jacobi to an inherent principle of distinguishing true from

⁴⁸⁵ *Werke*, Band 1, p.277.

⁴⁸⁶ *Werke*, Band 1, p.280.

false or illusory cognition, since all conscious cognitions are equally *our* consciousness as soon as we experience them and do not introduce the possibility of our becoming estranged from ourselves through them. This is the univocity of belief, that we discussed in chapter 1 [p.32], but now seen from the perspective of the inherence of belief in a unity of consciousness that is assured by personality.

In the last letter (and the last text) in volume 1, Jacobi emphasizes how important this idea is for him:

The annihilation of all cognition would at the same time be the annihilation of all life. I have no use for being without consciousness, without personality, without genuine *subsistence* and I would rather be, with Kant, the most miserable under the *naturis naturatis*, than a Spinozist *natura naturans*.⁴⁸⁷

It is significant that Jacobi sides with Kant against Spinoza in that he does not want to reduce the essence of our rationality to nature. It is possible to read Jacobi's view on personality as a development of Kant's reference to personality in the *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. The humanity formula of the categorical imperative is highly dependent on Kant's conception of personality, which he characterizes as that which 'raises mankind over itself'⁴⁸⁸, what 'connects [knüpft] him to the order of things'⁴⁸⁹, as that which is only thinkable by the understanding and at the same time has the whole of the sensible world 'under it', 'including the empirical determinable existence of man in time'.⁴⁹⁰ It is striking that Kant uses 'knüpft' here. The sense of being knotted or connected to the order of things by personality certainly seems very similar to

⁴⁸⁷ *Werke*, Band 1, p.403.

⁴⁸⁸ Kant, *AA* 5:86.

⁴⁸⁹ Kant, *AA* 5:86.

⁴⁹⁰ Kant, *AA* 5:86.

Jacobi's position. For Kant, then, personality works in much the same way as in Jacobi, although Kant does not tie it to self-consciousness, but only to freedom. Very few scholars recognize the importance of the notion of personality for Jacobi's philosophy, Sandkaulen and Jonkers⁴⁹¹ being notable exceptions.⁴⁹²

Volume 1 of the *Werke* puts forward Jacobi's views concerning the fundamental structure of the living being and how this relates to an ethical drive through self-consciousness and personality. The next volume will provide us with some insight into how Jacobi believes that freedom fits into his account, after which we can once again compare his view with Kant's notion of personality.

3. The second volume: the inseparability of freedom and reason

Turning to volume 2, we find a preface written specifically for this volume. However, it, and *DH* itself which is the main text in volume 2, deals with many epistemological issues that we have already discussed. Jacobi reiterates that *DH* was written in order to dispute the charge that he was 'an enemy of reason, a preacher of blind faith, someone who despises science and especially philosophy, an enthusiast or a Papist'.⁴⁹³ He does not deviate from the use of reason as the feature that distinguishes humanity from

⁴⁹¹ Jonkers, 'Das Absolute als Substanz oder persönlicher Geist', in *Hegel-Jahrbuch* 2015.

⁴⁹² Sandkaulen, 'Daß, was oder wer? Jacobi im Diskurs über Personen', in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: Ein Wendepunkt der geistigen Bildung der Zeit* (1998).

⁴⁹³ *Werke*, Band 2, p.4.

animality.⁴⁹⁴ What Jacobi does include in his account now is the notion of reason, which he did not start incorporating until 1789.⁴⁹⁵

Jacobi introduces the distinction between understanding and reason through a reference to ordinary language use: ‘never has someone spoken of an animal reason’.⁴⁹⁶ He does this to show that we have the understanding in common with animals (we can thus speak of an animal that “understands”), but that reason is a unique aspect of the human species. We have seen this notion of reason already in use in the previous volume, but now Jacobi intends to elaborate what reason does in a general sense as distinct from the understanding. He does this by introducing another distinction: that between the natural and the supernatural. The understanding only takes up [vernimmt] the sensible,⁴⁹⁷ and thus only deals with nature and the natural world. Reason, on the other hand, is the ‘Organ’ that ‘takes up the supersensible’⁴⁹⁸ (an organ lacking in animals). This introduction of a systematic distinction between the natural and the supernatural, in a way which does not disregard the natural, can also be read as Jacobi’s response to Reinhold’s labeling of him as a ‘supernaturalist’ (see [p.36]). In respecting the value of the natural, Jacobi does not conform to the views held by Schlosser with whom Reinhold had grouped Jacobi under this label. Jacobi further uses the metaphor of seeing in order to argue for the importance of both reason and understanding, which he likens to having two eyes.⁴⁹⁹ We cannot pretend that only one eye presents

⁴⁹⁴ *Werke*, Band 2, p.26.

⁴⁹⁵ Kladde I of the *Denkbücher* bears this out. We must then read the reference to ‘later writings’ that make a clear distinction between understanding and reason as writings after *DH. Werke*, Band 2, p.7.

⁴⁹⁶ *Werke*, Band 2, p.8.

⁴⁹⁷ *Werke*, Band 2, p.9.

⁴⁹⁸ It is significant that Jacobi here uses a modification of the verb ‘vernehmen’. Since it doesn’t necessarily concern an epistemic operation, he cannot use ‘wahrnehmen’, but it is very likely that he refers to a similar process here: an immediate taking into oneself of something from an unknown origin. *Werke*, Band 2, p.9.

⁴⁹⁹ *Werke*, Band 2, p.9.

the entire picture because then we would disregard what the other eye has to offer.

The way in which reason operates within us is difficult to grasp, since ‘consciousness of reason and its revelations are only *possible* in an *understanding*.’⁵⁰⁰ Reason is thus a revelatory organ, in the sense of taking-to-be-true in *DH* (in that sense it would also be correct to say that we only understand through reason, since it provides the perceptions that can be understood). Reason also reveals our personal existence and drive to us. Jacobi reformulates reason as a comprehensive organ of immediate givenness, which operates both epistemically and ethically. Jacobi recounts that he erroneously took the faculty of concepts and judgments for reason in *DH*.⁵⁰¹ Hence: ‘with consciousness, the living soul becomes a rational soul, a human being’.⁵⁰² A minimal condition of our existence as a rational being is thus that we are conscious (through the understanding) of the fact that we have a personal existence, are ethically driven and epistemically receptive to a givenness in perception. Notice that the inconceivability of the complete functioning of reason is a constitutive element of what it is to be a human being.

Drive has a special function in relation to nature: ‘There are drives in man, and there is a law in him, which unceasingly commands him *to prove himself mightier than the nature that surrounds and permeates him*’.⁵⁰³ We must draw two important lessons from this passage. First, there is an imperative in man to conquer nature. Secondly, nature is not just outside of us, but it also permeates us. We will soon return to this issue when Jacobi offers a clearer definition of nature. For the purposes of this section, we can conclude that reason is absolutely essential to conceiving of ourselves as free or determined.

⁵⁰⁰ *Werke*, Band 2, pp.9-10.

⁵⁰¹ *Werke*, Band 2, pp.10-11.

⁵⁰² *Werke*, Band 2, p.10.

⁵⁰³ *Werke*, Band 2, p.44.

A much shorter but very important text in the second volume of the *Werke* is *Ueber die Unzertrennlichkeit des Begriffes der Freiheit und Vorsehung von dem Begriffe der Vernunft*, which immediately follows *DH*. It primarily develops the connection between reason and freedom. Jacobi's definition of freedom is fairly straightforward:

By the word freedom I mean that ability of man through which he is himself [er selbst ist], solely acting in himself and outside of himself, [by which he] functions [wirkt] and produces.⁵⁰⁴

Freedom is conceived as a personal self-actualizing process, which is in line with the fact that Jacobi has previously argued that rational planning is solely possible by virtue of personality. He reiterates this connection here as well:

Insofar as he sees, feels and regards himself as a free being, he ascribes [schreibt zu] his personal characteristics, his science and art, his intellectual and moral character only to himself. He sees himself as an author [Urheber] in as far as he sees himself as the creator of these. And only in as far as he sees *himself*, *spirit*, *intelligence*, and not nature (from which he has sprung in a part of his being, in a necessary way and to which he belongs with this part and is intertwined [verflochten] in its general mechanism, is woven into [eingewebt] it) as the author and creator of these, he calls himself free.⁵⁰⁵

It seems that the price of conceiving of ourselves as free is the disconnection from nature, because we reflectively construe the natural mechanism as deterministic. This reference to 'general

⁵⁰⁴ *Werke*, Band 2, p.315.

⁵⁰⁵ *Werke*, Band 2, p.315.

mechanism'⁵⁰⁶ does not mean that Jacobi claims that reality is inherently deterministic, but rather that the only way we have of understanding experience ends up in reducing it to deterministic mechanism. In this regard Jacobi is largely in line with Kant's freedom-nature dualism. He is more adamant than Kant, in fact, in maintaining that we can only consider ourselves as free in so far as we recognize ourselves as the author of this thoroughgoing conceptualization. Jacobi is then not hostile to the workings of the understanding at all. On the contrary, he believes that our theoretical cognition is a necessary *precondition for practical action*, because it allows us to rationally disentangle ourselves from nature, and this act of reflection is a free act. Note Jacobi's use of 'verflochten' and 'eingewebt' in describing our belonging to nature. This evokes the same knotting that we pointed out earlier: we are knotted to nature in an inconceivable way, and the negative realism involved here forces us to recognize that we must acknowledge this knotting by reflecting on it, and that we thereby affirm that we are separate from it, not just in the I that reflects, but also in our ability to freely manipulate these natural mechanisms.

Although the dualism of freedom and determinism is also an essential component of Kant's philosophy, Jacobi only leaves room in this argumentation for recognizing *myself* as a free being. This raises the question of other moral agents, or rather: How do we recognize other minds as distinct from the mechanism of nature at all? In order to avoid the pitfall of losing any sense of moral action that anticipates the existence of other moral agents, which surely cannot be Jacobi's position,⁵⁰⁷ we should consider the implication: that, according to Jacobi, we ascribe freedom to others only when we conceive of *ourselves* as free. The previous volume

⁵⁰⁶ In *Werke*, Band 2, p.80, Jacobi specifies that the mechanism of nature is infinite in the sense that the understanding is unable to recognize an absolute first or last to the set of causalities under which we consider nature.

⁵⁰⁷ Cf. *Werke*, Band 2, pp.320-321, where Jacobi cites the need to respect and love mankind.

had shown that a human being is rendered non-free when reduced to merely sustaining his life. Consequently, this hypothetical person will not have a sense of his ethical drive, which will then not motivate his reflection to conceive of the natural world as one which can be manipulated by the free actor. Since there is no moral knowledge of freedom that we could use as a model for this ascription, we are necessitated to search for a solution that is generally considered to be idealist: there is no way to recognize other minds as such, but there is a tendency in the regular patterns of our cognition to assume that there are other such minds anyway.

This choice requires that our construal of moral agents principally utilizes our own personality as a model in order to distinguish persons from nature. Kant, for instance, does not address the problem of recognizing moral agents in the natural world at all. The problem is this: If persons are really ‘free and independent from the mechanism of nature’,⁵⁰⁸ how would we recognize them based on our conscious cognition of that nature? In arguing that man is partly determined by natural mechanism, might also argue that we can construe any free action that another moral actor might take as causally determined by this same natural mechanism. In fact, we have no way of *perceiving* a free act, neither our own, nor anyone else’s, in this view. Kant’s conception of personality is meant to be a general form that applies to all humanity and can only be part of the intelligible world.⁵⁰⁹ Doubtless the rigid distinction between the sensible world and the intelligible world is, in this case, meant to avoid using Kant’s philosophy in order to dehumanize certain individuals.⁵¹⁰ One might expect Jacobi’s reasoning to be vulnerable to exactly this problem, while also giving a more complete account of this recognition process. Kant appeals to the universality of the

⁵⁰⁸ Kant, Kant, *AA* 5:87.

⁵⁰⁹ Kant, Kant, *AA* 5:87.

⁵¹⁰ Although, Kant is quick to strip certain groups of people (like children and drunks) of their humanity in his non-critical writings.

intelligible world, which leaves him unable to apply a notion of personhood, beyond, perhaps, appealing to common-sense. Jacobi's solution can only be one that is based on the negative realism that he believes is involved in our conscious relationship to our personality. Any way of dealing with other minds that is not based on our own notion of personality would leave us unable to consider them as moral agents and would treat human beings as things in nature that we ultimately merely conceive of in an idealist fashion. We will return to this point because Jacobi ascribes to the cognition of others a constitutive role for any possible self-cognition.

The note that Jacobi added in the *Werke* version of this text⁵¹¹ is important, because it further develops what is included amongst the things of nature. Generally, when early modern philosophers discuss the role of mechanism in the natural world, they refer to physical objects in the world of extended objects. Jacobi, on the other hand, defines mechanism as that which 'necessarily follows the laws of causality in time' and adds that this includes *chemical, organic* and *psychological* processes. The new sciences chemistry, biology and psychology have shown Jacobi that the field of nature, of objects of potential reflection, has been greatly enlarged. That also means that there are more causal chains which freedom would have us be aware of and, through it, raise ourselves above.

Jacobi holds that, at least so far as our consciousness is concerned, reason and freedom are inseparably knotted together to such an extent that the deduction of one from the other cannot be legitimately brought about.⁵¹² This interconnection also means that we cannot fully understand freedom:

⁵¹¹ It was originally part of appendix 1 of *Jacobi an Fichte*, rather than appendix 2.

⁵¹² *Werke*, Band 2, pp.316-317.

This I will admit freely, that the territory of freedom is the territory of non-knowing.⁵¹³

Finally, one of only two letters that Jacobi added to this volume shows the direction that he does *not* want to take in his ethics: eudemonism, or the mere pursuit of happiness.⁵¹⁴ Since happiness is (in most conceptions) a goal that can be construed purely mechanistically, as the causal fulfillment of needs through external objects, it is not something that follows from the ethical drive, in Jacobi's view. We can now turn to volume 3, in which Jacobi provides an answer to the question of what place God has within his practical philosophy.

4. *The third volume: God and our personality*

The longest texts in volume 3 are *Jacobi an Fichte* and *Von den Göttlichen Dingen und ihrer Offenbarung*.⁵¹⁵ This volume primarily puts forward Jacobi's criticism of idealism, and it does not extensively elaborate on his ethical position. The concluding point of another important text in the volume, the *Abhandlung Über das Unternehmen des Kritizismus, die Vernunft zu Verstande zu bringen*, however, is highly significant for our purposes. The last part of the text was written by Friedrich Köppen, since Jacobi was too ill to finish it at the time, but we can be assured of its compliance with Jacobi's position by the fact that Köppen was a close and faithful disciple of Jacobi and because Jacobi chose to reproduce the text in this volume without changing this part. We can therefore safely attribute it to Jacobi insofar as it represents his philosophical position. This part of the text presents a criticism of Kant's practical philosophy, particularly of the way in which Kant formulates the moral law in a sharp distinction with inclinations

⁵¹³ *Werke*, Band 2, p.322.

⁵¹⁴ *Werke*, Band 2, pp.513-533.

⁵¹⁵ Hereafter referred to as *GD*.

and drives.⁵¹⁶ It puts forward the argument that Kantian morality, insofar as it is strictly a negation of inclinations and drives, is based on nothing. A coherent account of moral philosophy should spring naturally from an account of freedom and human action in Jacobi's view. We have seen that Jacobi's practical philosophy is concerned with exactly this account. In this text, he characterizes the vocation towards freedom as a feeling 'raised above nature'.⁵¹⁷ Here we once again find the drive towards the good as distinguished from the realm of understanding and reflection.⁵¹⁸ This drive is 'the divine in life, not the workings of cold, empty maxims'. Refusing to follow the Kantian approach invests Jacobi's ethics with a fairly non-committal worldview wherein it is difficult to prescribe rules of conduct that have a general validity in every possible situation.

If we try to imagine a positive course of action connected to following the ethical drive as an inner divine, we could say that one might be inclined to act according to divine qualities, which is why Jacobi in these contexts often refers to freedom and love, which are often considered divine qualities. We might even argue that freedom, in this sense, is an intellectual virtue, because freedom is, according to Jacobi, the ability to raise ourselves above mechanism through reflection. This would make love something that follows from freedom, since we then love the propensity for freedom and reflection in others because we recognize their inner divinity. But do we truly respect the other as a different person? That would be highly problematic for Jacobi's position, since differences are recognized only by the understanding (based on distinct identities). It follows from this that equality would be the

⁵¹⁶ *Werke*, Band 3, pp.186-195. For an analysis of Jacobi's criticism of Kant's moral philosophy see Crowe (2014). My own remarks on Kant are of a comparative nature in order to elucidate the novelty of Jacobi's practical philosophy.

⁵¹⁷ *Werke*, Band 3, pp.192-193.

⁵¹⁸ In Jacobi's unwillingness to oppose good to evil he differs from Leibniz and his contemporaries Kant and Schelling. In fact, in Jacobi's use, 'good' seems nothing other than the activity of drive.

sole concern of virtue although this means that we, in effect, are only able to respect the inner divinity in ourselves. Tolerance would, conversely, be an epistemic operation in which we are only able to accept our own freedom to reflect on the historical determination of the position of others.⁵¹⁹ Neither avenue admits of an ethical engagement on the level of an actual recognition, based on different distinct personalities.

We have seen that ‘God’ is introduced in our consciousness as the model of an omnipotent being, a being endowed with an absolutely free will. Additionally, we seem to have no legitimate critical tools that would allow us to distinguish between this idea of God and the self. This is why Jacobi emphasizes the ambiguity between the ideas of God and the self. This ambiguity is more than a mere application of negative realism. Jacobi argued for maintaining this idea of God as an independent being, while also arguing against attempts to externalize or depersonalize God. This importance of God as a ‘God with personality’ is in fact what Herder praised as an innovation that Jacobi introduced into the public debate (see [p.125]). This idea of God as a personality, as something that stands out against sensibility and retaining a special kind of individuality, is inseparable from our own way of considering ourselves as personalities that stand out over and against the contents of our reflection, over and against the way in which we construe the natural mechanism, inside or outside us. The operative use of this idea of God is thus that it provides us with a model of absolute freedom. We might speculate as to the ethical use that Jacobi believed could be made of this idea of God. If we momentarily lose our ability to consider ourselves as free, we still retain this idea of God, in its ambiguous relation with our sense of self, which might

⁵¹⁹ Jacobi conceived of tolerance as an intellectual operation to reconstruct the historical constitution of a person’s opinions. It stands to reason that this cannot become an ethical commitment, because in developing tolerance we are only reflecting on the mechanism of causality that formed opinions. *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 5.1, p.205.

provide us with an imperative to untangle ourselves from any assumption of causal determinacy. Another point of criticism with regard to Kant's practical philosophy in *GD* is that Kant still requires a transcendent realm of ends even though he has abolished the possibility of significant ends in the phenomenal world.⁵²⁰

In another text taken up in this volume, *Ueber eine Weissagung Lichtenbergs*, Jacobi claims:

With the creator the creation also necessarily disappears for man. Both destinies are inseparable in his mind [Geiste]. If God should become a specter [Gespenst] in his mind: then quickly so will nature, then consequently also his own mind.⁵²¹

This claim puts forward exactly the point of an ambiguous relation between the self and God in our mind, albeit cryptically. If we eliminate the idea of God as a personality, we eliminate our continuous reminder that we are free, and then we will forget that we can distance ourselves from any causal determination by way of reflection. Again as a consequence, the mind, as an integrative unity bringing together the theoretical and practical dimensions in man, will subsequently disappear as an entity that is separate from nature. The important distinction is that God and nature disappear *in the mind* first, and then the mind itself follows in disappearing. God and the mind are thus both interrelated and distinct, together forming the possibility of rationality. The reference to a specter, as the model of an intangible entity, had previously been used in *Jacobi an Fichte*. The fact that the mind itself could now become a specter shows how important the issues of applicability and of efficacy are

⁵²⁰ *Werke*, Band 3, pp.186-195.

⁵²¹ *Werke*, Band 3, pp.201-202.

for Jacobi's conception of rationality. The specter only half-lives its transient existence and is unable to affect its surroundings.

In a letter to Kant, which is included in this volume, Jacobi argues that our sense of original action, the freedom of the universal impressed upon the particular and the individual impressed upon the person, arises from 'the immediate intuition which the rational being has of itself in coherence [Zusammenhange] with the original being [Urwesen] and a dependent world'.⁵²² We can thus discern two principles required for ethical action:

- i) The principle of separation from the natural world (enabling freedom).
- ii) The principle of generative unity (active both in our subsuming individual distinctions in our personality and the determination of our actions in the world from universal to particular).

Both features are essential for making ethical action possible, according to Jacobi's argumentation. One of the main points made throughout this volume is the importance of the ambiguity between God and self as an insisting personality and the degree to which this makes practical action possible.

In terms of secondary literature on the relation between Kant and Jacobi in practical matters Stolzenberg and Crowe provide admirable explorations, but do not refer to the way in which Jacobi can be read as implicitly criticizing and further developing Kant's notion of personhood. As I've argued, the importance of this notion is the lynchpin of Jacobi's practical philosophy.

⁵²² *Werke*, Band 3, pp. 530-531.

5. *The fourth volume: practical awareness of God*

We have reached volume 4.1,⁵²³ which contains what is perhaps the most sustained account of Jacobi's ethical position, not so much in its central text, the first edition of *SB*, but rather in its new preface and the supplements to the second edition of *SB*. The preface to this volume effectively functions as a kind of final statement of Jacobi's position, since he passed away that same year in 1819. In this preface, he restates many of the points that we have previously discussed: the fact that the feeling that is taken to be the foundation of religion is reason, which allows us to distinguish ourselves from the sensible world,⁵²⁴ and the fact that having a self and having a personality are one and the same.⁵²⁵ Jacobi takes this moment to restate the seminal importance of the notion of personality:

Who does not accept personality in my sense, can
also not accept my philosophy.⁵²⁶

Jacobi repeats that there can be no reason without a person and that these notions are irrevocably tied together. He also takes steps to qualify the way his philosophy deals with the question of God, by pointing out what question we should ask concerning the idea of God:

That is why my philosophy asks: *who* is God; not:
what is he? Everything *what* belongs to nature.⁵²⁷

There is no reason other than in a person, in the
same way, while reason is, *God* is and is not just a
divine.⁵²⁸

⁵²³ Volumes 4.2 and 4.3 are collections of letters that were published after Jacobi's death.

⁵²⁴ *Werke*, Band 4, p.xxi.

⁵²⁵ *Werke*, Band 4, pp.xxi-xxii.

⁵²⁶ *Werke*, Band 4, p.xxiii.

⁵²⁷ *Werke*, Band 4, p.xxiv.

If reason can only exist in a person, and the world only in a rational author, all-mover, ruler [Regierer], this being must be a *personal* being. Such an entity only let itself be represented under the image of a human rationality and personality. To him must be attributed [beygemessen werden] the attributes, which I recognize as the highest in man: love, self-consciousness, understanding, free will.⁵²⁹

Reason is the ability through which we model a second personality, one that is raised above and thus not bound to nature.

The only recourse for moral appeal left to Jacobi seems to be the feeling inherent in the ethical drive, and this indeed seems to be his central argument:

We experience [erfahren] that there is a God as often as the conscience [Gewissen] reigns supreme in us, inalienably giving testimony of [bezeugend] the free personality. Through a divine life man becomes aware of [wird inne] God. In this way the road towards cognition of the supersensible is a practical, not a theoretical or a merely scientific road, and that is why Christ says 'I am the way, the truth and the life'.⁵³⁰

Jacobi ties the call of conscience to the freedom of our personality which, through the ethical drive, allows us to live a divine life: the life in which we try to embody divine qualities. It is in this that we become aware of God. Evidently, awareness of God is something different from the idea of God as being ambiguously tied to the self. The awareness of God is then construed as a self-actualization

⁵²⁸ *Werke*, Band 4, pp.xxiv-xxv.

⁵²⁹ *Werke*, Band 4, pp.xlv-xlvi.

⁵³⁰ *Werke*, Band 4, p.xxv.

structured by the requirement of maintaining freedom. Around this time, near the end of his career, Jacobi has started identifying his thinking with Christianity, because this particular form of religion is so vehemently opposed to any kind of deification of nature.⁵³¹ One might be inclined to read this as proof of the idea that Jacobi comes out in favor of religion over science. However, in the preface to this volume he opposes this reading, stating that he is only fundamentally opposed to the Aristotelian ideal of science, if it is understood as leading to a determined totality of cognition, because that results in a closed system (i.e. a system that conceives of ethics mechanically), not to science as such.⁵³² Jacobi prefers to preface the edifice of science (now referring to the general sense of the natural science of his contemporaries) with a science of non-knowing, which allows us to cognize that human knowing will always occurs ‘piecemeal’ [Stückwerk].⁵³³

Since ethics is tied to free action, Jacobi takes steps to protect human action from being reduced to causality. He argues that it will always remain inconceivable to the understanding how an act can posit itself.⁵³⁴ On this count, Jacobi is aware of the fact that the feeling to which he refers in the ethical drive is considered to be problematic by his contemporaries:

[W]hen I seek to answer before the tribunal of the schools with the doctrine of freedom, which is the foundation of my philosophy, the question of what I imagine to be the freedom which I assume in defiance of the understanding, admittedly in that way I assume that this is for me the only veritably real and dignified. [...] If I should now say that I imagine under this that which I necessarily presuppose, also probably must imagine it in the

⁵³¹ *Werke*, Band 4, p.xxv.

⁵³² *Werke*, Band 4, pp.xxx, xxxii.

⁵³³ *Werke*, Band 4, pp.xliii-xliv.

⁵³⁴ *Werke*, Band 4, p.xxxiii.

innermost part of my mind [des Gemüths], because when I admire, respect, love or honor someone because of a work or an act, then this does not suffice for them, and they claim that a grounding through feeling is no grounding at all.⁵³⁵

This illustrates the difference in methodology between Jacobi and many established philosophers. As we have seen, Jacobi has criticized all attempts at a thoroughly demonstrable foundationalism throughout his career. Negative realism commits itself to certain presuppositions, but only to fairly minimal and intuitive presuppositions supposed to facilitate the subjective processes that we are already engaged in. One of the claims that stretch our credibility to some degree in Jacobi's account is the ethical drive, because we see no direct proof for its existence. However, to the degree that Jacobi only connects the drive to concrete ethical practices with respect to which we cannot help but noticing we generally engage in these practices (respect, love, honor), Jacobi's position becomes somewhat more credible through this indirect proof. Then again, there is still the lurking objection that these practices might stem from the aforementioned chemical, psychological and biological tendencies, which persists because Jacobi has not thoroughly examined their natural determinations, at least not enough to discount this possibility.

At this point, we can ask some questions concerning the application of Jacobi's practical philosophy. In the above passage, Jacobi seems to connect loving or respecting another person with the principle of freedom. I have argued that, with respect to the perception of other persons, there is a problem in Kant's account of personhood. Kant likewise claims that the idea of personality 'arouses respect' and 'presents the superiority over our nature',⁵³⁶

⁵³⁵ *Werke*, Band 4, pp.xliv-xlv.

⁵³⁶ Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, AA 5:87.

but he does not see much of a problem in recognizing personality, since it is ‘natural and easily noticeable to the commonest human reason’.⁵³⁷ Be that as it may, this does not explain how we can connect a particular personhood that we recognize or assume to the natural object that we perceive (i.e. the person Mary versus the bundle of reflected conscious cognitions that we may want to attribute to this person). Jacobi’s approach might actually offer an explanation of how this ‘most common’ operation can occur, which consequently allows us to draw conclusions about its implications. It is not the case that we have a special ability to discern free persons (and hence ethical actors); we have seen that we do not even have criteria to resolve the ambiguity between the self and God, let alone meaningfully distinguish between our own personhood and someone else’s. Rather, we ascribe the sense in which we grasp our own personality to a specific subset of our own contents of reflection (such as, the body, past actions, etc.). To be sure, this process does not reach beyond a highly subjective construal, but it does show that we can be generous in the ascription of freedom. This approach might explain some of the processes behind the misrecognition of personhood (cases in which we think we are dealing with persons but later correct this assumption) showing that, while the notion of personality we ascribe is always strong and inalienable, the articulation of this personality can only occur through very subjective characteristics. A specific subset of characteristics might then lead to our ascription of personality (because it is, for instance, sufficiently similar to our own subset of characteristics) even though we might later retract it.

This places the standard of ethical action within ourselves: since we are attributing personhood, it is our own responsibility to act accordingly (and there does seem to be a valid way for someone else to dispute your ascription). If we understand this view as a criticism of Kant, Jacobi’s emphasis on personality and its

⁵³⁷ Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, AA 5:87.

ascription undermines Kant's moral philosophy, and perhaps it was meant to do just that. Our concern here is primarily to show the scope of Jacobi's practical philosophy, and from this perspective we can conclude that Jacobi even places the recognition of moral agents within our agency. Consequently, this means that the ethical relationship to others is in many ways indistinguishable from a self-relationship. This implies that Jacobi would promote divine qualities in others through practical action.

Animals, as beings without reason, but who exhibit an instinct towards maintaining their existence, might merit some consideration for Jacobi, although not the same that he awards to the human being. Apparently, a recognizable self-consciousness of their existence in others, as the basic principle of personality, produces an ethical interest in us, likely because it facilitates the ascription of our own idea of personality which helps us think of the entity under consideration as coherent, throughout its behavior in time.

Yet, the rest of the natural world: plants, inanimate matter, the heavenly bodies, etc., should then be of little interest to Jacobi's account of ethical action. This is not to say that these should be callously disregarded or thoughtlessly destroyed, but we must conclude from Jacobi's account that natural existence is subservient to those things that we can more easily construe as having personhood. One could conclude that it follows from this state of affairs that we are allowed to manipulate these existences for the sake of those entities that we can recognize as ethical actors. From a contemporary ethical perspective this is, of course, problematic because we would like to ascribe ethical value to things in our environment or to the environment as such. However, I would suggest that we can take this account as a fairly accurate depiction of how we still function today with regard to these environmental issues. Since Jacobi's time, it has taken us many years to realize that we cannot surreptitiously disregard or destroy the existence of natural objects, because these will ultimately impact our own

continued existence on a larger global scale (in terms of climate change, pollution, etc.). A Jacobian account of this problem might be that our reflection on the causality of the natural world can and has become more refined, to the point where we are (nearly) able to conceive of a correct course of action. This would not mean that we recognize natural objects ethically, but rather that we can feel an ethical drive to help preserve the existence of other human beings (whom we can construe as free rational agents) through the large-scale effects of natural objects and situations. Since this process involves ascriptions of personhood, ascriptions which are not a natural quality, of the physically present human beings, Jacobi's approach actually has the advantage that it could construe the existence of *future* generations of human beings as valuable of preserving.

I have put forward this problem in order to show the relative strength of Jacobi's practical philosophy. It provides a philosophical underpinning to human empathy, which suggests that ethical action could be directed beyond notions of actually present human beings. Additionally, with Jacobi's notion of personality, we need not connect personhood inextricably to legal status or citizenship in the kingdom of ends.

6. *The fifth volume: conclusions drawn from Woldemar*

Before drawing our final conclusions, we will briefly return to the issue of the recognition of other minds, for which we must turn towards Jacobi's second novel *Woldemar*⁵³⁸ in volume 5 of the *Werke*. Although volume 5 appeared after Jacobi's death and did not receive the editorial polish that the other volumes received, there is no reason to doubt that Jacobi intended to include *Woldemar* into the *Werke* in this volume. In this novel, Jacobi produces an account of our dealings with other minds that

⁵³⁸ Hereafter referred to as *WM*.

provides further insight into *our motivation* for recognizing other persons. Our social existence is necessary for our mental life because:

Man [...] is made in such a way that he feels himself more in others than in himself.⁵³⁹

Once more Woldemar said: 'Man feels himself more in others than in himself. We cannot be aware of our bodily appearance other than in another body that mirrors it before us. Our soul cannot perceive itself, other than through another mind [eines andern Geistes] which throws back its impression.'⁵⁴⁰

Apparently there is a special kind of activity that the interaction with others can make us conscious of. It is essential to realize that any conception of others is primarily motivated by the need to reflect upon ourselves, according to Jacobi.

Woldemar incorporates many remarks on the ethical drive which Jacobi in this text specifically connects to Aristotle's theory of virtue.⁵⁴¹ He remarks that the ethical drive is not only an essential requirement of ethical action, but also for rationality as such:

Where there is no drive towards virtue, or where it remains undeveloped, there can occur no ethical

⁵³⁹ *Werke*, Band 5, p.48.

⁵⁴⁰ *Werke*, Band 5, pp.49-50.

⁵⁴¹ 'No other philosopher than Aristotle has seen so deeply that human excellence, or virtue can only be derived from his drive, cannot be cognized in any other way than that in which we cognize our existence.', *Werke*, Band 5, p.76.

actions, neither good nor bad; there is sheer animality there.⁵⁴²

This point draws attention to the concerns I have raised with regard to the development of the virtue drive and the possible intrusion of chemical, biological and psychological mechanisms. Would it be possible for us to think that we are acting ethically while we are in fact totally determined by some biological process, in Jacobi's view? Some aspects of Jacobi's theory are on the cusp of becoming a progressive, non-prescriptive, individualist ethics, while other aspects remain as undeveloped as they were in some of his contemporaries. There seems to be an affirming and emancipatory doctrine in the fact that the virtue drive, as the highest form of the ethical drive, is available to all human beings. In addition to this, it provides an ethical underpinning to the rational need to interrogate the ways in which we might be causally determined. Both of these aspects necessitate *freedom from* as a continuous striving, in Jacobi's ethics. From this striving follows the task to retain our ability to freely act through a reflection on this causality, the task to retain our *freedom pur sang*.

There is an uneasy relation between these two sides of freedom, which Jacobi acknowledges by referring to freedom as both the *root* and the *fruit* of virtue.⁵⁴³ This further attests to the fact that Jacobi's philosophy is completely committed to the application of rationality to human action, which is the ultimate standard for the success of Jacobi's position. One such application is friendship:

I am wherever I strive! *There*, where I can assert:
who believes in *friendship*, necessarily also believes
in *virtue*, in a capacity for the *divine* in man, and
that whoever does *not* believe in such a facility or

⁵⁴² *Werke*, Band 5, p.76.

⁵⁴³ *Werke*, Band 5, p.447.

in virtue, it is impossible to believe in true genuine friendship.⁵⁴⁴

This is the same kind of evidence or indirect proof that Jacobi often uses: a proof that shows that what he is arguing for is, in actu, already presupposed in our present life.

Jacobi also offers a further clarification of the priority of drive over mere animal inclinations:

The opposite of this brutality consists of a higher desire [Verlangen], *which subjugates* [unterwürfe] *all animal desires* [Begierden] and, in its completion, raises mankind up to the freedom of gods.⁵⁴⁵

Whereas the part of the drive that is considered to be lower is associated with our animal nature (that is concerned with sustaining our existence), Jacobi believes that a higher form of the drive (warranting 'Verlangen', higher ethical drive, instead of 'Begierden', lower animal needs) is capable of subjugating all animal desires. The use of 'subjugation' indicates that animal desires are conceivable as causal chains from which we are free as self-conscious individuals. We should then conclude that the ethical drive is opposed to needs or inclinations, but in a profoundly different way from Kant's opposition between inclinations and the moral law. Rather than turn away from our inclinations in moral indignation, Jacobi's practical philosophy would have us study our animal needs in close detail, in order to understand just how they compromise our will.

It is this epistemic operation that makes the emancipation (the 'raising up' in this passage) of the ethical drive possible. The 'completion' of the higher desire then refers to the way in which the ethical drive comprehensively 'subjugates' the causal

⁵⁴⁴ *Werke*, Band 5, p.444.

⁵⁴⁵ *Werke*, Band 5, pp.76-77.

determinations of needs to higher desire. The ultimate aim of this procedure is that no need can influence the initial determination of our pure will. It also means that, strictly speaking, the threat of death will not influence truly ethical action. The main purpose of animal needs is, as Jacobi argued, instinct, the persistence of our existence:

The animal strives towards food, since it knows that it satiates and that the satisfaction [Stillung] of hunger is knotted with a lust, the sign of the achieved goal. *Man* feels himself driven [angetrieben] towards acts of benevolence, justice and generosity, without any other intention than the satisfaction of this drive. And so decisively is this drive the *foundational drive* [Grundtrieb] of human nature, that the human being does not only feel his highest pleasure in the satisfaction [Befriedigung] of it, but also so resolutely feels the determination of his existence [Daseins], that he does not deign to call those who love their lives more than this passion [Lust] a *man*.⁵⁴⁶

Apparently the possibility of raising ourselves above animal needs lies in the fact that we can understand the need as essentially occupied with the goal of the continued existence of the organism.

One of the stylistic markers for the difference in these operations of the animal and the human being can be found in the fact that Jacobi again uses different words for the satisfaction of instinct and drive: 'Stillung' versus 'Befriedigung' respectively. The key distinction between 'Stillung' and 'Befriedigung'⁵⁴⁷ is that the ethical drive can flatly contradict the satisfaction of instinct, since it is only concerned with ethics without a continuous concern for our

⁵⁴⁶ *Werke*, Band 5, pp.79-80.

⁵⁴⁷ There is no English translation that immediately makes the operative distinction between these terms evident.

own continued existence. We derive pleasure from acting according to the ethical drive, but there is no discernible goal involved, which means that ethical action does not come to an end, as the satisfaction of a need does. The ethical drive in this way involves a negative realism, in that epistemic operations cannot provide us with conditions for completing the action that the drive would have us engage in. There is no way to prove that the ethical drive is without a goal, but we find ourselves incapable of discerning one. In a strange way, the ethical drive is the only thing *from which* we are not free.

What does this mean for our everyday lives, in Jacobi's view? It means that a prescriptive ethics can only develop an understanding of our inclinations (and is in a way a negative ethics), and that the ethical actions that follow from the drive can only be anticipated *as an unexpected event*, since the ethical drive is not directly accessible to our reflection:

Something originary that is hidden deep in our soul tells us that we are divine nature. It proclaims [verkündigt] a drive to us of uncreated [unerzeugter] nature in us, that transforms the perishable into the imperishable, it imparts the nature of the eternal to the temporal, and strives to give autonomy to the dependent. It is a drive that much sooner devises reason than that it can be devised through reason.⁵⁴⁸

We must examine the ways in which our limited knowledge about causal determinations affects our potential for ethical action. As previously mentioned, Jacobi includes chemical, biological and psychological mechanisms as things we need to thoroughly reflect on if we want to be able to act freely. It is possible that this addition might lead his practical philosophy in the same direction

⁵⁴⁸ *Werke*, Band 5, pp.124-125.

as Kant's. In Kant's moral philosophy we are never sure that we are, will or have ever acted morally, since there is simply no way in which we might attain knowledge about the actual motivating forces bringing about an action. Jacobi's practical philosophy appears to take pride in being an apt description of ethical behavior that we are already exhibiting (for instance, in our friendships). Ostensibly, this seems to be a great advantage over Kant's position. However, true ethical action in Jacobi's sense becomes rarer if we consider the amount of knowledge that would later be accumulated through the scientific study of the human being (particularly in the advances in psychology, neuroscience, and biology). Even if we only consider psychology, there might be many ways in which we are causally determined, which then leave us less ways of identifying and grasping ourselves. We might then question in what way Jacobi meant the task of a thorough reflection on the ways in which our actions are causally determined. Do we really have to understand all the ways in which we are causally determined? Or should we simply reflect the best that we are able, in which case it is the striving towards thorough reflection that confronts us with the inalienable freedom of our personality? But in this case, would there not still be a problem if we seek to act based on the knowledge that we have? The inability to examine some psychological determinations would then not undermine the foundation of ethical action because the striving towards a thorough reflection is then enough to confront us with our freedom.

For one, there is already an account of the limits of cognition built into Jacobi's account in the form of his negative realism. This means that, at the very least, we cannot fully discern how existences have a causal relation to us. It is then unlikely that Jacobi would require us to fully submit every possible causal relation to reflection, but that the task of making ethical action possible must specifically be located in the scope of what our cognition can grasp: nature as mechanism. Even in this scope, the

task does not seem to require exhaustiveness, but rather that we do not shrink back from something that can be understood as a mechanism. For instance, it is plausible that Jacobi would require us to at least reflect on the degree to which our actions could be determined by our needs.

On the other hand, I would argue that these restrictions to thorough reflection could subtly delineate the scope of action that is at our disposal. One might be tempted to take unnoticed and therefore unreflected causalities, which are actually chemical, biological and psychological mechanisms for hard *limitations* of human action, which severely fictionalizes the ultimate scope of practical philosophy. For instance, if we are not aware of a certain psychological causal mechanism within us, we might never be able to construe an ethical act able to run counter to this mechanism. Since philosophy, in the realist account, is limited to what it has access to reflectively, Jacobi should guard himself against the reference to incomprehensibility as an excuse to not have to think through the hard problems relating to these kinds of inclinations. Jacobi seems to have somewhat understood this problem, as can be seen from this passage from a letter that was added to volume 1 of the *Werke*:

A complete doctrine [Lehre] of our desires [Begierden] (the word desires taken in its broadest sense), would at the same time be the best moral, and every true moral is nothing more or less than a doctrine of desire. This doctrine, when it does not leave the understanding the least of doubt, would nevertheless not yield a theory of happiness that actually works for one and all men.⁵⁴⁹

This is a surprising admission for Jacobi, because, whereas he opposes the Aristotelian ideal of complete systems at the

⁵⁴⁹ *Werke*, Band 1, p.355.

theoretical level, he is advocating a similar theoretical edifice as important for ethical action. A doctrine of desires would not involve a comprehensive claim about natural determinations, and this is exactly why it does not yield practical knowledge in terms of a theory of happiness: it is only a precondition for freedom. As we have seen, the highest happiness can only result from action and not from ends.

8. Conclusion

Jacobi's position is often judged based on the criteria of the positions that he criticizes (an example: Allison judging Jacobi according to Kant's criteria, as discussed in chapter 2 [p.43]). If we consider Jacobi according to the criteria and concerns of his own position, a very different picture emerges. By taking the constraints of Jacobi's negative realism into account, and reconstructing the way in which the *Werke* introduce Jacobi's practical philosophy, I have shown that Jacobi adheres to an ethics that tries to be as minimally prescriptive as possible. In certain respects, Jacobi's notion of the ethical drive is indebted to Aristotle, but also sharply breaks with Aristotle through its rejection of *eudaimonia* as a highest happiness. Further comparative research on the differences between Jacobi's practical philosophy and Aristotle's and Kant's practical philosophy should be undertaken. For our purposes, it suffices at this point to show what kind of a practical position follows from Jacobi's realism. This exposition of Jacobi's practical philosophy contributes to a better understanding of Jacobi's realism, because it shows how the approach to our epistemic claims as oriented towards the application of rationality and human action follows from negative realism. Lacking a direct way of taking recourse in or proving some of the most foundational aspects of ourselves (most notably of which is the "self" itself) places the emphasis on the human actions that we are already engaged. It also shows most emphatically that Jacobi's realism is not a skepticism,

because it is committed to an ethical drive in man which, despite the fact that we cannot directly understand it, makes it possible for the human being to cultivate divine and benign qualities.

The most obvious reason for retaining this possibility is because the ethical drive first and foremost appeals to our intellectual abilities: we must reflect on the ways in which we are causally determined in order to realize that for all this determinacy we are all the more free because we are able to reflect on these determinacies and are therefore able to counteract them. Such an ethics would not have been possible without Jacobi's negative realism, because we are, in his view, unable to fully grasp the self. This self that stands out, even out of reflection, but which we deem to be our essential existence, leaves room for freedom despite possible causal determinacy. Conversely, there is also a way in which Jacobi's negative realism would not be possible without his emphasis on practical philosophy, because we first realize the relationality of our epistemic claims when we attempt to find a correct course of action. The two positions are thus inextricably linked.

The symmetry of the beginning and the ending of the *Werke*, in being bracketed by Jacobi's two novels, reflects Jacobi's idea that a philosophical position (and, more generally, any commitment that a human being may take) can only emerge out of a living position (which was an important conclusion of *SB*, see [p.33]) in the sense of being phenomenologically rich, involving reason and feeling and being applied to real-world situations. From this perspective, the presumed autobiographical character of these novels supports and legitimates the systematicity of the other texts. The volumes of the *Werke* that Jacobi edited embody this idea by starting with *Allwill*, which presents life without ethical commitment, and ending with *Woldemar*, which presents the ethical life in the fullness of application.

What is remarkable about Jacobi's ethics is that it is an ethics of *the unexpected* in the sense that it is first and foremost oriented towards ethical action that is not essentially determined by pre-existing causal determinations. The word *Trieb*, which Jacobi introduced into the philosophical discourse (in this terminological innovation predating Fichte) expresses a similar idea: unexpected effusion. Although Jacobi places a large emphasis on understanding the natural causality in relation to which we should and have to act, what we can say about the ethical drive is that it remains severely restricted in that there are no predetermined values to live by.

If we look at the examples of ethical action that Jacobi does present, such as, love and respect, we can observe that these uphold the unexpectedness of the ethical drive, because Jacobi does not offer a unifying framework that gives us any indication of how qualities like love and respect should be expressed in concrete sets of behavior. Unlike Kant, who offers a formal definition of personhood as something that we should respect, but refers to common-sense in terms of its application, Jacobi leaves room for thoroughly unexpected and unprecedented forms and cases of love and respect, cases which might evoke different actions based on the context in which we find them. It is possible that Jacobi was influenced by the Greco-Christian notion of *agápē*, as a kind of universal love that knows no boundaries. This notion of love is often construed as originating from God (hence John 4:8: 'God is love'). In Jacobi's sense, based on the ambiguity between the self and God and the distinction between immediacy and mediacy, this opens up the possibility of an ethics of loving, based on one's own personality, and without any special religious contexts such as rituals or doctrines. There are no clear indications that Jacobi is drawing on this tradition, but the presentation of his ethical drive as an unexpected immediate sympathy, which operates beyond the usual conceptual distinction between the self and another human being, certainly seems highly similar to aspects of this tradition.

There is also an aspect that is completely Jacobi's own, namely, the ability to conceive of our causal determinacy and the way in which the world mechanically operates. Jacobi intends our reflection on this to lead to an improved ability to act according to our ethical drive. It is essential to realize that many aspects of Jacobi's epistemological position, as it was put forward in chapter 2, are important for the functioning of his practical philosophy. For instance, the relationality between externally and internally perceived nature, and the epistemic importance of making relationality as distinct as possible, helps us to understand how our internal nature might relate to external nature, for instance, in the case of biological mechanisms. In addition to this, Jacobi's negative realism led him to the comprehensive notion of reason that is prominently argued for in the preface to volume 2 of the *Werke*.

Ultimately, Jacobi offers a notion of rationality that operates as a dynamic whole, of which conscious cognition is an important part, but only a part. Especially the incorporation of the ethical drive shows that conscious cognition is mainly oriented towards action, which makes rationality into a strongly functional concept in the sense that it does not have an essence on its own, but is defined by specific operations within human action. This account presents rationality as something that is not wholly transparent to itself in terms of its functioning (since not every aspect of its functioning, especially the immediate operations, can enter conscious cognition), but can work exactly because of these limitations to conscious cognition. In other words, maintaining a negative realism safeguards the functioning of rationality.

One of the most admirable features of Jacobi's approach to ethics is that he does not exclude anything from being discussed out of hand. In Jacobi's view, philosophy can potentially understand anything, from the formation of opinions to the underpinnings of the idea of God. As such, it is only limited negatively: it should not produce explanations that undermine the human activity that makes it possible. This conception of

philosophy bears a striking resemblance to Jacobi's definition of life as a self-sustaining principle. It was likely his tacit use of this conception of philosophy that inspired the proliferation of reconceptualizations of philosophy in the wake of Jacobi's realism, in Krug (as 'beschreiben'), Fichte (as 'Nachkonstruction'), which we will examine in the next chapter.

Wallace described all these moments of hesitation to me with the utmost particularity. He went right past the door, and then, with his hands in his pockets, and making an infantile attempt to whistle, strolled right along beyond the end of the wall. There he recalls a number of mean, dirty shops, and particularly that of a plumber and decorator, with a dusty disorder of earthenware pipes, sheet lead ball taps, pattern books of wall paper, and tins of enamel. He stood pretending to examine these things, and coveting, passionately desiring the green door.

— H.G. Wells, *The Door in the Wall*

5. The Limits of Philosophy

5.1 Fichte's response to Realism in the 1804-1805 Berlin lectures

Fichte gave one of the most sustained and direct idealist responses to the realists. This specific response has not received any extended attention in the secondary literature, so it will serve as a case study, exploring the limits of the realist approach and the degree to which some of the core realist arguments can still be incorporated into an overtly idealist account. In order to do this, we will look at Fichte's Berlin presentations in 1804-5, specifically the notion of *Nachkonstruktion*, which is designed to stand opposite an original construction (of consciousness or experience) and allows a way of thinking about the proper scope of philosophy's activity when one assumes out of hand that it cannot gain access to a putative original construction (and is then, strictly speaking, only an *after-construction*).

Shortly after Fichte moved to Berlin, two of his former students, Joseph Rückert and Friedrich Köppen, publicly allied themselves with realism. Realism in general stood in a complex relationship with Fichte, who as early as the mid-1790's believed that his own project was of an inextricably similar nature.⁵⁵⁰ Also, as early as the *Grundlage*, Fichte argued that his system was a synthesis between both positions, as a 'Real-idealism.'⁵⁵¹ Despite the bad blood that Jacobi's contribution to the *Atheismusstreit* ultimately created between them, the fact that former students of Fichte like Rückert and Köppen could become convinced of the

⁵⁵⁰ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe III, Band 2, p.391. See letter from August 30th 1795, where Fichte also explicitly recognizes Jacobi as a 'known realist' in *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi's auserlesener Briefwechsel*, Band II, p.207-211.

⁵⁵¹ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe I, Band 2, p.412. For an examination of this relationship in Fichte's work, see Pluder (2012).

realist cause, shows that the transition from Jacobian realism to a Fichtian idealism, which was perhaps arguably also Fichte's own trajectory,⁵⁵² might also work the other way round, suggesting that the one position is not necessarily an improvement on the other. Obviously, this created problems for Fichte, who seems to have felt the need to respond publically. He did not opt for the type of authoritarian vitriol that one might expect from a teacher who is forsaken by his students, perhaps due to the fact that Rückert had become a friend⁵⁵³ and due to Köppen's close personal relationship with Jacobi, who had become his new mentor.

Whether it was because of these or other reasons, Fichte opted for a relatively open, almost vulnerable, engagement with realism as such, not only in terms of its position but also by adopting and incorporating many of its core concepts and concerns.⁵⁵⁴ The result is most apparent in the last two presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* (out of three) from 1804 and in Fichte's 1805's *Die Principien der Gottes- Sitten- und Rechtslehre*. Fichte's short-lived return to the life of a university teacher, later that year at the university of Erlangen seems to be a return to a traditional presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and is therefore of much less interest for our present purposes. The private nature of the Berlin lectures allowed Fichte to utilize them as a kind of conceptual laboratory which in turn allowed him to assess the value of the highly complex developments of philosophy around 1800 and at times even forced him to critically engage with his own previous presentations of his project. One of the many ways in which this becomes apparent is the fact that Fichte no longer

⁵⁵² See Di Giovanni, 'The Early Fichte as Disciple of Jacobi' in *Fichte-Studien* 9 (1997), pp.257-273.

⁵⁵³ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe III, Band 5, p.146.

⁵⁵⁴ One could also say that he *intensified* his incorporation of realist concepts, since concepts like belief [Glaube] and drive [Trieb] had been part of his presentation since his early Jena years. See the Kreuzer review and *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre, Bestimmung des Gelehrten* respectively.

explicitly allied himself with Kant's project. This means that he no longer had to strike a favorable cord with self-avowed Kantians, but even more importantly, that he need no longer be tacitly bound to the methodological restrictions expected of bona fide "Kantian" projects.

Overall, by highlighting some of the problems and concepts in these texts, I will attempt to show that when we consider the 1804-5 period as one in which Fichte formulated his response to the realist project there are *two programmatic concerns* involved. First of all, this response cannot involve a superficial or wholesale refusal of Jacobian realism, as he had sometimes done during the Jena period, because it had become evident that there is much more than a passing resemblance between their respective positions. Not only had Fichte himself privately claimed this in his letters to Jacobi,⁵⁵⁵ but it had also been pointed out to a certain degree by Jacobi himself, in his contribution to the *Atheismusstreit*.⁵⁵⁶ Furthermore, the possibility of a synthesis between the two projects had been suggested by Reinhold (in 1799)⁵⁵⁷ and Rückert (in 1801).⁵⁵⁸

It was also during this period that Fichte had personal discussions with Jean Paul Richter. Jacobi considered Jean Paul (which was his penname) to be one of only a handful of people that understood the realist position the best. Despite Jean Paul having published a critical literary-philosophical analysis of Fichte's position in 1800,⁵⁵⁹ the two were apparently on friendly terms. Evidently, Fichte believed that he could not deny the similarity

⁵⁵⁵ For instance, this is the topic of Fichte's first letter to Jacobi in 1795 (cited above).

⁵⁵⁶ *Jacobi an Fichte* (1799).

⁵⁵⁷ See *Ueber die Paradoxien der neuesten Philosophie and Sendschreiben an J. C. Lavater und J. G. Fichte über den Glauben an Gott*.

⁵⁵⁸ See *Der Realismus, oder, Grundsätze zu einer durchaus praktischen Philosophie*.

⁵⁵⁹ See *Clavis Fichtiana*. Jean Paul's father-in-law was also present during at least one of these lecture series.

between the two positions any longer. The format of these presentations, as a private lecture open only to a select group of notables, likely meant that he could afford himself a bit more freedom in conception and expression than he could in publications or lectures at a university (especially following the *Atheismusstreit*). These lectures are therefore littered with references and allusions to realist publications. Secondly, since Fichte had to present a substantial response directed at ultimately explaining the way in which he believes his own position advanced upon the realist program, he became concerned with presenting the core concerns of the realist project faithfully, and wrote to Jacobi to ask whether what he took to be the core philosophical problem in Köppen's book, *Schellings Lehre oder das Ganze der Philosophie des absoluten Nichts*, accurately presented the core project of realism.

It is worth noting how both Rückert's and Köppen's books were linked to Schelling. As we've seen, Köppen's book represents a key moment in the realist criticism of nihilism by shifting the locus of criticism away from Fichte towards Schelling. Rückert's book was one of many realist publications that were reviewed in Hegel and Schelling's *Kritischen Journal*. The way in which Fichte systematically moved closer to the realists at this point can then additionally be understood as part of his break with Schelling. However, Fichte's adoption of realist themes and concepts does not, as I will show, ultimately aim solely at criticizing Schelling's position. Rather, Fichte attempts to answer questions concerning the aims and methodology of philosophy as such. The confrontation with realism forced Fichte to think about what was special about philosophy as a particular sort of discipline. On the one hand, this problem was becoming more pressing, because the sciences were increasingly becoming more specialized, making it very difficult for philosophy to function as a systematic ordering of all knowledge as a single unity. Such a task for philosophy was taken up by Leibniz and even Kant, who still had the luxury to be scientists and philosophers without having to make a significant

distinction between the two disciplinary activities. Fichte had explicitly supported the Kantian approach in his *Begriff-Schrift*, which might have been the source of Jacobi's ire. In actual fact, Fichte was uninterested in being a mere collator of scientific results, which is perhaps most apparent in his clash with Carl Christian Erhard Schmid.⁵⁶⁰ The criticism delivered by the realists forced Fichte to do something that was actually, historically speaking, a rather cutting-edge development: to explicitly *define philosophy as distinct from other scientific disciplines*. That is to say, Fichte began thinking in metaphilosophical terms about what were in important respects the features that made philosophy a discipline distinct from other disciplines.

2. Rückert and Fichte in amiable dispute

Rückert and Köppen both adhere to the realist dictum that it is impossible to demonstrate, conceive or grasp reality or existence as such. This dictum refers back to the fact that, in the realist's view, our experience is something that is an immediate result of something external to our cognitive apparatus.⁵⁶¹ Rückert expresses this point in the following way: there is an 'ordinary absolute synthesis between the I and an unknown = X', which can only be assumed from the practical standpoint. This reference to an act, in which we find ourselves already assuming that the cognition and the object of the cognition have come together in an absolute or pure I had been a key feature of Fichte's position, but it holds a similar prominence for Jacobi who, at least since the 1780's, argued that personality is the central feature of our theoretical engagement with the world, which is itself not knowable as such. His way of

⁵⁶⁰ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe I, Band 3, pp.229-271.

⁵⁶¹ Rückert makes this point in a letter to Fichte in J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe III, Band 5, p.146. Köppen argues that being is non-constructable and inconceivable in *Schellings Lehre oder das Ganze der Philosophie des absoluten Nichts* (1803) p.21.

showing this variously draws on activity, a feeling of selfhood, etc.⁵⁶² Here we find the first similarity between Fichte and Jacobi.

Rückert wrote to Fichte in 1802 that he believed the scope of the philosopher's practice is restricted to the theoretical, which means that philosophical method could not in principle move beyond the procedure of dissolving objectivity into 'I-ness' [Ichheit]. Rückert's suggestion echoes Jacobi's open letter to Fichte, specifically the passage about the knitted sock as a simile for the idealist method. However, the fact that Rückert believes this to be the *only* method of philosophy probably suggests that he did not know Jacobi personally, since Jacobi did not hesitate, at many points in his career, to describe his *own* position as a form of philosophy. Rückert's conflation of the idealist method with philosophy as such likely stems from a passage in the open letter, where Jacobi compares Fichte's philosophy with his own 'unphilosophy'.

I believe that this is actually Jacobi's playful allusion to the fact that Fichte often equates the *Wissenschaftslehre* with philosophy proper, thereby forcing anyone who does not accept the *Wissenschaftslehre* into the field of 'unphilosophy'. The philosophical contribution of Jacobi's own philosophy is, then, a criticism of the limits of traditional philosophy, of the ways in which it cannot know things, even though it might seem or suppose that it can. Jacobi considered his own realist position to be philosophical, however. And since he believed that his own position was not limited only to the theoretical, to the field of knowledge, Jacobi could not believe that the philosophical method was limited exclusively to theoretical reason in the way suggested by Rückert. Rückert should then be considered as on the outer periphery of the group of realists around 1800. Rückert is, in terms of allegiance, at

⁵⁶² One of the clearest expositions of this point can be found in the introduction to the second edition of *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (1789).

a mid-way point between Jacobi, whom he characterizes as ‘the only one among his brethren in the empty darkness of the times’⁵⁶³ who remains on solid ground, and Fichte, whose ‘true, pure spirit is the content of this writing’.⁵⁶⁴

Naturally, Fichte did not agree with Rückert’s suggestion that philosophy was a wholly theoretical affair. He had already addressed this point in 1800,⁵⁶⁵ and chose not to take up this point in his response to Rückert. Instead, Fichte focuses on one key problem, as a ‘hint’ [Wink] for what he believes should be the further development of Rückert’s thought.⁵⁶⁶ In saying that reality can only be grasped practically, Rückert had claimed that the practical grasping is possible in ‘experience’ [Erfahrung] as opposed to the theoretical scope of demonstration. Fichte objects:

This is completely true when we speak of particular reality. But what is reality of itself? Nothing, thoroughly nothing, other than the limits of free construction; and a particular is, without a doubt, not posited without a general. So, the other way around, we can just as well say: no reality can be (philosophically) experienced, but all reality must be a priori demonstrated and constructed. Both propositions are therefore one-sided, and only in the unification of both can the truth be found.

In essence, this frames the problem of reality in terms of two positions: on the one hand, a *naïve realism* that claims that reality is grasped in experience, but cannot be grasped philosophically, and

⁵⁶³ See *Der Realismus, oder, Grundsätze zu einer durchaus praktischen Philosophie* (1801), p.44.

⁵⁶⁴ p.49.

⁵⁶⁵ For instance, in the claim that his God is not thoroughly conceptual in *Aus Einem Privatschreiben* (1800). See *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe I, Band 6, p.373.

⁵⁶⁶ *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe III, Band 5, p.148.

on the other hand a *naïve idealism* that claims that only the demonstrable can be real in the proper sense, because we cannot conceive of a particular thing as real without employing the *concept* of reality. It is telling that Fichte frames the problem in this way, because it places the locus of the problem of reality in the construction of human experience. In this way, Fichte is following Jacobi who rejected the idealist claim that conceptual content alone is sufficient for explaining experience in his *DH*, but also recognizes that we have, consequently, reason to suspect that the intuition that the things we experience are real in a sense separate from our cognitive apparatus.⁵⁶⁷ Fichte's criticism of Rückert is, then, that in not making clear in what way experience relates to reality, he gives the impression of being a naïve realist, who believes that he grasps "real" things directly. Fichte succinctly remarks that the opposed claim would be to state that our understanding of experience is already theoretically predetermined. However, he concludes that the truth lies in bringing these two positions together.

The way Fichte concludes his 'hint' to Rückert is highly significant. In response to Rückert's claim⁵⁶⁸ that Fichte's philosophy can only deal with determinacy, that is, only with things that can be thoroughly known, Fichte responds:

‘My X (in A+X) must, going forward, become a known.’ [Fichte is citing Rückert here, in modified

⁵⁶⁷ Cf. the second presentation of the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*, where Fichte argues that one-sided idealism is refuted by deeper grounding of realism that annihilates everything outside of the realist. This might be Fichte's reading of Jacobi's claim that our perceptions of externality do not necessarily have an existence outside of our cognition. Externality is now nothing other than illusion [Schein]. Fichte does not seem to take the realist agnosticism regarding a true external existence seriously. Instead, Fichte is interested in the instance making the claim (the realist), which leads him to a 'higher idealism'. *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe II, Band 8, pp.184-6.

⁵⁶⁸ *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe III, Band 5, p.147.

form - TG] In the same way and nevertheless, it must remain completely inconceivable.

[...] this is exactly the task of philosophy: precisely the + sign is consciousness and the entering into this + is philosophy!⁵⁶⁹

Note that A represents the ‘absolute I’ here, as something that cannot grasp the real thing in itself. Fichte here places himself in line with the views of Jacobi⁵⁷⁰ and Wilhelm Traugott Krug⁵⁷¹ by saying that the exact way in which knowledge and reality come together remains *inconceivable* to us, even as we generate knowledge. This point can be summed up in the following way: we cannot reconstruct how the synthesis was originally formed, because we are only exposed to its post-factum construction: we find that our way of understanding the problem is already a synthesis that is brought forward by the ‘+’ of consciousness. Fichte then locates the task of philosophy in the elaboration of this post-factum consciousness. However, it is significant that he admits that, despite the fact that philosophy can only deal with the knowable within the constraints of consciousness, there is a way in which this synthesis remains inconceivable, since it is impossible for us to know its origins. The continuous recognition of this inconceivability will become one of the main issues of the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*.

3. Köppen and the scope of philosophical accounts

⁵⁶⁹ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe III, Band 5, p.149.

⁵⁷⁰ See *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus: ein Gespräch* (1787) and *Über das Unternehmen des Kritizismus, die Vernunft zu Verstand zu bringen* (1801).

⁵⁷¹ See *Entwurf eines neuen Organons der Philosophie oder Versuch über die Prinzipien der philosophischen Erkenntnis* (1801).

In 1804, Fichte writes a letter to Jacobi that allows us to pinpoint what he understood to be the significance of Köppen's book.⁵⁷² It is worth noting that this understanding is not explicitly linked to the book's conception of Schelling's position, even though this position was ostensibly the topic of the book:

Köppen's whole wisdom boils down to the fact that, for knowing, something is always left that cannot be penetrated by concepts and is incommensurable and irrational to it.⁵⁷³

Not denying this point, Fichte then asks Jacobi whether he believes that this is the highest possible that this is the highest insight philosophy is capable of:

What if the essence of philosophy were to lie in precisely this insight – the conceiving of the inconceivable as such?⁵⁷⁴

Although the inconceivability of the original construction is evoked several times in Köppen's book, thinking about the inconceivable as something that we need to reflect on is, in fact, a theme that goes back to Jacobi's *SB* (1785), and it can perhaps best be described as *the* general thematic of the German realists. It is then very likely that Fichte is aware of this fact when he asks Jacobi whether he believes that this is the essence of philosophy. As we've seen in his response to Rückert, Fichte characterizes the project of philosophy as the conceiving of the inconceivable, but he evidently did not believe that Rückert was aware of this project. The letter to Jacobi also shows that we must understand the task conceiving of the inconceivable not in the general sense as a making known of the unknown, but in line with the realists that it should perhaps be

⁵⁷² J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe III, Band 5, pp.235-8.

⁵⁷³ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe III, Band 5, p.236.

⁵⁷⁴ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe III, Band 5, pp.236-7.

put as a conceiving of the inconceivable *as inconceivable*. It then becomes known *in what way* we cannot know.

Fichte's reading of Köppen's book seems to have made him aware of the fact that this feature of his thought is in fact something that he shares with the realists. Interestingly, Fichte also warns against using a concept that is mediated in order to conceive of the inconceivable, evidently preferring that philosophy proceeds in a way that retains the immediacy of the inconceivable. We can understand this stipulation by relating it to his response to Rückert: namely, the inconceivable origin of the synthesis of consciousness makes the mediate mode of knowledge-producing cognition possible. This problem has been given many formulations in Jacobi's work, where it is famously labeled as nihilism and is even referred to in the very title of Köppen's book as 'the whole philosophy of absolute nothingness'. In making this point, Fichte is thus not warning Jacobi of a critical error but rather showing him that he understands the core realist problematic. This point is further supported by the fact that he asks Jacobi where the misunderstanding between his and Jacobi's position must now be located, since neither Kant nor Fichte himself now (since Köppen's book shifted the criticism to Schelling) bear the full brunt of the nihilism charge, especially in having understood the problem.⁵⁷⁵

Since this letter dates from March 31st 1804 two days after the conclusion of the first presentation, and Fichte does not mention the *Nachkonstruction* there, he did not incorporate substantial themes from Köppen's book in the first presentation. It could be the case that it came up in the discussions, which might have prompted Fichte to read the book and connect it to his own ideas. The second and third presentation of the 1804

⁵⁷⁵ Amongst other things, this reference shows that Fichte has read Jacobi's *Über das Unternehmen des Kritizismus, die Vernunft zu Verstand zu bringen* (1801), because Jacobi's analysis of Kant there makes Kant into a hopeless philosopher of the impossible knot of synthesis, and shifts the nihilist criticism towards Reinhold.

Wissenschaftslehre bear heavy marks of Köppen's realist thematic and terminology and shows an overall engagement with realism, in a way that was already anticipated by Fichte's letters to Rückert and Jacobi.

In order to make this connection palpable we will first have to take a closer look at Köppen's book, particularly the passages detailing his conception of *Nachkonstruction*. Köppen's book frames conceptuality as the realm of reflection and abstraction.⁵⁷⁶ Like all realists, Köppen deems to be empty all reflection, deduction and abstraction that does not substantively derive from experience. Since all reflection points back to an initially experienced existence, deduction is nothing more than a way of descending the 'ladder of abstraction' that we have previously ascended.⁵⁷⁷ Another analogy that Köppen offers us can be found in the claim that a microscope does not truly disclose new details to us: a microscope does not *create* the new details because these details were already visible, only greatly reduced in size. Conversely, when we look down at particularity from the heights of abstraction, we delude ourselves into thinking that we have better understood the particularity *through* the process of abstraction and that in this way we have gained new data, whereas we have, strictly speaking, only made it *less* visible. The only reason why we can still relate to the particular from the point of abstraction is because we have started out from the particular in the first place.⁵⁷⁸

So far, there would be little for Fichte to disagree with here, since this critique of methodology is meant to attack Schelling's attempt to use the absolute as the highest point of abstraction and deduce everything from this. Köppen's claim is that there is no point at which legitimate abstraction brings us to the 'absolute' as an abstraction that gives us access to the whole,

⁵⁷⁶ *Schellings Lehre oder das Ganze der Philosophie des absoluten Nichts* (1803), p.2.

⁵⁷⁷ *Schellings Lehre*, p.3.

⁵⁷⁸ *Schellings Lehre*, pp.3-4.

and therefore the absolute is fundamentally disconnected from our experience (which we cannot explain by taking recourse in the absolute). Again Köppen gives the example of the microscope, as an illustration of an instrument that allows us to access *new* (microscopic) data but is not a tool to amplify our *normal* (macroscopic) visual data (like eyeglasses). Considered in this way, the microscope is nothing like ‘abstraction’, which, in Köppen’s reading, propounds to examine something and provides new data about the thing we are abstracting from in the process. The criticism is that Schelling overestimates the abilities of the method of abstraction as a tool to gain new data. Köppen is thus skeptical about what abstraction can offer and believes that its uses for philosophical methodology are limited.

We also find the task of getting beyond naïve versions of realism and idealism in Köppen, which points the way to the notion of *Nachkonstruction*:

Realism constructs on the basis of the pure object of its cognition, idealism out of the pure subject. And it is necessary for the intent to complete that one constructs the ostensibly opposed subject out of the object and the other constructs out of the subject that is ostensibly opposed to the object.⁵⁷⁹

In essence, Köppen is expressing a vote of non-confidence towards the fact that naïve realists and naïve idealists alike (Schelling is considered to be among the latter) pretend to offer a clear access to the construction of cognition, but in fact remain dependent on the presupposition of an opposition between subject and object. Jacobi made the same point in *DH*, but with regard to our dependence on the opposition between internality and externality.

Köppen now moves on to the positive task:

⁵⁷⁹ *Schellings Lehre*, p.8.

The opposition must become mere illusion [Scheine] to both realism and idealism, if they do not want to give up their own consistency: the consistent realism must in the end enlighten itself in idealism and idealism must darken itself in realism.⁵⁸⁰

This explains why many of the realists, and Jacobi in particular, incorporate what is commonly known as idealist reasoning into their position. Evidently, there must be a realism that accepts that we *cannot but* consider our cognition to be internally determined, yet must recognize that this realization has no explanatory power with regard to the origin of construction outside of the cognizing subject as such. Köppen offers both praise and condemnation for Fichte on this point. Theoretically, he places him in the tradition of naïve idealism, yet practically he praises him for acknowledging an activity that his own philosophy cannot exhaustively come to know. Köppen likens this to the distinction between a tree (theory) and its root (praxis), but rebukes the claim that we should also consider that the roots draw nutrients from the ground, by which he refers to the immediate reality as assumed by the realists.⁵⁸¹ We must take this to be the aforementioned ‘darkening’ of idealism in realism (literally underground), in the sense that it presupposes a realism which it cannot recognize as such.⁵⁸²

Köppen then introduces the distinction that we were seeking to elaborate:

Human construction is an after-constructing
[Nachkonstruieren], not a pre-constructing

⁵⁸⁰ *Schellings Lehre*, pp.8-9.

⁵⁸¹ *Schellings Lehre*, pp.9-10. This analogy was likely supplied by Jacobi, who offers a similar analogy between reason and the growth of a plant in his *Denkbücher*, in a note that dates back to 1789. See Kladde II.

⁵⁸² Breazeale convincingly argues that this type of ‘abstract realism’ has always been a part of Fichte’s project. See ‘Fichte’s Abstract Realism’ in *The Emergence of German Idealism* (1999).

[Vorkonstruieren]. An after-constructing of his experience, his speech and thought-fabrications. Neither nature, nor spirit, always conditioned, not absolute.⁵⁸³

Since the original construction as such has become a kind of black box, a thing we have to presuppose, and because we have found it to be impossible to extricate ourselves from its post-factum outcome (experience), we have no unbiased or neutral access to a pre-construction with which to compare our post-construction status as engaged experiencing knowers (which we might want to do in order to determine if our cognitions are correct or even accurate). We are thus left with only the all-too-human construction of ‘consciousness’ and ‘experience’, we are forced to treat as a *Nachkonstruction*.

According to Köppen, this has far reaching implications for our conception of philosophy:

Through after-construction, the soulful organism of nature inevitably changes itself, for our cognition, into a dead mechanism.⁵⁸⁴

This is a different, and perhaps more refined way of describing the problem of nihilism than the way in which Jacobi initially did: if we do not realize that the accounts of our existence and cognition are limited to *Nachkonstruction*, we apply the limitations of our reflective accounts, which ultimately derive from a construction that we do

⁵⁸³ *Schellings Lehre*, p.13. I have tried to maintain the original *Nachkonstruction* as much as possible, since I do not find the direct translation very elegant. This can become very difficult in some passages, where it become a verb. I find that ‘reconstruct’ does not convey the problem that the phase was introduced to address, which is: we don’t know if it concerns a reconstruction in full of an original construction, we only know that it concerns an after-construction, leaving open the problem of full or undiluted access.

⁵⁸⁴ *Schellings Lehre*, pp.13-14.

not fully grasp, beyond the scope in which they can rightfully be applied. Applying them beyond epistemology to ontology, we reduce immediacy to mediation without realizing it. As a result, in Köppen's view, freedom and our individual personal existence are in peril of being reasoned away by an unknowing *Nachkonstruction*.⁵⁸⁵

This is, in essence, the central problem that Fichte took up in his 1804-5 Berlin presentations. We have seen how Köppen's book relates to the project of going beyond naïve versions of realism and idealism. But it also has a close connection with conceiving of the inconceivable, since Köppen is continuing the realist project in looking for the way in which the inconceivable, that is, the origin of construction, must be conceived of. And in this case, Fichte was investigating the realist project in a manner attempting to limit the excesses towards which the philosophical methodology tends. Fichte took up this project thus as a productive exploration of the limits of philosophical method.

I will show that that Fichte basically uses the same notion of *Nachkonstruction* throughout three 1804-1805 Berlin texts (1804/2 *WL*, 1804/3 *WL* and *Die Principien der Gottes- Sitten- und Rechtslehre*).⁵⁸⁶ His project is to grasp *Nachkonstruction* in its full relevance. This fact becomes abundantly clear near the end of the second 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*, where Fichte recommends Jacobi over Reinhold and Schelling, and declares that Jacobi holds the following three claims:

- i) We can only after-construct the originally existing.

⁵⁸⁵ *Schellings Lehre*, p.192.

⁵⁸⁶ In fact, Köppen seems to be the only one using the word at this time, so Fichte is obviously responding to him. The letter to Jacobi shows us that he connected this notion to the realist project.

ii) Philosophy must reveal and discover its *being-in-itself*, and *of itself*.

iii) That is why we cannot philosophize, and philosophy cannot be given.⁵⁸⁷

Fichte is taking the conclusions about *Nachkonstruction* to apply to Jacobi's entire position. He takes Jacobi to make the claim that cognition is limited to a *Nachkonstruction*, a product of an apparatus that allows for only subjectively valid statements, a suggestion that brings into question the activity of philosophy, at least in terms of its claims to grasp reality in-itself. And finally, Fichte takes Jacobi to conclude that since the traditional philosophical claims are subjective in this sense, there cannot be a philosophy as such. This is true to the degree that Jacobi criticizes philosophical methodology, for instance in his book on Spinoza, but untrue to the degree that Jacobi heavily suggests that these claims are themselves of a philosophical nature, and that there can thus be a philosophy that is aware of its limitations while still having something to offer.

The most interesting part of this reconstruction of Jacobi's position is that Fichte actually wants to save the validity of the first of the above three claims and can only do this by pointing out the problematic nature of the way in which Jacobi makes this claim:

When he *says*: we can merely after-construct, he ipso facto carries out more than a mere after-construction, and has, at least from the 'we' of which he speaks, luckily excluded himself. If he could only do that, he would also *do* it in his lifetime, but not *say* how he does it through this saying, how he raises himself to the after-construction of the after-construction itself. Or, when we want to exempt him: he tells us how he

⁵⁸⁷ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 8, pp.280-3.

reaches the universality of his statement, through which he prescribes his 'we' an absolute law – however his essence *pre*-constructs it to him, in no way the after-constructing only after-constructs – in which case he must humble himself, to only express himself in this way: I, and all those known to me, have, as far as I can remember, to this day only been able to after-construct. If it doesn't come to anything else tomorrow, this is to be expected.⁵⁸⁸

This brings us to the core of the problem that Fichte wants to solve. He grants Jacobi the secondary nature of cognition and the fact that we have to rethink what philosophy is, once we accept this claim. His way of answering the question is dependent on how we can consider the first claim to be valid. As Fichte remarks, the claim has a universal structure that is not merely empirical. If it was merely empirical, it would be a limited claim that is based on confirmation, which does not necessarily exclude the possibility that circumstances will change in the future. However, Fichte is also not content with dismissing Jacobi's claim as a performative contradiction, where what Jacobi says (universal insight into the form of cognition as a *Nachkonstruction*, as objectively valid) is in contradiction with his doing (expressing a product of his cognition, which is limited to *Nachkonstruction* and thus cannot express anything other than subjective validity).

The claim that philosophy entails the complete self-reflexivity of cognition, which is often taken for granted, is brought into question by the first claim. It is brought into question, not by its content but through its being stated, as an act. The question is,

⁵⁸⁸ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe II, Band 8, pp.282-6. Naturally, this criticism of Jacobi is not entirely fair, since Fichte is heavily paraphrasing Jacobi, to the point of putting Köppen's words in Jacobi's mouth. It is possible that Fichte's earlier cited letter to Jacobi was sent with the exact purpose of asking whether he was allowed to do this.

in essence: How can we make any claims about the limits of *Nachkonstruction*? How is the *Nachkonstruction* about *Nachkonstruction* possible without that claim being itself bounded by the limitations of all products of *Nachkonstruction* (and thus only being subjectively valid)? Fichte's core problem now becomes: How can philosophy make this claim without it being a *recursive* claim that is merely the product of our *Nachkonstruction*? Answering this question will also allow Fichte to provide a new definition of what philosophy is and how it is possible.

In the next section I will focus on the third presentation of the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*, because this is what Fichte calls an 'analytic' presentation of the final position, as opposed to the first and the second presentations, in which Fichte takes his listeners through several stages which culminate in the final position (which he calls a synthetical presentation).⁵⁸⁹

4. Fichte's formulation of 'Nachkonstruction'

As a type of correlate of realism and idealism, Fichte's point of departure is an opposition between *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruction*.⁵⁹⁰ 'Knowing', in a general, non-predicative sense is used to relate the two. Knowing (in this absolute⁵⁹¹ sense) can therefore be described as the original construction which splits

⁵⁸⁹ This is shown by the editors in *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe II, Band 7, p.299. The second presentation has the added difficulty that it proceeds from several opposed notions which might seem arbitrary to today's readers, but which are all, one way or another, notions taken from philosophical authors around 1800. The third presentation makes it easier for readers to gauge the value of the new notions that remain viable for Fichte, because they are presented as a part of the final systematic account.

⁵⁹⁰ Fichte makes it clear that these terms are but different versions of *anschauen* and *intelligiren*. See *J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe II, Band 7, p.325.

⁵⁹¹ For Fichte, absolute is merely a modal distinction of relative.

itself into *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruktion*. This might seem as if it was similar to Schelling, but Fichte would not claim that we have determinate access to this absolute knowing in its construction:

Since this construction consists of absolute knowing, it is itself necessarily without consciousness [bewusstlos].⁵⁹²

If we try our hand at a comparative interpretation, we could argue that the split between *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruktion* is, in part, a realist insight. Jacobi for instance observed that the externality (as in: things or the world) that we take to be prior to our cognition is actually still a cognitive construal (or construction) that is dependent on our internal-external perceptual forms. At this point, Jacobi and the other realists remain agnostic about an actual external existence, although they observe that i) we cannot seem to divorce ourselves from presupposing it, and ii) the constraints of our rational account make it impossible for us to prove or disprove genuine external things. Fichte pushes these points to the extreme and opts for taking the necessity of thinking about a presupposed external as evidence of an original absolute knowing, which we are trying to recuperate when we make particular claims.

The unspoken underlying assumption is that the explanation of our cognitive apparatus is not complete without taking a unified origin of its products to be of the same *quality* as its discrete products: namely, ‘knowledge’. The necessity of thinking of a “real” externality is then not, as realists might have it, at least partial evidence of the real externality as such, but rather, in an idealist sense, partial evidence of the fact that our cognition naturally tends to reach outside itself. This claim is in some way, however, always constrained by our construals of it.

This makes the original externality, as a *Vorkonstruktion*, into a necessary presupposition for cognition rather than into the

⁵⁹² J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.317.

substantive construal of the naïve realist that has to be wholly rejected. Conversely, the meta-theoretical account about the limits of conceptual explications into types of *Nachkonstruction* need not be abrogated as well. In fact, a novelty of this account is that Fichte actually accords *Nachkonstruction* a central role in human cognition. We use after-construction whenever we attempt to think about the way our cognition operates.⁵⁹³ It subsumes any construal we might make about a species prior or an external to cognition into a *Nachkonstruction*. This move was somewhat precipitated by Jacobi, but since Fichte commits himself to the connection between particular knowing as *Nachkonstruction* and absolute knowing, the insistence on the character of *Nachkonstruction* in our cognition can be more thoroughly explicated, albeit eschewing the realist's agnosticism about genuine externality as a *Nachkonstruction* of a preliminary *Vorkonstruktion*.

Having given absolute knowing this position, Fichte argues that it is absolutely 'inconceivable', which is why we find ourselves to be dependent on the split between *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruction*. The argument is as follows: while we cannot *know* the construction as such, the split between *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruction* gives us a tangible connection between determinate knowing and what we have to conceive of as the origin of this determinacy. It is obvious that this accords an enormous significance to our ability to understand the split itself. Since , moreover, Fichte continually emphasizes the importance of accepting that this will yield access, albeit in finite form, to all the contents of construction, this also creates an enormous task for our understanding and use of *Nachkonstruction*. Fichte is still an idealist:

⁵⁹³ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.318.

Knowing, as an absolute on itself standing principle, shatters itself in *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruktion* as *I*.⁵⁹⁴

The trouble begins when we actually acknowledge the fact that the *I* is the form in which we cognize all determination. Fichte is quick to remark that this acknowledgment is a *Nachkonstruktion*.⁵⁹⁵ And since placing the *I* as a principle is, according to Fichte, the start of any coherent philosophical account, this means that philosophy is stuck within *Nachkonstruktion* from the beginning.

One of the issues where Fichte departs from his usual approach is in the way in which he introduces the topic of freedom. Freedom is only possible because of the split into *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruktion*. The *Prinzipien* presentation, which directly continues the account of the third presentation of the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*, elaborates on this point: it is only because absolute knowing is projected as a *Vorkonstruktion*, which creates our experience of independent (external) being, that there is a *remainder*, which is expressed in the fact that we can reflect on the *Vorkonstruktion* through *Nachkonstruktion*, a move that institutes our freedom.⁵⁹⁶ Freedom is thus reframed as an epiphenomenon of the fact that construction is inconceivable. The *I*, in its pure empty form, can only relate to absolute knowing by externalizing it and then reflecting on it, but since it is limited to this construction process, a kind of specter of absolute knowing remains, understood as absolutely external to itself. This is the insisting model of freedom. This move echoes the emphasis that Jacobi places on the importance of the conception of God as the model of absolute freedom for the individual.⁵⁹⁷

⁵⁹⁴ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe II, Band 7, p.323.

⁵⁹⁵ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe II, Band 7, p.324.

⁵⁹⁶ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe II, Band 7, p.422. Fichte remarks that this is the basic form of the *I*: a self-feeling that is pure apperception.

⁵⁹⁷ See *Jacobi an Fichte* (1799) and *Ueber Eine Weissagung Lichtenbergs* (1802).

It is then the form of *Vorkonstruktion* that evokes our reflection in *Nachkonstruktion* which, in Fichte's description, shows that the two are irremediably connected, although *Nachkonstruktion* seems to retain its reflective primacy in the analytical process. This interconnection also means that anything that we recognize as existing (that is, in the form of *Vorkonstruktion*) must be graspable in *Nachkonstruktion*.⁵⁹⁸ This goes against some of the realist's claims, for instance Herder's commitment to the fact that the existence of certain things (e.g. God) always remains outside the scope of our reflection. Rather than framing experience in terms of appearances that do not represent existing things, however, Fichte is giving 'appearing' a constitutive place for reflection. It seems, moreover, that he has also reframed 'appearing' to include the perception of something existing outside us.⁵⁹⁹ Put more radically, this perception is the core structure of 'appearing', for Fichte.

So an external existence, something that was retained as a concept of the understanding (the thing-in-itself) in Kant, and to a certain degree also in the works of the realists, is given a *constitutive* role in Fichte's account. We can then understand Fichte's 1804-5 Berlin presentations as developing two essential questions that the realists raised. For one, the problem of an assumption about a genuine externality is related to the limitations of conceiving by way of the notion of *Nachkonstruktion*. Secondly, the realists can also be understood as being critical of the capabilities of a philosophical account for granting access to this externality through abstraction and deduction (at least, the pretense of doing so). In limiting the philosophical account to *Nachkonstruktion*, Fichte further explores the capabilities of philosophy once it *accepts* this fundamental limitation. We must now ask what this approach means for the project of philosophy, generally conceived.

⁵⁹⁸ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.332.

⁵⁹⁹ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.333.

5. *The project of philosophy*

Realizing that his own philosophical account, as a product of reflection, is limited to *Nachkonstruction*, Fichte argues that philosophy is a natural transition from ordinary life and that it, like any individual point of view, presupposes the original unity of the construction, of absolute knowing, even though it can, as *Nachkonstruction*, never reach that point.⁶⁰⁰ The argument is thus one of a necessary way of thinking that recognizes the ubiquity of *Nachkonstruction* and can conceive of the inconceivability of the original construction. This has clear implications for the project of accumulating knowledge, which Fichte now describes as ‘an infinitely increasing clarity of understanding oneself’. This, he argues, is the only positive meaning of ‘*Aufklärung*’.⁶⁰¹

What can philosophy do, if it is limited to *Nachkonstruction*? On this point Fichte is fairly optimistic:

Philosophy is the entering into [durchdringen] knowing, as principle of itself: as a result idealistic, after-constructing and imaging, so an image of imaging.⁶⁰²

That means that philosophy is ultimately that which provides us with insight into the principle of knowing by means of its after-constructing. We should not read this as an access to absolute knowing, because its absolute inconceivability is still in effect. At the very least, Fichte believes that philosophy is able to generally articulate how we transform appearing into determinate forms of knowledge. This has major implications for what *Nachkonstruction* allows for. Evidently, the rootedness of *Vorkonstruktion* in the I, as a

⁶⁰⁰ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.334.

⁶⁰¹ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, pp.338-339.

⁶⁰² J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.342.

projection of absolute knowledge as being, as *Anstoß*,⁶⁰³ is a part of what *Nachkonstruction* can reflect on.⁶⁰⁴

The problem that the realists would raise at this point is that we have no way of making sure that the *Vorkonstruktion* as such, which we might understand as the perception of externality, can be exhaustively expressed by the *Nachkonstruction without remainder*. However, Fichte seems to insulate himself from the skeptical consequences of this line of thought by assuming that any construal of an externality that cannot be recuperated in *Nachkonstruction* is itself a reflection that still operates *within* *Nachkonstruction*. This does not solve the skeptical problem, but it does commit Fichte to an account that proceeds in line with the only tool that philosophy has at its disposal: reflection. It also shows that Fichte makes certain concessions to the realists, especially in terms of the absolute inconceivability of construction, and draws their conclusions concerning *Nachkonstruction* to an interesting extreme.

Like the realists, Fichte blocks any inquiry into the causes of appearing in an originary construction:

Only why [the original construction] is there is inconceivable, but why it is inconceivable is the most conceivable.⁶⁰⁵

We must know the limits of this seemingly self-reflexive *Nachkonstruction*. In addressing this challenge, Fichte is following the same lines as earlier post-Kantian discussions on the thesis of the ubiquity of the understanding pointed out in response to Kant by the likes of Selle, Jacobi, Neeb, Maimon and Herder. This

⁶⁰³ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe II, Band 7, p.345.

⁶⁰⁴ In the second presentation of the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre* Fichte calls this the higher realism that (when we recognize that the projected being derives from absolute knowing) turns out to be a higher idealism. *SW* pp.225-226 J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe II, Band 8, pp.262-6.

⁶⁰⁵ J. G. *Fichte-Gesamtausgabe*, Reihe II, Band 7, p.362.

means that the understanding is already in charge as soon as we have any kind of representation⁶⁰⁶ and when we have any kind of determination concerning what we ourselves or the world are like. In this fashion one of the words that Fichte adopts in reference to philosophy's activity is '*beschreiben*', a 'describing', likely because this is what philosophical methodology is limited to, once one eliminates the possibility that it can go out and directly grasp real things.

In *Principien*, Fichte tries to answer the question of why we are able to posit that conceivability is the product of absolute knowing. In examining this issue, we can also find an answer to the question of *how* Fichte believes that *Nachkonstruction* can reflect on itself legitimately. Fichte argues that we cannot identify a particular activity and take it to be a factum of activity as a whole, since this identification squarely operates through *Nachkonstruction*.⁶⁰⁷ The only qualifying factor for an activity that would actually escape *Nachkonstruction*, while also encompassing its basic principle, would have to be an act that bridges the gap between *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruction*. This is what Fichte calls the '*ExistentialAkt*', a new term he introduces in this presentation. According to Fichte we discover the *ExistentialAkt*, already in actu, when we realize that any putative 'external' is always already connected in some way to the 'internal'.⁶⁰⁸ This is an argument that he takes from Jacobi's *DH*, which is clear from the fact that he also refers to this insight as '*Deutlichkeit*', as distinctness. In contradistinction to Jacobi though, Fichte takes the distinct awareness of the *ExistentialAkt* to also express something about absolute knowing, which is an elaboration of his project to conceive of inconceivability. Perhaps we can say that it concerns a particular knowing of absolute knowing *as* inconceivable.

⁶⁰⁶ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.349.

⁶⁰⁷ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.388.

⁶⁰⁸ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.388.

According to the analytic account that *Principien* continues, absolute knowing splits itself into *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruktion* through the *ExistentialAkt*, and the fact that we can at least make this issue distinct is Fichte's way of exploring what philosophy can contribute beyond the regular sphere of the *Nachkonstruktion* of the contents of *Vorkonstruktion*. This has implications for what the pure I is capable of. Not only can it grasp the entirety of the contents of *Vorkonstruktion* as *Nachkonstruktion*, it can also, at least to a certain degree, grasp how the dynamic between *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruktion* is formed in the first place. As Fichte puts it, it is only the *form* of the *ExistentialAkt* that we grasp, not its full efficacy.⁶⁰⁹ The *ExistentialAkt* also fulfills an important role in that we have to presuppose it when we notice that we are free with regard to any particular externalization.⁶¹⁰ Here we see Fichte once again assuming that our necessary way of thinking (of presupposing the *ExistentialAkt*) is correct.

To put the problem in another way, when we believe that we experience freedom, this is an epiphenomenon of the perception of things that are external to us, on which we in turn reflect *because* we are free from them. An intriguing aspect of this theory of freedom is that freedom is inextricably tied to the perception of externality and, in a way, is the engine that turns reflection on itself by conceiving of absolute knowledge as an inconceivable originary construction that makes its own process possible.⁶¹¹ Fichte thus calls freedom the absolute externality, which shows that he frames Jacobi's insistence that we need to assume something absolutely external in order to understand our cognition, this limit of explaining cognition, as the realm of freedom. On the one hand, this is another explication of the Fichtian/Jacobian dictum that every theoretical engagement is always a practical engagement in essence, but on the other hand, it

⁶⁰⁹ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.391.

⁶¹⁰ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.404.

⁶¹¹ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.410.

shows that Fichte is also interested in providing an explanation of how freedom *enters into* our cognition.

6. Conclusion: a critical assessment of Fichte's response to realism

There are clearly many more aspects of Fichte's response to realism to be addressed. For instance, during the period 1804-1809, Fichte writes several short outlines for a concrete response to Jacobi's position. In addition to this, there is an extended reflection on 'onesided' realism and idealism in the second presentation of the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehre*.⁶¹² In this chapter however, I have focused on the way in which Fichte responds to the overall concerns of the realists during the relatively narrow 1804-5 Berlin period. In relation to Rückert's claim that a theoretical philosophy should be prefaced by a practical realism and Köppen's claim that Fichte's practical roots need real sustenance, Fichte offers a coherent response: although it is a necessary part of theoretical philosophy to presuppose an externality that it, to a certain degree, projects outside of its cognition, the same also goes for practical philosophy, meaning that there is no reliable construal of reality to be found in practical philosophy either. Jacobi's later work seems to recognize this point as well, showing that externalized things need to be organized by way of our cognition as a mechanism, in a way that we are dependent on, if we want to act according to our drive. Fichte, however, does not fully account for the odd shift from individuality to universality that he institutes when he moves from the pure I (which can still describe a general form of individuals) towards absolute knowing and the *ExistentialAkt*. In a way, Fichte begs the question here: Does this constitute a rational access to a universal force that splits or internally divides itself in order to know itself (vide Hegel), or is this merely the limit of the way an individual can think about the limits of his own reflective

⁶¹² J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 8, pp.164-8.

abilities, a claim that entails ipso facto that philosophy too is limited by these constraints?

On the one hand, the realists might respond to this contention of Fichte's by pushing the point of *Nachkonstruction* further: How exactly do we know that this distinct awareness of the *ExistentialAkt* expresses something beyond the regular process of *Nachkonstruction*? How is this distinctness anything other than *Nachkonstruction* reproducing its own ability, only now with its own perceived process as content? Surely there are echoes of *Nachkonstruction* dealing with its contents as an externalization in the way in which this distinctness deals with an abstract, almost objectified pure I?

On the other hand, Fichte could justifiably turn the tables, on Jacobi, since, to a certain degree, Jacobi's account also holds that distinctness about the relation between external and internal is useful. Jacobi too, in a way, believed distinctness helps to express the limits of conceivability, but did not go to as great a length as Fichte did to radicalize the perception of externality as thoroughly reducible to the internalist *Nachkonstruction* account.

This is the question where the two differ: What is the *middle point* between the internal and the external? For Jacobi this is the self, or personality as a non-determined unity, which evinces a distinctness that is something different from an account in terms of mere *Nachkonstruction*, at least insofar as it helps to delimit the agency of the self with regard to the way in which it construes its field of action.⁶¹³ To have more distinctness about the relation between externality and internality, in this account, would mean

⁶¹³ Almost immediately after arguing for this distinctness as a higher perfectibility of the self's agency, Jacobi incorporated this function into his notion of reason (in *DH*), which does all the work of relating to the inconceivable that our mediate cognition requires: intuition of the contents of perception and relating the demands of the drive to acting within a theoretically construed world.

that we are better able to distinguish ourselves from perceptions about ourselves or the world, which in turn increases our freedom and ability to manipulate perceptions.⁶¹⁴ Knowledge, or determinacy in particular, would then be the conceptual tool that allows the self to act but is not its central feature, since Jacobi incorporates an immediate drive that remains inaccessible. Vice versa, Fichte would never argue that the pure I can have a content that it does not fully understand, like a drive. Instead, and especially in terms of action, the pure I would be limited to what *Nachkonstruction* can offer in terms of conceptual resources. This is why Fichte places drive in *Vorkonstruktion*⁶¹⁵ to such a degree that only when the drive has been transformed into determinacy can it become a part of the self, part of pure I, as *Nachkonstruction*. Seen from this perspective, the insight into the *ExistentialAkt* then is an odd avenue of argumentation for Fichte, because it admits something into the pure I that is, at least to a certain degree, inconceivable and immediate (unlike his treatment of drives). Fichte's attempt to solve this problem seems to be to admit that we conceive of it as *inconceivable*.

It is obvious what Fichte's approach rules out as inadequate philosophy: namely, any philosophy that claims an insight into originary constructions (i.e. any non-*Nachkonstruction* content) would be inadequate, as would be, for instance, the approaches of Schelling and Friedrich Schlegel, both of which claim that it is possible to have reflective insight into an originary construction. Fichte would likely consider the realists to be on the right track, although in his view they do not follow the argument far enough.⁶¹⁶ On the other hand, Fichte repeatedly points out that philosophy, or the examination of these problems, involves

⁶¹⁴ See Jacobi, *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus: ein Gespräch*, p.176/2 (see note to chapter 2).

⁶¹⁵ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.352

⁶¹⁶ See, for instance, what Fichte says about Jacobi in *WL 1804/2* in J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 8, pp.190-4.

‘*Selbstvergessenheit*’,⁶¹⁷ which might show that he both grants Jacobi’s point and believes that the realist approach is already removed from an articulation of the agency of the self at the moment it articulates the limits of conceivability. At the very least, it is a reference to Rückert’s book in which it was argued that we have to assume something outside of thinking, otherwise ‘*Selbstvergessenheit*’ ensues.⁶¹⁸ Fichte’s response seems to be bluntly that no matter how we approach the matter forgetting the self is inevitable.

On the whole, Fichte utilizes a wide variety of realist notions throughout these presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*.⁶¹⁹ In effect, Fichte places all of the realist notions that designate the immediacy of experience (feeling) and in ourselves (drive) in the *Vorkonstruktion*, as well as his own notion of *Anstoß* (which might have its own realist origins in Jacobi’s *Woldemar*). The fact that he nonetheless takes care to locate these notions in the place where we ineffably register existence is, in a very particular way, also a legitimization of these notions. Most strikingly, he completely adopts the modal distinction between immediacy and mediacy from the realists. The distinction is utilized to recognize that no matter how ubiquitous mediation is with regard to the capabilities of our cognition, we are forced to recognize that immediacy must enter the picture at several points if we are to account for mediation as such. Fichte ultimately concludes that we have to take *reflection as such*, as a process, *as immediate*.⁶²⁰ He takes the fact that we can grasp this point as something special. He takes our ability to grasp this as a ‘proof’ that we have reached the limits of explanation.⁶²¹ Interestingly, this is thus another conclusion that

⁶¹⁷ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.393.

⁶¹⁸ See Rückert’s *Realismus*, p.14. The term also appears in Jacobi’s *Woldemar*, but doesn’t seem to be an important concept there. See: *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Werke, Band 7.1, pp.307-8.

⁶¹⁹ More than we can to cover at this moment. For instance, feeling [Gefühl] receives an extensive treatment.

⁶²⁰ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.419.

⁶²¹ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.426.

Fichte has in common with the realists: whenever we reach immediacy at the limits of mediation, we have conceived of the limits of conceiving.

We are now in a position to consider whether Fichte accomplished the task he set out for himself: Is philosophy capable or recognizing its own limitations? In essence, the question is whether there is a way to produce a *Nachkonstruction* of *Nachkonstruction*? Can there be a claim about our cognition as *Nachkonstruction* that is not a recursive claim or a performative contradiction? By introducing absolute knowing and the *ExistentialAkt*, Fichte has framed *Nachkonstruction* as limited by the scope of its claims: it is bounded by whatever is projected into a *Vorkonstruktion*. Consequently, the claim about *Nachkonstruction* in general is not just, in Fichte's view, a claim about the form of *Nachkonstruction* but a claim about the *relation* between *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruction*. The *ExistentialAkt* makes this claim possible. This *ExistentialAkt* is subsequently grasped by philosophy in its form. The capacity of philosophy to abstract itself from particular propositions is therefore essential with regards to grasping the form of the *ExistentialAkt*. At the very least, this distinction between immediate grasping of form and mediate particular propositions aims to evade the recursivity that might have been the case in Jacobi's claim.

At this point one could raise a tentative criticism of this strategy: Is the recursivity issue really solved in this way, or is it merely moved towards the inconceivable, towards the *ExistentialAkt*? As Fichte would have it, the *ExistentialAkt* is something that remains outside of any claim we might make to validate a philosophical account. But that also means that Fichte has, in effect, made philosophy, as the *ExistentialForm* that is the direct framework of particular propositions (a *Nachkonstruction* of a *Vorkonstruktion*), into a *given*, into something that we have to immediately accept in order to refer to something (in this case absolute knowing). Fichte has then effectively inverted Jacobi's

third claim. This claim, which Fichte attributes to Jacobi, is ‘That is why we cannot philosophize, and philosophy cannot be given’. In Fichte’s view philosophy itself is now something that is *given*. It is worth remarking that this notion of philosophy in Fichte has essentially the same function as reason has in Jacobi from 1788 onwards.

The givenness of philosophy, as built into our regular cognition, does not have the absolutely unshakable nature that Fichte had sometimes attributed to it before 1804. This also has implications for the completeness and validity of any particular propositions of which we consider ‘absolute knowing’ to be the index. Curiously, Fichte seems to be aware of this fact at several points in the 1804-5 presentations and refers to his project as a ‘wager on good luck’ that ‘the *WL* is possible’.⁶²² This characterization is highly idiosyncratic for Fichte’s time and brings to mind Pascal’s wager, even though Fichte does not explicitly reference it. It is possible that this is yet another reference to Jacobi, who started his *DH* with a quote from Pascal. Whatever the origin of this characterization may be, Fichte’s philosophical project is now explicitly framed as a wager, as something which we do not know to be true, but which a bold gambler might be inclined to take a chance on. This wager-like quality of the *Wissenschaftslehre* shows the enduring progressive tendencies in Fichte’s work. Framing the undecided validity of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a wager allows for the ‘postulate of the *WL*’ to claim that ‘knowing is completely transparent to itself’⁶²³, meaning that it is self-reflexive. Strikingly, Fichte also refers to Jacobi’s first claim, that a *Nachkonstruktion* of an original existence is possible, as a ‘postulate’,⁶²⁴ again showing his kinship with Jacobi’s approach, despite the problematic relationship of their respective projects.

⁶²² J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.312.

⁶²³ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 7, p.317.

⁶²⁴ 1804/2 *WL*, J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe II, Band 8, pp.280-2.

However lopsided this account may seem in its dependence on our being able to grasp the form of something deeply unintuitive like the *ExistentialAkt* as the highest mediacy, this remarkable episode in Fichte's development shows how a confrontation with the realist position leads to the need for articulating the problems that a philosophical account faces qua philosophy and how this relates to its supposed ability to do more than (or even something alongside) other scientific disciplines. In the following years, Fichte develops this distinction between *Vorkonstruktion* and *Nachkonstruktion* into criticisms of the implicit assumptions of empirical and logical approaches to theory-building (this is especially apparent in his lectures on transcendental logic). The critique here is very close to Jacobi's criticism of the naïve realist in *DH*. Fichte argues that these approaches never realize that their approach is heavily dependent on, and limited to, the *Nachkonstruktion*. He has always been unusually concerned with the progressive capabilities of philosophical accounts and what these capacities entail. Perhaps he grasped onto the distinction because it gave him a solid framework with which to explicate the exact problem that a philosophical account faces when it had to explicate its own limitations.

Although Fichte's solution might at best be described as a wager that takes recourse in a kind of speculative account about the shattering of absolute knowledge (akin to the fall of the tower of Babel), it does explain philosophy's relationship to specific knowing and the operation of its genesis as a 'description' [Beschreibung]. This term, which we have grown accustomed to since Wittgenstein, was completely absent during this time and it only seems to have had a brief tenure around 1800 as a result of realist methodology. Krug used it shortly before Fichte also as a clear response to realism. Since Krug wrote a book on Fichte to which Fichte responded in 1801, it is likely that Fichte kept an eye on Krug's work and adopted this way of characterizing philosophy. In fact, the wedding of philosophy as a descriptive exercise with

the givenness of philosophy formally liberates philosophy from its traditional roles as a handmaiden to theology or as the mother of the sciences and orients it towards a bigger world outside of the university (note that Fichte was himself outside of the university at this point). This works well with Fichte's growing political and ethical interests, culminating in his resistance to the French occupation.

5.2 Krug's Pen and the emergence of Relativism

1. Polemical engagement

Wilhelm Traugott Krug belongs to the generation of young authors (Krug, Köppen and Rückert were born in 1770, 1775 and 1771 respectively) who were taught by the established philosophers, in this case Reinhold during his Jena period. One of Krug's early contributions to the debate with the realists was decidedly antagonistic. He published an attack on Herder's *Metakritik* under the pseudonym of 'a friend of truth'.⁶²⁵ Later Krug would recount:

Back then I was still such an enthusiastic worshiper of those [who Herder sought to] persecute, that I entered the arena [in die Schranken trat]. Even though the enemies were gallant knights, I did not dare to move to the walls with an open visor.⁶²⁶

Perhaps in no small part due to his former teacher's new commitment to realism, Krug would soon adopt some key conceptual decisions of the realists. He published books on Fichte⁶²⁷ and Schelling, which were not outright hostile but careful considerations of what worked and did not work in their idealist approaches. Over the course of two years, Krug would come to develop a position that attempted to elaborate what kind of a philosophical system could be held when one accepts the main conclusions that Jacobi drew when he formulated his realism.

⁶²⁵ Krug, *Uiber Herder's Metakritik und deren Einföhrung in's Publikum durch den Hermes Psychopompos : Nebst einer Beylage* (1799). The publication was part of a slew of responses to Herder's book, many of which were published anonymously.

⁶²⁶ Krug, *Lebensreise in sechs Stazionen: von ihm selbst beschrieben. Nebst Franz Volkmar Reinbard's Briefen an den Verfasser* (1842), p.85.

⁶²⁷ Krug, *Briefe über die Wissenschaftslehre* (1800).

While Krug would later argue for a ‘syncreticism’ or ‘synthesism’,⁶²⁸ the fact that the Jacobian realism informed his basic premises, makes him a remote adherent of realism. During the 1800-1801 phase of his work, he readily self-identified as a realist. This was especially apparent to Schelling and Hegel, who devoted an article (ascribed to Hegel) in the *Kritisches Journal* to a harsh polemical criticism of Krug’s works. Krug had earned a place in their roster of realists through his criticism of Schelling. Although the story of Hegel’s criticism of Krug’s pen is well-known, it is worth recounting the actual background of the argument, because it, to a large extent, vindicates Krug and shows how well he fits in among the second generation realists, who introduced Jacobi’s concepts into the academic discourse of philosophy.

In *Briefe über den neuesten Idealismus* (1801), which is Krug’s criticism of Schelling, Krug recounts Schelling’s challenge to the realist, to show how the external world operates upon us. Schelling claims that his own approach can offer the best explanation.⁶²⁹ However, as we’ve seen in chapter 2, it is exactly the ambiguity of this question that many of the realists are concerned with. Jacobi would reply that explanatory frameworks are parasitical upon this external-internal opposition, and that, we are nonetheless limited by this opposition in all of our explanations. For this reason, the response that negative realism provided to Schelling’s challenge *avant la lettre* is that the realist *cannot* convincingly show the way something works on us, *but neither can the idealist*. This is the reason why Jacobi refers to immediate perception, rather than one that can be fully conceived of. Krug senses that Schelling’s challenge is not a serious problem, and puts forward his own counter-example, which he calls a ‘parody’.⁶³⁰

⁶²⁸ Starting with *Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Philosophirens und die verschiedenen Systeme der Philosophie* (1802).

⁶²⁹ Krug, *Briefe über den neuesten Idealismus* (1801), p.75.

⁶³⁰ *Briefe über den neuesten Idealismus*, p.75.

Although Hegel took this response as a serious counter-challenge, Krug himself meant it as a parody that showed why Schelling's challenge did not make sense. The fact that he renders the challenge in quotation marks shows that it is not entirely his position, but that of a fictional third person, who challenges the idealist to 'describe' the 'way in which a determined representation of an external object (for instance my pen) develops'. This is the origin of Hegel's characterization of Krug's pen. The challenge is now to show how determinate representations emerge in consciousness rather than to show how the external world works on us. Interestingly, there is no sense in which this example should be so closely connected to Krug, because it is a parody of one *of Schelling's* polemical challenges. Another difference with the way in which Hegel takes up this parody, in order to ironically ridicule it, is that, whereas Krug speaks of a 'description', which is a product of a philosophical account, Hegel speaks of 'deduction', which is a philosophical method that the realists believe has clear limits. Krug thus did not want a philosophical account to deduce his pen, but rather wanted to show that there are clear limits to the descriptions that the philosophical account can offer. At the very least, Hegel is not presenting the challenge in its full strength and fails to mention the fact that Krug raised the challenge as a parody of Schelling's challenge in the first place.

In 1801 Krug published *Entwurf eines neuen Organon's der Philosophie*, with which he intended to establish the principles of his own system. This text was also attacked in Hegel's review, with a pun on Krug's name (meaning 'jug'). Hegel objected to Krug bringing together elements from several different authors in order to form his own position. Krug would later defend himself in the following way:

The Kantian philosophy did not suffice. The foundational pillars of the old building waver. I left and built myself a new one. It has been objected that I still carried over many materials

from the old one. That may be true, but that is not a mistake. Is it not unreasonable to throw away useful material merely because it is old?⁶³¹

This is the closest that Krug comes to responding to Hegel's review. In the preface to the later exposition on his system, the *Fundamentalphilosophie* (1803), Krug remarks that Hegel's text was so ridiculous as a review, so entirely unrelated to his position that it would be best to ignore it. Instead, Krug gave some advice on how a good review should be written.⁶³²

2. The genesis of Krug's realist ideas

Briefe über den neuesten Idealismus is an important text in the development of Krug's ideas because here he formulates what the task of philosophy should be, in his view, at the end of the text. In it, we hear echoes of negative realism:

I am only interested in knowing what the I's *way of acting* is, its *form* (i.e. *forma agenda*), through which *ability* [Vermögen], following what *laws*, and under what *limits* it is theoretically and practically active. As soon as I know this, I cognize and understand myself, I can become one with myself [, and] I am, from the perspective of all demands that I can reasonably make from philosophy, *satisfied* – and this *satisfaction of myself* is at the same time the *highest and final goal* of all *philosophizing*.⁶³³

This might seem very close to Fichte, in that it places the locus of philosophy on understanding oneself, but, as we've seen, this is

⁶³¹ Krug, *Lebensreise in sechs Stationen: von ihm selbst beschrieben. Nebst Franz Volkmar Reinhard's Briefen an den Verfasser* (1842), p.86.

⁶³² Krug, *Fundamentalphilosophie* (1803), p.xviii.

⁶³³ Krug, *Briefe über den neuesten Idealismus* (1801), pp.96-7.

also one of the central tenets of realism dating back to *DH* in 1787: namely, of knowing the limits of conceivability in order to more carefully assess the scope of action that the individual has (this was already the upshot of Jacobi's *DH*).

Krug's modification of these ideas consists in tying this task to the *purpose of philosophy as such*. This leads him to formulate the idea of a *limiting point* [Gränzpunkt], which is a term he specifically designs in order to show the point where our ability to conceive ends. The limiting point is then the limit between conceivability and inconceivability:

It is just as inconceivable and inexplicable how being and persistence [Bestehen] can precede representing and knowing as is the obverse. *The recognition of this inconceivability and inexplicability of the original condition [Beschaffenheit] and mutual relationship of subjective and objective on one another* seems to me to be the actual *limiting point*, where the *true, sober and modest philosophy* breaks with that *false, imagined and overbearing* [anmaassende] wisdom.⁶³⁴

This appraisal of what is essentially the negative realist position as the true, sober and modest philosophy over 'wisdom' is Krug's attempt to reclaim philosophy from the idealists. The limiting point thus functions as a marker to show the limits of conceivability and inconceivability, or, more succinctly, where our explanatory schemes fall short. The limiting point, as a way of demarcating the limits of philosophy as essentially offering a set of descriptions, is Krug's main contribution to the realist conceptual repertoire from this point onwards and up the *Fundamentalphilosophie* (1803).

In the previously mentioned *Entwurf* (1801), Krug tacitly ascribes to many central views of the realists. For instance, he

⁶³⁴ *Briefe über den neuesten Idealism*, pp.97-8.

argues that we cannot provide a full explanation of the I as the basis of all philosophy:

This avowal [Geständniss] of the inexplicableness and inconceivability of the I does not dishonor the philosopher, because he cannot at all show that and why it is inexplicable and inconceivable, [and] because consequently his avowal is not a proof of arbitrary stagnation in explanation and conceiving, nor a consequence of the laziness of philosophizing reason, but only a natural and necessary limitation of that reason. All philosophy must, in the end, bump up against inexplicability and inconceivability and the soberness and modesty of philosophizing – the wisdom in striving for wisdom – consists in the recognition of what is simply inexplicable and inconceivable and in not giving the impression that one can explain and conceive of everything.⁶³⁵

Krug warns that we must not take the task of philosophy too far beyond what is attainable and useful, which was also Jacobi's point in *Jacobi an Fichte* (1799). Here Krug is opposing those who he believes are attempting to hide the fact that philosophical description has limits behind the propaganda of sheer 'laziness' and the importance of the pursuit of 'wisdom'. The essential aspect of a true philosophy is that it must rationally recognize that certain avenues of research remain inexplicable and inconceivable, a fact that is its 'actual limiting point'.⁶³⁶ This is not to say that we now have room to doubt the reality of the I, according to Krug. While there is no regular avenue of presenting a proof (because it remains inconceivable), we find that we have a '*feeling of necessity*' of the

⁶³⁵ Krug, *Entwurf eines neuen Organon's der Philosophie* (1801), pp.22-3.

⁶³⁶ *Entwurf eines neuen Organons*, p.27.

reality of the I.⁶³⁷ Whereas some realists have tried to make the recourse to immediate feelings into a new kind of proof, Krug is unwilling to muddy the waters on this matter. He argues that proofs always deal with representations and that the ‘conviction’ that accompanies a feeling of necessity is a ‘belief’ with only subjective grounds.⁶³⁸ Like many other realists, Krug connects this belief to *immediacy*.

Krug offers a novel mode of argumentation in order to show that proof along idealist lines is unable to successfully eliminate the *possibility* of the existence of genuine external things that are *essential to* but *inconceivable for* our cognition. An idealist might argue, following the negative realist claim that the ‘reality of the external world’ is inexplicable and inconceivable, that this means that this external world does not exist. Krug offers three counter-arguments:⁶³⁹

- a) Inexplicability and inconceivability does not imply impossibility.
- b) The idealist will fail to explain the possibility of a different origin of representations without taking recourse to inexplicability and inconceivability.
- c) How does an ‘objective world’ arise in us if our representations of something external do not correspond to something external?

Argument (c) seems to place Krug within Kant’s notion of transcendental realism. Krug does indeed speak favorably of transcendental realism in the 1801 *Briefe*.⁶⁴⁰ It is not entirely clear there whether he means it in Kant’s sense. Arguments (a) and (b)

⁶³⁷ *Entwurf eines neuen Organons*, p.37.

⁶³⁸ *Entwurf eines neuen Organons*, pp.37-8.

⁶³⁹ *Entwurf eines neuen Organons*, pp.42-3.

⁶⁴⁰ Krug, *Briefe über den neuesten Idealismus* (1801), p.104.

tie in neatly with negative realism. In the *Entwurf*, Krug puts forward the following task for realism:

The realist observes the following conditions: he *first of all* watches out for wanting to explain the original constitution and mutual relation of the subjective and objective, because the deduction of knowing from being is just as impossible as the deduction of being from knowing. He also confesses that this inexplicability and inconceivability are overt and honest and holds immovably to the limiting point of true, sober and modest philosophy. *Secondly*, he watches out for wanting to give proofs of the reality of the objective world or to let the necessity of these proofs be imposed upon him. He retains his right to request the proof of the opposite, where it becomes easy for him to uncover the nakedness of this claim.⁶⁴¹

The terminology and the evocation of tasks certainly evince a confessional tone behind these remarks. However, Krug never explicitly makes this connection and it seems more likely that these monkish and pious virtues are meant to counteract what he perceives to be the ‘anarchy’⁶⁴² in philosophical discourse around this time. More likely this tone is meant as a kind of *catechism of philosophy*. This suggests that Krug is greatly indebted to realists like Jacobi.⁶⁴³ There is, however, also a large degree to which he is indebted to Fichte, for instance for describing philosophy as ‘the

⁶⁴¹ *Entwurf eines neuen Organons*, pp.47-8.

⁶⁴² *Entwurf eines neuen Organons*, p.xvi.

⁶⁴³ In fact, he uses a passage from Jacobi’s *SB* as the motto for his book on philosophical method: *Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Philosophirens und die verschiedenen Systeme der Philosophie in Rücksicht ihrer allgemeinen Gültigkeit* (1802).

science of the original form [Urform] of the I'.⁶⁴⁴ The fact that these two viewpoints can be brought together has been shown again and again, in the works of authors like Köppen, Rückert and, in a way, by Fichte himself.

3. Krug's notion of *Relativism*

One final notion that appears to be coined exclusively as a result of the debate between the idealists and the realists is *relativism* [Relativismus]. Krug's use of the term is the earliest known use, although, as I will show, it is a modification of a much earlier notion. Later in his life, Krug became committed to publishing philosophical handbooks and lexicons. The lemma 'Relativ' appears in his *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften* in 1838.⁶⁴⁵ It might seem odd according to today's standards of scholarship to coin words in handbooks, but it is entirely possible that the term originated here, since any such standards had not yet been formulated. Moreover, Krug clearly envisions his handbooks as in some ways programmatic. As such they are still good ways to learn about Krug's philosophical position.

Relativism, as the position that advocates the primacy of relations, might well be Krug's invention.⁶⁴⁶ I will reproduce the lemma in full:

Relative. – Addition: With the *system of pure* or *thoroughgoing relativism* one means the assumption

⁶⁴⁴ *Entwurf eines neuen Organons*, p.53.

⁶⁴⁵ Krug, *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, Band 5, Abteilung 2, p.224.

⁶⁴⁶ Johann Georg Walch's *Philosophisches Lexicon* (1775) only mentions 'relativ' as the adjective sense of a relation. Krug's *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, Band 3 (1833) briefly opposes 'relativ' to 'absolut', in the sense I mentioned I also found in Fichte and Schelling's work around 1800.

that everything that we perceive [wahrnehmen] and think (even the idea of reason, truth, morality [Sittlichkeit], religion, etc.) is only something relative or relational [Verhältnismässiges], and consequently has no essential stock [Bestand] and no general validity. This system, which the famous satirical author Swift has presented in a very humorous and therefore seductive way in *Gulliver's Travels*, under the mask of cheerfulness and jest, annihilates itself when it is considered philosophically, because what is in a relation, or is for something else, should also be something for itself. However, just as untenable is the other side, the *system of pure or thoroughgoing absolutism*, which recognizes nothing relative, no being for an other [kein Sein für ein Andres], but only accepts an Absolute that exists for itself [für sich seiendes]. Cf. *Absolutism* in the addition.

It should be noted that this definition of relativism, as the presumption that key tenets of our perception and thought are without existence and thus have no general validity (we can only say that they might be valid for our subjective cognition), sounds strikingly modern, something that might come from Rorty's, not Krug's pen. However, the semantic connection between relativism and *relationality*, such that 'relativism' comes to denote a particularly strong claim about the status of *relations* (as fundamental constituents of the world) seems to have largely disappeared from our contemporary notions of relativism. I will now attempt to show why this connection was so strong for Krug.

Interestingly, Krug effectively shifts the entire focus of the lemma from *relative* towards *relativism*, introducing *absolutism* as its antipode. While Krug refers to Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* as an example of relativism, it is clear that this is not his main reference

point. An examination of the lemma on absolutism reveals his actual frame of reference:

Absolutism is what some (most in a mocking tone) call the absolute system of identity.⁶⁴⁷

Krug goes on to say that ‘absolutism’ is actually derived from political discourse, in reference to an absolute ruler. Since the political notion does not function as an opposite to relativism, we are justified in locating the opposition in the field of philosophy, namely, in Krug’s reference to the absolute system of identity. There can be no doubt that this is in reference to the discussion surrounding *Schelling’s* system of identity, which Köppen attacked as being unable to relate experiential things to the absolute through a deductive method. It then also becomes intelligible why Krug opposes Schelling’s absolutism to relativism: an adherence to the absolute fails to give an account of how relations between plural things follow from the absolute. In a way, this was also the point of Krug’s raising the description of the pen as a counter-challenge to Schelling’s idealism.

We can thus conclude that Krug is readily predisposed to oppose absolutism. However, his definition of relativism also shows that he cannot commit to a relativistic view *either*, since he writes that relativism annihilates itself when considered philosophically. This suggests that relativism, as the claim that all of our cognition are merely relational, was originally a counter-claim that Schelling made when his position was characterized as absolutism. This is the context in which Krug defines relativism. A likely candidate for this origin of the opposition in Schelling’s work can be found in the addition to the introduction in the second edition of *Ideen zu einer Philosophie der Natur* (1803):

⁶⁴⁷ Krug, *Allgemeines Handwörterbuch der philosophische Wissenschaften*, Band 1 (1832), p.27.

When we determine philosophy wholly according to that in which it intuits and presents [anschaut und darstellt], the absolute act of cognition, of which nature is also only one side, the idea of all ideas, then it is idealism. Idealism thus is and remains all philosophy, and only under it does it understand once more this realism and idealism, only in that the first, absolute idealism, cannot be replaced with the latter, which is merely of a relative kind.⁶⁴⁸

As we have seen throughout chapter 2, Schelling has some cause to connect realism, in the sense of Jacobi and Herder's positions, to relationism. We've seen Jacobi claim that reason is solely occupied with the relations between external and internal forms and that certitude can only be drawn from the fact that, for any claim we might have, these two forms are irremediably related because this relationship is the post factum of immediate perception. For him, the fact that rationality operates only within this scope of formulating its reasoning on the basis of this relation is the first step towards understanding its limitations. For Herder in the *Metakritik*, the understanding is thoroughly limited by the necessary relation between supposedly opposed terms like internal-external, cause-effect, etc. He believes that cognition is mediated by relations. Naturally, both authors are building upon Hume's conception of relations of ideas and drawing out the implication that the understanding is overly dominant in our rationality.

Schelling's characterization of the realist account namely, that it is limited to relations, is incorrect then in the same sense as Krug's response to it: the core point of the realists is that the things that we only cognize in mediation, through relations, are also things

⁶⁴⁸ Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling *Historisch-kritische Ausgabe*, Werke, Band 13, p.105.

in their own right.⁶⁴⁹ However, Schelling's account is also correct in the sense that, for the most part, for the realists philosophical accounts of things are limited to relational types of accounts, meaning that they believe that any claim about external objects also expresses an implicit claim about our (subjective) internal conceiving of this object, from which the claim about externality cannot be satisfactorily untangled. If one was a relative realist in Schelling's sense, the kind that Krug dubbed relativistic, it would mean that one could not assert the 'general value' of reason, truth, morality, religion and so forth. Realists like Jacobi and Herder do, however, assert the general value of things like reason,⁶⁵⁰ truth, morality and religion, their approach to these topics is atypical in the sense that they locate the generality of their value only in the necessity of subjectivity or, as they would prefer to call it, rationality. This means that they are critical of explanatory accounts that claim to cognize an outside of sets of relations. Conversely, Schelling is unwilling to accept these strictures of structuring claims in philosophy, and therefore concludes that they are unable to present a comprehensive structural explanation of the sort absolute idealism is supposed to give.

We can see that relativism is, in this debate, ingrained within the way the realists have put forward their position, especially in their claims that relations are precisely what is important and fundamental rather than isolated things-in-themselves. Krug's response, though terse, is representative of how a realist would respond: rejecting the consequence and drawing on a different type of proof or demonstration in order to show that

⁶⁴⁹ This may be a bit of an over-simplification for Jacobi's case, because he would not so much hold that the objects that we discern through relations have a thing-in-itself counterpart, but rather that we must assume these discernible relations reflect actual things because they derive from immediate perception (and this assumption has practical relevance, Cf. chapter 4).

⁶⁵⁰ For an account of how Jacobi changed his characterization of reason see chapter 2 and 4.

the scope is in fact much larger. Interestingly, there is a certain similarity between the charge of *relativism* and the charge of *nihilism*. The term ‘relativism’, seems to have been coined by Krug, as far as I can tell. The charge of relativism was raised by idealists against the realists, in order to show that realism is ultimately unable to theoretically take up the core concerns of philosophy. Nihilism is, on the other hand, aimed at idealists by realists in order to show that idealism is ultimately unable to practically take up into the core concerns of philosophy.⁶⁵¹ And in fact both positions are advocating the *same* concerns. Although in this case the debate is about theory versus practice, this homology reoccurs many times within the debates between idealists and realists around 1800. This makes it, at times, difficult to show that the debate is in the end about philosophical content or method. It is possible to show that the realists and the idealists did in fact differ in terms of content and methods, but their public debates often don’t bear this out (and the same is true of many of the idealists). One of the reasons for this might be found in the fact that, as I have shown in chapter 2, from the outset, the realists use many arguments that we are now used to identifying with idealists.

⁶⁵¹ Krug repeats Jacobi’s claim that idealism ultimately leads to nihilism in his *Handbuch der Philosophie und der Philosophischen Literatur*, Dritte Auflage (1828), Band 1, p.53. Also, much earlier in *Briefe über den neuesten Idealismus* (1801), p.65, although he did not make explicit reference to Jacobi.

6. Realism around 1800 and realism in the 19th century

The previous chapters have expounded on key moments in the historical and systematic development of realism around 1800. Given this extended period of realist activity (spanning some forty years in which they critically engaged with some of the most intense discussions in German philosophy), as well as their contributions to the conceptualization of the discipline of philosophy and philosophical methodology, the reader might be left wondering why such a remarkable position has been more or less forgotten. This chapter will attempt to answer this question. But I can only sketch an outline of an answer, since the reasons for it are so complex that a book-length study could easily be devoted to it. Sadly, we must leave the impact the realists had on national contexts other than the German states unexamined, although we can remark that it appears that any impact of the realist authors has only been incidental and that the realist context of their position is mostly disregarded. Instead, this impact mainly occurs through a reception of their individual views on specialized subjects than anything like the inheritance of a realist school of philosophy.

Any account of a tradition that forgets a significant part of its history can only be given in a *longue-durée* perspective, at the very least. In order to provide an answer that satisfies the reader in a general historical sense, covering a period that roughly reaches from the mid to the last decades of the 19th century, we will focus on three key aspects. First (which will be the most expansive issue to consider), we will investigate how the dominant historiographies treat the realists during this period. My organizing principle here is the way in which the historiographies of philosophy that had the largest amount of impact on the scholarly community dealt with the realists. Obviously, this approach has limitations, most notably it has scant predictive capabilities, but I consider it to be the best approach for a short outline of how the ideas of the realists around

1800 were presented to those who were no longer their immediate contemporaries nor would readily have their works available. Secondly I will present some of the ways in which ‘Realismus’ became a *contested* label during this period. Finally, we will discuss a case study from the late 19th century, to wit the discussion between Eduard von Hartmann and Julius Hermann von Kirchmann concerning realism, in order to determine just how much of the systematic complexity of realism around 1800 can still be found in these late discussions about realism. As we’ll see, the discussion introduces notions of realism that are very similar to modern notions of naïve realism and transcendental realism, while still raising some arguments which are typically associated with the negative realism around 1800.

In terms of dominant historiographies, it is difficult to find more influential accounts than those written within the Hegelian and Schellingian schools. Because it is difficult to speak about the intentions of entire schools of philosophy, I shall focus instead on a few particularly influential textbooks.

1. Hegel’s and Schelling’s historiographies of the history of philosophy

During the first half of the 19th century, the Hegelian and Schellingian schools gained a large degree of influence and popularity. Hegel and Schelling’s historiography of the history of philosophy can arguably be read as being at least partially concerned with establishing and maintaining the superiority of their own thought in comparison with other authors. As we have seen in the early years of establishing their position, Hegel and Schelling clashed with the realists without publicly (that is, textually) recognizing that they were clashing with them as a group. Instead, they attacked the realists individually in the *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie*. The historiographies of Hegel and Schelling still bear some distinctive marks of this early approach. For one, there is no

recognition of the realists, neither *as realists* nor as a group of allied authors. Many of the realists remain unmentioned. They both discuss Jacobi but now ascribe different labels to his position than that of realism, several of which will become the standard way of describing Jacobi's position during the rest of the 19th century. In the way in which they incorporate Jacobi into their account of the history of philosophy, Hegel and Schelling's approaches have not essentially changed since the days of the *Kritisches Journal der Philosophie*: Jacobi is characterized as distinct from their own position but in a way which necessarily leads up to their own position. This strategy has the virtue that it evokes a sense of modesty, since Hegel and Schelling's own position is presented as merely building on Jacobi and other predecessors, while also, covertly, profoundly distorting and obfuscating Jacobi's position especially in his criticism of *their* respective positions. This is somewhat disingenuous because Jacobi was not only their predecessor, but also their contemporary, who directly or indirectly (for instance through other realists like Köppen) offered important criticisms of their positions. The overall effect of this approach is that the systematic complexity of Jacobi's negative realism completely disappears from the recounting.

In the version of Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie* from 1825-26, the treatment of Jacobi is fairly scant.⁶⁵² Hegel limits his comments to volume 4 of Jacobi's *Werke* concerned with the *SB*, but he accurately represents Jacobi's core argument concerning the inconceivability of the unconditioned, which in turn necessitates the conclusion that we can grasp reality only *immediately*. Hegel characterizes Krug and Bouterwek as 'dead imitators' or 'thieves' with regard to Kant, Fichte and Schelling, unwilling to recognize any original contribution they might have

⁶⁵² Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel *Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*, Band 9, p.167.

made nor their debt to Jacobi's work.⁶⁵³ We find a greatly extended discussion of Jacobi in the 1823-24 version of the *Vorlesungen*, which was used by Karl Ludwig Michelet as the main basis of the modern philosophy part of the lectures. This text was compiled from several versions of the course and was, since it was published in 1836, likely greatly influential for any self-described Hegelian or anyone interested in Hegel's philosophy who could not attend Hegel's lectures.⁶⁵⁴

This edition shows Hegel expanding his discussion of Jacobi to volume 2 and 3 of the *Werke*. Hegel emphasizes the connection made by Jacobi between God and the unconditioned and, consequently, the interconnection between thought and belief.⁶⁵⁵ The ultimate pay-off for Hegel in introducing thought into the Jacobian position is that he can now claim that immediate knowledge always involves mediated knowledge, because it is grasped in thought. This typically Hegelian argumentative strategy disregards the fact that Jacobi in fact goes through great pains to never characterize any kind of immediacy as "knowledge", because the precepts of negative realism make affirming this connection impossible. Such a move would lead to nihilism, since it incorporates immediacy into every act of the understanding, and does not retain the spontaneity of immediacy that bids us to conceptually understand the world in order to act freely with regard

⁶⁵³ *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*, Band 9, pp.160-1. A debt that they themselves generally downplayed, but which should be obvious to anyone familiar with Jacobi's realism.

⁶⁵⁴ One can, of course, raise questions as to Michelet's hand in the bringing together of the different versions of the lectures. However, since our primary concern is influential historiographies and their influence, this edition suffices as what passed for Hegelianism under Michelet, who was one of the most well known defenders of Hegelianism during this time. Michelet published the text in *Hegel Sämtliche Werke*, Band 15. Likely due to the fact that many of the material that was available to Michelet has been lost, his edition contains material that has not been published in the new critical edition.

⁶⁵⁵ *Hegel Sämtliche Werke*, Band 15, p.545.

to it. Without this specific component there is no reason why we would go on reflecting on new things.

Whether Hegel is purposefully redescribing Jacobi's position here or not, the effect of this approach gives the impression that Jacobi claims that we have immediate knowledge, which he then refuses to recognize outside the realm ascribed to belief. To someone only exposed to this reading this must appear to be a patent contradiction within Jacobi's position. We will shortly see that this Hegelian distortion of Jacobi's argument returns in Michelet's own works. One of the effects of this reading of Jacobi is that his negative realism is completely disregarded, which leaves Jacobi open to Hegel's accusation that he is not a sufficiently critical philosopher. Another persistent mischaracterization of Jacobi's position that can be found throughout Hegel's entire account is the conflation of feeling and belief, which facilitates his claim that Jacobi's immediacy involves knowledge. As we have seen, this way of criticizing Jacobi by denying terminological distinctions dates at least as far back as Reinhold's *Briefe*. Whereas belief always involves determinations and is therefore the core of any particular epistemic claim, according to Jacobi, feeling is general and merely receptive and does not involve any determinations, nor can we legitimately reconstruct how feeling becomes something that we are able to believe in. Feeling, whether related to the ethical drive or to the *Anstoß* of experience, remains a merely formal (that is, indirect, contentless) way of designating something that is inaccessible in terms of cognitive acts or the understanding, yet must be presupposed on the basis of the functioning of the cognitive process itself. Hegel's conflation of the two misrecognizes the negative realism that lies at the core of this distinction between these terms.

Turning towards Schelling's *Zur Geschichte der neueren Philosophie*, we discover similar strategies in dealing with Jacobi. This

was first published in 1861.⁶⁵⁶ Schelling's text exerted a large influence on popular conceptions of Jacobi after Hegelianism started to wane. Instead of characterizing Jacobi as a realist, Schelling describes him under the label 'Theosophie', in reference to a striving for divine wisdom. Like Hegel, Schelling is primarily focused on Jacobi's characterization of God as immediate. Both Hegel and Schelling seem to conceive of immediacy as a singular process, whereas Jacobi's negative realism introduces it at several points where reflection cannot venture beyond its limits. This is an important point that actually shows the incommensurable methodologies between Schelling/Hegel and Jacobi. Jacobi is led to determine the limits of the understanding *by virtue of* the understanding. He would likely contend that there is nothing that would legitimate us to bring various kinds of immediacies together without introducing an artificial abstraction that has no root in the matter involved. Unlike Hegel and Schelling, Jacobi never takes immediacies that emerge in different contexts (such as, revelation, drive, etc.) as the same things. He does not let our concept of immediacy dictate whether these immediate affections are the same.

In particular, as we have seen, this move would constitute a subsuming of immediacy under mediacy. For instance, revelation and God need not be construed as the same sort of thing for the negative realist, merely because we must consider both terms under the title of immediacy. Conversely, Hegel and Schelling would likely pretend that they are doing the obverse. This subsuming of different types of immediacies within one concept of immediacy would forget how we arrived at these three distinct immediacies in the first place. Judging by his references, Schelling seems to derive Jacobi's position from three texts: *SB*, *DH* and *Jacobi an Fichte*. He likely did not follow Jacobi's intended sequence of reading the *Werke*, as we outlined in chapter 4. Given the fact that the distinctness of these immediacies in Jacobi's position has to be

⁶⁵⁶ *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke*, Band 10.

reconstructed from such a developmental reading, it is understandable that neither Hegel nor Schelling pick up on it. Consequently, Schelling's characterization of Jacobi as a theosophist proceeds through the assumption that Jacobi advocated belief in an absolutely external God that somehow can only be intuited through immediate feeling.⁶⁵⁷ Although Jacobi's philosophy 'instead of really attacking the knowledge which displeases it, completely gives way to it, by withdrawing into non-knowing, with the assurance that only in not-knowing does salvation lie',⁶⁵⁸ Schelling still takes Jacobi to be a precursor to his own commitment to a historical philosophy⁶⁵⁹ and calls him 'perhaps the most instructive personality in the whole history of modern philosophy'.⁶⁶⁰

Overall, Hegel and Schelling's relationship to Jacobi was intensely complex, given how important his works were for their own philosophical development, and given the bad blood that resulted from the vicious attacks that the realist and speculative camps exchanged. For this reason, they could be excused from not recognizing and discussing Jacobi's position in its most complete systematic form. It is likely that very few readers of these historiographies would have started an extensive study of Jacobi's position, based on these accounts. Nor would they have readily identified Jacobi, or any other related author, with realism. Thus just taking up the historiographies of Hegel and Schelling, we could imagine, might likely lead to a general forgetfulness of Jacobi's negative realism and its advocates around 1800.

⁶⁵⁷ *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke*, Band 10, p.166.

⁶⁵⁸ *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke*, Band 10, p.167.

⁶⁵⁹ *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke*, Band 10, p.168.

⁶⁶⁰ *Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schellings sämtliche Werke*, Band 10, p.168.

2. Michelet

We will now turn to Michelet, who edited Hegel's texts and co-founded the Philosophische Gesellschaft in Berlin in 1843. The Philosophische Gesellschaft is an interesting society because it brought together philosophers of many different schools. Michelet's publications and presentations at this society, moreover, show that he dissents from Hegel's estimation of Jacobi in an important way. The reasons for this can be found in the fact that he believes that Jacobi's thought lies behind most of his own philosophical opponents: 'the Jacobian philosophy of belief [Glaubensphilosophie] is our most widespread enemy'.⁶⁶¹ This turning of Jacobi's philosophy into a veritable epidemic (a characterization that we coincidentally only really find in Michelet's writings) is supported by the fact that, in Michelet's estimation, Fichte and Schelling submitted to Jacobian skepticism in the end, presumably "infecting" all of their students. As I have argued in chapter 5, there is a grain of truth to this claim, however remote, although mere skepticism is far from an apt description of the negative realism that Fichte's work incorporated. Despite this almost epidemiological depiction of Jacobian philosophy, Michelet also feels compelled to universalize Hegel's philosophical development, when he claims that we all start out as philosophers of belief and then 'return to the immediate unity' through the dialectical method. Jacobi's position, in his view, is thus a regressive stage *within* for Hegelian philosophy.

It is important to note that Michelet sees his own time as completely devoid of innovations in systematic philosophy:

Kant, Jacobi, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel. They are the representatives of all schools of thought that interest and divide the philosophical public today. Beyond them there is almost no originality, there

⁶⁶¹ 'Wo stehen wir jetzt in der Philosophie?' in *Der Gedanke* (1867), p.9.

is no breakthrough of a new principle to be found.⁶⁶²

Michelet's preoccupation with Jacobian philosophy compels him to construct a more refined depiction of Jacobi's influence than Hegel ever did or needed to do, devoting a large section of the first volume of his *Geschichte der letzten Systeme der Philosophie in Deutschland von Kant bis Hegel* (1837) to the philosophy of belief. However, the fact that he sees Jacobian philosophy, as a philosophy of belief, represented everywhere among his contemporaries leads him to cast too wide a net, and he thus counts not only Bouterwek and Krug, but also Fries and his student Friedrich Calter as part of the Jacobian school.⁶⁶³ Additionally, he adds Hamann and Herder to Jacobi's peers.

A relative novelty of Michelet's historiography is his extensive treatment of Herder's *Metakritik*. The actual contents of these treatments do not extend much further than summaries, but his choices are nonetheless innovative for this period. In the end, Michelet's criticism is merely a repetition of Hegel's: the philosophers of belief consistently mistake the speculative for the understanding, ceasing to continue the labor of conceptual thought where it still has plenty of work to carry out.⁶⁶⁴ Such a criticism shows that Michelet's study of Jacobian philosophy of belief does not offer any insight into his negative realism either.

An amusing example of the difference in methodologies of the speculative and realist approaches can be found in volume 1 of Michelet's *System der Philosophie als Exacter Wissenschaft* (1876). Here he takes issue with Jacobi's claim that a cognized God is not a God at all, by introducing the Hegelianism that this claim implicitly includes a cognition of God (albeit negatively). As was previously

⁶⁶² *Geschichte der letzten Systeme der Philosophie in Deutschland von Kant bis Hegel*, Band 1 (1837) p.8.

⁶⁶³ *Geschichte der letzten Systeme*, pp.388,398,412,423.

⁶⁶⁴ *Geschichte der letzten Systeme*, p.358.

mentioned, this claim completely misses the point of Jacobi's careful use of cognition [Erkenntnis] as not being able to have consciously reproducible access to the immediate. Michelet uses the argument to conclude that only a cognizable God can be a God at all. He puts forward an analogy between the philosopher and the wine lover in order to illustrate the proper conduct of a philosopher, to show that a commitment to philosophy involves a commitment to cognition. Surely, a lover of wine who stands before a bottle of wine would empty it, he contends.⁶⁶⁵ Oddly enough then, to Michelet's mind, the lover of wine is more akin to an alcoholic than a connoisseur. By analogy, this would make the speculative philosopher akin to someone who loves wine *too much*, without moderation. It is not hard to imagine how a realist might have responded to this analogy, which certainly does not do Michelet's analogy or his argument any favors.

3. *Sons of the fathers: the younger Fichte and younger Reinhold*

Interesting cases in the historiography of the history of philosophy with regard to the realists are provided by Immanuel Hermann Fichte and Ernst Reinhold, who are both profoundly influenced by Hegel's account and, like Hegel and Schelling themselves, had a personal connection to the developments surrounding idealism and realism, due to the role played in that drama by their fathers. Since both Fichte and Reinhold had at least a period of appreciation for realism around 1800, one might expect their sons to be able to offer a more refined historiography. For some aspects of their work this is the case, but much of it still seems to be dominated by Hegelian historiography.

The younger Fichte's methodology in *Beiträge zur Charakteristik der neueren Philosophie zu Vermittlung ihrer Gegensätze* (1829) is strongly influenced by his father, in that he attempts to

⁶⁶⁵ *System der Philosophie als Exacter Wissenschaft*, Band 1 (1976), pp.8-9.

resolve disjunctions through their elucidation. This leads him to present an account of the history of philosophy, including a reading of Kant (after whom he was named) which is greatly influenced by Jacobi, in pointing toward the lack of recourse that consciousness has to “the true” and the need for the ‘immediate dicta of *belief* and *hunches* [Ahnung]’ offered by practical postulates.⁶⁶⁶ In his own way, the younger Fichte is also convinced that in ‘recent times’ there have been many attempts to wed Kant and Jacobi’s positions. He does not elaborate on this, but likely he is referring to psychological authors like Fries and Beneke.⁶⁶⁷ Ultimately, he declares this entire project to be impossible.⁶⁶⁸ Like virtually all readings of Jacobi at the time, the younger Fichte also assumes that Jacobi is committed to an absolutely external God.⁶⁶⁹ It is noteworthy too that the younger Fichte recognizes the problems with which Jacobi was concerned as ‘knots’, as dealing with a set of insoluble problems.⁶⁷⁰ In addition to this, he refers to many of the realists in passing (Rückert, Jean Paul, Bouterwek, Reinhold), showing that he does not share Hegel’s and Schelling’s divide-and-conquer approach to philosophy’s recent history in Germany. In the end, the younger Fichte’s approach to the history of philosophy is strongly Hegelian, although this aspect only emerges in his conclusions.⁶⁷¹

Volume 2 of Ernst Reinhold’s *Geschichte der Philosophie nach den Hauptmomenten ihrer Entwicklung* (1845) shows its Hegelian roots much more quickly through the criticism that it offers in rejecting Krug’s position as a superficial and popularized version of Kant’s

⁶⁶⁶ *Beiträge zur Charakteristik der neueren Philosophie zu Vermittlung ihrer Gegensätze* (1829), p.162.

⁶⁶⁷ For an analysis of these authors and their debt to Kant and Jacobi, see Beiser (2014).

⁶⁶⁸ *Beiträge zur Charakteristik*, p.164.

⁶⁶⁹ *Beiträge zur Charakteristik*, p.194.

⁶⁷⁰ *Beiträge zur Charakteristik*, p.210.

⁶⁷¹ Immanuel Fichte attended Hegel’s lectures.

epistemological work.⁶⁷² He also describes Krug's position as a 'doctrine of knots' [Verknüpfungslehre].⁶⁷³ In addition to this, he also remarks that in Bouterwek's position reason knots the appearance of the external world to the cognizing subject and offers no criticism of this position. He does not recognize that this is also Jacobi's view. On the one hand, Ernst Reinhold's inclusion of Krug and Bouterwek in relation to these ideas of an inconceivable knotting shows too that he is better informed about the realist group than most of his contemporaries, perhaps due to information that his father imparted to him. On the other hand, his exposure to Jacobi seems to have been fairly limited and rather typical of his time and, as we've seen in chapter 2, his also typical of his father's approach, since he only focuses on Jacobi's critical texts, which leads him to conclude that Jacobi merely offered criticism and did not develop his own position⁶⁷⁴ (we have seen that a comprehensive reading of Jacobi's *Werke* contradicts these conclusions. Whereas the younger Fichte reads Kant through a Jacobian lens, Ernst Reinhold seems to do the obverse (reading Jacobi merely as a critic of Kant), which would become the norm of reading Jacobi for the later neo-kantian tradition.

4. Kuno Fischer

We now turn to the most committed scholar of the history of philosophy during this period: Kuno Fischer, whose research spanned philosophy in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. His reading of Jacobi changes subtly throughout his career. In *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie: Erster Band, Das classische Zeitalter der dogmatischen*

⁶⁷² *Geschichte der Philosophie nach den Hauptmomenten ihrer Entwicklung* Band 2 (1845), pp.236-237.

⁶⁷³ *Geschichte der Philosophie*, p.236.

⁶⁷⁴ *Geschichte der Philosophie*, p.240.

Philosophie (1854),⁶⁷⁵ Fischer follows Jacobi's conclusions in a characteristically German idealist (that is, Hegelian and Schellingian) way: all philosophy necessarily leads to pantheism, but this is not an insurmountable problem, because it leads us to the most consistent form of philosophy. Like virtually every historiographical account during this time that mentions Jacobi, Fischer is convinced that Jacobi offers theism as the alternative to pantheism, which ultimately leads Fischer to read him as opposing religion to philosophy.⁶⁷⁶ I have argued in chapters 2 and 4 that Jacobi's position is in fact much more complex and at the very least we can say that it doesn't glorify religion over philosophy, even though a reading of the first edition of the *SB* might give this impression. It is curious that Fischer is still committed to this reading, which, as we have seen, was popularized by Reinhold in his *Briefe über die Kantische Philosophie* in *Der Deutsche Merkur*. We find a similar reading in Schelling's *Denkmal der Schrift von den göttlichen Dingen* (1812), which might have been Fischer's source for this reading, although it is also implied in Hegel's reading of Jacobi.

Starting in 1858, Fischer evidently abandons this thesis, and starts to construe Jacobi's position as realism.⁶⁷⁷ This reading receives its most thorough exposition in *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie, Band 5: Fichte und seine Vorgänger* (1869). Fischer recognizes that he has previously treated Jacobi merely as a 'philosopher of belief and feeling' and now seeks to examine Jacobi as an opponent of critical philosophy.⁶⁷⁸

His task, which is generated from a mental need,
is directed towards *one* point: towards the of itself

⁶⁷⁵ Which was first published as *Vorlesungen über Geschichte der neueren Philosophie. Abteilung I: Einleitung in das Studium der Philosophie* (1852).

⁶⁷⁶ *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie, Band 1, Das classische Zeitalter der dogmatischen Philosophie*, p.307.

⁶⁷⁷ *De Realismo et Idealismo* (1858), p.3

⁶⁷⁸ *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie, Band 5: Fichte und seine Vorgänger* (1869), p.187.

and in itself true, the originary, unconditioned and therefore towards existence [Daseins] independent from our representations.⁶⁷⁹

In general, Jacobi's greatest strength lies in the negative; his position stands out most clearly in opposition and annihilation [Verneinung]. He has the need and the power to see the way of thinking that is opposed to him through to the ground and to let himself be deceived by nothing that seems accommodating towards agreement in this.⁶⁸⁰

These two characterizations of Jacobi's approach, the fact that he is oriented towards the true that is prior to all products of cognition and the fact that this expresses itself negatively, in showing the ways in which we cannot relate to this originary reality, could have lead Fischer to an understanding of Jacobi's negative realism. However, the way he describes these points ('mental need', 'the need') suggests that he believes that these two fundamental aspects of Jacobi's position are characteristics of his own peculiar personality. The reading of the appendix to *DH* that follows shows that Fischer is no longer committed to his earlier reading of Jacobi, as he now argues that Jacobi is not a mystic, pietist or believer in authority.⁶⁸¹ Over and against this, he emphasizes the importance of Jacobi's position with regards to critical philosophy:

If we do not depart from reality, but from our representations, it will be impossible to get into reality [Wirklichkeit]. We have barred our way. We are caught in the net of our own forms of cognition, our concepts, which refer to intuitions [Anschauungen] that themselves stand under the

⁶⁷⁹ *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie, Band 5: Fichte und seine Vorgänger*, p.188.

⁶⁸⁰ *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie, Band 5: Fichte und seine Vorgänger*, p.188.

⁶⁸¹ *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie, Band 5: Fichte und seine Vorgänger*, pp.195-196.

forms of our sensibility and, in this perspective, under form and content (perception), are thoroughly subjective.⁶⁸²

In facing this problematic, in Fischer's reading, we are confronted with nihilism. He recognizes that Jacobi argues for a realism in order to escape this nihilism, but remarks that it is ultimately only an *illusion of realism*.⁶⁸³

Against critical idealism Jacobi affirms realism, whose theme [Thema] is the veritably actual [wirkliche], originary being, that is being in itself. On this point the post-Kantian realists, especially the Herbartians, can agree. Yet Jacobi affirms being as an object, not as a metaphysical cognition, but in an immediately grounded belief in the feeling, which is natural to us. This belief has a supersensible object and an anthropological root. This is the meeting point and the family resemblance between Jacobi and Fries. That reality as such manifests to us in truth, cannot be mediated through our subjective forms of cognition, but can only occur through immediate revelation. The whole primal source [Urquelle] is God himself.⁶⁸⁴

This criticism makes it abundantly clear that one of Fischer's main goals is to criticize Fries, and that he went back to his Jacobian commitments in order to do this. This gives Fischer's criticism of Jacobi a decisively Friesian slant, leaving Jacobi's own position somewhat distorted. For instance, Jacobi is not concerned with anthropology, or a supersensible object to the detriment of sensible

⁶⁸² *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie, Band 5: Fichte und seine Vorgänger*, p.199.

⁶⁸³ *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie, Band 5: Fichte und seine Vorgänger*, p.209.

⁶⁸⁴ *Geschichte der neuern Philosophie, Band 5: Fichte und seine Vorgänger*, pp.211-212.

objects, yet these are topics of Fries' works on anthropology and religion. Nonetheless, Fischer seems unwilling to accept the connection between reality and the self, which itself is understandable since *DH* does not develop this connection as clearly as other works do. As we will see when considering the semantic shift attached to "realism" as a label, Fischer's conception of realism is connected to Bacon's tradition, which means that he is predisposed to see reality as an objective feature as opposed to subjective idealism. Likely because he is caught between these oppositions, Fischer concludes that Jacobi's variety of realism is illusory in the sense that it does not succeed in establishing cognitive contact with reality.

5. Fries and Apelt

As has already become clear from Michelet's and Fischer's accounts, psychologists like Fries, Herbart and Beneke were seen as having a special relationship with the realists around 1800. None of them would characterize themselves as being a realist in Jacobi's sense, and they speak very little about realists other than Jacobi. Jakob Friedrich Fries is the only among these psychologistic authors who was actively publishing while Jacobi was still alive, and Jacobi approvingly cited him in the preface to the second volume of his *Werke*, which might have led to the widespread idea that Fries was connected to the realists.⁶⁸⁵ This likely made Fries feel that he had to prove that his position was superior to Jacobi's. In volume 2 of his *Die Geschichte der Philosophie* (1840) Fries lets the history of philosophy culminate in Kant and delegates Jacobi and Reinhold (the elder) to 'new great regresses', clearly showing his intent to do Kantian philosophy as well as his disdain for Jacobi and Reinhold.⁶⁸⁶ He then completely dismisses the discussion

⁶⁸⁵ *Jacobi Werke Gesamtausgabe*, Band 2, p.380.

⁶⁸⁶ *Die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Band 2 (1840), p.633.

between the realists and the idealists by declaring these labels themselves to be false distinctions:

In this incertitude of the notion, a dispute between idealism and realism is brought about, in which they mistake Kant's empirical idealism for transcendental idealism or illusion [Schein] for appearance [Erscheinung]. On the one hand, like with Fichte, an idealism is asserted, in which the I must posit his world at the same time as he cognizes himself. On the other hand, it is claimed, like with Jacobi, that there is a realism in competition with Kant's transcendental idealism, because, in truth, cognition can only consist in the cognition of things-in-themselves, while one mistakes the transcendental idealism with some kind of empirical [idealism] or, for that matter, with the skepticism of Aenesidemus[.]

Since Fries' main opponents at this point are still the idealists, he clearly attempts to discredit the idealist approach within a post-Kantian framework. Due to the fact that Jacobi is bound up (albeit critically) in the tradition of the transcendental idealism as initiated by Kant, Fries appears to be committed to dismissing the entire distinction between this kind of idealism and a Jacobian realism. In this, Fries follows Ernst Reinhold's assessment that Jacobi did not have a tenable position of his own: 'I have to be untrue to my friend Jacobi here, since I support Ernst Reinhold in the claim that he ultimately does not further the history of philosophy'.⁶⁸⁷

Like Kant before him, Fries was now involved in the kind of school-building which gives us cause to be suspicious of his account of the history of philosophy. He claims that Jacobi, as a

⁶⁸⁷ *Die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Band 2 (1840), p.645.

mystic, is not essential to the history of philosophy at that point in time (whereas in previous ages, mystics were essential):⁶⁸⁸

it pleased him to beautify his philosophical matters of the heart [Herzens-angelegenheiten] rhetorically, to defend them rhetorically and so he used his doctrine of belief particularly for the defense of belief in a higher divine truth. Although he was a staunch enemy of all mysticism, with this he involved himself in a mystic way of philosophizing nonetheless, and befriended himself with that ostensible spiritual dark speaking [geistreichen Dunkelsprecherei] for which people praise Hamann, and which, in a lovable way, passes into humorous poetry [Dichtung] in Claudius and Herder for instance, but also becomes too bothersome for the established scientific thinker, with the proverbs that, when they are meant philosophically, are neither true nor false.⁶⁸⁹

In this attack Fries displays exactly the kind of polemical emphasis on “clarity” and “scientificity” which would later be found in the rhetorical arsenal of the neo-kantians.⁶⁹⁰ The argumentative force of this renunciation is the same as Ernst Reinhold’s: Jacobi should only be valued for his criticism of Kant in the appendix to *DH*, but the rest of his work is deemed unimportant.

Fries’ student Ernst Friedrich Apelt elaborated on this characterization of Jacobi as a mystic in the second volume of the *Abhandlungen der Fries’schen Schule* (1847). He observes that one of

⁶⁸⁸ *Die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Band 2 (1840), p.645.

⁶⁸⁹ *Die Geschichte der Philosophie*, Band 2 (1840), p.646.

⁶⁹⁰ I do not deny that Fries had a conception of what science should be, but I merely want to point out the polemical effect of a historiography of the history of philosophy that utilizes these arguments.

Jacobi's key point was that there are different kinds of conviction in the human mind than those evoked by 'scholastic metaphysics'.⁶⁹¹ He then claims that Jacobi did not delve into the ground of these different convictions but rather took them on faith. Such a criticism might be true if one reads only the first edition of the *SB*, but a look at Jacobi's *Werke*, however, reveals that Jacobi did just what Apelt suggests he do, particularly in the second edition of the *SB*. It would be a fair criticism to level against Jacobi that he did not delve into convictions *enough*, but to say that he did not delve into it *at all* is plainly incorrect. It does not matter whether Apelt is consciously neglecting other works of Jacobi to strengthen his criticism or not: this episode shows that there was apparently a vested polemical interest for the Friesian school in distancing themselves from Jacobi. Apelt follows the standard account of the Friesian school in objecting to Jacobi's suggestion that there is a discontinuity between Kant, on the one hand, and Fichte and Schelling, on the other, in order to preserve the Kantian legacy exclusively for Fries.⁶⁹² Apelt also repeats Fries' polemical point that Jacobi does not understand the 'scientific' point of view, which he tries to nuance by the claim that Jacobi does not understand the 'essence of reflection'.⁶⁹³

The point of contention here is Jacobi's unwillingness to attribute truth to the propositions produced by reflection. However, Jacobi's only criticism with respect to the functioning of reflection is actually that it is in service of a practical engagement with the world, rather than with the production of a system. Beyond this point, Jacobi prefers not to ascribe truth to reflective propositions, because such an approach would suggest that reflection is capable of an exhaustive account of the content of reality, while it in fact only concerns cognition that we can at best

⁶⁹¹ 'Bemerkungen über F.H. Jacobi und seine Lehre' in *Abhandlungen der Fries'schen Schule* (1847), Band 2, p.81.

⁶⁹² 'Bemerkungen über F.H. Jacobi und seine Lehre', p.84

⁶⁹³ 'Bemerkungen über F.H. Jacobi und seine Lehre', p.86.

take to be subjectively valid. On this point, Jacobi could not be further removed from the goals of the Friesian school.

On a different note, although it still firmly supports Fries' polemic, Apelt observes that Jacobi distinguishes between object-cognition and intellectual cognition and that the latter is only graspable in 'poetic imagery'. Ostensibly, this remark is designed to pair Jacobi more easily with the German idealists (who had their own problematic relationship to intellectual intuition and the "idea"), but it is formally incorrect because Jacobi reserves 'cognition' for the first category. However, the so-called 'intellectual cognition', which corresponds to Jacobi's feeling or receptiveness to immediacy, is consistently expressed in what can be described as poetic imagery (see the end of *DH*). It is remarkable how important metaphorical imagery is in the realist discourse. We might then, with Apelt, raise the question of what necessitates this strategy and what it has to offer.

A reason for this emphasis on metaphorical imagery can be found in the fact that any frame of direct reference that has a semblance of "concrete" determinacy would suggest that we have a knowledge of something that, according to the realist position, must remain inconceivable, and would leave Jacobi open to the criticism that he maintains an arbitrary distinction, since the inconceivable is evidently also conceivable. Poetic license appears to be Jacobi's way of getting around the problem of communicating the problem that a more direct referential structure would immediately invoke a sense of determinacy, which is exactly the opposite of what Jacobi attempts to evoke. What is 'immediate' refers either to the receptivity that makes determinacy *possible*, or to the *feeling* we have of this process. To a certain degree, Jacobi's poetic expressions are designed to avoid the direct frame of reference that might lead one to say that knowledge of the inconceivable is possible qua conceivable.

Here is an example. First of all, and almost trivially so, we're made to understand that there is no actual "knot", made of twine or rope, at the core of a human being. That does not mean that we wholly discard this talk of knots within the frame of reference to concrete determinate particulars. Naturally, confusion can arise as to deciding what exact sense we are supposed to retain from a poetic metaphor. The knot seems to be used only in the sense that seemingly disparate elements come together in an irresolvable way. So what is meant if we are to *translate the metaphor into more literal discourse* is that the knot is composed of multiple ends that, for some reason, hold together. The risk involved in the use of a metaphor in order to communicate conceptual content (which for whatever reason cannot occur through literal direct reference) is that it might invoke an unintended sense, which was, unexpectedly, connected to the original instance of direct reference. In this regard, Fries and Apelt have some cause for concern, although they show very little interest in examining the reasons behind Jacobi's use of metaphors, nor do they offer their own solution to the problem. The simple fact that Jacobi is committed to communicating something about the peculiarities of human existence through the use of metaphor hardly counts him among the mystics however, and his overarching program of negative realism remains far removed from mysticism. All of Jacobi's metaphors express something that we are supposed to be able to find in our own subjectivity, while the mystic attempts, always in vain (by nature of the subject matter), to express his own mystic experience of something *beyond* subjectivity, which the reader has no way of reproducing ostensibly by way of the mystic's writings.

6. Johann Friedrich Herbart and Friedrich Eduard Beneke

Johann Friedrich Herbart's opinion of Jacobi was predominantly critical. *Zur Lehre von der Freiheit des menschlichen Willens, Briefe an Herrn Professor Griepenkerl* (1836), which constitutes

his most sustained commentary on Jacobi, particularly on the first part of the second edition of the *SB*, describes him as a ‘dilettante to theory’ who got stuck in it like in a spider’s web.⁶⁹⁴ Like Fries, Herbart also objects to the supposed lack of clarity of Jacobi’s text.⁶⁹⁵ Herbart’s criticism seems to be mostly geared towards showing that his own reading of Spinoza is *better* than Jacobi’s however, and it remains unclear why Herbart is under the impression that this addition to *SB* is about Spinoza at all, since it mostly develops Jacobi’s own position in response to the early critical reading of the first edition which painted Jacobi as a religious zealot. Jacobi’s point in this second edition to *SB* rather was to integrate a determinate account of the cognitive content of determinate nature with the immediate sense of freedom. Herbart thus offers us very little by way of a proper conception of Jacobi’s project beyond the simple fact that he was a critic of Spinoza and certainly nothing in terms of Jacobi’s negative realism. The overall effect of Herbart’s reading is to solidify the characterization of Jacobi as a mere critic.

Friedrich Eduard Beneke is likely the only one among his popular contemporaries who undertook a complete reading of Jacobi’s *Werke*, as is evidenced in his long review of this edition in volume 14 of *Hermes oder kritisches Jahrbuch der Literatur* (1822). He reports having spent a full year studying the texts.⁶⁹⁶ He is also the only one of the figures we’ve discussed who is not committed to an historiography that places Jacobi’s philosophy in a subservient or unimportant role in philosophy’s grand history and claims that the history of Jacobi’s philosophy is also the history of the entire newer philosophy, thereby recognizing Jacobi’s influence in the first part

⁶⁹⁴ *Zur Lehre von der Freiheit des menschlichen Willens Briefe an Herrn Professor Griepenkerl* (1836), pp.119-120.

⁶⁹⁵ *Zur Lehre von der Freiheit*, p.124.

⁶⁹⁶ *Hermes oder kritisches Jahrbuch der Literatur* (1822), Band 14, p.264.

of the 19th century.⁶⁹⁷ So great is Beneke's appreciation of Jacobi that he later writes that he reveres him with 'the love of a child'.⁶⁹⁸

It would perhaps be most apt to describe Beneke as a middle point between Jacobi's philosophy and the type of Kantianism that can also be found in Fries, one that places a large emphasis on "scientificity". The Jacobian origin of some of Beneke's concepts becomes immediately evident in the latter's *Grundlegung zur Physik der Sitten* (1822), which is structured as a series of fictional letters to a Kantian. The first letter attempts to account for the special respect that Beneke held for Jacobi, whom he calls the greatest 'independent thinker' [Selbstdenker] next to Kant.⁶⁹⁹ Against the practical philosophies of Kant and Fichte, Beneke prefers Jacobi's approach, which places feeling at the ground of morality. Characteristic of Beneke's approach to bring Kant and Jacobi together is his insistence that the feeling involved should be transformed into a science.⁷⁰⁰ It is also characteristic of Beneke's approach that he never specifies what it would mean to transform feeling into a science. Beneke likely understood very little of Jacobi's negative realism, which is apparent in Beneke's review of Jacobi's *Werke* wherein he is often quick to dismiss what he sees as contradictions in Jacobi's position as hyperbole. Jacobi does not reserve feeling for the process of the ethical drive itself but for the limited sense that we have of the fact that we are receptive of an immediacy. If transformation into a science involves thoroughgoing and exhaustive determinations, Jacobi would vehemently oppose this attempt as interently reductive of the indeterminate immediacy of feeling to the determinacy of conceptual mediation.

Beneke's approach to Jacobi is fairly unique in one sense at least: it does not primarily focus on Jacobi's critical writings but

⁶⁹⁷ *Hermes*, p.257.

⁶⁹⁸ *Psychologische Skizzen*, Band 1 (1825), p.320.

⁶⁹⁹ *Grundlegung zur Physik der Sitten* (1822), pp.1-2.

⁷⁰⁰ *Grundlegung zur Physik der Sitten*, p.6.

rather on the passages in the novel *Woldemar* concerning ethics. He even recognizes the influence of Jacobi's ethics on Friedrich Köppen's *Vertraute Briefen über Bücher und Welt* (1820), which he praises.⁷⁰¹ Beneke's account also shows his disdain for German idealism, since he writes of Jacobi in volume 1 of *Psychologische Skizzen* (1825):

how clearly [Jacobi] presented in these writings, and expounded with such warm enthusiasm [Begeisterung]. Healthy human reason, like a shield of Medusa, flashed down [niederblitzte], those ghostly figures, which remained to it as those speculative nebulous figures.⁷⁰²

As important as he thought Jacobi's work was, Beneke here again emphasizes the need to carry it on in a 'scientific spirit', without explaining what this would be and why he believed Jacobi's work lacked such a spirit.

Overall, these disparate approaches share some features in their accounts of the realists: i) there is no reference to the realists as a group, ii) Jacobi is the primary focus, but rarely for his commitments to realism, iii) Jacobi is consistently discredited on putatively "scientific" grounds in favor of some other ostensibly more "scientific" idealist system or ideal psychological system. The repetition of these features throughout the 19th century likely goes a long way towards explaining why the account of the realists around 1800 as a group with a coherent position has been completely forgotten. Their texts were no longer read, and when they were read (e.g. Jacobi), it was in the garb of a critic and insightful free-thinker (a status that does not live up to the credibility as a fully scientific or rigorous philosophy), and neither were they read in

⁷⁰¹ *Grundlegung zur Physik der Sitten*, pp.309,325. Köppen himself had by now mostly abandoned direct references to Jacobi and especially his realism.

⁷⁰² *Psychologische Skizzen*, Band 1 (1825), p.321.

conjunction as jointly forming a “realist” camp around Jacobi’s doctrine of negative realism. Even more strikingly, when the realists are referred to at all, they are dutifully summarized and subsequently both assigned a diminutive role in the overall development of philosophy around 1800 and criticized according to discrete strategic goals of the author. Since realism became increasingly disconnected from Jacobi’s philosophy, the middle part of the 19th century saw “realism” become a contested label, largely independent of any connection to Jacobi or his ‘we realists’.

7. Realism as a contested label

A sign of the general confusion surrounding the use of the term ‘realism’ can be found in Adolf Helferich’s bewilderment and outright irritation concerning its pairing with idealism in *Spinoza und Leibniz; oder, das Wesen des Idealismus und Realismus* (1846):

The history of philosophy has created this peculiar expression and interpreted it in the most arbitrary way, which has not happened without the intent that it was not even found to be worth the effort to make oneself clear about it, about what these words actually mean. Furthermore, one assumes without further ado that the history of philosophy occurs between real and ideal boundary posts [Grenzpfeilen], while systems at one point are closer to the one and at another point to the other.⁷⁰³

It is perhaps a testimony to the ubiquity of idealism and realism in the mid-19th century accounts of the history of philosophy that, later in the book, Helferich also carves up the history of philosophy

⁷⁰³ *Spinoza und Leibniz; oder, das Wesen des Idealismus und Realismus* (1846), p.1.

according to idealism and realism, despite his explicit protestations, and argues that Leibniz brings both together.⁷⁰⁴ Helferich refers to Jacobi as someone who is against philosophy but not as a realist.⁷⁰⁵

Ten years later, we find exactly the same attempt to identify and demarcate such a tradition with regard to the history of philosophy in Kuno Fischer's *Franz Baco von Verulam. Die Realphilosophie und ihr Zeitalter* (1856), which it is worthwhile citing at length:

The theater of the new philosophy surmises [bildet] a battleground, on which two hostile to one another opposed schools of thought, *realism* and *idealism*, dispute for the right of truth. These schools of thought are not particular systems, but genera [Geschlechter] of philosophy, which could in no other age as the new age become so clearly conscious of its natural differences and develop this as sharply and distinctly. If one were to compare scientific opposites with dramatic opposites, then the realists and the idealists were similar to both hostile choirs in the drama of the new philosophy. They will not be quiet, these opposites, until their unification is successful: until the hostile, tense ways of thought are so penetrated, that they mutually satisfy one another. Each lives only for the lack and weakness of the other. To get rid of these limits is what it means to distinctly understand them, to recognize the power of the opposites and make them one's own. [...] Precisely considered, realism and idealism have, in their new origins, followed not parallel, but converging roads, that at the same time meet

⁷⁰⁴ *Spinoza und Leibniz* p.6.

⁷⁰⁵ *Spinoza und Leibniz* p.48, 104.

in a common end. This end, in which the idealist and realist schools of thought cross one another, like a zenith [Scheitelpunkte], was the *Kantian* philosophy. It has taken accounts of both schools of thought and has united them in elements. It has, from this perspective, as in all others, established a normative [maßgebenden] point of view, which must serve the subsequent philosophy as a guiding star. When one asks today ‘what does it mean to orient oneself in philosophy?’ one must answer: it means to study Kant, and most precisely! After him no renowned philosopher has emerged who was not both realist and idealist at the same time.⁷⁰⁶

The various analogies that Fischer compiles in this lengthy passage (theater, sexes, travelers, lines, etc.) show that he is, despite the Hegelian claims about the unity of opposites, similarly looking for a useful way to think about realism in relation to idealism. It also shows that for many authors with Kantian commitments, Kant’s empirical realism had become the sole point of reference for realism as a philosophical label. In essence, Fischer is continuing the same strategy as Helferich by seeking to dissolve the opposition between idealism and realism by claiming that we can point out at least *one* philosopher who has wedded the two together for time immemorial. It’s just that Fischer’s choice is Kant rather than Leibniz. More to the point, however, the implication that saying there has been no philosopher of renown who has not been both a realist and an idealist is likely an attack on Feuerbach, who notoriously attacked Hegel’s idealism and at least on some occasions claimed to be a realist in addition to a materialist.⁷⁰⁷ This

⁷⁰⁶ Franz Baco von Verulam *die Realphilosophie und ihr Zeitalter* (1856), pp.vii-ix.

⁷⁰⁷ On the whole, Feuerbach is influenced by Jacobi in a unique way, which is beyond the scope of this chapter to develop. We will limit ourselves to the remark that his realism, which ultimately seems to

might mean that the attempts to bring the dispute between idealism and realism to a close in the work of a supposedly indisputable author could be seen as an out of hand rejection of the various attempts to recuperate the “realist” label philosophically that were being made during this time. It is important to note that, despite Fischer’s attempts to conclude the animosity between idealism and realism, he does use realism as a historiographical tool in a far more liberal way than anyone had before him: in his account, modern realism now starts with Francis Bacon and the English tradition, which allows him to neatly divide up Kant’s influences into idealist and realist categories.⁷⁰⁸

The second edition of Feuerbach’s *Das Wesen des Christentums* (1841) includes a new preface in which Feuerbach states his aims succinctly: he is opposed to Hegelian philosophy and supports only realism and materialism. Although Feuerbach never fully develops if and in what ways his commitment to realism is distinct from his commitment to materialism, we find the tacit assumption that they are essentially the same even a few decades later in Ludwig Weiss’s *Idealrealismus und Materialismus* (1877). This is perhaps to suggest that it was common knowledge that Feuerbach sought to adopt the contested label for his own means. It is striking how realism was, though subject to semantic change, still considered to be a *valuable* philosophical label, which must not fall into hostile hands. One would expect a label that is considered historically and systematically meaningless and outdated to simply fall out of use. It is difficult to discern the reasons for this from the

amount to the same as his his materialism, is very different from a Jacobian negative realism. In connection with Feuerbach’s use, see Stirner’s *Das unwahre Princip unserer Erziehung; oder, Der Humanismus und Realismus* (1898), p.13: ‘To remove the priesthood amongst scholars and laity of the people is the striving of realism, and that is why it must surpass humanism’.

⁷⁰⁸ ‘Bacon’s philosophy is the lively and wholly spontaneous expression of realism’. *Franz Baco von Verulam die Realphilosophie und ihr Zeitalter* (1856), p.xiii.

19th century polemics, but one possible explanation for this might be the fact that, even though figures like Fischer and Feuerbach vehemently sought to disentangle themselves from the German idealist tradition, they were still, intellectually, greatly indebted to that tradition. Perhaps they simply could not shake off the conviction that the *words* used by their teachers held intrinsic meaning, so deeply had labels like realism and idealism had become engrained in their vocabularies.

This might also explain the way in which realism became applied in education and literature during the latter part of the century, seemingly without proper definition or rationale for its introduction. Christian von Dillmann speaks about an ephemeral ‘realistic spirit, only through which one is able to speak of the spirit of the century’ in exactly this popularized way.⁷⁰⁹ Due to the relative popularity and lack of clear meaning of ‘realism’ as a label, even attempts to revive Hegelianism now claimed that ‘Hegel was the realist par excellence’.⁷¹⁰ This state of the label did not escape late 19th century authors. Wilhelm Volkmann observes that ‘the notion of realism has lately lost its sharpness’.⁷¹¹ Still, this overall fluidity of realism as a label does not explain how it emerged out of the 19th century as associated modern notions of epistemological realism. In order to, in some small part, provide an illustration of this transformation, I will consider Julius von Kirchmann’s realism and Eduard von Hartmann’s criticism of it.

⁷⁰⁹ *Volksbildung nach den Forderungen des Realismus* (1862), p.1. For more realism in education see Heinsius (1842) and Kreyssig (1871). For literary realism see Klincksieck (1891) and Maydorn (1900).

⁷¹⁰ Hugo Spitzer, *Nominalismus und Realismus in der neuesten Deutschen Philosophie* (1876), p.22.

⁷¹¹ *Lehrbuch der Psychologie vom Standpunkt des Realismus und nach genetischer Methode* (1884), p.iii.

8. *Julius von Kirchmann and Eduard von Hartmann on realism*

Kirchmann and Hartmann are curious cases in that they managed to be reasonably successful philosophical authors without holding a university position. Kirchmann describes his realism as a science of experience in which philosophy is forced to abandon its hubristic attempts to cognize beyond perception. In Kirchmann's view, even if philosophy could accomplish such a cognition, it would fall silent in its attempts to communicate it.⁷¹² He is also opposed to attempts to bring realism and idealism together, in the way attempted by Michelet and Fischer:

Even now, attempts are made to bind together idealism and realism in an ideal-realism. I unfortunately hold these attempts to be in vain. They only serve to obfuscate the determinacy of either one's principles and to manufacture a cloudy mixture, or they use realism only as a means, to initially gain content and then do not shy away from erecting on top of this foundation, through pure thinking, a building made of hypotheses, which unfortunately through its magnitude flatters the pride of man, but remains a house of cards, which the wind of a new idealistic system will easily blow over. I believe therefore, that these connections of both systems will always have a short existence and, like oil and water, despite eager shaking, will always be separated from each other.⁷¹³

⁷¹² *Die Lehre vom Wissen als Einleitung in das Studium philosophischer Werke* (1871), p.89.

⁷¹³ 'Über den Streit der Systeme innerhalb der Philosophie' in *Verhandlungen der Philosophischen Gesellschaft zu Berlin*, viertes Heft (1876), p.59.

Remarkably, Kirchmann's attack on attempts to bring idealism and realism together occurs in order to maintain the *specificity* of both, which he believes to be naturally, even diametrically opposed, such that a proposed mixture of the two will inevitably fail. In his characterization of the key problem of philosophy as an answer to the question of how to get from being to knowledge, Kirchmann distinguishes four possible answers to this question:

- i) to keep both distinct, but attempt to isolate a special 'fracture' [Brücke] where one separates from the other
- ii) to deny that being is distinct from knowing and degrade being into a special kind of knowledge
- iii) the obverse, deny the distinction but degrade knowing into a special kind of being
- iv) to posit being as the same as knowing, while at the same time keeping both separated.⁷¹⁴

Position (i) is associated with 'old' philosophy (in the sense of Descartes and Leibniz), (ii) with the system of idealism in Berkeley, Kant, Fichte and Schopenhauer, (iii) with materialism and (iv) with the identity-philosophy of Schelling, Hegel and their students. Kirchmann is critical of his contemporaries in that he does not connect his realism to the last three positions, but rather opts for the first. Obviously, the first position also received the most sympathetic articulation, although it remains unclear how the fracture, which he defines as human perception [Wahrnehmung], relates to the distinction between being and knowledge that is upheld or rescinded in the other positions.⁷¹⁵ He makes it clear, however, that his realism is supposed to present a position of common-sense (although not of a common-sense *philosophy*):

⁷¹⁴ *Asthetik auf realistischer Grundlage*, Band 1 (1868), pp.1-2.

⁷¹⁵ *Asthetik auf realistischer Grundlage*, p.4.

It can be designated as realism and leads philosophy back to the natural foundations of how the representations and thinking of all peoples [Völker] have existed and will continue to exist.⁷¹⁶

It seems that Kirchmann attaches egalitarian ideas to his realism that are similar to the ones that we have seen in Jacobi's reference to ordinary language use. Ostensibly, Kirchmann's account of realism might look similar to that of the realists around 1800 as well, especially if we consider that he opposes human perception to the active manipulation that the understanding exerts as the separating activity of thinking (i.e. that of discerning objects). However, the realists around 1800 would conclude from this that a truly scientific approach to perception is impossible, because the understanding intercedes in both the grasping of this perceptive content and in any attempt to communicate this. These similarities don't appear to be coincidental, because Kirchmann explicitly refers to Jacobi when discussing these points.⁷¹⁷ Kirchmann argues that it is philosophy's task to keep the 'representations of existence' separate from the 'forms of thinking'.⁷¹⁸ Ultimately this leads him to reintroduce the Kantian distinction between things-in-themselves and our knowledge of these things, which he believes cannot be proven but must be assumed as necessary:

This appeal to necessity unfortunately seems insufficient for knowing, which desires a proof, that is, that wants to depend on itself. But knowing forgets that it for that reason attempts to go *outside* itself. Knowing desires a proof for the knotting [Verknüpfung] with being. But in the concept of proof it is supposed that its truth is

⁷¹⁶ *Asthetik auf realistischer Grundlage*, p.2.

⁷¹⁷ *Asthetik auf realistischer Grundlage*, p.13.

⁷¹⁸ *Asthetik auf realistischer Grundlage*, p.9.

derived from a major premise, that is, from a knowing and not from something else. The demand for a proof for this fundamental principle contradicts itself. The guarantee for the truth of the connection of being and knowing, how it exists in perception, must then be sought elsewhere, and man has to be satisfied with all causes, with the *necessity*, in which his taking to be true is unfailingly tied to these fundamental principles. *Jacobi* called the taking to be true [Fürwahrhalten] of these fundamental principles a *belief* because they cannot be proven, in contradistinction to proofs that rest on knowing.⁷¹⁹

Interestingly, Kirchmann seems to have understood Jacobi's position with respect to the point that perception is the scope in which we believe that our particular claims refer to a given, to a taking-to-be-true ('Wahrnehmung' in Jacobi).

Karl Robert Eduard von Hartmann was also not without sympathies for Jacobi, although he subscribes to the Hegelian-Schellingian account of reading Jacobi as one of the 'philosophers of belief'. In his *Philosophie des Unbewussten* (1869) he remarks that his own notion of the unconscious is close to the philosophy of belief of Hamann, Herder and Jacobi, although he criticizes them for not rationally understanding their own foundation, which is something Hartmann's project seeks to remedy.⁷²⁰ Hartmann attributes Jacobi's unwillingness to provide such a rational understanding to his mysticism,⁷²¹ likely following either Schelling's reading of Jacobi as a theosophist or Fries' reading of Jacobi as a mystic. Some years later, Hartmann devotes a book to Kirchmann, *J.H. v. Kirchmann's*

⁷¹⁹ *Aesthetik, auf realistischer Grundlage*, p.13.

⁷²⁰ *Philosophie des Unbewussten* (1869), p.16.

⁷²¹ *Philosophie des Unbewussten*, p.279.

erkenntnisstheoretischer Realismus (1875), the title of which shows that Kirchmann's work was taken up in an epistemological way. This is exactly what Hartmann objects to.⁷²² The critical arguments that he develops are largely in line with those that a realist around 1800 could have raised against Kirchmann, although Hartmann does not seem to be aware of this fact. The main force of Hartmann's argument is that Kirchmann has no distinction between 'naïve' and 'transcendental realism', which suggests that he adheres to the unproven assumption that the two are one and the same.⁷²³

Kirchmann's complicated notion of realism, when applied to the 'simple man', that is to naïve realism, claims that the simple man distinguishes the tree in his head from the tree in the meadow and only introduces the identity of both, by virtue of his thinking. Hartmann retorts that the simple man would laugh at Kirchmann if he spoke of a tree in his head.⁷²⁴ The simple man does not make the Kantian distinction between the thing and its mirroring in his perception:

Thing-in-itself and the perceptual object do not merely count here as the same in terms of content, but also as numerically identical, for one and the same, and the perception is the inexplicable function of the soul that makes existing objects known, while the soul extends itself like a spiritual feeler and embraces the in-itself existing things with its consciousness, like the octopus embraces its prey with his tentacles.⁷²⁵

It seems as if Hartmann is attempting to reintroduce negative realism into Kirchmann's realism, or at the very least is using its

⁷²² von Hartmann, J.H. v. *Kirchmann's erkenntnisstheoretischer Realismus* (1875), p.1.

⁷²³ J.H. v. *Kirchmann's erkenntnisstheoretischer Realismus*, p.2.

⁷²⁴ J.H. v. *Kirchmann's erkenntnisstheoretischer Realismus*, pp.2-3.

⁷²⁵ J.H. v. *Kirchmann's erkenntnisstheoretischer Realismus*, p.3.

core arguments to depict Kirchmann's position as a realism in name only. This is perhaps not unsurprising, considering the enormous importance that Hartmann places on 'the unconscious': his own notion of realism, which is strikingly similar to that of Jacobi, attempts to show that our relation to reality is largely unconscious. Kirchmann, despite his recognition of the problematic nature of the understanding, does not seem to recognize a distinction between a perceived real and the real itself to the point that he is forced to transform every human being into a Kantian. The Kantian distinction introduces conceptions of real objects which leave the 'naïve' way of relating to reality outside of Kirchmann's mode of explanation. Hartmann concludes that Kirchmann assumes the 'numerical identity' of being and perception as an unproven axiom.⁷²⁶

Although Kirchmann, as we have seen, only claimed to examine perception as a fracture between being and knowing, this does of course not allow him to tacitly assume that the fracture is able to present us with the full extent of being or, put differently, that reality can exhaustively appear in perception or that it can even verifiably appear. Hartmann's criticism is thus correct to the extent that Kirchmann calls his own project a *realism*, ostensibly in a positive sense, while the negative restrictions remain unexamined. Furthermore, Hartmann's previous point also implies that Kirchmann's Kantianism compounds the problematic nature of his claim to a positive realism. Hartmann's criticism does not refer to what Kirchmann actually wants to do within perception, but rather to his claim to realism, which puts the debate firmly within the account of realism as a contested label in the later part of the 19th century. Hartmann concludes:

Perception factually teaches us nothing else than the *immanent* sense of the perceptual object, that is, as it exists as content of consciousness, and it

⁷²⁶ J.H. v. Kirchmann's *erkenntnistheoretischer Realismus*, p.5.

teaches us nothing immediate about whether this object of perception exists as a numerically distinct thing or not. It also does not make the least distinction between the content of both, posited as different, as similar or as identical (if not as numerically identical).⁷²⁷

The realists around 1800 held that treating reality as accessible to cognition obfuscates the distinction between the conceivable and the inconceivable and subsequently makes applied rationality impossible. Of course, Hartmann's ultimate aim is to determine these distinctions 'rationally' under the concept of the unconscious. Hartmann's account is meant to include an explanation of our 'naïve' relationship to reality, which he characterizes as tentacle-like. Clearly, Hartmann wanted to claim realism for his own project, as an attempt to show that perception originates in a supernatural real. As opposed to Kirchmann's supposed epistemological realism, Hartmann advocated a transcendental realism.⁷²⁸ In this position, Hartmann upholds the distinction between things-in-themselves and representations, but claims that there is a correspondence between the two (operating through the unconsciousness) that is rationally accessible.⁷²⁹ In this way, he could still claim to be a realist, since he does not confuse things with representations while retaining both the 'simple' cognition and the transcendental "complex" cognition. Obviously, any claims with regard to cognizable correspondences would have raised eyebrows among the realists around 1800, since in their view such an attempt would only shift the problem of conflating the distinctions of perception (Kirchmann's problem) towards the conceptualization of the 'real'. After all, Hartmann is still claiming a special access to the way Kirchmann's fracture operates. Any claim of correspondence suggests an access to the real thing as real,

⁷²⁷ J.H. v. Kirchmann's *erkenntnistheoretischer Realismus*, p.6.

⁷²⁸ As he argued in *Kritische Grundlegung des transcendentalen Realismus* (1875).

⁷²⁹ *Kritische Grundlegung des transcendentalen Realismus* (1875), p.6.

rather than the mere (ideal) perception of it. In the final tally, Hartmann might be susceptible to his own criticism of Kirchmann: if the only real that occurs in his position is a rationally construed correspondence, can he rightfully claim to be a realist?

9. Conclusion

This short overview over the German discussions on realism in the 19th century is admittedly fairly myopic in being focused on the issues that were important to the realists around 1800. It is not an exhaustive account of the importance of realism in 19th century Germany. There are many other ways in which realism is important outside of philosophy, such as, literary theory and art. However, this specialized approach allows us to provide a tentative answer to the question of how the philosophical realism around 1800 was well nigh forgotten during this time. There seems to have been strategic reasons for recasting Jacobi into the straw man position of a philosophy of feeling or belief, of someone who is either only a dabbler in constructive theoretical thought but had the right intuitions, or someone who was able to think but unwilling to communicate his thoughts clearly. Other realists are either not mentioned at all or discarded on the force of fragments of Hegelian criticisms.

I have introduced the thesis that realism became a contested label during the latter part of the century because it helps us understand the semantic over-determination of the term during that time. It was likely due to the fact that neo-Kantianism steadily gained dominance in academic discourse that realism would ultimately become largely associated with Kantianism in philosophy. The excursion into the discussion between Kirchmann and Hartmann on realism has shown that some of the key arguments of the realists around 1800 can recur without leading to the same negative realist position. Both authors seem to use

Jacobian arguments in order to advocate their own account of our access to reality, whether in perception or in unconsciousness.

Over the course of this reconstruction of several popular readings of Jacobi and of the semantic changes in the meaning “realism” in the 19th century it has become possible to group certain developments together in the way they responded to Jacobi. If one carefully identifies the polemical and strategic concerns involved, it becomes possible to see a continuity between certain problems already indicated by Jacobi and their recurrence in subsequent authors, for instance, between Jacobi’s criticism of ‘stubborn’ realism and Hartmann’s criticism of ‘naïve’ realism. On this more abstract level of identifying types of philosophical reactions one can thus discern important continuities that might not seem immediately evident at the ground level of the polemics between idealism and realism in the 19th century.

Conclusion

Key Challenges in characterizing 'Realism' around 1800

One of the main conclusions of this study is that there is a great deal of overlap between what we now (based on many decades of research) consider to be idealist arguments and some of the key arguments put forward by the realists around 1800. We can draw two tentative conclusions from this fact. First of all, and most generally, this shows the common root that the realists and the idealists find in the works of Kant. This 'conquering Hercules', as Jacobi described him, set the agenda much more forcefully than Jacobi publicly admitted, and this largely Kantian agenda defined the main contours for subsequent conceptions of realism in the 19th century (as well as the debates thereof). On the other hand, the realists, especially Jacobi and Herder, were on the forefront of publicly developing the implications of Kant's position in a way that effectively radicalized Kant's notions of realism (by no longer being restricted to what Kant called an 'empirical realism'). Their relationship to idealism was, as a rule, one of constant criticism. This brings us to the second conclusion: by all accounts, idealists like Fichte, Schelling and Hegel came to intellectual maturity in a world which was whether they were aware of it or not, rife with realist ideas from the fallout of the *Pantheismusstreit* and through Jacobi's *DH*.

The idealists adopt the "absolute" as the ultimate dimension of reality. It now becomes possible to compare the idealist recourse to the absolute with the realist recourse to the immediate. Both the absolute and the immediate share an important structural relationship to perception (taking-to-be-true). As early as 1788 Jacobi came to consider reason as the capacity that makes it possible for us to be affected by immediacy. One might convincingly argue that the core intuition of the idealists has also been to make reason, as a special capacity in our rationality, clear within a philosophical account. Seen from this perspective, it

appears as if the realist polemics about nihilism are unnecessarily hostile. However, as I have shown throughout this study, the realists are not merely opposed to the idea that reason could be capable of something like intellectual intuition (and Jacobi's reinterpretation of reason certainly seems more amenable to intellectual intuition as it is put forward by Fichte and Schelling), but are rather concerned with attempts to give an account of intellectual intuition which does not take into account the limitations introduced by the mediacy inherent to cognition. Ironically, considering Reinhold's and Kant's early classifications of Jacobi as a supernaturalist after Schlosser, Schlosser is for Jacobi the model of optimism about our ability to access immediate truths and provide a cognitivist account of it which has the potential to override the testimony of the senses.

Jacobi's avenue of showing how the idealist account goes astray is highly polemical but is meant to reveal the radical implications of this account of the mediate character of cognition. If we could really have an unproblematic and conscious transition from immediacy to mediacy without questioning the limits of mediate accounts that are put forward in conscious cognition and without remainder, this means that the door is opened to a plethora of problems in our practical existence. In this case, then, Jacobi was intent on keeping the door closed, to have a bounded conception of human agency which recognizes that our accounts are limited by the scope of our practical engagement: we can formulate a course of action only on the basis of the mediated results (interpretations) of perception, and at the highest level, this only refines our understanding of our actions, which thus brings us back to the particular contents of perception in terms of our particular practical undertakings and our understandings of them. A philosophical theory is similarly bounded in that at best it tells us something about our practical engagements and facilitates an efficient way of structuring our future actions.

For the realists, it is the limits of mediation that give us an immediate sense of freedom, that frames the world as determinable by our actions, which is lost when we consider ourselves and the natural world to be fully contained by a (in some way) conceivable absolute (reality). We have seen in chapter 5 that as soon as Fichte commits himself to a speculative notion of the absolute, the need arises to give a special explanation of freedom which retains the subjective feeling of freedom, a move that makes it into an epiphenomenon at the speculative level. The realist approach, since it is centered on the position of the individual, does not believe that it requires a special explanation of freedom. This is the main problem in the debate of the realists with Fichte and Schelling. Beyond this point, the criticism of Spinoza's substance as a totality of both the subject and the natural world still applies: recourse to the absolute confuses the notion of an inferred ground (in the absolute) with causality (in mediation) and attributes a unity to something of which we strictly have no experience (since identity is limited to perceptions and concepts). But through another inference, this unity suddenly applies to us, in a way that overrides any internal account that we may give of ourselves as practical actors.

Naturally, many refined accounts could be raised by the idealists, in showing how they do not succumb to this problem, and certainly the realists were not the most diligent in reading the idealists' texts either. However, I believe that the most interesting way to look at the realists' polemical engagements is not to focus on whether they were right about Spinoza, Kant, Fichte or Schelling, but rather on what they attempt to show by virtue of the criticisms of mediation and their conception of practice. The didactical value of the realist polemics is always to make us question the methodology of the philosophical account in relation to certain fundamentally human interests and needs.

Finding the right words

We have seen that the realists struggle in finding the words with which to describe what is, strictly speaking, not supposed to be part of our cognition, what is not properly describable. Their overall strategy seems to attempt to do this through words whose referent is as indefinite and as general as possible. Here is a selection of some of these words that we have found over the course of this study:

Realität, Dasein, seiende, Existenz, Gefühl, Medium, Glaube, Offenbarung, gegebene, unmittelbar, Wirkliche, Überzeugung, Trieb, Abndung, Band, Wink, Medium, Abgrund, eines Fremden, einprägen, Stimmung, Sachen, Zeugnis, Abstechendes, Absolutreellen

Some of these build on Jacobi's adherence to ordinary language terms, such as 'feeling', 'revelation', 'conviction' and 'testimony'. Others ('Existenz', 'Realität') are more abstract, and one can arguably question whether they were actually used in this way in ordinary language. Interestingly, many of these terms are used by both Jacobi and Herder ('Stimmung' and 'einprägen' are notable exceptions), but the other realists generally only opted for those terms when these were given canonical definitions suited to a set of doctrinal commitments (particularly 'belief' and 'revelation'). 'Belief' and 'revelation' had to be more strictly defined because Jacobi had not anticipated that the readers would take them up in a clearly theological register. The underlying discussion between Jacobi and Fichte, which Fichte draws attention to in 1800⁷³⁰ is then not exclusively that of ordinary language use versus the extensive use of neologisms.

The above set of words cannot comfortably be described as neologisms (partly because they lack any canonical definition as a matter of doctrine), but most of them do not fit comfortably within ordinary language use either ('belief' and 'revelation')

⁷³⁰ J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe, Reihe I, Band 6, p.377.

excepted). Since they are used to refer to experiences or contents that cannot be cognitively reconstructed in all of their detail, the realists could have also used mathematical notation in order to designate the non-cognized reality, but this formal procedure would remain unrelated to the core structure of cognition and would no longer refer to specific perceptions or any obvious connection to our practical engagements. Considering their criticism of philosophical methodology, it is hard to imagine a way that would have worked better for their purposes than the terms they employed (though greater clarity might have helped). As I have shown in chapter 4, one of the main ways in which Jacobi counteracted the problem of the lack of cohesion among these terms in his *Werke* is by showing the importance of reason in exactly this dual sense: a separate ability but one which unconsciously brings together the various aspects of our existence into a coherent whole capable of action.

Jacobi outlines a notion of reason that, beyond an openness to immediacy, also functions as that which holds the different abilities in a human being together. This not only applies to the faculties that we know from Kant, but also to some novel abilities that Jacobi identifies. For instance, we have the ability to make distinct how, in any claim or belief, there is an implicit relation between an external form and an internal form. Another is the ability, variously referred to, for instance as drive, that we have to raise ourselves above the objects of our reflection, thereby retaining our freedom from them. By introducing reason as an unconscious process of connecting, Jacobi is in a way answering the question ‘What can reason do?’ For Jacobi’s purposes, this does not mean that we have to determine the limits of reason, since we never consciously make use of it directly, nor does it command us to do anything that we are not already in the process of doing. Reason, as a whole, will inevitably remain indefinite, on Jacobi’s account, just because it *is* the indefinite reference to this combining

agency of mediate cognition and practical engagement with the world.

The call for a sober philosophy

As seen in chapter 5, Krug takes up some of the realist ideas and calls for a *modest* and *sober* philosophy. Even before Jacobi formulated his realism in *DH*, we can understand this call for modesty and soberness as integral to his project from the *SB* onwards, up to and throughout all of his realist polemical engagements. However, the exact characteristics of this approach were not clear from the beginning. Jacobi and the subsequent realists were searching for a good way to refer to reality and to our cognition, to the point of even struggling to find the correct words, as both distinct *and* related in such a way that cognition is both independent of and dependent on reality. In a way, realism around 1800 was an experiment in testing the problems of philosophical methods utilized by many philosophers as much as it was a coherent body of doctrines. Some of the ways in which they undertook this experiment may seem quaint (e.g. discussion of feelings, immediacy, belief, revelation) or distasteful (e.g. the polemical, often ad hominem, battles) to today's readers, but their approach was supported by arguments that would often become part of the main strains of idealism at the time (Fichte in chapter 5 is a good example of this). Moreover, many of the core concerns (ordinary language use, a use-based economy of epistemic claims and the priority of our practical engagements) have become prominent themes in today's philosophical and scientific landscape.

If we want to be able to seriously consider realism around 1800 as a *sober* philosophy, we have to find a way to specify what it means to defer to the necessary way we have to think of things. Throughout, the realists never frame this deferral as an acceptance of subjectivism. Although this putative necessary structure is indicative of what we might now be inclined to call subjectivity (the account of our inner construal of ourselves and our practical

engagements), many of the realists, especially Jacobi, Herder and Krug, use it to refer to the deepest fundamental structure of our self. In a certain way, this fundamental structure, which lies at the basis of beliefs, claims and actions, is also *real* but can only be indirectly discerned through its actions (among which is the natural framing of its thinking about things). This sounds very close to the position of idealism, but fundamentally it is the realist insistence on the modesty and soberness of philosophy that appears to set the realists apart from the idealist agenda around 1800. It is for this reason that the realists around 1800 are not simply concerned with the real existence of the external world but just as interested in the real existence of the self. The argument for this emphasis on the self is that, if we were to go against a necessary way of thinking about something, through some logical or linguistic magic trick (as the realists often called it), we would lose touch with the reality of our own self, and consequently with all of the operations that are based on this fundamental structure (e.g. our practical undertakings). The realists subsequently struggle to characterize the immediacy related to the revelation of sense and the immediacy of the self as of the same quality, because to do so would commit them to the same logical or linguistic trickery by which possibly dissimilar things are unified just because we have no valid cognitive tools by which to measure their potential dissimilarity. It is for this reason that we find Jacobi and Herder working with terms like 'Medium' and 'Bond': our very subjectivity becomes an obscured conduit between two or more possibly distinct immediacies (in Jacobi's case, sense becomes, through the medium of cognition, practical action as an expression of our drive).

We find two conclusions that are drawn from this state of the self in the works of the realists. One of them is Krug's modest proposal for a sober philosophy that simply recognizes that its philosophical descriptions are not accurate beyond a certain limit point. Beyond this limit point it becomes impossible for the individual to provide a philosophical account while retaining his

agency. This has the merit of being the least speculative solution, and it retains the individual's place as what gives us the description, therefore evading the danger of hypostatizing the philosophical description as a system. The other solution is Jacobi's tacit separation of two kinds of logics, or perhaps, if we want to be faithful to Jacobi (who believes that logical categories solely derive from experience), two kinds of *operating modes* within subjectivity. On the one level there is the *mode of cognition* where consciousness and reflexivity play out as mediate reflection on our cognitive acts. On the other level there is an *immediate sense of our personality*, which we feel we cannot describe by way of the deliverances of consciousness (cognition) alone. The two modes meet when we relate to others, because we attribute that sense of inalienable and inexhaustible personality to others. The only way in which we can do this is by assuming that other persons manifest themselves within our external perception, allowing us to attribute features and moral importance to these persons. The advantage of this approach is that it attempts to deal with a problem that remains unresolved in Kant: how do we perceive and recognize persons as persons? Are these recognitions based on our own notion of personality? Jacobi's answer seems to be to involve the notion of God first, as a proposed model of our absolute freedom, which we reach as we grasp our own personality as distinct from the way in which we are causality implicated in the natural world.

The thorny issue of theism

There are very few traditionally religious aspects (such as, the idea that God's commandments are inscrutable) to be found explicitly addressed in the works of the realists. Theism, however, does seem to play an important part in most of the realist's accounts. Jacobi, as I have tried to show in chapter 4, is deeply ambivalent about the relation of a notion of God to our own sense of personality (hence his claim that his theism is anthropomorphic).

As I have shown, Jacobi believes that the notion of a theist God is only of practical value.

I have also shown in chapter 2 that Reinhold seems to hold to a more traditional theological notion of God that is in danger of becoming pantheistic. This was most likely a commitment throughout his life, rather than a feature he adopted from Jacobi. In Herder's case, it is hard to pin down if and how he differs from Jacobi here. At times he ties our notion of God directly to human cognition and its analogical reasoning and at other times he seems less critical and adopts a Spinozist monism within which our cognition arises. In both cases, the notion of God is integrated within a philosophically systematic framework, making it difficult to maintain the claim that these authors are at their core religious authors rather than philosophical authors utilizing certain conceptions and vocabulary borrowed from their religious culture.

Realism around 1800 and today's realism

Interestingly, there is one feature that realism around 1800 has in common with most varieties of today's realism. Both the realists in our study and 20th-century realists like G.E. Moore relate their position to the certitude of specific claims. However, the avenue of their reasoning is markedly different. Moorean realism uses specific common-sense claims that exemplify indubitable certainties in order to draw conclusions about a mind-independent externality, an external world. The realists around 1800 do not allow for inferences about a real externality from particular claims. Not even those feelings of existence seem to suffice for Jacobi on this count. Instead, he argues that the naïve realist's claim of the certainty of particular beliefs actually refers to the abstract certainty of the immediate givenness of perception. From this perspective, any belief is certain simply because it draws on our own perceptions. One of the advantages of this approach is that it is not

in danger of hypostatizing the world of experience into something with which we all simply take part but instead individualizes experience, leaving room for radically different beliefs among various social, economic, political or ethnographic contexts. The realists around 1800 effectively frame their epistemic investments within a certain openness to the world, a set of needs and an ethical drive with which the individual forms her beliefs.

The connection between realism around 1800 and reflections about scientific norms is far from obvious. Jacobi wrote that he loves science and cognition when they have worth.⁷³¹ There is a sense in which the realist's ideas about the *aims* of science and knowledge are more refined than those of many other philosophers around that time. This is due to their focus on the individual and his practical actions. As seen in chapter 4, Jacobi's account allows for any part of nature up to and including our own mental states and habits, to be considered mechanically (that is causally and lawfully). This means that we ourselves maintain a detached distance, even from psychologically determined biases and tendencies. Although Jacobi argues that we must put ourselves into this position because it is the mandate of the ethical drive to submit the natural world to our explanatory schemes, to make it into a mechanism in order to better facilitate our own manipulation of it, a similar virtue can be found in the scientist's attempt to predict and control the natural world despite his own psychological bias.

Future Avenues of Research

Since this is the first study of realism around 1800, I have placed strong emphasis on its initial formulation, the conceptual decisions involved, as well as the group of realists that were closest to this approach, both chronologically and conceptually. Now that we are at the end of this study, there are myriad avenues open to

⁷³¹ *Werke*, Band 4, p.xv.

future research of which I want to highlight some of the most important ones.

i) The way in which the conceptual decisions made by the realists return or are changed by the groups who were their contemporaries, such as the *Friibromantiker*, the idealists and the psychologists. The key conceptual decisions outlined in chapter 2 allow one to assess to what degree these groups actually conform to the ideas of the core group of realists and to what extent they perhaps adopt the label while subtly changing its meaning.

ii) Similarly, the many attempts to wed idealism and realism (most notably in the idealists and *Friibromantiker*) can be assessed, not only in terms of their polemical content (i.e. to what degree do these attempts conform to the label), but also in terms of both their divergence from core realists conceptual decisions and the inherent homology or indebtedness to the realists that these approaches might harbor. As I have established, the realists use many arguments which we are now accustomed to call idealist, so there is ample opportunity to study the relationship between realism and idealism, particularly in terms of the idealist's historical indebtedness to the realists, without having to take recourse in the idealist's own accounts of the realist position or to today's implicit assumptions about what realism, in fact, is.

iii) As a conclusion of (i) and (ii), it is possible to chart the semantic variance in realism over the larger period of the 1780's through the 1850's (and perhaps even the rest of the 19th century).

Concluding remarks: the wall or the door?

By way of a final summary, we will try to answer Hamann's question about Jacobi's realism: Is it a wall or a door? If we take a wall to broadly connote restrictions, and a door standing for ways of access, there seems to be a clear answer to this question. Jacobi's

realism, and in varying degrees this is also true of Herder, Neeb, Krug and even Fichte (amongst others), is a realism that attempts to articulate the restrictions of our ability to conceptualize reality. In line with his initial project to conceive of the boundaries of the inconceivable, Jacobi's realism attempts to show where our conscious cognition's attempt at direct access to reality is barred. We cannot grasp any form of existence that is radically independent of our representation and we cannot even grasp our own existence. We also cannot consciously cognize immediate influences on our cognitive apparatus such as the way givenness affects us. When we attempt to consciously grasp these things and processes thoroughly, we find our access barred, we find restrictions. The realists are adamant that we need to respect these restrictions.

The wall that the realists around 1800 hit upon becomes apperent because the realists use a strategy of showing that the usual accounts that we give of the cognitive process remain incomplete. The point of finding these walls is not so much their negative use, the restrictions they pose to our cognition, but rather they are intended to *maximize* its efficacy. In a way, then, the realists at the same time open a door. They open the door that through this maximized efficacy of rationality, no longer rendered stale and lifeless in a myriad of categories, attributes and faculties, but connected to the individual, who applies it to the world he experiences through action. A door, of course, can mean very little for us if there were no restrictive framework which makes the door into an effective and serviceable access to areas that otherwise would be walled off or inaccessible. Similarly, if rationality engages in an avenue of reasoning that amounts to nihilism, it loses itself in the attempt to circumvent restrictions, without realizing that it is the restrictions themselves that make it effective.

Jacobi might also be presenting another door, which not all of the other realists acknowledge. This is the door of an ethical drive which allows us to live a divine life by transforming our needs

into virtues. This might also be a consequence of the other type of door. Jacobi certainly argues that these two types of doors are closely related: restrictions are essential for the door that the ethical drive presents. It is difficult to completely reconcile these two ways of understanding the function of a door in the Hamannian simile. Both seem highly dependent on the restrictions provided by the wall, but only by way of of an ethical drive do we see a vista of what lies beyond the door. Yet, if we were to step through this door, we would lose all restrictions because the ethical drive simply does not acknowledge restrictions. A simple way to resolve this issue is to take the first sense of the wall and the door as a presupposition for this second sense: we need an applied rationality in the sense of a rationality that is used under the constraints of our capacity to act. This opens the possibility of a second wall and door, which we can construe as purely practical: the restrictions then are our instincts and needs, which lead us to the vista of the ethical drive. By relying on this drive we can discard the restrictions (this sense is in line with Jacobi's claim that we can want to give up our life for the ethical drive).

Whichever way we consider it, it seems that the wall presents epistemic restrictions, while the door presents practical applications. This captures perfectly the force of what the realists around 1800 added to the philosophical discussion: in its popular reception, the discussion has, by and large, moved from metaphysics and theology to epistemology, but perhaps in the final analysis the discussion should be about the practical application of epistemology.

Appendix 1: Biographical information

Apelt, Ernst Friedrich

(1813, Reichenau – 1859) Member of the Friesian school with a special interest in astronomy. Contacted Fries as a 17 year old, after reading the *Neue Kritik der Vernunft*. Studied in Jena and later in Leipzig. Professor in Jena from 1840 until his death.

Bardili, Christoph Gottfried

(1761, Blaubeuren – 1808, Mergenstetten) A cousin of Schelling and a philosopher who is primarily known for inspiring Carl Leonhard Reinhold's realism. Teacher at the Tübingen Stift in 1786. Professor of philosophy in Karlschule in 1790. Professor at Stuttgart gymnasium in 1795.

Beneke, Friedrich Eduard

(1798, Berlin – 1854, Berlin) Studied theology and philosophy in Halle and then Berlin, where he was influenced by Friedrich Schleiermacher. Other notable influences include Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Professor in Berlin from 1820. Beneke's work mainly focused on psychology and religion.

Bouterwek, Friedrich

(1766, Oker am Harz – 1828) Philosopher, novelist, historian of literature. Studied in Göttingen. Gave lectures on Kant's philosophy in Göttingen in 1791.

Claudius, Matthias

(1740, Ploener Marktflecken Reinfeld – 1815, Hamburg) Poet who wrote under the penname 'Asmus'. Studied theology, jurisprudence and statecraft in Jena. Known for publishing *Der Wandsbecker Bote*.

Dillmann, Christian Heinrich

(1829, Illingen – 1899) Educator. Studied mathematics and physics in Stuttgart.

Feuerbach, Ludwig

(1804, Landshut – 1872 Rechenberg) Philosopher, best known for *Das Wesen des Christentum* (1841). Studied in Heidelberg and in Berlin, where he was influenced by Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Was an adherent of materialism. Godson to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Taught in Erlangen from 1828. Loses his position in 1832 because of heavy opposition to his theological views.

Fichte, Immanuel Hermann

(1796, Jena – 1879, Stuttgart) Son of Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Studied philology in Berlin. Lectured in Bonn from 1836 and Tübingen from 1843. Published his father's *Nachlaß*.

Fichte, Johann Gottlieb

(1762, Oberlausitz – 1814, Berlin) Philosopher, well-known for his popular transformation of Kant's philosophy into an idealism. Studied in Jena and Leipzig. Lectured in Jena from 1794 until 1799, when he was dismissed due to his part in the *Atheismusstreit*. Lectured in Erlangen in 1805 and in Königsberg in 1806/7. Was named the first rector of the Berlin university in 1811.

Fischer, Kuno

(1824, Groß-Sandewalde – 1907, Heidelberg) Studied philology in Leipzig and Halle. Lectured in Heidelberg from 1850 and in Jena from 1855 and again in Heidelberg from 1872. Has made important contributions to the study of the history of philosophy.

Fries, Jakob Friedrich

(1773, Barby – 1843, Jena) Studied in Leipzig and Jena. Fries was very influential as one of the main adherents of empirical psychology, after Kantian standards. Lectured in Heidelberg from 1812 and in Jena from 1816.

Hamann, Johann Georg

(1730, Königsberg – 1788, Wellbergen) Known for his 'Metakritik' of his friend Immanuel Kant. Studied in Königsberg.

Hartmann, Eduard von

(1842, Berlin, 1906, Berlin) Philosopher, known for his philosophy of the unconsciousness, which was influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer. Worked for the Berlin army and taught himself philosophy. Rejected offers to lecture from Leipzig, Göttingen and Berlin.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich

(1770, Stuttgart – 1831, Berlin) Philosopher, well-known for his absolute idealism. Studied in Tübingen. Lectured in Jena in 1801-6, in Heidelberg in 1816-18 and Berlin from 1818 until his death.

Helferich, Adolf

(1813, Schafhausen – 1894, Berlin) Studied in Tübingen. Lectured in Berlin.

Herbart, Friedrich

(1776, Oldenburg – 1841, Göttingen) Known for his contributions to psychology and pedagogy. Studied in Jena, where he was influenced by Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Lectured in Göttingen.

Herder, Johann Gottfried

(1744, Mohrungen – 1803, Weimar) Philosopher, poet, preacher. Studied under Kant in Königsberg.

Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich

(1743, Düsseldorf – 1819, München) Statesman, novelist. Studied in Geneva. Was president of the Munich academy of the sciences from 1804 until his death

Jenisch, Daniel

(1762 – 1804) Philosopher, preacher. Studied under Immanuel Kant in Königsberg. Became a preacher in Berlin.

Kant, Immanuel

(1724, Königsberg – 1804, Königsberg) Philosopher, known for introducing critical philosophy. Studied and taught in Königsberg.

Kirchmann, Julius von

(1802, Schafstädt bei Merseburg – 1884, Berlin) Lawyer, philosopher. Studied law in Leipzig and Halle.

Köppen, Friedrich

(1775, Lübeck – 1858, Erlangen) Philosopher. Studied under Karl Leonhard Reinhold and Johann Gottlieb Fichte in Jena. Lectured in Landshut from 1807 and from 1826 in Erlangen.

Krug, Wilhelm Traugott

(1770, Radis bei Wittenberg – 1842, Leipzig) Philosopher. Studied theology in Wittenberg, philosophy in Jena under Karl Leonhard Reinhold and in Göttingen. Lectured in Wittenberg from 1796, from 1801 in Frankfurt a.d.O, from 1805 in Königsberg as Immanuel Kant's successor, and from 1809 in Leipzig.

Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim

(1729, Kamenz – 1781, Braunschweig) Poet, publicist, librarian. Studied theology, medicine, philosophy and philology in Leipzig and Wittenberg.

Mendelssohn, Moses

(1729, Dessau – 1786, Berlin) Philosopher. Self-taught.

Michelet, Karl Ludwig

(1801, Berlin – 1893, Berlin) Philosopher. Studied in Berlin, under Friedrich Schleiermacher and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. Lectured in Berlin from 1826.

Obereit, Jakob Hermann

(1725, Arbon – 1798, Jena) Surgeon, publicist. Studied in Halle and Berlin. Died in Johann Gottlieb Fichte's house.

Reinhold, Ernst

(1793, Jena – 1855, Jena) Philosopher, son of Karl Leonhard Reinhold. Studied in Kiel. Lectured in Kiel from 1822, in Jena from 1824.

Reinhold, Karl Leonhard

(1758, Vienna – 1825 Kiel) Philosopher, known for popularizing Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy. Joined a jesuit order in 1772. Studied in Leipzig. Lectured in Jena from 1787, Kiel from 1793.

Richter, Jean Paul

(1763, Wunsiedel – 1825, Bayreuth) Author, known under the pen name Jean Paul. Studied theology in Leipzig.

Rückert, Joseph

(1771, Beckstein bei Landa – 1813) Philosopher. Studied in Jena under Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Lectured in Würzburg.

Salat, Jakob

(1766, Abtsgmünd bei Aalen – 1851, Landshut) Philosopher, theologian. Studied theology in Dillingen. Lectured in Landshut from 1809.

Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph

(1775, Leonberg – 1854, Ragaz) Philosopher. Studied in Tübingen. Lectured in Jena from 1798, in Würzburg from 1803, in Erlangen in 1821-23, and in Berlin from 1841.

Schlosser, Johann Georg

(1739, Frankfurt a. M. – 1799, Frankfurt a. M.) Publicist, statesman. Studied law in Jena.

Spitzer, Hugo

(1854, Einöde – 1937, Graz) Philosopher, sociologist. Studied in Graz. Lectured in Graz from 1882.

Sulzer, Johann Georg

(1720, Winterthur – 1779, Berlin) Philosopher, art critic. Studied theology in Zürich.

Neeb, Johann

(1767, Steinheim– 1843, Steinheim) Philosopher, statesman. Studied philosophy and theology in Mainz. Lectured in Bonn through 1791-1797.

Volkmann, Wilhelm Fridolin

(1822, Prague – 1877, Prague) Philosopher. Studied philosophy in Prague. Lectured in Prag from 1846.

Weiller, Cajetan von

(1761, München – 1826, München) Theologian. Studied philosophy in München.

Wizenmann, Thomas

(1759. Ludwigsburg – 1787, Mülheim) Studied in Tübingen.

Appendix 2: Realist dictionary

Abndung (presentiment): Referring to things that are very close to our personal existence but lack a direct perception, such as the presentiment of truth or the idea of God.

Deutlichkeit (distinctness): Referring to the epistemic quality of gaining insight into relations (specifically between internal and external perceptions).

Gefühl (feeling): Referring to an indirect and indistinct intuition that we have of something essential (existence, truth, self). Used sparingly by Jacobi. Herder is much more liberal in his utilization of various feelings.

Gegebene (givenness): Referring to something that our cognition receives, implying that we do not invent the contents of our perception. In most cases, the only thing that we can discern about a given is that something is given.

Glaube (belief): Referring to the core structure of any claim that we find plausible, that we believe in on the basis of perception.

Lebensweise (life-style): Referring to the historical constitution of our convictions, based on the perceptions that we have been exposed to.

Medium: Referring to the middle between two or more points or directions. Often used to show that solipsism is inconsistent, even though the concrete sources of our cognition remain inaccessible to us.

Nililismus (nihilism): Referring to a position that eliminates essential elements of human existence from its account and thus (unknowingly) refers to nothing.

Offenbarung (revelation): Much like givenness, but implying an active reception and ordering of that which is revealed (in terms of internal and external perceptions).

Persönlichkeit (personality): Referring to a sense of self that cannot be defined according to empirically manifesting characteristics. Often described as that which stands out against any background. Applied to both human beings and God.

Trieb (drive): Referring to something that unstoppably springs forth. Drive is something that is an integral part of humankind's higher abilities, but which cannot be predicted and which are only discerned in their effects (our actions). Often related to ethics and virtue.

Überzeugung (conviction): Referring to our direct investment in claims and perceptions, which emerges before we attempt to put formulate knowledge claims.

Wahrnehmung (taking-to-be-true) / *Empfindung* (perception): Referring to the specific way in which truth reaches us (through perception). In the sense of givenness and revelation, we take-to-be-true something that is true independently of ourselves.

Wink (hint): Indefinite intuition that by itself has very little power to convince or explain, but might gain this power in a particular context (like practical philosophy).

Wirklich(keit), *Wirkliche selbst*, *Dasein* (reality, the real itself, existence): Referring to a reality that is there whether we perceive it or not. Introduced as a comprehensive term because particular objects and characteristics are heavily dependent on the way in which we cognize. Oftentimes also evoked to refer to that which "works" on us or in us, whether we realize this or not.

Zeugnis (testimony): Referring to the extended metaphorical framework of the courtroom in the context of giving proof. A

testimony can lend credibility to something that cannot be directly proven.

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Summary (in Dutch)

Naast een groep uitvoerig bestudeerde filosofische idealisten, bestond er ook een groep filosofische realisten in de Duitse taalcontext rond 1800. De leden van deze groep zijn op individueel niveau relatief weinig bestudeerd en zijn vrijwel niet bestudeerd als groep. Dit boek vormt een eerste onderzoek naar deze groep realisten, primair door uitvoerig onderzoek naar het realisme van diens grondlegger, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1749-1819), wiens systematische verbintenis een grotere groep realisten inspireerde. De leden van deze groep pasten de positie aan aan hun eigen belangen, volgden het op een orthodoxe manier of ontwikkelden deze positie verder vanuit een systematisch oogpunt. Door middel van dit onderzoek behandel ik verschillende manieren om een realist in Jacobi's zin te zijn.

De hoofdthese is dat het aantoonbaar is dat er een groep van realisten waren rond 1800, en dat deze groep niet alleen gedeelde sociale en economische karakteristieken, vormen van argumentatie had, maar ook een consistente systematische problematiek. Deze problematiek noem ik negatief realisme, omdat het een bepaalde verkenning van de manier waarop we cognitief de realiteit niet begrijpen benadrukt. Veel van de argumenten die de realisten gebruiken lijken op die van de idealisten die in diezelfde tijd opkomen, maar ze blijven realisten in de zin dat ze niet alleen het idee van een cognitief toegankelijke realiteit ontkennen maar ook erkennen dat, hoewel ontoegankelijk, deze realiteit als essentieel moet worden gezien voor ons bestaan als individuele personen en ethisch handelende actoren.

Ondanks het feit dat een aantal van de argumentatielijnen van de realisten overeenstemmen met die van de idealisten hebben de twee groepen een aantal zeer invloedrijke en polemische confrontaties. De polemische context van deze conflicten lijkt vanuit de realisten bedoeld te zijn om het voor iedereen (en niet alleen voor beroepsfilosofen met een hoge geleerdheid en afstand

van het normale leven van de mens) duidelijk te maken wat de gevolgen zijn van de idealistische positie. Op deze manier komen de realisten in conflict met Kant, Reinhold, Fichte en Schelling. Het is opmerkelijk dat deze debatten direct te koppelen zijn aan de doorlopende ontwikkelingen in de posities van vele idealisten. Daarnaast zijn hedendaagse filosofen nog altijd schatplichtig aan deze debatten vanwege het feit dat twee belangrijke termen daarin voor het eerst hun filosofische definitie krijgen: nihilisme en relativisme.

Een aantal van de belangrijkste conclusies van de groep realisten voor het filosofische debat luiden als volgt:

- i. We moeten voorzichtig zijn met het trekken van gevolgberedeneringen met betrekking tot zaken die buiten onze waarnemingen liggen.
- ii. Dientengevolge moeten we ook uitkijken met veralgemeniseerde termen zoals ‘de waarneming’ en ons realiseren dat dit soort termen altijd terugverwijzen naar concrete individuen die hun eigen historie hebben en hun eigen belangen hebben om hun ervaring conceptueel te duiden.
- iii. Rationaliteit bestaat niet zonder een individu dat een praktische betrekking op zijn omgeving heeft. In die zin wordt rationaliteit alleen begrepen als toegepaste rationaliteit, waarin we bepalen met welke middelen en handelingen we het beste onze doelen kunnen bereiken (dat geldt voor zowel behoeftes als voor ethiek).
- iv. Hoe belangrijk het ook is om ons te realiseren dat onze belevingswereld gezien is vanuit ons perspectief als individu, er is geen manier om hieruit te bewijzen dat wij zelf bestaan, realiteit hebben. Er blijft dus altijd een kern van ons bestaan die buiten onze ervaring en reflectie blijft. De mate waarin deze kern buiten onze ervaring blijft is ook de mate waarin we vrij zijn. Er is immers geen manier waarop deze kern kan worden beïnvloed.

v. Bovenstaande opvattingen hebben verregaande gevolgen voor de filosofie. Het is niet de taak van de filosofie om een inzicht te bieden in iets dat we niet al kunnen waarnemen en over kunnen reflecteren. De filosofie *beschrijft* slechts dat wat we al waarnemen en waarover we al vinden dat we reflecteren. Voor veel realisten is het de taak van de filosofie om te begrijpen waar ons vermogen om te begrijpen ophoudt en wat er dan eigenlijk onbegrijpelijk is (ons bestaan, de realiteit).

Deze conclusies geven misschien de indruk dat de realisten een reactie van de maatschappij zijn op de pretenties van de filosofen. Ten dele is dat het geval. Daarbij leveren de realisten over het algemeen argumentatielijnen die voldoen aan standaarden van filosofische argumentatie, zoals coherentie en diepgang. Het is daarom niet vreemd dat een aantal van deze argumentatielijnen werden geïncorporeerd door de idealisten en op deze manier een onderdeel werden van het gevestigde discours. De realisten introduceerden ook de vraag naar de aard van de filosofie binnen dat discours op een moment dat vele wetenschappen zich emancipeerden van de filosofische faculteit. Daarmee leverden ze een belangrijke bijdrage aan de ongekennde complexiteit van deze periode in de geschiedenis van de filosofie.

Het laatste hoofdstuk van dit boek onderzoekt hoe het kan dat de realisten, ondanks hun niet geringe bijdrage aan zowel het debat van de tijd als het filosofische vocabulaire, toch grotendeels vergeten zijn. Aan de ene kant hebben de invloedrijke posities in Duitstalige context in de midden tot late 19^e eeuw de tendens om de bijdragen van de realisten te minimaliseren en om Jacobi te begrijpen als religieus denker. Daarbij wordt ook het label “realisme” een belangrijk label om te claimen en na een periode van relatieve chaos over de betekenis van de term, is het eind 19^e eeuw gebruikelijk om deze te begrijpen in de zin van Kants empirisch realisme.

Quaestiones Infinitae

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