

Chapter 1

Enlightenment and Anti-Enlightenment

The Jacobi Question

It is not by accident that Strauss begins his philosophical career with an interest in Jacobi (1743–1819). His thesis on the problem of knowledge in Jacobi is a way of countering the analysis of Cassirer and undertaking, starting in 1921, a critique of the rationalism of the Enlightenment that allows him to propose a different path than that of neo-Kantianism. Moreover, Jacobi attempts, beginning from the pantheism debate and the controversy concerning the Spinozism of Lessing, a theory of philosophy itself. This means that the concepts and the names of the philosophers themselves will serve, as in Nietzsche, as devices for thinking through the crisis of the West and nihilism. This also means that Jacobi represents a problem or a set of problems that concern the critic of reason.

Far from being, as for Kant and Cassirer, a representative of anti-rationalism, Jacobi is, in Strauss's eyes, the decisive and original figure of the internal critique of rationalism. This is why his analysis concerns, in the first instance, Jacobi's concept of reason: instead of making Jacobi into one of the *Schwärmerei* or a partisan of illuminism, which would be to conflate the German and French Enlightenments, Strauss sees what is at stake in Jacobi's distinction between understanding and reason. The understanding (*Der Verstand*) thinks objects, but it is not their source. By contrast, reason (*Vernunft*) is the locus of the revelation of being. It is, along with perception (*Wahrnehmung*), a mode of knowledge where reality is received, as we are reminded by the verb *vernehmen*.⁷ The object, far from depending on our understanding, which only organizes that which is given outside of it, is transcendent.⁸

The authentic rationalism that Jacobi wants to advance is opposed to the false rationalism of the Enlightenment, where reason is a flame that illuminates experience. The Enlightenment, which makes perception into an intellectual construction and belief in the reality of the object into a conclusion of reason, does not see the function of revelation and the receptivity of reason. It collapses into speculative egoism and idealism. These are philosophies of representation. By contrast, he who says, "I am not Cartesian" defends a hypercritical irrationalism and affirms as against Kant the existence of the thing-in-itself, but this philosophy of belief or non-philosophy goes hand in hand with realism, in which it is experience that illumines reason. This dimension distinguishes the Anti-Enlightenment of Jacobi from illuminism.⁹ His concept of reason is not only a weapon against the Enlightenment, but is a way of suggesting that reason is related to revelation and supposes it. Reason feels that which it grasps, for is already there. It is not the site where being pronounces itself in the logos but rather where it trusts in feeling. Reason and understanding suppose sense, and reason designates the sense of the suprasensual.

In forging this notion, Jacobi radicalizes the conflict between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy, rejecting the Kantian solution. The rationalism of the Enlightenment, the conception of reason which is that of philosophy since Aristotle, where it is assimilated to the understanding, leads to atheism. The strategy of demonstrations of God's existence is nothing but a last resort, masking the fact that the consequences of a coherent rationalism, just as appear in Spinoza, are the negation of human freedom and the critique of the biblical conception of God. Natural theology, of which Lessing appears to be the outstanding example, is a mirage. In Straussian terms, it signifies that there is no such thing as the moderate Enlightenment, or that the moderate Enlightenment, represented by Mendelssohn, is destined to be captured and overcome by the radical Enlightenment. And it is in the guise of a conflict between Jacobi and Mendelsohn that the pantheism controversy will break open and put in the center of philosophical debate the system of Spinoza. This is because the problem is that "Orthodoxy could be returned to only if Spinoza was wrong in every respect."¹⁰ Ultimately, it is a matter of knowing to which orthodoxy one should return. Is revelation internal, existential (Jacobi/Kierkegaard), or must it be based on biblical Revelation (Winzenmann)? Likewise, one could ask oneself if the return—or *teshuvah*—is a return to the Torah or simply to the culture that was founded by the Torah. Is it necessary to recognize that the new orthodoxy, in the end, has internalized the Enlightenment in opposing itself to the God of the tradition

(Cohen, Rosenzweig) or to revisit the teaching of Maimonides and the prophets (Cohen, Strauss)? Finally, one can pose the question of the place of mysticism (Scholem) in religious experience, which is the experience of a transcendent Call, to which religious doctrines give more or less adequate expression. For purposes of dissecting the modern religious consciousness, it is a matter of returning to Spinoza and the Enlightenment critique of orthodoxy.

Jacobi holds a threefold interest for Strauss. He demonstrates how the conflict between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy is a conflict between atheism and orthodoxy and that the debate has not been definitively resolved in favor of the Enlightenment. He avoids the Kantian solution of a religion within the limits of reason alone, permitting Strauss to overturn the neo-Kantianism of Cassirer. Finally, Jacobi stands for an internal critique of rationalism. In asking what conception of reason is at work in the Enlightenment, Jacobi is the first to say that philosophers of the Enlightenment have their own presuppositions and to put in question the truth of their system. This questioning opens up into a comparison between modern and classic rationalism, that is, into the question of knowing whether there is not a pre-modern Enlightenment. Thus "the Jacobi question" permits Strauss to reopen the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and ask whether Enlightenment is not essentially medieval.

After having discussed this heritage of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment at the same time as the pantheism controversy, and having shown the failure of the moderate Enlightenment, it will then be a matter of examining Strauss's reading of Spinoza's and Hobbes's critiques of Revelation. What is the legacy of this critique of the Bible? To what extent has it been accepted by the advocates of the new orthodoxy? Finally, what conception of reason and of man is at the foundation of modern rationalism and the theological-political problem as identified by the modern Enlightenment? All of these questions lead to an examination of the Straussian critique of the Enlightenment: What is it that permits Strauss to call the modern Enlightenment an obfuscation¹¹ and to say the modern rationalism has destroyed reason? Is it that Jacobi, because the task consists in securing and fully fathoming the problematic object by the reduction to the unquestionable conditions of its possibility,¹² grounds a philosophy of nothingness, fatalism, and atheism, and that only the *salto mortale* of faith and the heroism of belief will save man? Or, rather, is it necessary to return to the rationalism of Maimonides and an articulation of the theological and the political that the Moderns have forgotten?

The Pantheism Controversy

The Critique of Natural Religion

On the eve of the pantheism controversy (1780–1815), three positions were represented in the German Enlightenment: Lessing's theory of history, Kant's critical philosophy, and Mendelssohn's popular philosophy. Jacobi will attack these three figures and claim that their rationalism is unreasonable. The origin of the pantheism controversy is the religious philosophy of Lessing, whose *Education of the Human Race* appeared in 1780. Mendelssohn considers Lessing a partisan of rational religion who wishes to integrate Revelation into the exercise of reason and to reconcile finite consciousness with the divine Absolute. The stories of the Bible, dogmas, and rituals are the steps that allow man to understand, little by little, natural religion in its purity. Lessing explains, in paragraph 73 of his *Education of the Human Race*, that the concept of the Trinity is a way of grasping the idea of a God who does not exclude plurality. Natural religion, far from being identified with the content of a positive religion, conforms to reason. No revealed truth is definitively suprarational. The particular historical forms of religion are simply connected to the historical conditions of this rational religion.

This metaphysical humanism, where the taking into account of finitude does not exclude the search for the absolute, goes hand in hand with the message of tolerance in *Nathan the Wise* (1779). Inspired by Boccaccio, the parable of the three rings invites us to recognize the equal legitimacy of the three monotheistic religions and constitutes an appeal for the respect of man as man. But this text, in which the principal character was inspired by Mendelssohn, breaks somewhat with Lessing's philosophical doctrine and his attempt to resolve the antimony between Leibniz and Spinoza. Lessing seeks a fully rational, fully coherent concept of God, thinkable and accessible by the finite mind. If God is absolute and infinite, how does He permit of being conceived by man? To this problem relating to the system of Spinoza, Lessing adds a difficulty represented by every conception of a transcendent God: how God the creator, the transcendent God of the Bible, can conform to the concept of absoluteness required by reason?

Lessing believed he had found the solution to this antinomy in the notion of subjectivity: the unity of the subject or of substance does not exclude the plurality of thinking. This solution would cause Mendelssohn to say that the Spinozism of Lessing is a "purified Spinozism" (*geläutert*), compatible with morality and religion. In Lessing, the system of Spinoza

leads to the God of Leibniz, understood as monad of monads. Returning to the metaphor of the city, which one finds in paragraph 57 of the *Monadology*, if one conceives the divinity on a subjectivist model, one can think the totality of points of view without falling into pantheism, because this conception reconciles the unity of consciousness with the multiplicity of representations. Likewise, in Leibniz, human reason is a part of divine reason and revealed truths, which, *supra sed non contra rationem*, can be reconciled with the rationalism of natural religion. The problem is that Lessing denies to Revelation the heteronomy that constitutes its real meaning. Not only is this natural religion disembodied, but as well Mendelssohn—like Lessing and Spinoza—believes that reason is capable of self-grounding. He denies the irrational moment at the heart of reason itself that Jacobi calls Revelation. There is, says Jacobi, an abyss between this natural religion and positive religion. It is this abyss that is brought to light in addressing the “authentic Spinozism” (*authentisch*) of Lessing.

Jacobi met Lessing at Wolfenbüttel in 1780. It was in the course of a conversation with Jacobi that Lessing confided in him something he had not revealed to anyone, not even to his friend Mendelssohn. Jacobi read to him a poem by Goethe titled *Prometheus*. The rebellion of Prometheus is associated, according to Jacobi, with the Spinozism and pantheism of Goethe. What could be the religion of a free people? Could one believe in a transcendent God, creator of the world and benevolent, or is the God of Spinoza alone tenable? Lessing, in making Goethe's ode his own, said of Spinoza: “If I must put a label on myself, I don't see any other.” Jacobi reported this statement of the late philosopher in a letter to Mendelssohn dated November 4, 1783.¹³ Lessing would have said: “There is no philosophy but the philosophy of Spinoza.” He denounced the heteronomy of positive religion and affirmed that man must put himself on the path of an authentic religion, in which progress will be characterized by the union of transcendence and immanence. He denied that there was a transcendent God, Providence, or salvation.

The revelation by Jacobi of Lessing's Spinozism launched the pantheism debate and provoked the indignation of Mendelssohn. Jacobi saw in Lessing a “convinced Spinozist”: he is aware that the consequence of rationalism is a critique of the concept of the biblical God, the negation of human freedom or fatalism—which follows from a system that has eliminated final causes—and pantheism, which is the result of nihilism or constructivism that dissolves the object and subject of knowledge. Mendelssohn, for his part, had referred to a “purified Spinozism,” cleansed of those elements undermining morality and religion.

Jacobi's revelation of the Spinozism of Lessing necessarily served to destroy the skillful compromise that the German Enlightenment had struck between philosophy and religion. And Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786), German philosopher and Jewish thinker, incarnated this synthesis between the Western Enlightenment and Judaism. He was the greatest “model” for those Jewish thinkers who sought to give a modern expression to their tradition. Mendelssohn attempted to translate the elements specific to the Jewish tradition into the German language: he accommodated the thinking of the Law and of Revelation, which is at the foundation of the Jewish religious tradition within the framework of Western thought, and translated the Bible from Hebrew to German. Mendelssohn, who was close to the Wolffian theologians, in particular Baumgarten, sought to reintroduce the study of the Bible into a curriculum until then dominated by the study of Talmud and kabbalah. He privileged historical knowledge of the Bible, without neglecting the fact that religion served to console, to “edify,” as he said by employing the term *Erbauung*, which is dear to Protestant thought and which assumes, among the supporters of the religious Enlightenment, a reconciliation between faith and reason.

Mendelssohn is part of that movement of the Enlightenment that seeks to construct the personality of the individual, in feeling as well as in reason, at the heart of a reasonable and tolerant religion. It is in his first work, *Philosophical Dialogues*, published in 1785 with the aid of Lessing, that he makes a synthesis between the philosophy of Wolff and religious belief. The three ideas of natural religion (belief in God, immortality of the soul, and Providence) are the core of this rational system, which includes a metaphysics, an epistemology, and an ethics. The existence of God is presupposed by this philosophy, but it is equally possible to demonstrate by reason. Finally, this “Socrates of Berlin” is also a man born at Dessau, one of the main centers of the *Haskala* movement. Moise Dessau Mendelssohn, the Germanized patronymic of Moses, son of Mendel, was an eminent representative of the Jewish Enlightenment. Concerned with liberating Ashkenazy Judaism from the intellectual ghetto in which Talmudic casuistry and the kabbalah had enclosed it, in particular after the Reform, he set for himself the task of encouraging the study of contemporary science and philosophy and promoting a rational comprehension of Jewish texts. Appearing in the third quarter of the eighteenth century, *Haskala* borrowed from the Enlightenment many of its forms and categories while drawing its substance from Jewish thought and biblical exegesis of the medieval Andalousian tradition. Mendelssohn embodies this original borrowing and adaptation of the Enlightenment

problematic to the situation of Judaism. It is on account of this that the debate opened by the pantheism controversy is hurtful and worrying for him: it puts in question the confidence he had in Lessing. And the latter is no longer there to reassure him that differences of religious denomination will not be an obstacle to philosophical friendship and the progress of the Enlightenment. It was a “brother in Leibniz” that Mendelssohn felt he would lose if Jacobi succeeded in imposing his notion that Lessing was really a Spinozist.

The *Morning Hours*, only the first volume of which was published in Mendelssohn’s lifetime,¹⁴ focused on Lessing and could only allude to the debate with Jacobi. Mendelssohn wanted to reconcile Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy, Judaism and English empiricism, from which his concept of common sense derives. After writing the first volume of *Morgenstunden*, he feared that the moderate Enlightenment could be compromised by materialism on the one side and by the *Schwärmerei* on the other. But the publication, at the same time, of the letters of Jacobi to Mendelssohn on Spinoza’s doctrine was a shock. For two years, there had been exchanges of letters between Mendelssohn and Jacobi. The latter, through Elise Reimarus, had informed Mendelssohn concerning the Spinozism of Lessing. Herder, Hamann, Goethe, Lavater, and Reimarus were also immediately active in this discussion, either in suggesting that rationalism had shown its true colors (that is, the most scandalous atheism) or in minimizing the problem, reducing it to a minor accident on the Enlightenment journey. It is in this context that the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* published in 1784 articles by Mendelssohn and Kant on the question “What is Enlightenment?”

In publishing his correspondence with Mendelssohn, Jacobi brought this case before the public. His objective was to force everyone to choose his side and thereby to divide the Enlightenment against itself. He used Kant, who had limited the realm of knowledge in order to leave room for faith, to denounce the consequences of Lessing’s rationalism and to unmask the contradictions in Mendelssohn’s dogmatism (1785–1786). Then he went on to attack Kant himself as an inconsistent idealist (1786–1789). Finally, the *Pantheismusstreit* turned into the debate concerning the French Revolution (1789–1790). Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the intellectual world would be under the shock of what Hegel described as a “thunderbolt,” because a blow had been struck against the authority of the Enlightenment. The consequences of this upheaval, which will contribute to a reshuffling of the deck, both politically and philosophically, can be felt every time the meaning of Kant is reconsidered, for example, between Heidegger, who views the Kantian finitude as a break

from the metaphysics of subjectivity that is the legacy of the Enlightenment, and Cassirer, who believes that Kantianism is the fulfillment of the Enlightenment. Ultimately, the question of the legacy of this critique of the Enlightenment will be posed by Nietzsche, a radical *Aufklärer*, who rejects the Romantic reaction against the Enlightenment as *ressentiment* and seeks a “new Enlightenment,” but whose notion of “life” recalls the heroism, condemnation of doubt, and contempt of fear that are present in Jacobi.

There Is No Such Thing as Moderate Enlightenment

The debate that Jacobi provoked in speaking about the Spinozism of Lessing is an attack against the Enlightenment of Mendelssohn and his attempt to reconcile reason and Revelation: the natural religion of Lessing is disembodied, and the meaning that Mendelssohn assigns to the notion of Revelation is too weak. The natural religion of Lessing and the Judaism that Mendelssohn confines to legal obligation, which leave full freedom to the exercise of reason, have in common with Spinoza the belief that reason can be self-grounding, without the need of Revelation. The latter, in the strict sense, is heteronomous: it is received from the outside and is not immanent.

This is precisely Strauss’s own objection to the moderate Enlightenment. In Mendelssohn, Revelation has a weak meaning: his God is a God who can be demonstrated by reason and who does not *require* Revelation. Soon one would be able, like Cohen, to speak of a religion of reason and to claim that Judaism was the fulfillment of Kantian morality. Messianism will have become the hope of a humanity progressing in moral goodness. Religion will be retained, thanks to the dimension of hope that it carries with it and that sustains the individual’s striving toward goodness. It will be a complement to morality, but it will have been overcome as Law. This disappearance of religion as Law, which follows from the disappearance of the strong meaning of Revelation, is what Strauss rejects in the proponents of the moderate Enlightenment. The latter were playing with fire, because between the weak meaning of Revelation and its negation there is but a single step. Actually, there is no true moderate Enlightenment: it is to Spinoza that Mendelssohn’s argument leads. Mendelssohn had sought to reconcile Revelation with reason, and he weakened the former to the point of making it useless. He had attempted to create a synthesis of the Jewish tradition with the Enlightenment, and he denied to his religion the notion of Law, which is the core of its distinctiveness. He wanted to reconcile

Judaism and the West, and he transformed the faith of his fathers into a particular cult, tied to a past epoch, and revealed by Moses to a tribe that no longer exists. Mendelssohn wanted to preserve Judaism and win it recognition. And on each occasion, he betrayed it. He was victim of an illusion, which was to believe that one could create a synthesis of reason and Revelation, of Judaism and the West, and that there was continuity between modernity and the tradition. Where Mendelssohn saw continuity, Strauss saw a rupture. Thus, the quarrel between reason and Revelation is taken to its climax, thanks to the pantheism controversy, which permits Strauss to show that this conflict reduces to the radical divide between atheism and orthodoxy, and then between modern and classical rationalism, that is, to the break between the Ancients and Moderns. Finally, where Mendelssohn speaks of a synthesis between Judaism and the West, Strauss speaks of a tension between Jerusalem and Athens.

Mendelssohn says that Judaism is a religion of Law that asserts no dogma and that, for this reason, approximates natural religion, but his way of limiting Law to positive laws valid only for a single nation makes Judaism disappear as a religion. It becomes a mere culture or designates the remains of a culture, connected to the Old Testament's conception of God, but fated to merge with the universalism of reason, that is, to blend into morality. To speak of natural religion is to say that there is no necessity for positive religions, and that a wise man "does not remain where chance of birth has cast him."¹⁵ This way of relativizing the content of Judaism arguably opens into the Spinozist critique of particularist religion, the prescriptions of which ought to be abandoned in favor of a minimalist credo connected to whatever of universal morality there is in the Old and New Testaments. Is it not the theological-political problem that is specific to Judaism that is buried with Mendelssohn? Finally, what distinguishes Mendelssohn from Spinoza's rejection of a tribal religion, belonging to a bygone era and addressed to a people living in particular conditions? If these conditions are no longer present, because the Jews were readmitted to Berlin after 1671, and if people today are less inclined to idolatry than the people to whom Moses addressed himself, must one not reform Judaism in the direction of the modern Enlightenment and the West? Is not this the way to make Judaism relevant for the present and the future?

Mendelssohn thought that orthodoxy was an anachronistic form of religiosity but that Judaism could be preserved. He was mistaken, according to Strauss: once one says that orthodoxy is over, one makes Revelation in the strict sense disappear and one buries religion. The latter becomes a mere expedient, without doubt indispensable for the common people

who, believing in salvation, try to make themselves worthy of it by their virtue, but completely useless for the true wise man, for the philosopher who has read the *Ethics* of Spinoza and knows that the truth belongs to the third kind of knowledge. In the era of the Enlightenment, religion is but the last resort of ignorance. It is an illusion that still has a future, but one should wish for it to end.

The moderate Enlightenment of Mendelssohn is apt to be confused with the radical Enlightenment. Thus Strauss chooses to go back to the source: from the beginning of the 1930s, he works on Spinoza's critique of religion instead of analyzing Mendelssohn's writings about God, such as *Jerusalem*. Strauss is interested in the *Philosophical Dialogues* of Mendelssohn and in the *Phaedon*, where the characters of Lessing, Socrates, and Plato are presented, but he focuses above all on the *Morning Hours* because the debate provoked by Jacobi obliges the moderate Enlightenment to confront the legacy of Spinoza. And for Strauss, as for Jacobi, this confrontation reverts to the examination of the concept of reason underpinning Spinoza's system. It is, first of all, the belief in the sufficiency of reason that Strauss discovers at the heart of the modern Enlightenment critique of Revelation. This belief marks a true break between the philosophy of the Enlightenment and orthodoxy, which supposes that man cannot make his salvation alone, without the assistance of Revelation, and even without the assistance of a religion. This break deprives the intermediate position of Mendelssohn of all credibility and shows that the real problem is that of a discontinuity between classical thought and the modern ideal of the progress of humanity through science and reason.

Just as Jacobi shows that "purified Spinozism" does not exist, Strauss shows that the conflict between the Enlightenment and orthodoxy is a conflict between atheism and orthodoxy. The latter supposes a notion of Revelation that affirms its heteronomy, its transcendence rather than its immanence. It is here that Jacobi takes issue with Kant, to whom everyone turned at the beginning of the pantheism controversy. In a parallel fashion, Strauss is going to think this conflict between reason and Revelation, which is the opening chapter of his reflection on the legacy of the Enlightenment, in bringing to light the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns, that is, in refusing to believe that the problem has been solved by critical philosophy.

With the pantheism controversy, it is the entire modern Enlightenment that Strauss seeks to oppose to classical rationalism. No Modern, not even Kant, can pretend to have solved the conflict between orthodoxy and Enlightenment. No modern philosophy can claim to have surpassed

the Ancients and to be superior to them. The only weighty thinker will be Heidegger, who will speak of a necessary return to the Greek sources of knowledge. Strauss will borrow from him this idea while choosing a return to Socrates and Plato rather than to the pre-Socratics. He will also borrow the idea according to which Western history is characterized as a forgetting. This notion of a forgetting, conceptualized differently by Heidegger and by Strauss, is exactly what separates the latter from the Kantian schema of Enlightenment. For Kant, the Enlightenment designates a slow and never entirely complete process of the dissemination of positive knowledge, as with the Encyclopedists, but it is above all a matter of the capacity of individuals and peoples to think for themselves without submitting to any authority external to reason itself. In Strauss, there is neither this idea of general progress of the Moderns in relation to the Ancients nor this privileging of autonomy. Strauss rejects autonomy in the technical sense given to it in Kantian philosophy, and which is taken up again by neo-Kantianism with its primacy of the ethical, but he also dismisses the current sense of the term, which suggests that most human beings do not require guidance on the spiritual front and in the conduct of their lives. Strauss is a philosopher, but at the same time he affirms that human beings need Law conceived as heteronomy.¹⁶ This is the meaning of his return to Maimonides. The latter represents an attempt to think the idea of philosophy before the Law and to justify the Law by philosophical reason, which has nothing to see with the synthesis of philosophy and Judaism proposed by Mendelssohn.

Strauss rejected Kant and turned upside down the position of the neo-Kantians thanks to Jacobi. In order to address the refutation by Strauss of the moderate Enlightenment, from Mendelssohn to Kant, we must know how Jacobi turned Kantianism on its head, attacking it from within.

The Rejection of the Kantian Solution

At the beginning, Jacobi utilizes Kantian critical philosophy to oppose Mendelssohn. In his *Responses to the Accusations of Mendelssohn in his Letter to the Friends of Lessing* (1786), he said that philosophy does not permit the demonstration of God's existence and that all philosophy leads to atheism. In his *Letters to Mendelssohn*, he deploys the Kantian idea of the thing-in-itself, which supposes that human beings are receptive to that which is given. Because there is no logical proof of the higher truths of natural religion, and human beings therefore are not able to arrive at

any systematic conclusions, either a priori or a posteriori, concerning the existence of the thing-in-itself, Jacobi will say that our conviction concerning the existence of things outside of ourselves is a belief. The Jacobian concept of belief explained in *David Hume* derives at the same time from the empiricism of Hume himself and from the Kantian idea according to which the reality of objects is not addressed by reason. This thesis will permit Jacobi and his young friend Winzenmann—proponent of the heteronomy of Revelation and convinced that the tradition alone can provide it with a stable content—to say that rationalism, which purports to deduce the existence of the concept, leads fundamentally to an atheism. The concept of God undermines itself. Religion rests on a dangerous leap. Whoever would say that the infinite being thinks, as Spinoza saw, would be saying something no less absurd than if he affirmed that the infinite is finite. The response from Mendelssohn, who had treated Kant as a destructive force and who did not in the beginning receive his assistance, remaining in retirement up to then, was to have recourse to “common sense”: common sense is not able to choose between and give its assent to one or the other position. But this solution is a subterfuge: there is a conflict between Spinozism, that is, atheism, and fideism. The middle position that critical philosophy believed itself to occupy was untenable.

Jacobi takes up also the Kantian argument concerning the dogmatism of Spinoza by showing that his rational system rests on that which we call today a performative contradiction: it cannot explain how someone like Spinoza is possible. If we are nothing but modes of thought, how was Spinoza able to construct a system that begins with the definition of substance and purports to encompass the whole? Similarly, Strauss writes that “the clear and distinct account of everything that it presents remains fundamentally hypothetical. As a consequence, its cognitive status is not different from that of the orthodox account.”¹⁷ Spinoza hides the nonevident character of his premises by the success of his results. This critique of system and of the pretension of human reason to grasp the whole allows Jacobi to hone in on the misunderstanding of the philosophers. Not only have they confounded reason with the understanding in reducing it to the constructivist principle, but as well they thought reason did not need Revelation or a suprasensual realm given from the outside. The use of Kant opens up into an objection to Kant, as is shown by the conflict concerning the thing-in-itself.

Jacobi is going to make use of that which Kant discovered as positive in the dialectic of pure reason—that is, the privilege accorded to practical reason—because of the idea of freedom that allows the application of cer-

tain ideas found only a priori in reason. Jacobi borrowed from Kant in the first stage of the pantheism controversy in order to attack the dogmatism of Mendelssohn and Lessing. But, with the publication of his *David Hume and Belief or Idealism and Realism* (1787), he accused Kant of being an idealist who denies the existence of the thing-in-itself. Jacobi seeks to be more consistent than Kant himself. It is not only because Mendelssohn is dead that Jacobi turns against Kant from 1786, but also because he wants to prove that the solution to the conflict between reason and Revelation is not a religion within the limits of reason alone.

Kant understood that Jacobi's attack was against him. No longer was the opposition between rationalism and fideism, but rather between critical reason and dogmatism. In claiming that reason is the meaning of the suprasensible, Jacobi and Winzenmann succumbed to rational dogmatism. If they had reflected on the need for the Absolute that was part of the subjective functioning of our reason, they would not have taken their ideas for real objects. Jacobi falls into irrationalism, into *Schwärmerei*, into the virtually unavoidable tendency of reason to confuse its Ideas with things or to make hypostases and to enter into antinomies that critical reason or the consciousness of the boundaries and limits of our faculty of knowledge allows us to avoid. According to Kant, Jacobi and Winzenmann represent a regression in relation to the progress that critical reason has made in human rationality, progress that depends on awareness of the limits of the power of knowledge. This assimilation by the Kantian Enlightenment of rationality, Enlightenment, and critical reason is the strategy of the work titled "On a recently prominent tone of superiority in philosophy."¹⁸ Belief cannot have any theoretical significance, and Jacobi's dangerous move leads to mysticism, which for Kant is hard to distinguish from madness. The dogmatism of Spinoza that dooms Jacobi and the *Schwärmerei* derives from the same negation of the finitude of reason: Jacobi is a dogmatist. The pantheism debate merely reveals what Kant already knew, namely that this is the dialectic of reason: these doctrinal conflicts are manifestations of the antinomies of reason. The only solution is to limit the ambition of human reason to grasp the suprasensible and to guarantee belief in the supersensible as a presupposition of practical reason. And Jacobi turns this idea against Kant himself in suggesting that Kant is not consistent: the rationalism of Kant, like the rationalism of the Enlightenment, derives from absolute idealism, because it reduces everything to the subjective principle of representation. In the domain of religion, this means turning God into a moral idea.

To dissect the modern religious consciousness and to explain that modernity evolves irresistibly toward secularization, toward the reduction of religion to a morality where the respect of the other is the only vestige of a relation to transcendence, as a relation to something other than oneself, Strauss returns to the moment where the Enlightenment decided our fate. He returns to Kant, who belonged to the moderate Enlightenment, and opposed the latter to the radical Enlightenment, represented by Hobbes and Spinoza. And if the radical Enlightenment buried all revealed religion, if Spinoza is more dangerous than Mendelssohn, the moderate Enlightenment represents nevertheless a real danger. It conceals the problem and pretends to preserve something that it destroys. Kant is thus more formidable than Mendelssohn: the relation between transcendence and immanence that follows from his thought concerning finitude and that is manifest in his morality based on the immanent law of reason signifies that the heteronomy of the Law and Revelation are not necessary to morality and that religion is subordinate to morality. This attack against religion as Revelation is all the more effective in appearing to be gentle. While the radical Enlightenment uses the weapons of mockery and derision against orthodoxy, thus limiting the consequence of its critique and allowing the idea of a conflict—then of a choice between two stances, two opposite *interests*—to remain, the Kantian Enlightenment pretends to preserve that which, at bottom, it annihilates: with Kant, religion becomes the auxiliary of morality, and the path toward secularization is assured. Strauss is thus required to avoid the Kantian solution and, to do that, to say that it has been discredited. Such is the role of Jacobi. Awareness of the danger that the Kantian Enlightenment represents for religion explains in part¹⁹ Strauss's silence on Kant.

Strauss doesn't speak of Kant, but this silence is eloquent. It has a function and a precise significance. Further, it is not a matter of genuine absence: Kant is indirectly addressed by Strauss, because the critique of the relation between transcendence and immanence is at the source of the pantheism controversy and the debate concerning the French Revolution, and because Kantianism distinguishes Strauss from Cohen. The impasse of the Kantian solution first appears, in Strauss's view, in Cohen, who, in *The Religion of Reason Derived from the sources of Judaism*, interprets the morality of the prophets as if it culminated in Kantianism. This method of interpretation, linked to the Kantian scheme of Enlightenment, prevented Cohen from seeing what was distinctive in Judaism and in the articulation of theology and politics specific to the notion of the Law. In the philosophy of Cohen, which asserts the primacy of ethics, religion appears

as a complement that supports man's striving toward the good, and not as a Law expressing a particular relation between God and humankind, considered at one and same time individually and collectively.

Strauss implicitly criticizes Cohen for having pursued the task of the destruction of religion for which Cohen himself had reproached Spinoza, who was guilty of reducing the religion of his ancestors to a mere national religion. With Cohen, one no longer knows whether one is really dealing with a religion. He thus is closer to Spinoza than he admits. What distinguishes the Kantian philosopher who makes of God an atheistic concept? If religion is to have meaning, and not collapse, like natural religion, in a sort of hidden atheism, revelation must be thought of as divine Revelation.²⁰ Cohen belongs to the movement for a return to tradition, but that tradition escaped him because he was too Kantian. Cohen was a man of the Enlightenment, that is, a man who, in the very reflection on the relationship between immanence and transcendence, rejected the heteronomy of Revelation and the Law. His mistake derives from the Kantian theory of the moral law. When Strauss writes that the alternative between orthodoxy and the Enlightenment is an alternative between orthodoxy and atheism, he equally wants to say this: the Kantian solution and the idea of the suprasensible, of which I have no experience than by my reason, which is practically oriented, and because there is in me a moral law that gives me a priori the sense of good and evil, could never provide the means for the Jews to save their tradition or for the modern religious consciousness to transcend the paradoxes of secularization.

Here it is worth underscoring the originality of Strauss's philosophy in a time when most philosophers thought that the truth of the Moderns was to be found in Kant or Hegel. Strauss breaks with both of them through his use of Jacobi. Through his critique of the system of Spinoza, the exposure of its contradictions, and the scrutiny of rationalist dogmatism, Jacobi showed the way to Strauss for the rejection of Hegel's philosophy. As for the German Jewish philosophers of his generation, the idea that reason could grasp the totality of the real seemed difficult for him to admit, at once for the concern with existence that is at the heart of Jewish rationalism—and that would be the beginning point for Rosenzweig—and because the point of view of the philosophy of history, which justifies all of reality, even the unjustifiable, seems to be a way of writing an official history, which is in fact the story of the conquerors, as Walter Benjamin had suggested. But in showing that the Kantian solution to the conflict between Enlightenment and orthodoxy is only in appearance one of successful conciliation and mediation, in suggesting that Kantianism derives

from Spinozism, Jacobi further permitted Strauss to return to the sources of the problem, that is, the conception of man and of reason that is at the core of the modern Enlightenment, whether radical or conservative. And, moreover, this conception represents a total break with the kind of wisdom defended by the ancient and medieval philosophers. It is possible that reflection on religion is the occasion for reopening the quarrel of the Ancients and Moderns and showing the faults of the latter. What was destructive in the attack of the modern Enlightenment against religious orthodoxy? What is the reason that itself was lost and that Kantianism, despite appearances, was unable to rediscover?

The debate between orthodoxy and Enlightenment was not yet, at the start of the twentieth century, truly decided. The revealed religions were not rejected once and for all in an overturning of the past, and the remaining adherents to their tenets did not have to have recourse to subjective will. The debate over the kind of orthodoxy to which to return was opened. It was already present in the dispute over pantheism in the dialogue between Jacobi and Winzenmann. This debate concerning the content of Revelation is taken up by Strauss. Strauss invoked Jacobi in questioning the rationality of the Enlightenment, but he would not continue to be concerned with Jacobi, this purpose having been served. Strauss will have assimilated once and for all what had been gained through the pantheism debate, that is, the reversal of the neo-Kantianism of Cassirer, the return from the Moderate Enlightenment of Mendelssohn to the radical Enlightenment of Hobbes and Spinoza and the rejection of criticism. But Strauss would never become a man of the Anti-Enlightenment, because the return to orthodoxy that he proposes is less a struggle against the Enlightenment in the name of faith than a return to another type of Enlightenment, exemplified above all by Maimonides. This abandonment of Jacobi was foreseeable from the beginning, because Strauss never embraced on his own account the idea according to which individuality and existence are the true sites of Revelation. This idea, which appears in Kierkegaard, but also in Rosenzweig, is contrary to the sensibility of Strauss, who is not interested in religion for the sake of understanding his own faith. His interest rather is motivated by an inquiry concerning the necessity of transmitting a tradition and on the question of knowing the possibility of this transition in the present time. Considering the specific relationship of the biblical religions to the tradition, Strauss poses the question of how to know whether a tradition, in the sense of a nation or culture, can survive the Enlightenment critique of Revelation and the Bible.

Because he opposes an excessive internalization of faith, Strauss does not believe that subjectivity is the measure of all things. He seems closer to Winzenmann than to Jacobi. The young philosopher, who died in 1787, held that the tradition offered the best guarantee of difference, to the extent that stories, ceremonies, and rites constitute a genuine religious life. One finds in Winzemann a reflection that will be at the core of Rosenzweig's *Star of Redemption*, which is situated between Jacobi and Winzemann. The pantheism debate is really the spark for all of the questions that concern Strauss. The debate concerning Revelation, the final stage of the *Pantheismusstreit*, reveals the political agenda that is at the heart of the abstract critique of the rationalism of the Enlightenment. It equally permits us to understand the connection between the critique of the heteronomy of Revelation and the affirmation of a political teaching that differs radically from the political philosophy of the classics. Finally, it gives its full meaning to the theological-political problem, that is to say, the connection between religion and politics, which was considered as definitely solved by the modern Enlightenment and the advent of liberal democracy.

The Controversy over the French Revolution

The controversy over the French Revolution reproduces at the level of politics the first attack against the Enlightenment that occurred in the *Pantheismusstreit*.²¹ Burke and Rehberg have in common with Jacobi and Winzenmann the resort to empiricism and the critique of the abstract ideal of the rights of man.²² Rehberg (1757–1836), who already played a role in the pantheism debate, saw in the French Revolution and in Kantianism a rationalism that distorts reality and reconstructs it being from seductive but completely impractical ideas. Kantian morality and Rousseau's theory of the general will failed to close the gap between the universal and the particular. If the distinction between duty and particular duties is meaningful because it underscores the essence of morality and does not rely on conformity with conventions and existing commands, it still allows for particular duties to arise through the articulation of what is right and wrong in a specific situation. The content of right cannot be determined except in relation to a complete system of positive laws, that is, the state, as Hegel suggested in taking the example of theft, which has no meaning except in relation to the right to property.²³

This reference to experience will be still more evident in the political domain. This is why the critique of the abstraction of human rights

occupies a central place in the debate concerning the rationalism of the Enlightenment. Conversely, the link between the debate about the Revolution and the pantheism quarrel or the integration of this political question into a philosophical reflection on the claims of rationalism means that the critique of human rights has in the first instance not the polemical function that it would possess among certain French counterrevolutionaries such as Joseph de Maistre. Jacobi is not Joseph de Maistre, because that which he criticizes in the Revolution is first of all the idea that one can make a *tabula rasa* of the past and reconstruct the entire political edifice on an exclusively rational basis. The motivation of Jacobi, like that of Burke, who says, in reading the former, "I believed I was reading myself," is not to attack the idea of the republic or to defend absolute monarchy and the divine right of kings. It is rather to underline the unreasonable character of the revolutionary enterprise and its absurdity in showing that it is impossible to ground politics on abstract ideals and that such an enterprise is doomed to impasse, because it is profoundly unaware of that which is political life. Experience is not determined by the categories of our understanding, but rather is that from which we begin. It is not reconstructed but described. The point of departure, for thinking the political, is life, not the understanding and its a priori principles. Before establishing political right based on abstract principles and on the respect for man generally, it is necessary to begin, say Burke and Arendt,²⁴ from particular human beings and the concrete level where this question of respect of the person has to begin with a sense, that is, the nation.

The intention of Jacobi is thus not in the first instance polemical, even if his critique of the rationalism of the Enlightenment has political consequences: it leads the Anti-Enlightenment to naturally oppose itself to the Revolution or to the idea of a radical rupture with the past. Similarly, if the conception of reason as a function of revelation goes hand in hand with the rehabilitation of experience, it also signifies that the traditions and customs that are the empirical function of a society constitute the spirit of the laws. The abstract and universal principles of right thus cannot be applied without taking into account that particular instance that is the community. The source of right, far from being reason or the autonomy of the will, is history.

The reason at work in the project of the foundation of right and politics which is that of the Revolutionaries is a reason cut off from experience. It has "neither heart nor guts."²⁵ It is "arrogant" in setting itself up as the sole legislator. And reason is "not legislative, nor executive but purely juridical." It serves exclusively to apply given determinations to

given objects. The reason that is at work in the revolutionary project corresponds to the understanding. It stems from the pretension of man to reconstruct the real according to his principles alone. This pretension Jacobi had already denounced in the idealist metaphysics that is situated at the heart of revolutionary humanism. The latter can assert a purely human conception of right, thus a certain metaphysical modesty that contrasts with the foundation of right in the ancien régime and the absolute monarchy based on the divine right of kings, but upon closer examination this modesty turns out to be false. It goes hand in hand with the pretension to be able to construct the world beginning from purely rational ideals. The consciousness of human finitude supposes that one is envisaging a purely judicial, not legislative, function of reason and that one accepts the idea that man is not man except as he manifests him in belonging to a concrete world, to a community.

If man is finite, it is because the existence of the world precedes philosophical concepts. Man is not capable of total mastery in the domain either of speculation or of action. The relation between theory and practice must not be thought of in the way that philosophers have done up to now, because there is within immanence an element of transcendence that is irreducible, whether at the level of knowledge or of action. In both cases one must take a dangerous leap: one must give up applying to all societies an abstract philosophy—whether it is the apparently universal rights of man that are considered as more universal than cannibalism. In other words, the question is that of knowing whether human rights are one social ideal like others or whether they should be considered the content of modern natural right.²⁶ The fact that they serve as criteria for judging positive law and measuring the legitimacy of existing laws in our societies does not resolve that problem. This reveals the difficulties relative to the principles on which modern natural right depends, because it is not certain that these principles are as universal as they claim.

The impasse and the contradictions of the rationalism of the Enlightenment thus concern also the content of this humanism, that is to say, the utilitarian principles that are the foundation of the rights of man. Right is defined beginning from the “desire to be happy.” Jacobi sees here a form of Spinozism: the confusion between practical reason, duty, and happiness is a way of reviving the *conatus* of Spinoza, which is the tendency of each to seek his conservation and the improvement of his conditions of life. And this *conatus*, which alone can assure the universality of human rights, is neither right nor something that demarcates the specific difference between man and other sentient beings. Man is defined by desire,

and this cannot produce duty or obligation other than in a fleeting and illusory way. This modern notion of natural right leads to the concession that “whales, codfish and herring have rights in the same manner as human beings. One says that, if these animals do not have like us a valid right to existence, it is because their natural organization is inferior to ours and they do not possess that which we are accustomed to understand under the name of reason?” But if that is the case, it supposes that “the rights of man are in proportion to his intellectual capacities.”²⁷ With such a definition of natural right, how “could one regard it as inexcusable for Aristotle to defend natural slavery?” The desire or the quest for happiness, far from producing right and justice, could lead to the affirmation of the right of the stronger, which we wanted to eliminate. And this is the contradiction in the project of the Constituent Assembly. “It is the project to ground rationally the universality of human rights that exposes rationalism and juridical humanism as endlessly entering into contradiction with themselves. The aporias of the Declaration manifest the inherent absurdity of wanting to attribute to reason a legislative or executive power that it does not possess.”

The rationalism of human rights, blind to what separates is from ought, fact from right, the animal from the human, amounts to political nihilism. The subject, the particular human being, and the object, right as effective in the world, are equally destroyed: “By means of the abstract term ‘human being’ one defines concrete human beings, ‘him’ and ‘me’ and one denies to each one the right to affirm for himself what he denies for the other. But it suffices to substitute ‘him and me’ with ‘human being and animal’ in order for the ‘equality of rights and duties’ to disappear instantly, thus illustrating the superficiality and impracticability of the rational process of abstraction on which depends in the end all juridical humanism.”²⁸

Abstract reason is impotent to define human rights that are truly juridical and authentically human. One must search for another source of right than abstract reason and autonomy of the will. For Jacobi, this source is history. The romantic genesis of the critique of the abstract rationalism of the Enlightenment ends up reducing to nothing the idea of natural and universal human rights, but is it all the same a reactionary critique? And what is the position of Strauss? Does he embrace the historicism of the Romantics, following them in their critique of natural right thinking as such, or, rather, does he use Jacobi for his rejection of the Kantian solution of the grounding of right, starting from reason and in order to propose a reinterpretation of natural right in light of the rupture between Ancients and Moderns?