

## CHAPTER I

*Introduction: The Spinoza Connection,  
 or the Discovery of “Feeling”*

“Every cause is a living, self-manifesting, freely acting power [. . .], and every effect is an *act*.”

And without the living experience of such a power in us, of which we are continuously conscious, [. . .] we should not have the slightest idea of cause and effect.”

Jacobi<sup>1</sup>

“Hume himself grants [. . .] that we only derive the representation of power from the feeling of *our own power*, and specifically from the feeling of its use *in overcoming obstacles*.”

Jacobi<sup>2</sup>

“Things in themselves can be recognized only *subjectively*, i.e., insofar as they affect our feeling.”

Fichte<sup>3</sup>

## 1.1 Prelude: Jacobi and Spinoza

The reception of Kant’s critical philosophy, generally referred to in his own day as the Critique of Reason, was for the intelligentsia of the late German Enlightenment the dominant issue in the final two decades of the eighteenth century. But, just like the Critique itself, its reception did not take place in a cultural vacuum. Both Critique and reception fit within a broader discussion on the nature of the human vocation to which all the luminaries of the day contributed, Kant included.<sup>4</sup> The discussion was initiated in 1774 by J. J. Spalding, a rationalist theologian with pietistic leanings, with the publication of a tract by the title of, precisely, *Die*

<sup>1</sup> MPW 291.    <sup>2</sup> MPW 292.

<sup>3</sup> *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre*, GA I.2:109. English trans. Fichte (1988), 95.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed account of the historical context, see George di Giovanni (2005).

*Bestimmung des Menschen* (The Vocation of Humankind). Spalding republished the tract several times during the rest of the century, each time in a revised form that reflected the discussion's current status. In the original edition, however, he had already raised the three questions – What can I know? What must I believe? What can I hope for? – to which Kant gave his critical answers. Moreover, an event occurred in 1785 that, according to Goethe's testimony, served as the spark for a truly societal explosion.<sup>5</sup> As things turned out, it also steered the reception of the Critique into a course Kant himself would not have expected.

I am referring to the Jacobi/Mendelssohn dispute over the meaning of Spinoza and the implication that this meaning had for philosophy – Enlightenment philosophy in particular but, by implication, also philosophy as such. The story of the dispute has been told many times and from different points of view.<sup>6</sup> Seldom noted, however, is that the dispute had its antecedents in a spat between Jacobi<sup>7</sup> and the poets of the *Sturm und Drang* of which Goethe was the prominent exponent. Jacobi himself, at least in earlier years, had fancied himself a poet but in the sentimental style typical of the culture of feelings that the Enlightenment had spawned alongside its rationalism. The *Sturm und Drang* movement had sprung precisely in reaction to this culture, and Goethe had mercilessly ridiculed Jacobi's sentimentalism on more than one occasion.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, Goethe and Jacobi moved in the same narrowly elite social circles. The two met in person in 1774 and, as it happened, struck up a lively and emotionally laden friendship (only intermittent, as things turned out), in the course of which, apparently on the occasion of a trip undertaken in company, Goethe presented Jacobi with the poem later known as the *Prometheus*.

This is the poem that, in 1780, Jacobi gave to Lessing to peruse during a stay at the latter's household in Wolfenbüttel, just one year before Lessing's death. The poem occasioned a long conversation extending

<sup>5</sup> “[*Prometheus*, the poem at the origin of the event] became important in German literature because it occasioned Lessing to take a stand against Jacobi on important issues of thought and sentiment. It served as the spark for an explosion that uncovered, and forced to the level of spoken word, the most secret relationships of worthy men—relationships of which they themselves were not conscious yet lay dormant in an otherwise very enlightened society. The rapture was so violent that on its occasion, because of intervening contingencies, we lost one of our worthiest men, Mendelssohn.” Goethe (1985), 681.

<sup>6</sup> For an account sympathetic to Moses Mendelssohn, see Altmann (1973), pp. 591–759.

<sup>7</sup> Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743–1819), known to his friends as *Old Fritz*.

<sup>8</sup> That of his brother Georg as well. See *Das Unglück der Jacobis* (1772. *The Jacobis' Misfortune*); *Götter, Helden, und Wieland* (1773. *Gods, Heroes and Wieland*).

*Prelude: Jacobi and Spinoza*

3

over a number of days between Jacobi and his host regarding Spinoza and the Spinozist leanings of all philosophy. Other visitors to Lessing's household joined in. The poem was also included in the tract that Jacobi published in 1785<sup>9</sup> in which he related the 1780 conversation, allegedly verbatim, and also made public the letters he had in the meantime exchanged with Moses Mendelssohn on the occasion of Lessing's death.<sup>10</sup> The issue in the exchange was Lessing's Spinozism, which Jacobi alleged but Mendelssohn denied, at least as interpreted by Jacobi. Quite understandably, the issue expanded into a discussion on how to understand Spinoza himself. This tract by Jacobi was the cause of the social stir that Goethe later remembered. In retrospect, the stir was not surprising. On the one hand, according to common opinion at the time, Spinoza was a pantheist: in effect, therefore, a God-denier. On the other hand, the *Aufklärer*, despite their uncompromising rationalism, were not as keen as the *philosophes*, their French counterparts, on jettisoning their traditional Christian faith wholesale. They wanted to retain at least its presumed rational core. In their way, they still championed the cause of religion. Lessing was looked upon as having been, together with his friend Mendelssohn, the artificer as well as exemplar of the enlightened mind. To accuse him of Spinozism, as commonly understood, was tantamount to accusing the Enlightenment itself of bad conscience. It was atheist *contre soi*. At the heart of the upheaval that Jacobi's tract caused was a crisis of identity on the part of the Enlightenment.

This was in 1785. In 1780, however, at Lessing's house, Mendelssohn was not on the scene at all. The issue of Spinoza arose in immediate connection with Goethe's poem, presumably – since in his report Jacobi did not comment on the poem at any length – because of the view the poem expressed of the human vocation. There stood Goethe's *Mensch*: defiant before the gods on whose whims his life nonetheless depended; fated to suffering and death yet asserting his existence with joyful exuberance, fully aware of its ephemerality.<sup>11</sup> This was only a poetic vision,

<sup>9</sup> Jacobi (1785). An English translation is given in MPW 173–251: *Concerning the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Herr Moses Mendelssohn*.

<sup>10</sup> The circumstances of the exchange are very complicated but need not concern us here. See my introduction to MPW, especially 3–67.

<sup>11</sup> This was the poem's final strophe:

Here sit I, shaping Men  
 In my likeness:  
 A race that is to be as I am,  
 To suffer and weep,  
 To relish and delight in things,

reflective of the *Sturm und Drang*. Yet the shift to philosophical discourse was all too easy, for, in Jacobi's view, philosophy, because of its reliance on empty abstractions, which it assumed for the sake of explanation, had to be inherently Spinozist, that is, pantheist, consequently also atheist. The discourse preempted the possibility of any personal relation between the human individual and God. It thus fostered precisely the existential attitude that Goethe's *Prometheus* expressed and that Jacobi found intolerable. Whereas for the Enlightenment philosophers (Kant included, in his critical way) the issue of the human vocation was one of determining humankind's place in an objectively well-ordered universe, one based on universal laws, Jacobi was, instead, preoccupied with what it would mean subjectively for the human individual to occupy that place. And since he personally found the implication existentially insufferable, he rejected the philosophers' universe as simply a figment of abstractive reason.

Jacobi eventually extended his charge of Spinozism to Kant's new type of idealism. Kant's own immediate disciples, under pressure from the charge, took their task to be to demonstrate that it was possible to adhere to Spinoza's monism in principle, while adding to it the personalist dimension that Jacobi found missing. This is the circumstance that gave the Kant reception its unexpected course. One striking result, and also a telling illustration of the kind of uncomfortable paradoxes one courted in the effort at reconciling Spinoza and Kantian idealism, was Fichte's tract of 1800, also entitled *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (The Vocation of Humankind). Although Fichte, like Spalding, still saw the universe as a well-ordered totality governed by universal laws, unlike Spalding he no longer took the order as simply presupposed. He saw it as a moral achievement, the product of an act of the human will executed in faith. There was a paradox in this. Despite Fichte's language of subjective commitment and action, in his system the singular individual, the one who alone was of importance to Jacobi, was a vanishing quantity in this process of creating a moral world no less than in Spinoza's substance. Spinoza ended up having the last word.

Fichte's tract was also a striking witness to the truly revolutionary transformation that Enlightenment culture had undergone since Spalding's early reflections. At an intellectual level, Kant himself had contributed to the change. So had Jacobi, and, albeit at much distance,

And to pay you no regard—  
Like me! (trans. Jeremy Walker, cited in MPW 186).

*Prelude: Jacobi and Spinoza*

5

there was an affinity between Kant's critical project and Jacobi's existential worries.<sup>12</sup> It consisted in the fact that both, in opposition to traditional dogmatism, had insisted that the truth of experience be sought from the standpoint of one immersed in it, without transcending its limits. As Jacobi said addressing Mendelssohn, "we cannot experience anything without [. . .] *experience*."<sup>13</sup> Jacobi objected to Kant because in his view he had not been true to his own agenda but, while starting out from the standpoint of a subject bound to experience, had in fact reintroduced in his system all the abstractions of the metaphysicians through the subject's subjective back door.<sup>14</sup> In other words, as of 1800, the truth of experience, or, since the content of experience is phenomenal, the nature of what truly appears in appearance, was still the burning issue, just as it had originally been for Kant. However, the conceptual context in which it was raised had changed, and it is precisely the ways that this issue worked itself out in this new context after 1800 that we want to explore it in the study that follows. The general theme is that, although Fichte and Schelling distanced themselves from Spinoza, repeatedly by name and in their systems according to method, they nonetheless accepted his monism, and this made a difference to the post-Kant realism they both defended after 1800. It was Hegel who made this monism moot by undermining its conceptual foundations, thereby also finally exorcizing Spinoza's spirit, the same that Jacobi was given to invoke even with religious fervor<sup>15</sup> against what he took to be the *Aufklärer's* lack of illumination about themselves. The context was indeed different. In one respect at least, however, there was continuity between the late Enlightenment and the new Romanticism and that was in the still commanding interest in religion. This interest will shape the theme in crucial ways and will finally bring it to conclusion.

One can only speculate regarding the form that critical idealism would have taken if its reception had been left in the hands of Kant's more scholastic first reviewers, the likes of Christian Garve or Hermann

<sup>12</sup> Jacobi felt much affinity with the pre-critical Kant, for he saw him as placing existence ahead of essence. He was surprised when, in the debate of 1785, he found Kant siding with Mendelssohn. Kant's siding with the latter was not altogether unambiguous but not his rejection of Jacobi. See Kant (1996), p. 15. For Jacobi's early attitude towards Kant, see the dialogue *David Hume* in MPW 281, 284–285.

<sup>13</sup> MPW 237 (translation slightly modified).

<sup>14</sup> Appendix to the *David Hume* (1787), in MPW 331–338.

<sup>15</sup> As Jacobi exclaimed in a letter to Fichte: "May you be blest for me, you great, yea you holy *Benedictus!*" (MPW 520). In Jacobi's eyes, Spinoza had had the courage to bring his rationalism to its logical conclusions.

Andreas Pistorius, or of Carl Leonhard Reinhold, Sigismund Beck, and Solomon Maimon. Very likely, at their hands Kant would have assumed a more Hume-like face.<sup>16</sup> But in fact Jacobi hijacked the reception. Post-Kantian idealism was thus born under the sign of Spinoza. And there was something about Kant's Critique of Reason that fated it, so to speak, to this development.

### 1.2 The Critique of Reason and Classical Metaphysics

The Critique, while a rejection of classical metaphysics, remained at the same time bound to it. This not only made it vulnerable to misunderstandings; it generated a formalism that made it internally vulnerable to skeptical attacks. At its most innovative core, the Critique was a further elaboration of the well-known Socratic aporia regarding the acquisition of knowledge.<sup>17</sup> To wit: It seems that it is impossible ever to learn anything new, for to know that something is *truly* the case, one must recognize it as being such, and, for that, one needs prior knowledge. To the extent, however, that this prior knowledge does not exhaustively cover the object which is at the moment at issue, that is, to the extent that this object is new, its truth remains unfounded, problematic. Historically, this aporia set the stage for subsequent attempts at determining the source in experience of a pre-knowledge that would at once anticipate all that can possibly be known and save the possibility of genuine discovery. Kant's innovation – the centerpiece of his critical system – consisted in restricting this pre-knowledge to formal conditions of objectivity which, although universal in their own right, did not predetermine the content of any object. This last was a matter of actual experience: of discovery, in other words.

This was a brilliant strategy which, however, his contemporaries were not necessarily ready to appreciate, for it was based on the assumption that experience, contrary to the common view, is a complex process from its origin. It consists in the recognition of something as actually or at least possibly *there*, that is, *present* to a knowing subject; as such, experience is only achieved in a judgment (however spontaneous and self-unaware) that requires the satisfaction of two sets of conditions. The first is that the “something” at issue be recognizable for *what* it is: it has to be conceptualizable, in other words; as such, it can intelligently be looked for and

<sup>16</sup> Manfred Kuehn is a contemporary interpreter who makes the case for treating the historical Kant – not just Kant as the source of inspiration for current philosophical reflection – as a Humean. Kuehn (2001), pp. 259–265.

<sup>17</sup> Plato's *Meno* (80d–81a).

*The Critique of Reason and Classical Metaphysics*

7

therefore also recognized if discovered. The knowledge of a “thing” thus requires that the thing be made part of an intelligible universe of conceptual intentions governed by categories of thought accessible in principle by simple reflection (or *a priori*, in Kant’s terminology). As Kant said of his list of such categories, these are the determinations of the concept of an object in general<sup>18</sup> – in effect, what one *means* by, or is ready to recognize as, an object of knowledge. As for the second set of conditions, these have to do with the actual presence of the intended object. They are set by the limits imposed on this presence by the receptivity of the senses. The presence must occur, or the object be *given*, within the senses’ spatiotemporal reach. Only within this reach can the object be intelligently, that is, conceptually, recognized as realized.

This was a simple, but at the same time conceptually elegant, depiction of what happens in experience. It deftly finessed the problems associated with both essentialism and empiricism. On the one hand, to know does not mean to grasp an essence, an intelligible *in-itself* for which one would require some sort of always mystifying intellectual intuition.<sup>19</sup> In experience, one only recognizes an intended presence as spatiotemporally attained or at least theoretically attainable. On the other hand, it avoids the problem, typical of any psychological empiricism, of explaining how allegedly disparate sensations can be meaningfully associated to yield together recognizable objects, without, however, thereby implicating them in an already ongoing process of experience, that is, without begging the *explanandum*. On Kant’s scheme, sensations have *per se* no noetic value (they are “blind”) unless they are spatiotemporally structured from the beginning; they consist in a *here/now* or a *there/then* event which is in principle already implicated in a play of intentions. Despite the psychological paradigms on which Kant relied to present his critical theory, the theory itself was not explanatory. It did not explain the psychological genesis of experience but only defined its form, and it was clear that this form is intentional from the start.

Very likely unwittingly,<sup>20</sup> Kant was in fact reviving the distinctive element of Aristotle’s theory of knowledge, namely that knowledge is

<sup>18</sup> “But first I shall introduce a word of explanation in regard to the categories. They are concepts of an object in general, by means of which the intuition of an object is regarded as determined in respect of one of the logical functions of judgment.” KrV B128; Kant (2007).

<sup>19</sup> For the fuzziness of intellectual intuition, see Hegel’s preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, especially PS §§ 16, 17; GW 9:17.12–18.17.

<sup>20</sup> Kant had a low opinion of Aristotle whom he criticized for having derived his categories haphazardly (*zufällig*) and whom he considered an empiricist of the Locke type. KrV A81/B107; A833/B86.

a form of life, the defining mark of rational existence. To partake in the economy of this life – to be known, in other words – a thing must pass a test of relevance, so to speak. Or again, it must satisfy norms of intelligibility as determined not by the thing to be known but by the form of that life.<sup>21</sup> This was precisely Kant’s claim. Together with the further claim that a form of life that sets norms of intelligibility also establishes the conditions for free action, it was also the insight that was to govern the whole of post-Kantian idealism. Here is where the line of continuity between Kant and his idealist successors lay. Nonetheless, despite this continuity of insight, the post-Kantians all believed that they had to press the insight further than their mentor had done. This was because Kant had in fact obfuscated his own critical position. As we said, in presenting it, he had remained still bound to pre-critical metaphysics.

What was the obfuscation? Its source can be easily summed up in one word: the “thing-in-itself.” There is of course nothing particularly problematic about such a “thing,” if taken as a conceptual fiction only intended to express the ultimately sheer *givenness* of experienced objects or, in the subjective language that Kant seemed to favor, the irreducibly passive moment of all experience. Nor, for that matter, would it be particularly problematic to say that this “thing,” whatever it is, is known only to the extent that it is *in fact known*, that is, only as given in particular experiential situations. In the context of Kant’s theory of knowledge, this would have been a tautology indeed but not a pointless one. For it made clear that whatever of that “thing” is yet to be known as the result of any given experience must be sought in some other experience, without ever trespassing the limits of experience in general. The temptation to assume the standpoint of one who stands outside experience and is thus capable of presiding over its origin as a third uninvolved party must be resisted at all costs. This is precisely what the metaphysics that Kant dubbed “dogmatic” had done in the past. This kind of metaphysics explained the origin and content of experience as if it had access to a source of knowledge other than experience.

But Kant famously also said that the “thing-in-itself” is not and cannot be known *at all* – at least not by *us*, immersed as we are in

It was a belief widely held at the time that Aristotle was at the source of empiricism. The belief was spread by Brucker (1742), vol. 1. Cf. Mollowitz (1935).

<sup>21</sup> For a parallel that Hegel would have appreciated, see PS §109; GW 9:69,23–31. What is edible *for* an animal is determined by the latter’s organic constitution. This requires discovering *what* a thing is in itself. The norm of “edible” brings this “what” to light for the animal, precisely by rendering it problematic.



*The Critique of Reason and Classical Metaphysics*

9

experience.<sup>22</sup> This was a claim that his contemporaries found difficult to process. Lived experience is robustly realist, in the sense that it presumes that whatever is experienced also exists in some way or other independently of experience. The idea of the “thing-in-itself” is perfectly legitimate as a safeguard for this natural realism or the belief that the “thing” is known “in-itself,” albeit within the limits of experience. Indeed, there is nowhere else where it could be known. The idea expresses the irreducible “in-itselfness” of the objects of experience even *as experienced*. But Kant was saying that this “in-itself” could not be grasped at all from within experience. He further claimed that it would, however, be known by a hypothetical someone who transcended experience and was thus capable of a kind of direct and exhaustive grasp of it only yielded by an intuition at once immediate yet intellectual. In other words, while denying such an intuition to *us*, subjects bound to experience, Kant nonetheless still assumed it *de facto* as the standard of *truly* (not just *experientially*) true knowledge. This is the sense in which Kant remained strangely bound to classical metaphysics. While distancing himself from it, at the same time he also framed his critical system within its assumptions. The capacity to step outside experience and to consider it in abstraction from it remained the default position so far as the nature of reality and the possibility of knowledge are concerned.

This had serious conceptual repercussions for the critical system. The most obvious is that experiential knowledge – the only one available to human beings – is reduced to a mere appearance of knowledge. It is subjective not only in the perfectly uncontroversial sense already mentioned, that for a thing to be present to a subject of experience it has to satisfy conditions of objective presence set by the latter, but in the much stronger and controversial sense that, in satisfying such conditions, the thing’s phenomenal presence conceals the thing’s truth. As Hegel later said: “This is like attributing right insight to someone, with the stipulation, however, that he is not fit to see what is true but only what is false. Absurd as this might be, no less absurd would be a cognition which is true but does not know its subject matter as it is in itself.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> This is not how Kant need be interpreted, but the point is that he lent himself to this interpretation, and this made a difference to his reception, especially as mediated by an influential personality such as Jacobi. Consider, for instance, KrV A125 (Objects, “in the way in which they are represented, as extended beings, or as a series of alterations, have no existence outside our thought”), a text that Jacobi found especially contentious. MPW 334.

<sup>23</sup> Hegel, *Logic*, 26; GW 21:30.26–29.

There were two other serious consequences. The first is that Kant attributed to the postulated “thing-in-itself” the source of the passivity of the sense-affectations, as if the “thing” were their cause. Quite apart from the confusion that this use of “causality” caused for Kant’s first-generation interpreters,<sup>24</sup> the more serious implication is that sensations, because of their presumed origin outside the confines of intentional life, essentially resist conceptualization. Conceptualization remains for them no more than a form attached to them externally only by dint of theoretically dictated subjective requirements. However conceptually reworked they may be, sensations *per se* remain blind, an intractable surd of experience. To the extent, however, that they thus remain inherently unintelligible, there is no guarantee that the categorial constructions intended to bring them to objectification ever reach past the level of *imaginary*, not actual, presence. But according to Kant, sensations were the factor in experience that provide its existential traction. The assumption of the “thing-in-itself” undermined precisely this function attributed to them. This was the source of the new skepticism that Kant’s critical work occasioned – the doubt whether, on Kant’s own terms, there can ever be an effective connection between the conceptual reflection governed by the categories and the sense-content of experience.<sup>25</sup>

The other consequence relates to Kant’s theory of freedom. On the one hand, the theory rested on the idealizing power of reason, that is, on the latter’s capacity to generate norms autonomously. On the other hand, it also treated freedom as a kind of self-determining causality, such as is impossible on the side of the essentially heteronomous phenomenal nature but must rather be ideally projected on the side of the unknown “thing-in-itself.”<sup>26</sup> On these terms, the problem was inevitably posed of how to relate

<sup>24</sup> Notably Jacobi and Schulze-Aenesidemus who capitalized on the ambiguity of “cause” according as it is used in schematized or in purely categorial sense. For Jacobi, see MPW 335–336. For G. E. Schulze, who wrote under the pseudonym Aenesidemus, the relevant text is in di Giovanni and Harris (2000), pp. 105–133.

<sup>25</sup> I am referring to Solomon Maimon’s type of skepticism, not that of Schulze-Aenesidemus, which repeated Hume’s skeptical doubts. For a somewhat more detailed treatment, refer to di Giovanni (2005), p. 98; also di Giovanni and Harris (2000), pp. 32–36.

<sup>26</sup> Pinkard alludes to this problem with reference to Hegel: “One crucial difference from Kant was Hegel’s rejection of Kant’s claim that if we were to be free, we had to be capable of exercising a kind of non-natural causality on ourselves, a ‘transcendental causality’ that stood outside the natural causal order of things and that could initiate chains of events without itself being the effect of any earlier causal chain. Hegel, by contrast, conceived of freedom not as the exercise of any form of causality at all but instead of having to do with the nature of the way in which we are capable of assuming a ‘negative’ stance towards our inclinations, desires, and impulses.” Pinkard (2000), p. 473. This idea of “negative freedom” is, however, also present in Kant; indeed, it is the leading one.