

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was born January 22, 1729, in Kamenz in the Oberlausitz (Saxony), the son of a learned Lutheran pastor. Lessing, unlike many men of letters, was fortunate in his parents, and his respect for his father was undoubtedly responsible for some of the ambivalence and double-talk which characterized his own writings on theological subjects. He attended the University of Leipzig, intending to study theology, but his interest in literature and especially the stage led him to give up this plan, and in 1755 he moved to Berlin, where he became acquainted with Nicolai, Mendelssohn, and other leaders of the Berlin Enlightenment. He was disappointed in his hope of becoming Royal Librarian and failed also to become a member of the Berlin Academy, his nomination being vetoed by Frederick the Great. From 1760 to 1765 he was in Breslau on the staff of General von Tauentzien, and during this time he wrote the *Laocoon*, his most famous aesthetic treatise, and *Minna von Barnhelm*, his most successful play. From 1765 to 1769 he was dramaturgist to the new theater in Hamburg, and during this time he produced some of his dramas and the *Hamburg Dramaturgy*. In 1769 he became librarian of the Ducal Library of Brunswick in Wolfenbüttel, where he remained until his death in 1781. The last period of his life was devoted to religious controversy.

Lessing is important in the history of German culture in four respects. First, he is the founder of modern German drama. While Bodmer and

Breitinger had opposed the imitation of French drama, it was Lessing who finally broke the French dominance by producing a native substitute for French originals and imitations. Unlike the French adaptations of classical themes in almost actionless poetic drama, Lessing's plays are on contemporary themes and his characters are German bourgeoisie. Though Lessing was not a dramatist of the very highest rank, his influence on the German stage was revolutionary; if in part he substituted English models for French ones, this in itself was a factor in his success, since the realistic English was apparently more in accord with the developing taste of the times than the classical and formal French.

Second, Lessing was Germany's greatest critic and was the leading writer on aesthetics of his time—writing aesthetics and not merely art history, as Winckelmann did, and writing it in German for the ordinary reader and not in Latin for the Wolffian student, as Baumgarten did. Third, he was the principal disputant in the religious controversies of the third quarter of the century, and the debates over revelation and reason, which we have already discussed in other contexts, culminated in his theological writings. Finally, he *may have* formulated an esoteric philosophy which did not become fully known until after his death, though there are clues to it in many of his published writings. Partly Spinozistic and partly Leibnizian, and hence ambiguous and puzzling in many ways, it exercised a very great influence on the thinkers of the *Sturm und Drang* when the more typical Enlightenment ideas began to fade in the decade after his death.

Before discussing Lessing's creative philosophical work, a major source of difficulty in understanding him must be indicated. Lessing was first and foremost a polemical writer; by profession he was a critic, and a very large part of his work originated in his exercising his critical function on some writer, contemporary or long dead. Irony was his chief weapon, but one hesitates to call him a master of irony because he seems sometimes to have been mastered by it. His flaw was that he was often too clever, with the result that almost no one knew where he stood, and even now the controversy continues between those who think him a complete rationalist and those who see him as taking a major step from the Enlightenment to contemporary existential theology.¹ For his irony sometimes masqueraded as ambivalence, and he disappointed his allies as often as he outraged his enemies. "I make agreement with my obvious enemies," he wrote his brother Karl, "in order to be the better on my guard against my secret adversaries."² Friedrich Nicolai, saying that "Lessing could not tolerate anything that was too clear-cut," mentioned Lessing's proclivity for being a minority of one, to the point of speaking in favor of the Saxons in Prussia and of the Prussians in Saxony while he was attached to the Prussian staff. Mendelssohn accused Jacobi of naiveté in his report of conversations with Lessing, since Jacobi apparently did not realize the degree to which Lessing,

¹ Compare Karl Aner, *Die Theologie der Lessingzeit* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1929), and Henry Chadwick, *Lessing's Theological Writings* (Palo Alto, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1957), with Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought from Rousseau to Ritschl* (New York: Harper, 1959), chap. iii. Quotations from the second of these books are identified by the name Chadwick.

² March 20, 1777 (Chadwick, p. 13).

even while seeming to be very positive, might be merely playing with ideas and leading his interlocutor into a trap. Lessing's strategic perfidy included outright deception, as when he not only claimed to be ignorant of the identity of the author of the *Wolfenbüttel* fragments (Reimarus), but even suggested that they might have been written by Lorenz Schmidt (1702–1748), a deist already well known because of the persecution he had suffered.³ Lessing wrote most lucid and vigorous German, but often at a crucial point in an argument, or even in a summary of an argument, he practiced a kind of mystification which throws everything he has said into doubt. Lessing was one of the great masters of the art of invective and *argumentum ad hominem*, but his delight in scorning an opponent often kept him from dealing fairly with his ideas, and as his opponents changed, so also did his ideas seem to be transformed too. These considerations are important in warding off the danger of any too dogmatic or one-sided interpretation of Lessing's thought. In his aesthetic writings, he is clear and straightforward; in his theological writings, clear but devious; in his strictly philosophical (metaphysical) writings, obscure and tantalizingly brief.

Aesthetics

In his aesthetic and critical writings, which make up the largest part of his work, Lessing was a great divider, aiming to establish clear lines of division between and within the arts. In the essay on Alexander Pope, already referred to in Chapter XIII, one of his purposes was to distinguish poetry from philosophy and to pour contempt on the Academy for not having done so. He held that Pope did not even profess to be a philosopher, and that he should have been judged only on his poetry, which fell outside the scope of the question which really concerned the validity of Leibniz' optimism. In the *Hamburg Dramaturgy* he tried to state the essence of tragedy, distinguishing it from history and the other forms of poesy as sharply (and along the same lines) as Aristotle had done. And in his best-known work, the *Laocoon*, his purpose was to distinguish the critical criteria for poetry from those for sculpture and painting.

The *Laocoon* was ostensibly addressed to the question: Why does the statue of Laocoon and his sons show the father at most sighing or groaning, and not screaming in agony? J. J. Winckelmann, the historian of classical art, had used the fact that he is not screaming to buttress his argument for the noble Stoic dignity and equanimity of classical man. But Lessing, remembering that Greek and Latin authors had let heroes and gods roar and scream, argued that this fact had not a historical but an aesthetic significance: it was a clue to the difference between the purposes of the painter and the poet.

Because the painter or sculptor (Lessing uses the word "painter" generally to cover both) can, as it were, take only a snapshot of the subject, and purposes to produce a sensuously beautiful form, he must choose a moment and a gesture which will be sensuously beautiful, or he must invent such a gesture if none actually occurred. A screaming man is not beautiful

³ See below, n. 28.

to look at; ergo. . . . The poet, on the other hand, by the temporal nature of his medium,⁴ is able to portray growth and action; he does not have to single out a unique visually pleasing moment for representation. The poet is not interested in describing beautiful visual forms—and Lessing gives some fine examples chosen to show that he fails when he tries to do so—but in awakening our interest in his characters. He can sacrifice a momentary sensuous beauty for the sake of a temporal insight, whereas the external form depicted by the painter is not a significant or effective means to awaken a moral interest. The sculptor and poet, therefore, because of the differences in their media, follow completely different ends. In a sense both painter and poet are imitators; but not in the sense of the wearisome debate (which Lessing recounts) over whether the sculptor of the Laocoon group imitated a poetic description or whether the statue was older than poems describing the death of Laocoon and his sons. Rather there is one imitation of the sensuous surface, another imitation of the fulness of character. One art cannot successfully practice the imitation which is proper to the other.

But while Lessing seemed to be talking about ancient poetry and ancient sculpture, he was also talking about the contemporary French drama and the new German drama he was creating. French classical drama, he thought, had tacitly taken statuary and painting, not Greek drama, as its model. It is therefore static and does not arouse the pity and terror of true tragedy, as Shakespeare and the Greek tragedians did. Its characters are Stoic imitators of the marble Laocoon, who only sighs as he and his two sons are bitten and strangled by the serpent, not imitators of “bawling Hercules or wailing Philoctetes” who were very welcome on the Greek stage. And while Stoicism may be admired, “admiration is only a cold sentiment whose barren wonderment excludes not only every warmer passion but every other clear conception as well.”⁵ By writing bourgeois tragedy which goes against Aristotle’s dictum (repeated by Gottsched) about the rank of personages requisite to tragedy, Lessing moved from the static Stoic perfections of Racine to the lifelikeness of the English stage, and thereby came closer also to the sentiments of his audience.

This conception gave Lessing a much freer hand than his French and German contemporaries had had. Life, movement, and humor were brought to the stage. The characteristic and the ugly, which were impermissible when the playwright was thought of as a kind of painter, prepared the way for the blood and excitement of the *Sturm und Drang*; for just as nature sacrifices sensuous beauty of the individual form for the higher purpose of the perfection of the whole of this best of all possible worlds, so also the poet, now freed from the necessity to represent superficial graces or to convert passion into Alexandrine rhetoric, can show the laughable, the ugly, and the horrible.

⁴ That some arts are temporal and others spatial was not, of course, a new idea with Lessing. It was present in Mendelssohn and earlier writers; but none used it as fully as Lessing, who ties it in with another ancient problem of criticism—the merits of the treatment of the same subject in different media of art.

⁵ *Laocoon, An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. E. A. McCormick (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1962), p. 11.

But while Lessing prepared for the next step in the history of German drama, which would be to throw off all constraint in the anarchy of the misunderstood genius, he himself was disciplined by eighteenth-century scholarship and politesse. His conception of the function of art was still that of his enemy Gottsched: moral betterment.⁶ But it is moral betterment not through example and preaching, but through a catharsis of pity and terror. Also, his conception of the working of the artist is that of Bodmer and Breitinger: genius is necessary, and no man is made a poet, and no poem is produced, by rule. "What would one think of a cobbler," he asked, "who told his apprentices that all the knacks of his trade could be deduced from the one fundamental principle: each shoe must fit the foot for which it is made?"⁷ But though Lessing saw the necessity of genius for art, he had no developed theory of what this genius consisted in; and, whatever it was, he seems to have had a clear and objective awareness that he did not possess it in the highest degree. After his Hamburg period, he became more exclusively historian, theologian, and philosopher. Only in *Nathan the Wise*, near the end of his life, did he return to poetry and drama as the vehicle of his creativity.

Theological Controversies

As a youth writing to his father, Lessing showed himself to be a well-schooled and precocious Wolffian. But his uncompleted and unpublished *Thoughts on the Moravians*, written about 1750, shows his sympathy with Pietism, which he praises for its undogmatic and practical character. Man, he says, was created for acting, not for speculating, and only the Pietists have properly estimated him. The effect of religious controversy is that fewer Christians are made now than in the Dark Ages, before theological debate took religion far from the heart of the practical man. Luther and Zwingli, bitterly opposed as they were, in fact were disputing about a mere nothing. A reaction against such theologizing was led by Zinsendorf, who rejected metaphysical and theological speculations which had no application to life but were built up into holy truths which had to be accepted on pain of persecution and damnation.

During the next twenty years Lessing devoted himself from time to time to what he called *Rettungen* (apologies) for Christians who had been persecuted by the orthodox churches, whether Catholic, Lutheran, or Calvinist. Again and again he argued that orthodoxy, far from making men Christian, drives some of the most intelligent and worthy of them away from Christianity altogether—his prize example being Adam Neuser, who was harried out of Christianity into becoming a Mohammedan. Some of these papers are worthy of Voltaire in their condemnation of intolerance.

⁶ Thus his astonishing attitude to Goethe's *Werther*: he suggested a moralistic "cold epilogue" to prevent anyone's "mistaking the poetic truth for moral truth and believing that a character who engages our sympathy so strongly must have been good" (quoted from C. C. D. Vail, "Lessing's Attitude toward Storm and Stress," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 65: 805-823, [1950], esp. p. 817).

⁷ *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Lachmann-Muncker, V, 152. All quotations from Lessing, unless otherwise noted, are taken from this standard edition.

Yet Lessing did not associate himself with the contemporary sentimentalists or the neologists. He attacked Klopstock, Wieland, and Basedow, all of whom, under the influence of Shaftesbury, so far rejected “cold metaphysical thought” that they were unable to distinguish between a genuine religious sentiment and mere enthusiasm.⁸ And turning against the moral theology of the neologists and rationalists, Lessing attacked their tendency to identify religion with moral betterment. “Religion,” he says, “has far higher aims than to form righteous men. Religion presupposes the righteous man, and its goal is to elevate the righteous man to higher insights.”⁹

His defense of Leibniz, entitled *Leibniz on Eternal Punishments*, follows a similar line against the neologists, seeming to defend revelation and orthodox doctrine against the rationalistic critique. J. A. Eberhard, in his *New Apology for Socrates*, had attacked Leibniz for hypocrisy in his defense of the dogma of eternal punishment, which was almost universally rejected by Enlightenment philosophers. Lessing, in his reply, advanced two arguments. First, it was in accordance with Leibniz’ philosophy, and not as a concession to popular orthodoxy, that he taught that the consequences of any action, good or bad, can never terminate. Therefore man must bear some scar of sin through all eternity and can never be entirely blessed. Not even God can render undone what has been done by a free agent. But though the consequences of sin are eternal, they are not such as to destroy the hope and opportunity for betterment, since punishment is redemptive and not merely punitive. Hence, Lessing asserted, Leibniz’ metaphysics was in fact harmonious with the dogma, or with its spirit if not its letter. Yet the dogma, properly understood, was not the inhuman thing which outraged the Enlightenment.

A second line of defense was found in Leibniz’ clear distinction between the truths of revelation and the truths of reason. This would have permitted him to hold to doctrine of eternal punishment even if it were not in fact supported by his rational metaphysics; he should not be charged with inconsistency and hypocrisy by those who subjected all orthodox revealed doctrine to the test of human reason. With heavy irony, he wrote: “How could Leibniz have foreseen that there would soon be men who would give all explicable but not yet explained foundations (*Gründe*) a degree of strength and validity of which he had no conception? Unfortunately, because of the prejudices of his youth, he had to hold that to believe in the Christian religion merely from some or many or even all explicable reasons was the same as not to believe it at all; and that the only book which had been or could be written for the correct understanding of the truth of the Bible was the Bible itself.”¹⁰

There seems, then, to be a clear inconsistency in Lessing’s attitude. There is, on the one hand, his rejection of orthodoxy for its misinterpretation of man and for its persecution of righteous men. But, on the other side, there is his rejection of both sentimentalism (coming from Pietism) and neology (coming from Wolff) because the former dismisses theological rigor and the latter tries to substitute philosophical rigor for it by denying the dis-

⁸ *Gesammelte Schriften*, VIII, 130.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, XII, 98.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

inction between valid revelation and reason. Neither Pietistic sentimentalism nor neological rationalism nor Lutheran orthodoxy satisfied Lessing. Yet elements of each remained permanent parts of his thought, and because they are *prima facie* incompatible with each other, each had to be fundamentally revised and transmuted. Lessing could be opposed to each, but on different grounds from those on which they opposed each other. Let us make specific the points of his opposition to the two principal parties to the dispute, the neologists and the orthodox.

Against the neologists, Lessing objected to their presumption that a rational theology would in fact support the substance of a theology of revelation. It does so only if one or the other theology is treated with a dishonest indulgence. Their theological scheme is not a rigorous rational system but a “patchwork of bunglers and half-philosophers,” and under the pretence of making men “rational Christians” they produce only “unreasonable philosophers” (philosophers not really guided by reason, but by sentiment and tradition.)¹¹ And they are wrong, and can be shown to be wrong, on one point of capital importance: natural religion is not the original religion, which became submerged in a later theology of mysteries devised by a crafty priesthood, but is only a later growth from it. Revealed positive religion does not presuppose natural religion, but contains all the truths of the latter in a simple and obscure form. The return to a primitive Christianity or to a religion as old as the Creation is not to “return” to rational religion, but to go back to a religion of revelation and sentiment, more crude than its modern varieties.

Against the dogmatists, Lessing argued that much of their dogma was not actually revealed but was a later and spurious accretion. The Christian religion must be distinguished from the religion of Christ;¹² the letter of Christianity must be distinguished from its spirit. These distinctions have not been drawn by the orthodox, and those who have drawn them have not been tolerated. Their doctrine of the inerrancy of Scripture makes it impossible for an intelligent man to remain a Christian—at least a Christian by their criteria.

Of the two, it is hard to know which was the more important opponent in Lessing’s estimation: both were wrong, and yet the specific way in which each was wrong kept them from coming into fruitful controversy in which the issue might be decided. The orthodox could retreat behind the wall of separation between faith and reason, but more often they tried to dictate in the name of faith what was in fact a matter of reason, and thus brought their entire case into disrepute. The neologists could maintain the substance of faith by trying to give rational proofs of some matters of faith, but when they did so their arguments were in fact no proofs at all but rather, indeed, brought the cause of reason itself into disrepute.

There was in neither camp a sufficiently clear-headed and consistent opponent worthy of Lessing’s skill as a debater. In a marvelous *tour de force*, therefore, he decided to take *both* sides of the argument in the hope

¹¹ Letter to Karl Lessing, February 2, 1774 (Chadwick, p. 13).

¹² *The Religion of Christ*, (Chadwick, p. 106).

that his clear statement of the issues would force a true confrontation of the opposing views. In this way, anticipating Kant's strategy, he hoped to bring his enemies into a mutually destructive conflict and thus secure a middle position from which a reasonable hearing for both orthodoxy and free-thinking could be had. But the strategy was obviously a dangerous one, though it may have appealed to Lessing's fabulous polemical courage; it meant fighting a two-front war, with allies in neither camp.

Since the orthodox position had been skillfully stated for two centuries—Lessing seldom or never felt contempt for the great dogmatic creators of Christendom, no matter how much bitter contempt there was in his heart for such epigoni as Pastor Goeze—what was needed was an honest and uncompromising statement of the naturalist-rationalist, or antisupernaturalist, point of view. He needed a forthright statement of a theological position which excluded not only most of the traditional dogmas of Christianity but the very concept of revelation itself. This could be found neither in Baumgarten nor Semler; Bahrtdt was beneath his notice. He found what he wanted in the manuscripts given to him by Elise Reimarus, which we have already described. Since many thought that the publication of the Reimarus fragments was itself an act of impiety, Lessing appeared to be arguing with himself in his lengthy comments on the fragments. In fact, the controversies which grew out of the publication were by no means as fruitful as the internal controversy between the Reimarus texts and their editor. The public debate soon degenerated into mere theological billingsgate, in which Lessing had no peer, and it was ended only by an order from the Duke of Brunswick to desist from further writing on the fragments.

Lessing conceded to Reimarus that there is in fact no revelation which is available to all men for their rational acceptance. But he denied that such revelation had ever been required by the orthodox position, and therefore its absence was not an argument against the validity of the revelation claimed by the orthodox position. It suffices for faith to believe that God chose the manner of revelation which would in the shortest time possible make it available to the largest number of men, and that dispensation would be granted to those invincibly ignorant of it. Reimarus' argument does nothing to show that this defense of revelation is invalid.

Furthermore he conceded to Reimarus that it is impossible to deny patent contradictions in the accounts of the resurrection found in the Gospels. But he denied that the factual inaccuracy of the Bible is an argument against its divine inspiration. The Bible is not religion, he proclaims (Lessing invented the word "Bibliolatry" as a term of abuse), and the certainty of Christianity does not depend on the putative infallibility of the Bible. For, granting its infallibility just for the sake of argument, even then the Bible could not support Christian theology, since no eternal truth can be based upon any contingent historical truth. There is no valid inference from "Christ rose from the dead" (even if he did) to "Christ was the Son of God."¹³ There is a wide ditch between historical and metaphysical or theological truth, and Lessing confesses he does not know how to cross it.

¹³ *On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power*, (Chadwick, p. 54).

This, then, is a flank attack on Reimarus and on the orthodox position: it does not matter what the historical facts are, whether Reimarus or the infallibilists are correct, for no theological argument with a historical premise is valid. But the objection weighs equally against the orthodox and against Reimarus, who argued that since the historical record is spurious, its alleged theological meaning is also spurious. In this strategic *coup*, Lessing in fact strikes three sets of opponents with the same blow. As we have seen, it was a common presupposition of the orthodox, the neologists, and the naturalists that the validity of Christian doctrine depended upon the facticity of Christ's incarnation and the authenticity of our records of his revealed teachings. The orthodox asserted both and thought that they thereby saved Christian theology no matter how irrational it might seem; in fact, the more irrational the better, so long as they had authentic records of miracles and prophecy to humble human rationality. The naturalists—Reimarus, for example—denied both, and thought they had thereby destroyed the validity of Christian theology by showing it to rest upon inaccuracy, superstition, and fraud. The neologists chose just enough of the revelation to support Christian institutions but not enough to offend rational men, thereby producing the “patchwork of bunglers” about which Lessing complained.

Lessing confronted them with a better epistemology than they had. He was simply a better rationalist than they, deriving his epistemology from Leibniz and not, as they did, from Wolff. For Wolff, all knowledge begins as empirical, or, in his words, as historical, and rational knowledge is only a polysyllogism with abstract (and thus putatively rational) premises and a “historical conclusion.” But Lessing sees, with Leibniz, that truths of fact cannot be raised to the level of truths of reason. A truly rational theology cannot be based upon a historical record, no matter how accurate that record may be; and if the historical record is false, a genuinely rational theology might still be true. In fact, the rationalist–historiographical debate and its compromise are both misconceived.

While Lessing contends that the problem posed by Reimarus is an embarrassment to the orthodox theologian who has nothing but a historical record and tradition to go on, it is not in the least an embarrassment to the Christian, who does not need the proof of the text but has the “proof of the power and the spirit.” “For the Christian, the Christianity he feels to be so true and in which he feels himself so blessed is simply there”—he cannot explain it, he cannot justify it, but it is there as a self-validating conviction and commitment. “When the paralytic is undergoing the beneficent electric shock, what does he care whether Franklin or Nollet or neither is right?” Some religious truths or teachings are self-validating, independent of the historical record. The redemptive power of the practice of Christian love (the religion of Christ) and not the dogmas of the religion of Christianity is the principal “fact proved in itself, not as one which can be either proved or attacked historically, but as one which is certain in itself.”¹⁴

¹⁴ The argument is found in *The Testament of John* and *On the Proof of the Spirit and of Power* (Chadwick, pp. 60, 55). The last quotation is from Barth, *Protestant Thought*, p. 133.

To the orthodox theologian he counsels emphasis upon the mysterious and miraculous element in faith and maintenance of a dividing line between faith and reason; for once the line is obliterated (as it is when the theologian thinks he must defend the inerrancy of Scripture even when it deals with natural, historical events which are in the territory of reason), there is no way to defend the mysteries from rational and historical criticism of the kind Reimarus wrote.

This advice to the orthodox suggests that Lessing thought the dogmatic position not merely beyond reason, as it claimed to be, but overtly unreasonable. It suggests that rational men should try to cross this line and refute dogma instead of trying to cross this line and defend it, as the neologists had done with at least some articles of faith. Or it might mean that the disputes between the rationalists and irrationalists should be permitted to go on until they destroy each other, while each Christian finds within himself a theological truth above and beyond all rational argument. Those who see the first as Lessing's counsel count him the leading rationalist in theology before Kant; those who think the latter was his message see him as the leading eighteenth-century harbinger of existential theology.

Compromise will not work. The neologists have not, he thinks, actually produced a system of rational doctrine that can be accepted by truly reasonable Christians; it is too superficially, too speciously, intellectualistic to replace the solid traditional system of orthodoxy. Lessing does not want to throw the baby of mystery out with the bathwater of historical error.¹⁵ The orthodox, on the other hand, have solidified their position on an irrational plane which can be defended only with ever-increasingly implausible historical hypotheses.

At this impasse, Lessing's most characteristic contribution to religious controversy appears: What is wrong with both systems is that they fail to see the historical dimension of the problem of faith versus reason.

The neologists wished to establish a new orthodoxy, rendering sacrosanct the present stage of their criticism of tradition and their theory of accommodation with respect to earlier stages in religious thought. The orthodox wished to retain an orthodoxy that was already, in the eighteenth century, historically and philosophically indefensible. In method Lessing seems to agree with the neologists' theory of gradual emancipation from revelation and gradual substitution of rational for dogmatic positions. But if this was a common part of their method, their purposes were entirely different. "If [Semler] and I seem to be going along the same path," he wrote, "we certainly do not want to go to the same place."¹⁶ Semler's goal was simply to destroy revealed doctrine so far as it was based only upon revelation, but to maintain those contents of revelation which passed the rational tests of professors in the University of Halle who had read their Wolff. Lessing's aim was to maintain a moving line between the truths of faith and the truths of reason so that faith would not be squeezed in a corner and reason would not be frozen with the dogmas and the rationalities of A.D. 1760.

¹⁵ Lessing's rhetoric is rather more earthy than this English cliché; see his letter to Karl Lessing, February 2, 1774; *Gesammelte Werke* (Berlin: Aufbau Verlag, 1957) IX, 597 (not in Chadwick).

¹⁶ *Gesammelte Schriften*, XVI, 492.

He wanted not only to keep the relationship between them somewhat fluid, but he also wanted to keep open the possibility of entirely new speculative inputs into each. The age was not yet completely enlightened; reason still had jobs to do. Who knows but what something related to present standards of reason, as reason is now related to obsolescent revelation, might not yet be brought forth in the fullness of time? Lessing wants to be able to say of some New Covenant, "It will come! It will assuredly come!—the time of a new eternal gospel, which is promised us in the primers of the New Covenant itself!"¹⁷

But both neology and orthodoxy were static, absolutistic. Each was the basis of an unchangeable dogmatism. Orthodox dogmatism was the bitter end of the open-minded tolerance of Luther, as Lessing fondly, or desperately, imagined Luther: "The true Lutheran does not wish to be defended by Luther's writing but by Luther's spirit; and Luther's spirit absolutely requires that no man be prevented from advancing in the knowledge of truth according to his own judgment."¹⁸ But on the other side was a danger of a "new papalism of neology."

The unfinished character of theology is the consequence to be drawn from the concept of progress involved in this conception of the moving line of division. This is the outcome also of the famous parable of the rings in *Nathan the Wise*: each man is to practice his own religion (each is to believe that his ring is the genuine one) and pass it on to his descendants for a thousand years, and then some wiser judge will decide which was the true religion (the genuine ring of blessedness) by examining the moral fruits of each.¹⁹ This is also the basis of Lessing's most famous statement, which is often quoted more for its rhetoric than for its deep philosophical meaning: "If God were holding all the truth that exists in his right hand and in his left just the one ever-active urge to find the truth, even if attached to it were the condition that I should always and forever be going astray, and said to me, 'Choose!', I should humbly fall upon his left hand and say, 'Father, give! Pure truth is only for thee alone.'"²⁰

The moving line between revelation and reason is the chief theme of Lessing's best-known theological writing, *The Education of the Human Race*.²¹ Just as Leibniz' sharp distinction between truths of fact and truths of reason, and his denial of the possibility of a Wolffian transition from the former to the latter, helped Lessing to attack Reinarus, Goeze, and Semler all at once, here another Leibnizian idea is invoked. It is not entirely consistent with the use of the insurmountable dogmatism of the previously used Leibnizian expedient, but it serves Lessing's purpose with equal brilliance. It is the idea of continuity in the development of the monad from a state of indistinct consciousness to a full consciousness of things, as reason, which gives knowledge of causes, brings mere historical and em-

¹⁷ *Education of the Human Race*, §§ 85, 86 (Chadwick).

¹⁸ *Anti-Goeze*, in Chadwick, p. 23.

¹⁹ Act III, scene vii.

²⁰ *Gesammelte Schriften*, XIII, 24.

²¹ How Lessing was brought to this finalistic treatment of history and its bearing upon religious enlightenment is brilliantly treated in E. J. Flajole, S.J., "Lessing's Retrieval of Lost Truths," *Proceedings of the Modern Language Association*, 74: 52-66 (1959).

irical knowledge into the light of reason. As Kant accuses Leibniz of the error of intellectualizing the senses, Lessing exploits Leibniz by intellectualizing revelation. He does so not by applying (as the neologists did) a fully developed rational standard from who knows what source to a primitive revelation allegedly from God. Rather, he does so, in a quasi-Leibnizian manner, by seeing a continuity between the historical, empirical revelation and the more perfect reason emerging from it in the course of history and maturation. Lessing speculated that man might in the course of time have more than five senses; here, in the *Education of the Human Race*, he is speculating that what was once given only historically, in revelation and during the childhood of mankind, may later (when reason, as it were, has developed as another sense) be understood rationally. Then the historical evidence, even if it be authentic, will no longer be either sufficient or necessary.

Revelation and education give man nothing he could not get from within himself, says Lessing (*Education of the Human Race*, § 4); just as Leibniz could say that sensation could give us no knowledge which we could not, in principle, get from ourselves through the rational development of our thought. Leibniz' theory of preformation provides the vantage point from which Lessing sees "in all positive religions simply the process by which alone the human understanding in every place can develop and must still further develop" (*Education*, Preface). The analogy on which it is based is between revelation and education. "What education is to the individual man, revelation is to the whole human race" (§ 1). Just as education gives the individual nothing he could not have got himself, but gives it more quickly and more easily, revelation gives nothing that human reason could not have got alone, but gives it sooner (§ 5). Just as education must make use of the powers of the child, revelation had to take place in an order determined by the capacities of the people who were to receive it, and hence idolatry and polytheism, not natural religion, were the first stage of revealed religion (§ 7). Revelation, then, is not a monolithic body of doctrine, for later revelation supersedes the earlier (§ 36), but nothing essential is lost in this supersession and correction; only the literal truth of the vehicle of the earlier revelation is given up, as when the truth of the fall of man is preserved even if the forbidden fruit is not believed literally to have been its occasion (§ 48).

The Old Testament is the primer, suitable to a childlike intelligence; but the Jews tried to maintain this primer after the people had outgrown it, and in defense of the literal truth of what was in fact felt and seen not to be the literal truth the Jews developed their subtle and sophisticated and incredible theology. Then a new teacher, Christ, came to give the growing child a new book (§ 53); the child became a youth, and some doctrines he could not have understood as a child, e.g., the immortality of the soul and rewards and punishment after death, were revealed to him (§§ 58-60).

Now, after seventeen centuries, there are new teachers (neologists) who wish to take this second primer from the youth of mankind, but Lessing cautions against destroying this book until "these weaker fellows of yours have caught up with you," and he counsels them that the older primer may

contain important truth which will be lost in their newer book (§ 69). Rather than rejecting the mysteries as the neologists threatened to do, Lessing proposes that they consider rational interpretations of them, as, for example, in his rational interpretations of the concepts of the Trinity, original sin, and salvation (§§ 73–75). But Lessing goes even farther than those who had attempted to make rational religion parasitic upon revealed religion by taking the substance of the latter and basing it upon the arguments of the former. Not only does revelation have to submit to reason in the course of man's progress, but reason itself develops under the guidance of revelation, and develops in its adequacy as a tool to go beyond what has been revealed and beyond what is, at this moment, even its own insight. To illustrate this, Lessing introduces his most daring speculation, the doctrine of metempsychosis (§ 93) to replace the doctrine of immortality in the tradition of revealed Christianity.

This speculation was meant seriously, but we do not have to take it seriously to see Lessing's polemical reason for proposing it, and it would serve its polemical purpose just as well if Lessing himself had not really accepted it.²² For its purpose was to show a possibility the neologists had not thought of when they subjected teachings about heaven and hell to a destructive criticism. Here is a doctrine, Lessing seems to be saying, that answers many of the questions the eighteenth century raised in the field of theodicy. It answers them better than either the orthodox or the neological view, yet it has not been considered by those who wish to claim victory for a narrow and ostensibly antimetaphysical theory to replace Christian metaphysics. The neologists, especially in the doctrine of accommodation as developed by Semler, assumed the Wolffian mind of the eighteenth century to be normative for all times, and tended toward a "papacy of deism"; but Lessing tries to shock the neologists out of their naturalistic and rationalistic complacency in order to keep the various paths of religious development open for a thousand years until some wiser judge will be able to decide which religion is the correct one.

Lessing's Alleged Spinozism: the Jacobi-Mendelssohn Controversy

Spinozism in the early eighteenth century was the "monstrous hypothesis" which Bayle condemned for its antiteleological, fatalistic, atheistic, materialistic view of the world. Its pantheism was only a polite name for atheism, and eighteenth-century Germany was little inclined to be polite to "the degenerate Jew of Amsterdam," especially when his most vociferous spokesmen in Germany, Conrad Dippel (1673–1734) and Johann Christoph Edelmann (1698–1767), combined a notoriously murky presentation of Spinoza's views with an equally disreputable mode of life which shocked all right-thinking people; they seemed to be living examples of the evil consequences of Spinozism. Spinoza's biblical criticism, with its extremely ra-

²² He did accept it and call it "my system" in *Dass mehr als fünf Sinne für den Menschen sein kann* (fragment from the late 1770's).

tionalistic consequences for the evaluation of revelation, offended those who had no understanding of his metaphysics; in fact, the *Ethics*, from which they could have learned the metaphysics, was a rare book, while the *Theological-Political Tractate*, which gave the religious consequences, had a considerable clandestine circulation.

Wolff, in his *Theologia naturalis* (1737), had given²³ what he considered to be a full-scale refutation of Spinozism, and this was a competent examination of the Spinozistic theory. This did not prevent his Pietist opponents, however, from making the same accusations against Wolff that Wolff was making against Spinoza. Such refutations of Wolff through affiliating him with Spinoza were written by Joachim Lange and by Johann Franz Budde.²⁴ What was common to Spinoza and Wolff, it appeared to their opponents, was the demonstrative, rationalistic method. To those who wished to continue to philosophize in the rationalistic way, or even to think instead of to feel in philosophy, it was important to show that the connection asserted to exist between Wolffianism and monistic pantheism, atheism, fatalism, and free-thinking did not in fact hold. The adherents of the Leibniz-Wolffian school did so not by defending Spinoza, whom they opposed as much as Leibniz and Wolff had opposed him,²⁵ but by trying to show that Wolffianism was not a halfway house on the road to Spinozism.

At the same time there were efforts to get a fairer hearing for Spinoza himself. One of the best defenses of Spinoza was that in Gottfried Arnold's *Impartial History of the Churches and Heresies* (*Unpartheyische Kirchen- und Ketzer-Historie*) in which Arnold (often regarded as more impartial to the heretics than to the orthodox) gave not only a commendatory account of Spinoza's life but defended him against the charge of atheism and chided Spinoza's Christian critics with acting as if they, not Spinoza, were impious atheists.²⁶ Mendelssohn himself tried to show that Spinoza was the true inventor of the distinctively Leibnizian theory of pre-established harmony, for which he was rebuked by Lessing.²⁷ Lorenz Schmidt, one of the trans-

²³ *Theologia naturalis*, §§ 671–716.

²⁴ Johann Georg Walch, the encyclopedist for the Thomasians, devoted a long article to the refutation of Spinoza in his *Philosophisches Lexicon* (2nd ed., Jena, 1733), cols. 2411–2418, and repeats Lange's criticism in col. 1401. For a full account of the accusations that Wolff was a Leibnizian, see Max Wundt, *Die deutsche Schulphilosophie im Zeitalter der Aufklärung* (Tübingen, 1945), pp. 236ff.

²⁵ Leibniz, (*Philosophical Papers and Letters*, trans. L. E. Loemker, p. 570, says: "I consider [the *Ethics*] dangerous for those who take pains to master it"; see also pp. 297, 300–316. Mendelssohn, in *Philosophische Gespräche*, long before the Jacobi controversy, complained about the guilt by association imputed to the Wolffians (*Gesammelte Schriften*, I, p. 11).

²⁶ The anonymous editor of the 1741 (Schaffhausen) edition of Arnold's work felt constrained to "tell the truth" about Spinoza and to correct some of Arnold's errors, such as the statement that Spinoza had become a baptized Christian. Among the "truths" the editor tells are: Spinoza voluntarily withdrew from the Jewish community because his income of a thousand guilders was cut off as a consequence of a fight he had upon leaving a comedy (the latter item a Calvinistic morsel picked up no doubt from Bayle's article on Spinoza). Compare Arnold's own account (*Unpartheyische Kirchen*, II, 222) with the editor's *Anhang*, pp. 1152–1153.

²⁷ *Durch Spinoza ist Leibniz erst auf die Spur der vorherbestimmten Harmonie gekommen* (1763).

lators of the so-called “Wertheimer Bible,”²⁸ which went too far toward rationalism and antidogmatism even for other Wolffians, translated Spinoza’s *Ethics* as a kind of appendix to his translation into German of Wolff’s Latin refutation of Spinoza, and was commonly believed thereby to have accomplished his purpose of spreading a knowledge of Spinoza under the guise of publishing a refutation of him.

These various lines of thought about Spinozism met in the great controversy, the so-called *Pantheismusstreit*, between Mendelssohn and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi about 1780. It was Jacobi’s view that “The Leibniz-Wolffian philosophy is no less fatalistic than the Spinozistic, and leads the persistent inquirer to the foundations of the latter. Every path of demonstration issues in fatalism [Spinozism].”²⁹ That the rationalistic, demonstrative method did lead to some kind of monism and pantheism was conceded by Mendelssohn, but he denied that Spinozism was a correct expression of this conclusion. His own pantheism, according to which space is not a real attribute of God, and the world is created by God’s thought—he called “refined [geläuterter] pantheism,”³⁰ and this he believed was acceptable also to Lessing. To show this, he cited Lessing’s *The Christianity of Reason*, written in 1752 or 1753 and first published in 1784. He could also have cited *On The Reality of Things Outside of God* (*Über die Wirklichkeit der Dinge ausser Gott*), written in 1762 or 1763.

The latter, as a more metaphysical and less theological work, may properly be considered first. It opens with a sentence that might sound dangerously Spinozistic: “However I define the reality of things outside of God, I must confess that I can form no concept of it.” If the reality of things is taken in the Wolffian sense as the “complement of possibility,” this complement is present to God in a concept or it is not. If it is, then the whole reality of a thing, and not merely its possibility, is in God; and no one would assert that God lacks a concept of the real. Granted that the *concept* is in God, might it not be of a thing which is not dependent upon God for its existence? But then its reality would be something of which God would have no concept, for in God’s concept of a thing must be found everything which is in the reality of the thing itself, including its independence of God. Lessing is here involved in a problem which was to engage Kant later in his refutation of the notion of the “complement of possibility” which must itself be possible, whereupon everything ontologically possible must be ontologically real.³¹ Lessing sees the difficulty, but covers it up with an argument that “to exist outside of God” means not to exist necessarily as God exists, while “to exist in God” means to exist as God himself exists,

²⁸ The Wertheimer Bible followed Reimarus in its naturalistic explanations of miracles and Wolff in its passion for exegetical definitions. The Spinoza translation is *B. de Spinozas Sittenlehre widerlegt von dem berühmten Weltweisen unserer Zeit Herrn Christian Wolff* (Frankfurt and Leipzig, 1744). Schmidt died in Wolfenbüttel in 1749, and Lessing allowed the belief to persist that he was the author of the Fragments.

²⁹ *Ueber die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen and Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, in H. Scholz, *Die Hauptschriften zum Pantheismusstreit* (Berlin: Reuther und Reichard, 1916), pp. 178–179. Hereafter cited as “Scholz.”

³⁰ *Morgenstunden*, 2nd ed. (1785), pp. 233ff.

³¹ *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 231 = B 284.

that is, necessarily. Spinoza's language for this distinction is *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*. But Lessing does not mention this, and his argument seems to be un-Spinozistic because it referred only to the attribute of thought. So Lessing then asks:

If this is all that is meant [by real existence outside of God], why should not the concepts God has of real things be these things themselves? They are adequately distinguished from God, and their reality is no less necessary because they are real in God. Would there not have to be an image in God's mind [*Idee*] corresponding to the contingency they have outside God? This image is only their contingency itself; whatever is contingent outside God will be contingent in God, else God would have no concept of the contingent outside him.³²

There is in this work, certainly, a monism, but it is unlike Spinoza's. The world is in God, as God's thoughts; God is not in the world or identical with the world, as in true pantheism. The theory Lessing is here espousing is idealistic, in the manner of Malebranche, rather than realistic, in the manner of Spinoza. For this reason it is possible for Lessing to do something impossible for a Spinozist, viz., accept the specifically idealistic Leibnizian formulation of the great chain of being and of the world as a hierarchy or society of spiritual substances. This he had done in *The Christianity of Reason* (1753), which applied these notions specifically to the interpretation of the Christian mysteries. This short essay is even less Spinozistic than the one just cited, and goes beyond even Leibniz' attempt to justify Christian doctrines. God's creation is equivalent to his having a conception of a thing (§ 3), and he can have a conception of "all his perfections at once and of himself as inclusive of them" or of "his perfections individually, one separated from another and each by itself in its own grade" (§ 4). The former is the Son of God (§§ 5-8), and the harmony between this thought and the God thinking it is the Spirit (§ 10). The thought of the perfections severally constitutes, in their totality, the World (§ 14); and each individual perfection has a place in the hierarchy of perfections in the great chain of being and Leibniz' continuum of monads. This hierarchy will eventually be seen (as Leibniz saw it) to extend even into inanimate nature (§ 21). Each simple being reflects the universe; those that are conscious of their perfections and have the power to act in accord with them are moral beings, i.e., beings who can follow a law—a law which is derived from their own nature, and can be none other than: "Act according to your individual perfections" (§§ 25-26). This essay is repeated in its entirety by Mendelssohn, and it is difficult to see why he should have bogged at § 73 of *The Education* except, perhaps, because of its obscurity.

There is obviously little Spinozism here. Yet there were in Lessing's works things that made his friends uncomfortable. There was the same attack on Scripture and orthodoxy and intolerance that one found in Spinoza. More

³² These thoughts presumably grew out of conversations with Mendelssohn and are implicit in § 73 of *The Education of the Human Race*, a "crypto-Spinozistic" thesis which Lessing had not been able to explain to Mendelssohn, according to Jacobi's account of the conversation (in Scholz, p. 69; Mendelssohn's testy reply, *ibid.*, 301ff).

sinister was Lessing's repeated rejection of the freedom of the will—he even thanks his creator that he does not possess freedom by which he could interfere with the plans of the best of all possible worlds.³³ And was he not regarded by his enemies as little better than an atheist? All his talk which seemed to show he held to rational Christianity might very well be a cover for atheism. Did not Lessing himself, in *Ernst und Falk*, speak of the necessary secrecy of the true Freemason who will not say what he knows when it is wiser to remain silent? Had not Lessing been indulgent to the indisputable hypocrisy of Reimarus, whose secret was not discovered until long after his death? There were many ready to believe the worst.

The open accusation that Lessing was not just a crypto-Spinozist but that he frankly acknowledged his Spinozism was made by Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi in his *On the Teaching of Spinoza, in Letters to Mendelssohn*, (*Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, (Breslau, 1785). The events leading up to this publication were complicated.³⁴ They involved Mendelssohn's hearing of Jacobi's accusation but publicly ignoring it while replying to it by indirection in his *Morgenstunden* (1785); Jacobi's suspecting that Mendelssohn was going to reply to his charge before he made it in public, and thus rushing into print his account of his conversation with Lessing and his correspondence with Mendelssohn; Elise Reimarus' acting as go-between, transmitting information and perhaps misinformation from each man to the other; Hamann's persuading Jacobi to attack Mendelssohn. There were breaches of faith and confidence in Jacobi's handling of his end of the affair; for example, he published (anonymously) a poem of Goethe's (*Prometheus*) which Goethe had not yet published, simply because it was the first subject he and Lessing discussed, and he published Mendelssohn's letters without his permission. There were, naturally, accusations that he had not reported Lessing's conversation accurately. Some claimed that Lessing was a dying man who did not know what he was saying and was led into a trap by Jacobi; others that Lessing was in full possession of his faculties and, playing with ideas as was his wont, had led Jacobi into a trap. The tone of the controversy was not raised when Mendelssohn died early in 1786 and Jacobi was accused of having hastened his death. Much of this is only of antiquarian interest now and of little concern to the historian of the ideas under dispute; suffice it to say that Lessing dead was the subject of a dispute as lively as any he ever participated in while among the living. The dispute amongst scholars is not yet ended.

The evidence Jacobi presented for his statement; "Lessing was a Spinozist," is found in his detailed report of conversations he had with Lessing on July 6 and 7, 1780. It is presumably as accurate as a nonstenographic report of a lengthy conversation can be. It has the ring of memory, not imagination, even in the fact that Jacobi does most of the talking and that

³³ *Gesammelte Schriften*, XII, 298.

³⁴ A brief account with necessary details is given by Kurt Weinberg, "Pantheism Controversy," in *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (New York: Macmillan, 1967), VI, 35–37. A running account of the bickerings, accusations, and counteraccusations bearing upon Mendelssohn's death is to be found in Arnulf Zweig's note on it in his edition of *Kant's Philosophical Correspondence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 120–121n. A full account with the most important documents is in Scholz.

almost all the long speeches are by him, while Lessing seems unusually quiet and passive most of the time, agreeing with Jacobi more often than leading or disagreeing. It may not be a verbatim report, but it is certainly not made up out of the whole cloth.

Jacobi shows Lessing Goethe's *Prometheus*, a rejection of the doctrine of progress in the form of an apostrophe to Zeus by the suffering Prometheus.

Lessing. I find the poem good . . . The point of view in the poem is my own. The orthodox concepts of divinity are not mine any more. I can't appreciate (*geniessen*) them. 'Σὺ καὶ Πᾶν! [One and All—the One (God) is the All (the cosmos)—a common expression among the pantheists, found also in Mendelssohn.] I know no other; this is the tenor of the poem, and I confess I like it very much.

Jacobi. Then you would be pretty much in agreement with Spinoza.

Lessing. If I were to name myself after anyone, I know no other.

Jacobi. Spinoza is good enough for me; but what a mixed blessing [*schlechtes Heil*] we find in his name!

Lessing. Yes, perhaps so. And yet, do you know a better?³⁵

The next day Lessing came to Jacobi and said he wanted to discuss his expression "One and All" which had seemed to shock Jacobi.

Jacobi. I certainly expected nothing less than to find you a Spinozist or pantheist. And you said it in so matter of fact a way. I came to you to get your help against Spinoza, more than for any other reason.

Lessing. You know Spinoza?

Jacobi. I believe I know him as very few others do.

Lessing. Then there is no help for you. You'll become his friend. There is no other philosophy than that of Spinoza.³⁶

Jacobi then explains, at great length, his conception of Spinoza's philosophy, brings all the usual objections to it, and then describes his alternative to it which involves the mortal leap (*salto mortale*) of faith. Lessing says he understands the *salto mortale* very well, but does not have to make it himself. Yet

Lessing. I notice you would like your will to be free, I don't desire a free will. But in general what you say doesn't shock me. It is just a human prejudice that we regard thought as the most important and primary thing and want to derive everything else from it. But everything, including our ideas, depends upon higher principles. Extension, movement, and thought are obviously grounded in a higher power which is far from being exhausted by them. It must be infinitely more perfect than this or that effect, and there can be a kind of joy (*Genuss*) in it which not only transcends all concepts but is wholly inconceivable. That we can think nothing about it doesn't destroy its possibility.

Jacobi. You go even farther than Spinoza. For him, understanding is worth more than anything.

Lessing. For men only! He was far from thinking our miserable human acting for purposes was the best method, and far from making thought supreme.³⁷

³⁵ *Ueber die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, (Scholz, p. 77).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 82–83.

Jacobi himself, of course, believes that thought is speculatively impotent, so he now agrees with what he takes to be Lessing's meaning even if he does not attribute it to Spinoza.

Jacobi. The inquirer's ultimate goal is what cannot be explained: the irresolvable, the immediate, the simple. [When we try to explain everything] we create an illusion in our mind which blinds us and does not enlighten us. We sacrifice what Spinoza called the deep and sublime—knowledge of the highest sort [*scientia intuitiva*]³⁸—to knowledge of the lowest kind [opinion or imagination]. We close the eye of the soul with which it sees itself and God, in order to see only with the eyes of the body.

Lessing. Very good! I can use all that, but I don't have to make the same thing out of it [i.e., I don't have to fall back into blind faith]. Your *salto mortale* doesn't seem to me to be too bad. I understand how a man with brains can make this headlong plunge in order to get away from where he stands. Take me with you, if it works.

Jacobi. If you want to stand on a shaky place like mine, it just happens.

Lessing. [No], even then there must be a plunge, for which I don't trust my old legs and heavy head.³⁸

The remainder of the dialogue contains little of surprise. There is a suggestion (later modified or withdrawn) that Leibniz too was a Spinozist, a praise of Spinoza's personal character, a favorable expression about personal immortality, and a few jokes (they complain about the rain; Lessing says, "Well, my dear fellow, you know it may be I who am raining.") Then Jacobi closes his report with the statement: "Lessing believed there was no cause of things distinct from the world; or, *Lessing was a Spinozist.*"

In judging this conclusion, several things should be considered. First, Jacobi may have been right; Lessing could have been as great a hypocrite as Reimarus or Lorenz Schmidt. But, second, Mendelssohn is very plausible in his argument that it is unlikely that Lessing would have revealed to a comparative stranger a conviction (at that time daring, if not dangerous) that Mendelssohn had not in thirty years of intimate talk so much as suspected.

Third, we must remember Lessing's spirit of antithesis. May he not have described exactly how he was later to deal with Jacobi when he wrote: "The more convincingly anyone tried to demonstrate to me the truth of Christianity, the more doubtful I became. The more boldly and triumphantly another wished to trample it under foot, the more inclined I felt to maintain it intact, in my heart at least."³⁹ Against Jacobi's irrational sentimentalism, would not a man with Lessing's love of contradiction and argument, unaware that his words were to be published, be tempted to go to the opposite extreme, especially since (as we have seen) he had already written things which were certainly pantheistic if not explicitly Spinozistic? Mendelssohn wanted to know how serious Lessing was. Was Lessing pulling Jacobi's leg?⁴⁰ Next, it must be noted that *Lessing* never said, "I am a Spinozist." He said Spinozism is the only philosophy, but he had little respect for

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91.

³⁹ *Bibliolatrie, Gesammelte Schriften*, XVI, 471.

⁴⁰ Letter from Elise Reimarus to Jacobi, September 1, 1783 (Scholz, p. 69).

systematic philosophy in the manner of Wolff; he did not say, "If you study Spinoza you will become a Spinozist," but in effect "If you study Spinoza and learn what he really said, you will become his friend and not beat him like a dead dog [his own expression]." ⁴¹ He said that if he had to "name anyone" he would name Spinoza, but he added that he hoped his Credo was not to be found in any book. ⁴² Moreover, it was Jacobi, not Lessing, who introduced the name of Spinoza. When Lessing said that he was familiar with the thought in Goethe's poem, he meant Aeschylus, as Hamann pointed out, ⁴³ and it was Jacobi who ignorantly thought he meant Spinoza. Since we know what Lessing thought of "philosophical poetry" from his essay on Pope, it may well be that he had not even thought that he was engaged in a philosophical dispute when he made his favorable remark about the verse. Finally, it should be noted that Lessing really (and not just in Jacobi's judgment) went beyond Spinoza's own rationalism toward a kind of mystical naturalism that is closer to Mendelssohn's "refined pantheism" than to Spinoza's rationalistic monism. And he did not deny it when Jacobi accused him of going "farther than Spinoza."

If it was Jacobi's intention to destroy Spinozism in the various appendices to his book where he argues in detail against Spinoza, this quotation was a tactical mistake. For it was Lessing's "going farther than Spinoza" which gave Spinoza for the first time in Germany a respected place in philosophy. There were as many philosophers ready to "go farther than Spinoza" as there were those ready to give up rationalism because it led to Spinoza. *The paradox is that Spinoza's influence became strongest and most fruitful when rationalism was on the wane in Germany.* The root of this paradox is in Lessing; its fruit we shall see later in Herder.

The controversy between Jacobi and Mendelssohn can be seen as a continuation of the debate which Lessing himself had started by his publication of the Reimarus fragments. The debate against orthodoxy had, of course, been going on in Germany since Thomasius. It had become involved in historical disputes which Lessing saw were irrelevant to the philosophical problem, since no eternal truth could be derived from a historical truth, however well established. But since Lessing believed that a proper interpretation of the historical process could resolve the rationalist-orthodox dispute, he needed a confrontation of a historian who, unlike Semler, rejected the validity of the very idea of revelation, with orthodox thought that saddled itself with an impossible historiographical burden of authenticating revelation. Had Reimarus not existed, Lessing would have had to invent him in order to have a clear-cut statement of an antiorthodox position based on history and rationalism. Lessing tried to resolve the theological issue in his historical theory of revelation as education, and then tried to salve the religious wounds of the controversy with "the proof of the spirit and the power" of "the religion of Christ" and "the Christianity of reason."

Now though the disputants did not see it in this way, we can see Jacobi's philosophy of faith as a proof of the spirit and the power. The debate be-

⁴¹ *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, (Scholz, p. 88).

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 80 and note.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. cxxi.

tween rationalism and orthodoxy which Lessing had led (having largely ignored the sentimental alternative after his subsidiary attacks on Klopstock and Basedow) now gave way, after his death, to a dispute between reason and faith, not reason and dogma. Jacobi thought rationalism could not stop with neology or Mendelssohn's refined pantheism or even Wolff's compromising scholasticism; it had rather to go to the bitter end in Spinozism—and he thought he had Lessing's word to show that this was in fact where it had led. This conviction, together with his rejection of Spinozism, changed the point at issue in a radical way. The debate was no longer among the orthodox, the Wolffians, the neologists, and the naturalists and religious rationalists concerning the degree to which revelation or reason had the prerogative, for on this slippery slope there was no place to stop between Wolff's harmless scholasticism and Spinozistic atheism. The debate was now on the question of the competency of reason in general. The sentimentalists and fideists of Lessing's time were left out of the great debate between Jacobi and Mendelssohn, but they were in the center of the next stage.

If the rehabilitation of Spinoza was the first important consequence of the controversy, a renewal on the highest possible plane of the perennial conflict between faith and knowledge was the second. Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* was his contribution to the debate started by Lessing and Goeze, but his more important “denying knowledge in order to make room for belief”⁴⁴ and his condemnation of the philosophy of healthy common sense (“misology reduced to principle”)⁴⁵ was his solution to the problems disputed by Mendelssohn and Jacobi. His *What Is Orientation in Thinking?* (1786) was his explicit reply to both Mendelssohn and Jacobi.

But what he, Hamann, and Herder said about the issues raised is examined in later chapters.

⁴⁴ *Critique of Pure Reason*, Introduction to 2nd ed., p. xxx.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, A 855 = B 883.