What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?

Translator's introduction

Was heisst: Sich im Denken orientiren? was first published in October 1786 in the *Berlinische Monatschrift* VIII, pp. 304–30.

The "Orientation" essay is Kant's contribution to the so-called pantheism controversy, one of the eighteenth century's most famous and influential philosophical disputes, whose course helped determine the course of German philosophy well into the following century. The principals in the dispute were F. H. Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn, and its focus was the alleged Spinozism of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Mendelssohn and Lessing had been close friends for many years. After Lessing's death in 1781 Mendelssohn intended to write a laudatory character sketch of one of the eighteenth century's greatest and most respected German writers and thinkers, particularly on the topics of religion and art. Toward the end of his life, however, Lessing had also been acquainted with the much younger Jacobi, to whom (as Jacobi claimed) Lessing had confessed his allegiance to the philosophical principles of Spinoza. This was extremely disturbing, since Spinoza was widely regarded as an atheist and necessitarian whose principles were subversive of all religion and morality. The suggestion that the great rationalist Lessing might have been a secret Spinozist was both shocking to the learned public and at the same time profoundly ambiguous in its implications. On the one hand, it could mean that the principles of Enlightenment rationalism might in fact be morally and religiously subversive; on the other hand, it could mean that Spinozist pantheism was a more formidable philosophical position than rationalist orthodoxy allowed. Both conclusions were, in fact, widely accepted; both determined the course of philosophy in Germany throughout the period of German idealism.

In 1783, Jacobi initiated a correspondence with Mendelssohn mediated by Elise Reimarus (daughter of the deist theologian H. S. Reimarus), in which the two men debated the extent and nature of Lessing's Spinozism. It soon became clear that the real issues did not have as much to do with what Lessing's opinions were as with deeper philosophical differences over the ultimate implications of applying reason consistently to moral and religious questions. Mendelssohn defended an orthodox theology based on reason. He held that Lessing's agreement with Spinoza was only partial, and that it

not only need not but in fact did not extend to the more objectionable tenets of Spinozism. Jacobi argued that one cannot consistently embrace philosophical rationalism at all without committing oneself to the heterodox pantheism, necessitarianism, and even materialism for which Spinoza's philosophy was infamous. This, he thought, was the profoundest result attained by Lessing's courageous rationalism. Jacobi's position was that solely on the basis of philosophical reason, systematically developed, no morally and religiously tenable view of life is possible. A healthy human existence is attainable only through an attitude of faith rooted not in rational reflection but in the attitudes of moral practice.

This controversy became public in September 1785. Hearing rumors that Mendelssohn was about to publish a book touching on their disagreement, Jacobi quickly brought out *On the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn* (Breslau, 1785). This was indeed followed just a few weeks later by Mendelssohn's *Morning Hours* (Berlin, 1785), which contained a defense of rational theism along with reflections on maintaining a stable and consistent relationship between a speculative philosophy based on reason and the standpoint of healthy common sense. It also included a discussion of Lessing's theological opinions.

When Mendelssohn read Jacobi's account of Lessing's views and the account of his own correspondence with Jacobi, he was incensed and immediately penned a reply: *To Lessing's Friends: an Appendix to Mr. Jacobi's Correspondence on the Doctrine of Spinoza* (Berlin, 1786). Mendelssohn accused Jacobi of distorting Lessing's views and slandering his memory; he attacked Jacobi's recommendation of the "narrow path of faith" as a form of philosophical "enthusiasm" (*Schwärmerei*) that exalts authority over reason in matters of both religion and philosophy. This was to be Mendelssohn's last contribution to the controversy. In January 1786, he suddenly fell ill and died.

Within a month of this tragic event, Kant was urged by two of Mendelssohn's friends (and Kant's as well), Marcus Herz and Johann Erich Biester (editor of the *Berlinische Monatschrift*), to enter the struggle to avenge the death of the great Moses (see AK 10:431–3). The request was not out of place, for although Kant's critical views were at odds with Mendelssohn's Wolffian "dogmatism," the two philosophers had known and deeply respected one another's work for over twenty years. But some of Kant's own students had been urging him to enter the dispute on the other side, since they saw Mendelssohn's rational theology as contrary to critical principles and regarded Jacobi's moral faith as fundamentally continuous with Kantian principles. For the same reason, it was also apparently Jacobi's expectation that Kant would agree with him rather than with Mendelssohn.

After the publication of *To Lessing's Friends*, Jacobi defended his position in *Against Mendelssohn's Imputations in His Writing to Lessing's Friends*

(Leipzig, 1786). He protested that his aim had never been to accuse Lessing but rather to praise the integrity and consistency of his rationalism. In reply to the charge of "enthusiasm," Jacobi quoted passages from Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason,* denying the possibility of theoretical cognition of God and recommending instead an attitude of moral faith; he argued that the *Critique* expressed the same views as his own, and hence that he could no more be charged with "enthusiasm" than could the great *Aufklärer* of Königsberg.

Kant's reaction to Jacobi's position, and to Jacobi himself, was, however, anything but favorable. In April 1786, Kant wrote to Herz that the whole controversy "is nothing serious; it is only an affected *enthusiasm of genius* trying to make a name for itself"; but then added tantalizingly that he might write an essay for the *Berlinische Monatschrift* exposing the "humbug" (*Gaukelwerk*) (AK 10:442–3).

In June, Biester again appealed to Kant to join the controversy in opposition to Jacobi's "enthusiasm." In the meantime, in May, there had appeared a thoughtful defense of Jacobi's position: *Results of the Jacobian and Mendelssohnian Philosophy by a Volunteer* (Leipzig, 1786). Its author was Thomas Wizenmann, a young philosopher still in his twenties, who was to live only a year longer, and to whose criticisms of his views on moral faith Kant – with respect – replied in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (AK 5:143n). It may have been Wizenmann's intervention, more than anything else, that prompted Kant finally to address the issues between Jacobi and Mendelssohn, since Wizenmann went beyond Jacobi, holding in effect that healthy common sense itself was a function of religious faith and ultimately of revelation. This shifted the focus of the discussion, taking a position more directly opposed to Kant's on an issue that put Kant and Mendelssohn squarely in the same camp.

In the "Orientation" essay, published in October 1786, Kant did indeed take Mendelssohn's side in the controversy. He seized on Mendelssohn's idea, presented in the *Morning Hours,* of an "orientation" of philosophical speculation through rational common sense, reinterpreting this concept to accord with Kant's own doctrine that the shortcomings of theoretical speculation must be made good through rational faith on moral grounds. And Kant concurred in Mendelssohn's hostility to Jacobi's conception of faith regarding it, as a dangerous form of enthusiasm that denied the absolute authority of reason in matters of belief. The concluding pages of the "Orientation" essay also bring out an ominous *political* dimension to the controversy. Frederick the Great, the protector of Enlightenment, had died in August 1786; with the expected accession of Frederick William II, Kant could already see a troubled time ahead for all those who valued freedom of thought and rational inquiry in religious matters – and this, Kant insisted, must include not only philosophers such as Mendelssohn and himself, but also Jacobi and his supporters, whose

lawless freedom to believe as inspiration prompted them would certainly place them among the earliest victims of repressive orthodoxy. The threat of this repression is implicit in the concluding paragraph's ardent plea for Jacobi and his friends not to abandon the cause of reason in its hour of peril.

Jacobi's disappointment with the "Orientation" essay seems to have led to a fateful redirection of his critical talents. Jacobi's attitude toward Kant was always ambivalent, and even his later writings praised Kant while criticizing him. But Jacobi had wanted to emphasize the continuity between their positions, especially on issues of faith and reason. In the "Orientation" essay, however, Jacobi found criticism not only of himself but also of great philosophers such as Leibniz and Spinoza, criticism which he regarded as unfair and founded on misunderstanding. From this point on, Jacobi's criticism of systematic philosophy focused on the argument that Kantian criticism is afflicted with internal inconsistencies regarding the "thing in itself" and leads inevitably to a skepticism even more corrosive than that to which it seeks to reply. These charges were first brought against Kant in Jacobi's *David Hume* (1787), but later they were turned against Fichte, whom Jacobi regarded as the most radical and dangerous of the Kantians. Jacobi's criticism of Kantian philosophy was extremely influential in determining its form during the 1790s and beyond.

The "Orientation" essay has been previously translated into English three times. The first translation was by John Richardson, a student of Jakob Sigismund Beck; it appeared in *Essays and Treatises on Moral, Political and Various Philosophical Subjects, by Emanuel Kant,* 2 volumes (London: William Richardson, 1798–9). The second translation was by Lewis White Beck in *Immanuel Kant, Critique of Practical Reason and other writings on moral philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949; reprinted: New York: Garland, 1976), pp. 293–305. The most recent translation is by H. B. Nisbet, in H. Reiss (ed.), *Kant's Political Writings,* second enlarged edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 237–49.

What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?

However exalted the application of our concepts, and however far up from sensibility we may abstract them, still they will always be appended to *image* representations,[a] whose proper function[b] is to make these concepts, which are not otherwise derived from experience, serviceable for *experiential use.* For how would we procure sense and significance for our concepts if we did not underpin them with some intuition (which ultimately must always be an example from some possible experience)? If from this concrete act of the understanding we leave out the association of the image – in the first place an accidental perception through the senses – then what is left over is the pure concept of understanding, whose range is now enlarged and contains a rule for thinking in general. It is in just such a way that general logic comes about; and many *heuristic* methods of thinking perhaps lie hidden in the experiential use of our understanding and reason; if we carefully extract these methods from that experience, they could well enrich philosophy with many useful maxims even in abstract thinking.

Of this kind is the principle to which the late Mendelssohn expressly subscribed for the first time, so far as I know, in his last writings (the *Morning Hours,* pp. 164–165 and the *Letters to Lessing's Friends,* pp. 33 and 67):[1] namely, the maxim that it is necessary to orient oneself in the speculative use of reason (which Mendelssohn otherwise trusted very much in respect of the cognition of supersensible objects, even so far as claiming for it the evidence of demonstration) by means of a certain guideline which he sometimes called *common sense* or *healthy reason* (in the *Morning Hours*), and sometimes *plain*[c] *understanding* (*To Lessing's Friends*). Who would have thought that this admission would not only have a destructive effect on his favorable opinion of the power of *speculative* reason when used in theological matters (which was in fact unavoidable), but that even 8:134
common healthy reason, given the ambiguous position in which he left the employment of this faculty in contrast to speculation, would also fall into

[a] *bildliche Vorstellungen*
[b] *Bestimmung*
[c] *schlicht*

the danger of serving as a principle of enthusiasm in the dethroning of reason? And yet this happened in the controversy between Mendelssohn and Jacobi, chiefly through the not insignificant inferences of the acute author of the *Results;** even though I do not ascribe to either of the two the intention of bringing such a destructive way of thinking into currency; rather I prefer to regard the latter's[d] undertaking as an *argumentum ad hominem,*[e] which one is justified in using merely as a defensive weapon, so as to use one's opponent's vulnerabilities to his disadvantage. On the other hand, I will show that it was in fact *only* reason – not any alleged sense of truth, not any transcendent intuition under the name of faith, on which tradition and revelation can be grafted without reason's consent – which Mendelssohn affirmed, staunchly and with justified zeal; it was only that genuine pure human reason which he found necessary and recommended as a means of orientation. Yet here the high claims of reason's speculative faculty, chiefly its commanding authority (through demonstration), obviously falls away, and what is left to it, insofar as it is speculative, is only the task of purifying the common concept of reason of its contradictions, and defending it against its *own* sophistical attacks on the maxims of healthy reason. – The extended and more precisely determined concept of *orienting oneself* can be helpful to us in presenting distinctly the maxims healthy reason uses in working on its cognitions of supersensible objects.

In the proper meaning[f] of the word, to *orient* oneself means to use a given direction[g] (when we divide the horizon into four of them) in order to find the others – literally, to find the *sunrise.* Now if I see the sun in the sky and know it is now midday, then I know how to find south, west, north, and east. For this, however, I also need the feeling of a difference in my own subject, namely, the difference between my right and left hands. I call
8:135 this a *feeling* because these two sides outwardly display no designatable difference[h] in intuition. If I did not have this faculty of distinguishing, without the need of any difference in the objects, between moving from left to right and right to left and moving in the opposite direction and thereby determining *a priori* a difference in the position of the objects, then in describing a circle I would not know whether west was right or left

* Jacobi, *Letters on the Doctrine of Spinoza.* Breslau, 1785. – Jacobi, *Against Mendelssohn's Imputations Regarding the Letters on the Doctrine of Spinoza.* Leipzig, 1786. – *The Results of the Jacobian and Mendelssohnian Philosophy Critically Investigated by a Volunteer* (ibid.).[2]

[d] i.e. Wizenmann, who in the *Results* had accused Mendelssohn, in his appeal to "healthy reason," of relying as much as Jacobi on religious faith.

[e] argument directed to the man

[f] *Bedeutung*

[g] *Gegend*

[h] *keinen merklichen Unterschied*

of the southernmost point of the horizon, or whether I should complete the circle by moving north and east and thus back to south. Thus even with all the objective data of the sky, I orient myself *geographically* only through a *subjective* ground of differentiation; and if all the constellations, though keeping the same shape and position relative to one another, were one day by a miracle to be reversed in their direction, so that what was east now became west, no human eye would notice the slightest alteration on the next bright starlit night, and even the astronomer – if he pays attention only to what he sees and not at the same time to what he feels – would inevitably become *disoriented.* But in fact the faculty of making distinctions through the feeling of right and left comes naturally to his aid – it is a faculty implanted by nature but made habitual through frequent practice. If only he fixes his eye on the Pole Star, he will be able not only to notice the alteration which has taken place, but in spite of it he will also be able to *orient* himself.

Now I can extend this geographical concept of the procedure of orienting oneself, and understand by it orienting oneself in any given space in general, hence orienting oneself merely *mathematically.* In the dark I orient myself in a room that is familiar to me if I can take hold of even one single object whose position I remember. But it is plain that nothing helps me here except the faculty for determining position according to a *subjective* ground of differentiation: for I do not see at all the objects[i] whose place I am to find; and if someone as a joke had moved all the objects around so that what was previously on the right was now on the left, I would be quite unable to find anything in a room whose walls were otherwise wholly identical. But I can soon orient myself through the mere feeling of a difference between my two sides, the right and left. That is just what happens if I am to walk and take the correct turns on streets otherwise familiar to me when I cannot right now distinguish any of the houses. 8:136

Finally, I can extend this concept even further, since it could be taken as consisting in the faculty of orienting myself not merely in space, i.e. mathematically, but in *thinking* in general, i.e. *logically.* By analogy, one can easily guess that it will be a concern of pure reason to guide its use when it wants to leave familiar objects (of experience) behind, extending itself beyond all the bounds of experience and finding no object[j] of intuition at all, but merely space for intuition; for then it is no longer in a position to bring its judgments under a determinate maxim according to objective grounds of cognition, but solely to bring its judgments under a determinate maxim according to a subjective ground of differentiation in the

[i] *Objecte*
[j] *Object*

determination of its own faculty of judgment.* This subjective means still remaining is nothing other than reason's feeling of its own need. One can remain safe from all error if one does not undertake to judge where one does not know what is required for a determinate judgment. Thus ignorance is in itself the cause of the limitations of our cognition, but not of the errors in it. But where it is not arbitrary[m] whether or not one will judge determinately, where there is some actual *need* – and moreover one attaching to reason in itself – which makes it necessary to judge, and yet we are limited by a lack of knowledge in respect of factors which are necessary for the judgment, there it is necessary to have a maxim according to which we may pass our judgment; for reason will be satisfied. For if it has been previously made out that here there can be no intuition of objects[n] or anything of the kind through which we can present a suitable object to our extended concepts and hence secure a real possibility for them, then there is nothing left for us to do except first to examine the concept with which we would venture to go beyond all possible experience to see if it is free of contradiction, and then at least to bring the *relation* of the object to objects of experience under pure concepts of the understanding – through which we still do not render it sensible, but we do at least think of something
8:137 supersensible in a way which is serviceable to the experiential use of our reason. For without this caution we would be unable to make any use at all of such concepts; instead of thinking we would indulge in enthusiasm.

Yet through this, namely through the mere concept, nothing is settled in respect of the existence of this object and its actual connection with the world (the sum total of all objects of possible experience). But now there enters *the right* of reason's *need*, as a subjective ground for presupposing and assuming something which reason may not presume to know through objective grounds; and consequently for *orienting* itself in thinking, solely through reason's own need, in that immeasurable space of the supersensible, which for us is filled with dark[o] night.

Many supersensible things may be thought (for objects of sense do not fill up the whole field of possibility) to which, however, reason feels no need to extend itself, much less to assume their existence. In the causes of the world, reason finds enough to keep it busy with those which are revealed by sense (or at least are of the same kind as those which reveal themselves to it), without having any necessity to make use of the influence of pure

* Thus to *orient* oneself in thinking in general means: when objective principles[k] of reason are insufficient for holding something true, to determine the matter according to a subjective principle.[l]

[k] *Principien*
[l] *Princip*
[m] *willkürlich*
[n] *Objecte*
[o] *dicker*

spiritual beings in nature; the assumption of these spiritual beings would rather be disadvantageous to the use of reason. For since we know nothing of the laws according to which they would operate, whereas we know – or at least we can hope to find out – a lot about the others, namely the objects of the senses, presupposing them would rather violate the use of reason. Thus that is not a need at all, but merely impertinent inquisitiveness straying into empty dreaming to investigate them – or play with such figments of the brain. It is quite otherwise with the concept of a first *original being* as a supreme intelligence and at the same time as the highest good. For not only does our reason already feel a need to take the *concept* of the unlimited as the ground of the concepts of all limited beings – hence of all other things* – , 8:138
but this need even goes as far as the presupposition of its *existence,* without which one can provide no satisfactory ground at all for the contingency of the existence of things in the world, let alone for the purposiveness and order which is encountered everywhere in such a wondrous degree (in the small, because it is close to us, even more than in the large). Without assuming an intelligent author we cannot give any *intelligible ground* of it

* Since reason needs to presuppose reality as given for the possibility of all things, and considers the differences between things only as limitations arising through the negations attaching to them, it sees itself necessitated to take as a ground one single possibility, namely that of an unlimited being, to consider it as original and all others as derived. Since also the thoroughgoing possibility of every thing must be encountered within existence as a whole – or at least since this is the only way in which the principle of thoroughgoing determination makes it possible for our reason to distinguish between the possible and the actual – we find a subjective ground of necessity, i.e. a need in our reason itself to take the existence of a most real (highest) being as the ground of all possibility. Now this is how the Cartesian proof of God's existence arises, since subjective grounds for presupposing something for the use of reason (which always remains a ground only within an experiential use) is taken to be objective – hence *need is taken for insight.* Just as it is here, so it is also with all the proofs of the worthy Mendelssohn in his *Morning Hours.* They accomplish nothing by way of demonstration. But they are not for that reason by any means useless. For not to mention the fine occasion which such acute developments of the subjective conditions of the use of our reason provides for the complete cognition of this faculty of ours, of which they are lasting examples, a holding of something true on subjective grounds of the use of reason – if we lack objective ones and are nevertheless necessitated to judge – is always of great importance; only we must not give out what is in fact only a necessary *presupposition* as if it were a *free insight;* otherwise we needlessly offer the opponent with whom we are *arguing dogmatically* weaknesses which he can use to our disadvantage. Mendelssohn probably did not think about the fact that *arguing dogmatically* with pure reason in the field of the supersensible is the direct path to philosophical enthusiasm, and that only a critique of this same faculty of reasons can fundamentally remedy this ill. Of course, the discipline of the scholastic method (the Wolffian, for example, which he recommended for this reason) can actually hold back this mischief for a long time, since all concepts must be determined through definitions and all steps must be justified through principles; but that will by no means wholly get rid of it. For with what right will anyone prohibit reason – once it has, by his own admission, achieved success in this field – from going still farther in it? And where then is the boundary at which it must stop?

without falling into plain absurdities; and although we cannot *prove* the impossibility of such a purposiveness apart from an *intelligent cause* (for then we would have sufficient objective grounds for asserting it and would
8:139 not need to appeal to subjective ones), given our lack of insight there yet remains a sufficient ground for *assuming* such a cause in reason's *need* to presuppose something intelligible in order to explain this given appearance, since nothing else with which reason can combine any concept provides a remedy for this need.

But one can regard the need of reason as twofold: *first* in its *theoretical,* second in its *practical* use. The first need I have just mentioned; but one sees very well that it is only conditioned, i.e. we must assume the existence of God *if* we *want to judge* about the first causes of everything contingent, chiefly in the order of ends which is actually present in the world. Far more important is the need of reason in its practical use, because it is unconditioned, and we are necessitated to presuppose the existence of God not only if we *want* to judge, but because we *have to judge.* For the pure practical use of reason consists in the precepts of moral laws. They all lead, however, to the idea of the *highest good* possible in the world insofar as it is possible only through *freedom: morality;*[p] from the other side, these precepts lead to what depends not merely on human freedom but also on *nature,* which is the greatest *happiness,* insofar as it is apportioned according to the first. Now reason *needs* to assume, for the sake of such a *dependent* highest good, a supreme intelligence as the highest *independent* good; not, of course, to derive from this assumption the binding authority of moral precepts or the incentives to observe them (for they would have no moral worth if their motive were derived from anything but the law alone, which is of itself[q] apodictically certain), but rather only in order to give objective reality to the concept of the highest good, i.e. to prevent it, along with morality, from being taken merely as a mere ideal, as it would be if that whose idea inseparably accompanies morality[r] should not exist anywhere.

Thus it is not *cognition* but a felt* *need* of reason through which Men-
8:140 delssohn (without knowing it) oriented himself in speculative thinking. And since this guiding thread is not an objective principle[s] of reason, a principle of insight, but a merely subjective one (i.e. a maxim) of the only use of reason allowed by its limits – a corollary of its need – and since *by*

* Reason does not feel; it has insight into its lack and through the *drive for cognition* it effects the feeling of a need. It is the same way with moral feeling, which does not cause any moral law, for this arises wholly from reason; rather, it is caused or effected by moral laws, hence by reason, because the active yet free will needs determinate grounds.

[p] *Sittlichkeit*
[q] *für sich*
[r] *Moralität*
[s] *Princip*

itself alone[1] it constitutes the whole determining ground of our judgment about the existence of the highest being, and its use as a means of orientation in attempts to speculate on this same subject is only contingent, so Mendelssohn erred here in that he nevertheless trusted speculation to the extent of letting it alone settle everything on the path of demonstration. The necessity of the first means could be established only if the insufficiency of the latter is fully admitted: an admission to which his acuteness would ultimately have brought him if he had been granted, along with a longer life, also that application of mind, found more often in youth, which permits the alteration of old, habitual ways of thinking to accord with alterations in the state of the sciences. In any case, he retains the merit of insisting that the final touchstone of the reliability of judgment is to be sought in *reason alone,* whether in the choice of its propositions it is guided by insight or mere need and the maxim of what is advantageous to reason itself. He called reason in its latter use "common human reason"; for this always has its own interest before its eyes, whereas one must have left the course of nature behind if one is to forget this interest and look around idly among concepts from an objective viewpoint, merely so as to extend one's knowledge, whether or not it is necessary.

Since, however, in the question before us the expression: *pronouncement of healthy reason* always remains ambiguous and can always be taken either – as Mendelssohn himself misunderstood it – for a judgment of *rational insight* or – as the author of the *Results* appears to take it – for a judgment from *rational inspiration,* it will be necessary to give this source of judging another name, and none is more suitable than **rational belief or faith.**[2] Every belief, even the historical, must of course be *rational* (for the final touchstone of truth is always reason); only a rational belief or 8:141
faith is one grounded on no data other than those contained in *pure* reason. All believing is a holding true which is subjectively sufficient, but *consciously* regarded as objectively insufficient; thus it is contrasted with *knowing.* On the other hand, when something is held true on objective though consciously insufficient grounds, and hence is merely *opinion,* this *opining* can gradually be supplemented by the same kind of grounds and finally become a *knowing.* By contrast, if the grounds of holding true are of a kind that cannot be objectively valid at all, then the belief can never become a knowing through any use of reason. Historical belief, e.g., of the death of a great man, as reported in some letters, *can become a knowing* if his burial, testament, etc. are announced by the local authorities. Hence what is held true historically based on mere testimony – e.g. that somewhere in the world there is a city of Rome – can be believed, and yet someone who has never been there can say *I know* and not merely *I believe*

[1] *für sich allein*
[2] *Vernunftglaubens*

that Rome exists – these can very well be compatible. By contrast, pure *rational faith* can never be transformed into knowledge by any natural data of reason and experience, because here the ground of holding true is merely subjective, namely a necessary need of reason (and as long as we are human beings it will always remain a need) to *presuppose* the existence of a highest being, but not to demonstrate it. A need of reason to be used in a way which satisfies it *theoretically* would be nothing other than a pure *rational hypothesis,* i.e. an opinion sufficient to hold something true on subjective grounds simply because one can never expect to find grounds other than these on which to *explain certain given effects,* and because reason needs a ground of explanation. By contrast, *rational faith,* which rests on a need of reason's use with a *practical* intent, could be called a *postulate* of reason – not as if it were an insight which did justice to all the logical demands for certainty, but because this holding true (if only the person is morally good) is not inferior* in degree to knowing, even though
8:142 it is completely different from it in kind.

A pure rational faith is therefore the signpost or compass by means of which the speculative thinker orients himself in his rational excursions into the field of supersensible objects; but a human being who has common but (morally) healthy reason can mark out his path, in both a theoretical and a practical respect, in a way which is fully in accord with the whole end of his vocation; and it is this rational faith which must also be taken as the ground of every other faith, and even of every revelation.

The *concept* of God and even the conviction of his *existence* can be met with only in reason, and it cannot first come to us either through inspiration or through tidings communicated to us, however great the authority behind them. If I come across an immediate intuition of such a kind that nature, as I am acquainted with it, could not provide that intuition, then a concept of God must serve to gauge whether this appearance agrees with all the characteristics required for a Deity. Now even if I have no insight at all into how it is possible for any appearance to present, even as to quality, what can only be thought but never intuited, this much is still clear: that in order to judge whether what appears to me, what works internally or externally on my feelings, is God, I would have to hold it up to my rational concept of God and test it accordingly – not as to whether it is adequate to that concept, but merely whether it does not contradict it. In just the same way, even if nothing in what he discovered to me immediately contra-

* To the *firmness* of belief belongs the consciousness of its *unalterability.* Now I can be wholly certain that no one can ever refute the proposition *There is a God;* for where will he get this insight? Thus it is not the same with rational faith as with historical belief – where it is always possible that proofs of the contrary might be found out and where one must always harbor the reservation that one might alter one's opinion if our information about the matter should be extended.

dicted that concept, nevertheless this appearance, intuition, immediate revelation, or whatever else one wants to call such a presentation, never proves the existence of a being whose concept (if it is not to be vaguely[v] determined and hence might be subject to association with every possible delusion) demands that it be of *infinite* magnitude as distinguished from everything created; but no experience or intuition at all can be adequate to that concept, hence none can unambiguously prove the existence of such 8:143
a being. Thus no one can *first* be convinced of the existence of a highest being through any intuition; rational faith must come first, and then certain appearances or disclosures could at most provide the occasion for investigating whether we are warranted in taking what speaks or presents itself to us to be a Deity, and thus serve to confirm that faith according to these findings.

Thus if it is disputed that reason deserves the right to speak *first* in matters concerning supersensible objects such as the existence of God and the future world, then a wide gate is opened to all enthusiasm, superstition and even to atheism. And yet in the controversy between Jacobi and Mendelssohn, everything appears to overturn reason in just this way; I do not know whether it is directed only against *rational insight* and knowledge (through the supposed strength of speculation) or also against *rational faith*, so as to set up in opposition to it another faith which everyone can make up for himself as he likes. One would almost infer the latter intention when it is proposed that the Spinozist concept of God is the only one in agreement* with all the principles of reason and is never- 8:144

* It is hard to comprehend how the scholars just mentioned could find support for Spinozism in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.[3] The *Critique* completely clips dogmatism's wings in respect of the cognition of supersensible objects, and Spinozism is so dogmatic in this respect that it even competes with the mathematicians in respect of the strictness of its proofs. The *Critique* proves that the table of the pure concepts of the understanding has to contain all the material for pure thinking; Spinozism speaks of thoughts which themselves think, and thus of an accident that simultaneously exists for itself as a subject:[4] a concept that is not to be found in the human understanding and moreover cannot be brought into it. The *Critique* shows it does not suffice for the possibility even of a thought-entity that there is nothing self-contradictory in its concept (even though of course it then remains allowable, if necessary, to assume its possibility); but Spinozism alleges that it has insight into the impossibility of a being the idea of which consists solely of pure concepts of the understanding, which has been separated from all the conditions of sensibility, and in which a contradiction can never be met with;[5] and yet it has nothing at all by means of which to support this presumption, which transgresses all boundaries. It is just for this reason that Spinozism leads directly to enthusiasm. By contrast, there is not a single means more certain to eliminate enthusiasm from the roots up than that determination of the bounds of the pure faculty of understanding. – Likewise another scholar[6] finds *skepticism* in the *Critique*, even though precisely the starting point of the *Critique* is firmly to posit something certain and determinate in respect of the range of our cognition *a priori*. Similarly [he finds] a *dialectic* in the critical investigations, whereas the aim is to resolve and forever eliminate the unavoid-

[v] *unsicher*

theless to be rejected.[8] For although it is wholly compatible with rational faith to concede that speculative reason itself is never in a position to have insight into the *possibility* of the being we must think of as God, it can't be reconciled with any faith, or with the holding true of any existence at all, to say that we could see clearly[w] the *impossibility* of an object and nevertheless could have cognition of its actuality through other sources.

Men of intellectual ability and broadminded disposition! I honor your talents and love your feeling for humanity. But have you thought about what you are doing, and where your attacks on reason will lead? Without doubt you want to preserve inviolate the *freedom to think;* for without that even your own free flights of genius would soon come to an end. Let us see what would naturally become of this freedom of thought if a procedure such as you are adopting should get the upper hand.

The freedom to think is opposed **first** of all to *civil compulsion.* Of course it is said that the freedom to *speak* or to *write* could be taken from us by a superior power, but the freedom to *think* cannot be. Yet how much and how correctly would we *think* if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we *communicate* our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us! Thus one can very well say that this external power which wrenches away people's freedom publicly to *communicate* their thoughts also takes from them the freedom to *think* – that single gem remaining to us in the midst of all the burdens of civil life, through which alone we can devise means of overcoming all the evils of our condition.

8:145 **Second,** freedom to think is also taken in a sense[x] in which it is opposed to *compulsion over conscience;* even without having external power some citizens set themselves up as having the custody of others in religious affairs, and instead of arguing they know how to ban every examination of reason by their early influence on people's minds, through prescribed formulas of belief accompanied by the anxious fear of *the dangers of one's own investigation.*

Third, freedom in thinking signifies the subjection of reason to no laws except *those which it gives itself;* and its opposite is the maxim of a **lawless use** of reason (in order, as genius supposes, to see further than one can under the limitation of laws). The natural consequence is that if reason will not subject itself to the laws it gives itself, it has to bow under the yoke of laws given by another; for without any law, nothing – not even nonsense – can play its game for long. Thus the unavoidable consequence

able dialectic in which pure reason becomes involved and entangled when it is employed dogmatically everywhere. The Neoplatonists, who called themselves "eclectics" because they knew how to find their own conceits all over the place in other authors – if they had previously put them in there – proceeded in just this way; hence nothing new happens under the sun.[7]

[w] *einsehen*

[x] *Bedeutung*

of *declared* lawlessness in thinking (of a liberation from the limitations of reason) is that the freedom to think will ultimately be forfeited and – because it is not misfortune but arrogance which is to blame for it – will be *trifled away*[y] in the proper sense of the word.

The course of things is roughly this. First *genius* is very pleased with its bold flights, since it has cast off the thread by which reason used to steer it. Soon it enchants others with its triumphant pronouncements and great expectations and now seems to have set itself on a throne which was so badly graced by slow and ponderous reason, whose language, however, it always employs. Then its maxim is that reason's superior lawgiving is invalid – we common human beings call this **enthusiasm,** while those favored by beneficent nature call its *illumination.* Since reason alone can command validly for everyone, a confusion of language must soon arise among them; each one now follows his own inspiration, and so inner inspirations must ultimately be seen to arise from the testimony of preserved facts, traditions which were chosen originally but with time become *intrusive* documents – in a word, what results is the complete subjection of reason to facts, i.e. **superstition,** because this at least has the *form of law* and so allows tranquility to be restored.

Because, however, human reason always strives for freedom, when it first breaks its fetters the first use it makes of its long unaccustomed 8:146
freedom has to degenerate into a misuse and a presumptuous trust in the independence of its faculties from all limitations, leading to a persuasion of the sole authority of speculative reason which assumes nothing except what it can justify by *objective* grounds and dogmatic conviction; everything else it boldly repudiates. Now the maxim of reason's independence of its *own need* (of doing without rational faith) is **unbelief.** This is not a historical unbelief, for it is impossible to think of the latter as purposeful, hence it cannot be anything imputable (for everyone must believe a fact if it is sufficiently attested, just as he must believe a mathematical demonstration, whether he wants to or not). It is rather an *unbelief of reason,*[z] a precarious[a] state of the human mind, which first takes from moral laws all their force as incentives to the heart, and over time all their authority, and occasions the way of thinking one calls **libertinism,**[b] **i.e. the principle of** recognizing no duty at all. At this point the authorities get mixed up in the game, so that even civil arrangements may not fall into the greatest disorder; and since they regard the most efficient and emphatic means as the best, this does away with even the freedom to think, and subjects thinking,

[y] *verscherzt. Sich etwas verscherzen,* derived from *Scherz* = joke, means frivolously to lose or forfeit something.
[z] *Vernunftunglaube*
[a] *misslich*
[b] *Freigeisterei*

like other trades, to the country's rules and regulations. And so freedom in thinking finally destroys itself if it tries to proceed in independence of the laws of reason.

Friends of the human race and of what is holiest to it! Accept[c] what appears to you most worthy of belief after careful and sincere examination, whether of facts or rational grounds; only do not dispute that prerogative of reason which makes it the highest good on earth, the prerogative of being the final touchstone of truth.* Failing here, you will become unworthy of this freedom, and you will surely forfeit it too; and besides that you will bring the same misfortune down on the heads of other, innocent parties who would otherwise have been well disposed and would have used their freedom *lawfully* and hence in a way which is conducive[d] to what is best for the world!

* *Thinking for oneself* means seeking the supreme touchstone of truth in oneself (i.e. in one's own reason); and the maxim of always thinking for oneself is **enlightenment.** Now there is less to this than people imagine when they place enlightenment in the acquisition of *information;* for it is rather a negative principle in the use of one's faculty of cognition, and often he who is richest in information is the least enlightened in the use he makes of it. To make use of one's own reason means no more than to ask oneself, whenever one is supposed to assume something, whether one could find it feasible to make the ground or the rule on which one assumes it into a universal principle for the use of reason. This test is one that everyone can apply to himself; and with this examination he will see superstition and enthusiasm disappear, even if he falls far short of having the information to refute them on objective grounds. For he is using merely the maxim of reason's *self-preservation.* Thus it is quite easy to ground enlightenment in *individual subjects* through their education; one must only begin early to accustom young minds to this reflection. But to enlighten an *age* is very slow and arduous; for there are external obstacles which in part forbid this manner of education and in part make it more difficult.

[c] *Nehme . . . an*
[d] *zweckmässig*

Editorial notes

What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?

1 Moses Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Jubiläumsausgabe) (Stuttgart and Bad Cannstatt, 1929–) 3:2, 81–2, 198, 211.

2 The author of the *Results* was Thomas Wizenmann (1759–87). Cf. AK, 5:143.

3 See Jacobi, *On the Doctrine of Spinoza, Jacobis Werke* (Leipzig, 1812–25, reprint: Darmstadt, 1980) 4/1:176, 192.

4 Spinoza holds that thoughts are modes of God, considered as a thinking substance (*Ethics* IIP1 Proof), and that the human mind is the idea of an existing (extended) thing (viz. the human body), so that both minds and bodies are modes of the divine substance (*Ethics* IIP11, IIP13).

5 This may be a reference either to Spinoza's proof that there cannot be more than one substance with the same nature or attribute (*Ethics* IP5); or, more generally, to his argument that it is impossible for there to be more than one substance (*Ethics* IP10 Scholium); or, still more broadly, simply to Spinoza's willingness to infer real possibility from lack of contradiction.

6 This may be a reply to criticisms of Kant made by the popular Enlightenment philosophers J. G. Feder and G. A. Tittel. Or the target may be Christoph Meiners, *Outline of a Doctrine of the Soul* (Lemgo, 1786).

7 Cf. Ecclesiastes 1:1.

8 This became Jacobi's most prominent contention in the dispute with Mendelssohn, especially in *Reply to Mendelssohn's Imputations in His Writings to the Friends of Lessing, Werke* 4/2.

On the miscarriage of all philosophical trials in theodicy

1 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, saith the Lord." Isaiah 55:8.

2 Count Pietro Verri (1728–97), economist, politician, moralist, and literary man. ("Verri" is the usual spelling of the name.) The reference is to *Sull'indole del piacere* (1773), which was translated into German by Christoph Meiners as *Gedanken über die Natur des Vergnügens* (Leipzig, 1777; *Thoughts Concerning the Nature of Pleasure*). Count Verri was a pioneer in the movement to abolish torture. For another reference to Verri, cf. AK 8:232. For a modern edition of *Sull'indole,* cf. *Sull'indole del piacere e del dolore, con altri scritti di filosofia e di economia,* ed. R. De Felice (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964).

3 "But he is in one mind, and who can turn him? and what his soul desireth, even that he doeth."