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JOHANN FRIEDRICH JACOBI ON REASON AND REVELATION

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Abstract: Johann Friedrich Jacobi, an 18th-century German theologian and naturalist, was a prolific author of books, some of them with several editions. In his theological investigations, he emphasized the use of rational reasoning. In his proof of the existence of God, he used a physico-theological argument based on the apparent design of the world and drew on his experience as a naturalist in many religious arguments. However, he recognized the limitations of human reason and ultimately relied on scriptural revelation. And yet, at least in some of his interpretations of biblical statements he diverged from the views accepted at that time.

Sections: [Introduction] > 1 The book of nature > 2 Inborn abilities > 3 Reason and revelation > 4 Interpretation of the Bible > 5 The best world > [Conclusion].

Johann Friedrich Jacobi (1712–1791) was a German naturalist and evangelical theologian. In 1730–1731, he studied at the University of Jena, and in 1732–1733, at the University of Helmstedt. After moving to Göttingen, he worked as a private tutor. In 1735, he received an MA in philosophy. In 1738, he became a pastor in Osterode (Harz) and in

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1744, in Hannover. In 1758, he became the general superintendent of the principality of Lüneburg and a preacher of Celle (Lower Saxony). In 1787, he received a doctorate in theology at the University of Jena. He was a prolific author and some of his books went through multiple editions¹. Strongly influenced by the spirit of the Enlightenment, Jacobi assigned an important position to rationality in matters of theology.

1. The book of nature

The second half of the 17th century and the 18th century were a time of widespread popularity of physico-theology which proved the existence of God and His attributes, from the observation of the orderliness of nature detected at levels ranging from microorganisms investigated with the microscope to the astronomical macrolevel investigated through the telescope. Jacobi, a naturalist himself and the author of many scholarly works on natural philosophy, was attracted to the physico-theological perspective.

Jacobi proposed a proof of the existence of God that can be viewed as fairly typical of these times. As he argued, if someone saw for the first time a ship approaching a seashore, would the observer think this entire structure just came together without any intelligent entity being involved? Would the observer think that its movements were random? If so, is it that all these thick boards are so well fitted together? Why iron clamps are joining these boards together so well? Why are sails placed in the best places allowing the ship to move? How is it that the ship makes turns to avoid rocks and sails straight into deep waters? The conclusion is that some people built it and some people direct its movement (B 1.3–4)².

¹ J.Ch. Strodttmann, *Das neue gelehrte Europa*, vol. 6, Wolfenbüttel : Johann Christoph Meißner 1755, p. 332–361; F. Schlichtegroll, *Nekrolog auf das Jahr 1791*, vol. 1, Gotha : Justus Perthes 1792, p. 204–221; J.G. Meusel, *Lexikon der vom Jahr 1750 bis 1800 verstorbenen deutschen Schriftsteller*, vol. 6, Leipzig : Gerhard Fleischer 1806, p. 205–208.

² The following references are used for Jacobi's books:

A – *Abhandlungen über wichtige Gegenstände der Religion*, vols. 1–4, Zelle : Carl Gsellius 1773–1778.

B – *Betrachtungen über die weisen Absichten Gottes, bey den Dingen, die wir in der menschlichen Gesellschaft und der Offenbarung antreffen*, vols. 1–4, Hannover : Försterische Erben Hof-Buchhandlung 1765–1766, [1738].

S – *Sämtliche Schriften*, vols. 1–3, Hannover : Halwingsche Buchhandlung 1781–1784.

L – *Leichter und überzeugender Beweis von Gott und von der Wahrheit der christlichen Religion*, Zelle : Ernst August Richter 1787.

M – *Mein Glaube an die Lehren der göttlichen Offenbarung gestärkt und befestiget durch das fortgesetzte Betragen und die neuesten Schriften der Lehrer der reinen Vernunftreligion*, Celle : bey Ernst August Richter 1791.

If someone saw an anchored ship from the inside, various supplies in different rooms, and a particular arrangement in various rooms, the person would conclude that an intelligent being arranged all of it this way. The same conclusion is reached when looking at the world. Innumerable celestial bodies floating – as it was believed then – in a liquid, transparent medium, neither sink nor move erratically. The Moon and the Sun move across the sky at appointed times. Should it be so without an order imposed by an intelligent being? Look at the Earth filled with wonderful things and with animals, all of them able to find proper food. Consider the land that bears fruit, forests that provide wood to be used in fireplaces, as building material, and for making tools. Rain waters the plants, thunderstorms purify the air – all of this is wisely arranged (5–6). Consider the human body, the smallest parts of which are wisely fitted together. Any other order would be harmful to the organism. Such order found everywhere speaks about the wisdom, goodness, and amazing power of the being that made it. Consider newborn animals that have to be fed with milk and thus female animals are equipped with udders, but not birds (7). Animal organs are suitable to their environment; for instance, the feet of water birds, which allow them to swim, and the feet of land birds, which allow them to cling to branches. “If the world was not established by a wise architect, where does this harmony and great order come from? Certainly, if carelessness does not numb all our senses, and if senseless arrogance and stubborn malice do not make us fools, then we will inevitably come to the conclusion, even with the smallest thing in this world: there is a God. A small spider, an artful bee, and a hardworking ant call out to us: There is a God who brought this world into being through his power and established it with infinite wisdom” (8).

The divine imprint is clear in the animal world. Animals, although they lack reason, can produce beautiful and orderly products. Consider the hexagonal cells produced by bees: “the center of one cell is exactly where the baselines of three other cells meet on the opposite side” (B 1.328). This

VA – *Vermischte Abhandlungen*, vols. 1–2, Hannover : Johann Christoph Richter 1764.

VB – *Versuch eines Beweises, eines in der menschlichen Seele von Natur liegenden Eindrucks von Gott und einem Leben nach dem Tode*, Hannover : Johann Christoph Richter 1763.

W – *Was soll ich zu der Beruhigung meiner Seele glauben? Was soll ich hoffen bey den mannigfaltigen Meinungen der Gelehrten?*, Hannover : Gebrüder Hahn 1798 [1789].

Z – *Zweyter Versuch eines Beweises, eines in der menschlichen Seele von Natur liegenden Eindrucks von Gott und einem Leben nach dem Tode*, Hannover : Johann Christoph Richter 1764.

is the best form considering that there should be no void between neighboring cells; a cell should accommodate the rounded body of a bee; also, “for stability and good connection (329), the point where the baselines of different cells converge on one side must be the center of the cell on the other side of the wax tablet,” which is an arrangement that minimizes the amount of wax needed and distributes forces evenly across the structure. With no knowledge of mathematics, bees are able to create such structures (330). Consider ants and the anthills they build, spiders and the webs they spin (331, 2.235)³. “Truly, anyone who fails to see the wisdom of the Creator here and to notice his infinite desire to have a world in which even the smallest corners are adorned with well-ordered structures and artistic beauty, must be clouded by stupidity or hardened malice” (332).

2. Inborn abilities

Part of the orderliness of nature is its hierarchical character, which Jacobi believed was deliberately established by God. “Since God takes pleasure in creatures and is the most perfect being, the more perfect creature will be more pleasing to him than the less perfect one”; therefore, He chooses the more perfect over the less perfect. For instance, people as rational creatures are more perfect than animals, thus, God so arranged the reproduction of animals that it does not hinder human reproduction. “God pays more attention and has greater purpose for the more perfect and beautiful creatures than for the inferior ones” (B 1.15). Thus, those who say that in the sight of God all creatures are of the same value and that He loves all of them the same way, deprive Him of omniscience and wisdom and ascribe to God the intellect that does not distinguish what is better from what is worse and states that His inclination toward more and less perfect creatures is the same (16). God pays more attention to animate than to inanimate nature (17), more attention to rational than to irrational creatures (18). God wills that rational creatures, the main object of His interest, grow in the use of their intellect to gain a better and more exact insight into the world than animals do, and perform actions which increase

³ The spider was one of Jacobi’s favorite examples to show God’s imprint in nature (B 1.40, 2.202, VB 7). He also authored an article on his observations of how spiders create a thread between two vertical points – say, two trees – to enable them to weave their webs (V 2.291–296), which he concluded with an exclamation about the greatness and splendor of God’s sublime being, about His wisdom, power, and benevolent Providence that shines forth from His works in a moving way into my eyes; and how delightful the sight is (296).

their perfection (25). This insight is not just about an increase in knowledge of the world and, indirectly, of God. It also implies moral progress. Rational beings attain greater perfection and a more complete happiness the more they grow in their intellect and insight, particularly when they apply their intellect to find the distinction between good and evil and through this knowledge direct the will toward goodness (22–24). The natural world is arranged so as to enable this rational and moral development. It can be easily observed that at birth, animals have an advantage over people: their umbilical cords are thin and separate easily (39); newborn animals can walk and follow their mothers; they suck their mother's milk for a few weeks and then feed themselves (40). On the other hand, human mothers often require assistance during delivery, newborn babies require constant care (41); their skulls are not entirely fused; their teeth take time to appear; it takes at least one year before they can walk (42). This is all so arranged that human children can develop their reason through family and social life since without interaction with people, reason cannot develop (47–48), and to develop speech, interaction with speaking people is necessary (50). Children are helpless, and parents take care of them, motivated by love and through this care, the love of children for parents and parents for children grows and children's minds develop (51–52). Even in the paradisiacal state of innocence, it was necessary for some exercises to bring them to a state of habitual goodness (220). Even Christ grew in human knowledge (221). He reached the level of compassion and obedience through temptations and afflictions (222). Nature plays an important part in this growth considering the fact that the Bible says that people should learn diligence from ants (Prov. 6:6) (238), wisdom from serpents, and meekness from doves (Mt. 10:16) (239).

As the example of animals shows, there are certain abilities that they bring to the world so that, for instance, birds instinctively know where to migrate in winter and how to come back (VB 9). This does not mean that rational beings do not have such abilities. Jacobi agreed that there are many innate abilities in all living beings, some specific, some universal. So, the ability to reason is inborn and it has to be developed during a lifetime (Z 23–24, 27). There are also universal inclinations, which should be treated seriously since, as Jacobi expressed it, until now no one has been able to show him a drive inherent in nature that did not have some truth as its basis and intention (58–59). People by nature feel what is beautiful and ugly, pleasant and unpleasant, bitter and sweet (14), they

have an inner moral sense to consider certain free actions as beautiful or ugly, noble or shameful, good or evil, and to perceive them as pleasant or unpleasant (18; B 3.154). Among these inborn inclinations, Jacobi considered fear to be of great importance. There is an inborn fear of lightning and thunder in “the innermost nature of man” (21), considered to be the sign of fear of a higher punishing being (22).

Decades earlier, Hobbes claimed in his *Leviathan* that the ignorance of natural causes caused “a Fear of things invisible [which] is the natural Seed of... Religion” (the end of ch. 11), which, for Hobbes, was an argument against religion, the argument frequently used by deists and atheists of his time. Jacobi accepted the premise, but not the conclusion. Fear is the origin of religion, but it was deliberately implanted by God in humans to stir them to the recognition of powers that are above human abilities and, eventually, to the recognition of His own existence. However, the feeling of fear of a higher being tells people only that there is a power upon which humans depend and which rewards good and punishes evil, but tells nothing about the nature of this being (35), that is, the concept of God is not inborn (Z 5). That is why the fear of a higher power is the source of many superstitious ideas about many deities. While fraud by some people certainly played a part, it would have accomplished little if that strong impression of fear of an invisible higher power were not present in human nature (52). All inner drives can be abused, such as the drive to satisfy hunger, the drive for procreation (54). Thus, fear of a deity leads to the concept of that deity, which is often wrong (59), but this can and should be rectified by revelation (60).

Fear also has a very important social aspect. Jacobi maintained that most nations have considered oaths to be the ultimate bond and the means of the strongest obligation in human society, which loses all its strength without fear of a deity (VB 76), that is, the fear of the punishment that the deity can inflict for human misdeeds. Many authors claimed in antiquity and in Jacobi’s times that punishment after death is just a superstition. However, such teaching is harmful since oaths lose their meaning. Politicians tried to reverse it (M 33). Oaths keep societies together and without religion, they would not hold together (Z 57), and so, “with regard to human society, it is not a matter of indifference what one believes about God and divine things” (A 2.25).

Fear of earthly punishment for misdeeds is not enough, and, surely, experience shows clearly that many evildoers prosper rather well in this

life. Therefore, the need for social cohesion requires that the fear of punishment should be extended to the afterlife, as well. And hence, all moral laws necessary for social life lose their power in the absence of belief in the afterlife and the existence of a punishing God (L 46, cf. 68, 104). With this conviction, Jacobi was in line with many intellectuals of his time⁴. It was asserted that all nations believe in the immortality of the soul. The validity of this belief was also confirmed, according to Jacobi, on the personal level. As he viewed it, in the human soul lie feelings that drive and compel a person to accept both the immortality of the rational part of the human being and life after death (VB 36); thus, people fear the souls of the dead, which seems to indicate a conviction about immortality (37). Moreover, there is a drive by which people want that even after their death the living speak well of them, and, on the contrary, they fear the shame that may linger when they are no longer here. This also indicates an inner conviction of immortality (VB 47). The desire to have a good name after death and the fear of still being despised and disgraced after death would be absurd if a person lost all sensations and thoughts with the death of the body (53).

3. Reason and revelation

If reason can arrive at the knowledge of God, is revelation necessary? Many thinkers during the age of the Enlightenment, and also before, made this claim. Is it conceivable that Jacobi, a Lutheran clergyman, could agree with it, thereby diverging from the *sola scriptura* principle? However, the study of revelation does not occur in a vacuum. Understanding revelation presupposes a natural insight into language, history, and the kinds of things that take place in society (B 2.14). “Doesn’t Christ, in his speech in Matthew 16:2, assume that we know that a bright evening glow is followed by a fair [day], and a dreary morning by a dreary day?” (15).

In their natural development, people first see what is around them, observe nature and other people before they are introduced to principles obtained from revelation. So, revelation presupposes reason in that some linguistic and cognitive abilities need to be sufficiently developed before the words of revelation can have any impact on anyone’s mind. It is interesting that Jacobi’s catechism begins with a physico-theological

⁴ For the popularity of the topic of immortality as a necessary element of social stability, cf. Anton Matytsin, Reason and utility in French religious apologetics, in: *God in the Enlightenment*, eds. W.J. Bulman and R.G. Ingram, Oxford 2016, p. 72–75.

introduction to the belief in God before it passes to the biblical arguments. He said that the heavens and the earth are works through which God can be recognized when attention is paid to the precise measure, order, connection, and beauty of things. For example, the Sun is of the right size and at the right distance from the Earth, celestial bodies move precisely, the makeup of human and animal bodies is skillfully organized, in all plants one can find the art, order, multiplicity, and beauty, and all living beings find what they need for their survival. Also, the Earth was created since, if it were eternal, rain would wash off all soil from mountains leaving barren rocks. The Earth was not created by accident since accident generates no orderliness, and so, no intelligible text is created by splattering ink on paper, no house arises from randomly piling up wood and stones, no painting is created by smearing a wall with paint⁵. Orderliness perceived in nature makes absurd the contention that the world came into being and into present form by chance and justifies the assumption that a rational high power is behind its creation and providential maintenance.

However, rationality has its limits. What one philosopher considers contradictory, another does not (W 41). “No reason contradicts itself more often and more vehemently than the reason of the greatest and most enlightened minds” (M 4). Human reason is the noblest gift of God (A 2.5), and yet, a person does not have to go far to see the severe limitation of human reason, considering that even knowledge of one’s own self is severely limited. “I don’t know my own self, my thinking being, at all; I don’t clearly know what thinking, acting, or living are, and I don’t clearly understand any of it. An inner feeling compels me to connect these concepts, and I don’t know what feeling actually is and how it compels my intellect to accept the above statements as truths. They are important, pleasant, imposed, and incomprehensible truths to me: that I see, hear, taste, smell, and feel; that, as soon as I want, my hands and feet move” (M 28). Moreover, history teaches that “for two thousand years now, one philosopher has always blown apart the edifice of another”. No one fathomed the essence of space and time, of substances (W 75). “When Kant appears, he shows that the intellect of the most profound scholar is not sufficient to complete them, and how much is still lacking in the

⁵ J.F. Jacobi, *Kurze und zur Erbauung eingerichtete Einleitung in die christliche Glaubens- und Sitten-Lehre, in Frage und Antwort gefasset und zum häuslichen Gebrauch herausgegeben*, Hannover : Johann Christoph Richter 1764, p. 2–4.

demonstrations of the first basic sciences” (76). He also put in doubt all proofs of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul (114), and yet, he thought that the belief in one God and in the immortality of the soul had to be assumed to act virtuously and happily (134), which, indeed, was a requirement set by Kant in his critique of the practical reason.

Therefore, in the presence of a bewildering amount of opinions even among the brightest minds, is there a chance for reason to settle firmly on anything? Jacobi proposed the following criterion of certainty: “Those reasons are the strongest and have the greatest probability, whose persuasive power has been most widespread and longest-lasting, and which have proven overwhelmingly strong among the greatest number of learned minds and the most enlightened peoples, and especially among those peoples who have had the greatest freedom to think, speak, and write, and whose persuasive and human-perfecting impact still continues after many centuries” (W 11–12; V 2.247–248). How long-lasting? At one point, Jacobi professed his trust in principles which were supported for at least 50 years by bright and free minds (133, 144, 154), on the other hand, he leaned toward principles which “have moved the majority of minds and especially the majority of scholars to the approval of a proposition, and also persist over centuries or even millennia, and continually spread this influence, and overcome the opposing foundations” (M 11). All of it, then, is very fluid; after all, what number of learned minds has to agree on something? And what is the cut-off level of intelligence to be considered a great mind? How long must something be commonly believed before it can be admitted as a candidate for reliability? Consider the Ptolemaic system that ruled for nearly two millennia...

Great as the power of human reason is, it is limited, particularly in things that matter, such as knowing who God is and how this knowledge should impact human lives on both social and individual levels.

Jacobi believed that no state can exist in a tolerable condition without religion. Nature has endowed all people with certain religious sentiments (A 4.4), which become the foundation of natural religion. However, this religion can be formed in a variety of ways. Dreamers, politicians, and self-serving priests infused religion with many superstitious statements (5), and no philosophy has been able to purify religion from superstition (6); the greatest philosophers could not agree even on one single religious statement (7); although some moral teachings they offer are fine, these teachings are powerless since they are not grounded in God. In fact, the

greatest collapse of morals was in places in which philosophical reason was a ruling principle (8). No philosophical morals were ever able to bring order to savage society. The books of revelation alone first provided the most sublime views of God, His perfections, decrees, works, and the purest virtues (10–11). These books are confirmed by the many prophecies and no human mind could produce so many fulfilled predictions as those found in the Bible (14). And so, the apostles in their preaching did not rely on philosophical arguments or on rhetoric. They pointed to the agreement of their teachings with prophecies of the OT prophets (215) and strengthened their message by miracles which they performed (214).

The reliability of revelation should be instilled in early childhood. A young person should be led to God through amazing works of God, through reading the Bible (B 3.440), by pointing to the orderliness of nature, the motions of heavenly bodies (441). By this statement, Jacobi tacitly endorsed also the promotion of science as part of education if for no other reason than that science can be viewed as an avenue leading to God. However, the investigation of nature does not reveal whether there is one God or many, whether God is omniscient, whether His providence is over all of nature or whether there are some aspects left to chance (40), nothing certain can be said about the afterlife. Such certainty comes from revelation (M 41). So, the main goal of the books of revelation is to make God known in the world and to purify natural religion, without which no state can exist in a tolerable condition, from harmful accretions (17). More importantly, revelation speaks about the crucified and resurrected Christ, which shows that He is the Son of God and His teachings are true (A 4.212).

4. Interpretation of the Bible

It is one thing to recognize the superiority of revelation; another is how this revelation is used. In theological matters, Jacobi professed “not to follow the theologians, but the very clear and repeatedly stated pronouncements of Scripture” (W 69), since scriptural statements do not contradict one another the way philosophers do (70). Moreover, there are in the NT things which are difficult to understand (A 1.64). What was directed in Scripture to most people was, at that time, clear and understandable (65). First rule: “To all the passages of the New Testament, spoken and written for the instruction of the masses, one cannot, with any truth, attribute any other meaning than that which those to whom they were directed could have grasped without any effort. One cannot

presume that the apostles, and even less so the bulk of their listeners and readers, associated with the words of the New Testament such thoughts as only a poet, a lofty orator, or a great scholar could have associated with them". Second rule: "One must not attribute to the words of the Bible such thoughts that only a dreamer or even a foolish person would clothe in such words" (70, 107; see also B 2.39–40). Many famous authors violated these rules (71). And Jacobi? Here are some examples, as we should assume, of the application of these rules.

In interpreting the words about the creation being freed from decay (Rom. 8:21), Jacobi said that in this world of ours almost all animals are predators and so are humans (A 1.167) and almost all living creatures can serve as food and thus they live in constant fear of being killed and eaten (168); therefore, the wailing of creation is understandable and its hope for a new creation (172). "Why should it be nonsense to imagine a magnificent deer, a majestic lion, or a shining peacock in the realms of the new spheres?... God is a source of life not only for humans but also for animals. He takes pleasure in an infinite variety of things. Oh, pleasant thought! Not only will I share in the new creation, but other creatures will as well" (173). What about the animals not quite magnificent and majestic, we may ask?

The Sun and the Moon were created with dampness and fog on the first day, when the Sun from time to time received black spots. Through weak light that shone through dampness and fog, there was day and night, before the Sun was perfected on the fourth day (L 195). This presumably addressed the problem that had nagged interpreters of why plants were created on the third day, before the Sun was created on the next day.

The images of hell as a dark prison, a place with eternal fire and gnawing worms, are just that, images (249). They should not be understood literally (L 251). Hell is a place of pain (252). The eternal Love does not punish just to inflict pain (259), but to improve (260). Would it mean that the infernal residence might not be eternal?

Originally, people lived in a small area in a warm climate and predatory animals were far away from this area (W 178). Useful grains (rice, wheat, etc.) and fruit trees would not survive in the wild without human care. They would be eaten by animals and overwhelmed by weeds (182). "From the number of animals that Noah took into the ship he built, it is clear that there were no lions, tigers, hyenas, wolves, eagles, hawks, or the like. For otherwise, there would have had to be far

more of the other animals that served as food for them! Noah therefore took only some of the easily tamed animals with him into the ship. The rest must have been left in regions where the destructive waters did not come” (184). Clearly, Jacobi sided with the idea of a local rather than a universal flood.

The presence of enormous rocks scattered across the surface of the Earth and the orogenic activity are resolved in a rather bewildering manner. Jacobi believed in the biblical flood, but he did not believe that the waters of the flood were powerful enough to carry huge rocks or push them together to form mountains (VB 1.260), nor that underground fires or earthquakes could have been the cause of such an orogenic activity (263). In his view, the present surface of the Earth was formed by forces governed by wisdom, and either a wink of the Omnipotence caused it, or the created spirits worked on it; Jacobi opted for the latter. He hypothesized that during the rotation of the Earth’s axis and the resulting great flood, the greater part of the Earth’s surface was destroyed, and from its debris, the new Earth’s surface was properly formed (264). In his opinion, the thought that we humans should be the only species of rational beings on this Earth, entrusted with a share of its preservation and governance, struck him as too presumptuous. He found it more plausible that there were other rational forces on this terrestrial globe that help build and govern it and take pleasure in doing so. Perhaps under higher powers, they govern the air and the clouds, or perhaps even the regular course of the Earth (266). This is because the creative Omnipotence does not want to accomplish everything alone but rather entrusts a part of the construction and beautification of the Earth to thinking beings, for example, humankind, whose diligence gives the Earth’s surface a completely different form than it would have had without it (287). However, it appears that in his argument Jacobi was not far from the opinion of many medieval thinkers that celestial spheres were under the control of intelligences or angelic spirits.

Clearly, some of Jacobi’s interpretations were not quite in line with the understanding of biblical statements by his coreligionists. In particular, viewing the biblical flood as a local event gained some traction only in the age of the Enlightenment. In that respect, Jacobi was torn between viewing this event from a purely theological perspective and from the point of view of a naturalist. Naturalist stance apparently prevailed. On the other hand, the belief in spirits invisibly moving rocks around the

surface of the Earth can easily evoke, even in a believer in the existence of the spiritual world a theological recoil.

5. The best world

Another theologically controversial issue concerned the assessment of God's creation. During creation, God repeatedly said that what He created was good. And yet, even cursory observation of the world seems to show imperfections. So, is the world good, stronger yet, is it the best of all possible worlds, as Leibniz pronounced, or not quite so? Some rejected the claim on purely theological grounds: if the world is the best possible, then God cannot do any better, thus, such a statement puts a limit on His power. It is interesting that one of the first problems Jacobi tackled was the problem of the perfection of this world⁶. To summarize his conclusion succinctly: it is and it is not.

Using rather tortuous terminological distinctions, Jacobi argued that substances are produced by God, and, as the work of His omnipotence, they are the best. This world, as regards substances, is the best of all possible worlds, and no better could have been created by God (13). However, under certain conditions, God can also will the relative best. God does not want to limit human freedom, so when people act in an evil way, God, in a way, wants it, but does not desire it (6). When God fully exercised His omnipotence by compelling free creatures to good actions, that freedom would be taken away (25), and the world is worse than the one in which evil actions are permitted (26). And hence, our world is not the best absolutely, it is only the best relatively (27)⁷. In this, Jacobi followed Wolff⁸, a follower of Leibniz, whose view is a solution acceptable also to Catholic theologians⁹.

⁶ I.P. Reusch (praeses), I.F. Iacobi (auctor), *Quo sensu hic mundus sit optimus (Ob und wie fern diese Welt die beste zu nennen)*, Jenae : Ex Officina Ritteriana 1734. In the preface, Reusch stated that the text is all of "our most excellent Jacobi," who "has developed it by his own effort, and thus has sufficiently proved the dexterity of his intellect and judgment".

⁷ Cf. Io[annes] Frid[ericus] Iacobi (praeses), W.M. Bruno (respondens), *Quo sensu detur et non detur ius naturae thesibus brevissimis exponit*, Goettingae: Litteris Hagerianis 1737, p. 13.

⁸ For example, he said that the existing world is the most perfect of all existing things, referring to Augustine, Ch. Wolf[f], *Theologia naturalis*, vol. 1, Veronae : Typis Dionysii Ramanzini Bibliopole apud S. Thomam 1738, p. 169, 188, and yet physical and moral evil does have a place in this world, p. 264.

⁹ It is, for example, stated that the world is perfect since all God's works are perfect, but it is not the best, having been corrupted by the fall of the human race. God alone is the

On that note, the perceived imperfections have been created deliberately. The fact that the world needs the constant assistance of God is not a sign of imperfection. Such a work is not a sign of imperfection, but rather of the perfection of the craftsman, if it is based on the living activity and enjoyment of the craftsman, which he finds in occupying himself with it¹⁰. God intended that rational created beings participate in the development of this world. In fact, this will also continue in the afterworld. People will be active in heaven – multiplying its splendor, increasing its pleasure, and glorifying the name of God (B 1.157).

The problem of the perfection of the world, or rather its imperfection, became a recurrent topic in Jacobi's writings. He believed that God does not force anyone to follow His laws, so, the world in which evil is allowed is better than the world in which God would eliminate all evil deeds through His omnipotence (B 1.287). If free spirits that are inclined toward evil were forced to do good, then, without changing their nature, they would prefer their vice and such compulsion would make them even worse off than allowing them to experience consequences of their actions (293). "The wisdom of God also advises that in the expansive government of the world (B 2.118), a lesser evil should be permitted if a greater one cannot be prevented in any better way". So, it is, for example, with polygamy (119). In old times, there were many small states constantly fighting with one another in bloody battles (120). So, in those times, males were born to kill one another (143), so, without polygamy, many women would be without husbands (144).

There is a problem with children dying in their first year. However, it is possible "that an unhealthy woman, through the bearing and suckling of one or more children, becomes healthy and thus prepared to bear healthy and long-lived children, and that the life of the latter depends on the death of the former? Who knows how many other cases there are in which the life of one is founded on the premature death of another" (B2.191). Some parts of a tree can wither when the seeds on

absolute good, and there can be innumerable worlds, any one of which, if God created it, would be the same in respect of His infinite wisdom and holiness, J. Schwetz, *Theologia dogmatica catholica*, vol. 1, Viennae : Typis Congregationis Mechitaristicae 1851, p. 403. For some other advocates of this view, see F.Ch. Baumeisterus, *Historiam doctrinae recentius controuersae de mundo optimo*, Lipsiae et Gorlici : Sumtibus Richterianis 1741.

¹⁰ W 56–57; [J.F. Jacobi], *Alles in der Natur lebt. Nichts ist ganz todt*, Leipzig : Die Sommersche Buchhandlung 1798 [1783], Zusätze, p. 38.

those parts are eaten by birds. So, seeds are not only for procreation; apparently, they also enable the flow of juices in the tree (207). “If one pays close attention to the things of this world, one finds that the destruction of one is necessary for the preservation of another”. And so, many flies have to perish for spiders to live (210). Consider plants: some are used by people and animals for various purposes, some eventually turn into dust, which is reused by nature to generate new plants (B 1.111). Particles of the human body can become particles of other bodies (112; VB 62–63) and which particles God will use for the new body we leave it to Him (B 1.117).

However, this argument should not be pushed too far. Jacobi rejected Mandeville’s argument that “all that we call misfortunes are fortunes for the state”. Fires, storms, and other disasters provide jobs for builders, carpenters, and others. “What is therefore a misfortune for some is a true benefit for others and for the entire state”. But was the London fire of 1666 such a benefit (B 3.269)? Mandeville said that benefit outweighed loss (270). True, some people enriched themselves, but most people were worse off (274). So, the question still remains: how can the 1666 fire be interpreted in theological terms?

Some said that God’s powers are limited in properly handling the unpalatable aspects of creation. In a rather theologically bold response, Jacobi stated that, “granted that the Creator’s intellect had limitations, it would still do me no harm if I worshiped him as omniscient. Perhaps he would never even learn my thoughts about him, or if they were revealed to him, he would easily forgive me for believing him to be more perfect than he was. However, this error, if it were one, would give me a strong inclination toward virtue and, in general, would provide peace of mind. But if God is truly omniscient, wouldn’t it be a culpable audacity and a grave insult to the Supreme Majesty if, despite so many proofs of accurate knowledge of the innermost essence of things, someone accused Him of making many futile provisions in His world, and therefore deny Him omniscience simply because one fails to see the usefulness of various things that do not reach the perfection of their own kind? Wouldn’t it be safer to impose narrower limits on one’s own understanding than to deny the Supreme a perfection that He truly possesses?” (232). That is, the solution is in the spirit of Pascal’s wager. It is better to believe in God’s omnipotence since such a belief should not offend God if He were not, but woe to those who believe otherwise and yet He is omnipotent...

Many events have nothing to do with human actions (B 3.1); indeed, many disasters – such as plagues or droughts (7), illnesses, deaths, wars (8), victories, and plunders (12) – come from God. “There are many circumstances that have the greatest influence on our happiness and misfortune; however, they are not subject to our freedom and have no necessary connection with our free actions; rather, they flow from the great structure of the world, insofar as it does not depend on our free will, but solely on the will of the Creator” (13). Surely, earthquakes belong to that category, and Jacobi devoted special attention to this natural phenomenon.

Jacobi started with the sobering belief that no one would ever discover all the causes of earthquakes, since who will uncover the Earth’s inner workings and reveal its structure, cavities, and passages, its various constituent parts, and their forces and circulation? How little hope is there of uncovering all this, since we are still so ignorant in explaining the movements of our own puny body, which has been so long examined and studied by anatomists? (108). However, he advocated the theory that earthquakes originate from subterranean fires (126), where he referred to Nicolas Lemery, who simulated an earthquake by an explosion (128), which Jacobi found inconclusive (129). It requires a great and wise arrangement for a fire to burn here and there in the Earth for so many hundreds, indeed more than two thousand years. Such a great arrangement is certainly not made in vain, but will have its great benefit in the structure of the Earth. This benefit, however, leads us to surmise with a high degree of probability (135) that no fire was set in the Earth from the very beginning (136). Seismic tremors arise from the expansion of heated, subterranean water: “when a small amount of cold water comes in contact with a [large] molten river, a large bursting and crackling sound arises and the blazing river leaps about with the greatest force. ...When such a stream of glowing river flows into a small place where there is cold moisture, it gushes about (138) with the greatest roar” (139), whereby “the water itself will immediately boil and roar and be transformed into hot steam which expands with the greatest force” (141). This, incidentally, is in line with what are now recognized as steam or hydrothermal explosions, which, actually can be *triggered by* or occur concurrently with seismic activity.

Volcanoes are useful, but they can also cause damage (192). Earthquakes impress on people the power and the providence of the great Creator and also their own smallness and powerlessness (193). The number of cities destroyed by earthquakes is small in comparison to the number of

those that are spared (194). Jacobi believed that volcanoes and earthquakes were useful (196), probably as sources of water, since earthquakes by squeezing and shaking water veins purify them. Earthquakes also foretell when the Earth reaches its end (197) when the Earth will be destroyed by fire (198). This, he believed, is what science told us about earthquakes. More important is what it means from a spiritual perspective.

God speaks through His works (Ps. 19), in which people should see His power and divinity (Rom. 1:19–20). All animals, fish, and birds tell us, God created us. Their makeup and instincts teach them skills that surpass the abilities of the best human craftsmen. Millions of stars preach the infinity of God, but He also speaks through the voice of thunder (S 1.2.369) and through the voice of storms, floods, earthquakes, and fires. This is the voice of love; He wants people to know Him as their highest good (370).

Some arguments Jacobi used are of questionable quality. For example, he said that there are so many components necessary to make a leather shoe or an iron knife (B 3.68). If only virtuous people were allowed to live, then many elements of the supply chain would be eliminated as they are made by wicked people (69). “Their number would be far from sufficient to provide the comforts that are now enjoyed in populated lands” (70). So, a critic may rhetorically ask whether it would be possible for all the necessary components in the supply chain for shoes and knives to be produced by exclusively virtuous people.

When disasters and misfortunes in this life are viewed from an eschatological perspective, their significance can be appreciated. People would forfeit the eternal joy by committing themselves to short-lived, earthly pleasures (B 3.107). “The diligent and truly thoughtful contemplation of the brevity of our lives and the vanity of earthly things is therefore a powerful means of moderating our overly great, overblown, and anxious worries, and thereby [a means] of becoming disposed to the pleasure and innocent enjoyment of earthly things, and, on the other hand, [a means] of suppressing negligence and sloppiness, which deprive us of the things that make this life comfortable and pleasant” (118). And so, disasters such as wars and plagues are punishments for vices and means of promoting virtue (B 3.82) (and not as a means of population control, as claimed by some (70–71)).

Ultimately, the limitations of human reason led Jacobi to explanations that may not be altogether convincing regarding the existence of evil, but in his words, “I would much rather say, as every reasonable and modest person who knows himself must indeed admit, that my understanding

is too weak to determine how to organize a world and govern it for all eternity” (B 1.315).

* * *

Jacobi represents an interesting example of a Lutheran theologian who was also an active naturalist. Committed to the Christian cause, he was also a scientist who relied on observation, experiment, and reasoning in explaining natural phenomena. However, his rationalism did not abandon him when investigating theological issues. In fact, he said he tried to connect reason with revelation (B 2.3): “Whenever possible, I seek to link the propositions of my reason with the propositions of revelation... My reflections aim to unite Scripture and my reason” (52). The ultimate purpose of the Old and New Testaments is to proclaim a rational religion (*vernünftige Religion*) (A 4.23)¹¹, since he assumed that Jesus and His disciples taught rational religion (251). When trying to reconcile reason and revelation, he was keenly aware of the unreliability of reason. Since even the brightest minds could not agree on so many important things, he maintained that reason must be used to say anything sensible at all, even in matters of revelation, that is, in the way revelation is and should be understood. Catholics could always refer to the central authority of the church in controversial matters, the authority which is rooted in Scripture and tradition. This tradition was vehemently rejected by Protestant authors and yet, Jacobi used as one criterion of the veracity of statements or theories the amount of time, at least 50 years, during which they had been accepted. In other words, he referred to tradition, a tradition expressed in rather secular terms. And yet this tradition served as a guide in interpreting some scriptural statements. And so, the *sola scriptura* principle is colored, not to say tainted, by a physico-theology that was particularly strong in 18th-century Germany. Jacobi explicitly took the position of physico-theology professing to follow in the footsteps of iconic figures of this approach, naming, among others, Derham, Nieuwentijt, Wolff, Lesser

¹¹ Jacobi also used the phrase *Vernunftreligion*, or even pure *Vernunftreligion*, which he found objectionable as contrary to Christian teaching (M 12, 15; W 101). In effect, this is a religion of the deists and atheists. At least one reviewer found setting *Vernunftreligion* against Christian religion inadmissible, i.e., review of *Was soll ich...*, *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, 99(1791), p. 33, but the reviewer appears to have overlooked the subtle and somewhat confusing distinction between *vernünftige Religion* and *Vernunftreligion*.

(B 1.Preface), and Fabricius (2.165)¹². But like them, he used naturalism for theological purposes; he was a theologian and spiritual pastor first, and a naturalist only second. He probably would not phrase it that strongly, but he did follow the principle that reason is a handmaid of faith, or rather *philosophia ancilla theologiae*. After all, there are things that can only be accepted by faith, even though they are incomprehensible (VA 2.76). And how small would God be if a limited human mind, which does not even know itself well and which does not even know how it thinks, were able to comprehend Him (77)?

JOHANN FRIEDRICH JACOBI O ROZUMIE I OBJAWIENIU

Słowa kluczowe: Johann Friedrich Jacobi, luteranizm, fizykoteologia.

Abstrakt: Johann Friedrich Jacobi, XVIII-wieczny niemiecki teolog i naturalista, był autorem wielu książek, z których wybrane doczekały się kilku wydań. W swoich badaniach teologicznych kładł nacisk na racjonalne rozumowanie. W swym dowodzie na istnienia Boga posłużył się argumentem fizyczno-teologicznym, opartym na harmonijności świata, i czerpał ze swojego doświadczenia naturalistycznego w wielu argumentach natury religijnej. Uznawał jednak ograniczenia ludzkiego rozumu i ostatecznie polegał na objawieniu biblijnym. A jednak, przynajmniej w niektórych swoich interpretacjach wypowiedzi biblijnych, odbiegał od poglądów przyjętych w swych czasach.

Sekcje: [Wstęp] > 1 Księga natury > 2 Wrodzone zdolności > 3 Rozum i objawienie > 4 Interpretacja Biblii > 5 Najlepszy świat > [Zakończenie].

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¹² There is thus no surprise that Jacobi received an accolade from Sulzer, a physico-theologian, who stated that “we gladly agree with his teachings and recognize the intentions of a higher being even in the calamities that we attribute to luck and mere chance,” [J.G. Sulzer, K.W. Ramler], *Critische Nachrichten aus dem Reiche der Gelehrsamkeit*, Berlin : Haude und Spener 1750, p. 34; he also considered Jacobi to be “a connoisseur of rational and human virtue”.

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