

Giuliano Sansonetti

For a history of effects: Hume and German anti-rationalism

The title of this paper was suggested by Isaiah Berlin's famous essay *Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism*, included in a volume celebrating the 200th anniversary of Hume's death and reprinted in 1979 in *Against the Current*¹. Berlin's essay deals with the reception of Hume's philosophy in J.G. Hamann and F.H. Jacobi: perhaps minor figures in the German philosophical *milieu* at the turn of the nineteenth century, they played however a key role in the so-called *Wendpunkt der geistigen Bildung der Zeit*, which spread from Germany to the whole of Europe and is usually characterised as the transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism. Berlin's readers may remember that his interest for such a transition was crucial in his works and thought.

Besides the circumstances by which it was occasioned, the essay describes an important episode which had enormous consequences and is usually defined as Romanticism, deemed as "the largest recent movement to transform the lives and the thought of the Western world"². Countering those views and interpretations which cast doubts on Romanticism as a homogeneous or univocal phenomenon, Berlin's position seems quite categorical. He wrote: "There was a romantic movement; it did have something which was central to it; it did create a great revolution in consciousness; and it is important to discover what this is"³. *The Roots of Romanticism* aims to demon-

¹ I. BERLIN, *Against the Current. Essays in the History of Ideas*, ed. by H. Hardy (Introd. by R. Hausheer), London, The Hogarth Press, 1979. The essay *Hume and the Sources of German Anti-Rationalism* is at pp. 162-187.

² I. BERLIN, *The Roots of Romanticism*, ed. by H. Hardy, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1999, p. 1.

³ *Ivi*, p. 20.

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strate this thesis convincingly. It is not possible to discuss here Berlin's idea of Romanticism; it is sufficient to stress the relevance of Romanticism in Berlin's own words: "It seems to me to be the greatest single shift in the consciousness of the West that has occurred, and all the other shifts which have occurred in the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries appear to me in comparison less important, and at any rate deeply influenced by it"⁴.

Berlin's interpretation may be summarised as follows. Romanticism is the most significant spiritual event to have occurred in modern Europe. It was generated by the crisis of the Enlightenment, which originated from a real countermovement, described in the essay published in the late 1970s: *The Counter-Enlightenment*⁵. Hamann and Jacobi were certainly key players in this countermovement, hence their crucial role in Berlin's analysis, as were several notions derived from Hume's philosophical outlook which enjoyed a certain renaissance within their thought, from death to transfiguration, so to speak. Hamann's and Jacobi's philosophies acquire, therefore, a meaning and a charm which are ambiguous and persistent. Thus, the microhistory of Hume's reception in the German philosophy is inserted into the macrohistory of European culture at the turn of the nineteenth century.

The crucial role Hume played in German philosophy was famously acknowledged by Kant who thanks to Hume was woken from his dogmatic slumber, that is from the Leibnizian and Wolffian metaphysics in which he was educated. Kant's criticism is obviously extraneous to Romantic philosophy, as well as to Hamann's and Jacobi's thought. In fact, Kant is not mentioned by Berlin. However, it is worth noting the particular ways in which their outlooks intersect: while Kant's critical project is addressed at Hume's sceptical arguments, these very arguments are accepted by Hamann and Jacobi and addressed at Kant's criticism. In this respect, the goal of this paper is more modest than Berlin's, which aimed to question the general spirit of the Enlightenment, especially focusing on the *philosophes*.

Berlin is more interested in Hamann than in Jacobi, because of a special sympathy with Hamann's themes and his original and somewhat bizarre character. Notably, Berlin devoted an important work to Hamann's unpublished papers, *The Magus of the North. J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*⁶. However, in order to shed new light on the debate generated by Kant's philosophy, more attention should be paid to Jacobi and to his role in the transition to German idealism. Thus, Jacobi's work cannot be consid-

⁴ Ivi, pp. 1-2.

⁵ I. BERLIN, *The Counter-Enlightenment*, in *Against the Current*, pp. 1-24.

⁶ I. BERLIN, *The Magus of the North. J.G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*, ed. by H. Hardy, London, Murray, 1993.

ered just as the popularisation of Hamann's ideas, as Berlin sometimes seems to suggest.

Let us return to the central topic of this paper, the spread of Hume's ideas in this crucial episode for the history of the European spirit. Berlin described Hume's influence as follows:

Hume's chief service in his attack on the Enlightenment [...] consisted in doubting two propositions. In the first place he doubted whether the causal relationship was something which we directly perceived, or indeed knew to exist at all [...] The second proposition doubted by Hume is more important for our purposes. When he asked himself how he knew that there was an external world at all, he said he could not deduce it logically. [...] Therefore I must accept the world as a matter of belief, on trust.⁷

Therefore, the notion of *belief* reflects Hume's position in the gnoseological debate, originating from Descartes, regarding the reality of the external world which can be believed, but not proved by sound arguments. The meaning of the Humean *belief* turns significantly in Hamann and Jacobi. Quoting a letter from Hamann to Jacobi, Berlin affirms that "There is no knowledge save by direct perception – a direct sense of reality which Hamann calls *Glaube*, faith, the direct capacity which all men have for unquestioning acceptance of *data* and not *ficta*"⁸. As a consequence, faith (*Glaube*), here meant as a synonym of belief, is deemed a particular form of sensitiveness, similar to sight or touch, providing that immediate evidence of the existence of the external world which could not be gained by any other means. Following Jacobi, Hamann uses faith as a Trojan horse in order to defeat rational thinking and disprove it as the only criterion in understanding the moral and the natural world, an assumption supported by the Enlightenment. It is not surprising that Hamann's faith acquires a strong religious connotation: we are immediately conscious of both the external world and of the existence of God, whom we know through an original revelation analogous to that of the external world. Berlin correctly comments: "What [...] has all this to do with David Hume? [...] Indeed, it *has* nothing to do with Hume. But Hume, so it turned out, had, all unknowing, a good deal to do with it"⁹.

Let us approach more specifically the topic of this paper by evoking that Gadamerian *Wirkungsgeschichte* which I have defined in the title as a "history of effects", something different from and something more than a mere mis-

⁷ BERLIN, *The Roots of Romanticism*, pp. 32-33.

⁸ BERLIN, *Hume and German Anti-Rationalism*, p. 169.

⁹ *Ivi*, pp. 170-171.

understanding or a conscious deception. The point is that intellectual developments are akin to material transformations and mostly evade linear and univocal explanations. It is not enough to say that Hume would be horrified by this reading of his statements; it is more productive to try to understand the renovation they produced in the history of ideas. On the other hand, Berlin noted, the notion of *belief* was interpreted idiosyncratically because it was not unambiguous – as Hume admitted in the *Treatise* – even though it did not have the Lutheran-Pauline connotation given by Hamann. Hamann himself looks somewhat lost when facing so polysemous a word, as he acknowledges in a letter to Jacobi written in April-May 1787: “I do not know what Hume or either of us understands by *Glaube* – the more we speak about it, the less we shall manage to seize hold of this lump of quicksilver; *Glaube* cannot be communicated like a parcel of goods, it is the kingdom of heaven and hell within us” (W IV, 358)¹⁰.

However, we can affirm that the Pauline-Lutheran view on faith is largely absent in Jacobi’s thought, where faith is discussed in terms not extraneous to Hume and his logical-gnoseological perspective. Recent scholarship has showed this unequivocally; in fact, while it is evident that Jacobi, under Hamann’s influence, referred to Hume, Jacobi and Hamann did not agree on the interpretation of the notion of faith and on the identification – supported by the latter only – of natural and Christian (supernatural) faith. It therefore seems quite extreme to include Jacobi – *sic et simpliciter* – in the history of modern irrationalism, as Berlin sometimes does. See for instance the commentary given by Norberto Bobbio – a scholar non sympathetic with irrationalism – who, editing Jacobi’s works in 1948, wrote: “Jacobi, the mystic Jacobi, loves clarity and order [...] His writing is limpid, sober, unambiguous. He slips into lyric-religious effusions only after a well-articulated criticism of his opponents”¹¹. As Valerio Verra stressed, while Hamann proposes a *positive* view on faith, intended as the Judaic-Christian Revelation materialised in the Bible, Jacobi endorses an Illuminist interpretation, where faith is a private religiosity with strong moral implications and extraneous to historical and

¹⁰ “Noch weiß ich weder was Hume, noch weiß wir beide unter Glauben verstehen, und je mehr wir darüber reden oder schreiben würden, desto weniger würde uns gelingen, dieser Quecksilber [...] Glaube ist nicht Iedermanns Ding und auch nicht communicabel wie eine Waare, sondern das Himmelreich und die Hölle in uns”. The German edition used is the one in 6 volumes edited by Jacobi himself (vols I-III), J.F. Köppen (vols IV/1-IV/2), and F. Roth (vols IV/3-VI), printed in Leipzig between 1812 and 1825 (reprint: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1968 e 1976; Berliner Buchdienst, Syndikat, 2001). References to Jacobi’s works are hereafter given with the letter W followed by the volume and the page number, the abbreviation of the title and the number of the page in the English translation contained in F.H. JACOBI, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, ed. by G. di Giovanni, Montreal, McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994. The *Spinoza Letters* are abbreviated as LS, *Idealism and Realism* as IR.

¹¹ N. BOBBIO, Introd. to F.H. Jacobi, *Idealismo e realismo*, Torino, De Silva, 1948, p. XI.

material elements. This religion calls Lessing's to mind, although Lessing was charged with pantheism in the famous *Über die Lehre des Spinoza, in Briefen an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*¹². In fact, Jacobi witnessed the transition from Enlightenment to Romanticism, the crisis of the former and the emerging of the latter; "precisely because he was deeply involved in this crisis he has the Enlightenment in mind, but, at the same time, he evades it. His evasion consists in the exploration of the deep, mysterious, almost inaccessible roots of our interaction with the absolute..."¹³.

Jacobi's acquaintance with the Enlightenment is proved not only by his interpretation of religion, discussed above, but also by his own view on philosophy as practical wisdom, a guide for a good life, in short "a philosophy for life". This leads to his refusal of systems, deemed as abstract and Scholastic, and his tendency to a philosophy totally adhering to the remotest aspects of life. In this respect, Jacobi's thought is more sympathetic to British philosophy, which he knew and praised, rather than with the German culture of the time. It is not surprising, then, that the title of one of his most important works quotes the Edinburgh philosopher, *David Hume, über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus*, also containing an appendix, *Ueber den transcendentalen Idealismus*, that would later become essential in the post-Kantian debate¹⁴. Published two years after the *Spinoza Letters* had placed Jacobi in the philosophical *milieu*, his work on Hume deals with the relationship between "faith" and knowledge, a topic already discussed in the *Letters* and fuelling a heated debate. It is revealing that *David Hume* started with the clarification of the meaning of "faith" within the context of the dispute on the problem of empirical evidence and its relation with the reality of the external world¹⁵.

The shocking statement contained in the *Spinoza Letters* was that knowledge is grounded in a "revelation", an immediate intuition of reality, so that knowledge is essentially a particular variety of faith. The passage is worthy of quotation in full:

¹² V. VERRA, *F.H. Jacobi. Dall'illuminismo all'idealismo*, Ed. di Filosofia, Torino, 1963.

¹³ BOBBIO, *Introd.*, p. XVI.

¹⁴ H.F. JACOBI, *David Hume on Faith or Idealism and Realism*, in *The Main Philosophical Writings*, pp. 253-338; the appendix *On Transcendental Idealism* is at pp. 331-338.

¹⁵ As Emanuela Pistilli wrote, in an unpublished draft "Jacobi explained the anomalous use of the word 'faith' with the need to counter the efforts of Dogmatic philosophies in applying rational (or formal) knowledge to the real world, in order to extend demonstrative evidence in the matters of fact, typical of logic, disregarding the notion that logic deals with identity and reality is made of diversity". This is explained, Pistilli notes, by Jacobi's belief that "the real, as well as freedom and creation, can not be reduced to deductive reasoning" (E. PISTILLI, *Tra dogmatismo e scetticismo. Fonti e genesi della filosofia di F.H. Jacobi*, Fabrizio Serra editore, Pisa-Roma, 2008, p. 167).

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My dear Mendelssohn [the addressee of the *Letters*], we are all born in the faith, and we must remain in the faith, just as we are all born in society, and must remain in society [...] How can we strive for certainty unless we are already acquainted with certainty in advance, and how can we be acquainted with it except through something that we already discern with certainty? This leads to the concept of an immediate certainty, which not only needs no proof, but excludes all proofs absolutely, and is simply and solely *the representation itself agreeing with the thing being represented*. The conviction that they generate originates in comparison, and can never be quite secure and perfect. But if every *assent to truth* not derived from rational grounds is faith, then conviction based on rational grounds must itself derive from faith, and must receive its force from faith alone [...]. A veritable and wondrous revelation!¹⁶

The gnoseologic dispute dominating modern philosophy seems to be here eliminated by a kind of unsophisticated realism, aiming to get rid of dualism and adhering to an immediate “revelation”, a pure and original source of knowledge. Yet, again, it should be noted that this realism is not naïve, as it derives from an acute awareness of the limits and possibilities of philosophy.

The principle of knowledge lies in an immediate belief, an original and spontaneous *Gewissheit*, which, as Jacobi had written in an earlier work, marks the boundary between truth and falsehood; it is a sort of original evidence that however allows an argumentative reasoning as a “second-hand evidence” and is the foundation of its persuasive power. This original belief is thus defined: “through faith we know that we have a body, and that there are other bodies and other thinking beings outside us”¹⁷. Jacobi here proposes a key comment, important too in his reaction to Kant, according to which we “feel” the external bodies with the same evidence we have when we feel our own existence, “without the Thou, the I is impossible”¹⁸. Moreover, Jacobi writes: “Philosophers analyze, reason, and explain to what extent we have experience of something outside us. I should mock these people,

¹⁶ “Lieber Mendelssohn, wir alle werden im Glauben geboren, und müssen im Glauben bleiben, wie wir alle in Gesellschaft geboren werden, und in Gesellschaft bleiben müssen. Wie können wir nach Gewissheit streben, wenn uns Gewissheit nicht zum voraus schon bekannt ist; und wie kann sie uns bekannt sein, anders als durch etwas, das wir mit Gewissheit schon erkennen? Dieses führt zu dem Begriffe einer unmittelbaren Gewissheit, welche nicht allein keiner Beweise bedarf, sondern schlechterdings alle Beweise ausschließt, und einzig und allein die mit dem vorgestellten Dingen übereinstimmende Vorstellung selbst ist (also ihren Grund in sich selbst hat). Die Überzeugung durch Beweise ist eine Gewissheit aus der zweiten Hand, beruht auf Vergleichung, und kann nicht recht sicher und vollkommen sein. Wenn nur Fürwahrhalten, welches nicht aus Vernunftgründen entspringt, Glaube ist, so muß die Überzeugung aus Vernunftgründen selbst aus dem Glauben kommen, und ihre Kraft von ihm allein empfangen. [...] Eine wahrhafte, wunderbare Offenbarung” (W IV/1, pp. 210-211; LS 230-231).

¹⁷ “Durch den Glauben wissen wir, daß wir einen Körper haben, und daß ausser uns andere Körper und andere denkende Wesen vorhanden sind”.

¹⁸ “denn ohne Du, ist das Ich unmöglich” (W IV/1, 211; LS, 231).

amongst whom I once counted myself. I open my eyes and ears, or stretch out my hand, and I feel, in the same instant and inseparably, You and Me, Me and You”¹⁹.

The importance of such a statement in gnoseology is thus emphasised in *David Hume*: “at the point of a simple perception [...] the *I* and the *Thou*, the internal consciousness and the external object, must be present both at once in the soul even in the most primordial and simple of perceptions – the two in one flash, in the same indivisible instant, without before or after, without any operation of the understanding”²⁰, where the principle of realism is clearly affirmed and the Cartesian primacy of the *cogito* and its evidence are radically challenged.

The faith described in the *Letters* is not about “eternal truths”, but about “the finite, accidental nature of man”²¹, as the principle of realism cannot but confirm. As already noted, the *David Hume* was composed to clarify the notion of faith as the first principle of knowledge and dispel any misunderstanding. The authority of the Scottish philosopher is invoked to support Jacobi’s thesis by means of extensive quotations from the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*. As a matter of fact, as it was often noted and it is easy to perceive, Jacobi sometimes manipulates Hume’s text, as *Belief* is not the same as *Glaube*, since the former does not have the religious connotations typical of the English word *Faith*. However, the German philosopher insists that his notion of faith is not inconsistent with Hume’s and quotes Hume himself: “faith is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what imagination alone is ever able to attain”. Jacobi is well aware that faith has an effect on knowledge only and does not affect religious sentiments. At the same time, Jacobi perceives the probabilistic character of human knowledge in Hume’s texts and recognises that this is extraneous to his own ideas. He wrote: “[Hume] leaves it everywhere undecided whether we actually perceive things outside us or merely perceive them as outside us”²² and this undermines Jacobi’s alleged realism. Hume’s philos-

¹⁹ “Die Philosophen analysiren, und räsonniren, und expliziren, welcher Maassen es zugehe daß wir erfahren: Etwas sey außer uns. Ich muß der Leute lachen, unter denen auch ich gewesen bin. Ich öffne Aug’ oder Ohr, oder ich strecke meine Hand aus, und fühle in demselbigen Augenblick unzertrennlich: Du und Ich; Ich und Du” (Jacobi’s letter to an anonymous recipient, 16 October 1775, quoted in PISTILLI, *Tra dogmatismo e scetticismo*, p. 143).

²⁰ “bei der allerersten und einfachsten Wahrnehmung, das Ich und das Du, inneres Bewußtsein und äusserlicher Gegenstand, sogleich in der Seele da sein müssen; beides in demselben Nu, in demselben untheilbaren Augenblicke, ohne vor und nach, ohne irgend eine Operation des Verstandes” (W II, 176; IR, 277).

²¹ “die ewige Wahrheiten [...]sondern die endliche und zufällige Natur des Menschen” (W IV/1, 211-212; LS, 231).

²² “Hume [...] überall unentschieden läßt, ob wir Dinge wirklich ausser uns, oder bloß als außer uns wahrnehmen” (W II, 165; IR, 272).

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ophy and its sceptical conclusion appear to Jacobi as hopelessly idealist, since it is not possible to know the external world directly, but only through the medium of ideas and representations of things. Hence, the definition of Hume's philosophy as a "sceptical idealism". As a matter of fact, in order to understand Jacobi's position, it is necessary to look at Thomas Reid rather than at Hume. Reid in fact affirms that things are known *by a sort of revelation* and that philosophers from Plato to Hume dealt with *representations* of things, instead of things themselves; as a result, they conclude that we do not immediately perceive the external objects, but rather their images in the mind. Reid observes that Hume

adopts the theory of ideas in its full extent, and, in consequence, shews that there is neither matter nor mind in the universe, nothing but impressions and ideas. What we call a *body*, is only a bundle of sensations, and what we call the *mind*, is only a bundle of thoughts, passions, and emotions, without any subject [...] The Egoists [...] were left far behind by Mr Hume; for they believed their own existence, and perhaps also the existence of a Deity. But Mr Hume's system does not even leave him a *self* to claim the property of his impressions and ideas.²³

Following Reid, Jacobi adopts the definition of "speculative egoism" with which he would later label all idealist philosophers from Kant to Schelling. The point is that for Jacobi

representations can never make the actual present *as such*. They only contain the properties of actual things, not the *actual itself*. The actual can no more be presented outside its actual perception *than consciousness can be presented outside consciousness, life outside life, or truth outside truth*. The perception of the actual and the feeling of truth, consciousness, and life are one and the same thing.²⁴

If the external world can be known only through an immediate perception, knowledge is not provided by reason, meant as the faculty of abstraction, comparison, and all other operations usually implied by the verb "to reason". According to Jacobi, immediate perception could be only ascribed to *Sinn*, sense, taking this word "in the full extent of its meaning, as faculty of perception in general"²⁵. *Sinn* and *Empfindung*, sensation (even though sense and sensation do not adequately translate the several nuances attributed by Jacobi to these German words), indicate an immediate knowledge and

²³ T. REID, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. by D.R. Bookes and K. Haakonssen, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2002, pp. 162-163.

²⁴ "die Vorstellungen können nicht das Wirkliche, *als solches*, nie darstellen. Sie enthalten nur Beschaffenheiten der wirklichen *Dinge*, nicht das *Wirkliche selbst*. Das Wirkliche kann außer der unmittelbaren Wahrnehmung desselben ebensowenig dargestellt werden, *als das Bewußtsein außer dem Bewußtsein, das Leben außer dem Leben, die Wahrheit außer der Wahrheit*. Wahrnehmung des Wirklichen und Gefühl der Wahrheit, Vernunftsein und Leben, sind eine und dieselbe Sache" (W II, 232-233; IR, 305).

²⁵ "in dem ganze Umfange seiner Bedeutung" (W II, 270; IR, 321).

exclude any mediation through ideas, which, for Jacobi, would unavoidably produce a loss of reality and the formation of a representation. Thus, Kantian transcendental idealism's goal of founding true, authentic realism through a representation (*Vorstellung*) appeared contradictory and unjustified to Jacobi, as he thought that the only real alternative was between realism and idealism, as the subtitle of the *David Hume* declared. According to this analysis, Kant stood between idealism and realism and was unable to opt for absolute realism, the only sound choice according to Jacobi. Briefly, Jacobi's definition of faith is closely related to Pascal and Rousseau's *lumen naturale*, that is a sensitive faculty common to humankind and providing true knowledge. In this sense, faith is "a limit to the knowledge attainable by reason and an absolute limit of knowledge"²⁶.

To conclude, I would like to go back to Berlin, with whom I started. It is not possible not to endorse what he writes on Hamann and Jacobi:

Nothing could have been further from Hume and his outlook. The history of his influence on a handful of German antinomian thinkers is no more than a footnote in any account of his philosophy, although an exceedingly odd one. It is of somewhat greater importance to the history of irrationalist ideas in Europe, both religious and secular, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, of which this revolt against reason marks the modern beginnings.²⁷

This should not be interpreted in negative terms only, as Berlin sometimes seems to do. In fact, we should ask whether the Romantic revolution could have taken place without Hamann's and Jacobi's contribution. Berlin himself portrays this revolution with passion and support and proposes a sort of dialectic of Romanticism, opposed to Horkheimer and Adorno's famous dialectic of the Enlightenment:

The result of Romanticism, then, is liberalism, toleration, decency and the appreciation of the imperfections of life; some degree of increased rational self-understanding. This was very far from the intentions of the Romantics. But at the same time – and to this extent the romantic doctrine is true – they are the persons who most strongly emphasised the unpredictability of all human activities.²⁸

[translation by Cristina Paoletti]

²⁶ PISTILLI, *Tra dogmatismo e scetticismo*, pp. 164-165.

²⁷ BERLIN, *Against the Current*, p. 187.

²⁸ BERLIN, *The Roots of Romanticism*, p. 147.