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# Liberalism and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Germany

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**LIBERALISM AND ENLIGHTENMENT IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY  
GERMANY**

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Liberalism is frequently viewed as a child of the Enlightenment.<sup>1</sup> Some of the more important figures within the liberal tradition, such as Locke and Kant, played significant roles in the Enlightenment, while others, such as John Stuart Mill and John Rawls, constructed their theories on the basis of principles first elaborated within the Enlightenment. Both liberalism and the Enlightenment have typically been seen as emphasizing the protection of individual rights over the more ambitious aim of achieving the human good. Indeed, both tend to be uneasy with talk of an ultimate good, advising tolerance of diverging conceptions of the ultimate purpose of life. Both traditions have a tendency to focus on the individual rather than the collectivity in their moral philosophies and their social theories alike. Thus, there are good reasons for supposing that those who regard the development of liberalism and the spread of Enlightenment as “aspects of one and the same current of thought and practice”(Gray 1986, 16) are not entirely misguided.

The identification of liberalism and the Enlightenment is not, however, quite as straightforward as it first appears. While it may be the case that leading figures of the English Enlightenment (assuming, for the purposes of argument, that we can speak of such a thing as an English Enlightenment)<sup>2</sup> also played a major role in the history of the development of liberalism, it is not at all clear that this relationship holds everywhere

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of some of the received wisdom on this point, see Garrard 1997, 281-82. For an account of Enlightenment natural law theory attentive to the ways in which these generalizations do not hold up, see Haakonssen 1996

<sup>2</sup> For an argument that there was one, see Porter 1981.

else. Eighteenth-century Prussia offers one counterexample worth examining. During the last quarter of the eighteenth century, a wide-ranging debate on the nature and limits of enlightenment raged in the pages of scholarly and popular journals (see Schmidt 1996). One particularly fierce sideline of this more general controversy was the dispute between Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn over Jacobi's claim that Mendelssohn's friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing had, shortly before his death, revealed to Jacobi that he was a "Spinozist." In the debate that followed — which came to be known, somewhat misleadingly, as the "Pantheism Dispute" — Mendelssohn defended the Enlightenment against Jacobi's criticisms.<sup>3</sup> Yet Mendelssohn, even when he was advocating such traditional liberal values as religious toleration, argued in ways that are difficult to square with our understanding of liberalism, while much in the views of Jacobi, the critic of the Enlightenment, is conventionally liberal.

In what follows I will first discuss Mendelssohn's defense of the idea of enlightenment and his arguments in favor of religious toleration. I will then examine Jacobi's critique of the Enlightenment in both its philosophical and its political dimensions. I will conclude with a suggestion about the tension between rationalist and critical strains within the Enlightenment and its significance for the relationship between liberalism and the Enlightenment.

### *Mendelssohn's Defense of Enlightenment and Religious Liberty*

In December 1783 the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* published an article by the theologian and educational reformer Johann Friedrich Zöllner that, in a footnote, posed the question "What is enlightenment?" (Hinske and Albrecht 1990, 115). Zöllner's question launched a debate that over the next decade would fill the pages of German literary journals and

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<sup>3</sup> For general discussions of the Pantheism Dispute, see Beiser 1987, 44-126, Beck 1969, 352-74, and Scholz 1916, lix-lxxvii.

moral weeklies. While Immanuel Kant's answer to the question in the December 1784 issue of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* is by far the most famous, it was not the first response to the question published by that journal. As Kant (1996, 64) noted in the closing footnote of his essay, three months earlier the journal had published an article on Zöllner's question by the great German-Jewish man of letters Moses Mendelssohn.

The question that appeared in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* had been under discussion for several months in the Berlin Wednesday Society, a secret society of "Friends of Enlightenment" closely linked to the journal. Its members included Zöllner and Mendelssohn.<sup>4</sup> While Kant's response was written without knowledge of the extensive discussions of the question within the Wednesday Society, Mendelssohn's essay represented, in part, an effort to summarize the debate about the nature, the advisability, and the possible limits of enlightenment that occupied the distinguished group of civil servants, clergy, and men of letters who made up the Wednesday Society.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to consider the members of the Wednesday Society liberals.<sup>6</sup> Some, such as the jurists Karl Gottlieb Svarez and Ernst Ferdinand Klein, were members of the Prussian bureaucracy who, committed to the reforms initiated by Frederick the Great, accepted the idea that it was the duty of the state to undertake measures that would further the common well-being of its citizens, and who viewed as legitimate the police powers that the state exercised over the material and spiritual lives of its citizens in pursuit of this goal (see Raeff 1975). Meanwhile, the clerical members of the Wednesday Society, all of whom embraced enlightened views on the relationship between reason and religion,

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<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the Wednesday Society and its membership, see Birtsch 1996.

<sup>5</sup> I have discussed the relationship between the published responses and the secret discussions in Schmidt 1989.

<sup>6</sup> For a general discussion of the relationship between the liberalism and enlightenment in Germany, see Beiser 1992, 15-26, 309-17.

expressed no qualms about the integration of their churches into the bureaucracy. Johann Joachim Spalding, Johann Samuel Diterich, William Abraham Teller were members of the Upper Consistory [*Oberkonsistorium*], the chief governing body of the Lutheran Church. Established as a part of the Prussian bureaucracy in 1750, the Upper Consistory was responsible for the appointment and supervision of clergy, the instruction of theological students, and the approval of candidates for teaching positions at the Lutheran seminaries.<sup>7</sup> Karl Franz von Irwing and Friedrich Gedike, also members of the Wednesday Society, were lay members of the Upper Consistory. There were members of the Wednesday Society who had no ties to the Prussian bureaucracy, including the writer and publisher Friedrich Nicolai, the philosopher and dramatist Johann Jacob Engel, and Mendelssohn. But even those who were not directly connected with the bureaucracy appear to have had few, if any, reservations about the program of reform absolutism. Indeed, the Wednesday Society itself testified to the shared assumptions that brought together reformist elements within the state bureaucracy engaged in the process of modernizing and rationalizing the legal code, enlightened clergy who practiced an interpretation of Christian doctrine that emphasized civic and social responsibilities, and philosophers who, in company with publicists, sought to transmit new and useful knowledge to a new reading public. For the members of the Berlin Wednesday Society, the state and the churches administered by it were potential instruments for social improvement, not barriers to reform — a situation far different from that faced by the French *philosophes*.<sup>8</sup> Their effort at enlightening the citizenry presupposed a state with the authority to intervene in the lives of its subjects to a degree that would be anathema to later liberal theorists.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the *Oberkonsistorium* and its responsibilities see Birtsch 1990.

<sup>8</sup> For a contrast between the situation faced by French *philosophes* and the German *Aufklärer* see Hampson 1981, 45 and Whaley 1981, 117. Also, see the discussion in La Vopa 1990, 35-37.

Mendelssohn's article in response to Zöllner's question represented an attempt to pull together the various strains of the discussion of enlightenment that predated the appearance of Zöllner's article in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.<sup>9</sup> In formulating his summary, Mendelssohn focused on the relationship of the term "enlightenment" to two other related concepts: "culture" [*Kultur*], and "education" [*Bildung*]. All three terms, he argued, denoted "modifications of social life, the consequences of the industry and the efforts of men to better their social conditions" (Mendelssohn 1996, 53). The most fundamental of the three terms was *Bildung* — a term which defies easy translation and can be rendered as "culture," "education," "formation," or "development." In the demarcation Mendelssohn proposed in his response to Zöllner, *Aufklärung* refers to the "theoretical" side of the process of *Bildung* and involves a "rational reflection on the things of human life." *Kultur*, in contrast, is concerned with "practical" matters, with "goodness, refinement, and beauty in handmade arts and social mores" (Mendelssohn 1996, 53). Summarizing the distinction for a friend shortly after the publication of his essay, he wrote, "*Enlightenment* is concerned with the theoretical, with knowledge, with the elimination of prejudices; *Culture* is concerned with morality, sociality, art, with doing and not doing."<sup>10</sup>

The distinction between *Aufklärung*, *Kultur*, and *Bildung* proposed by Mendelssohn in his response to Zöllner's question echoed a distinction he had made a year earlier in *Jerusalem*, his treatise on religious toleration. Where his response to

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<sup>9</sup> The origins of the discussion within the Wednesday Society may be traced to the lecture of December 17, 1783 by Johann Karl Möhsen (translated as Möhsen 1996).

<sup>10</sup> Letter to August Hennings of November 27, 1784 in Mendelssohn, 1977, 237. Note also his letter to Hennings of June 29, 1779, where Mendelssohn described his planned translations and commentaries on the scriptures as "the first step towards culture from which my people is, alas, kept at such a distance" (Mendelssohn 1976,149).

Zöllner subdivided *Bildung* into *Kultur* and *Aufklärung*, Jerusalem subdivided *Bildung* into “government” [*Regierung*] and “education” [*Erziehung*]. Government concerns itself with the actions of members of society and seeks to direct them towards the common good by providing them with “reasons that motivate the will” [*Bewegungsgründe*].

Education seeks to instill in individuals those convictions that motivate these actions, and attempts to do so by offering “reasons that persuade by their truth” [*Wahrheitsgründe*] (Mendelssohn 1983, 40). Despite the difference in terminology between Mendelssohn’s article in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* and his discussion in *Jerusalem*, the parallels are not difficult to see. “Enlightenment” and “education” are concerned with convictions, which they attempt to shape by examining the truth or falsehood of the beliefs which sustain these convictions. “Culture” and “government” are concerned with actions, which they seek to influence by providing incentives and disincentives that motivate the will.

At first glance, both Mendelssohn’s understanding of enlightenment and his account of the relationship between church and state would appear to adhere to well-worn conventions in liberal thought. Like Locke’s *Letter Concerning Toleration*, a work he knew and admired, Mendelssohn distinguishes “external” actions from “internal” convictions. He is concerned to confine the use of the coercive powers of the state to controlling the external actions of individuals. While legislation, with its system of rewards and punishments, can serve as an appropriate means for the motivation of the will, Mendelssohn — like Locke before him — thought it folly to assume that convictions could be coerced through laws establishing oaths of religious conformity. Where Locke and Mendelssohn part company was over Locke’s attempt to distinguish “the business of civil government from that of religion and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other.” Locke had defined civil government as “a Society of Men constituted only for the procuring, preserving, and advancing of their own Civil Interests” and defined “civil interests” as including “life, liberty, health, and indolency of

body; and the possession of outward things, such as money, lands, houses, furniture, and the like.” He explicitly denied that the state was concerned with the “the Salvation of Souls.” This was the proper concern of the church, “a voluntary society of men, joining together of their own accord, in order to the public worshipping of God, in such manner as they judge acceptable to him, and effectual to the Salvation of their Souls” (Locke 1983, 28).

Mendelssohn’s dissent from Locke moved on two levels. First, where Locke granted churches the right to expel members who dissented from the established principles of the church (with the proviso that excommunication could carry no civil penalties), Mendelssohn resisted the idea of granting even this much coercive power to religion.

Civil society, viewed as a moral person, can have the *right of coercion*, and, in fact, has actually obtained this right through the social contract. Religious society lays no claim to the *right of coercion*, and cannot obtain it by any possible contact. The *state* possesses *perfect*, the *church* only *imperfect* rights. (Mendelssohn 1983, 45)

While the state had the power to order and to coerce, religion has only power of “love and beneficence.” “The only rights possessed by the church,” Mendelssohn (1983 59-60) insisted, “are to admonish, to instruct, to fortify, and to comfort; and the duties of the citizens toward the church are an *attentive ear* and a *willing heart*.”

Second, Mendelssohn questioned the exclusively secular focus of Locke’s understanding of “civil things.” For Mendelssohn (1983, 42), the best form of government was that state which “achieves its purposes by morals and convictions; in the degree, therefore, to which government is by education [*Erziehung*] itself.” Hence, “one of the state’s principal efforts must be to govern men through morals and convictions.”

Since laws cannot create convictions, and rewards and punishments cannot produce principles or refine morals, the only means the state has available for influencing the morals and the convictions of its citizens is “persuasion [*Ueberzeugung*].”

It is here that religion should come to the aid of the state, and the church should become a pillar of civil felicity. It is the business of the church to convince people, in the most emphatic manner, of the truth of noble principles and convictions; to show them that duties toward men are also duties toward God, the violation of which is in itself the greatest misery ... ; that serving the state is true service of God, law [*Recht*] and justice [*Gerechtigkeit*] are commandments of God, and charity is his most sacred will; and that true knowledge of the Creator cannot leave behind in the soul any hatred for men. (Mendelssohn 43; omission in translation corrected.)

Circumstances such as the growth of population or the development of cultural differences may force the state to rely increasingly on externally binding coercive laws, but Mendelssohn holds that these must be seen as secondary remedies, used by the state when it cannot achieve its ends in tandem with religion through the shaping of the convictions and morality of the population.

Mendelssohn explicitly rejected Locke’s restriction of “civil interests” to the “temporal welfare” of the individual. It is, Mendelssohn (1983, 39) argued, neither in keeping with the truth nor advantageous to man’s welfare to sever the temporal so neatly from the eternal. At bottom, man will never partake of eternity; his eternity is merely an *incessant temporality*. His temporality never ends; it is, therefore, an essential part of his permanency and inseparable from it. One

confuses ideas if one opposes his temporal welfare to his eternal felicity.

Thus, the state cannot be completely indifferent to the matters that transcend the immediate concerns of “life, liberty, health, and indolency of body” and “the possession of outward things.” The distinction between state and religion, Mendelssohn maintains, cannot be made at the level of the interests each seeks to advance. The state differs from religion in that it alone has the authority to shape actions through coercive laws. But it can enter into a partnership with religion in advancing, through education and persuasion, both the temporal and the eternal interests of individuals.

To see more particularly what Mendelssohn might have had in mind, we need only look at the article in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* that served as a spur for Zöllner’s question in the first place. The article to which Zöllner responded had been written by a fellow member of the Wednesday Society: Johann Erich Biester, librarian of the Royal Library in Berlin and co-editor (with the educational reformer and Gymnasium director Friedrich Gedike) of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.<sup>11</sup> His article maintained that the presence of the clergy at marriage ceremonies led the “unenlightened citizen” to feel that the marriage contract was unique in that it was made with God himself, while other contracts “are only made with men, and are therefore less meaningful.” Because of this tendency to underestimate the importance of contracts which did not require clerical participation, Biester concluded that a purely civil wedding ceremony would be appropriate not only for the “enlightened citizen,” who “can do without all of the ceremonies,” but also for the unenlightened citizen, who would learn that all laws and contracts deserve respect (Hinske and Albrecht 1990, 95).

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<sup>11</sup> The article was signed with the initials “E. v. K.,” a pseudonym that Biester had used on other occasions. See the editorial note in Hinske and Albrecht 1990, 484.

Biester's intent, then, was not to remove religion from public life, but rather to teach citizens that *all* civil responsibilities, not just marriage, had a religious dimension. "How excellent," he wrote, "if faith and civil duty were more integrated, if all laws had the sacredness of religious prescription" (Hinske and Albrecht 1990, 99).

O when comes the time, that the concern for the religion of a state is no longer the private monopoly of a few who often lead the state into disorder, but rather becomes itself again the business of the state. ... Then we will have once again state, citizen, patriots; undefiled would be the debased names. ... Let politics and religion, law and catechism be one! (Hinske and Albrecht 1990, 101-102)

Formulations such as these are far removed from Jefferson's "thick wall" between church and state.

There is one final feature of Mendelssohn's definition of enlightenment that calls for comment. Near the start of the essay, Mendelssohn (1996, 54) states, "I posit, at all times, *the destiny of man* [*Bestimmung des Menschens*] as the measure and goal of all our striving and efforts, as a point on which we must set our eyes if we do not wish to lose our way." The more a people is brought, through art and industry, into harmony with this destiny, the more "*Bildung*" we ascribe to it. The goal is that culture and enlightenment join together to advance, and if it is ever forgotten, both will fall into corruption.<sup>12</sup> Mendelssohn had taken the notion from Johann Joachim Spalding's *Destiny of Man*. First published in 1748, Spalding's book was one of the most successful

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<sup>12</sup> For a discussion of the centrality of the notion of the "destiny of man" for Mendelssohn's work, see Hinske 1981, 94-99.

products of enlightenment theology.<sup>13</sup> Through a series meditations on the questions “Why do I exist?” and “What should I do?”, the book sought to discover a fundamental rule that could serve to guide one’s life. The first possibility Spalding considered was that of a life devoted to the satisfaction of physical drives, a possibility he quickly dismissed as offering no permanent satisfaction. Spalding next weighed the possibility of a life devoted to a more refined sort of desire, that associated with aesthetic experience. Such a life, however, takes no consideration of my relationship to others, and it too is rejected. Spalding then turned to a life devoted to the pursuit of virtue, which proved to be the first serious possibility as a destiny for man.<sup>14</sup> Spalding, who translated the works Shaftesbury and Butler, shared their view that there is a natural disposition in mankind to work for the common good. For Spalding (1908, 25) our “natural” ability to judge matters of right and wrong is, in fact, the “voice of God, the voice of eternal truth, which speaks in me.” This voice impels us to act to bring about a state of happiness that, because of the contingencies of human existence, can never be achieved on earth. This very failure to achieve the greatest good in this world holds out the promise of a future life wherein “my constrained and beclouded soul will be given so much more light and freedom that I will be assured of a complete enlightenment of all the obscure parts of the plan by which the world is ruled” (ibid., 28). This, then, is the ultimate end for which man is destined: immortality in the kingdom of God.

This account of human destiny provided Mendelssohn with what, in more recent literature, might be characterized as a “thick” theory of the human good. In the remainder of his essay in response to Zöllner’s question, Mendelssohn (1784, 116; Schmidt 1996, 54) discussed how this general destiny was subdivided into different

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<sup>13</sup> For discussions of Spalding’s book and its impact, see Schollmeier 1967, 56-65 and Adler 1994, 125-37.

<sup>14</sup> For the argument thus far, see Spalding 1908, 16-24.

particular destinies and how this division set the stage for potential conflicts that might arise between the universal “destiny of man as *man*” and one particular destiny that individuals fulfill: the “destiny of man as *citizen* [*Bürger*].” The problem does not arise for the practical dimension of *Bildung*. The goal of culture is the improvement of a social order that is divided into different estates and bound together by a network of rights and duties. Its task is to make sure that agreement between the various parts of the society is achieved. Its end can thus be nothing other than the cultivation of a *Bürger*, a member of political society, possessing certain rights and duties, equipped with the skills and abilities to perform a specific set of tasks. From the standpoint of culture, then, man’s destiny is simply membership in civil society.

On the theoretical side of the process of *Bildung*, however, it is possible for there to be a conflict between the “destiny of man as man” and the “destiny of man as citizen.” Enlightenment has two differing aspects, an “enlightenment of the citizen [*Bürgeraufklärung*],” which must adjust itself according to the ranks of society it addresses, and an “enlightenment of man [*Menschenaufklärung*],” which is “universal” and pays heed neither to social distinctions nor to the maintenance of social order. “Certain truths,” Mendelssohn (1996, 55) noted, “that are useful to men, as men, can at times be harmful to them as citizens.” So long as this “collision” between the enlightenment of man and the enlightenment of citizen is confined to matters that do not directly address what Mendelssohn termed the “essential” destiny of man as man or man as citizen, and thus do not put into question either those aspects of men that distinguish them from animals or those dimensions of civic duties that are necessary for the preservation of public order, Mendelssohn (1996, 55) saw little cause for concern and argued that rules can easily be drawn up to resolve potential conflicts. It is an entirely different matter when a conflict arises between the “essential” destiny of man as citizen and either one’s “essential” or “extra-essential” [*außerwesentlichen*] destiny as man.

The “essential destiny of man,” Mendelssohn explained in a letter to Hennings, “is a matter of *existence* [*Daseyn*], the extra-essential destiny is a matter of *improvement* [*Besserseyn*].” The first generates “perfection,” the other “beauty.” If it is not possible to achieve both, the latter must give way (Mendelssohn 1977, 236).<sup>15</sup> “In the absence of the essential destiny of man,” Mendelssohn (1996, 55) explained in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, “man sinks to the level of the beast; without the extra-essential destiny, he is no longer a good and splendid creature.” The most severe conflict occurs in those “unhappy” times when the essential destinies of man as man and man as citizen collide. In such cases the enlightenment that “is indispensable for man cannot be disseminated through all classes of the realm without the constitution being in danger of perishing.”

Here philosophy lays its hand on its mouth! Here necessity may prescribe laws, or rather forge fetters, that are applied to mankind, to force them down, and hold them under the yoke! (Mendelssohn 1996, 55)

When man’s “essential” destiny as a citizen collides with his “extra-essential” destiny as man, the consequences are less grim. Here it is not a question of the state reducing man to the level of a beast, but rather of a situation where “certain useful and — for mankind — adorning truths may not be disseminated without destroying prevailing religious and moral tenets”(Mendelssohn 1996, 55). Mendelssohn was echoing the views of a number of his colleagues in the Wednesday Society who saw a need to set limits to enlightenment; and he argued that in such cases the “virtue-loving bearer of

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<sup>15</sup> My rendering of Mendelssohn’s “außerwesentlichen” as “unessential” in my translation of Mendelssohn’s essay (Mendelssohn 1996) now strikes me as potentially misleading. In the passages that follow, I have translated the term as “extra-essential.”

enlightenment will proceed with prudence and discretion and endure prejudice rather than drive away the truth that is so closely intertwined with it” (Mendelssohn 1996, 55).<sup>16</sup>

Mendelssohn’s conception of enlightenment thus results in an approach to politics that is difficult to square with our typical understanding of what constitutes liberalism. It allowed for a considerably greater blurring of the boundaries between church and state, and it allowed for rather significant limitations on freedom of expression. With Spalding’s notion of the “destiny of man” providing him with a “thick” account of the human good, Mendelssohn allowed for political institutions that aimed at bringing about this good, even at the cost of limiting what some might see as the rights of individuals. Certainly there are formulations, particularly in Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem*, that prefigure certain aspects of the positions that would eventually be found in thinkers such as John Stuart Mill (or, staying within the German tradition, Mill’s own inspiration, Wilhelm von Humboldt). But what prevents us from treating Mendelssohn as “anticipating” certain liberal formulations is the presence of a contemporary who had already presented a recognizably liberal account of the state: Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Making matters difficult for those assuming easy linkages between liberalism and the Enlightenment, he was one of the Enlightenment’s most vocal critics.

#### *Jacobi on Faith and Political Power*

Jacobi’s critique of the Enlightenment reached its climax in his dispute with Mendelssohn over the question of whether Lessing, shortly before his death, had embraced Spinozism — a designation that, despite Mendelssohn’s attempted rehabilitation of Spinoza in his *Philosophical Dialogues* of 1755, remained tantamount to

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<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the debate within the Wednesday Society on this question, see Hellmuth 1982, 315-45.

an accusation of atheism.<sup>17</sup> According to Jacobi, during a conversation in the summer of 1780 Lessing had expressed admiration for Goethe's unpublished (and, to many contemporaries, sacrilegious) poem "Prometheus," and he had rejected "all orthodox conceptions of the divinity" in favor of the ancient Greek concept of the "One and All" (*hen kai pan*). When a shocked Jacobi asked whether this did not amount to an allegiance to Spinozism, Lessing allegedly responded, "If I were to name myself after someone, I know of no other."<sup>18</sup>

In notifying Mendelssohn of Lessing's statement, Jacobi was motivated by something other than an interest preventing Mendelssohn (who at the time was working once again on his oft-delayed eulogy for his friend) from neglecting an important — if disquieting — turn in Lessing's beliefs. Behind Jacobi's letter stood a deeply held antagonism toward the political and philosophical positions of Mendelssohn and the Berlin Enlightenment.<sup>19</sup> Prior to his dispute with Mendelssohn, Jacobi was known primarily as the author of *Woldemar* and *The Letters of Edward Allwill*, two philosophical novels that shared some of the hostility of the *Sturm und Drang* toward the Enlightenment's purportedly one-sided emphasis on reason at the expense of sentiment

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<sup>17</sup> Conversely, Spinoza was revered by radical exponents of toleration, freedom speech, and political reform. On this underground reputation of Spinoza in Germany see Beiser 1987, 48-52.

<sup>18</sup> **For the letter, see Mendelssohn, —, 13: 135-53; for the statement on Spinoza see *ibid.*, 137-38.** For discussions, see Altmann, 1973, 613-21; Beiser 1987, 65-69; and Saine 1997, 214, who notes the importance of the hypothetical form of Lessing's response, which does not mean "that he *had* to identify himself with any group or master."

<sup>19</sup> For a discussion of Jacobi's general strategy in the Pantheism Dispute, see Altmann 1994, 6-8.

and feeling.<sup>20</sup> Jacobi's initial literary efforts had been encouraged by Lessing, and after Lessing's death in 1781 Jacobi sent copies of his novels to Mendelssohn, seeking support in the face of less-than-favorable reviews. Mendelssohn, repelled by what he saw as their excessive sentimentality, responded by suggesting that Jacobi aim for a greater "simplicity of style" — which was hardly what Jacobi wanted to hear.<sup>21</sup> The rebuff convinced Jacobi that Mendelssohn had been corrupted by the "magisterial, self-satisfied demeanor" that he saw as the hallmark of the "*morgue berlinoise*." (Mauthner 1912, 17; Altmann 1973, 604).

Jacobi's attack on the Berlin Enlightenment had begun several years earlier with a critique of its politics. Between 1759 and 1761, Jacobi studied in Geneva, a city that had become the emblem of republican virtue for many during the eighteenth century. He returned from his studies with a hatred of absolutism and a contempt for "the stupidity of people who in our century regard superstition as more dangerous than the growing power of unrestrained autocracy."<sup>22</sup> In 1782 he published a short work entitled *Something Lessing Said*, which began by recalling a conversation in which Lessing had said that all

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<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of the novels, see George di Giovanni's introduction to Jacobi 1994, 117-51. For discussions of Jacobi's relationship with the *Sturm und Drang* see Nicolai , 1971, 347-60; Heraeus 1928, 94-95; and Pascal 1953, 3, 151-52.

<sup>21</sup> Mendelssohn's opinion was communicated to Jacobi by Christian Wilhelm Dohm in his letter of December 18, 1781 (in Zoeppritz, 1869, I:50). The letter begins with an allusion by Dohm to a warning in an earlier letter from Jacobi on the need to avoid contamination by "the Berlin spirit."

<sup>22</sup> Letter to J. W. L. Gleim of May 31, 1782, in Jacobi 1987, 35-6. For Jacobi's early political views, see Homann 1973, 38-96. On the significance of the image of Geneva during the Enlightenment, see Venturi, 1971, 84.

of the arguments of princes against the rights of the papacy were “either groundless or applied with double and triple force to the princes themselves”(Jacobi 1996, 191).<sup>23</sup>

The immediate point of departure for Jacobi’s somewhat disorganized essay was the publication of Johannes von Müller’s *Journeys of the Popes*, a critique of the autocratic character of the rule of Austria’s Joseph II. Von Müller’s work, in turn, had been occasioned by the visit of Pope Pius VI to Vienna in response to Joseph’s radical educational and ecclesiastical reforms. In the opening pages of *Something Lessing Said*, Jacobi suggested parallels between von Müller’s critique of Joseph and Justus Möser’s critique of Frederick the Great’s actions in the legal controversy involving the case of a miller named Arnold, who had sued the lord of a neighboring manor because the lord’s newly constructed carp pond had drawn water away from his mill, making him unable to meet rent payments to the lord of his own manor. Frederick was convinced that Arnold had received unfair treatment from the noble judges who had dismissed his suit. When an appeals court did not find for Arnold, Frederick reversed their decision, and imprisoned not only the judges who had initially decided against Arnold, but also the seven justices who had refused to grant his appeal. While Frederick’s reversal of what he regarded as yet another instance of the aristocracy exploiting commoners enjoyed considerable support, Möser was troubled by what he saw as the capriciousness of the action. In “On the Important Difference between Real and Formal Law,” the essay Jacobi cited at the start of *Something Lessing Said*, Möser (1986, 99-100) criticized Frederick’s flouting of the rule of law, and argued that a monarch “who bids compliance to a *real* truth just as he does a *formal* one overthrows the first and fundamental law, holy to every state.”

For Jacobi, both Joseph’s reforms and Frederick’s intervention on Arnold’s behalf highlighted what Jacobi saw as the central failing of the advocates of enlightenment: their

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<sup>23</sup> For discussions of this essay, see Snow 1996 and Beiser 1992, 145-47.

complicity with autocratic forms of rule, as long as the results of the policies of these rulers were seen as “enlightened.”

The great mass of our thinkers ... want to see the essentially true and the essentially good spread *by power*, and want to see every error suppressed *by power*. They would like to help promote an enlightenment — elsewhere than in the understanding, because that takes too long. They put out the lights, filled with childish impatience for it to be day. Oh hope-filled darkness, in which we hurriedly totter our way toward the goal of our wishes, toward the greatest good on earth; forward, on the path of violence and subjugation! (Jacobi 1996, 192)

Seeking to achieve substantive ends that were presumed to serve the public’s greater interest, the enlightened supporters of absolutism paid little heed, Jacobi argued, to the damage that was being done to the rule of law, the rights of individuals, and the civic life of the nation.

Jacobi insisted that civil society was, and could only be, “a mechanism of coercion” whose function should be simply “to secure for every member his inviolable property in his person, the free use of all his powers, and the full enjoyment of the fruits of their employment”(Jacobi 1996, 195). Attempts by apologists for enlightened absolutism to justify more extensive state intervention in the life of its citizens — whether justified by appeals to the “interests of state” or the “welfare of the whole” — led only to “the advancement of self-interest, money-grubbing, indolence; of a stupid admiration of wealth, of rank, and of power; a blind unsavory submissiveness; and an anxiety and fear which allows no zeal, and tends towards the most servile obedience” (Jacobi 1996, 200). Drawing on Adam Ferguson’s *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, Jacobi argued that present governments were in fact despotic forms of rule that corrupted

civic virtue and individual morality by eradicating the freedom necessary if either is to flourish.<sup>24</sup>

Mendelssohn criticized Jacobi's argument in his contribution to a multi-authored critical essay that was published anonymously in the *Deutsches Museum* of January 1783. The essay had been assembled, at Jacobi's request, from a number of critical letters Jacobi had received. His purpose in having these criticisms printed was to give him the pretext for writing a response that would amplify and clarify his original argument (see Altmann 1973, 599-600). Against Jacobi, Mendelssohn maintained that "perfectly virtuous characters can be more easily formed under a despot" than in a republic and argued that the real questions, unanswered by Jacobi, were how one might go about transforming monarchies into popular regimes and whether such a step would be advisable. Urging restraint in criticizing the political establishment, Mendelssohn asked,

What is the point of all declamations which can lead to nothing, which should lead to nothing. We tell a sick person, with all the embellishments of rhetoric, that he is dangerously ill; but we do not tell him what he has to do to make himself healthy, or at least to lessen his suffering. It would be better for him to think he is healthy, than to hear a truth, which cannot be useful to him. (Jacobi 1815, 399-400)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Long quotations from the "noble Ferguson" may be found in Jacobi 1996, 198-200. Jacobi also drew on two other defenders of republican virtue: Montesquieu (Jacobi 1996, 210 footnote 15) and Machiavelli (Jacobi 1996 204-6). For a discussion of Jacobi's use of Ferguson, see Oz-Salzberger 1995, 257-279.

<sup>25</sup> As support for the argument that virtuous characters can be formed more easily under despotisms than republics, Mendelssohn appealed to Lessing's decision to set his *Nathan* in Turkey, and to Socrates, who "was raised in Athens at a time when the form of government was inclined towards tyranny"

In his rejoinder, Jacobi (1815, 409) argued that such reticence could easily be undone. “I fully agree with the view: that one must not extinguish candles until it is day,” he wrote in his response, “But it does no harm at least to undo the shutters” and thus avoid the fate of those “who out of fear of awakening too early have slept until a second sunset.”

Jacobi’s attack on the Berlin Enlightenment did not stop with the critique of its political views; he also questioned its understanding of the relationship between religion and reason. It was this issue that lay at the heart of the Pantheism Controversy. Jacobi’s reading of David Hume and Thomas Reid had convinced him that reason cannot attain certainty about the existence of external objects, and that our experience of such objects takes the form of a revelation that is beyond argument and rests on “faith” alone.<sup>26</sup> Carrying this dichotomy between the spheres of faith and knowledge into theology, he argued that reason alone can never lead to certainty of God’s existence. This, he claimed, was the lesson he took from Spinoza.<sup>27</sup>

I love Spinoza because he, more than any other philosopher, has  
led me to the full realization that certain things cannot be

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(Jacobi 1815, 399). The latter example is hardly compelling; with the exception of an oligarchy imposed by Sparta briefly at the close of the Peloponnesian war, Socrates’ Athens was a democracy.

<sup>26</sup> For the importance of Hume and Reid, see Hammacher 1971, 120-121; Jacobi’s most extended discussion of Hume is found in his *David Hume über die Glaube, oder Idealismus und Realismus* in Jacobi 1815, 127-288, esp. 152-153 and 156-163. This rather strange reading of Hume is aided by Jacobi’s translation of Hume’s “belief” by the German “*Glaube*” (which carries religious connotations not found, for example, in “*Meinung*”); see Merlan 1967 483-4 and di Giovanni’s discussion in Jacobi 1994, 90.

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of Jacobi’s use of Spinoza, see Beiser, 54-55, 79-91 and di Giovanni’s discussion in Jacobi 1994, 73-90.

unraveled: one must not turn one's eyes from them; rather they must be taken as they are found. ... I must assume a principle of thought and action that remains totally inexplicable to me. (Jacobi 1994, 193)

For Jacobi, the goal of philosophy was not to explain the *reasons* for what existed. Its aim was rather simply “to disclose, to reveal existence.”

Explanation is the means, the path to a goal, the next task — never the last task. This last task is what can never be explained: the irresolvable, the immediate, the simple. (Jacobi 1994, 194).

Spinoza's importance for Jacobi lay in his relentless attempt to provide a complete explanation for the world. His failure, in Jacobi's eyes, to account for human freedom demonstrated what resisted reason and had to be taken on faith alone.

Jacobi had already provided a sketch of this discussion of the limits of reason in a passage near the beginning of *Something Lessing Said* in which he argued that apologists for enlightened absolutism had fundamentally misunderstood the relationship between reason and the passions:

What distinguishes man from animals and shapes his particular species is the capacity to see a relationship among ends and to guide his conduct by this insight.

Out of this source of humanity flows, in all its tributaries, the same reason [*Vernunft*], only overflowing beds and between banks of immense diversity and size and hiding its efflux from all eyes. These beds, these banks are the passions. Many have wanted to see it differently, and — against all appearances and arguments —

have taken reason for the banks, and the passions for the stream.

(Jacobi 1996, 193)

Jacobi was not disparaging reason. Indeed, he argued that only when “man is determined in and by himself” can he be said to be “fully human.” “Where there is no freedom, no *self-determination*, there is no humanity” (Jacobi 1996, 193). He was, however, insisting (like Hume before him) on the relative weakness of reason in the face of the passions. Hence the difficulty facing political theory: civil society must be “an institution of reason and not of the passions, a means of freedom and not of slavery, constituted for beings who by nature stand in the middle between the two.” Because reason can “never command a passion as such” civil society must find a way of turning the passions against each other, in order “to inhibit or stop one passion by means of another (Jacobi 1996, 194). A creation of human reason, civil society was a mechanism for checking the passions by means of the passions. Its ultimate concern was not with making men good, but rather with protecting them from the actions of their fellow citizens.

That coercion without which the society cannot exist does not have as its object that which makes man *good*, but rather that which makes him *evil*; it has a *negative* rather than a *positive* purpose.

This purpose can be preserved and secured through external form; and everything positive, virtue and happiness, then arise of themselves from their own source. (Jacobi 1996, 204)

If we were looking for a brief summary of what liberalism meant in the eighteenth century, it would be difficult to improve on this passage.

### *Liberalism and the Limits of Reason*

This brief sketch of the political views of Mendelssohn and Jacobi has led us to what may strike some as an unexpected result: Jacobi, the relentless critic of the Enlightenment,

articulated a vision of civil society that was recognizably liberal, while Mendelssohn, the Enlightenment's faithful defender, elaborated a political philosophy that, in many respects, is difficult to square with liberal principles. Jacobi saw the function of legislation as fundamentally negative; its purpose was not to make men good, but rather to protect individual rights. Mendelssohn, in contrast, saw politics as performing an important role in the process of achieving our destiny. When the destinies of man and citizen come into conflict, the public good trump individual rights.

Perhaps this result should not be all that surprising. Blanket generalizations about "liberalism" and "the Enlightenment" rarely provide much insight into the messier relationships that make up the history of political thought. There are too many different tendencies within the various efforts at enlightenment in late eighteenth-century Europe to inspire much confidence in generalizations about them. Indeed, sometimes it appears that the only commentators confident in making generalizations about what "*the Enlightenment*" stood for are those who are in the process of dismissing it (see Schmidt 1998). The same may well be true of liberalism. Asking questions about the relationship between "*the Enlightenment*" and "liberalism" may be asking for trouble.

Yet there may still be a utility in such an exercise insofar as it reminds us of how multifaceted the various intellectual currents that we call the Enlightenment were and of the role that a certain skepticism about reason played within both the Enlightenment and liberalism. The story that has been sketched here suggests that it may well have been Mendelssohn's confidence in what reason could achieve that led him to adopt certain positions that prevent us from classifying him as a liberal. Likewise, Jacobi's doubts about the power of reason fueled both his critique of the Berlin Enlightenment and his advocacy of political positions that were more recognizably liberal than those adopted by Mendelssohn. Some support for the suspicion that liberalism may best be fostered by an awareness of the limits of reason may be found in the series of essays that Kant published

between 1784 and 1786 in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. Splitting the difference between Mendelssohn and Jacobi, they sketch a different way of thinking about the relationship between enlightenment and liberalism.

In his famous 1784 response to Zöllner's question, Kant articulated a conception of enlightenment that departed in significant ways from Mendelssohn's formulation (see Schmidt 1992). Defining enlightenment not in terms of what it achieves, but rather by what it escapes, he famously characterized it as mankind's departure from a state of "self-incurred immaturity." In doing so, he tied his definition of enlightenment to an uncompromising defense of the free public use of reason (see Laursen, 1996 and O'Neill, 1989, 28-50). Two years later, in "What is Orientation in Thinking?" — his contribution to the Pantheism Dispute — he insisted, against Jacobi, that in seeking "orientation" in speculative thinking, there is no need to appeal to "some alleged truth-sense, nor a transcendent intuition dubbed faith"; here, as elsewhere, "reason alone" suffices (Kant 1949, 134). At the same time he argued that Mendelssohn had greatly overestimated what reason could demonstrate and thus failed to see that his defense of traditional proofs the existence of God represented a "dogmatizing with pure reason" that, paradoxically, culminated in "philosophical fanaticism"(Kant 1949, 297). The essay closed with yet another emphatic defense of the freedom of the press.

As Onora O'Neill has suggested in a number of important essays,<sup>28</sup> Kant's defense of free and open public discussion is central to his understanding of the nature of reason itself. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant rejected the axiomatic procedures of the geometrician as a way of establishing the authority of reason and instead developed

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<sup>28</sup> See, in particular, O'Neill 1989, 3-27, especially 14-15, 17-20 and O'Neill 1990, 184-199, especially 190-4.

his argument through images drawn from law and politics. Critical philosophy, in this presentation, serves as “the true tribunal for all disputes of pure reason.”

In the absence of this critique reason is, as it were, in the state of nature, and can establish and secure its assertions and claims only through *war*. Critique, on the other hand, ... secures us the peace of a legal order, in which our disputes have to be conducted solely by the recognized method of *legal action*. ... The endless disputes of a merely dogmatic reason thus finally constrain us to seek relief in some critique of reason itself, and in a legislation based upon such criticism. (A751-2/B779-80)

When imported into philosophy, geometrical methods can produce only the “so many houses of cards” resting on foundations that must simply be accepted dogmatically (A727/B755). Reason, Kant insists, cannot derive its authority from such presuppositions. It “depends on freedom for its very existence” and “its verdict is always simply the agreement of free citizens, each of whom must be permitted to express ... his objections or even his veto” (A738-9/B766-7).

In his 1785 essay in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* on the relationship between theory and practice, Kant sketched a conception of the nature of civil society that was as emphatic as Jacobi’s in rejecting paternalistic conceptions of political rule. Kant insisted that a “paternal government,” established on the principle of “benevolence” towards its people, represented “the greatest conceivable *despotism*.” He called instead for a “*patriotic* government” in which each citizen is pledged to defend the individual’s right to liberty (Kant 1991, 74). We would seem to have returned to familiar ground: a defense of enlightenment and goes hand in hand with support for liberal principles of political rule. Kant limited what enlightened reason could promise while at the same time setting restrictions on what the state could attempt to achieve. In working out the historical

relationship between liberalism and the Enlightenment, Kant lends support to what the example of Mendelssohn and Jacobi has suggested: only an enlightenment that has learned to criticize itself can provide a secure foundation for liberal politics.

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