

## “Nothingness or a God”: Nihilism, Enlightenment, and “Natural Reason” in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s Works

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### Abstract

Our paper analyzes one of the most important philosophical problems of the philosophies of the Enlightenment: the problem of the emergence and the justification of the autonomy of reason. Our study will reflect on the critique of the autonomous reason, a critique brought by the Enlightenment thinkers themselves. Kant is one example of criticizing, and moreover securing the status of reason in the Enlightenment. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, however, was not only an adversary of transcendental philosophy, but also a radical critic of the concept of ‘reason.’ In Jacobi’s works, reason faced a powerful critique of its own mechanisms of justification. Jacobi’s main thesis is that reason is threatened by the prospect of nihilism lurking from inside its main body of axioms. His critique against nihilism from the point of view of a believer is nothing new to the history of ideas, but here the direction of the critique changes against the vein of the Modern Age’s mainstream views with respect to the relation between reason and faith: reason’s own standards of truth are deemed as incapable of securing a safe place for reason against the prospect of an overwhelming nihilism. Thus, Jacobi emphasizes again and again that reason or cognition must find its standard of truth outside itself, or else it must face the scene of nothingness.

**Keywords:** nihilism, natural reason, God, rationalism, atheism, Enlightenment

### The Enlightenment of Belief

In his article *Philosophe* from the *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, Du Marsais stated that “reason determines the action of the philosopher” as “grace determines the action of the Christian.” (Du Marsais 2010).

The ground was set for a differentiation of the status of reason from that of faith. The “philosophic spirit” is described in its turn as “a spirit of observation and of precision, which relates all things to their true principles.” However, “it is not the philosophic spirit alone which the philosopher cultivates, he carries his attention and his concerns further.” It is reason that “compels him to know, to study, and to work to acquire sociable qualities,” so the philosopher’s life is a life dedicated to a social mission: the enlightenment (moral and intellectual) of fellow human beings. The philosopher is “an honorable man who wishes to please and to make himself useful.” He is not a social hermit or a social outcast. His correct<sup>1</sup> and honorable use of reason illustrates a moral quality, “humanity:” “Feelings of probity enter as much into the mechanical constitution of the philosopher as the enlightenment of the mind.” In contrast to “fanatics” and “superstitious” people, the philosopher’s attitude towards reason will thoroughly influence his life and conduct, as well as the life and conduct of others:

“The more reason you find in a man, the more probity you will find in him. In contrast, where fanaticism and superstition reign, there reign the passions and anger. The temperament of the philosopher is to act according to the spirit of order or by reason; as he loves society deeply, it is more important to him than to the rest of men to make sure that all of his actions produce only effects that conform to the idea of the honorable man.” (Du Marsais 2010)

The article “Raison” from the same *Encyclopédie* has been published in 1765, the same year as the year of the publication of the “Philosophe”. Its author is unknown. The article proposes four basic meanings which can be granted to the notion of “reason:” reason as faculty, a “natural faculty with which God endowed men to know truth, whatever light it follows, and to whatever class of subjects it applies”; reason as “the same faculty considered, not absolutely, but only inasmuch as it functions in accordance with certain notions, which we bring with us at birth, and that are common to all men of the world” reason as “that very natural light by which the faculty that we refer to by this name is guided ... one ordinarily understands the term when one is speaking of a proof, or of an objection taken from reason, and which one wants to distinguish in this way from proofs and objections grounded in divine or human

authority (*qu'on veut distinguer par - là des preuves & des objections prises de l'autorité divine ou humaine*);” and, finally, reason as “the sequence of truths that the human mind can attain naturally, without being aided by the light of faith” (“Reason” 2010). There are two main types of truths: “*eternal* truths (*vérités éternelles*), which are absolutely necessary, to the point that the opposite would imply contradiction ... truths of which the necessity is logical, metaphysical, or geometric ...” and “*positive* truths (*positives*) ... the laws that it pleased God to give to nature, or because they depend on nature.” (“Reason” 2010)

The article states that the “eternal truths” cannot be contested by faith,<sup>2</sup> the “eternal” truths being “absolutely necessary,” and independent of any faith, opinion or belief. These are marked as “self-evident propositions.” This being the case, the author of the article is very keen in clearly distinguishing reason from faith: “it is now necessary to establish the precise boundaries that lie between faith and reason (*il faut maintenant marquer les bornes précises qui se trouvent entre la foi & la raison*).”

First, reason is impervious to “divine revelation” if “it contradicts what is known to us, either by immediate intuition, as in the case of self-evident propositions, or by obvious deductions of reason, as in demonstrations.” Reason is therefore the “true competent judge in every thing of which we have a clear and distinct idea,” since revelation cannot nullify the decrees of *natural reason*, although it can confirm these eternal truths, by agreeing with the “self-evident propositions.” Thus, reason can always defy the absurdities of faith, i.e. when propositions of faith are in contradiction with the eternal truths of reason: “Wherever we have a clear and evident judgment of reason, we cannot be forced to renounce it to embrace the contrary opinion under the pretext that it is a matter of faith. The reason for this is that we are men before we are Christians.”

Second, revelation can be of assistance in those cases where our natural reason is *beyond its jurisdiction*: “reason not being able to rise above probability, faith guides the mind where reason falls short.” If reason is uncertain of a truth *when*

*it is not self-evident*, and the mind only speculates in probable conjectures, the mind “is forced to give its assent to an account that it knows to come from he who can neither deceive nor be deceived.” Therefore, “when the principles of reason do not make us see plainly that a proposition is true or false, manifest revelation can resolve the mind, standing as *another principle of truth* (my emphasis). In this case, a proposition supported by revelation becomes a matter of faith, and is above reason.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, this explains the fact that *faith* may be able to guide the reason, where reason itself falls short.

The author of the article “Reason” stresses the importance of determining the exact place and jurisdiction of reason over faith. Against the alleged interest of several Enlightenment writers to limit the significance of faith to reason as such or really exclude faith from the affairs of human reason altogether, leaving reason alone – with its obvious limitations – to deal with metaphysical truths, this author, through his work of defining reason, which, supposedly, reflected the general view of the authors of the *Encyclopédie*, casts a new light on the Enlightenment’s general views on faith, and, obviously, on the limitations that reason must first set upon its own dealings with metaphysical and non-metaphysical truths. The mind is “uncertain of the truth of what is not self-evident to it;” therefore, on some occasions, on the path of its continuous and strenuous search for a certain amount of evidence, the mind seeks support from faith. The author of the article goes even further:

“This far extends the influence of faith, without doing violence to reason, which is neither harmed nor harried, but aided and perfected by new lights emanating from the eternal source of all knowledge. Everything that is based on the jurisdiction of revelation must prevail upon our opinions, on our prejudices and on our interests, and has the right to demand of the mind its perfect assent. But such submission of our reason to faith may not reverse the limits of human knowledge, and does not shake the foundations of reason. Instead it leaves us the liberty to employ our faculties for the purposes for which they were given.” (“Reason” 2010)

To take Kant, for example, he understood that determining the precise middle ground between faith and reason (generally understood) meant not only that man’s reason should be finally

freed from the absurd dictates of blind faith – a state of obscurity seen by Kant as a self-imposed state of nonage<sup>4</sup> – a dogmatism spawned by religious dogmas, individual or collective superstitions etc., but also that reason should free itself from its *own* shortcomings in relation to belief (Kant 2004, 150). Therefore, through his *Criticism*<sup>5</sup>, Kant thought he had found a way not only out of the dogmatism of "belief" (blind, unquestioned faith), but also out of the dogmatisms that were incumbent to the realm of reason itself, such as the "dogmatism of metaphysics." This particular 'dogmatism' of 'metaphysics' is in itself a source of "unbelief," a sort of dogmatism that ultimately leads, according to Kant, to skepticism. Another dogmatism of "unbelief" was, obviously, *atheism*, alongside *materialism* or *fatalism*:

"The *Critique* ... previously instructed us about our inevitable ignorance with respect to things in themselves, and ... restricted everything that we can *cognize* theoretically to mere appearances. (...) Now only through **critique** can *materialism*, *fatalism*, *atheism*, freethinking *unbelief*, *fanaticism*, and *superstition* (which can become universally harmful), and lastly *idealism* and *skepticism* (which are more dangerous for the schools, and can scarcely pass over into the public) be cut off at the very root. (...) The *Critique* is not opposed to the *dogmatic procedure* of reason in its pure cognition, as science (for science must always be dogmatic, i.e., it must always be rigorously proven from secure principles *a priori*), but to *dogmatism*, i.e., to the pretension of making progress in pure cognition from concepts (philosophical cognition) using only principles such as reason has long made use of, without inquiring into the manner and the right by which reason has arrived at those principles. *Dogmatism* therefore is the dogmatic procedure of pure reason, *without a preceding critique of reason's own ability*. Consequently, this opposition should not, under the self-assumed name of popularity, speak in favor of babbling superficiality, nor indeed of skepticism, which makes short work of metaphysics; on the contrary, the *Critique* is the necessary preliminary preparation for the advancement of a well-founded metaphysics as science, which necessarily must be worked out dogmatically and, in accordance with the strictest requirements, systematically, and so scholastically (not popularly), for this requirement on it is irremissible, since it obligates itself to carry out its business wholly *a priori*, hence to the complete satisfaction of speculative reason (...)" (Kant 2004, 150-153)

Regarding the realm of practical reason, Kant agrees that *freedom* (a postulate of practical reason), no less than *God*,

cannot be *cognized* theoretically, but only *thought* of as *transcendent* “principles” that “profess to pass beyond” the limits of experience, as opposed to *immanent principles*, “whose application is confined entirely within the limits of possible experience” (Kant 1965, A 296/B 352).<sup>6</sup> Later, in his *Critique of Judgment*, Kant will distinguish the aesthetic from the rational ideas, the latter being referred to as according to an objective principle which is “incapable of ever furnishing a cognition of the object” (cf. Caygill 1995). In the *Preface* to the Second Edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant agrees with limiting knowledge to the objects of possible experience and with the establishing of the “ideas” as objects of (rational) faith (Pomerleau 2012). He will therefore search – this is part of the nature of his critical inquiry into metaphysics – for the transcendental conditions of our capacity to speculate metaphysically, which he will find in the *a priori* ideas of pure reason (soul, universe, God). He will contend that some ideas serve a “regulative” function, and not a “constitutive” one (Kant 1965, A 180/B 222), in the sense that they do serve “the heuristic purpose of regulating our thought and action,” although they cannot constitute knowledge. *God*, *freedom*, and *immortality* are considered regulative ideas that function as “postulates of practical reason”, since “it is reasonable for us to postulate them as matters of rational faith.” (Kant 1965, A 3/B 7) To “postulate” these ideas means to believe in them, since they are enormously significant to our values and to our commitment to these values. Although none of these ideas are objects of any knowledge, they yield to a justifiable, subjective, yet rational belief – faith in God – which appears as a middle ground between objective knowledge and purely subjective, arbitrary opinion. (Kant 1965, A 822/B 850) This is part of what has been usually known as the “moral argument” of Kant’s *Critique of Practical Reason*. The argument contends that it is morally justified, or “morally necessary,” to follow Kant’s words, to see ideas, such as *God* or *immortality*, as arguments or hypotheses for a “rational faith.” God is a “regulative idea that can be shown to be a matter of rational belief.” Thus, the famous passage from the preface to the second edition of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, where he states that he had to “make

room for belief" in his criticism of knowledge appears as a justification of the role that "rational faith" had in Kant's endeavor to ascertain a justifiable place to faith in his criticism of traditional metaphysics:

"But since, for morals, I do not need anything more than that freedom merely does not contradict itself, and hence that it indeed at least permits of being thought without there being need for further insight into it, and that it therefore does not in any way obstruct the mechanism of nature regarding the very same action (taken in another respect), then, the doctrine of morality retains its place and the doctrine of nature keeps its as well, something that would not have taken place if the *Critique* had not previously instructed us about our inevitable ignorance with respect to things in themselves, and had not restricted everything that we can *cognize* theoretically to mere appearances. This same exposition of the positive benefit of the critical principles of pure reason can be produced with respect to the concept of *God* and the *simple nature* of our *soul*, which, however, I pass over for brevity's sake. I can therefore not so much as even *assume God, freedom, and immortality* on behalf of the necessary, practical use of my reason, if I do not at the same time *deprive* speculative reason of its pretension to transcendent insights, since, in order to achieve such insights, it must make use of principles which, because they in fact extend only to objects of possible experience, always change their object into appearance if they are indeed applied to something that cannot be an object of experience, and which therefore pronounce all *practical* expansion of pure reason to be impossible. I therefore had to cast out knowledge in order to make room for belief (my emphasis); the dogmatism of metaphysics, i.e., the *preconception that it makes progress without a critique of pure reason, is the true source of all the unbelief (always extremely dogmatic) which conflicts with morality.*(my emphasis)." (Kant 2004, 150)

Kant's main attempt at securing a certain role for "faith" in his rational reconstruction of metaphysics is not an isolated move. He is really following the trend of the Enlightenment, which saw *faith* as capable of establishing a *standard of truth* in those cases that natural reason could not reach beyond its jurisdiction. Kant succeeded in keeping a balance between faith and knowledge by recognizing the role of *faith* in supporting the standards of reason or, better yet, in providing justifiable arguments of faith with respect to things which were considered uncognizable, beyond any possible experience: God, immortality, freedom, the postulates of practical reason.

## Deism

The Enlightenment thinking in general succeeded in keeping a balance between faith and knowledge, by limiting the claims of reason and by transforming the character of faith – by integrating faith into a system of justifiable beliefs – of beliefs that function as standards for the advancement of knowledge, appealing to standards of truth which are beyond the limits of discursive thinking. Faith made an appeal to the source of all knowledge – which was God – without, at the same time, doing violence to reason and to the Enlightenment’s demands for a concept of “reason”.

However, the relation between faith and knowledge did not developed so harmoniously throughout the entire Age of the Enlightenment. Some of the authors of the *Encyclopédie* were facing charges of *atheism*, such as Diderot, a guest of the *salons* of the famous 18<sup>th</sup> century Baron D’Holbach. Bayle and Voltaire also had to respond to charges of atheism. However, among French intellectuals, only d’Holbach and later Naigeon practiced a militant atheism, based on a purely materialistic explanation of the world.<sup>7</sup> During his visit to France, Hume had also been a guest of the atheists’ *salons*. He was actually a Deist, reluctant to Christian dogmas, influenced by Hobbes, Locke, Shaftesbury, Pope, and Bolingbroke. Atheism is considered to have appeared as a doctrine in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as an effect of the emergence of religious toleration. Nevertheless, militant atheism professed in the *salons* was still rejected by the intellectual majority.

The fate of atheism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was complicated by the emergence of Deism among the intellectuals of the Enlightenment. The authors of the *Encyclopédie* were also Deists. Deism was a philosophical form of understanding religious truths, which supported the idea of a Deity that should be fully explainable by reason and not by revelation or dogma. However, the article “Raison” of the *Encyclopédie* spoke clearly about revelation and about revealed truth as a support for the truths of reason.

Generally, the Deists were tolerant and non-atheists. Their doctrine, though, left a deep mark upon the



Enlightenment philosophies. They emphasized the necessity of understanding faith as a sustainable argument of belief – from here emerged the idea of a “rational faith” or rational belief in a God that did not resemble much to the God of the Christian tradition, but rather to a God imagined by philosophers. In Diderot’s own words: “I believe in God, although I live very happily with atheists.” The transformation inside the concept of “faith” itself came from the Enlightenment thinkers’ original belief in the sanctity of man and the inviolability of human freedom:

Mais il faut être bien peu philosophe soi-même, pour ne pas sentir que le plus beau privilège de notre raison consiste à ne rien croire par l’impulsion d’un instinct aveugle & mécanique, & que c’est deshonorer la raison, que de la mettre dans des entraves ainsi que le faisoient les Chaldéens. L’homme est né pour penser de lui-même.<sup>8</sup>

The article *Athéisme* from the *Encyclopédie*, authored by Formey (Formey 2012), described atheism as “the opinion of those who deny the existence of a God in the world.” Thus, the simple ignorance of God is not really *atheism*. But “to be charged with the odious title of *atheism* one must have the notion of God and reject it:”

[*Athéisme*] c’est l’opinion de ceux qui nient l’existence d’un Dieu auteur du monde. Ainsi la simple ignorance de Dieu ne ferait pas l’*athéisme*. Pour être chargé du titre odieux d’*athéisme*, il faut avoir la notion de Dieu, & la rejeter. L’état de doute n’est pas non plus l’*athéisme* formel: mais il s’en approche ou s’en éloigne, à proportion du nombre des doutes, ou de la manière de les envisager. On n’est donc fondé à traiter d’*athées* que ceux qui déclarent ouvertement qu’ils ont pris parti sur le dogme de l’existence de Dieu, & qu’ils soutiennent la négative. Cette remarque est très importante, parce que quantité de grands hommes, tant anciens que modernes, ont fort légèrement été taxés d’*athéisme*, soit pour avoir attaqué les faux dieux, soit pour avoir rejeté certains arguments faibles, qui ne concluent point pour l’existence du vrai Dieu. (...) L’*athéisme* ne se borne pas à défigurer l’idée de Dieu, mais il la détruit entièrement. (Formey 2012)

### *Aut Deus, aut nihil*<sup>9</sup>

Facing the dire consequences of dealing with a religious faith that was strongly directed towards the imperatives of reason, some Enlightenment thinkers began to have second thoughts about reason's *ability* to master the issues which itself was trying to address: for example, the issues of *God, immortality of the soul, human freedom, etc.* Their concerns materialized into expressing doubts about the real capacity of reason to ascertain not only the truths of religion, but also its own (immutable) truths. Soon, these doubts cohered into a full-blown critique of human reason, yet not in a Kantian manner. These critiques appeared on the occasion of the "pantheism controversy" in Germany, sparked by a dialogue between the philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and the dramatist Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Lessing, an upholder of Spinozism, was criticized by Jacobi as supporter of a dogmatic *atheist* philosophy – the philosophy of Spinoza. The controversy emerged roughly around 1785, on the occasion of the publication of Jacobi's *Letters on the Teachings of Spinoza*.<sup>10</sup> The second edition appeared in 1789, and readdressed Jacobi's critique on Spinoza's substance, which was deemed as *materialistic* substance. Jacobi also saw Spinoza's materialism as a consequence of Enlightenment's treatment of reason; therefore, pantheism was strictly equated with materialism and, finally, as a form of *atheism*. Actually, Jacobi's critique went even further. He complained about reason's inability to master its own powers and about the rationalistic project altogether: reason is not only incapable of mastering its own powers, but everything touched by it turns into *atheism* and, consequently, *nihilism*. A treatment of reason as 'dogmatic' as the Enlightenment's reason was bound to fail, precisely because *this* reason rejected faith altogether. Moses Mendelssohn was Jacobi's most important critic: he ridiculed him for confusing Spinozism with atheism and for lack of philosophical *savoir-faire*.<sup>11</sup> The first (1785) edition summed up Jacobi's critique quite clearly, in a few theses:

"Spinozism is atheism. (...) The Leibnizian-Wolffian philosophy is no less fatalistic than the Spinozist philosophy and leads the persistent

researcher back to the principles of the latter. (...) Every avenue of demonstration ends up in fatalism. We can only demonstrate similarities. Every proof presupposes something already proven, the principle of which is Revelation. Faith is the element of all human cognition and activity." (Jacobi 1994, 233-234)

This is, roughly, the sum of Jacobi's entire work in a few sentences. A later work, entitled *David Hume Über den Glauben, oder Idealismus und Realismus* (Jacobi 1994, 252-339) was another reply of Jacobi to Mendelssohn's critique of the Jacobian *Glaube* (belief). In the 1815 edition of *David Hume on Faith or Idealism and Realism. A Dialogue. Preface and also Introduction to the Author's Collected Philosophical Works*, Jacobi will state the same thing: "all human cognition derives from revelation and faith (my emphasis)." (Jacobi 1994, 538)

Basically, Jacobi's argument against rationalistic philosophy in general consisted on four main accusations against rationalism: any consistent version of the rationalist view of reason as a ground for explanation will lead to a dogmatic system, which can be characterized as: 1) monistic, 2) atheistic, 3) fatalistic, and 4) nihilistic.<sup>12</sup> I will refer here mainly to nihilism.

Jacobi will criticize the main argument of rationalistic philosophy with reference to a First Cause, the knowledge of which is based on the Principle of Sufficient Reason, guided by the idea of "infinite intelligibility" of a finite series ending in a *causa sui* (Franks 2000, 97). The First Cause, Jacobi states, cannot be proven of as transcending the "totality of series of conditions,"<sup>13</sup> since reason itself is only a formula of *conditioned conditioning*, working within a series of conditioned conditions: "to want to discover the conditions of the unconditional; to want to *invent* a possibility for what is absolutely necessary, and to construct it in order to comprehend it, seems on the face of it an absurd undertaking." (Jacobi 1994, 376)

If rationalism tries to prove its hypothesis, the Principle of Sufficient Reason will require that finite realities should be part of an infinite substance (a monistic worldview). On the other hand, rationalism is atheistic, because reason in itself is atheistic: only belief in a transcendent reality is genuinely theistic (Franks 2000, 98). If finite conditions are dependent of an infinite monistic reality, then there really is no freedom for

human beings: freedom is seen here as a capacity to *generate*, to initiate finite series of conditions, which, according to rationalism itself, seems impossible. The infinite substance hypothesized by rationalism denies the existence of finite entities: furthermore, it denies its own existence as an entity. The clear consequence of this is that rationalism asserts that All is Nothing. The result is absurd (Franks 2000, 98).

Thus, atheism, along with its nihilism, is, according to Jacobi, “the indirect consequence of man’s attempt to understand nature for theoretical and practical purposes.” (Jacobi 1994, 361) This is a full-scale critique of the philosophical notion of reason seen both as theoretical-instrumental, and as practical-instrumental.<sup>14</sup>

Jacobi starts to develop another perspective with respect to cognition: “the principle of cognition is living being,” because cognition understood through and as “the faculty of abstraction and language,” really suggests the fact that “our philosophical understanding does not reach *beyond* its own creation,” so that “we understand perfectly what we thus create, to the extent that it *is* our creation. And whatever does not allow being created in this way, we do not understand.” (Jacobi 1994, 370) Ironically, the only thing which does not fall under the laws of the all-encompassing reason is the real world itself, that is, “the actual existence of a temporal world made up of individual finite things producing and destroying one another in succession,” that “can in *no way* be conceptualized, which is to say, it is not *naturally* explicable.” (Jacobi 1994, 373) However, the fate of reason is not utterly doomed. Jacobi suggests that there could be a way of redressing the role of reason, by returning to what he names as a “natural reason.” “Natural reason,” in Jacobi’s view, is reason’s capacity of seeing the world *as it is*, as a temporal world, beyond abstraction, without transforming “the natural into something supernatural.”

“But reason need not despair because of this incomprehensibility, for knowledge forces itself upon it, so to speak; namely, the knowledge that the condition of the possibility of the existence of a temporal world lies outside the region of its concepts, that is to say, outside that complex of conditioned beings which is nature. So when reason searches for that condition, it is searching for something extra-natural or supernatural within what is natural; or again, it is trying

to transform the natural into something supernatural." (Jacobi 1994, 373)

The basic argument against rationalism as nihilism – actually it was the first text where Jacobi used the exact term "nihilism" – appears in Jacobi's famous open letter to Fichte (*Jacobi an Fichte*, 1799)<sup>15</sup> where Jacobi criticizes Fichte's rationalism and explicitly accuses him of "nihilism." Jacobi's reply attacked the essence of Fichte's philosophical thinking, his rationalism, precisely at a time when Fichte was under intense criticism from the part of the religious circles in Germany. Jacobi's accusation of atheism couldn't have come at a worse time for Fichte. He was in the middle of the so-called "Atheist dispute," which was generated by Fichte's 1798 essay *Über den Grund unsers Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung*. Because of these accusations, Fichte was forced to resign from his academic position in Jena and to leave for Berlin.

Jacobi's main points of accusation relied on his earlier critique against Leibnizian rationalism and transcendental philosophy. He criticized especially the philosophical tendency to theorize upon the notion of God in the most rigorous manner:

"It would not be any reproach to Transcendental Philosophy that it does not know anything about God, for it is universally acknowledged that God cannot be known, but only believed in. A God who could be known would not be a God at all. But a merely artificial faith in Him is also impossible as faith; for in so far as it only wants to be artificial – i.e. simply scientific or purely rational – it abolishes natural faith and, with that, itself as faith as well: hence theism is abolished as a whole." (Jacobi 1994, 500)

Here, Jacobi clearly recognizes that faith is incompatible with reason and that between these two there cannot be any sort of compromise. Either reason abolished faith, or vice versa. Actually, here Jacobi is confronting us with a dilemma that has been troubling philosophical thinking for centuries. Is faith really incompatible with reason? Is there just one way of acknowledging God?

Jacobi defined his philosophy as a "non-philosophy," that had its essence in "non-knowledge." (Jacobi 1994, 500) He accused both materialism and idealism of supporting the same method of "attempting to explain everything from a self-determining matter alone or from a self-determining

intelligence ... their opposing courses do not take them apart at all, but rather bring them gradually nearer to each other until they finally touch.” (Jacobi 1994, 502) He accused both materialism, and idealism of philosophical monism which would eventually lead to fatalism. Against Fichte, he issues a warning: a philosophy understood only as a construct of pure reason is only an illusion, since “pure reason only takes hold of itself,” without saying anything about the external world. Moreover, a philosophy of pure reason would only turn real things into empty abstractions and futile illusions. A rationalistic philosophy would only transform the thing into pure *nothingness*: “For man knows only in that he comprehends, and he comprehends only in that, by changing the real thing into mere shape, he turns the shape into the thing and the thing into nothing.” At the core of rationalism lies a very treacherous and concealed *nihilism*. The reference to Fichte’s “I” is unmistakable:

“Since outside the mechanism of nature I encounter nothing but wonders, mysteries and signs; and I feel a terrible horror before the nothing, the absolutely indeterminate, the utterly void (these three are one: the Platonic infinite!), especially as the object of philosophy or aim of wisdom; yet, as I explore the mechanism of nature of the I as well as if the not-I, I attain only to the *nothing-in-itself*; and I am so assailed, so seized and carried away by it in my transcendental being (personally, so to speak), that, just in order to empty out the infinite, I cannot help wanting to fill it, as an infinite nothing, a pure-and-total-in-and-for-itself (were it not simply impossible!): since, I say, this is the way it is with me and the science of the true, or more precisely, the true science, I therefore do not see why I, as a matter of taste, should not be allowed to prefer my philosophy of non-knowledge to the philosophical knowledge of the nothing, at least in *fugam vacui*. I have nothing confronting me, after all, except nothingness; and even chimeras are a good match for that.” (Jacobi 1994, 519)

Only a “natural reason,” which man already possesses, Jacobi argues, would accept “to call a God who is *non-personal* a God *who is not*, a non-entity.” (Jacobi 1994, 520) Is God a figment of my imagination, then? Yes, but only to the non-believer of rationalistic philosophy:

“Hence do I claim: Man finds God because he can find himself only in God; and he is to himself unfathomable to him. ‘Necessarily,’ for

otherwise there would reside in man a supra-divine power, and God would have to be capable of being invented by man. God would then only be the thought of someone finite, something imaginary, and by no means the Highest Being who subsists in Himself alone, the free creator of all the other beings, the beginning and the end. This is not how it is, and for this reason man loses himself as soon as he resists finding himself in God as his creator, in a way inconceivable to his reason; as soon as he wants to ground himself in himself alone. Then everything gradually dissolves for him into his own nothingness. Man has this choice, however, and this alone: *Nothingness or a God* (emphasis mine). If he chooses nothingness, he makes himself unto a God, that is, he makes a phantom into God, for it is impossible, if there is no God, that man and all that surrounds him should be anything but a phantom. I repeat: God is, and is outside me, a living, self-subsisting being, or I am God. There is no third." (Jacobi 1994, 524)

## Conclusion

Thus, Jacobi reiterates the dilemma: either God or nothingness. Facing a powerful critique of its own mechanisms of justification, Enlightenment's reason, at least with respect to the rationalistic worldview, is threatened by the prospect of nihilism lurking from inside its main body of axioms. Jacobi's critique against nihilism from the point of view of a believer is not something entirely new to philosophical thinking. However, the relentless criticism against *reason's* own standards of truth leaves no choice in front of the alleged overwhelming nihilism: reason or cognition must find its standard of truth outside itself, or else it must face the prospect of nothingness.<sup>16</sup> Reason cannot be autonomous without being itself condemned to its own illusion of power. The Enlightenment's vision of an all-powerful, autonomous reason is thus shattered. If there is not a human cognition in the shape of a "non-philosophy" that could find its roots in revelation of faith or in "non-knowledge," then philosophical reason is doomed to dream its own dream of godlessness and self-deception.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> “The world is full of intelligent people and very intelligent people, who always judge; they always guess, because to judge without a sense of when one has a proper reason to judge is to guess. They do not know the extent of the human mind; they believe that everything can be known: thus they are ashamed not to be able to pronounce judgement and imagine that intelligence consists in judging. The philosopher believes that it consists in judging well: he is more satisfied with himself when he has suspended the faculty of making a decision than he would be to have come to a decision before having a sense of the proper reason for a decision.” (Du Marsais 2010)

<sup>2</sup> “Now it is those last truths that faith would never oppose.” („Reason” 2010)

<sup>3</sup> All of the above quotes appear in „Reason” 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. (Kant 2012): “Enlightenment is man’s emergence from his self-imposed nonage. Nonage is the inability to use one’s own understanding without another’s guidance. This nonage is self-imposed if its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in indecision and lack of courage to use one’s own mind without another’s guidance. *Dare to know!* (*Sapere aude.*) ‘Have the courage to use your own understanding,’ is therefore the motto of the enlightenment.”

<sup>5</sup> The newest Romanian analysis of Kant’s critique of metaphysics can be found in (Bondor 2013, 119 ff.)

<sup>6</sup> See article “Transcendent” in Caygill (1995).

<sup>7</sup> Materialism was a constant preoccupation for many of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century French intellectuals: Helvetius, La Mettrie, Condorcet, Cabanis, de Sade, Volney, Laplace, De Tracy, Benjamin Constant, Lamarck, Saint-Simon, Thurot, Stendhal, etc.

<sup>8</sup> Diderot. 1976. “Chaldeans”. In *L’Encyclopédie II (Lettres B-C), Oeuvres complètes*, edités par John Lough et Jacques Proust. Volume 6: 331. Paris: Hermann.

<sup>9</sup> The expression is a title of an English book against atheism published in 1659 by Vincent Hattecliffe: *Aut Deus aut nihil. God or nothing, or, a logical method comprised in twelve propositions, deducing from the actual being of what we evidently experience, the unavoidable necessity of a God, against the atheists of our age and nation*. It suggest the dilemma faced by the honest defender of religion against atheism who, confronted with atheist theses, is forced to reject atheism altogether, due to the common opinion that atheism draws attention to the perspective of nihilism concerning reality as such.



<sup>10</sup> For references to this work and other major works of Jacobi, see (Jacobi 1994).

<sup>11</sup> See Mendelssohn's reply in Jacobi (1994, 350-358).

<sup>12</sup> See the sketching of Jacobi's critique in (Franks 2000).

<sup>13</sup> (Franks 2000, 98): "(...) if the First Cause transcended the totality of series of conditions, temporally (by existing prior to creation) or modally (by being capable of existing without creation), either there would be some *prior* reason for creation (whether regarded as a temporal act or as an eternal actuality) and the First Cause would not be first, or the First Cause would be conditioned by nothingness, contravening the Principle. (...) First Cause can (therefore must) be the totality of the series of conditions, regarded as an infinite whole prior to its finite parts, or the *ens realissimum* of which all realities are limitations. Therefore, infinite intelligibility requires all finite realities to be modifications of one infinite substance: in short, the Principle of Sufficient Reason entails that reality be a monistic system, which philosophy should mirror."

<sup>14</sup> See, for comparison, Heidegger's own critique of nihilistic reason in (Heidegger 1982).

<sup>15</sup> The text appears as *Jacobi to Fichte* in (Jacobi 1994, 497-536).

<sup>16</sup> "If this is not to happen – if the divine in man is not to be delusion, if truth and purified reason are to be godlessness instead, then the non-knowledge of an entirely different kind. It must be that place of truth which is inaccessible to science." (Jacobi 1994, 533)

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