IF A NATIVE OF ETHIOPIA were on a Sudden transported into Europe, and plac’d either at Paris or Venice at a time of Carnival, when the general face of mankind was disguis’d and almost every Creature wore a Mask; t’is probable he woul’d for some time be at a stand, before he discover’d the Cheat: not imagining that a whole People cou’d be so fantastical, as upon agreement, at an appointed time, to transform themselves by a Variety of Habits, and make it a Solemn Practice to impose on one another, by this universal confusion of Characters and Persons. Tho he might at first perhaps have looked on this with a serious eye, it wou’d be hardly possible for him to hold his Countenance, when he had perceiv’d what was carrying on. The Europeans, on their Side, might laugh perhaps at the Simplicity. But our Ethiopian wou’d certainly laugh with better reason. [xxiv] T’is easy to see which of the two wou’d be ridiculous, bear a double share of Ridicule. However, shou’d it so happen, that in the Transport of ridicule, our Ethiopian, having his Head still running upon Masks, and knowing nothing of the fair Complexion and Common Dress of the Europeans, shou’d upon the Sight of a natural face and Habit, laugh just as heartily as before: wou’d not he in his turn become ridiculous, by carrying the jest too far; when by a silly presumption he took Nature for mere Art, and mistook perhaps a Man of Sobriety and Sense for one of those ridiculous Mummers.


Our friend’s allegiance to Spinozism, it is claimed, is no mere hypothesis, as the Patriarch in *Nathan* puts it, that one only contrives for the sake of debating the pros and contras of an argument.³ A man of established reputation in the republic of learned letters, Mr. Jacobi, steps before the public and declares it to be a veritable fact: Lessing was really and truly a Spinozist. The proofs adduced in this public heresy trial, he claims, can be found in an epistolary exchange
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between himself, a third party, \(^4\) and me, and it is further alleged that this correspondence establishes the fact [of Lessing’s Spinozism] beyond the shadow of a doubt.

This correspondence is actually the inciting reason behind my having sped up, quite contrary to my intention, the release of my *Morning Hours; or, Lectures on the Existence of God*, a work whose plan was conceived some years before. \(^2\) I mentioned this inciting reason in the preface to the first part of the *Morning Hours*; the correspondence itself, I hoped, would then follow in the second part. From the beginning I had intended to place this philosophical dispute [about the Spinozism of Lessing] at the front and center of the work, and I received permission from Mr. Jacobi to use his letters in whatever way I wished. But then some rather troubling concerns presented themselves. The matter seemed too delicate, and the reader too unprepared, to allow me to jump straightway into the middle of such an awkward inquiry. I wanted first to bring the subject [of Spinozism] itself into clear focus and only then enter upon the question of how things stood with the various persons involved with the subject; I wanted to begin by laying out for inspection my own ideas about Spinozism, about what is harmful and what is innocuous in this system, and only then examine whether this or that person was a follower of the system, and in what sense he had taken it up. \(^3\)

Was Lessing a Spinozist? Did Jacobi hear this from Lessing himself? In what circumstances and in what mood did they both find themselves when this confidentiality was shared? We [[Jacobi and I] could postpone these questions until we and our readership had come to a mutual understanding about the subject before us: what Spinozism really was or was not. I therefore altered my initial intention, and I decided to refrain from making use of my correspondent’s kind permission until the second part of the work. But I see that he judged it to be better to rush ahead of me. Unworried by its consequences, he throws into the public sphere an apple of discord. \(^5\) He accuses our friend Gotthold Ephraim Lessing—the editor of the *Fragments*, the author of *Nathan*, known to the world as the great and admired defender of theism and of the religion of reason—he accuses him of being a Spinozist, an atheist, and a blasphemer. What are we supposed to do now? \(^4\) Do we want to undertake the defense of our friend? The harshest inquisitorial court never begrudged the accused heretic the benefit of a defense. But I would have thought we could confidently let the author of *Nathan* mount his own defense, and if I were Plato or Xenophon, I would be well advised not to write a defense speech for this Socrates. To say “Lessing” in the same breath as one says “hypocrite,” to mention the author of *Nathan* in one breath with the word “blasphemer”—whoever can do this would...
be a man to attempt the impossible and might even find it an easy matter to join “Lessing” and “simpleton” together in a single thought. However, since I have already gotten entangled in this affair, and Mr. Jacobi has summoned me, first in private letters and now before all the world, to take up the case of our friend, let us jointly examine the basis of the accusation! Hiding nothing from your eyes, I shall go through the charges of the indictment; [5] I will offer additional details to fill out the presentation of the facts where my own involvement is touched upon, and I will add commentary where I find it to be necessary.

4 In his own account of the matter, Mr. Jacobi says he had heard from a friend [Elise Reimarus] that Mendelssohn had just set about writing something concerning Lessing’s character, and he inquired of her how much, or how little, Mendelssohn had known of Lessing’s religious convictions. He wrote: Lessing had been a Spinozist.

5 “My friend [Elise Reimarus],” he informs us, “perfectly grasped my import, and the matter seemed to her extremely important, and that very moment she wrote to Mendelssohn to reveal to him the information to which I had made her privy.”

6 He continues: “Mendelssohn was astonished, and his first impulse was to doubt the accuracy of my testimony.” [6]

7 That I was astonished is not properly a part of the simple presentation of the facts, but the narrator’s conjecture. The information to which Mr. Jacobi made our mutual friend privy, and that she in turn had revealed to me, could in point of fact never have aroused in me any such impulse as he describes. Neither Lessing’s high repute nor that of any other human being could ever dislodge me in the slightest degree from my conviction that Spinozism is false. Nor could this information have any influence upon my friendship for Lessing, nor could my view of Lessing’s genius and character suffer in the least because of it. Lessing is a follower of Spinoza? Oh well! What do speculative doctrines have to do with human beings? Who would not be overjoyed to count Spinoza himself as his friend, however much of a Spinozist he may have been? Who refuses to admit the truth of Spinoza’s genius and noble character? [7] As long as one had not yet accused my friend of being a secret blasphemer, and therefore also of being a hypocrite, I felt rather indifferent about the information that Lessing was a Spinozist. I knew that there was a purified Spinozism that can make common cause with all that religion and morality ask of us in a practical way, as I had amply shown in my Morning Hours. I knew that this purified Spinozism was able to be brought into harmony especially with Judaism, and that Spinoza, his speculative doctrine notwithstanding, would have been able to remain an orthodox Jew if he had not in some of his other writings called into question
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the authentic core of Judaism—its legislation—and, as a consequence, removed himself from it. The doctrine of Spinoza is obviously much closer to Judaism than it is to the orthodox teaching of Christians, so if I could love Lessing, and be loved by him, when he was still a strict follower of Athanasius, or when I at least took him for one, why then should I not love him all the more when he came closer to Judaism and I recognized him to be a follower of the Jew Baruch Spinoza? [8] The appellation “Jew and Spinozist” could never be so startling to me, nor so irksome, as it perchance may be to Mr. Jacobi.

Finally, I had also for some time been quite aware that our friend had been inclined to pantheism in his earliest youth, and that he not only found a way to connect it to his religious system but had even attempted to demonstrate the truth of the creed of Athanasius on the basis of it. The passage from a youthful treatise that I had occasion to cite in my Morning Hours shows this quite clearly. I had received from him this treatise for my perusal at the very beginning of our acquaintance.

The information, then, that Lessing was a Spinozist could be for me neither surprising nor strange. [9] But the fact that I was made a gift of it by Mr. Jacobi was highly unpleasant, I must confess. Basically, I was previously unacquainted with Mr. Jacobi, though I was aware of his merits as a writer, but in the field of metaphysics I had never seen anything from him. Also, I did not know that he enjoyed a friendship with Lessing and had personal contact with him. So I treated his information as a mere anecdote that perhaps he had picked up from some traveler. We know this class of travelers in Germany, the ones who carry around their souvenir albums from place to place, and whenever they see or hear something about some notable figure, they hawk it about in great haste and zeal from one end of the country to the other, or even give it out to the press for publication. Such a man, I thought, had perhaps picked up a half-understood word from Lessing, or maybe Lessing had written that Greek motto of his in the traveler’s souvenir album:

One and All, [10]

and the anecdote monger had turned Lessing straightaway into a Spinozist. However, I quite clearly saw how one might be inclined to make this the instigating cause for a trial of Lessing. The study of natural history has gotten Germans into the habit of classifying everything. When they are not able to quite take the measure of the sentiments and writings of a man, they grasp the first available opportunity to pigeonhole him within some category and turn him into some “-ist,” as if with this one stroke they had taken care of all remaining loose ends.
I really was then on the point of writing about Lessing’s character, and I sensed pretty clearly that this anecdote would lead me far astray from my goal. It would involve me in disputes and inquiries that were not in tune with my intentions. I saw that the anecdote would inveigle me into thorny subtleties and force me to renew a quarrel that should have been finished long ago. [11] It was therefore highly unwelcome to me, this pronouncement of Mr. Jacobi, and I pressed for further explanation: How and in what circumstances and with what precise terms had Lessing made known his Spinozism? I pressed these questions on Mr. Jacobi with perhaps a little too much energy, but they were appropriate given the matter at hand. I was, after all, not disposed to sparing his feelings.

I received in full measure the further explanation that I had asked for. A missive addressed to me by Mr. Jacobi gave me abundant evidence to conclude that I had been rather mistaken about my man, that Jacobi had penetrated more deeply into the subtleties of Spinoza’s doctrine than I suspected, that he really had had personal contact with Lessing, that he had held intimate colloquies with him, and that therefore the information about Lessing’s being a follower of Spinoza was no mere anecdote mongering. It had to have issued from those intimacies. [12]

Whoever has experienced such intimate colloquies, whoever has had the good fortune to enjoy them, will not cast doubt on the honesty and fidelity of what issues from them. In this sanctum of friendship one opens oneself not only head to head, but heart to heart, and one allows all one’s secret corners and recesses to be exposed to the other’s view. One friend reveals to the other all his secret doubts, weaknesses, shortcomings, and infirmities so that they can be brought beneath, and perhaps also be healed by, the touch of the friend’s hand. Whoever has not tasted the pleasure of an hour of such an outpouring of the heart has never in his life felt true cheer. Oh, what pain it must have caused poor Rousseau when in the fullness of his heart he languished after such spiritual refreshment but instead encountered in the other man a mind like a rock face that drove him back with redoubled force! [13]

If the colloquy that Jacobi held with Lessing were of this kind, we of course would have nothing to bring forward to excuse our friend, and we would simply be compelled to acquiesce to the fact that Lessing was the most enigmatic character that has ever lived, a strange mixture of hypocrisy and resoluteness of spirit, a man in one respect closed in upon himself to the point of total obstinacy and in another respect open to the point of puerile frivolity. But I would be deeply grieved for my own sake, for the sake of my friend Lessing, and for the sake of Mr. Jacobi himself if this were so.
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14 For my own sake, since I confess that it would greatly depress me if our friend Lessing, with whom I lived in intimate friendship for over thirty years, with whom I carried on an unceasing quest for the truth, and with whom I held constant commerce, in both speech and writing, about these very matters of the most vital import; [14] that I, who so loved him and who was loved by him, that I should not have been judged worthy of the same confidence that another man, a mere mortal like me, had learned how to receive after only a few days of friendly social contact. I confess my weakness. I know of no earthly creature whom I would not envy for being so preferred.

15 For the sake of our friend Lessing, for how far must he have fallen in the last days of his life if he had said all those things that he is supposed to have said in this colloquy in complete and sincere confidence. In this colloquy he appears not to be the bold and decisive thinker who follows his reason and lets it guide him whenever he strays into error. He appears to be a stale atheist, not from the school of [Thomas] Hobbes or [Baruch] Spinoza, but one of those childish wags who makes a sport of kicking at whatever happens to be important and dear to his neighbor. [15]

16 Mr. Jacobi, however, admits to having condensed and compressed his report of the conversations. But, in line with his well-known sense of honesty, we can certainly assume that the principal point of the whole affair did not suffer from this treatment, and that what he attributed to each person was actually what was said. Still, one discovers not one sound thought in anything that Lessing brings forward. All the rational arguments are scored to Mr. Jacobi’s advantage. He defends Spinozism with all the ingenuity that can possibly be made to serve this system. Lessing does not make the slightest objection worthy of any interest; he permits the sort of arguments to stand as correct and valid that he and I in earlier conversations had so many times before tested for soundness and upon whose real worth we had passed judgment, and when his friend here and there lets him get a word in, it is only a strained effort at brilliance that ends up for the most part being just some blasphemous wisecrack. [16] Could Lessing have so completely forgotten himself in the midst of this sincere outpouring of his heart? And what about that whole matter of his judgment regarding the poem “Prometheus” that Jacobi put into his hands and that Lessing was so taken with?8 He certainly could not have put it into his hands because of its literary merits, but only because of its daring content. The poor art critic! How far you must have sunk to have been in earnest when you judged this paltry production to be of some merit! In better days I saw him on a number of occasions return into the hands of some poet far more tolerable verses with the words, “Pretty good, my friend, pretty good! But what was the point of writing verse? You should first make sure that
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your thoughts would meet with your approval if they were framed in prose!” Mr. Jacobi apparently suffered from qualms of conscience about printing these verses without providing a prophylaxis against them, so he therefore inserted in his book an inoffensive page that the reader of tender conscience could use as a replacement for the bedeviling verses. My sense is that Lessing would have definitely found the prophylaxis to be more noxious than the poison itself. Anyone who could lose his faith because of such poor verses must surely have had little to lose. In a word, in all of Lessing’s contribution to this colloquy, I cannot recognize the least trace of his character, and where there ought to be an earnest but friendly confidentiality, I find nothing of his penetrating mind and inventiveness, nothing of his philosophy and his critical acumen.

But for Mr. Jacobi’s sake, I would also be deeply grieved if he himself had taken this colloquy as an expression of a confidential trust that our friend had reposed in him. All the friends and acquaintances of Mr. Jacobi praise his integrity and admire his heart even more than his intellectual gifts. But how can his conduct in regard to Lessing be reconciled with this vaunted integrity? His friend places in his lap a confession, and then he reveals it to the public; his friend makes him privy in the last days of his life to his weakness, and he then seeks to use it to vilify his memory in coming ages. He raises accusations at great length against one whom he calls his friend, without being able to bring forward any other witness to the crime except for one person: himself. One person only as witness, himself, for by his own admission he was an accomplice; indeed he played the major part in this affair and had rather entrapped his friend than discovered him already on the path of crime. He is in the end careful enough to keep open for himself a back door through which to make his retreat and escape from the grasp of atheism, returning to the safety of the banner of faith. But why does he slam the door shut behind himself and not let his poor accomplice also slip through? Why must this poor fellow stand there unarmed, defenseless, and utterly abandoned? I repeat again: if Jacobi himself had really believed that Lessing had entrusted him with a secret that he wanted to keep concealed, one would find it difficult to account for his behavior.

But even more incomprehensible, I think, would be his conduct in regard to me. In the opening pages of his book he explains that Lessing let him know that he treasured me most highly among his friends; then, in one of his philosophical conversations with Lessing, he, Jacobi, expressed his astonishment that a man like me could have been able to so zealously embrace the proof for the existence of God based on the idea of God, as I do in my treatise on certainty; and “Lessing’s apologies,” Jacobi goes on to say, “immediately led me to the question whether he had ever put forward his own doctrine as a challenge to Mendels-

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Lessing showed forbearance toward my weakness, apologized for my zeal for
metaphysical a priori reasoning, and kept his true system hidden from me, his
so highly treasured friend, apparently so as not to rob me of a conviction with
which he saw me living so peacefully and happily. Mr. Jacobi heard this from
his own lips, at the very time when he made him into a confidant of his great
secret, and yet I am the first person whom Mr. Jacobi seeks out in order to force
upon me this dangerous secret, from whose knowledge my friend, through the
course of so many years, had wanted to spare me. If things stand exactly as they
look on the surface, I must ask: which person here manifests a more serviceable
religion, a more authentic piety: [21] the atheist, who does not want to deprive
his beloved friend of his conviction in natural religion, with which he observes
him to be happily contented, or the orthodox Christian, who, as it were, unpity-
ingly knocks from out of the lame man’s hands the very crutch on which he was
managing so well to drag himself forward?

In order to settle all of these difficulties and apparent contradictions, I am able
to see only one way to pursue the matter, and though it requires that I rely upon
a hypothetical reconstruction in certain parts, it seems to me, when I consider
what Mr. Jacobi declares to be his intention, that this reconstruction is quite
natural and, given the character of the parties involved, not unreasonable.

“The intention of this work,” Mr. Jacobi declares in his preliminary remarks,
“I have briefly stated directly following my last letter, and, I think, I have made it
patently obvious in everything thereafter up to the end of the work.”[22] Nothing
can in truth be more obvious; [22] it is an intention that is undissembled and
well-meaning. Mr. Jacobi openly seeks to lead those of his fellowmen who have
lost themselves in the wilderness of speculation back to the level and secure path
of faith. It is to this end that all of his conversations with Lessing are directed; it
is to this end that his correspondence with Hemsterhuis, with our mutual friend
[Elise], and with me is directed.

What is first of all important to note in regard to Lessing is that perhaps
Jacobi himself never really believed that this man had confided in him a special
secret, but he much more likely thought that Lessing was a man of unsettled
principles who had the gift of expressing with equal cleverness now this and now
that side of an issue, that today he could be the voice of theism and tomorrow of
atheism, and that maybe the day after he would even defend superstition. Jacobi
probably thought that here was a man who did not try to hide his opinions, and
that whenever whimsy, or the spirit of contrariness, suggested an idea to him, he would not hesitate to inform all the world about it. [23] Jacobi looked upon Lessing as a misguided sophist lost in his own chicaneries, as someone, in other words, who viewed truth and falsehood in the same light, or darkness, and for whom, in the end, a joke could count for philosophy, and blasphemy, when the mood struck him, could be passed off as forcefulness of intellect.

23 Jacobi, who believed he had found our friend in a sad state of mental confusion, formed the magnanimous resolution to heal him of his illness. And just like a skilled doctor, Jacobi ventured at first to worsen the evil so that he might afterward be able all the more reliably to cure it. He led Lessing ever deeper into the labyrinthine twistings of Spinozism, drew him into the thorny hedges of pantheism, so that the one method of escape left to him would be all the more welcome when he finally revealed it to him. This method of escape, as we today are able to see rather clearly, was to retreat under the banner of faith. [24] He wanted to convince Lessing that there are certain things, as he puts it (p. 77), to which one simply cannot close one’s eyes, and since these things cannot be proved rationally, they must be accepted just as one finds them, and this means that one must turn one’s back on philosophy, because philosophy can only result in all-consuming skepticism.14 And in response to Lessing’s curious question, “So what then does one turn toward?” the answer is given: toward the light, about which Spinoza says that it illuminates itself and the darkness alike, and therefore it looks as though Spinoza, the very person who had led Lessing so far astray, is the one to bring him back on the path toward the truth.

24 Our friend, who had almost certainly sensed Mr. Jacobi’s barely disguised intention right from the start, had enough sporting spirit to encourage the view of him to which the other held fast. And part of the story may be that he simply appreciated the cleverness by which Jacobi knew how to muster his arguments in defense of the teaching of Spinoza. [25] You who know our friend are aware that he took greater pleasure listening to an absurd thesis cleverly advanced than the truth poorly defended. So he played the role of the rapt student to the hilt, never uttered one word of disagreement, but always nodded his assent to everything, and did his best to steer the discussion back on track with some little witticism whenever it threatened to take a different direction. It is for this reason that I could not have known about this great secret of his, though I was his constant and most intimate friend, nor can one credit Gleim as being in on this metaphysical comedy.15 This open and jovial host, who knew quite well both the philosophy and the whimsy of his guest, would have been unable to carry on the joke for very long. Here we have the explanation for the sudden
inspirations and the dull platitudes, the swooning over bad verses, all of which is so unnatural for one such as Lessing. [26]

Let everyone think as he will! I will continue holding to my hypothesis, since it seems to me to be more natural. So Mr. Jacobi, when he noticed that his attempt to win over Lessing had failed, believed it was incumbent upon him to persevere in his pious intention of turning the example of Lessing into an edifying warning to all other swaggering speculators, a lifeline thrown out to them in good time, but their last hope of rescue if they refuse to clutch it. Do they want to join the Lessings and Leibnizes and Wolffs and all the others who march under the banner of metaphysics and become determinists, and consequently, if we believe Jacobi (p. 172), also fatalists and Spinozists, and therefore *atheists*, or would they prefer to surrender themselves to the extremes of skepticism? No, let them rather, before it is too late, follow the light that illuminates the darkness too! [27] *Every proof presupposes something already proven, either itself something requiring proof, or something whose starting point is revelation, and furthermore: The foundation of all human knowledge and action is faith.*

Since Mr. Jacobi does not know me, I, too, may be described by him as a hireling of reason, as someone who grants too many concessions to reason and none at all to faith, who operates with the delusion that with the help of metaphysical demonstrations he could put everything right, that with his quiddities he could exorcise the spirits or go to work against some magic-wielding cabal. Hence the earnest effort to cure me, too, by whatever means, of this disease. [28] And hence the license to divulge to me the secret that our friend is said to have taken such pains to keep hidden from me. The good and frank intention of bringing me into the fold of faith, while it cannot justify everything, at least excuses many things.

From the very first I suspected that something was afoot not unlike what I had very often experienced before with such well-meaning attempts on the part of my contemporaries. I therefore let Mr. Jacobi understand in my response to him that the cure in my case would be attempted in vain, and that in regard to eternal truths and tenets I admit to no other form of conviction than that which derives from rational argumentation. Judaism commands faith in historical truths, in *facts* upon which the authority of our positive ritual law is based. [29] The existence and the authority of the supreme lawgiver, however, needs

* This thesis is supported by a passage from Lavater in which it is supposed to be shown that the perception of truth (intuitive knowledge) is the foundation and starting point of faith. If this is really faith and revelation, then our quarrel is over: Aristotle is full of revelations, and Spinoza is a knight of faith.
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to be recognized through reason, and in this matter, according to the principles of Judaism and according to my own principles, neither revelation nor faith has any role to play. Furthermore, since Judaism is not a revealed religion, but is rather a revealed law, I said that as a Jew I had one more reason to search for conviction through rational argumentation.

Let me be permitted to explain in a bit more detail what I mean when I say these things [about reason and revelation], since they are so easily able to be misconstrued. What I assert of Judaism, that it requires absolutely no faith in statements of eternal truths, but only in statements of historical truths, I have clearly shown in a more fitting context, to which I must refer the reader. The Hebrew language has in fact no proper word for what we call religion. Further, Judaism is not a revelation of doctrinal propositions and eternal truths that we are commanded to believe. It consists solely and entirely in revealed laws for the serving of God, and it presupposes that, on the basis of natural and reasonable evidence, one comes to be convinced of those tenets of religion without whose truth no divine lawgiving could have taken place. When I speak of conviction based on reasonable evidence, and when I assert that in Judaism such conviction is undoubtedly presupposed, I am not talking about the metaphysical arguments we are accustomed to carry on in books, nor about scholastic demonstrations that have stood the test of the most subtle refinements of critical probing, but about the dicta and the judgments of a simple common sense that looks things straight in the eye and calmly takes their measure. To be sure, I am a great admirer of demonstrations in metaphysics, and I am fully persuaded that the principal truths of natural religion are as capable of apodictic proof as any proposition in solid geometry. But nevertheless my conviction in the truth of the tenets of [natural] religion is not so entirely dependent upon metaphysical arguments that it is compelled to stand or fall with them. One can cause me to have doubts about my arguments, one can show me that in places my reasoning is in error, but yet my conviction remains unshaken. Petrus Ramus, a man who knew how to raise a host of doubts about the primary and derivative postulates of Euclid, remained nonetheless fully convinced of the truth of Euclid’s Elements. Many a mathematician can cast doubt upon the certainty of the Euclidean postulate about parallel lines, but yet they are also able to stake their happiness and their lives on the truth and the incontrovertibility of the postulates that are derived from it. Now, it seems to me that the certainty of natural religion is just as brilliantly resplendent, just as incontestably sure, to the unspoiled and undeluded common sense of all humans, as any proposition of geometry.

* Jerusalem; or, On Religious Power and Judaism.
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every walk of life in which a human being may find himself, at whatever rung of enlightenment on which he may stand, he has the resources and means, the opportunity and sufficient strength, to persuade himself of the truths of the religion of reason. The reasoning of that Greenland Eskimo who, as he walked about with a missionary one beautiful morning on an ice floe, saw the dawn blaze forth between the frozen peaks and declared to his companion, “Look, brother, at the young day! How beautiful must he be who has made this!”—this reasoning, which was so convincing for the Greenlander before the pious preacher had led his understanding astray, is also convincing for me, and has for me the very same force as the simple and artless reasoning of the Psalmist:

He who has planted the ear,  
surely He must hear; [33]  
He who has formed the eye,  
surely He must see?  
He who imparts knowledge to the son of man,  
the Eternal One, also knows the thoughts of men.  

[Psalms 94:9–11]16

This natural conclusion, easy enough for even a child to draw, has for me all the certainty of a geometric axiom or postulate and the overwhelming force of an irrefutable demonstration. I assign to my philosophical speculation the task of correcting the claims of common sense and, as much as possible, turning them into rational knowledge. As long as both of them, speculation and common sense, remain on good terms, I gladly follow them wherever they lead me. But as soon as they have a falling out, I seek to orient myself and lead them both, if possible, to the point from which we started.17 [34] When superstition, priest-craft, the spirit of contradiction, and sophistry disorient us with their various dizzying subtleties and sleights of hand, when they have brought our common sense into confusion, we must of course have recourse to the tools of our art in order to come to its aid. The metaphysical subtleties that are used to mislead us must be held up to and compared with the truth, examined and tested against it, and if they do not pass muster, the attempt must be made to replace them with a more precise set of concepts. When it comes to a real and authentic conviction in natural religion, a conviction that stands some chance of having an influence upon a human being’s happiness, these fancy methods are neither useful nor necessary. The human being whose reason is not yet spoiled by sophistry need only follow the direct lead of his own mind, and his happiness stands secure.

[35] I will treat this at greater length in the continuation of my Morning Hours, and here I rest content with merely quoting the words of a certain sage who has
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encompassed in two very readable little tracts much useful philosophy, though
he is quite displeased with the subject of philosophy." 18

“Natural religion is both the simplest and the most comprehensible religion:
it is so easy, so suited to everyone’s capacities, that one cannot but be amazed
when one hears philosophers seriously claim that it is not for the common man.
Using a number of different approaches, I have essayed to present to our country
laborer ideas concerning the supreme being in accord with natural religion, and
each time the man was quick to comprehend, firm in his grasp, and straight in
his judgment; he felt the power of the ideas, which awakened his mind, brought
it peace, and gave it new strength. [36] These ideas are of one stock with every-
thing that is beautiful, good, and perfect among men; they lend such things an
illuminating brilliance, and they also are illumined by them; each allows the
other to stand out in sharper relief, each reinforces the other.

“I maintain that the easiness of the concepts of natural religion and the difficulty
of those of revealed religion prove the falsehood of the philosophers’ claim; the
common man cannot comprehend the latter concepts, but can comprehend the
former; thus does my understanding reach a secure resting ground, etc.”

To return now from this digression to my reply to Mr. Jacobi’s charges, I
present here my Demurrers concerning his conversations with Lessing, which I
took the opportunity of sending to him and in response to which his subsequent
letters were composed.

Demurrers against Mr. Jacobi. 19

[37] You say: “Every coming-into-being [of something finite] in the Infinite,
in whatever metaphoric terms you choose to describe it, by whatever change
in that Infinite it happens, requires that something arises out of nothing.” You
believe “Spinoza had therefore banished the possibility of any transition from
the Infinite to the finite, completely rejecting all causas transitorias, secundarias
or remotas (transitional causes, secondary causes, or remote causes), and he
replaced an emanationist with an immanentist concept of the Ensoph [Infinite],
posited as an indwelling, eternally self-identical, and unchanging cause of the
world, which, when taken together with all its consequences, would be one
and the same as all of them.” 20 Here I run into difficulties that I for my part am
unable to resolve: (1.) If a series without beginning did not seem to Spinoza to
be an impossibility, then an emanationist coming-into-being of [finite] things
would not necessarily lead to positing a becoming out of nothing. (2.) If the vis-
ible things around us are for Spinoza something finite: their indwelling within

*The Village Preacher and The Village School.
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seeks to defend his teachings, as H. J. maintains it is—why he allows himself in that case to set up our friend Lessing as so unabashedly a devil’s advocate, as he calls it. [84] Why does he allow himself to libel a dead man who can no longer defend himself, and against whom he is incapable of bringing forward any other evidence besides an oral conversation and no other witnesses than his own person?

In a word, I can as little discover for myself Mr. J.’s practical principles as I can his theoretical ones. I believe that in circumstances so ill-suited to be set to rights through a disputation, it is well that we go our separate ways. Let him turn back to the faith of his fathers, bring a muzzled reason into obedience through the conquering might of faith, beat back any upwelling doubt, as happens in the postscript of his work when, invoking authorities and their dictates, he blesses his childlike return and seals (page 213) it with words from the pious, angel-pure mouth of Lavater. [85]

I for my part remain with my Jewish infidelity. I place my trust in no mortal’s “angel-pure mouth,” nor would I rely upon the authority even of an archangel when it came to eternal truths upon which human happiness rests, since in this matter I either stand or fall upon my own two feet. And what is more, since all of us, as Mr. J. says, are “born in belief,” I therefore return to the faith of my fathers, which in accordance with the original meaning of the word, is not a faith in a teaching or an opinion, but is a trust and confidence in God’s attributes. I assert with full and unqualified confidence in the omnipotence of God that He has the power to bestow upon humans the ability to recognize the truths upon which happiness is based. [86] I cherish a childlike confidence in God’s mercifulness, that it is His will to bestow this ability upon me. Strengthened by this unwavering faith, I seek to learn and be persuaded of as much as I can from wherever I can. And praise to the benevolence of my Creator! I believe that I have discovered much, and everyone can find just as much if he seeks with open eyes and does not want to interpose himself before the light. So much for what concerns me.

As to what concerns our friend Lessing, his fate in the end is also not as hard as it initially might have been suspected. H. J. has placed him in company with people whom he may not find so unpleasant. According to a text he found among his papers, which he shares with us, on p. 170 he [Jacobi] explains that although Spinozism is atheism, the philosophy of a Leibniz or a Wolff is no less fatalistic than that of Spinoza, and he says that they lead anyone who perseveres in his study of them back to the principles of Spinoza. [87] In the end, he adds, every path in pursuit of demonstrative truth leads to fatalism. Scarcely could the spirit
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of Lessing, who once so much enjoyed the company of those outcasts, harbor any fear of being bored by their society now. Therefore let Lessing put all fear to rest and return to the quiet abode of peace and to the embrace of men who, like him, were journeyers on the path toward demonstrative truth, and, like him, trusted a little bit in reason.