

## Review

**Birgit Sandkaulen, *The Philosophy of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: On the Contradiction between System and Freedom* (Bloomsbury Studies in Modern German Philosophy), translated by Matt Erlin. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. ISBN 978-1-350-23571-7. Pp. 280. Hardback 90.00 Pound, Paperback 28.99 Pound, Ebook 26.09 Pound.**

Hegel declared Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi a ‘turning point of the intellectual formation of this age’ (*Briefe* 1969: 213), the young Schelling compares him to Plato (Schelling AA I,2 1980: 146), and Fichte considers him the reformer of philosophy along with Kant (Fichte GA I,7 1988: 194). Nevertheless, during the 19th and 20th centuries, Jacobi was defamed as an apologist of religious faith and an enemy of reason. The situation did not change until the 1990s when scholars such as Dieter Henrich rediscovered Jacobi’s impact on the evolution of Classical German Philosophy. But it was Birgit Sandkaulen’s masterful study *Grund und Ursache* (2000) that put an end to reading Jacobi solely through the eyes of his recipients. Furthermore, it revealed the systematic significance of Jacobi’s philosophy. In so doing, Sandkaulen removed the rubble of a 150-year-long history of ‘mischaracterizations and marginalizations’ (viii) of Jacobi as a philosopher of unreflecting faith. This enabled a growing number of scholars to reveal the true impact of Jacobi on post-Kantian philosophy. In contrast, despite George di Giovanni’s meritorious translation of some of Jacobi’s major works and some eye-opening studies on Jacobi by researchers such as Brady Bowman, the broad picture of Jacobi in anglophone research on Classical German Philosophy is still shaped by Frederick Beiser’s *Fate of Reason* (1987) and its misrepresentation of Jacobi as an ‘irrationalist’ who set his religious faith against enlightened reason. Thus, even in the very recent volume *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and the Ends of the Enlightenment* (2023), some contributions still misrepresent Jacobi as a merely religious thinker. Therefore, Birgit Sandkaulen’s monograph *The Philosophy of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi* is not only an excellent book but, even more, a necessary one. For it reveals both the historical impact and the systematic significance of Jacobi’s philosophy. In this way, she presents a new picture of Classical German Philosophy.



The first part of Sandkaulen's extended translation of her original German book *Jacobi's Philosophie* (2019) elaborates on different aspects of Jacobi's philosophy of free action and individuality. It presents Jacobi's fundamental philosophical concern—his insistence on the individual's live-worldly experience as a personal agent. Sandkaulen thus demonstrates that Jacobi's philosophy is first and foremost a 'metaphysics of action' (39). Only in a second step, our consciousness of freedom can then reveal our relation to God. Accordingly, Jacobi's concept of belief does not describe a religious confession but the pre-reflexive action consciousness of the human individual who experiences herself as a free cause in her practical operations. Sandkaulen further shows that it is this irreducible action consciousness that Jacobi sets against any perfect philosophical system. Jacobi considers Spinoza's system the perfect paradigm of such speculative systematicity. Sandkaulen thus demonstrates the complexity of Jacobi's reconstruction of Spinoza that gives Jacobi's philosophy the character of a '*double philosophy*' (15), his '*Spinoza and Anti-Spinoza*' (18): Systematically, speculative thought cannot avoid Spinozism together with its fatalism, but this fatalism contradicts our 'existential interests of freedom'.

To get into more detail: A biographical study introduces the reader to the life of Jacobi and sketches out the main ideas of his philosophy. The second chapter introduces the reader to the center of Jacobi's double philosophy which he first presents in his *Letters on Spinoza*. With his *salto mortale*, the '*practical contradiction*' (23) against Spinoza's fatalistic system, Jacobi sets our personal action consciousness against the speculative interest in a '*universal and wholly rational*' (20) world explanation and its principle *a nihilio nihil fit*. Whereas this leap cannot be deduced logically, Sandkaulen makes its motivation transparent. In a system of rational explanation, we necessarily lose the concepts of personally imputable actions, time, and, consequently, causation. Whereas Spinoza obscures this cost through the confusion of ground and cause, Jacobi insists on the clear difference between these two concepts. Whereas 'ground' designates a timeless relation of logical dependence, causation implies a temporal succession. This relation is only given in our personal 'experience of agency' (27). In our actions, we make the experience of spontaneous, final causation. Without this pre-reflexive awareness of unconditionality, we would have no concept of causation at all.

Chapter three then analyses this pre-reflexive consciousness which Jacobi also calls 'belief'. As Sandkaulen points out, this belief is not to be identified with religious faith but is based on our existential experience of freedom which is rendered impossible within closed rational systems. Jacobi's belief is not a '*theoretical attitude*' (34) but our *practical* certainty of being the free cause of our performances. Reality, too, can only be experienced in our practical performances and not in our theoretical judgments. Jacobi's *salto mortale* thus demands a '*paradigm shift*' from speculation to our 'practical life activity' (40). As the following chapter

then shows, this philosophy of life is anything but irrational. Quite the contrary, in our personal experience as acting, intentional causes we also experience a substantive reason that is not just a cognitive power among others but our innermost determination as living individuals: our human spirit that is our fundamental self.

The fifth chapter's analysis of Jacobi's conception of freedom shows how Jacobi overcomes Kant's dualisms and outclasses the latter's concept of freedom. For Jacobi, there is no dichotomy between duty and inclination as there is no greater joy than acting freely and 'being entirely *at one with ourselves*' (64). Freedom is not just a postulate but a fact that we experience in our actions that are directed to the good instead of the useful. Yet, we can only be free when we are at the same time related to other free individuals. For, as chapter six sketches out, Jacobi's philosophy of freedom is not based upon subjectivity as the universal structure of an impersonal self-relation but upon our '*existential* consciousness' (78) of being this unique person. This means being a 'who' and not a property that designates a 'what'. Being a person cannot be grasped by a concept but only by the immediate experience of oneself being an incomparable individual. Thus, the individual can only be designated by a name. Before Fichte, Jacobi thus had the 'original insight' into the circularity of the reflection model of self-consciousness. But being this one and no other already implies the relation to another personal individual. The experience of friendship reveals this relation paradigmatically: For the friend is a singular, different 'you' and not pure subjectivity (chapter seven). Being such a person is an identity *sui generis* that cannot be grasped through attributes but realizes itself in one's actions. It can thus not be conceived without existential freedom.

Along with the reflection model, Jacobi also eliminates the '*representation model of consciousness*' (111) and replaces it with a radically realistic alternative which he bases upon our action praxis (chapter 8). This realism does not naively assume a similarity between our representations and the world. Rather, Jacobi criticizes the representational model *in toto* as based on a theoretical attitude towards the world. In contrast, Jacobi's realism is founded on our experience as practical, engaged agents in the world. Certainty of ourselves and the world are therefore coequally original. Consequently, Jacobi does not conceive of our categories as theoretical concepts but as practical categories of our experience of action. Based on this ingenious reconstruction of Jacobi's realism, Sandkaulen then gives a masterful interpretation of Jacobi's famous but mostly misrepresented critique of Kant's thing in itself (chapter nine). According to this critique, Kant can only speak of sensibility and affectioning meaningfully if he presupposes '*real*' (137) affection by things in themselves. Since Kant does not maintain the perception of an external, subject-independent world but the perception of a world that is represented as spatially external, there can be no relation to things in themselves.

After thus having elucidated Jacobi's philosophy, the second part confronts the post-Kantian systems with their claim to get past Jacobi's contradiction between system and freedom. Jacobi's claim that all systematic philosophy has to go through Spinoza's fatalistic, 'immanentist metaphysics' (18) and that Spinoza's system can only be overcome by a leap out of theoretical speculation is an everlasting provocation for the post-Kantian systems. However, Sandkaulen does not only clarify how Jacobi influenced these later systems. Rather, her careful investigation of the different attempts to integrate Jacobi's concepts of freedom, personhood, and life into a system is Sandkaulen's *experimentum crucis* for the cogency of Jacobi's philosophy of freedom.

Fichte, whose attempts Sandkaulen scrutinizes in chapters ten and eleven, tries to mediate speculation and life (162). But in so doing, Fichte marginalizes Jacobi's individual. Whereas Jacobi is interested in the concrete person and the difference distinguishing the individual from all others, Fichte only elaborates on the I-hood without personal determination. For Fichte, the living individual is only a privation of the I-hood that has to be annihilated both theoretically and practically. In his *Vocation of the Human Being*, where Fichte tries to avoid Jacobi's critique of nihilism by practical realism, reality is merely the sphere where we fulfill our duty, it is the matter of our ethical aims that we have to sublimate into the world of reason. The individual is only an instrument of absolute reason. Hence, Fichte's ethical world of reason just replaces Spinoza's *natura naturans* with the will of universal reason and leaves no place for Jacobi's personally accountable individual (179). The same result holds for Schelling's *Freedom Essay* (chapter twelve) which also claims to reconcile the concept of personality with the idea of a system whereas Schelling follows Jacobi in the mutual conditionality of freedom and personhood and discards his former depreciation of personality as a mere privation declaring it a divine attribute.

In *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel tries to solve Jacobi's challenge that Spinoza's system annihilates the possibility of an open time and cannot conceive of causation as a real bringing into being. Hegel accuses Jacobi, who maintains the reality of time, of not rising above imagination and eliminates time from philosophy as a speculatively irrelevant product of our imagination. But Sandkaulen shows Hegel is incorrect in ascribing the nothingness of time as an insight to Spinoza (chapter 13). Hegel himself later rejects the idea of the nothingness of time. Jacobi's position as the third position of thought in Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* shows that Hegel owes much more to Jacobi than he is willing to admit. But, as Sandkaulen demonstrates, in contrast to his review of Jacobi's works, the *Encyclopaedia* merely exploits Jacobi for the problem of a precondition-less opening (chapter 14). To this end, Hegel ascribes a position of immediacy to Jacobi that eliminates its existential character and reduces it to an epistemic position. Hegel is thus able to ignore Jacobi's challenge of individuality. As a consequence,

Hegel is not able to sublate both Spinoza's systematicity and Jacobi's action consciousness of freedom into his system of freedom. His determinate negation cannot replace Jacobi's *salto mortale* as his logically mediated sublation of finitude and infinity is directly opposed to the very intention of Jacobi's philosophy: the individual freedom of action that is committed to the experience of our limitedness (chapter 15).

To summarize, Sandkaulen's book sets a standard for any future research on Jacobi and post-Kantian philosophy that one might still contradict but must not undercut. Furthermore, it is also an excellent book: it combines systematic rigor with ingenious exegesis. Sandkaulen does not impose her prejudices and opinions on Jacobi—which is one of the main reasons for the history of him being deterred (17)—but engages in a careful reading of both Jacobi's writings and the works of his contemporaries she is criticizing. In so doing, she reveals both the systematic significance and the historical impact of Jacobi. One must also praise the organization of the book which not just gathers certain essays on Jacobi. Rather, it is a sophisticated monograph that opens with an exploration of Jacobi's double philosophy, then elaborates on the different aspects of this very philosophy, and, eventually, contrasts it with post-Kantian attempts to integrate both Jacobi's Spinoza and his Anti-Spinoza. Sandkaulen thus expounds on the incommensurability of Jacobi's insistence on the freedom of the individual and the post-Kantian systems of freedom. The book is therefore not only a brilliant interpretation of Jacobi and a new cornerstone in research on post-Kantian philosophy but also a convincing plea for the legitimacy of personal individuality and our intentional consciousness of freedom against any modern or current marginalizations. Eventually, one must congratulate the translation of Sandkaulen's exquisite German into such clear and pleasant-to-read English.

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