

Between Nature and Freedom. F.H. Jacobi on Living Beings

Abstract

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi [1743–1819] is not commonly regarded as a theorist of living nature. The article challenges this assumption and argues that Jacobi's thought entails, at least in germinal form, a conception of life partially akin to that presented by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment*. Jacobi envisions life as a principle uniting nature and freedom in a manner that remains unknowable through concepts but is nevertheless experienced through feeling. The phenomenon of living nature, that Jacobi addresses using conceptual tools from both Spinoza and Kant, elucidates the distinctive coexistence of dualism and monism that characterizes his philosophical position.

Introduction

Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi [1743–1819] is not typically associated with a philosophical account on ›the living‹. While being at the center of a revival within scholarship on classical German philosophy in recent years,¹ Jacobi has rarely been investigated as a thinker of organic nature. At first glance, this gap seems largely justified. Although Jacobi was exposed to scientific studies during his education in Geneve, where he studied the works of notable biologists like

1 Hampton, Alexander J.P. (ed.) (2023): *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and the Ends of the Enlightenment: Religion, Philosophy, and Reason at the Crux of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP; Sandkaulen, Birgit (2023): *The Philosophy of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*. London: Bloomsbury.

Buffon and Bonnet,² he is not regarded as a philosopher of nature, as his contributions in this field are not comparable to those of Kant, Herder, or Schelling. And, although his writings abound with a vitalistic lexicon, this vocabulary mostly refers, metaphorically or analogically, to the field of activity and receptivity of human spirit, to the spontaneity of its freedom, rather than to organic nature. While one could speak of Jacobi as a *Lebensphilosoph*, as in O.F. Bollnow's classical account,³ it seems nonetheless farfetched to make of him a theorist of living nature. In his novels, with a distinctly Rousseauian and proto-Romantic sensitivity, Jacobi sometimes speaks of an all-encompassing feeling of life uniting human beings and nature.⁴ However, this feeling does not provide any scaffolding to conceptual articulation. Based on this feeling only, the structure of life and the functions of natural life do not become on the whole any more intelligible.

The purpose of this article is to at least partially question this set of assumptions. I argue that Jacobi's thought implies, albeit at a germinal level, an original and significant theory of natural life. This theory primarily concerns the specific intelligibility of organic life on both ontological and epistemological levels. Secondly, it addresses the role of life within the totality of reality. I develop my argument in the following steps. Firstly, I outline the historical background to Jacobi's idea of living beings, emphasizing the coexistence within his thought of a dualistic paradigm, inspired by the early Kant, and of a monistic model inspired by Diderot. Secondly, I analyze the complex relationship between Jacobi's conception of nature and Spinoza's as the key point for understanding organic life and its ambivalent positioning between the mechanical order of nature and the teleological order of freedom. Finally, in the third step, I outline the main

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- 2 Pistilli, Emanuela (2008): *Tra dogmatismo e scetticismo. Fonti e genesi della filosofia di F.H. Jacobi*. Pisa-Roma: Serra; Frilli, Guido (2023a): »Wissenschaft«. In: Sandkaulen, B./Schick, S./Koch, O. (ed.): *Jacobi-Wörterbuch Online*, Version v6, URL=<https://jwo.saw-leipzig.de/articles/v6/604f3415>, last accessed on 05.12.2023.
 - 3 Bollnow, Otto F. (1966): *Die Lebensphilosophie F.H. Jacobis*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.
 - 4 Verra, Valerio (1971): »Lebensgefühl, Naturbegriff und Naturauslegung bei F. H. Jacobi«. In: Hammacher, K. (ed.): *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Philosoph und Literat der Goethezeit*. Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 259–271.

features of Jacobi's understanding of living nature, comparing them with some relevant points in Kant's *Critique of Judgement*.

My main aim is to claim that Jacobi's approach and conclusions are akin to the ideas concerning organic life and moral teleology developed by Kant in the third *Critique*. This affinity, hitherto underexplored in the scholarly literature,⁵ deserves to be emphasized for several reasons, both historical and systematic. Firstly, because Jacobi's theory, which can almost entirely be tracked to works published in the years 1787–1789 (*David Hume*, the second edition of the *Spinozabriefe* with related appendices, and the writing *On the Slavery and Freedom of Man*), in fact anticipates Kant's third *Critique*, published in 1790.⁶ Secondly, because Jacobi's ideas can be regarded as an autonomous development of Kant's own pre-critical ideas, particularly – as pointed out by Jacobi himself – those presented in the 1763 writing *The Only Possible Argument for the Demonstration of the Existence of God*.⁷ Thirdly, because Jacobi's aforementioned writings had a considerable impact on the development of post-Kantian philosophy, especially on early German idealism.⁸ From a systematic perspective, finally, Jacobi's idea of living beings is worth of a closer inspection for its being closely connected to the beating heart of his thought: the theory of freedom. Although Jacobi firmly rejects Kant's transcendental approach, he aligns with the latter in

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- 5 An instructive attempt has been recently made by Koch, Oliver (2021): »Kausaler Zusammenhang und Lebendige Einheit. Zum Naturbegriff bei Jacobi und Kant«. In: Jaeschke, W./Sandkaulen, B. (ed.): *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Ein Wendepunkt der geistigen Bildung der Zeit*. Hamburg: Meiner, 107–123, 115–118; see below, chapter 3.2 for discussion. For a broader viewpoint concerning Jacobi and Kant, see Schick, Stefan (2019): *Die Legitimität der Aufklärung*. Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann; Jaeschke, Walter/Sandkaulen, Birgit (ed.) (2021): *Jacobi und Kant*. Hamburg: Meiner.
 - 6 As aptly remarked by Sandkaulen 2023, 123–124. For this reason, I will primarily reference texts from this period in this article.
 - 7 I quote from AA: Kant, Immanuel (1902): *Gesammelte Schriften (Akademie-Ausgabe)*, I-XXIII. Königlich-Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (ed.), henceforth: AA, and from W: Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich (1998–): *Gesamtausgabe: Werke*, 7 Bd. Hammacher, K./Jaeschke, W. (ed.). Hamburg: Meiner, henceforth: W. Translations from German are mine.
 - 8 On Jacobi's influence, Jaeschke, Walter/Sandkaulen, Birgit (ed.) (2004): *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Ein Wendepunkt der geistigen Bildung der Zeit*. Hamburg: Meiner.

establishing a necessary connection between the idea of natural life and the awareness of freedom.⁹

1. Mechanism, Physiology and Teleology: The Historical Background

1.1 Bayle's Critique of Descartes

In modern philosophy, speaking of the living means, at least concerning the range of problems feeding into Jacobi's philosophy, to deal with the framework established by Descartes's ontological dualism and the challenges it presents. Descartes reduces the entire corporeal nature to mechanism and accordingly conceives all living beings, including animals and human bodies, as complex machines. Provided that by ›life‹ one means an internal principle of unity, animation, growth, and movement, Descartes makes it altogether alien to *res extensa*; life would be rooted instead in the freedom of self-conscious thinking. As emphasized by Hans Jonas,¹⁰ life as a natural fact becomes then unintelligible; living beings, to the extent that they are the object of mechanistic science, are analyzed as functional structures governed solely by the laws of external causality.

As early as Pierre Gassendi, many modern philosophers highlighted the difficulties connected to Descartes's mechanistic dualism for the understanding of life. A paradigmatic reference in this connection is Pierre Bayle's entry on *Rorarius* in the *Dictionnaire philosophique*.¹¹ In this long article addressing the controversial issue of the soul of animals, Bayle underscores the significant advantages of the anti-Cartesian option. The soul stands for the principle of life,

9 See the interpretation of Sandkaulen, Birgit (2019): »Der Begriff des Lebens in der Klassischen Deutschen Philosophie—eine naturphilosophische oder lebensweltliche Frage?«. *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 19, 911–929. For Jacobi's concept of life as connected to a *lebensweltlich* approach, as such irreducible to all *naturphilosophisch* account.

10 Jonas, Hans (2001): *The Phenomenon of Life. Toward a Philosophical Biology*. Evanston (IL.): Northwestern UP.

11 Bayle, Pierre (1741): *Dictionnaire historique et critique*. Vol 4. Basel: Brandmüller, 76–87.

namely the intrinsic capacity for motion and sensitivity.¹² If animals have a soul, nature is endowed with sensitivity and life. Several implications can be consequently spelled out. A first consequence is the weakening of the privileged position of human beings.¹³ Granted that the soul of animals is not qualitatively different from the human soul, human beings can be seen as part of a shared nature; to the extent that their distinctive traits, starting from reason and morality, cease to be essential attributes. Distinctions between sensation and thought, between physical self-preservation and moral goodness blur into differences of degree rather than of essence.¹⁴ In this sense, the position illustrated by Bayle – and probably also advocated by him – aligns with the physiological and empiricist tradition that from Gassendi ultimately traces back to Epicurus. These ideas later found full expression in the Enlightenment period, notably in Diderot's *Rêve de D'Alembert*.

A second consequence concerns the uncertain epistemological status of the living. The natural order must include animated beings, yet they cannot be fully understood on the basis of the dynamic and kinetic categories applying to inanimate bodies. Accordingly, the homogeneity of the Cartesian and later Newtonian framework must be either modified or rejected.¹⁵ For Descartes, for Newtonian physics, and later for Kant's analytics of pure reason, nature is the domain of objectivity regulated by the universal and necessary laws of motion. However, provided living beings are assumed as facts of nature, the latter must accommodate some distinction, of uncertain status, between living and non-living beings, and possibly between natural life and human life. Many theoretical options were developed in this regard in the century spanning from the first edition of Bayle's *Dictionnaire* to Schelling's *Ideas for a Philosophy of Nature*.¹⁶ For my purposes, it is sufficient to introduce two of them: Kant's early dualistic approach, and Diderot's monistic vitalism.

12 Ibid., 79.

13 Ibid., 76–77, 81.

14 Ibid., 80.

15 See the essays collected in Nachomy, Ohad/Smith, Justin E.H. (ed.) (2014): *The Life Sciences in Early Modern Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

16 For an overall viewpoint on the 18th-century philosophy of the living see Duchesneau, François (2018): *Organisme et corps organique de Leibniz à Kant*. Paris: Vrin.

1.2 Kant's Early Dualism and Diderot's Monism

Kant's *Beweisgrund* is admittedly key in Jacobi's philosophical breeding.¹⁷ In this text, Kant distinguishes between an »amoral« and a »moral dependence« of the world on God.¹⁸ »Amoral dependence« is Kant's phrasing for the Newtonian universe governed by the uniformity of the causal laws of motion. These laws are the real expression of the logical principle of reason (of »determining reason«, as Kant calls it¹⁹). The system of nature, governed by the laws of motion, has nothing moral about it. It does not reflect God's choice, but rather the necessary determination of things. This necessity excludes any element of contingency other than the general existence of matter, that is, the contingency of divine creation as a whole. But the lawfulness of matter does not depend on God's moral choice for the good; it does not reflect God as »spirit« or willing intelligence, but rather God as a *Realgrund* – something akin to Spinoza's impersonal God.²⁰

What, then, is meant by »moral dependence« of things on God? Kant's answer will find full development in the third *Critique*. However, already in 1763, it is clear that it refers to »organized beings«, that is, living beings. The contingent givenness of »organized beings« cannot be deduced from the universal laws of the »system of nature,« even where nature makes room, as in Leibniz and Kant himself, for *force* [*Kraft*], that is to say, for the internal dynamism of substances. Life can only be understood as the »technical« product of a free, intelligent, and provident will. A moral spirit is then what exceeds the mathematized world of logical essences ruled by the

17 W 2.1, 46.

18 AA II, 100–103.

19 This lexical choice entails a critique of the principle of sufficient reason by Leibniz and Wolff, as Kant does not consider that concrete space-temporal interactions, though necessary as expressions of the coexistence between substances, are already inscribed in the logical predicates that ground the possibility of substances in themselves. On Jacobi's own framing of the problem, drawing on themes and issues from both pre-critical Kant and Leibniz's monadology, see below, chapter 2.2.

20 On Kant's *Beweisgrund* and Spinoza in connection to Jacobi, see Boehm, Omri (2014): *Kant's Critique of Spinoza*. Oxford: Oxford UP, ch. 1.

principle of reason. In this regard, organisms make purpose directly visible in a purposeless world.²¹

With this distinction, Kant does not aim at excluding the physical-chemical basis of life from the laws of matter; however, he believes that life as the principle of the »contingent unity« of things is incomprehensible on the level of mechanical necessity alone.²² Kant emphasizes that only the idea of the living allows for specifying the homogeneous world of universal laws into a harmonious order that includes contingency and particularity. In a way that foreshadows the moral teleology of the third *Critique*, God as the moral cause of the world, organic purposiveness and the beauty of nature are inseparable moments in the order of creation.²³

In the modified Newtonianism of Kant's early writings, one can still somehow detect Descartes's dualism between mind and mechanism, or between will and nature, as its implicit paradigm. At variance with Descartes, life is seen as part of objective reality; however, living organisms belong to the »artificial order« built by God as a moral will. This amounts to saying that they exceed the »natural order« of the lawfulness of matter. Organic life somehow combines the two orders, inasmuch as it manifests the unity of a *nexus finalis* realized through the *nexus effectivus* of material causality.²⁴ Yet between the two regimes there remains a gap of essence, not one of degree; as Jacobi will claim in full agreement with Kant, there can be no intermediate system between the system of final causes and that of efficient causes.²⁵ The former refers to the order of freedom, while the latter to the order of matter.

On the opposite end, the anti-Cartesian position finds full development in Diderot's brilliant and imaginative *Rêve de D'Alembert*

21 AA II, 106–107.

22 Ibid. II, 93–95, 106.

23 One can add (see *ibid.* II, 151–154) that the a posteriori argument for the existence of God that Kant draws from the contingent existence of life, while not demonstrative on the rational level, is more »convincing« than the a priori argument linking the logical predicates of substances to the necessary existence of a *Realgrund*. The a posteriori argument shows, in fact, the »omnisufficiency« of God, meaning that God's moral and architectural wisdom is not limited to the universal necessity of laws but also encompasses contingent existences.

24 These are Kant's categories in the *Critique of Judgement*, § 65.

25 W I.1, 228.

(1769). For Diderot – who purposely entrusts his ideas to the dream of a mathematician – life is inseparable from nature, to the point that it is in fact its determining element. Sensitivity is the essential property of life, and all matter, even seemingly inanimate matter, is intrinsically sensitive.²⁶ The difference between physical pleasure and moral good, or between sensibility and thought, is only of degree, just as, more fundamentally, the difference between inert and sensitive matter, or between plants and animals. While developing both Leibniz's ontological *continuum* and Spinoza's monistic metaphysics in a materialistic and vitalistic direction, Diderot sees all beings as connected through a deterministic network of unconscious ›small perceptions‹.²⁷ Consciousness, will, and personality are not essential properties or attributes of individual substances, but rather more complex and specialized articulations of the relational physiology structuring all natural beings. *Pace* Kant, then, organisms do not embody any purposive cause distinct from the blind efficient causality of natural laws. Living individualities are rather provisional nodes in the vital processes of transformation involving nature as a whole.

Despite their contrast, Diderot's and Kant's respective positions share a fundamental trait: life cannot be explained starting from the absence of life. Kant addresses this issue by framing life as an expression of a moral purposiveness transcending the lawful order of nature; Diderot, on the other hand, eliminates the absence of life from the ontological framework, equating nature, life, and sensibility. Jacobi agrees with both thinkers on this assumption: life, whatever its meaning, can be neither derived nor explained on the basis of non-living matter. What distinguishes Jacobi's thought on this score is that both alternatives – Kant's early dualism and Diderot's monism – coexist with one another in some sense. Jacobi's idea of life is marked by this significant coexistence.

26 Diderot, Denis (1975): *Œuvres complètes*. Dieckmann, H./ Proust, J./ Varloot, J. (ed.). Paris: Hermann, 103–119.

27 See Fauvergue, Claire (2015): »Conscience, mémoire et perception chez Leibniz et Diderot«. In: Leduc, Christian/Pépin, François/Rey, Anne-Lise/Rioux-Beaulne, Mitia (ed.): *Leibniz et Diderot: Rencontres et transformations*. Montréal: Presses de l'Université Montréal, 289–308.

2. Nature, Life and the Problem of Spinozism

2.1 Spinoza and Jacobi's Idea of Nature

The best way of focusing this idea is to introduce Jacobi's conception of nature. However, in order to achieve this, the role of yet another important antecedent must be considered, namely, Baruch Spinoza. As remarked by many commentators, Jacobi's idea of nature shares distinctively Spinozistic traits.²⁸ Jacobi holds that nature is a mechanistic »connection of merely efficient causes«.²⁹ This connection is the expression of the logical principle of reason. This means that everything in nature has a reason determining its existence; for natural beings, material genesis and rational explanation are one and the same. Nature, in other words, is the mechanistic domain where *causa* and *ratio* coincide. Physical mechanism and logical necessitarianism are inseparable. The real cause of a given change corresponds to the necessary connection between an *explanandum* and its *explanans* on the logical level. Like Spinoza, thus, Jacobi conceives nature in terms of a parallelism³⁰ between causes and reasons. Similar to Spinoza, above all, Jacobi also believes that the conditioned and finite sphere of nature requires an unconditioned and infinite cause. On the natural level, everything is necessarily *mediated* – both in conceptual and material terms – by an open-ended series of conditions, namely, by the set of causes determining its coexistence with other beings. Natural mechanism, in other words, is the realm of finitude and passivity, or of »fatalism«, as Jacobi puts it. Everything that can be known, explained, and demonstrated is nature; an »actual beginning«,³¹ without conditions or mediations, is unknowable and inexplicable.

According to Jacobi, we »are not capable of forming a representation of an absolutely self-subsisting being«. ³² Still, this representation

28 See Koch 2021 on Jacobi's more Spinozistic than Kantian conception of nature as mechanism; on Jacobi's ambivalent stance toward Spinoza, see Sandkaulen 2023, ch. 2.

29 W, I.1, 229.

30 Ibid., I.1, 260–263.

31 Ibid., I.1, 259.

32 Ibid., 2.1, 247.

is necessary for the conditioned realm of nature to subsist and even to be conceived. The existence of every »finite thing« relies on »co-existence« [*Mitdaseyn*]; nature as the totality of mechanical connections expresses the order of coexistence of beings in an infinite series of conditions. But it is impossible for us »to form a representation of an absolutely dependent or passive being.« If such a being were entirely passive or conditioned, it could not even be »something determinate«; »in that which has no quality in itself [*an sich*], nothing could be produced through relationships«.³³

In other words, the domain of nature implies the unconditioned level of what subsists »absolutely in itself,« and is upheld by the latter. If they did not already possess some intrinsic self-subsistence, natural beings would not be identifiable at all, nor they could be determined by a network of relationships; they would dissolve into a sheer flow, in a disorder without reference points. The open-ended series of transformations affecting all natural things is conceivable only in reference to an intrinsic subject or substrate of transformation. Or, in different but congruent terms: natural passivity is possible only in reference to a core of »self-activity« (*Selbstthatigkeit*³⁴).

In short, mechanistic nature exists only by assuming a »supernatural« domain.³⁵ There must be a first cause, unconditioned and self-subsistent, at the foundation of the conditioned order of nature. This cause, for Spinoza, is the unique substance as infinite power and essence, as the source of the unity and self-activity sustaining every mode as an individual expression of God. Spinoza's God as *natura naturans* mirrors Jacobi's own answer to the problem of the »supernatural«. It responds in fact to the inescapable need to presuppose an »actual beginning« at the basis of natural mechanism. Without much alteration, Jacobi's relationship between nature and »supernature« can be translated into Spinoza's relationship between *natura naturata* and *natura naturans*.

As Jacobi stresses, nature is the realm of all that can be explained through concepts, since concepts express and formalize conditions, mediations and relationships. However, every concept presupposes »supernatural« cores of unity and self-activity that cannot be

33 Ibid., 2.1, 247.

34 Ibid., 2.1, 247.

35 Ibid., 1.1, 258.

grasped conceptually. In a certain continuity with Spinoza's notion of *scientia intuitiva*, Jacobi conceives feeling [*Gefühl*], or even belief [*Glaube*], as kinds of insight capable of alluding, at least indirectly, to the unconditioned reality that underlies the natural order of conditions.³⁶ Feeling is a grasp of something that cannot be objectified; of an intelligible core that cannot become an object despite being presupposed by every conceptual – i.e. natural – objectification.³⁷ Following the terminology of Kant's *Beweisgrund*, Jacobi argues that only feeling grasps »existence« [*Dasein*]: the thing itself that so to speak »begins,« that »absolutely posits itself« into being.³⁸ Concepts only address the »relative« properties of the thing, namely, they address nature as the domain of relativity. As argued in the *David Hume*, concepts can never reveal reality as such. They contain only the properties of »actual things, not actuality itself«.³⁹

2.2 Life as Unum per se and Self-activity

This is where life and living beings come into play. Being an »actual beginning« is in fact, as Jacobi argues in the *David Hume*,⁴⁰ the defining characteristic of every *living* individuality. All living being [*lebendes Wesen*] is inconceivable on the natural, mechanistic level of *causa sive ratio*, since it possesses an immanent unity, and a capacity for self-determination and self-movement. Life is the intrinsic quality of that which enters into change and relation with others

36 Frilli, Guido (2023b): »Gefühl«. In: Sandkaulen, B./Schick, S./Koch, O. (ed.): *Jacobi-Wörterbuch Online*, Version v6, URL=<https://jwo.saw-leipzig.de/articles/v6/afleel62>, last accessed on 05.12.2023.

37 In his later writings, Jacobi describes reason [*Vernunft*] as the access to an unconditioned that is both presupposed within nature and excluded from it; in this way, he distinguishes it, in a Kantian manner, from the understanding [*Verstand*] as the faculty of explanation, conceptual mediation, and as the cognitive organ of nature as a mechanical connection. However, this lexical choice does not change the substance of the problem, because reason continues to be, in fact, a form of feeling; see *ibid.*

38 AA II, 72. On Jacobi's deep debt to Kant's early conception of being and existence, see the recent Livieri, Paolo (2023): *Metafisica dell'esistenza. La rivelazione della realtà in F.H. Jacobi*. Padova: Padova UP.

39 W, 2.1, 69.

40 *Ibid.*, 2.1, 73–78.

not in spite but precisely because of its »self-activity.« One might once more reference here Hans Jonas and the idea that every living organism is a precarious unification of freedom and necessity, individuality and relation, self-assertion and change, formal stability and material transformation.⁴¹ Similarly, according to Jacobi's lexicon, all living individuality is a unification of nature and ›supernature.‹ For Jacobi, all attempt at explaining life, at conceptualizing it with the analytical tools of the understanding, leads to the annihilation of the phenomenon of life itself. All living phenomena can be dissected and reconstructed based on the order of mechanism: from metabolism to generation, from sensitivity to locomotion, even to the psychological connections regulating thought, which can be transformed into purely mechanical laws.⁴² In all these cases, however, the object of explanation is not life but only its material basis; not thinking as the living activity of a personal individuality, but the psychological mechanics of symbolic connections.

In the *David Hume*, Jacobi accounts for the relationship between life and nature through a Leibnizian terminology.⁴³ Every real existence must be an *unum per se* independently of the relations in which it is involved, and precisely to be determined by these relationships; it must be *self-active* in order to be passive, receptive, and conditioned by something else.⁴⁴ Accordingly, life is the quality of all that is truly existent, inasmuch as only the existent is *unum per se* and self-active. Actuality, intrinsic unity, existence, and activity are one and the same thing. There is nothing truly real outside of life, since nature as the order of passivity and finiteness requires the unifying force of life in order to subsist.

The core set of claims developed in *David Hume* does not fall far from Diderot's standpoint. Everything that appears as non-living, and therefore as merely mechanical, is a subordinate moment to life, and it is real only as a property, consequence, expression, or remnant of life. From this vitalistic perspective, much like for Diderot, consciousness, intelligence, will, personality, and spirit are but grad-

41 Jonas 2001.

42 W, 2.1, 230.

43 See the analysis of Acerbi, Ariberto (2010): *Il sistema di Jacobi. Ragione, esistenza, persona*. Hildesheim: Olms, 141–143.

44 W, 2.1, 56.

ual amplifications of life's intrinsic activity, distinct as for the level of complexity, but not in essence.⁴⁵ It is the active spontaneity of what is *unum per se* that expresses itself, in more complex degrees, as consciousness, personality, and spirit. Even the highest spiritual capacities, such as morality and knowledge, are expressions of the original dynamism of organic individuality.⁴⁶

Jacobi's proximity to Diderot's vitalistic monism is in fact a consequence of the Spinozistic assumptions underlying Jacobi's general conception of nature. Jacobi clearly believes that Spinoza is the true source of the naturalistic vitalism found in a thinker like Diderot.⁴⁷ This might sound surprising, as Spinoza does not, at first glance, appear to be a thinker of life. Yet in the 1815 *Einleitung* to volume II of the *Werke*,⁴⁸ Jacobi specifically refers to Diderot's *Dream*, namely quoting the famous passage about the universe as an infinite spider web; in this regard, he suggests a strong connection between Diderot and the naturalistic consequences of Spinoza's metaphysics.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Jacobi's deployment of a Leibniz-inspired monadological lexicon, absolutely central to his understanding of the living, is in fact responding to Spinozistic issues. This point deserves further elucidation due to its centrality.

In the *David Hume* Jacobi underscores, alongside with Leibniz, the importance of the *principium individuationis*, which is threatened by Spinoza's ontological monism.⁵⁰ Jacobi strongly emphasizes

45 Ibid., 2.1, 84–90.

46 Moral action, indeed, is self-preservation of personality, and therefore an extension of physical self-preservation on the level of human universality: see *On the Slavery and Freedom of Man*, *ibid.*, 2.1, 244. Knowledge of the natural world, in turn, is presented by Jacobi as the appropriation of the world, the reduction of the manifold to the identical and the unstable to the persistent, for the sake of the technical control of nature: it is, ultimately, an expression of the self-affirmation of »living existence«: see *Appendix VII* of the 1789 *Spinozabriefe*, *ibid.* 1.1, 240–252.

47 As well as in Herder, another Spinozistic philosopher with whom Jacobi engages deeply: see *Appendix V*, *ibid.* 1.1, 223–230.

48 Ibid., 2.1, 432.

49 On Diderot's biologicistic Spinozism in the *Rêve de D'Alembert*, see Wolfe, Charles T. (2014): »Epigenesis as Spinozism in Diderot's Biological Project«. In: Nachtomy, O./Smith, J.E.H. (ed.): *Life Sciences in Early Modern Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 181–203.

50 W, 2.1, 56.

this difference between Spinoza and Leibniz in the *Appendix VI* of the 1789 *Spinozabriefe*.⁵¹ This point is so significant that, in fact, »only from the side of individuation can Spinozism be successfully attacked,« and the alternative to Spinoza's »Eleatic acatalepsy« can only be the »Leibnizian monads.« However, Jacobi also tends to crucially downplay the relevance of the contrast between Leibniz and Spinoza, highlighting their decisive affinity on the mind-body dualism problem. Both philosophers, according to Jacobi, »considered the soul and body as a *unum per se*.«⁵² Spinoza rejected the inanimate, merely geometric nature of Cartesian *res extensa*, dynamizing it to the point of identifying force [*Kraft*] with »the living essence of God himself.« Since each singular mode is God in a particular expression, »the life of a single thing is the force by which it persists in its being and real existence. Therefore, *every single thing has its own distinctive life force* [*Lebenskraft*; my emphasis]«. ⁵³

Similar to Leibniz's system of pre-established harmony, the nature and constitution of each singular thing, according to Spinoza, are determined by its ›compossibility‹ in connection with other things, established eternally by God's necessary decree. Analogous to Leibniz, Spinoza establishes a parallelism between thought and matter, stating that every material movement is also, on its ideal side, appetite, and every material passivity is ideally conscious sensitivity, however infinitesimal and imperceptible.⁵⁴ On this ground, one could claim, Spinoza conceives all nature as sensitive and appetitive; anticipating Diderot, Spinoza sees nature as a living totality expressing itself into an infinite heterogeneity of living singularities.⁵⁵

Due to the polemical verve of the *Spinozabriefe*, one might well be under the impression that Jacobi outright rejects Spinoza's ontological monism; but, on the contrary, Spinozism constitutes a part of Jacobi's own philosophy. All things considered, Spinoza's *natura naturans* leads to the core of Jacobi's problem of the living.

51 Ibid., I.1, 234.

52 Ibid., I.1, 240.

53 Ibid., I.1, 241.

54 Ibid., I.1, 245.

55 On Spinoza as a philosopher of life, see Zac, Sylvain (1963): *L'idée de vie dans la philosophie de Spinoza*. Paris: PUF.

2.3 Life and Freedom: Beyond Spinozism

The monistic approach, however, is only *part* of Jacobi's answer to the problem of the living. Together with Spinoza and Diderot, Jacobi maintains in the *David Hume* that nature is a living totality articulated into infinite living individualities. Yet, the fundamental difficulty of Spinoza's speculative monism lies in the reduction of ›supernature‹ to the exclusively *immanent* cause of nature. Ultimately, Spinoza, much like Schelling later on, identifies the supernatural cause of nature with a »blind active essence«, and hence with necessity and fatalism. Spinoza's *Alleinheit* is the first cause of nature, yet devoid of personal intelligence and will.⁵⁶ It coincides with the eternal self-generation of nature as a totality. In this view, all nature – including human nature – becomes the »blind« outcome of a totality without freedom, intention, or foresight. According to Jacobi this outcome, while non-mechanistic in its premise, is ultimately indistinguishable from mechanism.

At variance with Spinoza's *natura naturans*, Jacobi claims that *freedom* alone can be the unconditioned or ›supernatural‹ cause of nature.⁵⁷ Freedom is the unconditioned »self-activity«, the »independence of the will« raising the human being above all natural condition, passivity and sensibility.⁵⁸ Freedom, in both human beings and God, is always defined by Jacobi as an intelligent, personal and willing cause. As he claims in *Appendix VII*, »regarding the supernatural, whose existence we are certain of, we only have to decide whether we want to admit that it is a blind actiose being, or an intelligence«.⁵⁹ The resultant opposition between nature and freedom is prominent in all of Jacobi's philosophical texts, from the first edition of the *Spinozabriefe* to his later writings. Similar to the dualistic framework of Kant's *Beweisgrund*, the *moral* order of freedom transcends natural mechanism. While the latter at most requires God as a logical totality, the former hints at God as a personal

56 On the connection between Jacobi's personalistic theism and his critique of Spinoza and Schelling, especially in the writing *On Divine Things* (1811), see again Livieri 2023.

57 See Sandkaulen, Birgit (2000): *Grund und Ursache. Die Vernunftkritik Jacobis*. München: Fink.

58 W 2.1, 248.

59 Ibid. 1.1, 265.

and intelligent will. Nature as such excludes all »forethought, plan, free choice, intention«. ⁶⁰

In agreement with Kant, Jacobi insists, as seen above, that there can be no »intermediate system« between the »system of final causes«, i.e. the doctrine of freedom, and that of »efficient causes.« Yet this means that natural life, to the extent that it is *also* nature, cannot be a complete expression of freedom as »supernatural« cause. A gulf remains between freedom and organic life inasmuch as the former is by definition a purposive, willing, and intelligent cause, while the latter is self-activity which is also – in varying degrees – blind, instinctive, and non-intentional.

For Jacobi, freedom is not only immanent to nature, but also remains essentially heterogeneous to it. More precisely, whereas freedom *per se* transcends nature, life can be seen as the way in which freedom also acts, so to speak, *within nature*, as the intrinsic cause of the unity and activity of natural things. Hence, the relationship between nature and freedom is at the same time one of transcendence and one of immanence. This duplexity also explains why, in Jacobi's picture, dualism and monism do not exclude each other but – in a way that still needs clarification – do coexist. In sum, Jacobi's philosophy seems to give birth to two seemingly irreconcilable demands: the »embodiment« of freedom as organic nature, which leans toward a sort of vitalistic monism, and the transcendence of freedom over nature, which leans towards a Kantian dualism between mechanism and free causality. Depending on Jacobi's contextual emphasis, then, nature appears either as merely mechanistic or as completely infused with life and sensitivity; in the former case because freedom transcends nature, and in the latter because it is embodied within nature as life. Another aspect of the same oscillation concerns the concepts of personality, will, and intelligence. While from a monistic viewpoint they appear as immanent and gradual developments of an all-pervading organic life, from a dualistic viewpoint they transcend all living nature, inasmuch as they are the elements defining properly teleological or free causality.

This oscillation, however, does not uncover an internal inconsistency within Jacobi's thought; nor does it correspond to different moments of his intellectual development, which would first have

60 *Jacobi an Fichte*, *ibid.*, 2.1, 234.

vitalistic accents and then fully resolve into dualism. It is instead a structural ›antinomy‹ in something like the Kantian sense; it is, as I would argue, the consequence of the twofold relationship of immanence and transcendence between freedom and nature. Hence, Jacobi's critique of Spinoza can be articulated in the following, paradoxical terms: only by safeguarding the transcendence of freedom with respect to nature, denied by Spinozism, can one ensure its immanence as *living* nature as well. It is only by ›jumping beyond‹ Spinoza⁶¹ that the genuine core of Spinozism can be preserved: that is, the idea of nature as permeated by the vivifying force of freedom. Thus, the resolution to the above outlined ›antinomy‹ of life must be provided by an approach which is capable of both *connecting* and *separating* nature and freedom.

3. Jacobi and Kant's third Critique

3.1 Feeling Life, Feeling Freedom

The latter formulation already highlights the essential affinity between Jacobi's solution and the theoretical framework of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*. According to Kant, there can be no intermediate point between the »legislation« of freedom and that of nature.⁶² However, both legislations have effects on the same »territory.« Although the intelligible cause of free actions is heterogeneous with respect to sensibility, the effects of freedom do affect sensibility – first of all, in the form of the feeling of respect [*Achtung*]. Therefore, there must be a »mode of thinking«⁶³ that allows for the coexistence of the effects of freedom with sensibility and nature. This mode of thinking is the field opened up by the subjective purposiveness of reflective judgment.

It is important to point out, from the outset, that Jacobi's idea of freedom is fundamentally different from Kant's. One might say that Jacobi's idea of freedom is more akin to the cosmological

61 Jacobi's famous *salto mortale* is indeed a jump beyond Spinoza yet taking Spinoza as the firmest basis, as argued by Sandkaulen 2000.

62 *Einleitung*, II, AA, V, 175–177.

63 *Denkungsart*, *ibid.*, V, 176.

concept of »transcendental freedom« in the third antinomy of the first *Critique* than to the idea of moral legislation in the second *Critique*. Jacobi rejects in fact Kant's understanding of the causality of freedom based on the consciousness of moral law and, instead, sees freedom as *personal* self-determination, as well as a metaphysical ›sense‹ making us receptive to the ›divine things‹.⁶⁴ This difference points to Jacobi's principled dissatisfaction with Kant's transcendental approach to metaphysics. However, the paths of the two philosophers deeply intersect on the issue of the connection between natural sensibility and freedom as the »supersensible substrate of nature«.⁶⁵ On this connection, I argue that they achieve similar conclusions.

These conclusions can be foreshadowed in the following, very general terms. For both thinkers, human existence transcends the natural fact of living; to be human involves an *awareness* of one's life. This awareness is not given in sensibility *per se*, that is to say in life as an exclusively natural fact. It is rather linked to an awareness of something transcending life, that is to say, freedom as a purposive, intelligible cause. In order to develop awareness of life, receptivity to a supersensible cause is required. In other words, humans are aware of their animality precisely because, paradoxically, they feel themselves as being more than animals. A feeling for the ›embodiment‹ of freedom within sensibility comes here into play.⁶⁶ Feeling connected to animals also ties us to nature and prompts us to conceive nature as a common living whole, of which we are a part. Feeling connected to freedom, instead, makes us aware of our transcending nature. Still these two moments are inseparable and, in fact, mutually presuppose each other.

64 See Schick 2019, 243–250, and Stolzenberg, Jürgen (2023): »Freiheit«. In: Sandkaulen, B./Schick, S./Koch, O. (ed.): *Jacobi-Wörterbuch Online*, Version v6, URL=<https://jwo.saw-leipzig.de/articles/v6/288c8265>, last accessed on 21.12.2023.

65 AA, V, 195–196.

66 I follow here Nuzzo, whose reading of the third *Critique* convincingly stresses the apriori connection between moral freedom and natural sensibility through the concept of ›transcendental embodiment‹ (Nuzzo, Angelica (2008): *Ideal Embodiment. Kant's Theory of Sensibility*. Bloomington: Indiana UP.).

According to Kant, when we conceive nature as living, we make no pronouncement whatsoever about its objective constitution⁶⁷ – we provide no natural explanation, in Jacobi's terms. However, judging nature as homogeneous with the teleological effects of freedom does not entail projecting a mere illusion onto things. Indeed, we perceive ourselves as natural creatures yet receptive to freedom, and therefore, we extend to things a sense of immanent purposiveness that, at least with respect to our own life, is undeniably real. Kant precisely designates this sense as the »feeling of life«⁶⁸ and asserts the necessary connection between such feeling and our reflection on natural purposiveness. In other words, the feeling of life is not a *pathological* or purely material experience;⁶⁹ it is a feeling endowed with a transcendental value, as it is linked to the awareness of the effects of freedom within our nature. Only by virtue of this awareness, which allows us to feel life within ourselves, can we also understand life outside of us. Moreover, by virtue of this awareness we can see nature as the embodiment of supersensible moral purposes. A reflective consideration of living beings leads us to contemplate nature in its entirety as responsive to purposes, and thus, in an analogical sense, as a living totality.

For the purposes of subjective reflection, nature then appears to us not as a blind mechanism but as an articulated system, expressive of moral meanings: as an ›architectural‹ totality of forms progressing from the simplest entities to the complexities of conscious organisms, which are capable of setting moral ends for themselves. Certainly, no objective judgment on this totality is viable, as it would end up objectifying it and, consequently, either reducing it to mechanist nature or placing it in a purely spiritual transcendence. However, the principle of teleological reflection, while only subjective, is a necessary *a priori*, as it is grounded in the real experience of the sensible effects of moral freedom.

67 AA, V, 396–398.

68 *Lebensgefühl*, *ibid.*, V, 204.

69 See the *Erste Einleitung*, VIII, *ibid.*, XX, 230f.

3.2 Living Organisms and Purposiveness

Jacobi's ideas closely align with the Kantian connection between the supersensible, nature, and teleological reflection on life. As an important premise, one should remark that Jacobi acknowledges a key proximity between Kant's concept of organic purposiveness, as outlined in § 65 of the third *Critique*, and Spinoza's understanding of living individuality.⁷⁰ This proximity is somewhat concealed, since Spinoza, as is well-known, denies all ontological pertinence to the concept of final cause; yet it fits perfectly within the framework of Jacobi's own Spinozistic conception of organic life. According to Kant, »organized beings« must be seen as »natural purposes« [*Naturzwecke*].⁷¹ Unintelligible based solely on the *nexus effectivus*, living individuality must involve a »connection of final causes.« To have a »purpose« means to have an »idea« organizing the whole, as the parts of an organic being are possible only »through their relation to the whole.« This idea, according to Kant, cannot be preconceived, as in art, in the mind of an external craftsman but must be immanent to the living being.⁷² In other words, the idea is not only a cause but also an effect, so that the parts »bind together to form the unity of the whole,« and the organism is always »mutually cause and effect« of itself. The organic being, in other words, is a self-organized unity that realizes a perfect reciprocity of cause and effect, whole and parts, means and ends. It is not merely a simple artificial machine endowed only with »motive force,« but a whole with an immanent »formative force« [*bildende Kraft*]: a »propagating formative force that cannot be explained by the mere faculty of movement (mechanism)«.⁷³

70 See Koch 2021, 121–122. Jacobi's understanding of Spinoza foreshadows Hans Jonas's brilliant analysis in *Spinoza and the Theory of Organisms*, in: Jonas, Hans (1974): »Spinoza and the Theory of Organism«. In: *Philosophical Essays: From Ancient Creed to Technological Man*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 206–223.

71 AA, V, 373–375.

72 This is a key difference with respect to the earlier *Beweisgrund*, and the reason why the third *Critique* at least partly overcomes the quasi-Cartesian dualism between the natural and the moral orders of creation.

73 Ibid., V, 374.

Now Spinoza's *natura naturans*, according to Jacobi, allows for a thorough explanation of all the characteristics that Kant attributes to living beings as natural purposes. Spinoza's *causa sui* is, in fact, an active force in all of its individual expression. The modes Spinoza refers to are both links in the deterministic chain of *natura naturata* and immediate expressions of the immanent causality of God within ›singular things‹.⁷⁴ As such, they are self-organized individualities, both causes and effects of themselves. Like Kant's ›propagating formative force,‹ Spinoza's living individuality is simultaneously active and passive, preserving itself while constantly undergoing change.

Unlike Spinoza, however, Kant states that living beings are not conceivable as *objective* expressions of a metaphysical *natura naturans*; instead, they are intelligible only reflectively, that is, in connection with our own feeling of life. We can reflect on the *nexus finalis* of living nature because we grasp it through a kind of analogical reflection: an analogy not with the intentional causality of art, but with the feeling of *our own living nature*.⁷⁵ As previously seen, this feeling involves the experience of a corporeality that is receptive to an intelligible causality. As Spinoza deprives life of the connection to the consciousness of purposive freedom, his theory of individuality, while allowing for the intelligibility of living organisms, ends up reducing them to a ›merely mechanical‹ connection:⁷⁶ the ›living force‹ remains a blind ›essence‹ or totality. The perspective of Kant's purposive reflection on nature, to the contrary, makes it possible to maintain both the transcendence of the supersensible with respect to nature, and its immanence in the teleology of the living.

74 W, I.1, 96, 104, 112.

75 For Kant, see Nuzzo 2008, 290. This point distances my reading from Koch 2021, 121–123, who instead distinguishes Kant's tenet from Jacobi's for the following reasons: 1. the exclusively subjective function of Kant's reflective judgment, contrasting with the ontological status of life in Jacobi; 2. the epistemic rather than practical significance of the judgment of purposiveness in Kant; 3. the fact that Kant's idea of natural purpose, according to Jacobi, is reducible to Spinoza's mechanistic causality. In my view, the connection between reflective judgment, the feeling of life, and the feeling of freedom weakens the first two points and shows the affinity between Kant and Jacobi on the third point: organic purposiveness falls into mechanistic causality precisely when ›ontologized‹ in the manner of Spinoza and Schelling, that is, when detached from the feeling of freedom inherent in the acting subject.

76 W, 3, 104.

Jacobi shows great interest in this solution, as evidenced by his reading notes on the third *Critique* in the *Notebooks*, as well as by the Kantian quotation in the epigraph of the 1792 edition of the novel *Allwill*.⁷⁷ His key argument can be fruitfully compared to Kant's. According to Jacobi, we cannot know the »supernatural« directly; however, »we possess, despite our finitude and the enslavement of our nature [...] an analogue of the supernatural, that is, of the being that does not act mechanically«. ⁷⁸ This analogue is given to us »through the consciousness of our self-activity in the exercise of our will.« The specificity of human existence is then defined by the unity between our natural passivity and the feeling of the unconditioned, given in the consciousness of our willing activity. This unity is the unknowable »principle of life, the internal source of understanding and will«. ⁷⁹ Although unknowable in itself, the principle of life is genuinely experienced by every being capable of acting purposively. The »consciousness of our self-activity,« inasmuch as it makes us *feel* freedom within our nature, also makes us feel our being alive: our being *self-active* and *unum per se*. Only by virtue of this feeling can we grasp life in the external nature: »reality can only be revealed by immediate perception, just as consciousness can only be revealed by consciousness, life by life«. ⁸⁰ We can understand the living in nature because we feel ourselves as living and natural beings. This feeling is in turn possible because we not only live but also, as aware of acting freely, perceive ourselves as transcending natural life. By virtue of this duplexity, we understand natural life that is akin to us, and at the same time understand nature in its entirety as expressive of »supernatural« values.

Conclusion

A theoretical stance akin to that of the third *Critique* leads Jacobi to account for a peculiar coexistence of dualism and monism, of the

77 Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich (2020): *Die Denkbücher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobis*. 2 Vol. Krebs, Sonia V. (ed.). Stuttgart: frommann-holzboog, I, 80, 112; II, 257–259, 323–324; W, 6.1, 93.

78 *Appendix VII*, W, 1.1, 262.

79 *Ibid.*, 1.1, 263.

80 *Ibid.*, 2.1, 70.

transcendence and the immanence of freedom with respect to nature. The gap between the intentional causality inherent in freedom and the blindness of organic teleology is insurmountable; however, it is precisely the awareness of free causality that provides us with a »scheme,« in the Kantian sense, to understand ourselves as living beings and to conceptualize ourselves as part of a shared living nature. For Jacobi as well, there is a »mode of thinking« that not only bridges the gap between life and freedom, but also make sense of the totality of living nature and its various, homogeneous degrees.

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