Schwerpunkt

Guillem Sales Vilalta

Elise Reimarus's crucial contribution to the *Pantheismusstreit:* Bridging divides in Enlightenment philosophy

Zusammenfassung

Elise Reimarus' Rolle im *Pantheismusstreit:* Ein Brückenschlag in der Philosophie der Aufklärung

Dieser Artikel stellt drei miteinander verknüpfte Thesen zu Elise Reimarus' Rolle in den frühen Phasen des Pantheismusstreits auf: (I) dass ihr Engagement für die Förderung des Dialogs zwischen gegensätzlichen philosophischen Perspektiven maßgeblich dazu beitrug, die Kluft zwischen Friedrich Jacobi und Moses Mendelssohn zu überwinden; (II) dass ihr dialogischer Ansatz in der Philosophie einen eigenständigen Beitrag zum Pantheismusstreit darstellt, der sich von den Positionen sowohl Jacobis als auch Mendelssohns unterscheidet; (III) dass Jacobi Reimarus' Erkenntnisse zur Verbreitung seiner eigenen Ansichten über Philosophie und Spinozismus vereinnahmte. Zur Begründung dieser Thesen ist der Artikel wie folgt gegliedert: In der Einleitung werden der aktuelle Forschungsstand zu Reimarus und ihrer Bedeutung für den Pantheismusstreit dargestellt (1); es folgen eine Analyse von Jacobis Konzeption des Spinozismus und dessen philosophischen Implikationen (2); eine Untersuchung der vermittelnden Bemühungen von Reimarus und ihrer eigenständigen philosophischen Grundlagen (3); sowie eine abschließende Diskussion, die die breitere Bedeutung von Reimarus' Beiträgen zu dieser Debatte bewertet (4).

Schlüsselwörter
Elise Reimarus, Friedrich Jacobi, Moses Mendelssohn, Spinozismus, Pantheismusstreit

Summary

This paper aims to demonstrate three interrelated theses regarding Elise Reimarus's role in the early stages of the *Pantheismusstreit*, namely: (I) that her commitment to fostering dialogue between opposing philosophical perspectives was fundamental in bridging the divide between Friedrich Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn, thereby advancing the controversy; (II) that her dialogical approach to philosophy represents an original contribution to the *Pantheismusstreit*, differing from the stances of both Jacobi and Mendelssohn; (III) that, nevertheless, Jacobi appropriated Reimarus's insights to bolster the dissemination of his own views on philosophy and Spinozism. To substantiate these claims, the paper is structured as follows: an introduction to outline the current state of research on Reimarus and her significance for the *Pantheismusstreit* (1); an analysis of Jacobi's conceptualization of Spinozism and its philosophical implications (2); an examination of Reimarus's mediatory efforts and their distinctive philosophical underpinnings (3); and a concluding discussion assessing the broader impact of Reimarus's contributions to the debate (4).

Keywords
Elise Reimarus, Friedrich Jacobi, Moses Mendelssohn, Spinozism, Pantheismusstreit

1 Introduction: The importance of considering Reimarus's proper contribution to the *Pantheismusstreit*

Elise Reimarus (1735–1805) has gained increasing recognition for her contributions to the German Enlightenment. While her intellectual significance was tentatively acknowledged in the twentieth century (Badt-Strauss 1932; Sieveking 1940; Horvath 1976), Almut Spalding's biography (2005) marked a turning point in reassessing her importance. While Reimarus's literary works have attracted growing scholarly interest (Spalding 2003; Curtis-Wendlandt 2012, 2013), this article focuses instead on her epistolary network, particularly on her 1783 correspondence with Friedrich Jacobi (1743–1819) and Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786). These letters, exchanged during the debate over G. E. Lessing's (1729–1783) Spinozism, provide key insights into a controversy that culminated in one of the late German Enlightenment's greatest milestones: *On the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn (Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, 1785). In this work, Jacobi articulated his views on philosophy and Spinozism, grounded in the contentious claim that Lessing had embraced Spinoza's philosophy in his final days:

"I sat down on the other side of the desk against which Lessing was leaning, he began:
[*Lessing*] I have come to talk to you about my *hen kai pan*. Yesterday you were frightened.
[*Jacobi*] You surprised me, and I may indeed have blushed and gone pale, for I felt bewilderment in me. Fright it was not. To be sure, there is nothing that I would have suspected less, than to find a Spinozist or a pantheist in you. And you blurted it out to me so suddenly. In the main I had come to get help from you against Spinoza.
[L] Oh, so you do know him?
[J] I think I know him as only very few can ever have known him.
[L] Then there is no help for you. Become his friend all the way instead. There is no other philosophy than the philosophy of Spinoza.
[J] *That might be true. For the determinist, if he wants to be consistent, must become a fatalist: the rest then follows by itself."*[1] (Jacobi 1994: 187, emphasis G. S. V.)

Strictly speaking, the *Pantheismusstreit* (i.e.: the dispute on the extent to which rational philosophy leads to fatalism and atheism) is said to begin with the publication of Jacobi's *Briefe* in 1785.[2] However, the epistolary exchanges that shaped Jacobi's provocative views on Spinoza occurred earlier, between 1783 and 1784. The first (and remarkably

1 „So bald [...] ich mich an die andre Seite des Tisches, worauf Leßing gestützt war, niedergelassen hatte, hub er an: Ich bin gekommen über mein Ἑν και Παν mit Ihnen zu reden. Sie erschracken gestern. Ich. Sie überraschten mich, und ich fühlte meine Verwirrung. Schrecken war es nicht. Freylich war es gegen meine Vermuthung, an Ihnen einen Spinozisten oder Pantheisten zu finden. Und sie sagtens mir so platt heraus. Ich war großen Theils gekommen, um von Ihnen Hülfe gegen den Spinoza zu erhalten. Leßing. Also kennen Sie ihn doch? Ich. Ich glaube so gut als ihn äus-serst wenige gekannt haben. Leßing. Dann ist Ihnen nicht zu helfen. Werden Sie lieber ganz sein Freund. Es giebt keine andre Philosophie, als die Philosophie des Spinoza. Ich. Das mag wahr seyn. Denn der Determinist, wenn er bündig seyn will, muß zum Fatalisten werden: hernach giebt sich das Uebrige von selbst." (Jacobi 1785: 13f.)"

2 The so-called *Pantheismusstreit* (also known as *Spinozastreit* and *Spinozismusstreit*) prompted by Jacobi's views on Spinozism has been largely analysed. For an exhaustive survey of its emergence and development, see specially the classic accounts by Timm (1974), Christ (1988) and Zac (1989). Regarding the subsequent influence of the *Pantheismusstreit* on German idealism, see Jaeschke/Sandkaulen (2004).

most extensive) letter in the *Briefe* was written on November 4, 1783, and the last on September 5, 1784. Mendelssohn and Jacobi are commonly taken to be the leading characters of the *Pantheismusstreit*, and to some extent they were. After all, their positions represent the core of the controversy: Jacobi asserted that Lessing was a "resolute Spinozist" [*entschiedener Spinozist*], while Mendelssohn counterargued that Lessing could not have embraced any philosophical system in a "resolute" and dogmatical manner. Yet, despite their prominence, Mendelssohn and Jacobi never had a direct correspondence. From the first to the last letters included in *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, their communication was mediated entirely by Elise Reimarus: acting at Jacobi's request, Reimarus informed Mendelssohn of Lessing's alleged Spinozism and relayed Mendelssohn's responses back to Jacobi. Consequently, the beginning of the *Pantheismusstreit* hinged on two key sets of letters: (i) those exchanged between Jacobi and Reimarus, and (ii) those between Reimarus and Mendelssohn.

Jacobi himself was notably unjust in recognizing Reimarus's pivotal role in the affair. To begin with, he casted Mendelssohn as the only addressee of the *Briefe* (*„in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn"*), and omitted any mention of the extensive correspondence with Reimarus that had actually prompted their composition. In addition, he also decided to conceal Reimarus's name at the very beginning of the work, thus rendering her invisible to the readers:

> "In February of the year 1783 *a close friend of Lessing*, who through him became my friend too, wrote to me that she was planning to make a trip to Berlin, and asked me whether I had any commission for her there. She wrote to me again from Berlin. *Her letter* dealt mainly with Mendelssohn, "this true admirer and friend of our Lessing". *She* reported to me that she had talked a lot with him about the deceased of glorious memory, and about me as well. […] *When she was home again, I wrote to her.*"[3] (Jacobi 1994: 181, emphasis G. S. V.)

Likely to emphasize his personal conflict with Mendelssohn and to heighten the controversy's impact, Jacobi decided not to uncover the name of the mediator who made his discussion with Mendelssohn possible. Fortunately, Jacobi's inelegant omission of Reimarus's name has not prevented her contribution from being recognised by many modern surveys of the polemic.[4] In this respect, Alexander Altmann's remarks on the *Pantheismusstreit* within his biography of Mendelssohn are worthy of consideration (Altmann 1973: 599–611). In a section aptly titled "An Uneasy Correspondence", Altmann provides a detailed account of the exchanges between Reimarus, Jacobi, and Mendelssohn regarding Lessing's alleged Spinozism. His thorough analysis underscores the significance of Reimarus's mediation, giving her interventions a proper attention:

3 „Eine vertraute Freundinn von Leßing, welche durch ihn auch die meinige wurde, schrieb mir im Februar des Jahres drey und achtzig, daß sie im Begriff sey, eine Reise nach Berlin zu unternehmen, und fragte mich, ob ich Aufträge dahin hätte. Von Berlin aus schrieb mir meine Freundinn wieder. Ihr Brief handelte hauptsächlich von Mendelssohn, ‚diesen ächten Verehrer und Freunde unsers Leßings'. Sie meldete mir, daß sie über den Verewigten, und auch über mich Geringen viel mit ihm gesprochen hätte [...]. Da sie wieder zu Hause war, schrieb ich ihr" (Jacobi 1785: 1f.).

4 Although this fact has become especially well known today, the testimony of figures such as J. G. Hamann shows that the role of Reimarus was already recognized in her time, even if only by a few people (Jimena Solé 2024: 469).

"Elise conveyed to Jacobi a summary of Mendelssohn's reply. She had evidently taken pains to smooth over its rough edges and tone down its occasional harshness. The result was a rather tame and courteous letter. By putting Mendelssohn's array of questions in the form of indirect speech she succeeded in making them sound less aggressive. She omitted whole sentences that she considered offensive." (Altmann 1973: 611)

Thanks to scholars like Altmann, Reimarus's importance for the *Pantheismusstreit* was established beyond doubt. Subsequent researchers, including Ursula Goldenbaum (2009: 200f.), Guillem Sales Vilalta (2019), and Reed Winegar (2021: 145–149), have also emphasized her unique role as a mediator. These efforts have been invaluable in ending the invisibilization of Reimarus which, as shown above, was arguably driven by Jacobi himself. However, it seems to me that doing justice to Reimarus still requires a further step. By viewing her solely through the lens of Jacobi's and Mendelssohn's interventions, Reimarus comes to be regarded as a mere mediator who did not make any contribution of her own, and who was only concerned with facilitating the dialogue between Mendelssohn and Jacobi. Therefore, the goal of this article is to offer a survey of the *Pantheismusstreit* mainly focused on the letters by Elise Reimarus that led to the outbreak of the polemic in 1783. In doing so, my aim is to argue: (I) that her commitment to dialogue bridged the divide between Friedrich Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn; (II) that her approach to philosophy must be seen as a unique contribution to the *Pantheismusstreit*; (III) that Jacobi later appropriated her insights to promote his own views on philosophy and Spinozism.

Having outlined the purpose of this paper, the third of these theses requires now to have a quick overview of Jacobi's key points in the *Briefe* before addressing Reimarus's letters in detail.[5]

2 A *salto mortale* over fatalism: Jacobi's views on philosophy and Spinozism

Although the title of Jacobi's *Über die Lehre des Spinozas in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* suggests that his views on Spinozism are developed across multiple letters, it is striking to see that nearly all of his central theses are contained in the first one. This letter, originally written on November 4, 1783, forms the cornerstone of Jacobi's work. In it, Jacobi recounts a purportedly real conversation with Lessing in Wolfenbüttel shortly before Lessing's death (a dialogue that allegedly shaped Jacobi's interpretation of Spinoza). Very interestingly, Jacobi begins the letter with some programmatic reflections on the primacy of sensibility and inner sense over mere rational cognition. These introductory remarks provide a revealing outline of Jacobi's philosophical orientation and establish the foundational perspective from which his ideas should be construed:

5 Jacobi's work has received an extensive treatment which, as has already been pointed out, goes beyond the limits of the present research. With regard specifically to this point, we refer the reader to the comprehensive and schematic exposition of the different versions of Jacobi's *Letters* by Livieri and di Giovanni (2023), which features an up-to-date bibliographical list of Jacobi's scholarship.

"I was eight or nine years old when my childish depth of sense led me to certain remarkable *visions* (I know no better word for them) that still stick with me to this day. My yearning to attain certainty regarding the higher expectations of man grew with the years. […] Spiritually minded men who search for the truth out of inner need – of these there are only a few. […] Where both depth and sharpness are missing – where there is only mere so-called knowledge, without sharpness or depth, without the need or the enjoyment of truth – what could there be more disgusting?"[6] (Jacobi 1994: 184)

Following this preliminary critique of purely rational knowledge, Jacobi recounts his purported encounter with Lessing. The dialogue is presented as unfolding over two separate days, with the first constituting a sort of introduction to the more substantive exchange on the second. During the initial, much briefer conversation, Jacobi reads a poem to Lessing, who commends it for its unconventional religiosity. In this context, Lessing remarks that the pantheistic motto *hen kai pan* most aptly expresses his own theological stance. This declaration marks the conclusion of the first day, serving as a prelude to the more central and dramatically framed discussion that occurs on the following day:

"*Jacobi:* Then you must be pretty well in agreement with Spinoza. *Lessing:* If I have to name myself after anyone, I know of nobody else. *J:* Spinoza is good enough for me: yet, what a wretched salvation we find in his name! *L:* Yes indeed! If you like …! And yet … Do you know of a better one …?"[7] (Jacobi 1994: 187, emphasis G. S. V.)

On the second day, Jacobi and Lessing engage in an extended discussion of this issue. Lessing is portrayed as the one who takes up Spinozian philosophy to articulate his position to Jacobi, who appears somewhat unsettled by Lessing's earlier praise of Spinoza. The two interlocutors quickly find common ground on a key point: both regard Spinoza as the only thinker to fully embody the essence of philosophy. For Jacobi, this entails a strictly deterministic worldview that inevitably leads to fatalism, i.e.: the belief that all events, including every human action, are absolutely predetermined. Jacobi attributes this determinism to Spinoza based on his rejection of transcendence. By identifying God as both equivalent to His creation and as the immanent cause of His own "self-creation", Spinoza is said to turn the world into an infinite chain of effects devoid of final causes. Such causes, Jacobi argues, could only exist if God were a transcendent being endowed with intellect and will. As he succinctly puts it:

"The first cause cannot act in accordance with intentions or final causes, any more than it can exist for the sake of a certain intention or final cause; it cannot have an initial ground or a final end for performing something, any more than it can itself have a beginning or end."[8] (Jacobi 1994: 188)

6 „Mein kindischer Tiefsinn brachte mich im achten oder neunten Jahre zu gewissen sonderbaren – Ansichten (ich weiß es anders nicht zu nennen), die mir bis auf diese Stunde ankleben. Die Sehnsucht, über die besseren Erwartungen des Menschen zur Gewißheit zu gelangen, nahm mit den Jahren zu [...] Geister, die aus innerem Bedürfniß nach der Wahrheit forschen, deren sind, Sie wissen es, nur wenige [...] Wo beydes mangelt: bloßes, sogenanntes, Wissen, ohne Schärfe so wie ohne Tiefe, ohne Bedürfniß und Genuß der Wahrheit selbst: was kann eckelhafteres gefunden werden?" (Jacobi 1785: 8ff.)

7 „Ich. Da wären Sie ja mit Spinoza ziemlich einverstanden. Leßing. Wenn ich mich nach jemand nennen soll, so weiß ich keinen andern. Ich. Spinoza ist mir gut genug: aber doch ein schlechtes Heil das wir in seinem Namen finden! Lessing. Ja! Wenn Sie wollen! ... Und doch ... Wissen Sie etwas besseres?" (Jacobi 1785: 12)

8 „Die erste Ursache kann eben so wenig nach Absichten oder Endursachen handeln, als sie selbst um einer gewissen Absicht oder Endursache willen da ist; eben so wenig einen Anfangs-Grund oder Endzweck haben etwas zu verrichten, als in ihr selbst Anfang oder Ende ist" (Jacobi 1785: 16).

Beyond the later details of the letter and the interesting note that Leibniz would also have denied transcendence like Spinoza, what is central here is the portrayal of Lessing as endorsing Spinozism, reconstructed by Jacobi as a fully deterministic and fatalistic worldview. This characterization is far from trivial. Jacobi's account effectively revives the religious stigma that had shaped Spinoza's reception at the turn of the seventeenth century and into the early eighteenth century.[9] In other words: Jacobi applies to Lessing's alleged Spinozism the same accusations previously levelled by the Pietist theologians in Halle against Christian Wolff (accusations that resulted in Wolff's expulsion from both the University of Halle and the Kingdom of Prussia in 1723). It is therefore unsurprising that Jacobi distances himself explicitly from the position that he ascribes to Lessing:

"*Jacobi:* But my credo is not in Spinoza.
Lessing: I dare hope that it is not in any book.
J: That's not all. *I believe in an intelligent personal cause of the world.*
L: Oh, all the better! I must be about to hear something entirely new.
J: You had better not get your hopes up too much. *I extricate myself from the problem through a s*alto mortale, and I take it that you are not given to any special pleasure in leaping with your head down. […] The whole thing comes down to this: from fatalism I immediately conclude against fatalism and everything connected with it."[10] (Jacobi 1994: 188f., emphasis G. S. V.)

This schematic overview of Jacobi's theses suffices for the purposes of the article. What is most relevant here is to recall that Jacobi advanced overtly polemical ideas, which were deeply connected to the religious stigma surrounding Spinoza's reception since the late seventeenth century and which ultimately elicited a decisive response from Mendelssohn (arguably, one of the most prominent enlightened philosophers of the time). As previous-

9 The discussion of Spinozian philosophy in early modern Germany was, from its very beginning, mostly grounded on secondary literature written by (mainly Protestant) theologians and religious thinkers, with a distorted emphasis on Spinoza's alleged atheism (Otto 1994:14–33). This emphasis on Spinoza's dangerous atheism by Protestant philosophers and theologians is by no means an accident: Spinoza came to be known through reviews and commentaries on his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670), the work in which the Old Testament is approached as a historical piece of literature deserving critical analysis, instead of considering it a source of divine Revelation. Such a religiously biased criticism of Spinoza had already gained a wide acceptance when his *Ethica* also came to be known by the 1680s, and the controversy between Christian Thomasius (1655–1728) and E. W. von Tschirnhaus (1651–1708) is a good example of that. Tschirnhaus's claim (*Medicina mentis* 1687) that virtue and happiness depend exclusively on human reason caused Thomasius to consider him an "spinozist", that is, a dangerous follower of Spinoza's atheistic philosophy (Wurtz 1980). Works discrediting Spinoza as a morally dangerous atheist continued to appear during the next years. In fact, this image persisted and retained its centrality well into first half of the 18th century, as is apparent in the process that led to Christian Wolff's expulsion from the University of Halle in 1723, and his refutation of Spinozism under pressure in 1737. To put it short: Wolff's claim (*German Metaphysics* 1720) that Leibnizian pre-established harmony is the best account of mind/body dualism was a new version of Spinozistic determinism and fatalism for Joachim Langue, the leading voice of the Pietist group opposed to Wolff, who had also been severely critical of Leibniz's *Essais de Theodicée* (Wilson 1995: 446–452).

10 „Aber im Spinoza steht mein Credo nicht. Leßing. Ich will hoffen, es steht in keinem Buche. Ich. Das nicht allein. Ich glaube an eine verständige persönliche Ursache der Welt. Leßing. O, desto besser! Da muss ich etwas ganz neues zu hören bekommen. Ich. Freuen Sie sich nicht zu sehr darauf. Ich helfe mir durch einen Salto mortale aus der Sache; und Sie pflegen am Kopf-unter eben keine sonderliche Lust zu finden. [...] Die ganze Sache bestehet darinn, daß ich aus dem Fatalismus unmittelbar gegen den Fatalismus, und gegen alles, was mit ihm verknüpft ist, schließe." (Jacobi 1785: 17f.)

ly noted, Jacobi articulated his position under the influence of Reimarus, who played a crucial role in shaping the extensive letter where Jacobi programmatically set forth his insights. With this context in mind, we shall now examine how Reimarus prompted Jacobi to write that famous letter and also incited Mendelssohn's rebuttal of Jacobi's claims.

3 A careful listening: Reimarus's 1783 dialogue with Jacobi and Mendelssohn

As we turn to examine how Reimarus catalyzed the *Pantheismusstreit* through Jacobi, an important question arises: how did she earn the trust of both Jacobi and Mendelssohn? Reimarus's position can, in part, be attributed to her roots in a remarkably bourgeois family that had already produced prominent intellectuals like her grandfather Johann Fabricius and her father Hermann Samuel Reimarus. This environment afforded her a solid education (Spalding 2005: 75–108), which eventually resulted in an original (yet not really extensive) production, including both literary works and philosophical treatises[11] (Winegar 2021). Combined with her intellectual pursuits, this background established Reimarus as a prolific correspondent, placing her at the heart of the late German Enlightenment.[12] Through her extensive correspondence with leading thinkers, Reimarus cultivated an *ethos* of listening and dialogue, a philosophical attitude primarily grounded in receptiveness. As this analysis seeks to demonstrate, such philosophical stance was not only original but also indispensable for the *Pantheismusstreit*.

Let us then turn to Reimarus's 1783 letters with Jacobi and Mendelssohn. The first letter concerning Lessing's alleged Spinozism was sent by Jacobi to Reimarus on July 21, 1783, several months after the last letter that Reimarus had sent to him. Jacobi begins with a brief apology for the delay in replying, which he attributes to an extended journey that had prevented him from properly addressing her last message. However, he quickly shifts focus to underscore the gravity of the matter that he wishes to share. Jacobi reveals his central claim without further ado: "You may know, and if you don't, I will tell you here under the rose of friendship, that Lessing was a resolute Spinozist in his last days" (Mendelssohn 1977: 122, translation into English G. S. V.). This assertion is accompanied by an explicit directive regarding Mendelssohn. Jacobi insists that Mendelssohn, who was reportedly writing a biography of Lessing, must be made aware of this fact for two reasons. First, he speculates that Lessing may have concealed his (dangerous) Spinozism from Mendelssohn out of friendship. But secondly, and ironically casting doubt on the prior reason, Lessing may have said nothing to Mendelssohn because the friendship between the two seems to have cooled and grown distant in Lessing's final days.

11 Incidentally, Maria Jimena Solé has published recently (2024) the very first translation and modern edition of the anonymous treatise entitled *Freiheit* (1791): since Almut Spalding's 2005 biography of Reimarus, there is a growing consensus that Reimarus was the author of this treatise. Even more recently, Anaïs Delambre (2024) has reflected very interestingly on the traces of Spinozism that can be tracked in the treatise.

12 In addition to Mendelssohn, Lessing and Jacobi, Reimarus maintained epistolary exchanges with such important figures as August Hennings, Hermann Campe, Friedrich Nicolai and Karl Leonard Reinhold. For the details of her most important exchanges, see Sieveking (1940).

On August 4, 1783, Reimarus wrote to Mendelssohn to inform him of the sensitive letter received from Jacobi, seeking his opinion on the matter. Notably, Reimarus conveys her concern without directly disclosing the content of Jacobi's message. Instead of summarizing it, she encloses Jacobi's letter in full at the end of her own, allowing Mendelssohn to read it firsthand. Reimarus's words to "introduce" Jacobi reflect a deep sense of unease. She expresses a particular anxiety about the cryptic reference to "what Lessing thought in his last years": according to reports from unnamed friends of Lessing, there are indications that he may have embraced atheism [*Aberglaube*] shortly before his death. Echoing Jacobi's urgency, Reimarus stresses the importance of addressing the issue promptly, urging Mendelssohn to resolve it at once. The dramatic tone of her appeal is worthy of attention:

> "Only you are in a position to judge whether the public should be apprised of the information contained therein. I am very anxious to hear to what extent it is new to you and what you think of these last beliefs of our friend. […] With regard to this I am suspending my judgement until I hear yours. I am also keeping the entire matter strictly to myself." (Altmann 1973: 606, translated from Mendelssohn 1977: 120f.)

This letter to Mendelssohn is a first exemplification of Reimarus's profound commitment to dialogue as a cornerstone of intellectual engagement. Her handling of Jacobi's letter offers an early indication of this approach. Unlike Mendelssohn's more defensive stance, which will be discussed below, Reimarus does not challenge the legitimacy of Jacobi's perspective. On the contrary, she treats his remarks with careful consideration, acknowledging their merit and the significance of Jacobi's concern. This legitimization of Jacobi's viewpoint is evident in the weight that she assigns to his claim regarding Lessing's Spinozism. Her sense of urgency about this "accusation" is vividly expressed in her communication with Mendelssohn, stating that "I thought it necessary to send it [Jacobi's letter] to you, my dearest Mendelssohn, because only you are in a position to judge whether the public may or may not accept the news it contains, […] I confess it, and if it is blasphemy, then forgive me for his [Lessing's] holy shadow!" (Mendelssohn 1977: 120, translation into English G. S. V.)

Reimarus's commitment to dialogue is further exemplified by another aspect of her letter: her reaction to Lessing's alleged Spinozism. After carefully considering Jacobi's position and acknowledging its validity, Reimarus views it as imperative to facilitate a dialogue between Jacobi and Mendelssohn to resolve the matter comprehensively. Her appeal to Mendelssohn to engage in the discussion reflects a conviction that philosophically significant questions must be examined collaboratively through open debate. In essence, Reimarus's letter appears to display two complementary moves which are worth highlighting: (i) she thoughtfully listens to and legitimizes Jacobi's concerns, expressing a sincere sense of worry, and (ii) she reaffirms her steadfast dedication to dialogue by urging Mendelssohn to engage with Jacobi and provide an accurate response to his statements.

Jacobi's assertion regarding Lessing's alleged Spinozism elicited a prompt reply from Mendelssohn on August 16, 1783, in which the contours of his position for the ensuing dispute were made manifest. Mendelssohn wastes no time in challenging Jacobi's approach. He begins by questioning the ambiguity of Jacobi's claim that "Lessing was

a Spinozist", suggesting that the statement is fundamentally misleading. What does this actually mean, Mendelssohn asks? Did Lessing truly embrace the Spinozist system? And if so, he puts further, which version of it? Was it Spinoza's own formulation in the *Tractatus* or the *Principia philosophiae Cartesii*, or was it Bayle's tendentious and biased portrayal? Beyond this critical issue concerning definition, Mendelssohn raises a second, equally significant objection to Jacobi's argument, which shall be best conveyed in Mendelssohn's own words: "If Lessing may have subscribed any man's system in such poor manner, and without any further qualification, then he was not himself in asserting something paradoxical, which he himself rejected in a more serious hour." (Mendelssohn 1977: 123, translation into English G. S. V.)

The opening paragraph of Mendelssohn's letter encapsulates the core of his critique of Jacobi, which unfolds along two main lines of argument. First, Mendelssohn contends that Jacobi's claim is inherently nonsensical. At first glance, this might appear to be a linguistic objection, and to some extent it is: after all, Mendelssohn insists that Jacobi must clarify precisely what he means by asserting that Lessing was a "resolute Spinozist". However, this linguistic critique is underpinned by a deeper philosophical insight. For Mendelssohn, the belief that a thinker like Lessing could wholly embrace a philosophical system is fundamentally flawed. In his view, genuine philosophers do not uncritically adopt systems; rather, they engage in rigorous analysis of those systems, appropriating well-founded elements while critically addressing problematic aspects. Very interestingly, this position resonates with Mendelssohn's reflections on metaphysics in his *Philosophische Gespräche* (1755), an early work where Mendelssohn sought to rehabilitate Spinozian philosophy, and which was likely influenced by his own discussions with Lessing:

> "To understand Leibniz successfully, it is necessary to become a good Leibnizian first. One must be familiar with his fundamental theses and definitions, just like a diligent student who only aims at focusing strictly on his words. At this point, the difficulties will not have to be sought, but will eventually emerge on their own. [...] [W]hoever reaches the top of the road will eventually encounter them. It will only be necessary not to close one's eyes to what appears there at sight." (Mendelssohn 1971: 21, translation into English G. S. V.)[13]

In the third dialogue of the *Philosophische Gespräche*, the fictional interlocutors Neophil and Philopon emphasize the necessity of maintaining a critical attitude in philosophical inquiry. As Neophil observes, every philosopher, no matter how esteemed, has erred at some point (and Leibniz, widely regarded as one of the greatest thinkers of all times, is no exception). Thus, approaching any philosophical system requires a critical and questioning mindset. It is only through this approach that doctrines can be thoroughly understood, distinguishing their well-founded elements from those in need of revision and refinement.

13 Mendelssohn offered in the third dialogue of his 1755 *Gespräche* a rather interesting nuance to the peculiar rehabilitation of Spinoza traceable in the precedent dialogues of that work. In the first and second of the *Gespräche*, he explicitly opposes the (still prevalent at the time) religious critics of Spinoza by claiming that, when treated in strictly philosophical terms, Spinoza must be granted the really remarkable merit of anticipating Leibniz's pre-established Harmony. It is in the third of the *Gespräche* that he farther clarifies his understanding of philosophy, suggesting in a Baylean inspired mood that definitive truths are really difficult (if not impossible) to achieve, even in Leibniz's case. Regarding this theme, see Sales Vilalta (2024).

When Mendelssohn's letter to Reimarus is read in light of the *ethos* articulated in the 1755 *Gespräche*, Jacobi certainly seems to be at odds with Mendelssohn. In his *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*, Jacobi operates more as a polemicist than a philosopher, displaying an aversion to strictly rational debate. He seeks to transform what might otherwise be an essentially philosophical question (namely, the nature of Spinozian philosophy) into a quasi-religious controversy, employing a visceral rhetoric reminiscent of the condemnations issued by Protestant theologians against Spinoza in the late seventeenth century. Mendelssohn, by contrast, adamantly opposes Jacobi's method and works to delegitimize his broader and contrarian approach to intellectual matters. For Mendelssohn, philosophers of Lessing's calibre adopt a critical attitude toward doctrines and reject the wholesale acceptance of systems, especially when this acceptance serves merely as a polemic tool for provocation. Given these starkly divergent perspectives, it is evident that any meaningful dialogue between Mendelssohn and Jacobi on Lessing's alleged Spinozism would have been fraught with difficulty, if not altogether impossible.

It is precisely Reimarus's commitment to dialogue that allowed both approaches to be staged in the subsequently called *Pantheismusstreit*. Reimarus's particular commitment to fostering dialogue is once again evident in her subsequent correspondence with Jacobi, which ultimately laid the foundation for the pivotal letter of November 4, 1783 (as said, the centrepiece of *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn*). Her approach here is as subtle as it is significant. On September 1, 1783, just two weeks after receiving Mendelssohn's reply, Reimarus addressed Jacobi directly, without first responding further to Mendelssohn. Her summary of Mendelssohn's letter is notably thorough and impartial, as she methodically recounts: (i) Mendelssohn's scepticism regarding the meaning of the phrase "to be a Spinozist"; (ii) his argument that Lessing's recognition of certain truths in the *Ethica* does not necessarily render him a Spinozist; and (iii) his request for Jacobi to provide a more detailed explanation of his claims. It is after reviewing Mendelssohn's letter that Reimarus makes a final step that would prove instrumental in advancing the dialogue and shaping the ensuing controversy:

> *"You see, dearest Jacobi, this is the result of your message, which I could not possibly have concealed from Mendelssohn, and of which you must not regret to tell me more.* For what would you have said if Mendelssohn had come out with what he thought he had to say about Lessing's character, and there was nothing in it about other things? You would then have had to reproach yourself for having mutilated the cause of truth." (Jacobi 1987: 203 f., translation into English & emphasis G. S. V.)

This demand to Jacobi at the end of the letter was the conclusive step that led to the articulation of the *Pantheismusstreit* proper. Reimarus's genuine interest in the question gives a final legitimacy to Jacobi: based on her encouragement, he will not hesitate in expressing his singular views at length on November 4, 1783, along the foreseen core letter of his subsequent *Briefe*. The consequence of all this is as surprising as it is paradoxical: thanks to Reimarus's genuine desire to set a discussion on the issue, Jacobi became definitively legitimised to state publicly his religious and contrarian perspective on Spinozism and philosophy. In the end, Reimarus's engagement with philosophical dialogue ended up being the main weapon by which Jacobi could give way to his anti-

rationalist and even anti-philosophical perspective. To a certain extent, a mostly dialogical and open-minded approach to philosophical inquiry can be seen as turning into the sword of one of its most biting and fearsome rivals.

4 Conclusion: from careful listening to passional controversy

Let us conclude this article by reviewing the extent to which its three core theses have been argued, namely: (I) that Elise Reimarus's commitment to fostering dialogue was essential in bridging the divide between Jacobi and Mendelssohn and prompting the *Pantheismusstreit*; (II) that this dialogical approach represents a distinct and original contribution to the controversy, diverging from the philosophical stances of both Jacobi and Mendelssohn; and (III) that, nonetheless, Jacobi harnessed Reimarus's mediatory efforts to advance the dissemination of his own views on philosophy and Spinozism.

The first and second theses have been shown to be closely intertwined. In fact, Reimarus's philosophical originality (II) has come to be the key element to explain her triggering of the controversy (I). Reimarus's approach to philosophical matters stands apart as neither aligned with Mendelssohn's critical rationalism nor Jacobi's polemical and "emotional" stance. Mendelssohn upheld a vision of philosophy as rigorous critique, dismissing uncritical endorsements of entire systems as philosophically untenable. Jacobi, by contrast, disdained purely rational debate, framing Spinozism in dramatic, almost theological terms akin to the early modern stigmatization of Spinoza by Protestant theologians. In contrast to them, Reimarus, cultivated a more inclusive intellectual *ethos*, granting equal attention to both Mendelssohn's and Jacobi's viewpoints. By doing so, she facilitated dialogue between figures whose perspectives were deeply at odds, so that her bridging effort came to be indispensable in initiating the *Pantheismusstreit*. Thus, her inclusive stance (grounded in listening, legitimizing diverse viewpoints, and fostering dialogue) emerges as a unique approach to philosophical inquiry in the context of the *Pantheismusstreit*, without which Mendelssohn's and Jacobi's opposing perspectives could not have resulted in any dialogue at all.

Reimarus's original approach to philosophy within the *Pantheismusstreit* should be also considered in connection to the gendered constraints of her time.[14] Compared to her male contemporaries, who occupied privileged positions in the public intellectual sphere, women were much more excluded from the formal avenues of publication. This exclusion limited their ability to produce and disseminate philosophical treatises and to consequently engage more directly in the controversies that shaped the intellectual landscape (a limitation which, incidentally, is also illustrated by Reimarus's rather scant production). In response to that, figures like Reimarus often adopted alternative strategies to assert their intellectual agency. Her foreseen mediatory role exemplifies it: rather than authoring polemical works, she used her epistolary network to influence debates

14 For a general overview of the interplay of gender factors in the intellectual scene at the time, see Gordon (1992).

and to prompt intersubjective discussion. This subtle yet impactful approach allowed her to contribute philosophical insights in a more indirect manner, circumventing the structural barriers that restricted women's participation in the public sphere to a non-negligible extent. Her involvement in fostering dialogue, therefore, can be seen not only as an original philosophical attitude, but also as a practical adaptation to the gendered realities of her intellectual life in the late German Enlightenment.

As for the third thesis of this article, it has been shown that Reimarus's open-minded mediation undeniably advanced Jacobi's agenda. Her encouragement in the September 1, 1783, letter was instrumental in prompting Jacobi to articulate his controversial claim about Lessing's Spinozism, leading to the eventual publication of his 1785 *Briefe*. In effect, Reimarus enabled Jacobi to bring his polemical ideas into the public sphere, where they significantly influenced contemporary and later debates on Spinozism. While Jacobi's appropriation of Reimarus's mediatory efforts also underscores the gendered dynamics of intellectual exchange (where her contributions were instrumental yet underacknowledged) it also highlights the paradoxical outcomes of her dialogical attitude.

In fact, Reimarus's role in prompting Jacobi to write what would become his most renowned work was far from insignificant. Jacobi's *Briefe* had a profound impact on his contemporaries and subsequent generations, and has been often regarded as marking the beginning of a new phase in the intricate reception of Spinozian philosophy among German thinkers (Jimena Solé 2011: 223). Thus, Reimarus's role in initiating the *Pantheismusstreit* ultimately contributed to the emergence and development of German Idealism. In this sense, her willingness to include even controversial and divisive views in philosophical dialogue exemplifies both her intellectual generosity and the transformative potential of her mediatory philosophy, making it particularly fair and necessary to take it as an original and crucial approach to the philosophical inquiry of the time.

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Author's details

Guillem Sales Vilalta, PhD, Juan de la Cierva Post Doctoral Researcher at the Center for Human and Social Sciences of the Spanish National Research Council (CSIC). Research focus: German Enlightenment, Moses Mendelssohn, feminists approaches to the history of early modern philosophy, history of early modern logic.
Email: guillem.sales@cchs.csic.es