

## The “felt need of reason” in Kant’s *Was heisst: sich im Denken orientieren?*

Claude Piché, Université de Montréal

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**ABSTRACT :** In his text “Was heisst: sich im Denken orientieren?” Kant takes the risk of stressing the role of feeling in rational faith. There is a risk involved here because feeling is at the very center of the thesis he opposes: Jacobi’s conception of faith as an inner revelation. Kant is nevertheless ready to integrate feeling as a constitutive part of his view on rational faith as long as it expresses a “need of reason” itself, and not an act of blind faith. He sees that Mendelssohn’s rationalism, which aims at establishing a proof of God’s existence and of a future life on strictly theoretical (objective) grounds, is clearly insufficient and provides no orientation. In fact, orientation in the sensible as well as in the intelligible world always involves the mediation of a subjective feeling. The unity of personhood in the realm of rational faith has therefore to take into account the sensible and the rational aspects of the phenomenon.

**KEYWORDS :** Kant, Mendelssohn, Jacobi, Reinhold, Enlightenment, rational faith, need,

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At first, Kant in no way intended to intervene in the Pantheism Controversy that broke out in Germany in the mid-1780s. If, in the end, he decided to do so, it was because he finally gave in to the entreaties of, among others, his correspondents in Berlin, Marcus Herz and Johann Erich Biester. The latter, the co-editor of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, made Kant see that what was at stake in the controversy between Mendelssohn and Jacobi was nothing less than the very future of the German Enlightenment. The challenge to reason represented by Jacobi’s fideism and by Wizenmann’s exhortation for a return to the religions of old called for a firm response. Kant’s intervention, entitled “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” duly appeared in the October 1786 edition of Biester’s journal.

There were several reasons to make Kant reticent to intervene in this debate. Among these, there is surely the fact that, in the summer of 1786, Reinhold had begun the publication of his series of *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*, in which he intended to employ the “results” of the *Critique of Pure Reason* for securing reason’s rights against *Schwärmerei* but also for restricting reason to its legitimate claims against such dogmatic rationalism as Mendelssohn’s. Kant could well have considered himself to be free from any obligation to take part in the dispute, all the more since Reinhold had had the foresight to bet on the issue best suited for showing the critical philosophy’s relevance to such matters: rational belief. Indeed, it is precisely this approach that Kant himself will adopt in his short essay on the question of orientation in thinking.

Consequently, we can legitimately inquire into how Reinhold – the self-appointed spokesperson of the critical philosophy – reacted to Kant’s 1786 contribution to the debate, a contribution which he had *not*, of course, foreseen in the original plan for his *Letters*. It goes without saying that he had no choice but to take note of Kant’s article; and that is precisely what he does in the third *Letter*, which appeared in the January 1787 issue of *der Teutsche Merkur* (the first two *Letters* having been published together in the August issue of the preceding year). The question that presents itself, then, is the following: How does Reinhold integrate Kant’s argumentation into his own reasoning? It is my intention here, to set out the divergences that appear between Reinhold’s and Kant’s respective approaches to the question of rational belief.

Through his *Letters*, Reinhold intends to meet a number of theoretical needs in order to strengthen rational belief in its legitimate claims. For this, there is consequently “a need for a critique of reason,” that is, a need for a rigorous philosophical investigation that would bring to light the proper basis, theoretical as well as practical, of rational belief. In Kant’s case, the argumentation of the 1786 text also deals with a need, a “need of reason,” but not in the sense that one feels a need *for* reason. Rather, it is reason *itself* that experiences a need: the one that lies at the basis of rational belief. It is because a need emanates from reason, or, better, because the rational subject – literally – *feels* a need, that belief is possible. In other words, when there is mention of a need of reason in Reinhold’s texts, the word “reason” in this expression functions as an objective genitive; i.e. the need is oriented towards reason, it points to reason as its object. For Kant, in contradistinction, this expression does not mean a need *for* reason, but rather that reason itself harbors a need, so that in this case the genitive is subjective. This purely

grammatical distinction can serve as a clue for retracing the fundamental difference between Kant's and Reinhold's respective approaches – even though both serve a common cause: the elucidation and defense of rational belief. And it is precisely this divergence that I would like to examine, by analyzing, first, Kant's position in his text “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” and by comparing it, not with all eight of the *Letters* which came out in 1786-1787, but only with the passages in which Reinhold integrates the Kantian theme of the “need of reason” into his own reasoning. What interests us here, of course, is the spirit in which Reinhold takes up this theme. More precisely, we shall have to investigate why Reinhold tends to minimize the role of feeling (*Gefühl*) by which, according to Kant, the need of reason manifests itself.

One tends to think of the Reinhold of the *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* of 1786-1787 as still being entirely Kantian. Such a judgment is certainly well-founded, in that Reinhold, in his *Letters*, does not deviate in any fundamental way from the critical philosophy. The emphasis he puts on the necessity of an entirely convincing elucidation of the first principles of theoretical and practical philosophy, however, already allows us to discern, *in nuce*, the eventual distancing from Kant that will later come to light fully in the *Essay on a New Theory of the Human Faculty of Representation* of 1789. For my present purposes, I shall simply show that, for Kant, rational belief is essentially grounded in the subjectivity of the individual, i.e., the subject who experiences “the need of reason” in the form of a feeling, while for Reinhold, by opposition, the strength of the conviction of this moral belief essentially flows from the universal validity of the principles upon which it is based. If we consider these two approaches –complementary ones, it must be said – from the perspective of the Pantheism Controversy, we shall be forced to conclude that Kant was seeking to demonstrate to Jacobi, the “supernaturalist,” and to Wizenmann, the proponent of the traditional religions, as well as to Mendelssohn, the rationalist, that reason is not cut off from belief, but that, on the contrary, reason leads to belief – that is, once one has grasped that a need issues from reason in the form of a feeling, i.e., as something that is not at all abstract and impersonal, but rather purely subjective. In Reinhold's eyes however, it is rather the lack of clarity and evidentness of the principles of reason that is in large measure responsible for irrational excesses, on the one hand, and the idle speculations of dogmatic rationalism, on the other. As we can see, the absence or, better, the rejection by

Reinhold of the sensible dimension of belief found in Kant will help us to circumscribe the originality of the Kantian approach to personhood.

The novelty of Kant's 1786 intervention compared with the *Critique of Pure Reason* consists in its inclusion of two elements, namely the "need of reason" and "feeling," which were not present in the chapter of the Canon of Pure Reason entitled "Opining, Knowing, and Believing." Indeed, these two elements, which are introduced in 1786 into the discussion of the status of belief, are interdependent, as what is at issue is the "feeling of the need proper to reason." For Kant the need of reason manifests itself in the form of a feeling.

By grounding belief on a need of reason, Kant is not truly breaking from the expositions of the first *Critique*. He is in fact completing them. In the chapter of the Canon just mentioned, belief has "subjective foundations," which are identified, at A 829/B 857, with the "moral disposition" of the individual. In 1786, however, Kant returns to the "subjective foundation" of belief; only this time, he identifies it with the "need of reason": "At this point *the right of the need* of reason comes into play, as a subjective ground for presupposing and admitting something that reason cannot claim to know on the basis of objective grounds" (Kant, 1786, AK VIII, 137). For Kant, it is a properly moral disposition that gives rise to belief, a disposition which, in "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?," leads to what is called a "need of reason" that affects sensibility by way of a feeling. By introducing feeling into the 1786 text, Kant ascribes a role to sensibility that may seem surprising, especially in relation to "rational" belief. Furthermore, if one takes account of the context into which Kant's text was introduced, his emphasis on the role of feeling in moral belief may seem, at first sight at least, to be a risky move: for does this not concede too much to Jacobi, a declared enemy of the concept of reason claimed by the *Aufklärung*? Indeed, in his struggle against rationalist metaphysics, it is precisely to feeling that Jacobi appeals to provide a foundation for belief. In his *Letters on the Doctrine of Spinoza*, for instance, he endorses the thesis of the Dutch writer Hemsterhuis according to which every conviction is ultimately derived from a conviction based on feeling. This feeling expresses the immediate certainty that is constitutive of belief (Jacobi 1785, Meiner, 81, 113). Given all of this, it is important to inquire into the motives that pushed Kant, or so it would appear, to make an analogous move, while, in the same text, he twice commends Mendelssohn for having restricted himself, in the face of all opposition, to reason, to pure reason (Kant 1786, AK VIII, 134, 140).

Upon closer inspection, one realizes that by introducing the theme of feeling into his discussion, Kant in fact intended to prove Jacobi right – at least up to a point. Given that the status of belief represented one of the biggest stakes in the Pantheism Controversy, Kant had to describe this phenomenon accurately. And it just so happened that Jacobi had identified an essential characteristic of belief: in his writings, he emphatically stresses the strictly subjective character of this phenomenon. So Kant could not help but go along with this, even though Jacobi’s argument was directed against German Enlightenment, and among other things against the concept of reason defended by Mendelssohn, as we see in the following passage targeting the dogmatic rationalists: “The cause of this terrible mistake is that they consider as objectively cognized... a truth that reveals itself only in a subjective manner” (Jacobi 1786, 269). Jacobi’s emphasis on the subjective dimension of belief is really aimed at bringing out the role that is played by the individual, the person, in the phenomenon of belief. He is clearly attempting, in this way, to justify his critique of rationalist philosophy, which does not attribute any specific role to the individual subject, to the unique and irreplaceable Self. It is well known that, in Jacobi’s eyes, Spinozism – the ultimate outcome of philosophy under the aegis of a reason that proceeds by way of demonstrations – at once eliminates any claim to establish a relation to God conceived of as a person. But we also know that Kant, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, had managed to avoid this pitfall, and that he retained the possibility of a God endowed with intelligence and a will. This explains why, even in the midst of the Pantheism Controversy, Kant could still acknowledge Jacobi – without thereby falling prey to *Schwärmerei* – for having brought to light the personal character of belief as well as the corresponding importance of feeling.

Kant’s move is surely not as innocent as it may seem. In 1786, he was intervening in a debate that had already been raging for some time; accordingly, he had to take account of the writings of those who had preceded him. The references contained in the footnotes to “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” and the argumentation of the article itself all the more, clearly show that he had indeed acquainted himself with the writings of Mendelssohn, Jacobi, and Wizenmann. He was therefore not unaware that *de facto* he was already implicated in the Controversy, in that the critical philosophy had been invoked during the course of the debate. I am thinking here of Jacobi’s work, *Replies to the Accusations of Mendelssohn* of April, 1786, in which he appeals to the authority of none other than Kant in order to support his thesis

regarding the subjective character of belief. In it, he quotes long passages from the chapter of the Canon of Pure Reason pertaining to the act of holding-to-be-true, in order to demonstrate, following Kant, that there is a fundamental difference regarding the way in which one must conceive of assent in the case of a truth obtained by theoretical argumentation compared with the conviction pertaining to belief. Kant deems that in the latter case, “my conviction is not *logical*, but *moral* certainty” (KrV, A 829/B 857). It goes without saying that in order to integrate this excerpt into his own text, Jacobi must needs disregard its original context, for what this particular passage of the *Critique* actually deals with is rational belief, i.e., a belief that, in spite of its subjective dimension, is nonetheless founded on reason. Kant is in no way fooled by this, but, on the other hand, he cannot help endorsing the subjective aspect of this phenomenon that Jacobi describes. Kant himself, at the beginning of his chapter, had specified that while knowledge (*Wissen*), properly speaking, is valid “for everyone,” belief (*Glaube*), by contrast, is only valid “for myself” (KrV, A 822 / B 850). Thus belief does not make a claim to unanimity. It does not appeal to the assent of everyone; on the contrary, it remains a strictly individual matter. And this is what Jacobi is right to stress. Indeed, his intention comes out clearly when he quotes, *in extenso*, the paragraph from which the previous sentence was taken. There, we find the following statement regarding moral certainty, from Kant’s own hand: “since it rests on subjective grounds (on the moral *Gesinnung*), I must not even say, ‘*It is* morally certain that there is a God, etc.’ but ‘*I am* morally certain, etc.’” (KrV, A 829/B 857). Jacobi takes care to reproduce these nuances of Kant’s which specify that the verb “to believe” can properly be conjugated only in the first person singular. Moreover, these remarks contained in the first *Critique* are by no means incidental; we find them again in the *Logic* edited by Jäsche, for example, where they are treated quite thoroughly.

The theme of feeling is meant to confirm the subjective dimension of belief. Feeling individuates, as it can only come from a particular subject. It is, for Kant, the sensible effect produced by practical reason in the face of the expectation of the realization of the highest good. It is a tangible mark of the need that issues from reason. Besides, Kant had long held that a need, generally speaking, expresses itself to the individual as a feeling. As long as one keeps in mind that the feeling at issue here is founded on a particular kind of need, i.e., one issued from reason, then there is no danger in emphasizing its essential role in belief. Jacobi, for his part, does not give evidence of such prudence. Or rather, it was very much in his interest to dissociate belief

from reason, particularly from the model, defended by Mendelssohn, of speculative reason as proceeding by way of “demonstrations.” This is why, in his *Replies to the Accusations of Mendelssohn*, he once again appeals to Hemsterhuis’s conception of conviction brought on by feeling. In reality, Hemsterhuis expositis, in his own fashion, the Kantian distinction between logical conviction and moral conviction – leaving out, however, the latter’s rational foundation. Thus, Hemsterhuis can speak of a “purely sentimental conviction,” thereby implying that the assent has nothing to do with any logical constraint or rational element whatsoever.

Consequently, the dichotomy presents itself as follows: conviction is either logical and rational, or irreducibly sentimental.

The two alternatives presented here fairly accurately characterize the respective parties implicated in the debate before Kant intervened, namely, Jacobi’s conception of belief and Mendelssohn’s dogmatic rationalism. As we know, Kant does not identify his own position with that of either of these two parties, but neither does he adopt a middle road or some kind of compromise. The concept of *Vernunft-glaube*, which had already been firmly established in the first *Critique*, is in no way meant to be an artificial synthesis of these two elements, but is rather the product of an original theory, the outlines of which had been clearly delineated since 1781. And this critical solution remains entirely valid for the Pantheism Controversy. But what is most worthy of our interest in “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking” is the particular angle that Kant works from. If the whole text in fact gravitates around the theme of orientation, it is because Kant wants to bring out the specificity of rational belief, which he had already mentioned, but without elaborating further, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The initial examples of geographical and mathematical orientation with which he illustrates his thesis are really designed to emphasize the importance of the properly subjective character of all orientation: locating the cardinal points or orienting oneself in a dark room require one to refer to a feeling, namely the feeling of distinguishing between right and left. Just the same holds true for the orientation of thinking in speculative cognition: as speculative reason, on its own, cannot establish points of reference for itself. Practical reason must do so, by means of its felt need. In sum, if Kant does take note of Jacobi’s point, it is only because this provides him with an opportunity to confirm that practical reason alone can speak to the individual, whereas theoretical reason only addresses itself to the subject in general.

As the first two *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* were published only two months before the appearance of “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?,” one can consider Reinhold and Kant to have intervened in the debate at practically the same stage of its development. Accordingly, the footnotes in the *Letters* cite the same works to which Kant refers; i.e., principally those of Mendelssohn, Jacobi, and Wizenmann. It appears to me to be necessary to point this out, as it is against this common background, shared by Reinhold and Kant, that we can bring out the due significance of the divergences that we will find between the two authors – differences which, at first sight, may have appeared to be relatively secondary.

I shall restrict myself here to examining how Kant is treated regarding the need of reason, particularly in the three *Letters* that followed the publication of “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?.” If one takes into account that Reinhold founds his entire defense of the *Aufklärung* on Kant’s critical philosophy, then one sees clearly that he could not simply mention the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* article in passing, but that he had to find a way to integrate Kant’s argumentation into his own. It should therefore come as no surprise that the theme of the “need of reason” promptly appears in the fourth *Letter* (TM 1(1787) 120). So the question for us shall be to determine how Reinhold incorporates this element into his own reasoning. For the sake of brevity, we can quickly retrace, in a few steps, the fate of the “felt need of reason” (*gefühltes Bedürfnis der Vernunft*) in the *Letters*. I would like to thereby illustrate, with the help of quotations, precisely how Reinhold gradually distances himself from Kant, going from initial acquiescence to what would eventually amount to blunt refusal.

In the third *Letter*, published in January, 1787, Reinhold starts out by very faithfully reproducing Kant’s position, noting that feeling and reason are complementary, just as explained in “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?”: “Yet when they are united, reason and feeling – the elements of morality – give rise to moral faith and constitute, if I may help myself to this expression, the only pure and living meaning that we have for the deity” (TM 1(1787) 33). Yet immediately after stating this Kantian thesis, Reinhold launches into a number of historical considerations which, in the following *Letter*, will have weighty consequences for the way in which he envisages the articulation of these two elements. In effect, feeling and reason are henceforth treated from a chronological perspective, in the sense of a succession which goes from a moral need that is at first merely “felt” to a need that is precisely cognized: “In the meantime – that is, during the protracted period that was necessary for the human spirit to move



from an obscure feeling to a distinct consciousness of the moral need – mistaken explanations of the feeling were inevitable” (TM 1(1787) 122). At this intermediate stage of history, i.e. between the advent of Christianity and the contemporary moment, feeling appears as an obscure (*dunkel*) representation that inevitably engenders misunderstandings and will eventually have to give way to a clear and precise consciousness. Indeed, other passages in the same *Letter* bring out the true status of feeling, for Reinhold: “There had to be previous ages when humanity was as little receptive to the distinct cognition [*deutliche Erkenntnis*] of that need as this cognition was indispensable to humanity, when the mere feeling of this need gave rise to a conviction in the two basic truths of religion, and when much less weight was placed on the cognition of the grounds of this conviction than on the utilization of its consequences for morality” (TM 1(1787) 121). While the text does concede a role to feeling concerning religious convictions, the epithet “mere” placed in front of the word “feeling” implies that the latter has an inferior status compared with “distinct” cognition. This adjective is manifestly aimed at depreciating feeling *vis-à-vis* distinct cognition.

Another question is whether feeling will be able to keep its role once the need of reason will have been elucidated, or whether it will not simply become eclipsed by conceptual cognition. For that is indeed what is at stake: if, in both passages, Reinhold employs the adjective “distinct” to describe consciousness and cognition, it is because that is precisely the term that he reserves for cognition of the understanding, or even of reason. The merely transitory, or even ephemeral, character of feeling on the historical scale is clearly affirmed in the same *Letter*, specifically in a passage where Reinhold avers that this history of the belief in the existence of God culminates with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that is, the contemporary moment. At issue here is the foundation of the convictions of the *sensus communis* regarding the existence of God and a future life: “... it turns out that this ground could consist in nothing other than the feeling of the moral need, which the Critique of Reason has resolved into distinct concepts [*in deutliche Begriffe aufgelöset*] and elevated to the single and highest philosophical ground for cognition of religion” (TM 1(1787) 120). Here it becomes evident that this historical development, i.e., the transition from the obscure and confused feeling to the clear and distinct concept, is conceived of as an instance of epistemological progress. The need of reason appears in history first as a feeling and later as a clearly defined cognition. Feeling is hereby represented as a formerly indispensable yet currently obsolete stage of this progression. Indeed, with the advent of the

critique of reason, the feeling of the need of reason gets analysed, decomposed, even dissolved (*aufgelöset*) to give way to distinct concepts that are accessible to cognition. This transition to the concept implicates a rupture with feeling – and this constitutes the natural outcome of Reinhold’s argumentation: “The moral interest... which was first resolved into its pure elements by the Critique of Reason, is grounded on a need that is either felt [*gefühlte*] or distinctly [*deutlich*] cognized” (TM 2(1787) 168). Here, the rupture is complete: the necessity inherent to belief is *either* felt (as in the earlier stages of history and for the *sensus communis*) *or* it is distinctly cognized by means of concepts – or, better – in its essentially conceptual, rational content.

So after having restated the Kantian thesis of the union of reason and feeling in moral belief, we find Reinhold subsequently introducing an outright disjunction between the two terms: *entweder...oder....* In other words, the specific function that Kant had given to feeling in moral belief (as the latter’s subjective foundation) is thrown out. By emphasizing the sentimental character of belief in Jacobi’s work and by showing its relevance to his own conception of belief, Kant sought to be true to the phenomenon. That Reinhold concluded otherwise can surely be ascribed to his approaching the problem from substantively different premises. In truth, the question of the status of feeling, for Reinhold, was already decided with the publication of the very first *Letter*. The philosophers “of the heart,” that is, the thinkers like Jacobi and other “despisers” of metaphysics, lose themselves, to his eyes, in the “labyrinth of obscure feelings” (TM 3(1786) 108). From the outset, feeling is marked out as a sensible representation that differs, by definition, from a distinct representation. Of course, Reinhold always presented himself as the philosopher who would reconcile the heart with reason. In the present case, however, he deemed it more advisable to put the emphasis on reason, as only it is able, thanks to its clear and distinct conception of the ultimate foundations of belief, to reassure the moral subject in her expectations, namely the existence of God and a future life. Reason, and reason alone, therefore, can calm the worries of the heart. Such is Reinhold’s position. This does not mean that he thereby relapses into the intellectualist philosophy of the Leibnizian-Wolffian school, for Kant had made him see the primacy of practical reason and of moral truths. He is thus immunized against the attempts to found morality on a concept of “perfection” *à la* Wolff, for example. Nevertheless a peculiarly rationalist purpose does linger in his thought. Thus in the fourth *Letter* he does not hesitate to speak of the “fog of sensibility” (TM 1(1787) 127), which

must be cleared away by an analysis that would lead to a clear and distinct conception of the thing in question. Moreover this Cartesian moment of Reinhold's will soon be repeated a second time, namely in his search for an entirely evident first principle at the foundation of philosophy.

In his famous *Letter to Fichte* (1799), Jacobi will claim that transcendental philosophy can arrive, in the realm of ethics, at nothing more than an "impersonal" concept of "personality" (W III, 39). If, in this judgment, Jacobi has Kant in mind as well as Fichte, we have to conclude that he has overlooked the details of Kant's contribution of 1786 to the Pantheism Controversy. In other words, Jacobi refuses to take notice of the reference to feeling that Kant, in his discussion of the problem of orientation, had chosen as his guiding thread in order to give the full picture of his concept of personhood.